



Today's Mexican Culture

Mexico is officially known as the "United Mexican States." There are multiple provinces/states within Mexico, each influenced by geography and ethnic background. In addition to an incredible diversity of landscape and climate, ranging from arid desert to mountains to seaside to wetlands, there are more than 50 ethnic groups comprising the Mexican population.

The people of Mexico are generally a warm and gracious population. Most Mexicans today are descendants from the original Indians that inhabited the area, or a combination of Indian and Spanish lines from the Europeans that settled in the area after the 16th century. In some areas of southern Mexico the pure Indian blood is still very dominant, and these cultures have changed little over the centuries. Chiapas is a southern state that still has decedents that run directly from the earlier Mayan civilization.

The influence of Old Spain is prevalent in many parts of today's Mexico. Spanish is the national language of Mexico. Christianity was brought to the local people in the 16th century by the Spanish, and dominates the religious signature of the country today. Even the basic design of most of Mexico's towns, with a central plaza and adjacent church, came from the design of many of the older cities in Spain.

Mexican culture is, of course, ever-evolving, with the nation's complex history and diverse population reflected in nearly every facet of contemporary life.

Architecture

The Spanish conquest of Mexico introduced European architecture and ornamentation to the New World, but the intricate designs and bright colors of the indigenous culture blended with the Old World styles to create a distinct Mexican hybrid.

The combination of European architectural styles including the Baroque and Neo-Classical with local materials like Puebla tiles can be found in Colonial houses, with their interior courtyards and wrought-iron grilles on the windows, as well as public architecture.

The architecture of this period is perhaps best captured in the churches and cathedrals. Missionaries were the architects of these vibrant buildings, drawing on individual memories of various European styles. Today, a full range of architectural styles can be found in major urban centers.

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Modern architecture has also flourished. Functionalism, expressionism, and other schools have left their imprint on a large number of works in which Mexican stylistic elements have been combined with European and North American techniques. In the great manufacturing center of Monterrey there are fine examples of industrial architecture. Perhaps the most outstanding achievement of contemporary Mexican architecture is the Ciudad Universitaria outside Mexico City, a complex of buildings and grounds housing the National University of Mexico.

Painting and Murals

Since the arrival of the Spaniards, Mexican artists tended to follow the lead from Europe. But that changed after the revolution of 1910. In the 1930's, such well-known artists as Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and others began to paint unique murals and other works that brought together the styles of the Old World and the ancient Mexican cultures.

The Mexican mural movement lasted from the 1920s to the 1970s and represents some of the finest revolutionary art of the century. It was initiated by Minister for Education, José Vasconcelos, who wanted to develop a national cultural identity for the nation. Rivera's panoramas of Mexico combined the styles of Italian fresco painting and pre-Columbian iconography, and incorporated allegory and symbolism. His masterpiece *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Central* can be seen today in Mexico City's Museo Mural Diego Rivera.

Today, Mexico's most famous contribution to world painting is the work of Rivera's wife Frida Kahlo, whose violent, melancholy work reflects a troubled life. Her self-portraits in particular have struck a chord with modern tastes, earning her a contemporary popularity that eluded her while she was alive.

Literature

Mexico has a long and distinguished literary tradition. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a nun in Colonial Mexico, wrote many poems and won fame for her defense of women's rights. José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi is often considered the first important Hispanic American novelist for his satirical novel *El Periquillo Sarniento* ("The Mangy Parrot"). Juan Rulfo wrote two of the most influential works in the history of Latin-American literature- *El Llano En Llamas* and *Pedro Paramo*.

The influential poet Octavio Paz won the Nobel Literature Prize in 1990. He was an influential figure also in the fields of diplomatic service and cultural promotion.

The city of Guadalajara hosts the biggest and most important international book fair of the Spanish-speaking world each year, known best as the "FIL" (Feria Internacional del Libro de Guadalajara in Spanish, or Guadalajara International Book Fair in English). In 2006, it will be celebrating its 20th edition and the guest of honor will be "Andalucía"

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Music and Dance

The music of Mexico is extraordinarily diverse and features a wide range of different musical styles. The best-known Mexican genre by far is ranchera, interpreted by a band called mariachi. This style of traditional Mexican song is considered old-fashioned, but respected, traditional music and is usually listened to as much as modern music. Other new styles such as cumbia, pop, and rock have seen increased popularity as the music of Mexico faces a new generation of young people. Southern Mexican folk music is centered around the marimba, which remains popular in Chiapas and Oaxaca. In Yucatán the traditional Jarana music and dance is popular.

In addition to its music, or perhaps to go along with it, México has an incredible variety of traditional dances. In some, you'll hear carved drums and reed flutes that echo the timeless rhythm of rain dances to the god Tlaloc, or dances to Huitzilopochtli, god of war. In others, you'll hear strains from the waltzes brought by the French and Spaniards. But in most cases the two have blended together in a vibrant style so unique that it is now México's own. Some of the more popular are the "Viejitos" ("Dance of the Little Old Men") from Michoacán. The "huapango", a dance from Veracruz, is performed on a wooden platform that acts as a sort of drum for the dancers' feet. And of course, there's the "Jarabe Tapatio", which is considered the national dance. You probably know it as the Mexican Hat Dance. The best time to see and hear Mexico's kaleidoscope of music and dance is at a fiesta. And it seems that almost any excuse is good enough to have a party.

Fiestas

If there is one aspect of Mexican culture that defines the nation's character and social life, it is surely the multitude of religious and patriotic fiestas. Nearly every day marks a celebration of a saint or political uprising somewhere in the country. Fireworks, bands, and dancing are the constants in these colorful outdoor parties, which may have their origins in the cultures of the indigenous populations or that of the Spanish conquistadors.

Most celebrations are local, but Independence Day (marking Father Miguel Hidalgo's cry to arms against Spanish rule), the Days of the Dead, and the day (December 12) honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, are national in scope

The Days of the Dead (November 1 & 2) offer a particularly striking glimpse into the Mexican character, beliefs, and values, as the population celebrates the return of departing souls. Family is the center of Mexican life, and the Days of the Dead provide a way for Mexicans to celebrate the familial bonds that stretch beyond the grave. Skulls and skeletons; altars for the dead incorporating flowers, photos, textiles, and paper; sugar figures of skulls and tempting native foods; and various crafts depicting the dead with great humor all combine to create an entirely original holiday with a surprisingly un-morbid feel.