

Exhibits

SEEING IS BELIEVING!
THE CIRCUS IN MEXICO

For all of us, at one time or another, the circus opened up a route to the far reaches of our imagination. A tent of magic realism, a chalk ring in which what is, just can't be, and what you see, you can't believe. Incredible and unheard of things play with our desire for fantasy. A real show, we leave satisfied that we enjoyed great entertainment, more exciting than television, more eloquent than the movies.

But the circus is much more: there, reality is reborn on the stage; there, laughter, that great subverter of order and solemnity, is enthroned; there, the agility and grace of the human body are carried to their utmost. This, and much more, is what lies inside the circus.

On the outside, the circus is a mirror and prism of the reality which surrounds it. It captures the fantasy prohibited by repressive institutions. It embraces the wandering Gypsy life denied by concrete cities. It collects, sifts and recreates the people's cultures of every neighborhood, every town which it visits. It is an historic counterweight to the loss of collective emotion, of joyous rites, of people's identity.

This is why the National Museum of Popular Cultures has opened the exhibition, "SEEING IS BELIEVING, THE CIRCUS IN MEXICO," as part of the Ministry of Public Education's programs for promoting and stimulating culture in Mexico. On this occasion the exhibition focuses on a popular tradition which is little-known by the public at large: Mexican circuses.

Why has the National Museum of Popular Cultures spent nearly three years carrying out research for an exhibition on the circus? Because the circus is not only entertainment, a happy moment shared with friends and neighbors. Its freshness and appeal go beyond the painted faces; behind the make-up there is a long history, a purpose and a metaphor.

Its history, as with everything Mexican, dates from before the Conquest. By that time, acrobatics and other demonstrations of physical agility had already gained a place in public events and celebrations. In fact, the word *machincuepa*, which means somersault, comes from *nahuatl*, the language of the Aztecs, where it means "to know how to spin...how to turn over."

This proclivity of human beings to carry physical skill to its furthest limits is common to the vast majority of the world's peoples, especially those of Asia and the Middle East. The example set by Chinese acrobats, Indian

troubadors and Arab magicians, provided many of the ideas and routines which have been incorporated into today's circus.

Part of the National Museum of Popular Cultures exhibit recreates a colonial street bearing the edicts and prohibitions of the Inquisition against circus shows. The Inquisition outlawed laughter and punished fantasy. Its objective was to dominate and conquer consciences. Poor sinners were even burned because they dared to step into this world of imagination. In this way, by crushing the imagination, the powerful muzzled peoples' minds and condemned the colonized to reject their own creativity, to renounce the strength that comes from the imagination and from their own culture.

All imperial powers have applied this kind of pressure in an attempt to culturally sterilize the peoples they colonize. In this context the circus, by creating and disseminating the right to free the imagination and to cultivate human physical, emotional and spiritual capacities, becomes an exercise in liberation.

Mexican circuses have a long history of traveling the country's byways, going from town to town, developing trapeze artists, jugglers and clowns famous for their artistic excellence. And their fame has not been limited to Mexico. Many Mexican jugglers and trapeze artists such as the Flying Gaonas, have been acclaimed in circuses around the world, including the famous Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus of the United States.

Today many, many circuses continue playing to audiences throughout the country, from the tents of small peasant circuses to the large modern businesses which cross the borders to present their shows in other countries. Why has



the circus tradition continued in Mexico? Perhaps due to the eagerness shown by a people that does not seek isolation in individualism and that defends with life and limb their collective identity. An eagerness to share a live emotion for the necessity felt by Mexicans to see the faces and, at the same time to pay with the masks those same faces become. The exhibition is a way to pay homage to give public and collective recognition to that entire league of artists who for so many years have brought happiness to the lives of the people, offering

is simultaneously recreation and creation of new perceptions and new sensations. All who go to see it will be different when they leave. They won't become spider women or elephant men but they will come out with a completely different vision of the circus and the areas it touches: the human face, the animal cage, the tent, the house and the street. With this effort, the National Museum of Popular Cultures fulfills the purpose for which it was created: to reclaim and stimulate popular cultures through its exhibitions. Similarly, the General

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them a magical and unexpected dimension to their daily lives. But through the exhibition, the public can also go behind the curtain and enter the world of the performers. It even gives us a chance to satisfy that great curiosity many have felt to peek in on the home of circus artists. In the center of the museum stands an ancient truck loaded with memories, broken cups and makeup. The entire exhibition attempts to recreate all of those circus gestures and routines which make us feel such excitement. Thus, the museum gives us something which

Directon of Popular Culture fulfills its obligation to promote the country's popular cultures. The circus is in effect an entire world. Mexican figures from a narrow colonial street appear, a Pandora's box is opened, a Mayan Indian on stilts comes alive. It is an eminently creative work, which takes that which circus people have entrusted to the museum, recreates it and returns it to them and to all the public that visits the exhibition ★

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