

The Surrealist Garden of Sir Edward James, Xilitla

The Surrealist Garden was a destination that was in my mind to visit for a long time before I actually visited it more than ten years ago. Why is Sir Edward James' Surrealist Garden so fascinating? Because it shows us that it's not only possible to dream, but it's also possible to turn those aspirations into reality, that one can cross the boundaries of the merely possible into the realm of the incredible.

Sir Edward James fell completely in love with Xilitla, a magical town located in the Huasteca region of Potosi. He knew that every man seeks both inspiration and ultimately answers, and while the ultimate goal of his path may be hidden, it is still present, just waiting to be revealed. James visited Mexico on several occasions. In 1945, he discovered Xilitla with one of his friends. They had arrived at a unique place known as Las Pozas. James decided to swim and when he got out of the water, he lay down to rest, and minutes later, his friend did the same. However, when he got out of the water, his body was completely covered by multicolored butterflies. Seeing this, James understood that this was the sign he was looking for. He had found the earthly paradise he had dreamed of so much.

In 1947, James decided to buy a 40-hectare plot of land to create a unique space that would bring together three elements: architecture, nature, and poetry. We know that James was a talented artist and poet, and we sense his creative gifts in every step we take in his splendid garden; it has been designed to take full advantage of the physical space, offering evocative constructions, hidden jewels, and the heady fragrances of Mother Nature— all of which presents a dialogue between the human visitor and the spirituality of the surrounding landscape.

He was a lover of archaeology, history, and literature and he thought he could create a space where he could begin the construction and then leave it purposefully unfinished, allowing Mother Nature and fate to complete the art work. He had hoped to create a conversation between architecture and nature, and by allowing these forces to "mingle together"— unfettered by man's interference—he felt that a magical moment would be the result. And it worked: The resulting space amazes and astonishes visitors!



Photo: Jim Podruski

The framework of the construction involves 36 concrete structures, built in various ways—sometimes painted with vivid colors, sometimes left in their natural state. The crowning achievement of the garden is its omnipresent communication with the rugged terrain, which offers surprising waterfalls, rivulets, ancient trees, and rhythmic sounds, which are produced by the gentle drops of dew, by the cascading waterfalls, and by the constant flights of insects that hover everywhere. It is both a wild, untamed place, and an ordered sanctum, offering visitors peace and tranquility.

James lived in a dream world that was rich in marvelous imagery, abundant fantasies, and magic, all left to be mixed and molded in the imagination of the visitor. He was attracted to the ideas of Salvador Dalí and surrealism. Not only did he sponsor his art, but he was also able to collect a fair number of Dalí's works, as well as those of other surrealist artists, including Magritte, Tchelitchew, Fini, Leonora Carrington, Cocteau, Nahs, Delvaux, and Reppert Bismarck. Collecting these treasures was spiritual nourishment for his soul, and these works helped spawn his own creative energies.

James uses painting, architecture, and poetry to express his creative needs. His interest in surrealism ultimately found its supreme outlet in Xilitla. All his life he had searched for the ideal place that would serve as the canvas for his creative yearnings, and he found the perfect spot in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. For James, Xilitla represented his promised land, an extraordinary palette where he could express his deepest dreams and desires.

The image of the garden is an important theme for artists who wish to understand the Eden analogy. And for James, the idea of mingling with nature represented an eternal mystical experience, a space where one could feel and thank God for life. It is enough to observe how the stones and the vegetation of Xilitla communicate, forming a unified vision. Nature and the world that man creates are marvelously blended, taking root and ultimately standing together. The physical construction that he engineered in Xilitla represents an expression of faith and pure poetry that, in metaphorical forms, lead us along the path through our inner lives.

His love for nature included a deep fascination for orchids. The flower, when it sprouts from the earth and opens completely to the light of the sky, penetrates cosmic reality and becomes an image of the universe. James felt this keenly and for him, orchids were the symbol of the perfection and spiritual purity he so longed for.



Bromeliad shaped fountain, Xilitla

Photo: Jim Podruski

Xilitla is permeated with symbols that contain transcendental meanings, one of which is the staircases. There are stairs everywhere, and, curiously, these stairs don't go anywhere. They remind me of the stairs painted by M. C. Escher, the master of impossible figures, optical illusions, and imaginary worlds. The ladder is a symbol of the progression towards knowledge and of the ascent towards that knowledge. If it rises toward heaven, it is the knowledge of the apparent or divine world; if it enters the subsoil again, it is the hidden knowledge that is buried in the depths of the unconscious.



The Cinematographer, Xilitla (Stairway to heaven)

Photo: Jim Podruski

James' magic universe is fabulous. His poetic dreaming provides a vista into a sublime world. Note the language of his last sonnet before he died:

Last Sonnet

I have seen as much beauty as a man has rarely seen;
That is why I will be grateful to die in this small room,
Surrounded by the forest, the great green darkness
From the trees my only darkness - and sound,
The sound of green.

Here, in the warmth of the rain, what could have been
It is resolved in the tenderness of an elevated sentence:
Give your best, rest—and after you
The flowering of what you loved and planted
It will still murmur your intentions.

And the ghosts of the birds I loved
They will accompany me as friends,
When like them I have own
Beyond the realm of words.
You, among the trees, will hear them,
Long after the end
Calling me across the river.
Well, the bird calls continue,
Just as—protected by the courtship of its wings—
My soul still sings among unknown silences.

I urge you to discover the labyrinthine path of symbols and meanings behind James' surrealist garden and share the land that encourages us to become aware and have an experience in paradise—Mexico.



Xilitla, San Luis Potosí



Xilitla, San Luis Potosí



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