

ART, MIRACLES AND MEXICO

I Winds blew away four days' greenish-brown pollution so that the evening of December 14 was clear. From El Cerrito, the little chapel atop the ancient, sacred hill of Tepeyac, I watched the yellow lights of Mexico City saturate the flat lake bed on which Aztecs constructed what is now the world's most populated city. The sunset was red-orange, with a few narrow clouds. To my right, guarding the entrance to the chapel, a stone-cut archangel Michael towered against the sky, chalk-white against the encroachment of night.

I felt as with him in flight. The city below me glowed like a coal bed against the Sierra Madre, and directly underfoot, around me, encompassing me, were the brooding spirits that, two days before, had left me numb with excitement, confusion and perhaps fear. Although I had journeyed to Mexico City for one reason — to examine a new, controversial museum, the Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporaneo, and its American director, Robert Littman — I had hooked something else, and it wasn't shaking loose.

A few weeks earlier, the Centro Cultural, underwritten by the Fundación Cultural Televisa of Mexico's privately owned Televisa media conglomerate, had opened an unparalleled display, *Four Centuries of the Image of the Virgin of Guadalupe* (through March 13).

HOW THE AMERICAN PUT
THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE
INSIDE THE NEW MUSEUM
OF THE TELEVISION GIANT.

BY ROD DAVIS



Opposite: Celebrants jam the avenue leading to the Basilica de Guadalupe.
Above: Robert Littman, director of the Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporaneo.

It featured more than 500 paintings, statues, *ex votos* (offerings) and icons of the legendary appearance of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego, a converted Aztec Indian, on December 12, 1531, here, at Tepeyac, where I now stood. To be in Mexico on the anniversary of that apparition, to compare the celebration in the streets with the accumulated art in the museum would be, I reasoned, a good way to examine the creative process: how artists interpret history and how history later sits in judgment. I still think it was a good idea. I just wish it had been an idea with a neat ending.

I walked down a few steps from the chapel to a stone balcony. The vending booth under the stairs was still open, and three young girls sat outside playing a game. Two days ago they would've been fighting for a place to stand up.

On December 12, the parapets of El Cerrito had been filled with pilgrims — mostly poor and Indian — who had journeyed from all over Mexico to arrive at its holiest place.

Juan Diego would scarcely have believed how the site of his vision would look four centuries later. A labyrinthine city had grown around the hill, and at the base of Tepeyac, the immense stone structure of the old Basilica de Guadalupe (1709) opened onto a courtyard the size of several football fields, a fortress of antiquity amid the metropolis. Tonight the courtyard was empty. You could stroll right



across it, and inside the new space-basilica (1976), built because the old one sags and crumbles of its own weight, I easily found a seat for the round-the-clock Masses of the Christmas season. I was able to walk around the altar and stand on one of the three slow-moving conveyor belts that

dollar, she gave it to him with such an expression of kindness that there, in this hall of the Virgin, it seemed irrelevant the boy was a con artist. I looked at her and was reminded of what I had seen in the brown eyes of a young Indian baby among the Aztec dancers and drummers in the courtyard. The baby

they had carefully hauled and unpacked all the Virgins upstairs, they wanted their own. So they built a shrine in an empty parking space and filled it with a large portrait, flowers and personal offerings to receive blessings from the Holy Mother of Mexico.

Robert Littman, who is Jewish, drove his station wagon down a ramp past the shrine and pulled up next to Paula Cussi de Azcarraga, the beautiful blond wife of Televisa owner Emilio "The Tiger" Azcarraga. It was Monday, a normal closing day for the Centro, but there were important visitors — sufficient to bring out the director and the chairman of the museum board. Bill Luers, president of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, was in town to announce a blockbuster upcoming exhibition of Mexican art at the Met in 1990.

Of course he would view the Virgin exhibition. What he would see first, however, would be video previews. Tiers of TV sets mounted in the Centro lobby played tapes on the meaning and importance of the show, the same tapes that had been broadcast to the Mexican public in preceding weeks on Televisa channels.

It was an impressive use of a popular medium to entice a television-oriented culture toward art, and entirely consistent with the cultural tack of the Centro. It was not accidental that a media empire was involved, nor, perhaps, that the wife of the owner of the empire was once a popular news anchor on Mexican TV. Sitting later that day in Mr. Littman's office attired in abundant gold jewelry and leopard-pattern blouse, Mrs. Azcarraga didn't look like a champion of the common

When the young boy approached her to ask for a dollar, she gave it to him with such an expression of encompassing kindness that there, in the hall of the Virgin, it seemed irrelevant the boy was a con artist.

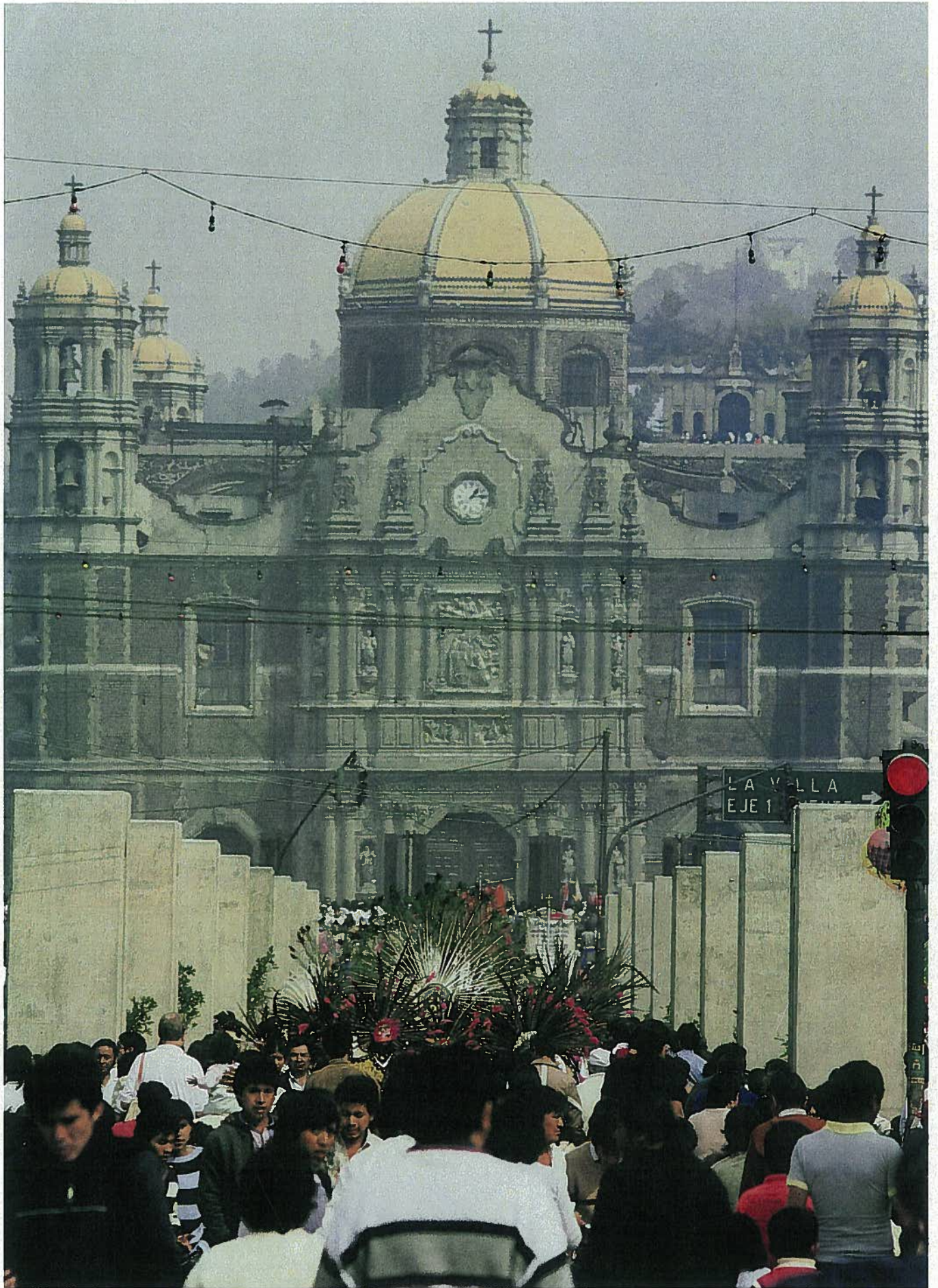
passed beneath a glass case enclosing the *tilma*, or peasant's cloak, on which the Virgin's image was, according to legend and church doctrine, emblazoned by holy light. The act occurred a scant decade after Hernán Cortez had sacked and looted the Aztec empire and instituted forced conversion to Roman Catholicism.

When I saw the *tilma* I was with Kathy Kelley, a Mexican-Irish artist from New Orleans. She and a friend had come to Mexico specifically to observe the holy day festivities. My purposes were, in contrast, stubbornly secular. For me the "miracle" of the Virgin was uncomfortably close to the evangelistic and imperialist purposes of the conquistadors, but the absolute faith in Kathy's brown eyes moved me. Even when a young boy approached her in the basilica pew to ask for a

was on her father's shoulder, staring at the crush of people, the spectacle. I had thought: What's going into those eyes? Later, what will shine out? More than faith, I thought.

II

Earlier that same day, December 14, I had been not in an open space but a closed one. Not a vast, strange, chaotic stage of Aztec and Christian religiosity but the ordered, contemplative quarters of art: a museum. Actually, in the basement parking garage. Upstairs, hundreds of renditions of the Virgin filled two spacious floors around the open atrium of the Centro Cultural, a modern structure in the Polanco, Mexico City's yuppie district. But in the basement was another Virgin — that of the workers. Although





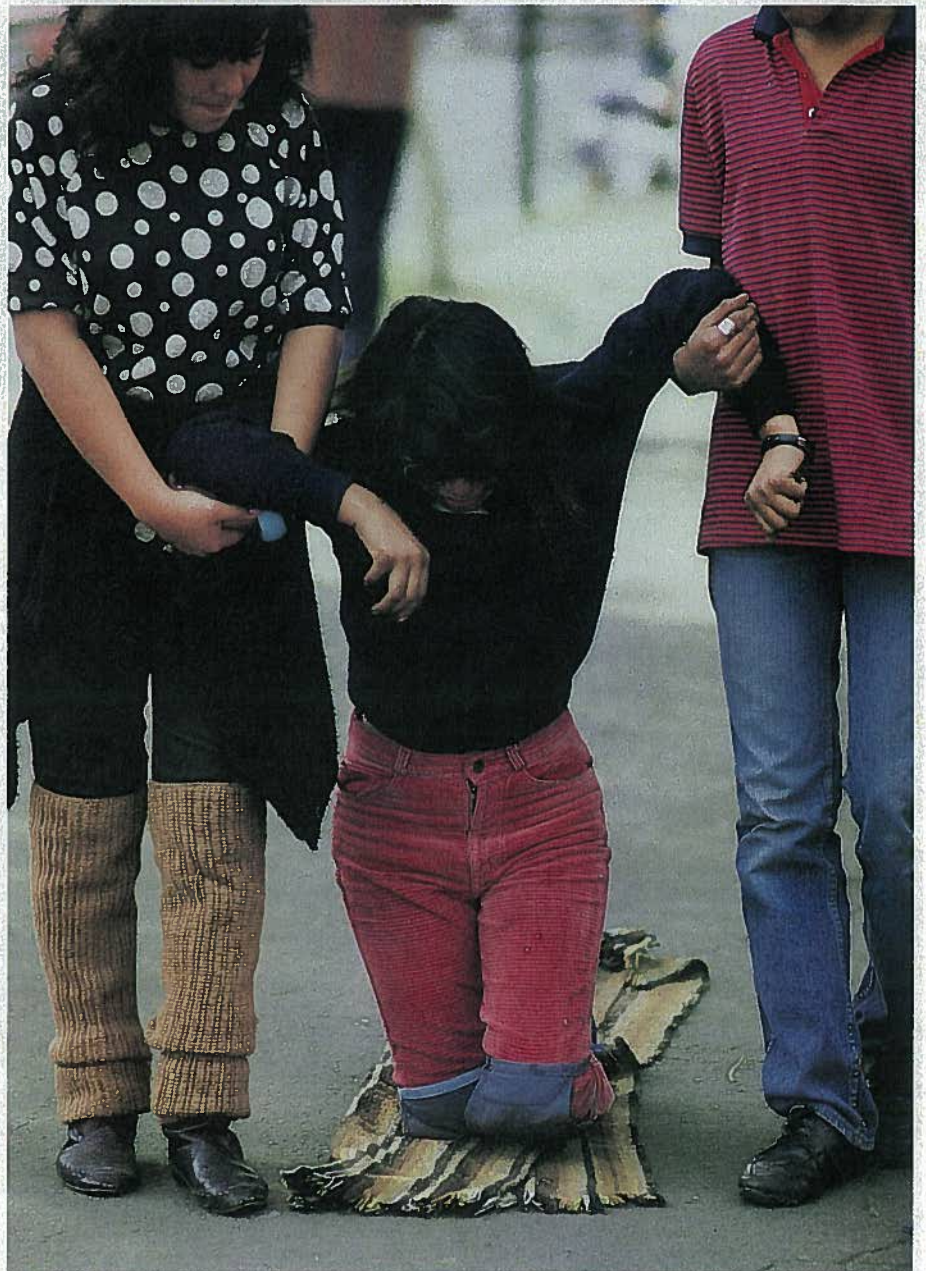
man, but her defense of the Centro's mission — to popularize and demystify art — was vehement.

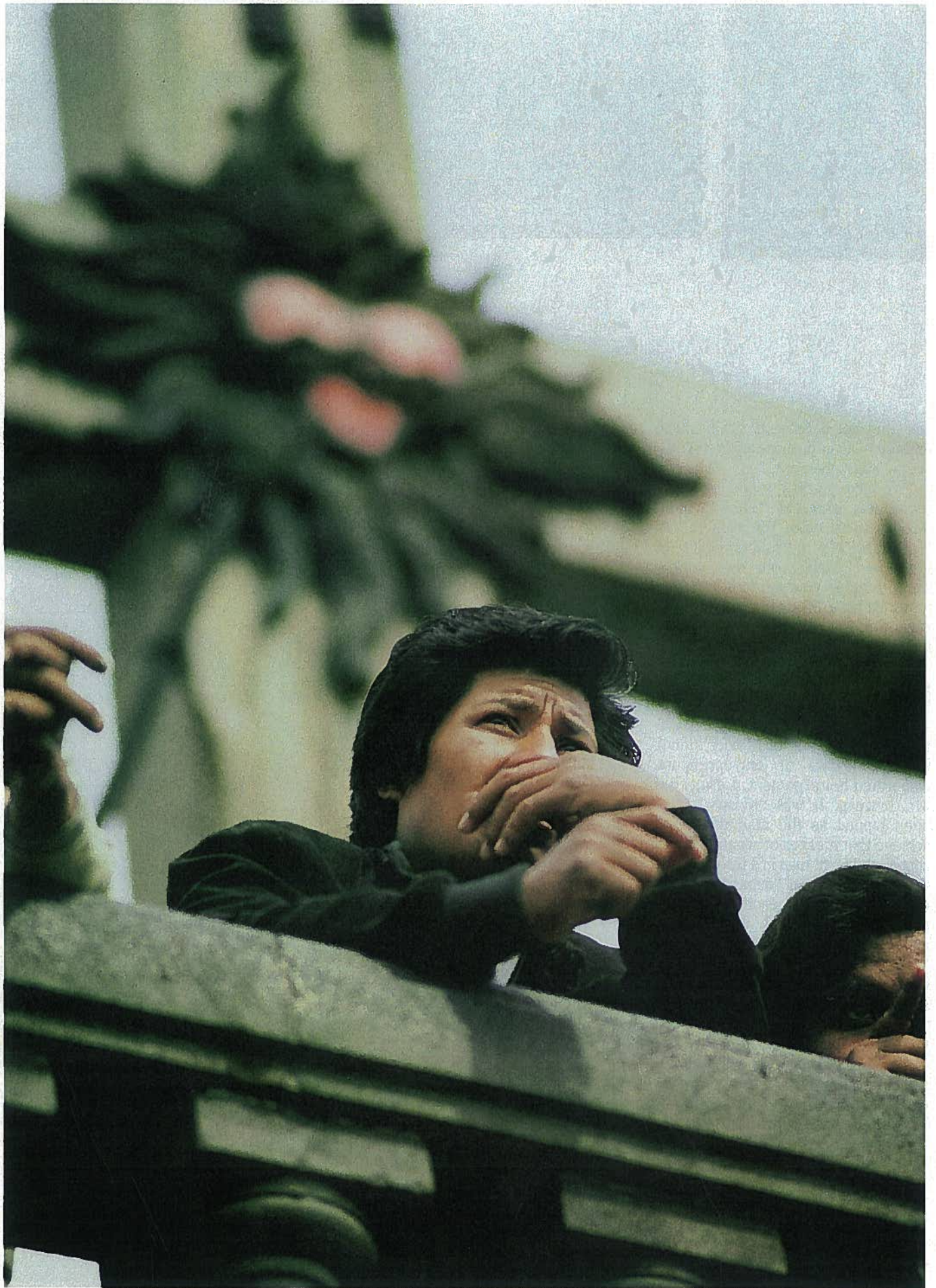
"We have found the poor are very frightened," she said. "They think art belongs to an elite. We want to say, 'Come to our museum. Don't be frightened. Make your own conclusions. Expose yourself to it.' That's a new idea here. The museums here always thought of themselves as being for an elite. We're trying to fight that."

As Mrs. Azcarraga, whose dinner guests might include the Luers, or Mexican poet Octavio Paz (one of the 14 members on the Fundación Cultural board) or any of Mexico's intellectuals, artists or entrepreneurs, elaborated her argument, I glanced at Mr. Littman. It was obvious he had been tapped as the man who could achieve that merger of art and popular appeal, the point man in a free-fire zone that some would call "debasing art" and others would call "reaching the people" — and that nobody would get exactly right.

His background could not have been more appropriate. At 47, he had the M.A. in art history, the track record with important institutions, the contacts, the savoir-faire, the exposure — he was just back from Berlin, Paris, London and New York. But he also had publications such as "A History of Television Commercials" for the

Right: A teen-age girl, flanked by her brother and sister, drags herself on her knees up a promenade in the center of the avenue toward the basilica's steps. **Above:** Art works in various media depict the Virgin of Guadalupe at the Centro Cultural.







S

ome wore the simple white of peasants and carried banners of the Virgin. Others were dressed like Aztecs. It seemed there were no boundaries, no limits; you could be anything, if designed to honor the memory of the Virgin.

American Film Institute, *Life: The First Decade* and *History of the Picture Postcard*. As we talked that afternoon, he was searching his office shelves for catalogs of recent exhibitions — Pablo Picasso to Miguel Covarrubias — but also looking for a videocassette of commercials pitching them.

He and Mrs. Azcarraga, not to mention Mr. Azcarraga, were not merely children of the media generation, but apostles for it. "I never think of playing down to an audience," Mr. Littman explained — his silk tie, pleated trousers and European-cut sports jacket a match for Mrs. Azcarraga. "I think of doing what interests me. If I spend two years putting something together, I don't want to be bored, and if I'm not, neither will the audience." At last he found the proper cassette and punched it into the Sony behind the door. "I just want people to react. I love it when they react."

The events that led Mr. Littman to the Centro began in 1981, when, as director of the Grey Gallery at NYU, he journeyed to Mexico City with Hayden Herrera, biographer of Frida Kahlo, the painter and longtime mistress of Diego Rivera. It was a whirlwind stop, but Mr. Littman was introduced to several persons in the vibrant Mexican art scene, including Alberto Raurrel, the Cuban-American director of the newly opened Museo Rufino Tamayo, a project of Televisa and a

forerunner of the Centro Cultural. In 1982, only a year into the job, Mr. Raurrel was dining in a fashionable Polanco restaurant when armed robbers stormed in. Mr. Raurrel challenged them and was shot dead.

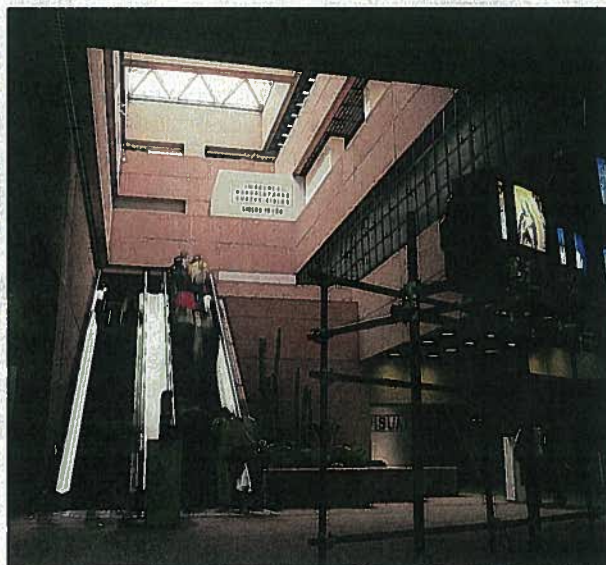
The suddenness and absurdity of the death made the tragedy slow healing, but in time Mr. Littman was offered the directorship. In 1983, he began commuting from New York. He wouldn't replace the well-liked Mr. Raurrel so much as continue the momentum of the project. At the Tamayo, Mr. Littman would have a chance to do things with art and museum space that he couldn't do elsewhere. The budget was good, and the immense resources of Televisa stood in pointed, much-envied contrast to the severely pinched budgets of facilities throughout the

world, especially in Mexico, where all major museums are operated under the government's Ministry of Education. Although the patronage of Televisa prompted considerable criticism of the Tamayo/Centro museum, in Mr. Littman's eyes the connection also enabled art exhibitions to reach millions of people through Televisa broadcasts. Private resources could be mobilized for the public good. Art could be presented in a way that would not frighten the non-elite. The possibilities were intoxicating.

Mr. Littman, a New York native, broke the news to his mother at the Russian Tea Room in Manhattan. She was proud of her son, the museum director, but the news hit Mexico City's art community like a left-handed compliment. "It was the same as if somebody from New York had been picked to head a museum in L.A.," Mr. Littman later recalled. Only more so. Artistic communities everywhere are insular and self-protective. Add to that sensitivity about Americans dropping in to run the best and brightest space in town and you have problems.

Not until 1986 did the Centro Cultural under Mr. Littman emerge as the force that, by 1987, would seize the very soul of Mexico and put it on display. In that year, a feud erupted between Rufino Tamayo and Televisa's Fundación Cultural, which

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Opposite: A moment of contemplation amid the noisy celebration. Above: At the Centro Cultural, a TV screen shows an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

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more or less pitted the new American against the octogenarian superstar of Mexican painting. Mr. Tamayo favored a permanent — static, to critics — orientation for the museum that bore his name, while Mr. Littman and his staff wanted to make waves — bring in Picasso, show off contemporary talent, give the museum a national following and an international reputation. “Mexico deserves to be part of the world, a very important part of the culture of the world,” Mrs. Azcarraga would later put it. “We wanted to share that and we didn’t want to be segregated.”

Disagreements ensued. Mr. Littman was attacked, viciously, in a Mexico City daily. Mr. Tamayo wouldn’t budge. Then Televisa, which had donated the land for the Tamayo museum and had taken over paying its bills after another industrial sponsor, the Agfa group of Monterrey, went broke, wearied of the bickering. The entire 92-person staff from the Tamayo took up a dare to “go open their own museum” and moved a few blocks away to a Televisa building used as the

press center for the 1986 World Cup soccer matches. They renamed it the Centro Cultural. The Tamayo went into government ownership.

Señor Littman sought to quell the controversies. He took Spanish lessons each morning, he mingled, he haunted the city’s galleries (“He’s the only museum director in the city who gets out and buys paintings,” one gallery owner said), but most of all he looked for exhibitions that would lure fresh faces to the Centro — at latest count about 4,000 a day, 10,000 on some weekends. The admission is about four cents — free on Sundays. *The Giacometti Family* featured the first known presentation of the works of the four Swiss relatives as such. *Leo Castelli and His Artists* brought in the works of Warhol, Pollock and 85 other artists associated with the famous New York gallery. Then came Covarrubias, and the Virgin, backed up by an impressive permanent collection that includes more than 1,300 photographs assembled by Manuel Alvarez Bravo.

Criticism of Mr. Littman did not stop — it never does in art, or politics or

culture. But for the moment, he outflanked it. Even the first exhibition at the Centro in 1986 was an end run. You might have expected anything for a premiere on the heels of a nasty controversy, but probably not *Momento Mori*, a collection of death images displayed to coincide with Mexico’s Day of the Dead, a Halloween-like religious holiday that reveres the spirits of the deceased. Like the Virgin exhibition, it was bold, provocative and public relations genius. If you think of a museum director as a circus ringmaster, Mr. Littman was booking the crowd pleasers. He was doing what he was hired to do.

“He’s made a wonderful example for other museums to follow,” Patricia Ortiz-Monasterio, co-owner of the vibrant OMR Gallery, told me. “I think many artists here still remain dubious because of the links to Televisa, but what matters is that Littman and the Center are bringing in art. And buying it. I think they’ve done a wonderful job.”

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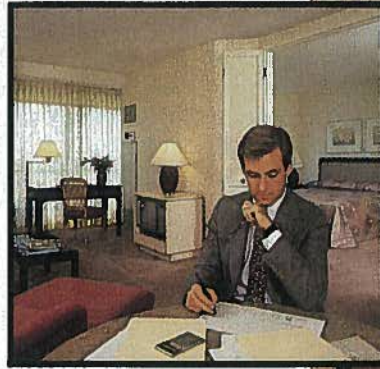
III

Outside the Centro Cultural, its modest red-brick façade almost hidden between two giant hotels, the Polanco district lops over into Chapultepec Park, home to the zoo, the castle and other museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Anthropological Museum and the Tamayo. Down car-congested Reforma Avenue and in front of every bank, since the peso began sliding toward 2,500 to 1, guards with riot helmets and machine guns waited for robbers. It was said there was a bank job almost every day, that it was usually the guards who were shot.

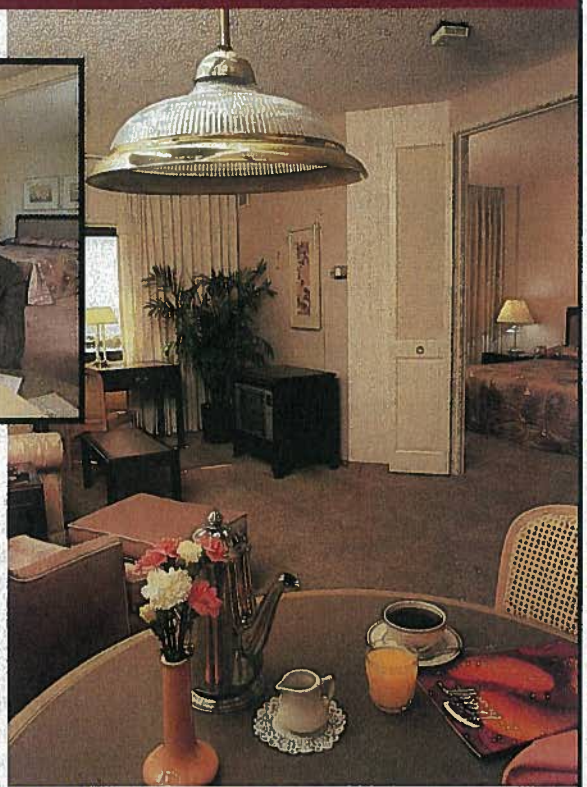
It would not have surprised me to have seen a small sticker or statuette or a postcard of the Virgin in a getaway car or on a guard's gunstock. I had seen *guadalupana* on almost every taxi dashboard and in uncountable windows. A considerable part of the 20th-century section of the Centro's exhibition was devoted to this popularization of the Virgin's image, which seems to have become an industry in its own right. Nor is it peculiar to Mexico. The Hispanic influx in the United States has sparked interest in the Virgin, not only in her religious role as the reincarnation of Mary but also as a kind of feminist hero. Recently in Austin I visited a young, decidedly non-religious intellectual. She listened to Laurie Anderson tapes and dressed punk and talked of deconstructionist theory, but in the center of her living room wall was a ceiling-high shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

That shrine, the images in the Centro, the key-chain Guadalupe madonnas on the taxicabs, the ornately framed portraits for sale on the streets — all of those things are tactile. You can buy them or see them or touch them, and they speak with the intensity of all art, vulgar or splendid, in degrees of credibility and seduction. And they can be powerful.

Standing in front of Baltazar de Echave Orio's 1606 painting of the Virgin, the first known portrait of the tilma image, and then winding my way through halls replicating the same image, but in hundreds of contexts, had stirred me deeply. Yet how could it compare to the celebration itself? Had Robert Littman captured the soul of Mexico in these remarkable images or was it just a magician's trick, a way of seeing the power of the Virgin without



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ART, MIRACLES AND MEXICO

really being able to feel it?

Lost among the Centro's paintings and icons and carvings, medallions and vestments, I traveled in my mind back to December 12. It was nearly noon, and I was part of the crowd filtering in from the city to the basilica — hundreds of thousands of us. On Guadalupe Avenue, the main approach, we were shoulder to shoulder. The movement was all forward, and slow. The streets were lined with vendors selling drinks in plastic sacks, pork rinds, oranges, children's dresses, sandals, pictures of Jesus. Here and there were groups of worshippers in special costumes, as you'd see at Mardi Gras. Some wore the simple white of peasants and carried banners of the Virgin. Others were dressed like Aztecs. I even saw a man dressed like a *ninja*. It seemed there were no boundaries, no limits; you could be anything, if designed to honor the memory of the Virgin.

I saw a young teen-age girl. Flanked on each arm by her brother and sister, she was dragging herself on her knees

up a promenade in the center of the avenue toward the basilica steps. I don't know how far she'd come like that. I had seen other penitents inching their way along as relatives shuffled blankets in front for kneepads, but in none had the agony been so apparent as in the girl. Her face was contorted in tears and pain under her thick spectacles. I wanted to ask why — why did she think the Virgin expected suffering? — but I couldn't. I had no right.

I made my way closer, pulled along by the crowd. Within a few blocks of the series of stone steps that lead up through iron gates to the basilica courtyard, I lost contact. I was aware of my body, and the people bumping into it, and the ones trying to get it to buy this trinket or that booklet or this rosary; but what I think of as my spirit had gone off like a young GI in a border cantina.

I heard the drums. Faintly, then above all else. I walked up the flights of steps into the courtyard. Thousands filled the great open area, but in

a dozen places the crowds parted to make way for circles of dancers. Most wore the same attire: loincloths, Aztec headdresses and, wrapped about their ankles, small seed-filled gourds known as *ojo de venado* (deer's eye), which shook like castanets. The participants weaved and bobbed in each circle, and the sum of the circles was one huge, rhythmic heart thump, driven by dozens of drums fashioned from barrels or casks.

With my fair hair and skin, I felt impossibly European among the mostly *indio* crowd. The smog parted for a moment and I could see peaks of some of the surrounding volcanoes. Those mountains had seen much here. They had seen a nation build a city from a lake and then a boatload of invaders come and exterminate that nation, and then a new nation rise from all that carnage, and a symbol of the unity of that havoc created just up the hill from where I stood.

On December 12, 1531, the Virgin appeared to Cuauhtlatohuac, née Juan Diego, for the fourth time in as many

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days. On her previous appearances, she had told Juan Diego to inform the bishop at nearby Tlaltelolco of her presence and to build a shrine on the spot so that she could dispense compassion, love and protection.

No one believed him, and Juan Diego wanted to give up. So on a sudden trip to find a priest for his dying uncle, Juan Diego avoided the route that had led him to the vision three times since December 9. The Virgin appeared anyway. She told Juan Diego not to concern himself about his uncle, that she would cure him. She then instructed Juan Diego to proceed again to the bishop, and to take with him roses from a nearby bush — growing on dry, rocky soil where no flowers had ever been seen. Juan Diego picked the roses and wrapped them in his apron, a common piece of Indian clothing.

At the chapel at Tlaltelolco, Juan Diego obtained an audience with Bishop Fray Juan de Zumarraga. He told his story and opened his cloak. The roses fell to the floor, but that was not why the bishop and his aides suddenly dropped to their knees. Imprinted on the cloak was a radiant image of the Virgin. She appeared to be walking slowly forward on a crescent moon, her hands together as if praying, and wearing a gold crown with 10 stars and a blue mantle adorned by 46 stars. A cherub appeared underneath, holding up her mantle, and 129 rays of light shot out from her silhouette.

Thus was the legend. The church immediately recognized the appearance as a divine miracle, and put the tilma in a chapel. The Virgin of Guadalupe became the most important religious symbol in Mexican culture. Within a decade, hundreds of thousands — millions, probably — of Indians converted to Catholicism. Military and economic pressures helped, but word of the Virgin, who after all had appeared not to a Spaniard but to a converted indio, was of inestimable persuasiveness.

Today, the legitimacy of the Virgin of Guadalupe is virtually uncontested, even in a country that separated church from state following the 1910 revolution, a country where priests and nuns cannot wear their habits publicly and where politicians don't attend church, at least in official capacity. The reason is not just that Mexico is almost totally Catholic; it is because the Virgin is

more than a religious figure: She is a symbol of melding. It doesn't matter whether her image was the work of a miracle or a brilliant church conspiracy involving a masterful painter well-schooled in the 17th-century European style and the mythology of Indian deities. To deny the Virgin would be to deny the Mexican race, which is essentially the product of Spanish and Indian fusion — violent and bloody fusion, but irreversible. The Virgin of

Guadalupe thus has appeared next to the Pope as well as on the banners of revolutionaries. "You can be against the church," said the painter Miguel Cervantes, "and still be for the Virgin." She is a symbol of political and religious primacy, and her power is not dissimilar to that of Allah.

How she can be felt! I wandered through the crowds in the courtyard for more than an hour. The drums thudded my brain to near hypnosis.

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Eventually, I made my way into the new basilica. Large signs over the doorways bore a strange admonition: "No balloons." I went in and tried to get through the crowds ringed around the amphitheater-style seating. At the front of the huge structure a Mass was in progress, and above the backdrop of the altar area was a large portrait of the Virgin.

It was too crowded, so I started for the steep stairs leading to El Cerrito. Penitents climbed, knee by raw knee, through tides of faithful. Reaching the chapel I had to squeeze inside, bunched between two elderly Indian grandmothers. The interior was small and ancient, full of spirits and fading murals. The altar was crowded with flowers and offerings. Women knelt along the railing and chanted a sad refrain, "Adios, adios, adios . . ." On a wall, a rendition of Christ bleeding from the crown of thorns was entitled *Señor de la Misericordia*. Next to it were coin boxes for offerings. I put several 100 peso coins into the slots. I put

more into a box for poor children. Then I was swept along with the crowd. Outside, I had to take several breaths.

It was early afternoon and the throngs increased in the streets below. My mind leapt back to the Centro Cultural. How did all this energy, however produced — from heaven or mass psychology — find expression in a nice clean building across a city where people's desperation drove them to drink gasoline and spew fire out at intersections, hoping to collect spare change? Was that the fate of art, to lose the essence of the passion of its time, to pale next to the event, the history it sought to preserve?

But Mr. Littman had told me a story. In putting together the Virgin exhibition, the Centro's staff had scoured the country for icons. In one small village, they obtained the permission of the local bishop and priest to borrow a painting for the show. But the bishop forgot to tell the townspeople, and when the Centro truck showed up to pack and ship the Virgin, the people gathered in

front and threatened to stone the invaders. The painting stayed; the museum crew left.

It is true, you cannot see that particular Virgin in the Centro's collection, but you can see hundreds of others, each with a history, each inspiring loyalty of impossible intensity. Two floors of such art is a presence that multiplies the events of December 12 from an entire country — from around the world. Each Virgin is testimony to the ability of 400 years of artists to find the critical emotion, the great moment of history or legend, and put it into a form that is a channel directly to the heart of the original primordial energy. That was what I saw in the museum, whether in the rich oils in ornate frames or the hand-size ex votos, in which ordinary people painted out scenes from blessings they had received. It is what the townspeople saw in their treasured parish portrait.

I remembered Mr. Littman driving his car past the garage shrine, his fascination with somehow putting this

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Small Golf Firm's New "S" Ball Takes Distance Title In Ohio Competition

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AKRON, O — It stands to reason that only one golf ball can be the longest. But a half dozen of the top makers, including TopFlite, Titleist and Pinnacle, have publicly claimed the distance title. One company — Maxfli — actually calls its DDH "the longest ball in history."

Recently an independent testing organization pulled the rug from under those advertising claims.

Using a mechanical hitting device (to be sure each ball got the same swing force), the Rubber Development Laboratories of Akron, Ohio compared eleven of "the world's longest balls," plus a newcomer submitted by a small golf company in Connecticut. The new ball outhit them all — Titleist, TopFlite, Pinnacle, Wilson, Hogan, Dunlop and five others — by up to 28 yards.

Elated by their success, the winning company is now seeking professional endorsements for their ball, and is taking steps to expand their production. In the meantime, news of the new ball's distance title has people flocking into their executive offices. "We're thinking of getting a cash register for our receptionist," quipped the company's president.

Twenty-eight extra yards from a golf ball is extraordinary because major manufacturers (Titleist, TopFlite, etc.) purposely restrict how far their balls can go,

making a golfer's skill the determining factor on distance.

The "S" ball disregards these self-imposed restrictions on distance. As one pro observed after playing 18 holes with it, "The thing is so hot it could drop scores into the 50's. It not only takes off like the Concorde, it gives you a steadier roll on long putts and grabs a green on an approach shot like a dropped cat. Frankly, it's a hustler's dream. A player could cut 10 strokes and his opponent wouldn't have a clue why."

The company refers to the ball publicly only by its code name, "S". Only a buyer knows the name actually on the ball.

To encourage golfers to try the ball (for fun or profit) the company *guarantees* it will outhit any ball by at least 30 yards. If it doesn't, buyers can keep *three "S" balls free*, and return the rest of their order for a full refund (less postage).

If you want to shoot a score that will terrify your competition, you can order the "S" ball direct. One dozen cost \$21.95 (plus \$1.95 shipping) ... two dozen cost \$39 (Save \$8) ... six dozen cost \$99 (Save \$42). Shipping is free on orders of two or more dozen. Send a check (or cc number and expiration date) to National Golf Center, (Dept. H-659), 500 S. Broad St., Meriden, CT 06450. Specify white or Hi-Vision™ yellow. CT and NY add sales tax. No P.O. boxes please. All orders are handled on a first come, first-served basis. Or call (203) 238-2712.

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symbolic power not only in a museum space, but also out into the world itself, mixing it all up, which is maybe what the Virgin is ultimately about. I thought of Paula Azcarraga's odd reply to my complaint that more people from the basilica, where crowds were uncountable, didn't also show up at the Centro, where there weren't even waiting lines. I wanted people to see both things, as I had done.

"It's hard for people to get here from the basilica," she said. "They might be tired, or it costs too much."

"You could run buses back and forth," I said, "if you really wanted to bring this to the people."

"No," she said without a moment's hesitation, "that would be cheating."

I'm sure she didn't mean it as a koan — a Zen puzzle — but I took it as one. Cheating, art, religion. I don't think a bus would be too much to ask. □

Rod Davis is senior editor for American Way.

THE TIME OF THE CAJUN

(FROM PAGE 77)

stroke of genius: The local jukebox operators were converting to 45 and needed records. Mr. Soileau had them.

"The word got out that there was a crazy guy doing French records," Mr. Soileau recalls. "Pretty soon, Lawrence Walker showed up with a tape of four tunes he'd made at KEUN in Eunice and asked me if I'd put them out. The old-time record guys — Eddie Shuler and George Khoury in Lake Charles — weren't doing much French music any more, so I said yes. Then Aldus Roger showed up. I found myself with a who's who of local music on my doorstep. I'd been calling my label Vee Pee after Ville Platte, but I decided to change the name to something more associated with me, so that's how Swallow Records came about."

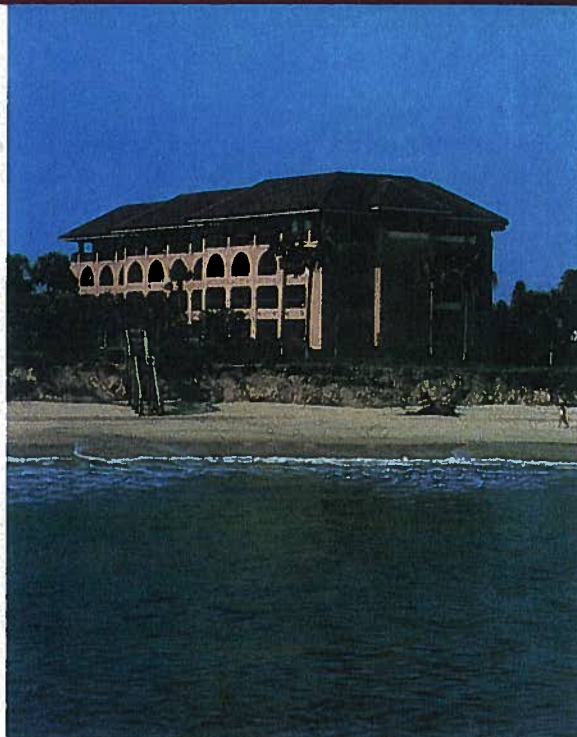
In the late '50s and early '60s, the Jin and Swallow labels recorded "swamp pop" by singers such as Tommy McLain and Rod Bernard, who were Cajuns but worked in an area closer to rock 'n' roll. Several of these songs caught on nationally, which made Mr. Soileau something of a magnate. He bought a record-pressing plant and began manufacturing records for many

small labels. In the time-honored tradition, he also made certain he had a share of the royalties.

It was those royalties that brought about Mr. Soileau's latest triumph. "I had a record I'd done on Rockin' Sidney about 25 years ago called 'Evil Woman,' and on the other side was something called 'You Ain't Nothin' but Fine.' Well, a few years ago, the Fabulous Thunderbirds and Rockpile and several other bands recorded that song,

and I got a bunch of royalties for Sidney, so I called him up to see how he was doing. It turned out he had an album he wanted somebody to put out, so I told him to bring the tape up here and I'd listen to it. He'd recorded it at home, in his garage, but it sounded just fine. So we put it out, and pretty soon we began to get action on one track, but the deejays were complaining that it sounded funny. I asked Sidney if he'd re-record it, and he told me

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