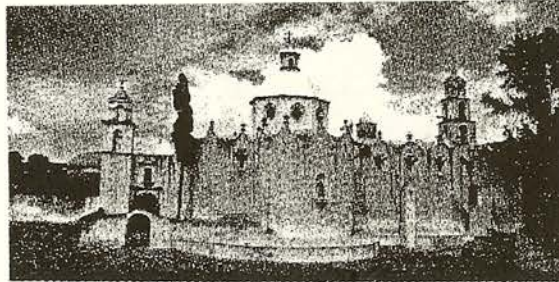


LOS ANGELES TIMES

CALENDAR

Monday, November 25, 2002



HIDDEN AWAY: Exterior of 18th century church.

Hope restored

An unusual L.A.-based philanthropy group for the arts is aiding endangered historic properties around the globe.

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC
Times Staff Writer

ATOTONILCO, Mexico — It's a sunny Saturday afternoon in San Miguel de Allende as a group of Los Angeles philanthropists boards a chartered bus with a flashy paint job. As the bus heads north on the Dolores Hidalgo Highway and turns west onto a dirt road leading to the tiny village of Atotonilco, the passengers chat about their children, the stock market, last night's margaritas and the best places to buy Mexican jewelry. But when they disembark, stroll down a path lined with stalls of Catholic goods and approach the village's claim to fame, an 18th century church in a walled complex, they snap to attention.

The time has finally come for the group — which banded together five years ago and calls itself the Friends of Heritage Preservation — to see the results of its biggest project to date: the restoration of the Calvary Chapel of the Sanctuary of Jesus of Nazareth. An astonishing shrine, it's austere on the outside but so elaborately decorated inside that it's popularly known as the Sistine Chapel of Mexico.

It's also an extraordinary labor of love. Founded in 1740 and built over 36 years by Father Luis Felipe Neri de Alfaro — who hired an otherwise unknown artist, Miguel Antonio Martinez de Pocasangre, to carry out his imaginative plan for filling the walls and ceilings with religious imagery and text — the improbable monument might also be likened to Los Angeles' Watts Towers, constructed over 34 years by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia.

The Atotonilco sanctuary originated as a spiritual retreat near thermal hot springs, and it has become a major destination for Mexican pilgrims and penitents. But by 1996 it had fallen into such disrepair that the World Monuments Fund, a New York-based conservation organization, put the church on its worldwide "Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites."

American Express Co., founding sponsor of the World Monuments Watch program, donated \$20,000 to kick-start the conservation at Atotonilco. Several nonprofit organizations contributed to the restoration of the nave and its side chapels. But the Calvary Chapel, a wing of the church that was once its crowning glory, seemed hopeless.

"It was such a wreck, no one would touch it," says Suzanne Booth, a former paintings conservator at the Getty Conservation Institute who founded the Friends of Heritage Preservation. But it was perfect for the Friends, who gave \$300,000 to restore the chapel. Although their contribution amounts



Photos by AUGUSTIN ESPINOSA Courtesy of Friends of Heritage Preservation

RESURRECTION: *Paintings in the Calvary Chapel of the Sanctuary of Jesus of Nazareth in Atotonilco, Mexico, before (below) and after work by L.A.-based Friends of Heritage Preservation and Mexico's government.*

to less than half the \$800,000 spent on the project, the Friends managed the conservation and brought in matching funds from the Mexican government.

"This group does things differently," says computer tycoon Peter Norton, a high-profile arts patron who joined the 20-member group precisely because it operates informally and takes on projects that tend to, in his words, fall between the cracks.

A banner on the front of the church welcomes the Los Angeles benefactors while representatives of Atotonilco, the Mexican state of Guanajuato and the federal government form a reception line near the entrance. When the Friends go inside, a youthful choir sings and Father Fernando Manriquez performs a short service.

"Art is like music," he says. "It's a
[See Group, Page E8]



A church's prayers are answered

[Group, from Page E1]

universal language that heightens the spirit. May God repay you for your generosity."

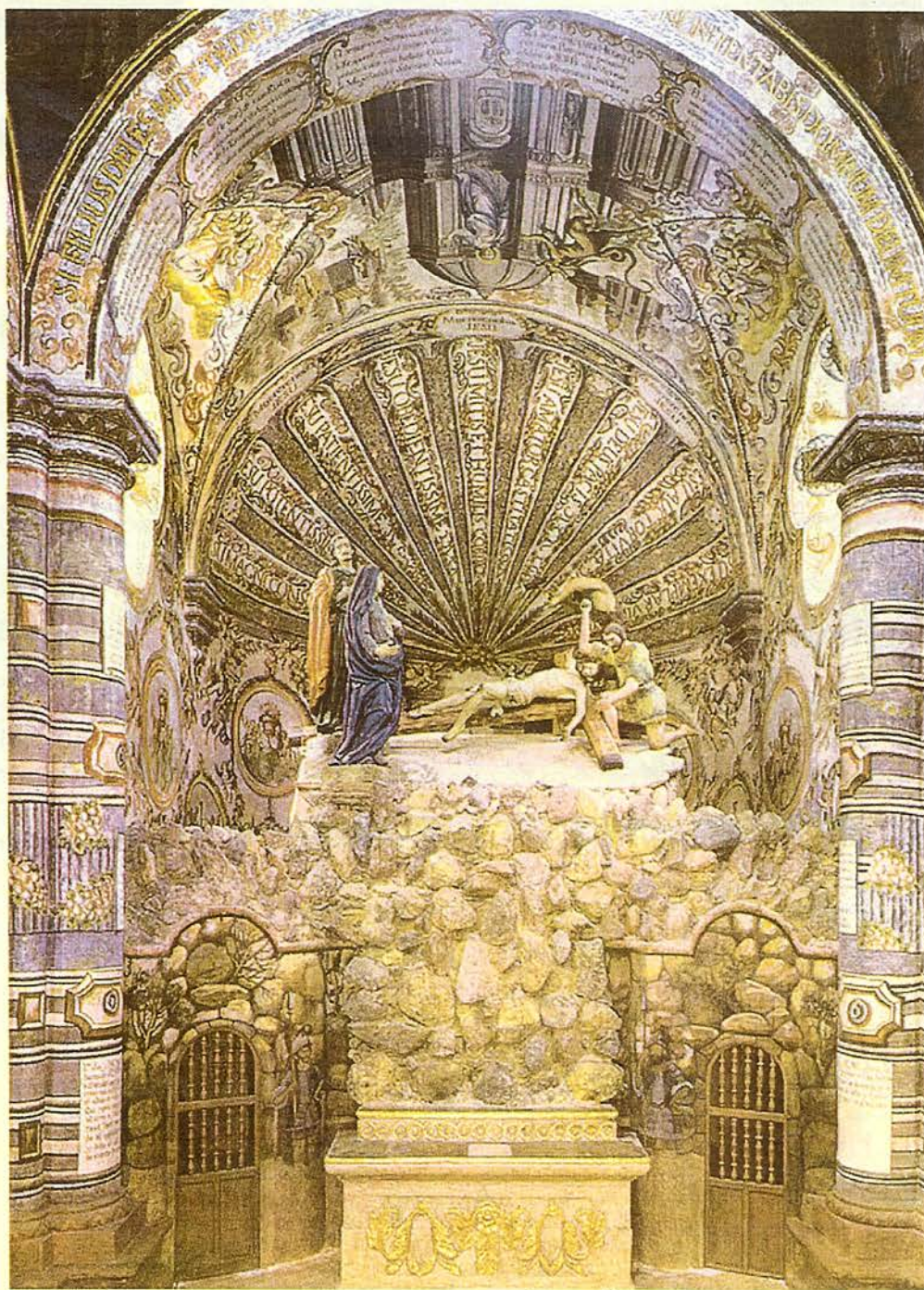
Then comes the moment of truth. As the visitors enter the Calvary Chapel, they break into smiles and whip out cameras.

"The first time I came here, I had tears in my eyes because I couldn't believe we were going to spend all that money on a place that was such a mess," says Booth's husband, David. "Now I have tears in my eyes because it's so beautiful."

Dedicated to Holy Week, when pilgrims flock to Atotonilco, the chapel is about 75 feet long and 45 feet wide — nearly as large as the main body of the church. The floor plan is shaped like a Roman cross, and the vaulted ceiling is punctuated by small, cross-shaped windows. Three altars, positioned where the cross-piece of the floor plan intersects with the main shaft, are topped by simulated rock that represents the hill of Calvary. Above the rock, in large, scalloped niches, groups of life-size painted sculptures depict scenes of the Crucifixion.

Visitors who approach the altars pass a series of religious paintings on canvas. But most of the walls and soaring, arched ceiling are covered with hand-painted biblical text and a profusion of fanciful imagery inspired by an odd mix of Austrian etchings and indigenous folklore. The life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus are enacted by a cast of characters including cherubs, angels, Roman soldiers, devils and grotesque demons.

When the Friends first saw the chapel, about three years ago, the paintings were obscured by grime. Water had seeped through the roof and foundation and around the windows, causing further damage. The sculptures were broken and their once-bright surfaces were pitifully dull. Even more discouraging, Suzanne Booth says, was a section around one of the sculptural scenes that had been slathered in muddy brown paint.



AUGUSTIN ESPINOSA Courtesy Friends of Heritage Preser

RESTORED GLORY: An interior view of the chapel after the project was completed. Most of the walls and ceiling are covered with hand-painted biblical text and a profusion of fanciful imagery.

The first step to fixing the mess was "about \$100,000 of work that you don't see — digging drainage ditches around the chapel, sealing the windows and repairing the roof," says Miguel Angel Corzo, a consultant to the Friends who directed the Getty Conservation Institute from 1990 to 1998. He is currently president of the University of Arts in Philadelphia and heads the nonprofit Global Alliance for Conservation, USA.

Corzo enlisted Augustin Espinosa, whom he calls "the best conservator in Latin America," to restore the chapel. With a team of 20 Mexican assistants, Espinosa removed paint that wasn't part of the original artwork and cleaned the walls and ceilings, a painstaking process executed with cotton swabs.

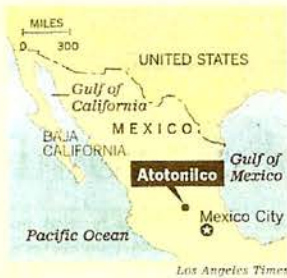
"We were surprised to find that the original work was in rather good shape," Espinosa tells the Friends. The goal was to "respect the authenticity of the work," he says, while bringing the paintings back to a condition that allows worshippers to understand the message. The conservators touched up places where they could determine what had been lost and toned some sections to maintain a balance of color throughout the ensemble, but added nothing new.

The best thing about the project is that the chapel can finally be used for its intended purpose after many decades of neglect and several years of restoration, Suzanne Booth says. It's also a notable accomplishment for an unusual philanthropic group that is still forging its direction.

Booth, who met Corzo while they were both employed by the Getty, no longer works as an art conservator, but it's still her passion. About six years ago, she and her husband, a founder of Dimensional Fund Advisors, a mutual-funds management firm, consulted with Corzo to discuss possible ways of being of assistance to the field. Instead of sending money to a large organization with a broad agenda, such as the World Monuments Fund, or joining a support group that is allied to a particular country, region or site, they decided to form an independent, flexible organization that would fund projects that others might not tackle.

"We like to make a difference," Suzanne Booth says.

Corzo, whose work at the Getty Conservation Institute always involved collaborations with groups in the countries where the projects were located, suggested that the Booths leverage their funds by forming partnerships. They set up the



'It was such a wreck no one would touch it.'

— SUZANNE BOOTH

Friends of Heritage Preservation founder, on chapel project

Friends as a "charitable giving group," Suzanne Booth says. Although it does not have tax-exempt status — deliberately, to avoid getting mired in bureaucracy — it works with nonprofit organizations and thus qualifies for tax breaks.

Members pay \$25,000 in dues every two years. The money is kept in a holding account managed by the Jewish Community Foundation, which sends checks to designated recipients.

So far, the Friends have joined forces with the Getty Conservation Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum on several projects. The group gave \$120,000 to the conservation of "América Tropical," a mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros on Olvera Street. (The Getty has provided major support for the \$4.5-million project, expected to go on view in 2004.) The Friends also paid transportation and insurance costs to bring European Old Master paintings from impoverished German museums and New York's Hispanic Society to L.A., for treatment at the Getty.

One ongoing project involves four medieval panel paintings given to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art by William Randolph Hearst. Although LACMA has a conservation laboratory, it doesn't have the means to correct serious splits and expansion in the artworks' wood structure.

The Friends sent the panels to a wood specialist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Upon their return, they will be cleaned by LACMA conservator Joseph Fronck.

What's next? That's up to the



AUGUSTIN ESPINOSA Courtesy Friends of Heritage Preservation

MUCH WORK TO DO: The chapel, designed to commemorate Holy Week, as it appeared before the project got underway.



DAVID BOOTH

ON TOUR: Founder Suzanne Booth, at the sanctuary, says Friends likes "projects that have a beginning, a middle and end."

group, Booth says.

"We like projects that have a beginning, a middle and end," she says, noting that the most satisfying projects are relatively contained and yield concrete results. But that leaves lots of possibilities, including a large mosaic at the Russian Academy of

Sciences in St. Petersburg and host of sites in Mexico.

"Excitement is the key thing the group discuss potential project on the plane back to Los Angeles. Doing good work is the point, he says, "but you'll lose the group without excitement."