

RISD MUSEUM

Circus, August 1, 2014-February 22, 2015

The circus presents human and animal bodies in their extremes, juxtaposing grace, strength, and elegance with the wondrous and grotesque. These characteristics extend to the visual culture of the circus, from ephemeral advertisements designed by now-unknown artists to monumental canvases executed by critically acclaimed painters. The artists whose works are featured in this exhibition delve into both the imagery of the circus and its wider cultural connections, exploring popular entertainment as subject matter and a times using it as a tool for cultural critique.

The first modern circus was performed in London in 1768 at Philip Astley's equestrian school, with the first American incarnation debuting in 1774 in Newport, Rhode Island, with Christopher H. Gardner's performance of equestrian acts. Between 1850 and 1950, the circus grew to include animal acts, acrobats, and the sideshow, giving rise in the U.S. to Barnum & Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" and the Ringling Brothers Circus, Zirkus Sarrasani and Zirkus Hagenbeck in Germany, the Cirque Fernando (later Medrano) and the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris, and dozens of smaller troupes throughout Europe and the United States.

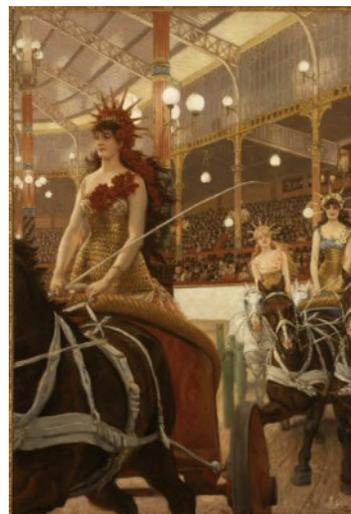
The rise of the circus was closely tied to the industrialization of the United States and Europe. An increasingly pervasive railroad system enabled touring to small towns as well as large urban centers. The manufacture of circus posters—typically made with woodcut until the 1870s—changed dramatically as widespread use of the technology of lithography enabled poster designers to make more complex and graphically dynamic images in greater quantities. For its audiences, the circus served as both entertainment and education, providing many circus-goers with their first exposure to cultures from around the world, shaping knowledge while simultaneously reinforcing Western rule of, and cultural dominance over, colonized lands.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

James Tissot
French, 1836-1902
Ladies of the Chariots (Ces Dames des Chars), 1883-1885
Oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. Walter Lowry 58.186

Clad in shimmering scales and diadems, the elegant charioteers in *Ladies of the Chariots* were called amazonas, so named for the strength needed to hold the reins from a standing position. These women raced horses at top speed around the interior track of the Hippodrome de l'Alma, an enormous iron and glass structure built in Paris in 1877.

Tissot places the viewer at an unusual vantage point, not in the stands with the rest of the audience but on the track, perilously close to the performers, heightening the risk involved in their act. He also



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takes great care to highlight the architectural and technological features of the Hippodrome, including the partly retractable ceiling and the electric lights, which enabled evening performances.

Henri Matisse, designer

French, 1869-1954

The Nightmare of the White Elephant (Le Cauchemar de l'éléphant blanc), from the artist's book *Jazz*, 1947

Color pochoir on paper

Mary B. Jackson Fund 1987.058



Here Henri Matisse creates an overall sense of the chaotic atmosphere of the center ring, with harsh red slashes and black undulating forms which almost obscure the elephant who stands on a ball in the background.

In 1943, at the age of 74, Matisse began work on the portfolio *Jazz*, 20 prints of circus and theater images accompanied by texts and poems. His "crystallizations of memories of the circus" were designed using paper cutouts, which Matisse arranged as collages. Assistants then prepared the collages for printing using a stencil process called pochoir.

John Steuart Curry

American, 1897-1946

Tamara Codona on the Trapeze (Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus), 1932

Charcoal on paper

Museum purchase: Gift of Mr. Houghton P. Metcalf, Jr. and the Jesse Metcalf Fund 1988.007



In this drawing, European aerialist Tamara is hoisted up to the highwire as figures in the audience lean forward in nervous anticipation. She had joined the Flying Codonas, a group of trapeze artists who were stars of the circus world, in 1931. Tamara's act was particularly dangerous because she performed without a net.

John Steuart Curry spent several months in 1932 traveling with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Fascinated by the strength and bravery of the aerialists, he executed multiple drawings and sketches of the acrobats in action which he later used as studies for paintings and prints.

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Max Pechstein
German, 1881-1955
Somali Dance (Somalitanz), 1910
Woodcut with handcoloring on paper
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.656

Like many other German artists of his time, Max Pechstein embraced African and other non-European art as an uncorrupted and more authentic antidote to the stultified refinement of German society. Here his deliberately crude execution—rough gouges, simplified forms, and contrasts of color—heightens the “primitive” aspects of his subject.

This print is based upon a dance Pechstein saw at an ethnographic show in Berlin or Dresden. Products of colonialism, Völkerschauen (“people shows”) were presented in zoos and at circuses and world’s fairs, displaying foreigners for the entertainment of European audiences. During these highly staged shows, participants donned costumes, played instruments, sang, and danced.



Ilse Bing
American, b. Germany, 1899 - 1998
Circus, Trapeze Artist, 1936
Gelatin silver print
Walter H. Kimball Fund 2001.68.2

In the spring of 1936, German-born photographer Ilse Bing spent three months in New York City. During her visit, she documented a variety of subjects, including a performance by the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus at Madison Square Garden. Inspired by geometric patterns and the effects of artificial light, she isolates a trapeze artist among the maze of wires and ropes, eliminating reference to the tent or audience and heightening the anticipation of coming daredevil feats.



Otto Dix
German, 1891-1969
Illusion Act (Illusionsakt), from the portfolio *Zirkus*, 1922
Etching with drypoint on wove paper
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2012.115

The magician conjures an illusion familiar to audiences of this period: the Human Spider, an act first developed by Henry Roltair, whose hall of illusions was featured in the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Otto Dix's heavy use of drypoint, a printmaking technique that results in soft-edged lines, adds a dreamlike quality to this image, heightening its mystery.



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In the wake of World War I, Dix used his artwork to critique German bourgeois society. He felt great sympathy for circus performers and others on the fringe of society. This print is one in a portfolio of ten etchings which included images of trick riders, a tattooed lady, and an animal tamer.

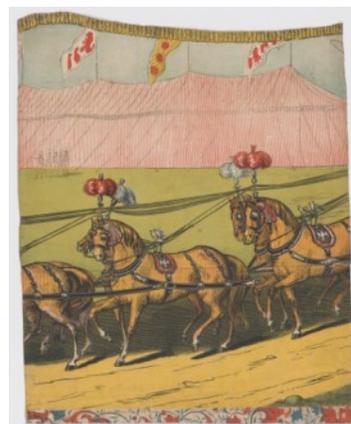
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
French, 1864-1901
At the Circus: Bareback, 1899
Crayon, ink and pastel on wove paper
Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 34.003

In 1899, inspired by his many visits to the Cirque Fernando in Paris, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec worked from memory to compose this drawing and at least 39 other circus-related works. Perched precariously atop an enormous horse, a bareback rider raises her arms, gliding effortlessly around the ring. Seamless communication between horse and rider is essential for a successful equestrian act, and Toulouse-Lautrec's touches of pale blue pastel throughout the rider's costume, hair, and body, as well as on the horse's saddle pad, bridle, and tail ribbon, allude to this connection.



American
Circus Poster, 1850-1855
Four-part color woodcut on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 44.558.3

This poster depicts the free spectacle of the circus parade, placing on display the carved, painted, and gilded wagon, often the single most valuable object among the circus's equipment. Upon arriving in a town, performers and animals marched through the streets, allowing spectators to judge the circus's quality. Circus Day ground progress to a halt—shops closed their doors, schools cancelled classes, and factories shut down, enabling many citizens to attend.



The woodcut's size and the imprecision in the registration of the print's various layers of color and tone indicate it was likely adhered to a building and meant to be seen from a distance.

RISD MUSEUM

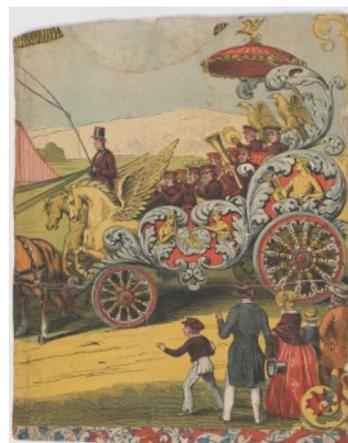
American

Circus Poster, 1850-1855

Four-part color woodcut on paper

Museum Works of Art Fund 44.558.4

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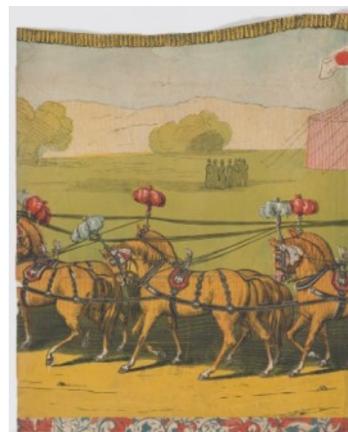
American

Circus Poster, 1850-1855

Four-part color woodcut on paper

Museum Works of Art Fund 44.558.5

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American

Circus Poster, 1850-1855

Four-part color woodcut on paper

Museum Works of Art Fund 44.558.6

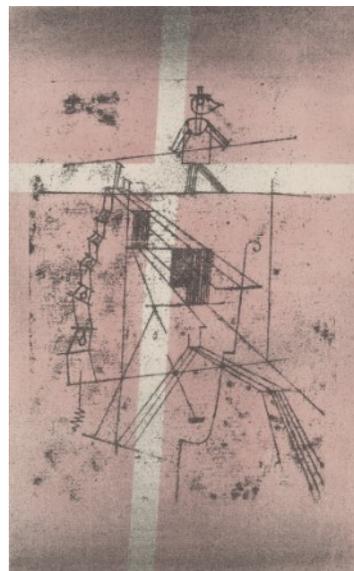
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Paul Klee, designer
Swiss, 1879-1940
The Tightrope Walker, 1921
Color lithograph on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 44.694



Marc Chagall, designer
Russian, 1887-1985
The Acrobat, 1925
Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 50.092



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Max Beckmann
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922

Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922

The Barker, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922
Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.1

Devoid of the typically lighthearted aspects of the circus, Max Beckmann's *Annual Fair* is filled with crowded, vertiginous pictorial spaces, focusing on acts primarily seen in the sideshow—many of which were known to be hoaxes—and offering glimpses of the performers backstage, perhaps revealing the artificiality of the circus.

After Beckmann's traumatic experience as a member of the German medical corps during World War I, the theater, carnival, and circus became increasingly important settings in his imagery, functioning as metaphors for folly, political hypocrisy, and chaos in postwar German life.

Max Beckmann
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922

Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922

The Snake Charmer, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922

Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.10

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Max Beckmann, designer
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922

Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922

Dressing Room, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922
Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.2

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Max Beckmann, designer
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922

Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922

Behind the Wings, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922

Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.3

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Max Beckmann, designer
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922

Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922

Shooting Gallery, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*,
1922

Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.4



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Max Beckmann
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922

Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922

The Big Man, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922

Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.5



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Max Beckmann, designer
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922
Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
The Negro, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922
Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.6

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Max Beckmann, designer
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922
Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922
The Tightrope Walkers, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922
Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.8

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Max Beckmann, designer
German, 1884-1950
Franz Seraph Hanfstaengl, printer
ca. 1922

Marées-Gesellschaft, publisher
R. Piper and Co., publisher
German, ca. 1922

Negro Dance, from the portfolio *The Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922
Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.9



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Alexander Calder
American, 1898-1976
Tumblers with Spectators, 1931-1932
Ink and crayon on paper

The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art:
gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irving J. Fain 69.205



American artist Alexander Calder lived in Paris between 1926 and 1933, a transformative time during which he created *Calder's Circus*, a two-hour long, multi-act performance featuring mechanized sculptures on a miniaturized scale, and made wire sculptures of acrobats and other circus performers. Calder's drawings between 1931 and 1932 display a line quality similar to that of his wire sculptures; each figure in *Tumblers with Spectators* appears to be composed of a single line, as though fashioned out of wire, endowing the acrobats with infinite flexibility. This drawing also mimics the transparency of the sculptures, making visible the line between the floor and the wall through the performers' bodies.

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Martin Lewis, designer
American, 1881-1962
Circus Night, 1933
Drypoint on paper
Gift of Mrs. Gilman Angier 79.039



Auguste Brouet, designer
French, 1872-1941
L'Acrobats, ca. 1900
Drypoint and roulette on paper
Anonymous gift 80.275.5



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August Sander
German, 1876-1964
Circus Artists (Zirkusartisten), 1926/1932 printed later
Gelatin silver print
Edgar J. Lownes and Walter H. Kimball Funds 84.022



In this photograph, August Sander shows a group of circus performers at rest behind the caravan rather than in a dramatic moment of performance under the big top, emphasizing the everyday reality of circus artists' transient, unconventional lives. Featuring performers of different races and a woman in Orientalist costume, Sander's image reinforces the exotic qualities of the circus. During the Weimar era, Sander produced nearly 600 portrait photographs of Germans for a project that he called *People of the 20th Century*.

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Georges Rouault, printmaker

French, 1871-1958

Parade, from the portfolio *Circus of the Shooting Star (Cirque de l'étoile filante)*, 1934

Color aquatint on paper

Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.1129



Charles Demuth

American, 1883-1935

Bicyclists, ca. 1916 - 1917

Watercolor and pencil on paper

Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.1178

Between 1916 and 1917, Charles Demuth executed a group of watercolors featuring circus performers and dancers. Fluid brushstrokes and translucent washes of color emphasize the performers' flexible bodies and nimble movements. The yellow areas mimic the effect of spotlights and create a hazy, dreamlike glow around the figures, enhancing the sense of their strength and daring.



Edouard León Louis Edy-Legrand

French, 1892 - 1970

Crowd at the Circus, ca. 1930

Ink and pencil on paper

Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.1205

This drawing by French illustrator Edouard Léon Edy-Legrand is one of a group of preparatory drawings executed for a 1930 illustrated edition of Alphonse Daudet's 1872 novel *Tartarin of Tarascon*. In this scene, Tartarin, a portly, mustachioed man, visits Madame Mitaine's menagerie in Tarascon, a town in southern Provence, where he encounters a lion. As he stands before the creature in its cage, it emits a loud roar, causing the other spectators to flee in fear. The chaos and frenzy of the crowd is underscored by the artist's undulating layers of linework in both graphite and ink.



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John Steuart Curry, designer
American, 1897-1946
Associated American Artists, publisher
American
Missed Leap, 1934
Lithograph
Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.418



Pablo Picasso, designer
Spanish, 1881-1973
At the Circus (Au Cirque), from the series *La Suiter de saltimbanques*,
1905-1906
Drypoint on paper
Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.833

Between 1904 and 1906, saltimbanques, or itinerant circus performers, were the primary subject for Picasso, who saw them as social outsiders mirroring his own experience as an artist. Although most of Picasso's images lack the gaiety and spectacle of the performance, *At the Circus* portrays two entertainers standing atop a large horse. The delicately rendered figures lack costumes, safety equipment, a saddle, or bridle; Picasso focuses on their graceful performance as they move together in complete freedom.



Waters & Son
American
Torrey Brothers
American
Curiosities Exhibited in Barnum's Late American Museum in New York..., 1865-1870
Wood engraving
Courtesy of the John Hay Library, Brown University TL61.2014

Located in New York City at the corner of Broadway and Ann Street, P. T. Barnum's American Museum served as a hybrid zoo, museum, theater, and sideshow. Thirty-eight million visitors came through its doors between 1841 and 1865, the year the museum burned down.

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Barnum then took many of the acts on the road—including conjoined twins Chang and Eng, Tom Thumb, and a live giraffe and sea lion—creating what would become one of the most famous circuses in American history.

Strobridge Lithograph Company
American

Adam Forepaugh: Lalla Rookh's Departure From Delhi, 1884
Courtesy of Howard and Janice Tibbals TL87.2014.1

The opening act at the circus was the spectacle, or spec. Designed to transition the audience between the real world and the fantasy they were about to witness, specs ranged in subject matter from historical re-creations, such as Columbus's discovery of the New World, to grand processions, as seen in *Lalla Rookh's Departure from Delhi*.

Loosely based on Thomas Moore's 1817 romance, Adam Forepaugh's 1881 spec set the bar for extravagant opening productions. The poster's designer also set a new standard: rather than depicting the procession against the backdrop of the circus, the scene takes place on a street in Delhi, thus manifesting the all-encompassing fantasy the spec was supposed to achieve.

Strobridge Lithograph Company
American

Barnum & Bailey: A Glance at the Great Ethnological Congress, 1895
Courtesy of Howard and Janice Tibbals TL87.2014.2

Here, Native Americans present a dance, a costumed gentleman performs as a whirling dervish, and Russian men in green tunics perform a Cossack dance, all surrounded by groups of animals from every corner of the globe. P. T. Barnum first presented the Ethnological Congress in 1884 in a tent larger than his sideshow tent, continuing to enlarge this display and modify it over time. The human "specimens" from other parts of the world were both an exotic spectacle and an educational experience, often exposing Americans to cultures and races they had never seen before.

Strobridge Lithograph Company
American

Barnum and Bailey: Chaste, Charming, Weird and Wonderful Supernatural Illusions, 1898
Courtesy of Howard and Janice Tibbals TL87.2014.3

A rapt audience observes various illusion acts such as the Living

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Mermaid, the Living Sphinx, the Human Spider, and Blue Beard's Chamber, arranged in niches around the room. These illusions were particularly astonishing because the figures moved, spoke, and interacted with the audience, a seemingly impossible feat.

Magicians are a staple of circus life, but P. T. Barnum in particular sought to raise the bar on the illusions presented under his big top. During the 1897–1898 season, James Bailey, Barnum's circus partner, hired Henry Roltair, a magician who had gained a name for himself in the 1870s and '80s for creating incredibly complex illusions.

Fernand Léger
French, 1881-1955
Tériade Editeur
French

Cirque, 1950

Unbound volume with text and 34 color and 29 black lithographs
Courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange
funds from Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection
(BMA.2006.92) TL99.2014

In *Cirque*, artist Fernand Léger's heavy black outlines, flattened forms, and bright palette render all the figures—whether clowns, sideshow performers, acrobats, or equestrians—equally glamorous and grotesque.

Léger provides a unique perspective on the circus: in his text, he compares the performance rings to the cyclical nature of life. In the wake of World War II and in the same year as the passing of his wife, this analogy worked to a highly philosophical and deeply poignant effect.