

BIENVENIDOS
AL
MUSEO
DEL
JUGUETE
MÉXICO D.F.

ESTACION
EXCLUSIVO PARA

Museo del Juguete
Antiguo México
REYNOLSA

CAMERON



Museum of Old-Fashioned Toys, Mexico (MUJAM) Toys that Make History

Isabel Morales Quezada*

Mexico City, a neighborhood, and a street play host to this oasis in time and of memories and the echoes of childhood, where the word “museum” takes on a different meaning. As you walk toward it, all you see is an old building and a mom-and-pop store with the sign “Súper Dulcería Avenida” (Avenue Super Candy Store). But one thing catches your eye: a leprechaun-type figure poses next to a sign reading, “Welcome to the Toy Museum.” Next to that, a narrow door and stairs lead up to the part of the building above the store. On the second floor, you have to knock on a gate to get in; you get the impression that you’re in a kind of intimate space, like a friend’s house where you might arrive unannounced, or perhaps after a long time. Finally somebody opens up, and you walk into another dimension.

An old photograph near the entryway might sum up the essence of this place: it’s a black and white shot of street vendors selling toys on the Day of the Three Magi in Mexico City. It captures an age-old tradition that dictates that on January 6 every year, toys become the protagonists in thousands of stories that children spin with them. Just as the lens captured a moment, this place captures an age, and together with it, the memories and dreams of several generations; except that in this case, what we see is not an image, but the toys themselves brought out of the past.

This time capsule wouldn’t make any sense if you couldn’t access it, which is why the museum opened its doors in 2006. Its creator, Roberto Shimizu, architect by profession and



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collector by vocation, began amassing toys as a child, around 1955, although he prefers to say that “God gave him the gift of saving things.” His parents emigrated from Japan and owned the Avenue Candy Store, and “La primavera” (the Springtime) Stationary and Book Stores, all located in the popular Doctores Neighborhood. Mr. Shimizu remembers the area’s humble tenements, the solidarity of local residents, his trips on the little Chapultepec Forest Park train, and the Day of the Three Magi when he and his brothers helped his parents sell toys in the store.

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Unless otherwise specified, photos by Patricia Pérez Ramírez.

“Remembering is reliving,” is emblazoned on some of the display cases that hold the objects stirring visitors’ memories. Many go with their children, telling them their childhood stories about favorite toys; what happens here is a kind of reunion with the toys they loved so much and that time had sent into oblivion. There are all kinds, from robots, collectable cars, a beautiful dollhouse, kitchen sets, to cardboard dolls and toys specially made of economical infused plastic in the shape of fashionable heroes like Superman or Mexican wrestlers, used to fill up piñatas.

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hibit represents Mexico itself, its culture and its traditions, some of which have changed or are on the brink of being lost, while others continue. Each piece sketches a nostalgic urban scene: a scale model of the Latin American a Tower, a symbol of the city; another of the Chapultepec Park Zoo; a jigsaw puzzle of a picture of University City’s Central Library; a taco and sandwich cart that also boasts the sale of “delicious, fresh *tepache*-pineapple ade”; a little wooden Pemex oil truck; an enormous city bus with a typical bright-orange subway train car inside; a wrestling ring with a figure of the famous Santo el Enmascarado de Plata (Silver-Masked Santo); and even figures caricaturing an ex-president. These objects are not rigorously arranged, but you can construct a narrative based on them; what they tell us is part of the history and panorama of an innocent, vibrant Mexico of the second half of the twentieth century.

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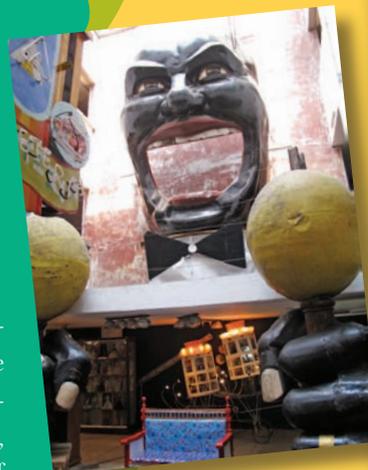
Cortesía Miujam

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Most of the toys were collected during a time when the government almost completely banned imports, spurring the development of Mexican industry. Thus, without the globalization of our day, manufacturers designed their own toys, reflecting the situation closest to them, like the Mexico of the time, particularly from 1930 to 1970.

“This is why this museum is unique in the world,” Mr. Shimizu proudly explains, because what can be found on the market today does not have the distinctive, “local” flavor of the toys found here. A large part of what collectors all over the world gather today, regardless of the nationality, is “Made in China.” Besides that, they are not toys made for children, but created specifically for collectors. The owner of more than one million pieces gathered over his lifetime, of which “barely” 40 000 are on exhibit, emphasizes that this collection “is made more with human energy than with money or good taste,” adding that it has been made by “carrying, arranging, and storing.”

It has been a titanic effort that one step at a time has led to building this space that preserves the playful spirit of childhood; museography plays an essential role, avoiding any hint of solemnity. Designed and built by Roberto Shimizu, space ships, jukeboxes, boxes with lens through which visitors can look onto the brilliant universes inhabited by an endless number of toys, or a steel box with a circular, sub-





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marine-type hatch break with the tradition of traditional display cases, making a huge contribution to changing the mood of both children and adults, as well as sparking their curiosity to find out what’s inside them. Visitors’ smiles and surprised faces are proof that he has achieved the desired effect.

When you finish the visit, the question arises: How is it possible that everyone finds his or her favorite toy? To answer that, we have to go back to the story of how this collection came about. Being born in Mexico City, and in the Doctores Neighborhood in particular, was very important, says Roberto Shimizu. Since the government prioritized centralization, a large number of items and toys came to the capital first, specifically to this neighborhood, where they were sold at accessible prices because most people, especially residents of this area, lacked the financial wherewithal to buy expensive or sophisticated toys. So a Mexican industry making low-cost items proliferated.

“I picked up what I found on the street, what nobody thought to keep because they placed no value on it.” But,

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the value of these objects is in the emotions they trigger. And another thing: these are toys conceived of for children to play with. "I kept everything that made us happy," he says. And that's why he wanted to exhibit them; so, he created a time capsule without seals, open to anyone who wants to visit it, and in its birthplace. When asked why he's reticent to change the museum site, he explains that if it's all moved to a better-off neighborhood, it wouldn't be accessible to the people who visit it now, and it would lose its essence. The pieces would be seen as objects to be venerated, like something exotic or extravagant; the reunion of the visitor and the toys would no longer be as natural. In addition, he is particularly fond of Doctores residents since his parents' shop was always very successful. He thinks that the museum somehow gives back a little of what it gave him.

Toys like the ones found here tend to disappear, explains Shimizu, since the country and the way of looking at the world have changed. For example, children used to go out onto the street to play with their toys, to be with other children and their parents, but today, those parents seem content to keep the children busy, distracted, and shut in, which is what happens when you opt for electronic toys. He also says that public spaces have been neglected and changed, like the sidewalks, that have gotten narrower, or disappeared altogether, to make room for cars.

In addition to relating part of the city's history through its toys, this museum is important because it shows and reminds us of a time that continues to be part of Mexicans' memory. The Shimizu family hopes that whoever goes to the museum will perceive and value the creative capacity of the hed Mexicans in all eras. The fabulous microcosms encapsulated in each display case nourished the imagination of thousands of children who, today, as adults, when they see these pieces again, tell their children stories they thought were lost. Perhaps this is why, once visitors are inside the museum, time stops and hours go by without their realizing it. **MM**



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Museo del Juguete Antiguo, México (Mujam)
(Museum of Old-Fashioned Toys, Mexico)
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