Concerning the photographs of Mexican Church Art, taken by:

Ellen Auerbach, New York City and Eliot F. Porter, Santa Fe, N.M.

In 1955, we, Ellen Auerbach and Eliot F. Porter, went to Mexico to photograph Church Art. Our trip was the outcome of a short trip to Mexico in 1950 by E.F.P who at that time was greatly impressed by the mixture of Spanish and Indian culture found in the churches. Probably because of the difficulties involved, the beautiful interiors of these churches had rarely been photographed and never in color.

We were equipped with a sketchy knowledge of Spanish and a variety of cameras (two 35 mm-two 2¼ reflex-two 4x5 view cameras plus a 16 mm movie camera). The trip lasted four and a half months, covered territory of Mexico from Nogales to San Cristobal las Casas. Over 10,000 miles by Chevrolet carryall and 1000 miles by plane, train, taxi, and bus to Yucatan and Chiapas.

We visited literally hundreds of churches, some for minutes, some for days. We also photographed markets, pyramids, temples, ruins, some landscapes ~~&c~~ over 3000 pictures in all most of which are in color.

It is one of the uses of modern photography to make exhaustive statistical records. Flashlights and fast films facilitate the process. In our collection we rarely considered this aspect. Our only goal was to get pictures which show the saints and their surroundings as they are revered by the Mexican people. Therefore, we decided to use only the existing illumination however dim and unsuitable it seemed from a photographic viewpoint. We made very long exposures. Most of the time, moving objects had to be sacrificed. Tripods had to be used and no "candid shots" were possible. Therefore, permission had to be obtained to take pictures; this was often a major obstacle especially when it came to Indian village churches. Often the exposure-meter showed no reaction at all and we literally worked in the dark. But, because photofilm can accumulate light through time, some of the resulting pictures show more than met the eye. We never planned or arranged

anything and had to prevent the astonished Indians from beautifying the altars. This method meant a great effort in time and patience but it seemed the only way to catch some of the atmosphere and essence of what we saw.

Mexico is being industrialized at a rapid pace; its highways extended and improved; the people presented with the blessings of modern living. Storebought things are preferred to their own handicrafts. More and more churches are being renovated. The touching handcarved images with their home-made clothes replaced by hideous stereotype plaster saints. Fluorescent light fixtures infest places where candles used to flicker. Old floors are being ripped out and loud-patterned machine-made tiles put in their place. The change is greatest in prosperous towns and villages near the highways.

Although these pictures represent neither a complete nor a methodical collection (barely could the surface be scratched even in four and a half months) they represent an already partly historical record, for some of the churches were being renovated even while we took pictures in them.