

Teaching Periodization and Polycentrism through a Church in Oaxaca, Mexico



Image 1: The Church Templo de la Compañia in Oaxaca, Mexico. Photograph by the Author.

Teachers of world history at any level of instruction know how problematic it can be to teach the central world history concepts of periodization and polycentrism (multiple origins or sources of events and ideas). Yet, these concepts can not only assist students to gain a command of the discipline of world history, but aid in their development of critical thinking skills. This article offers a means to develop both by offering specific learning activities associated with the local history of Jesuit missionary activity in 16th century CE Oaxaca,

Mexico. In the process, parallel core disciplinary concepts such as *cultural diffusion*, *technological diffusion*, *imperialism*, *macro-change*, *colonialism*, *secularization*, and *self-determination* can be addressed insofar as the teacher desires, and offers the means do so. Further, the learning activities that follow will offer the means to develop the important disciplinary thinking skills of *continuity and change* and *relationship of events over time and place*. If this sounds over-ambitious, teachers will find immediately below that these activities can be are calibrated for their classroom audience. Descriptions for educators of the history of the Church at the center of this and eighteen terms employed in the learning activities can be found in the Appendix. Moreover, a very accessible study of the place of Oaxaca in early modern world history by this author can be found in Volume 13, number 2 (2016) of this journal.

Learning Activities

This set of learning activities is complex and may fit an undergraduate level course more easily than a secondary school course of study. However, based on the author's lengthy experience of secondary world history teaching, a number of tasks in this model can be completed through efficient teacher planning. The learning activities have all been created in such a way that they may be employed separately at the discretion of educators.

Learning Activity One

The first learning activity should be teacher directed and it should be addressed to the class as a whole. In this segment, the students should be shown a map of Oaxaca State inside Mexico and a map of Oaxaca City inside Oaxaca State. Following this geographic orientation, the educator should introduce this photo of the Jesuit church, the Nuestra Senora de la Guadalupe or Templo de la Compania, which was constructed in fits and starts from c. 1576 CE to its completion in c. 1760 CE. This introductory activity should be brought to closure by the teacher through a short history of the Jesuit Order from its beginnings in the mid-16th century CE, Spain to the arrival of the initial Jesuits to Oaxaca in 1576 CE.

Learning Activity Two

The second student task should involve the learners in becoming aware of the details of eleven architectural and cultural elements of the La Compania Templo. This goal should be accomplished by the educator presenting a slide show of the selected images 2-13 during which the set of slides is purposively displayed out of correct chronological order. The full list of elements with an accompanying photo for each should be as follows:



Image 2: Nuestra Señora de la Guadalupe Chapel, Photograph by the Author.



Image 3: Cloister View of Vitruvian Aesthetic. Photograph by the Author.



Image 4: Pointed/Ogee Arch in North Portal. Photograph by the Author.



Image 5: Portrait of Charles 3rd - King of Spain - 1787 C.E. Source: Google Image, Labeled for Non-Commercial Re-Use.



Image 6: Cloister View of the Persian Garden. Photograph by the Author.



Image 7: Main Retablo with “Churriguesque” Details. Photograph by the Author.



Image 8: Mixtilinear Arch - North Portal. Photograph by the Author.

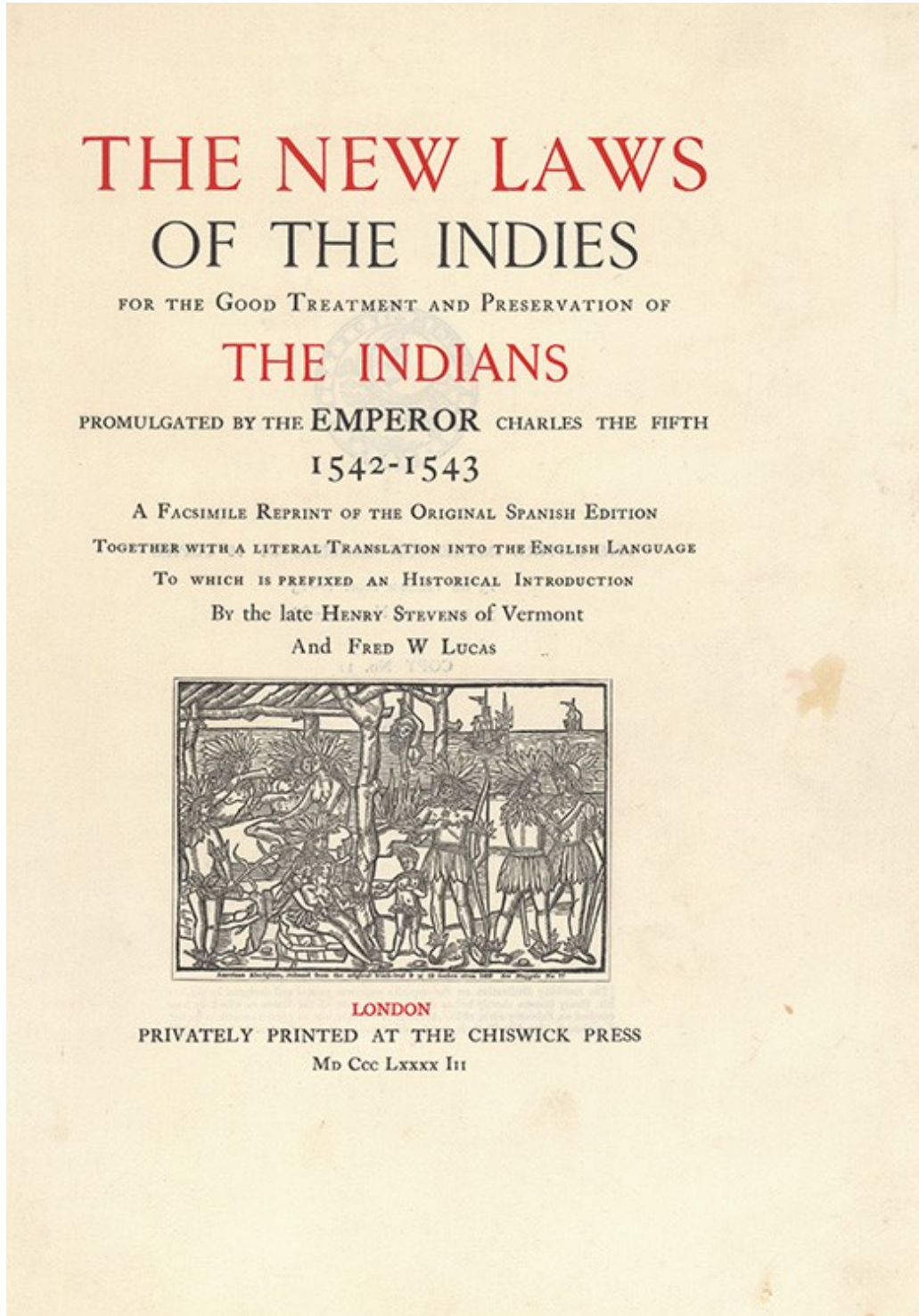


Image 9: *Laws of the Indies*, 1542-1573 CE. Source: Google Image – Labeled for Non-Commercial Re-Use.



Image 10: Roman Basilica Style Nave. Photograph by the Author



Image 11: Templo de la Compania, Renaissance Style East Portal. Photograph by the Author. See also Image 1, for its setting and fuller façade.



Image 12: Central Dome Over a Square Floor Space. Photograph by the Author.

Learning Activity Three

The total number of students in the class should be broken up into eleven sub-groups of two to three students per group. Each sub-group should be assigned one of the eleven elements of the church from the list in Learning Activity Two. Once the assigning of topics is completed, the teacher should assign a specific set of questions to each group relative to its assigned topic. The set of tasks relative to each element should be as follows:

Group 1 – Nuestra Senora de la Guadalupe Chapel

- a) Who was Miguel Hidalgo and how is he linked to this image?
- b) Why is the Virgin draped in the Mexican flag?

Group 2 – Cloister View of Vitruvian Aesthetic

- a) Contrast the sizes of the columns in the lower and upper floors of the cloister
- b) Research the relationship of the Ancient Roman architect Vitruvius and the contrasting shapes of the columns

Group 3 – Pointed/Ogee Arch in the North Portal

- a) What is the origin of the pointed arch and the ogee arch?
- b) How did the pointed arch and ogee arch get to Oaxaca, Mexico?

Group 4 – Portrait of Charles 3rd- King of Spain 1787 CE

- a) What decision about the Jesuits in Mexico did Charles 3rd make in 1769 CE?
- b) What happened to the Jesuit Convento - a full block in size - after 1767 CE?

Group 5 – Cloister View of Persian Garden

- a) When and where was the Persian Garden (Charbagh) first designed?
- b) What relationship between the Persian Garden and this cloister garden can you identify?

Group 6 – Main Retablo with Churriesque Elements

- a) What is an estipite?
- b) What is the history of estipites?

Group 7 – Laws of the Indies-1542- 1573 CE

- a) What is the history of the Laws of the Indies?
- b) Why is the Jesuit Church not located on the Zocalo but 20 yards away?

Group 8 – Mixtilinear Arch- North Portal

- a) What is the origin of the mixtilinear arch?
- b) How did the mixtilinear arch end up in Oaxaca, Mexico?

Group 9 – Roman Basilica Style Nave

- a) Why is the nave called a basilica style?
- b) Why does the nave have a side door?

Group 10 – Renaissance Style East Portal

- a) Why does the East Portal have an ancient Greek triangular pediment and an Ancient Roman arch over the door?
- b) What were these architectural elements doing in 16th century CE Oaxaca, Mexico?

Group 11 – Central Dome over a Square Floor Space

- a) What is the origin of this architectural element?
- b) How did it get to Oaxaca, Mexico?

Sources: Educator will meet with groups in class to discuss sources. Wikipedia may be used for guidance, but evidence must be from an educational source and handed in with answers to the assigned questions.

Learning Activity Four

Group members do the assigned research tasks in the time frame set by the teacher and then prepare a short presentation to the class as a whole. These presentations will specifically address the groups' assigned questions and must include specific evidence to support all claims including a list of sources consulted. They also must include all of the group members in the oral reporting. While the presentations are taking place, the non-presenting students should take their notes and the educator should illustrate the provided evidence with the original set of illustrations- see Learning Activity Two. At this juncture of the lesson, the teacher should complement the data in the presentations with relevant expertise.

Learning Activity Five

Once the group presentations are completed, all of the discussed aspects of the Jesuit Church should be placed in correct chronological order and classified into one of these four conventional time periods: Ancient World History- 7000 BCE- 500 CE, Post-Classic World History- 500-1500 CE, Early Modern World History- 1500-1800 CE. and Modern World History- 1800-2000 CE. This organization performed by students and instructor would appear as follows upon completion:

Ancient World History- 7000 BCE- 500 CE

Persian Garden- 550 BCE

Roman Basilica- c. 150 BCE

Vitruvius- 20 BCE

Post Classic World History- 500-1500 CE

Dome Over Square- 535 CE

Ogee Arch- 884 CE

Mixtilinear Arch- 976 CE

Early Modern World History- 1500-1800 CE

Italian Renaissance- 1450 CE

Virgin of Guadalupe- 1531 CE

Laws of the Indies- 1542-1573 CE

Churriesque- 1749 CE

Charles 3rd- 1767 CE

Modern World History- 1800-2000 CE

Miguel Hidalgo- 1810 CE

Learning Activity Six

Using the chronological organization from learning activity five, the entire class with the assistance of the teacher should place all of the aspects on a global timeline. The completed timeline would appear as such:

7000 BCE _____

Ancient History-7000 BCE-500 CE

Persian Garden- C.E.-c. 500 BCE

Roman Basilica-W.E.- 150 BCE

Vitruvius- W.E.- 20 BCE

500 CE _____

Post-Classic History- 500 CE-1500 CE

Dome Over Square- M.E.- 535 CE

Ogee Arch- C.A.- 884 CE

Mixtilinear Arch- W.E.- 976 CE

1500 CE _____

Early Modern History-1500-1800 CE

Italian Renaissance- W.E.- c. 1450 CE

Virgin of Guadalupe- L.A.- 1531 CE

Laws of the Indies- L.A.- 1542-1573 CE

Churriesque Architecture- W.E.- 1749 CE

Charles 3rd –W.E.- 1767 CE

1800 CE _____

Modern History- 1800-2000 CE

Miguel Hidalgo- L.A.- 1810 CE

Polycentric Code: W.E. – Western Europe, M.E. – Middle East, C.A. – Central Asia, L.A. – Latin America

Learning Activity Seven

This learning activity will develop the core notion of any history- *periodization*. For this purpose, the educator should employ the completed outline above. Students should then be presented with a series of questions for which they will discuss their responses in small groups of two or three. The teacher should follow the student discussions with insights that will develop a fairly comprehensive notion of *periodization*. The set of questions to be addressed is as follows:

1. Why are there dividing lines at 7000 BCE, 500 CE, 1500 CE, and 1800 CE?
2. Are the dividing lines at 500 CE, 1500 CE and 1800 CE related to important *macro-changes* in world history?
3. Do the dividing lines have to be where they are?
4. This timeline is an example of a periodization system. Based on the example, what is a working definition of *periodization*?
5. Why is the time period from 500 CE to 1500 CE referred to as Post-Classic History rather than the conventional Medieval History?

Based upon student discussions and educator's insights, the following points about *periodization* in world history should be emphasized:

1. Timeline dividing lines are important because they represent *macro-changes* in world history
2. Since this is a world history timeline, the dividing lines are identified with seminal events of the past such as the voyages of Columbus and Da Gama at c.1500 CE. By inference, if the timeline were about the history of science or human demographics, the dividing lines would probably be in different positions such as the global population decline caused by the Black Death in the 14th century CE.
3. The placement of dividing lines on a timeline is not absolute because the choice of their location is a function of the historical perspective of the designer. For example, many world history scholars consider the rise of Islam in the 7th century CE, as more important to world history than the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the late 5th century CE. Consequently, for these world historians the dividing line at 500 CE would be moved to 650 CE.
4. Definition of *Periodization* - A rational attempt to organize the past through identifications of *macro-change* in history
5. A system of *periodization* may be an example of revisionist history. For example, many world historians reject the term Medieval for the period from c. 500 CE to c. 1500 CE because of its Eurocentric background. These scholars substitute the term Post-Classic

to this time period to indicate that by c.500 CE the classic civilizations in India, China and the Middle East were also all gone in addition to the Western Roman Empire that collapsed in 476 CE.

Learning Activity Eight

Students will complete this learning activity with a much greater understanding of the *polycentric* nature of world history. The teacher should begin a large class discussion with this question: Considering our global timeline, has this learning experience been only about Oaxacan events? After some time for student thought, the educator should make the point that the narrative of La Compania Templo has been a *polycentric* story, which involves events from five global regions. Not only can this discussion develop the notion of *polycentrism* but it can efficiently lead to a reinforcement of the concept of *cross-regional connections*. For example, the Persian charbagh in the church's cloister is a function of *cultural diffusion* from Central Asia through the Middle East, North Africa, Southern Spain and ending up in New Spain.

Learning Activity Nine

If time allows, the teacher may elect to go beyond the topics of *periodization* and *polycentrism*. This goal could be easily addressed through an effective use of the global timeline from learning activity six and the corpus of information from the entire learning experience. Students should be sent to search for examples of previously learned, core world history themes because many of them are in this lesson: for example- *cultural diffusion*- ogee arch and many others, *technological diffusion*- hydraulics in charbagh, *imperialism*- creation of Spanish city of Anteguerra/Oaxaca, *macro-change*- Columbus/Cortez, *colonialism*-Laws of the Indies, *self-determination*- Hidalgo, *secularization*- Jesuit Convento after 1767 CE.

Continuity and *Change* in world history can easily be demonstrated by having students compare and contrast the main façade of the 16th century CE iglesia and the main retablo in the apse of the church. The east front of the edifice is a pure Renaissance composition with architectural elements from Ancient Greece and Rome. Whereas the main retablo is 18th century CE. Churriguesque in nature with its many estipites but it also contains some Moorish mixtilinear arches and a statue of Ignatius Loyola at the apex.

The *relationship of events over time and place* is also a significant world history understanding and the global timeline plus the corpus of lesson data facilitate the identification of many of these. With the instructor's guidance, students can be led to see the influence of the Enlightenment- c.1750 CE on the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 CE. Working in pairs, students will be able to identify the effects of the French Revolution- c. 1789-1799 CE on Miguel Hidalgo. They will also be able to trace the connection between the Protestant Reformation- 1517 CE. and the Catholic Counter Reformation-c. 1545 CE on the arrival of the Jesuits to Oaxaca in 1576 CE.

Conclusion

Students, who experience these learning activities with an effective instructor, will initially learn quite a bit about the missionary project of the Jesuits in colonial Oaxaca. They will also gain insight into how much local history has a global dimension. The notion of *periodization* will be clarified and the theme of *polycentrism* in world history will be reinforced. Finally, in terms of content, the learners will realize that architecture can be an excellent source of world history understanding.

Participation in these activities will also greatly supplement the students' academic skill development. The group tasks will facilitate the building of work cooperation skills. They will also require a high level of historical research and interpretation to successfully complete. In addition, the requirement that all group members orally participate in the reports will directly address students' ability to articulate historical arguments.

Appendix

This background information for educators includes a short description of eighteen terms from the learning activities described in the article. Each one will be followed by a link that can be accessed for further information on the topic. Many more links on all of these topics can be found by a simple google search. Whether the links are shared with students to assist in their research is up to individual teachers.

1. **Basilica Single Nave**—The nave of a Catholic church is the central part of the church that connects the entrance to the apse or altar area, which is usually situated in the East. Basilica is a Latin term that has two meanings. The first relates to its use by the Roman Catholic Church today. In that context, a basilica is a church that has been designated as an important place of worship by the Pope. For world historians, a basilica was a Roman pre-Christian law court. The layout of the court was adopted by the Early Christian Church in c. 400 CE as its fundamental design for places of worship with the altar in the East which was the pre-Christian location of the Roman judges. See employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth212/early_christian_basilica.html
2. **Central Dome Over a Square Floor Space and Pendentives**—The Ancient Romans developed the dome and used it to cover some of their places of worship such as the Pantheon in Rome c. 125 CE. Roman builders, however, never figured out how to place a round dome over a square floor space. Consequently, the floor space beneath the dome in the Pantheon is a pure circle. Byzantine architects working for Emperor Justinian solved this problem and applied their solution to the dome of Hagia Sophia completed in Constantinople of 537 CE. As you can see in photo number 11, the round dome of the Jesuit Church in Oaxaca, Mexico is supported by four triangular architectural elements called pendentives that transfer the weight of the dome down four columns that are placed in four corners of a square floor space. For Hagia Sophia, see

www.hagiasophia.com/hagia-sophia-dome, For pendentives see www.thoughtco.com/pendentives

3. Charbagh—Charbagh is a Persian word for a garden design that dates to the Achaemenid Empire of Ancient Iran c. 500 BCE. The charbagh must be enclosed, have a water source in the middle which is surrounded by four green geometric areas of plantings. Muslims adopted the design as they conquered Persia in c. 654 CE and related its design to the Garden of Paradise in the Koran. As a result of Islamic imperialism, the charbagh design was taken by Muslims throughout the Middle East, across North Arica and into al-Andalus- southern Spain. Charbagh—See www.gardenvisit.com
4. Charles the Third of Spain—Charles the Third was the king of Spain from 1759 to 1788 CE. He was greatly influenced by the Enlightenment and therefore sought to modernize his kingdom. On 4/5/1767 CE, he expelled the Jesuits from Mexico. See www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/va-jesuits-4.htm
5. Churrigueresque Details—Churrigueresque architecture was a very elaborate style of architecture that developed in the late 17th century CE Spain and remained popular there until the mid-18th century CE. It was developed by the Churriguera Family in Spain- ergo the name. The style became much more popular in colonial New Spain than in Spain. See www.britannica.com/art/Churrigueresque
6. Convento—In the United States, we normally distinguish between a monastery and a convent with monastery being a home for religious men and convent being a residence for religious females. In Mexico today, there is no distinction, a convento may be a residence for religious males or females. See <https://www.colonialmexico.net/the-sixteenth-century-the-age>
7. Estipite—The estipite is a form of column or pilaster featured in Churrigueresque architectural style. When one looks at an estipite it becomes quite obvious that it is only a decorative feature because its base is smaller than its middle section. Consequently, it cannot carry any weight. In the Jesuit Church, there are many on the retablo or altar screen that is in photo 6. See www.britannica.com/topic/estipite
8. Jesuit Order—The Jesuit Order is a Catholic religious order founded by Ignatius Loyola in Paris, France during the year 1540 CE. They became staunch supporters of the Pope during the period of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter Reformation. One of their greatest goals was to spread Catholicism through missionary work. In pursuit of this, Jesuit missionaries were at work in India, Southeast Asia, Japan and China in the mid to late 16th century CE. They initially arrived in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1576 CE. tendenciaelartedeviajar.com/en/2019/07/history/jesuit-missionaries-2
9. Miguel Hidalgo—Miguel Hidalgo was a Catholic priest and a Mexican born criollo in early 19th century CE New Spain, who was greatly influenced by his Enlightenment education. In 1810 CE he started a rebellion against Spanish born “peninsulares,” who had taken over New Spain from the viceroy. His army broke down after some military

defeats and some social class differences. Hidalgo was captured by the Spanish and shot as a traitor in 1811 CE but the rebellion he started in 1810 CE eventually led to Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 CE. Early in the rebellion, Hidalgo placed the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on his battle flag. See www.thoughtco.com/father-miguel-hidalgo-y-costilla-biography-2136418

10. Mixtilinear Arch—The mixtilinear arch was developed in Moorish Spain during the early Taifa Kingdoms period c. 1060 CE. Its main purpose is at least as much decorative as structural, and it contains many angles. From 11th century CE, it spread throughout the Post-Classic/Medieval Islamic world. See www.jstor.org/stable/20840025
11. Nave—The nave is the central section of most Christian churches. Traditionally, the nave is a rectangular architectural element that connects the entrance of the building to the sacred part of the structure, which is known as the apse. Roman law courts or basilicas were the prototype for the Christian nave. See www.britannica.com/topic/nave
12. New Laws of the Indies—1573 CE.—The New Laws of the Indies were promulgated by King Philip the Second in 1573 CE and they were a corpus of 148 laws that dealt with urban planning in New Spain. They employed many of the ideas of the Ancient Roman architect Vitruvius and the Italian Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti and they reinforced much of the urban design used in New Spain since the 1520's CE. One of the central ideas was that the new Spanish towns in New Spain had to be built in a grid pattern that would run north-south and east-west off a rectangular main plaza. The laws also stated that only one church could be on the main plaza and that was the cathedral representing the bishop and the Pope. Consequently, the Jesuit Church in Oaxaca is located about 20 yards off the main plaza or zocalo. In fact, the photo of the east façade in this paper was taken from the southwest corner of the main plaza. See www.academia.edu/10311737/Laws_of_the_indies
13. Nuestra Senora de la Guadalupe—Our Lady of Guadalupe—The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is the single most important religious image in Mexico period. It represents a “miraculous” appearance of the Catholic Virgin Mary to an Aztec indigenous in 1531 CE. The woman in the image is clearly indigenous in facial features and her garments use colors only allowed for Aztec royalty. In 1810 CE, Miguel Hidalgo placed her image on his battle flag in the beginning months of the Mexican War for Independence from Spain, which was ultimately successful in 1821 CE. Consequently, the Virgin of Guadalupe is also a very important nationalist image in Mexico today. See www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/early-europe-and-colonial-americas/colonial-americas/a/virgin-of-guadalupe
14. Ogee Arch—The ogee arch is an architectural element that has a beautifully crafted pointed arch at its apex. Central Asia is the place of origin of this arch design and it was adopted by Muslims in c. 651 CE when they conquered Sassanid Persia. Through the process of cultural diffusion, the design of the arch was taken throughout the entire

Post-Classic Islamic world including Moorish Spain. See <https://study.com/learn/lesson/ogee-arches.html>

15. Persian Garden—Please see number three in this appendix since Persian Garden and Charbagh are the same thing
16. Renaissance East Portal—Facade—a Renaissance façade is one that features pure Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman architectural elements. It also usually presents these elements in a symmetrical composition. The Jesuit church in Oaxaca has an East façade that has an Ancient Greek pediment, a pure Ancient Roman arch over the door and the entire composition is balanced. See <https://architectureofcities.com/renaissance-architecture>
17. Vitruvian Aesthetic—Vitruvius was an Ancient Roman architect, who in c. 40 BCE wrote his “De Architectura” or “Ten Books on Architecture”. This work follows the typical Renaissance narrative of being lost in Post-Classic World History and being found in the 15th century CE. In Vitruvius’s case, the story is true. His architectural treatise was re-discovered in 1414 CE and published by the Italian humanist Leon Battista Alberti in 1450 CE. His work is the only surviving architectural treatise from the Greco-Roman period and it had great influence in colonial New Spain. Specifically, Vitruvius believed that if architectural elements diminish in size the higher they are placed in a building composition, this would be aesthetically pleasing to the viewer. With regard to the photo number 2 above of the cloister of the Jesuit Church in Oaxaca, if one looks carefully it will become obvious that the architect was a student of Vitruvius. The columns of the first-lower register are larger than the corresponding elements in the second register. See www.britannica.com/biography/vitruvius, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proportion_\(architecture\)#Roman_architecture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proportion_(architecture)#Roman_architecture)
18. Zocalo—Zocalo is a Mexican name for the main plaza of some of the Spanish colonial cities in New Spain. As described in number 12 of this appendix, the New Laws of the Indies from the Spanish crown mandated that any new Spanish town in New Spain had to be built around a rectangular main plaza. Furthermore, all of the streets in the four cardinal directions had to emanate off the four corners of the plaza. In some Mexican cities such as Mexico City, Puebla and Oaxaca, the main plaza is called the zocalo. In other Mexican cities, the central plaza is called the Central Garden or Plaza Mayor. Regarding the zocalo in Oaxaca City and the New Laws of the Indies, it was mandated that the only church to be allowed on the main plaza was the Cathedral, which represented the Pope. Consequently, the Jesuit Church was built about fifteen yards off the Southwest corner of the zocalo. See <https://xaca.mx/en/experience-old-fashioned-oaxaca-in-the-citys-zocalo/>

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