

ARTS & CULTURE

Briscoe's *Destino* Brings San Antonio History to Life in Three Dimensions



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SCOTT BALL / RIVARD REPORT

A stereograph of San Pedro Park.

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A stereograph pairs two regular, two-dimensional photographs to create a three-dimensional effect. History can be said to work similarly, bringing multiple narratives of our shared past together to create a multidimensional image.

With *Destino San Antonio* (<https://www.briscoemuseum.org/news/destino-san-antonio/>), an exhibition of 80 19th-century stereographs, or “stereoview” photographs, set to open Friday, Sept. 21, at the [Briscoe Western Art Museum](https://www.briscoemuseum.org/) (<https://www.briscoemuseum.org/>), artist and guest curator Anne Wallace hopes to open a dialogue about the true complexity of San Antonio history.

The city is a “crossroads of many, many influences and cultures,” Wallace said, and “the very striking thing about these photos from the 19th century is how evident that is.”



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Guest Curator Anne Wallace

Deeper truths available in each of these photographs, Wallace said, reveal how prevalent in the life of the city were members of various Native American tribes in the area, free blacks, Mexicans, mestizos, and other groups that tend to be overlooked in common Spanish colonial and Texian narratives.

Of these photographic views of the daily life of San Antonio's rich and poor, military and civilian, and everything in between, Wallace said, "It's so rich, it's so fascinating, it's so not what we've been told."

Business and land ownership among black citizens, during an era when selling property to them was illegal, is just one lesser-known fact to be drawn from these images, she said. Wallace described one picture showing President Theodore Roosevelt stopping by the Menger Hotel to have his beard trimmed at the black-owned barbershop there.



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B. W. Kilburn, 16748. Pres. Roosevelt Arriving at the Alamo Plaza, San Antonio, Tex., 1905, Silver Gelatin Process

Wallace cited the research of scholars Everett Fly, Ramon Vasquez, Jackie Dale Tointigh, Norma Cantú, John Phillip Santos, Bruce Shackelford, Lawrence T. Jones III, and Claudia Guerra, editor of the official Tricentennial book *300 Years of San Antonio & Bexar County* (<http://tupress.org/books/300-years-of-san-antonio-bexar-county/>), as contributing such fascinating facts to the exhibition. All will be present in the show via short video documentaries accompanying the various thematic groupings of stereoview images.

Related: [300 Commemorative Book Weaves San Antonio and Bexar Histories Together](https://therivardreport.com/300-commemorative-book-weaves-san-antonio-and-bexar-histories-together/)
(<https://therivardreport.com/300-commemorative-book-weaves-san-antonio-and-bexar-histories-together/>)

The title of the exhibition is itself a question, Wallace said, and plays on multiple meanings. While typically translated from Spanish as “destination,” *destino* also can be read as fate or destiny, which implies a connection between past and future meeting in the present.

“What I would love to come out of this show is an opening for a much broader acknowledgment and dialogue and history of the city,” she said, than the Spanish colonial history highlighted by the city’s Tricentennial.

Collections and Keepsakes

The stereographs are drawn from a collection of 579 such images purchased by the Briscoe in 2014 from Robin G. Stanford, a noted Houston collector who also gave a collection of Civil War photographs to the [Library of Congress](https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-15-051/new-civil-war-stereographs/2015-) (<https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-15-051/new-civil-war-stereographs/2015->

[03-31/](#)) in 2015. Former head of exhibitions and programs Jenny Chowning invited Wallace to develop an exhibition from the collection, due to her prior work as an artist researching local histories.

“Stereoview” photographs became widely popular after the invention of photography in the 19th century, even making it well into the 20th century in the form of the novelty View-Master toy. (<http://www.view-master.com/en-us>), eventually supplanted by virtual-reality technology.

However, the View-Master still exists, and new versions will be available in the Briscoe gift shop. “We’re being retro, bringing it back,” said Sharon Garcia, head of communications and marketing. These throwback keepsakes will have a local twist, however, with reels of images of familiar locations in downtown San Antonio.

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Stereoscopes are used to view the stereographs during the exhibition.

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A 19th-century vintage postcard image of San Fernando Cathedral is part of *Destino San Antonio* at the Briscoe Western Art Museum.

During the opening weekend of the show, the Briscoe will lead stereographic walking tours through downtown, offering “then and now” comparisons of the Alamo, San Fernando Cathedral, and other popular spots. Tours are 1 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 22 and 23.

Artist Colleen Woolpert, the designer of the patented Twinscope viewers (<http://www.colleenwoolpert.com/TwinScope-Viewer>) affixed to the walls of the exhibition, will lead a workshop on Saturday, Dec. 8, for participants to make their own stereographs of downtown.

Both events are part of a robust slate of participatory programming surrounding the show, said Kristin Mancillas, the Briscoe’s education and programs manager. Details of the events, including a free community opening reception Tuesday, Sept. 25, with guest performances by local artists, will be posted on the Briscoe website (<https://www.briscoemuseum.org/programs-events>).

Complicated Histories

A curious aspect of the stereographs is that many have been used to illustrate history books. (Several appear in a concurrent exhibition (<https://therivardreport.com/itc-archival-photo-exhibit-scratches-surface-of-san-antonio-history/>), at the Institute of Texan Cultures.) But, Wallace pointed out, in those cases, only one of the paired images appears. Similarly, she hopes the *Destino* exhibition will inspire people to think about what they are not seeing, or “what’s outside the frame.”

Despite the richness of detail available in Stanford’s collection, “this is just a very partial imprint of what was happening, and it is really important to think about what’s not there, what was not photographed, what was going on outside the view,” Wallace said.



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A stereograph of the San Antonio River.

For example, she does not shy away from the fact that Texas was a “genocide state,” and a “slave state,” which she learned through researching the complexity underlying her own family’s local history. The Galveston native shares ownership of a ranch near Albany, Texas, with 100 cousins, all descended from a group of pioneer settlers five generations past.

In her own observation, Wallace said, there tends to be a glorification of the “western” aspect of Texas, like cowboys and pioneers, “and of course that’s part of my family’s story. But these other threads, no one wants to really look at.”

Those threads include that the biggest boom in plantation slavery before the Civil War was in Texas, she explained. It’s natural to want to ignore these aspects of history, because they’re “terrible,” she said, but a recent Blue Star Contemporary [artist’s residency in Berlin](https://bluestarcontemporary.org/berlin/) (<https://bluestarcontemporary.org/berlin/>) gave her particular insight into how the German city deals with its complicated and traumatic past.

Experiences with archives there gave her insight into how to approach facts such as her own ancestors’ ownership of slaves and that the family ranch occupies what was once part of a Comanche reservation.

She became interested in “what’s really happening, versus the myths or stories we tell ourselves.”

Ultimately, a more complex view of our shared history will help San Antonio better understand its future, which might look a lot more like its past, she said.

“I hope that [*Destino*] will really move people, and cause them to really think about what’s here, and be open to all the research that’s coming out about whose descendants are still here, and how people are still mixing it up, and all the contributions people are making,” Wallace said.

Destino San Antonio runs through Jan. 21, 2019. Museum hours are Tuesday 10 a.m.-9 p.m. and Weds.-Sun. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Regular admission is \$10, with discounts for seniors, students, and retired military. Museum members, active military families, and children 12 and under receive free admission.
