
TALKING FILES: Catching images

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At the Museum of the Image visitors can see 1900 pieces regenerated, classified with rigor, and perfectly working, which laugh at the passage of time and trip up nostalgia.

Bernabé Bebo Muñiz, a hospitable antiquarian born in the 1925 Havana, reaffirms himself in every ambush that life sets for him, as a scrutinizing and tenacious individual in the findings, who skips all borders when it comes to shape his fancies. Not by choice he founded in 1992, in his house on 8th Street in Santiago de Cuba's Vista Alegre suburb, the only Museum of the Image that exists in our nation, and likely, in Latin America.

The development of Bebo, whom I briefly met in one of his visits to the capital, is really interesting: he was linked to several informative spaces abroad in the 40s and 50s, he definitively returned to Cuba in 1959 and, after participating in the founding of the newsreels of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC) and Tele Rebelde channel, he settled in Santiago de Cuba, where he set up the photography labs of the eastern region, and over time, he took over the leadership of ICAIC's cameramen in the province, before joining, in 1975, the Film Studies of Television as director of photography.

However, his instinct to find good adventures and to mock routine demands more: he worked in several feature films and documentaries, and from 1973, before the surprise and skepticism of his friends and relatives, he started to try his fortune as a private collector, to cultivate the art of detail, in the way of a classical Homer, without suspecting that his new hobby would lead him to find his real loves: silhouettes, volumes, sets, flashes; profuse light; chiaroscuro.

From now on, he would become an obsessed antiquarian who will open his arms to photography, cinema, video, television and radio. His ambition has no walls!

Colleagues and people, in general, who visit his home, are surprised by the plurality of textures that are seen in his Museum of the Image.

There visitors can see 1900 pieces regenerated, classified with rigor, and perfectly working. Among them, there stand out a 19th-century projector of manual operations; a 1871 stick, convertible into a photographic camera; a devise to make photos of the size of a 40-cent coin, which dates from the beginnings of the previous century; one of the first TV cameras seen on the island in the late 1940s, and a tiny Petal camera, from that same time, belonging to a dangerous spy whose name was swallowed by a shark.

Together with these devices, attractive from the first glance, there are small anthological tapes, some of them filmed by Bebo himself, in which visitors can see images of the burial of Orthodox leader Eduardo Chivás, of Fidel's entry into Havana in 1959, and of the Literacy Campaign, among many other events of our national history.

Bebo Muñiz, who died in 2001, tried to theoretically base his Museum of the Image with numerous files and, in his eagerness to save a good part of the national identity in the visual field, he never had vacations. Such integrity earned him numerous medals, trophies, plaques and other awards, such as the Shield of Santiago de Cuba, stored by this always smiling man in a small room of his house, which few people had access to.

Those who knew him more thoroughly say he had modesty mania, something that matters him little: his name will be present in any monographic account that is made on the audiovisual theme. Current communicators owe him that. At the moment, his biography appears in my work "Hijos de la luna" (Sons of the Moon), designed to help youngsters lacking knowledge, who venture through the paths of the picturesque thing.

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