



Wednesday 10.20.2004  
News Search

**GO**

[Advanced search](#)

- [calendar](#)
- [upfront](#)
- [news](#)
- [last words](#)
- [feature](#)
- [culture](#)
- [events](#)
- [stage](#)
- [words](#)
- [screens](#)
- [music](#)
- [food & drink](#)
- [find a restaurant](#)
- [list your restaurant here](#)
- [best of SA 2004](#)
- [classifieds](#)
- [business directory](#)
- [community](#)
- [links](#)
- [contact](#)
- [work here](#)
- [ftp / archives](#)

EMAIL DELIVERY

**Get the news sent to your Inbox**

 [Click here to sign up](#)

## culture: events

### Wonder anew at an old act

BY SUSAN PAGANI

10/14/2004

Photographs of a 1920s Mexican circus document the timeless human desire to create a spectacle

Although mounted on bright red walls that announce "CIRCUS!" with cheer, the Witte Museum's photography exhibit, *El Gran Circo Beas*, is less festive than the usual big-top proceedings, and more like a photo documentary - at times playful, at times pensive.

Between 1920 and 1925, Guillermo Robles Callejo documented the itinerant circus for which the show is named. The show notes say that he was a stationer, who took the photos while a member of the Club Fotografico in Puebla, Mexico. The exhibition presents 38 photos, only a small portion of 8,000 he produced - including not only the circus but also ordinary sights like convents, roads, and train stations - which had been lost until Jorge Carretero Madrid rediscovered them 60 years later.

In "Mandrill with its Trainer," the subject sits dapper in a sailor suit, top hat, and parasol, appearing to talk to his trainer, who stands off to the side looking rather like a butler awaiting instructions. This is a rare moment of complete fantasy. In "Circus Monkeys," handlers walk or drag two monkeys through empty streets: One of the monkeys holds its chain with both hands over its head, preserving the slack so he won't be choked. Similarly, in "Something Strange in the Streets of Puebla," a camel is paraded before a group of locals. Among them stands a young girl, hat in hand, eyebrows knit in wonder. It takes a moment to notice that she, like many of the people, is barefoot on the rough-cobbled road.

Callejo captured reality, but it's still a slightly romantic circus reality. Like all circuses, there are freaks - not hirsute ladies or men with tails, but optical illusions. The "Flower Vase Lady" features the head of a pretty young thing wearing a sparkly flapper-like headdress set atop a very thin, fluted vase of roses and palm fronds. And, in "Caged African Lion," a desk-size pipe organ and chair sit behind an occupied wooden crate on the back of an old motorized wagon. Did someone play as the circus rolled into town? Did the big cat roar along?



Circus ladies pose for Guillermo Robles Callejo in one of 38 photos on view at the Witte Museum.

**El Gran Circo Beas**  
10am-5pm Mon, Wed-Sat,  
10am-8pm Tues,  
noon-5pm Sun  
\$7 adult, \$6 senior, \$5 ages 4-11  
**Witte Museum**  
3801 Broadway  
357-1900



**SANANTONIO CURRENT**

Is looking for a  
**Classified Sales Rep.**

Many of the circus folk are photographed in an open field, rather than the big top, and that lack of context makes them seem at once

more ordinary and more fantastic. "Bear and Its Trainer Posing for the Camera" is an awkward photo in which neither is truly posed and their faces are blurred. But on the horizon, a row of men is visible climbing up a wall at the far edge of the field to watch. It's interesting to imagine a time that seems so socially and historically different.

And yet doesn't. One of the photos captures two elephants parading through town while two rather cavalier gents ride along splay-legged on their heads and a crowd of children follows close behind. Have we changed that much? If they sent an elephant down South Alamo, I'd be the first to follow it to the circus. •



**Today's Mexican circuses train animals with treats, but here the unsmiling Enrique Welter controls the lion with a whip, a folding chair, and a prod.**

[©San Antonio Current 2004](#)

[To the top of the page](#) | [Send a letter to the editors regarding this story](#) | [E-mail this story](#)

[Read our Privacy Policy](#)

[Home](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Community Directory](#) | [Marketplace](#) | [Weather](#)

Copyright © 1995 - 2004 [PowerOne Media, Inc.](#) All Rights Reserved.