

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // ENTERTAINMENT

Briscoe's 'Destino San Antonio' is a virtual journey back in time

Deborah Martin

Sep. 19, 2018



Stereoscope postcards are on display at The Briscoe Western Art Museum as part of the “Destino San Antonio” interactive exhibit.

Photo: Billy Calzada /Staff Photographer

Long before the term “virtual reality” was coined, there were stereographs.

The images consist of two photographs of the same subject shot from slightly different perspectives. Seen through a specially designed viewer, the images come together in such a way that they seem to be three-dimensional. They were wildly popular in the 19th century, when many flocked to penny arcades see them. Those who could afford to purchase their

own viewers – which looked like a combination of opera glasses and a View-Master – could travel the world without ever leaving their parlors.

“They were like TV in the 19th century,” said artist Anne Wallace, who curated “Destino San Antonio,” a new Tricentennial exhibit featuring more than 80 stereographs for the Briscoe Museum of Western Art. “Even now, people that collect them, you just fall into this world.”

“Destino San Antonio” opens up that world, giving 21st century folks a glimpse of what life was like here after the Civil War. In addition to the stereographs, the exhibit includes maps fleshed out with photographs depicting a few buildings from that time that are still around; videos including interviews with scholars who add additional dimension to the show; a video projection featuring enlarged stereographs playing on a loop; and lots of hands-on elements, including both arcade machines and hand-held viewers so visitors can see the images as intended.

On ExpressNews.com: [Fall arts guide](#)

The photographs on display capture children playing, including one image of a group taking part in a Thanksgiving pageant; Apache Chief Geronimo and other members of his tribe during their detention at Fort Sam Houston; a rare image of the 8th Cavalry Band, a serious-looking and seriously mustachioed group of musicians; Theodore Roosevelt riding into town; people tending their homes on mission grounds; and vendors selling their wares in front of Main Plaza.

The images vividly capture the diversity of the community. That’s one of the first things that struck Wallace when she started working on the show.

“San Antonio was a very, very mestizo city with racial mixing of all kinds,” she said. “That is so apparent in these photos.”

It was also the largest city in the state back then, and a popular subject for photographers, many of whom came to Texas after the Civil War. Photographers were drawn to exotic locales, which were good sources for top-selling images. And San Antonio fit the bill.

“In the period after the Civil War through the late 19th century, this was still kind of the Wild West,” said Michael Duchemin, president and CEO of the Briscoe. “Most people would never get here.”

On ExpressNews.com: [Alamo exhibit offers another perspective](#)

The Briscoe owns most of the stereographs in the show, and this is the first exhibit drawn from the collection. The museum acquired them about three years ago from Houston-based collector Robin Stanford, who had been gathering the images over about 40 years.

José “Che” Guerra, chairman of the Briscoe’s board, was approached about whether he was interested in the entire collection for himself. He wasn’t, but he immediately thought that it was something the Briscoe needed.

“I’ve collected photographs for a while,” Guerra said. “To find a grouping like this is very difficult.”

The value of the images, he said, is that they “give you the opportunity to step back and see the way it used to be, in 3-D. It’s pretty awesome.”

Because it is such a big collection, it took Wallace a long time to make her selections for the exhibit. She wanted to make sure she was choosing photos that aren’t well-known, noting that many famous images from that time were first presented as stereographs.

“I didn’t want to use the same ones,” she said. “I really wanted to use ones that told you something about people or how they lived, what they were doing, what they made, how diverse they were.”

She seems to have pulled that off.

“I’ve had a lot of people tell me that they’ve seen tons of historic photos of San Antonio, and that there’s a lot of these that they’ve never seen before,” said Sharon Garcia, head of communications and marketing for the museum. “These are not the ones you see in books.”

“Destino San Antonio” will have a gala public opening at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday including performances by Eva Ybarra, Andrea “Vocab” Sanderson, David Zamora Casas and the Beethoven Maennerchor. Admission is free. The exhibit will be up through Jan. 21 at the Briscoe Western Art Museum, 210 W. Market St. Admission ranges from \$8 to \$10; it is free for ages 12 and under, Briscoe members and active-duty military and family members. Call 210-299-4499 or visit briscoemuseum.org for more information.

dlmartin@express-news.net | Twitter: @DeborahMartinEN

Deborah Martin is an arts writer in the San Antonio and Bexar County area. Read her on our [free site, mySA.com](#), and on our [subscriber site, ExpressNews.com](#). | dlmartin@express-news.net |
Twitter: [@DeborahMartinEN](#)

©2018 Hearst