

PURE SCIENCE IN A TIME OF WAR

MEXICO'S TONANZINTLA OBSERVATORY

Six Mexican stamps issued in 1942 represent a wartime triumph of international political and scientific co-operation, and were the first to feature astrophotos. They were issued to celebrate the concurrent openings of the National Astrophysical Observatory at Tonanzintla,* 100 km south-southeast of Mexico City, and the Inter-American Scientific Conference.



The "Tonanzintla Issue" ranking the cover shown above, posted in Mexico City, includes three regular postage stamps and three airmail stamps. The subjects, from upper left to right, picture a total solar eclipse, a Russell Diagram, the Horsehead Nebula, the Sombrero Galaxy, the Whirlpool Galaxy, and the Ring Nebula.

The threat of war in 1940 prompted the United States to adopt a "Good Neighbor Policy" towards Latin America; Mexican President Avila Camacho sent an emissary to Washington to assuage American concerns about Mexico's nationalization of its oil industry.

In this atmosphere of détente, Mexican astronomer Luis Erro conceived the idea for a state-of-the-art observatory and discussed it with President Camacho. With the moral and financial help of Erro's friend, the famous astronomer Harlow Shapley, the observatory at Tonanzintla came into being almost at light speed. Its opening would be the highlight of the the Inter-American Scientific Conference, scheduled the following February.

The purpose of the conference, President Camacho explained in a letter to Shapley, would be to

...contribute to the maintenance, in the American Continent, of the progress of science and culture, and thus counteract as much as possible the paralyzation of scientific and cultural activities in the countries devastated by war.

The images featured on the Tonanzintla stamps were taken at Harvard Observatory, which also built the Tonanzintla telescope.

Astronomers at Tonanzintla went on to create their own impressive images. In 1943, Mexico sponsored an international astrophysical conference, inviting astronomers and astrophysicists from Allied nations around the world.

* Also spelled "Tonanzintla" with a "t" ending the second syllable.