

I have been going to San

Since the early 1970's I have been an Annual guest of the Hydens at their splendid house in San Miguel de Allende, a beautiful Colonial town about two hundred miles north west of Mexico City. On my many painting forays in and about ^{San Miguel} ~~the town~~ I often come upon a small Chapel just off a dusty road about twenty minutes from town. The building had been abandoned for many generations. Though cracked and crumbling and completely empty, the structure was still standing - a testament to the sturdy craftsmanship of the early friars and their Indian converts. Few people know about this church, but it is thought to date from the 1570's. There

still are remains of charming 18th Century ^{ceilings} ~~frescoes~~ ^{the walls} ~~which can be seen~~ ^{apparently} now and then beneath ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~structure~~ ^{structure} of Cordel ~~some~~ ^{of} century of Cordel smoke.

As a life long student of precolonial cultures of Mexico I often see ~~some~~ ancient symbolism and ~~hidden~~ ^{hidden} messages that are hidden from the casual tourist with little or no knowledge of Mexican Gods, and this place was no exception.

As I ~~placed~~ ^{changed} my painting equipment about me in the dusty field frontier, the

the Chapel, I enjoyed watching the
comings and goings of Swallows who
had built their nests within the
dark recesses of the building. It was the Swallows in fact
that had ~~attracted~~ really made me want
to paint the Chapel in the first place.
For me they gave a very special poetic meaning
to the scene.

Unlike the Judaeo-Christian Religion
of the Conquistadores, the Religion of the
Indigenous Cultures of Mexico was based
on Nature and natural phenomena.
Every aspect of Nature carried Divine
messages which manifested themselves
in a thousand different ways. This is
why the early evangelists had
concluded that efforts to convert the
Aztecs and others (who had been conquered
in the 1520's) were failing by the 1550's.

For the Indians the Christian God
was an abstract, moral and legalistic
entity - worthy of being worshipped along
side their other gods - he resembled their
gods Tlazcaltlipoca and Quetzalcoatl - but not
replacing the other deities who had given
them Air, Water and food for their bodies
and victory in war, and who manifested
themselves constantly through natural
phenomena. It was not until the

European diseases of Small pox, influenza, diphtheria and measles destroyed the native populations (Mexico's population of 15 to 25 million souls plummeted to 1.5 millions by 1575) that the Indians were finally converted. Even then some of the old religion remained. Blending in often wonderful ways with the new faith.

And this is what I saw when I first beheld this small chapel and its flock of nesting barn swallows, for the swallow was thought by both Europeans and native peoples to be capable of resurrecting itself after death. ^{This myth persisted} ~~But~~ until John A. Audubon wrote a paper dispelling the notion in the 1820's.)

During the cold months of the year when swallows ^{actually} migrated to warmer climes, people thought that the birds literally buried ^{themselves} ~~themselves~~ in the mud of shallow ponds and "died" only to be reborn ^{in the spring} ~~when~~ with the spring sun. The Swallow ^{is} ~~is~~ associated with the Aztec God Xipe Totec - the God of Renewal and Spring time and who perfectly embodied the Aztec belief that all existence was bound in endlessly repeating cycles, of birth, death and rebirth. And although

They were looking at it with a vastly different perspective the Spanish friars were likewise filled with a sense of renewal with the annual return of the Swallows. The celebrated ^{annual} return of the Swallows ^{living spirit} to Mission San Juan de Capistrano in California is a ~~surround~~ part of our own culture.

Being conscious of both traditions and points of view, the little Chapel near San Miguel and its feathered inhabitants was filled with layers of meaning for me.

With both traditions and points of view in mind, I could see many layers of meaning in that little Chapel near San Miguel and its feathered inhabitants. The Church now old and weathered