

## Franciscan Missions (Mexico)

No 1079

### 1. BASIC DATA

*State Party:* Mexico

*Name of property:* Franciscan Missions in the Sierra Gorda of Querétaro (Santiago de Jalpan, Santa Maria del Agua de Landa, San Francisco del Valle de Tilaco, Nuestra Señora de la Luz de Tancoyol, San Miguel Conzá)

*Location:* Municipalities of Jalpan de Sierra, Landa de Matamoros, and Arroyo Seco in the State of Querétaro de Arteaga (Sierra Gorda region)

*Date received:* 5 December 2001

*Category of property:*

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a serial nomination of five *groups of buildings*.

*Brief description:*

The Franciscan missions of Sierra Gorda were built in the last phase of the evangelisation of the interior of Mexico in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, and became an important reference for the continuation of the evangelisation and colonisation of California, Arizona and Texas. The richly decorated façades of the churches are of special interest, representing an example of the joint creative efforts of the missionaries and the *Indios*. The rural settlements that grew around the missions have retained their vernacular character.

### 2. THE PROPERTY

*Description*

The nominated property consists of five Franciscan missions, which date from the 1750s and 1760s. The properties are located in the mountainous Sierra Gorda region in central Mexico, where evangelisation took place much later than elsewhere. Of the five missions, Santiago de **Jalpan** (the earliest, built 1751-58) and Nuestra Señora de la Luz de **Tancoyol** are located in the municipality of Jalpan de Sierra, Santa Maria del Agua de **Landa** and San Francisco del Valle de **Tilaco** are in the municipality of Landa de Matamoros, and the mission of San Miguel **Conzá** is in the municipality of Arroyo Seco.

The Franciscan missions were complex organisational units run by friars aiming at evangelising, congregating and teaching indigenous people. Each mission had to erect the church, find the natives, subdue them, and then group them in huts around the church. The missionaries had to learn the native language, supply the population with food, teach them how to behave, and only then evangelise them. All five missions share similar elements in relation to their environment, the town, and the religious buildings. The environment offers splendid mountain views; the strategic

locations of the missions determined the layout and development of the native settlement around. Today, these are traditional rural settlements.

The architecture of the missions is designed following a general pattern, though there are individual differences. Their features are reminiscent of 16<sup>th</sup> century convents, and include generally an atrium, a Sacramental Doorway, an open chapel, processional chapels, and a cloister. There are also some features taken from Mexican baroque art of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, evidenced in the cross-shaped ground plan of the church, in the carved and stuccoed façade, and the use of lime plaster in the interior. These features are most characteristic of Jalpan, Landa and Tancoyol, while Tilaco and Conzá have more individual design; eg there are no chapels. The buildings are made in local stone, and have plaster rendering. The orientation of the complex differs in each case; the main façade is oriented to the west only in Tilaco, while Jalpan faces east, Tancoyol south, and Conzá and Landa south-east.

Considering that the congregation generally gathered outside, the main elevation of the church is opulently decorated with winding plants and flowers, fantastic architectural elements, angels, figures of virgin and saints, including St. Francis. While the general layout of the complex reflects the Franciscan model, the spirit and forms of decoration refer to local traditions and local products as gifts to God. Artistically the whole has a particular air of innocence and naïveté. Strategically, the images were 'ideographic', enforcing the didactic scope of the mission. The façade has usually three horizontal and three vertical sections, forming framed fields; in Tancoyol, there are five horizontal sections. The dominating colour is ochre.

In contrast, the interior is now much less pretentious; it has simple plaster rendering, and the altarpiece has straightforward architectural forms. A cupola crowns the transept crossing. Seen from the front, a tall bell tower is attached on the left side of the church. The lower part of the tower is plain on a square plan; the upper part is richly ornate with architectural elements. The residential part, on the right side of the church, has an arched entrance and in some cases there is a cloister passage around the court. Otherwise it is relatively simple without decoration.

*History*

The northern region of Sierra Gorda, where the missions are placed, is part of the mountainous central Mexico. In ancient times, the native inhabitants used to be involved in mining and trade, living in small settlements scattered over the lower parts of the mountains. Sierra Gorda was a natural barrier between the agricultural, sedentary people and the nomadic, hunter-gatherer tribes of the north. At the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, the people were mainly living on agriculture. The *Huastec* lived in large feudal estates and were skilled in cotton spinning. The *Jonace* lived in caves and attacked estates. The *Pame* was a large group who grew corn and lived in grass or palm-leaf houses; they were docile and collaborative with the friars.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, due to political interests and silver mining, armed conflicts were often provoked, involving the Spaniards and groups of native people. This resulted in the destruction of many of the early missions. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Franciscans made attempts to penetrate further

into the country, but were not able to establish permanent presence. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they obtained a new authorisation, resulting in the decision, in 1744, to establish five missions (Jalpan, Conca, Tancoyol, Landa and Tilaco). Due to continuing conflicts in the region, the first years were difficult, delaying the construction of the actual mission complexes until 1750-51, under the leadership of Friar Junípero Sierra.

The construction phase took some two decades combined with the active evangelisation work by the Franciscan friars. By the end of the period, in 1770, the mission was accomplished. The political situation had changed, and the missions were secularised. Due to rebellions and armed conflicts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the missions suffered and the gilded altarpieces were destroyed. Towards the end of the century, the churches faced further problems and some images that were replaced, eg in the central part of the front of Jalpan. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the population decreased, and some missions were abandoned at times; others had alterations, such as the atriums of Landa (1966) and Jalpan (1964). Nevertheless, they have continued as religious entities, dominating the settlements which grew around them as well as being a reference for the region. From the publication on the Baroque in the Sierra Gorda region, by Monique Gustin in 1969, a new interest was revived to safeguard these baroque masterpieces, leading to restoration during the 1990s.

The driving force in this phase of evangelisation was Junípero Serra (1713-1784), a Spanish Franciscan priest whose missionary work in North America earned him the title of Apostle of California (he was beatified by the Pope in 1988). He was instrumental in the establishment of the Sierra Gorda missions, where he served from 1750 to 1758, moving then to south-central Mexico (1758-1767). When Spain began its occupation of Alta California (present-day California), Serra joined the expedition, and in 1769 he founded Mission San Diego, the first in California. Altogether 21 missions were founded by him and his successors in California, where they became the strongest factors in the development of the region.

### **Management regime**

#### *Legal provision:*

The Franciscan missions are protected, within the framework of the constitutions of Mexico and the State of Querétaro, by the relevant building and urban codes, as well as the following legal instruments:

- Federal Law on Monuments and Archaeological Zones (1972), establishing regulations for protection, research, conservation and social use;
- Law on Religious Congregation and Public Cults (1992), regulating preservation of the occupied buildings;
- Law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the State of Querétaro (1991).
- The Sierra Gorda is protected as a Biosphere Reserve (1997) due to its exceptional biodiversity.

The five missions are listed in the National Register of Immovable Properties. A State decree on conservation zones is in the process of being approved.

#### *Management structure:*

The management of the mission complexes and the surrounding urban area are the responsibility of various levels of administration, including the National Commission for Historic Monuments, the National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH). The physical plans for the settlements have been elaborated by the Division of Urban Development and Housing of the Querétaro Secretariat of Urban Development and Public Works (SDUOP), taking into account the cultural and natural values of the whole environment. The division has also been responsible for the conservation and restoration projects undertaken from 1989 and which still continue.

The settlements are subject to the State Development Plan (1998-2003).

Each of the nominated properties has its own property management plan. In addition, there is a comprehensive management plan, which provides the framework for the coordination of actions regarding all properties within their regional context.

The State Secretariat for Tourism has started to launch tourist programmes, and provide information and facilities for visitors.

#### *Resources:*

The Franciscan Missions have received funding from the Federal State, INAH, and the State of Querétaro. In 2001, the total budget of restoration amounted to ca 254,000 \$ US.

The INAH centre of Querétaro has 75 staff, including managers, architects, restorers, researchers. In addition, the Commission of Historic Monuments of Querétaro's INAH Centre has a team of specialists in archaeology, social anthropology, linguistics and history.

Economically, the Sierra Gorda region is poor; the population is mostly involved in primary industry, related to agriculture and livestock raising.

### **Justification by the State Party (summary)**

**Criterion ii:** the Sierra Gorda Missions bear witness to the cultural coexistence between two different groups with their environment. They stand as the result of an exchange of values and influences between evangelising Franciscan friars and the native population. The iconographic wealth in the facades of the churches is the result of the creative work of both groups and a true mirror of their spirituality and worldview.

**Criterion iii:** the most thorough evangelising work carried out by the Franciscan Order in America is reflected in the architectural and artistic achievement in these missions. Through their work they were able to ensure the evangelisation of northern Mexico along a corridor that reached northern California and the Baja Peninsula, thus expanding a new cultural system. However, churches built in these areas were not as large and did not have the same features as those built in the Sierra Gorda.

**Criterion iv:** all five missions are part of settlements of great cultural significance that have managed to preserve their original layout and spatial arrangement and which

stand as evidence of the use in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of a religious domination system that actually dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The hybrid baroque facades of the churches bear exceptional witness to a rich variety of shapes, images, colours and iconography that betray them.

### **3. ICOMOS EVALUATION**

#### ***Actions by ICOMOS***

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the five sites in August 2002. ICOMOS has furthermore consulted religious orders and historians on the significance of the nominated properties.

#### ***Conservation***

##### *Conservation history:*

After the completion of evangelisation work by the Franciscan friars in 1770, the missions were secularised. During the following century and until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the buildings suffered from neglect, abuse and some destruction. A new interest was revived in their safeguarding in the 1970s, resulting in efforts to improve the social-economic conditions of the settlements in the 1980s, and the restoration of all five missions starting in 1989.

##### *State of conservation:*

The current condition of the mission complexes is satisfactory both in relation to the structure and the context.

##### *Management:*

The ICOMOS expert during the field visit has taken note of several issues related to the management of the sites. At the time of the visit the planning tools for conservation areas were under preparation. Similarly, the 'Urban Image Improvement Programme' is currently under preparation by SDUOP and INAH. It is noted with satisfaction that, since the mission took place, the authorities have now completed the conservation management plans for the ensembles and they are being implemented.

The ICOMOS expert emphasised the need to favour those types of tourism that can sustain the identity of the place (emphasis on local cultural and ecological issues). The local management team should be enforced in its relationship with the community, encouraging communal participation, eg artistic and artisan activities. Education and training on heritage management, and cultural and eco-tourism should be systematically organized in Sierra Gorda, incorporating local authorities, communal leaders, teachers and others. The missions should be provided annual budgets for regular maintenance after the restoration. It is also necessary to verify that the seminar function has necessary spaces and equipment for its proper functioning.

While it is noted that the region is already listed as a biosphere reserve (MAB), the importance of a landscape protection area for the particularly beautiful valley in Tilaco should be considered.

#### *Risk analysis:*

In the past, the region has been over-exploited causing deforestation, changes in agricultural activity, plagues, and clandestine felling. There have been frequent forest fires. Droughts and frosts have depleted agricultural production resulting in losses of producers on the mountains. Efforts are now made to reforest for commercial purposes, and to prevent such damages. In fact, the MAB programme is reported to be giving positive results in the region.

The visitor facilities are considered inadequate; there are few specialised establishments, and infrastructures are just beginning to be created.

The population is beginning to be aware of new facilities, however, which will have an impact on the currently traditional environment. There is a risk of the population losing its traditional identity. The changes would easily also reflect in the character of the built environment, which has kept its vernacular aspect until now. Some efforts to mitigate such changes have already been taken by the authorities and the local communities.

#### ***Authenticity and integrity***

The architecture of the Franciscan Missions of Sierra Gorda is associated with the final phase of the evangelisation of Mexico in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The basic design criteria of such missions were already established in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. While taking the main elements of the earlier schemes, the Sierra Gorda Missions give a new interpretation to them in the vernacular context. The aesthetic originality is in the external decoration of the churches, which has strong indigenous component in the selection of themes and execution.

As noted above, the buildings have faced a period of neglect, losing some of their features. Partly this was due to the renovation of the interiors in a sober neo-classical expression, common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The recent restoration of the five missions was based on a thorough research, and was carried out in an appropriate manner by qualified teams. The historic stratifications and changes were duly respected. It has also been possible to reveal and reintegrate the original polychrome colour schemes of the church façades.

In the present time, the centres continue their religious function, being used as ceremonial centres and as a core for activities in the territory. So far, the surroundings of the missions have had a fairly coherent development as vernacular villages (Concá, Landa, Tancoyol, Tilaco) or as a small township (Jalpan). The land use has retained its traditional form, even though there are fears of adverse developments at present.

#### ***Comparative evaluation***

The Franciscan missionaries were the first of the religious orders to arrive in Mexico in the 16th century, followed by the Dominicans, the Augustinians, the Company of Jesuits, and others. The overall design of the religious ensembles and churches was made by experienced monks and technicians, but the construction work was mainly carried

out by the indigenous people, the *indios*, of the different localities.

The aim of the missions was first to convert to Christianity established civilisations, which lived in urban centres and had building skills. While taking the general layout from European models, they took into account the way of living of the indigenous, and what appealed to them. The ensembles usually contained: a water fountain, a courtyard, the chapel of the *indios*, the chapels for procession, the church, the cloister, and large fenced garden for vegetable and fruit. Fine examples are, eg the monasteries of Huejotzingo, Calpan, Acolman, Actopan, Atlatlahcan, and Tepoztlán.

In the baroque period, the church elevations became especially elaborate – in Mexico perhaps more than in other Latin American countries. The sculptured message was addressed to the people who gathered outside, and represented symbols referring to Christian faith and local traditions. In many cases the Spanish and Creole masters did not apply any specific style. The materials could vary from stone to brick and mortar. The first priority was to provide accommodation and the basic facilities; the church could be built or redecorated later. Many Mexican churches are in Baroque style.

The five missions of Sierra Gorda represent a vernacular ensemble, distinguished from the previous especially in social and cultural aspects. The underlying philosophy and policies characterised them as being closer to the people, and their communal function still continues. The missions were established in mountain areas of difficult access, addressing nomad population rather than urbanised civilisations as was the case earlier. The missions reflect the philosophy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, aimed at the initial Franciscan idea of simplicity. The buildings are simple in their general layout and interiors. The church elevations are the only features that stand out, and are considered the most remarkable in the last phase of evangelisation.

In the spirit and architectural character, the Franciscan missions also differ from the Jesuit Missions, (eg those inscribed on the World Heritage List in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay), which were inspired by the wish to create an ideal society, a ‘city of God’.

#### ***Outstanding universal value***

##### *General statement:*

The Franciscan missions of Sierra Gorda represent the last phase of evangelisation in Mexico, addressing the nomadic populations of the central parts of Mexico, and then becoming an important base for the continuation of evangelisation in California and North America. The Sierra Gorda Missions are distinguished by their vernacular character both in the unpretentious mission buildings as well as in the well-preserved settlements that grew around them. At the same time, the church elevations represent an intense artistic declaration of Franciscan and indigenous motives and symbols.

##### *Evaluation of criteria:*

**Criterion ii:** In Sierra Gorda, the Franciscan friars founded their work with the nomadic population of the mountain region on the ideas emerging in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. The rich iconography of the church façades reflects this encounter. Through the work of Junípero Serra, the missions became a fundamental reference in the region that extended from Mexico to California, Texas and Arizona, where it founded a new cultural system, reflected in many place names (eg San Francisco, Santa Clara).

**Criterion iii:** This criterion is closely related to the previous as the Sierra Gorda Missions bear witness to the evangelisation process by the Franciscans, which extended to a large part of North America. This cultural encounter is witnessed in the harmonious relationship of the missions with the vernacular settlements that grew around them, and in the use of Franciscan and indigenous symbols in the richly decorated church elevations. The missions were founded in the proximity of ancient ceremonial centres and small pre-Hispanic settlements, aiming to replace pagan beliefs with the new faith.

**Criterion iv:** The Sierra Gorda Missions represent a vernacular version of a type of settlement, of which the layout and spatial arrangement have their origins in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. While recognising the cultural significance and the specificity of these settlements, ICOMOS considers that the criteria ii and iii are more relevant in defining the value of this nomination.

## **4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Recommendation for the future***

While recognising the initiatives already taken by the authorities in the management of the territory of the Sierra Gorda Missions, ICOMOS wishes to encourage special attention to the control of future developments in the region, taking into account sustainable land-use in and around the settlements, and the character of the landscape.

### ***Recommendation with respect to inscription***

That the property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii* and *iii*:

**Criterion ii:** The Sierra Gorda Missions exhibit an important interchange of values in the process of evangelisation and colonisation of central and northern Mexico, and the western United States.

**Criterion iii:** The five Sierra Gorda missions bear witness to the cultural encounter of the European missions with the nomadic populations of central Mexico, remaining a significant testimony to this second phase of evangelisation in North America.

ICOMOS, March 2003