

Circus and the City

New York, 1793–2010



Libsohn–Ehrenberg.
“April Manhattan.”
*Cue, the Weekly
Magazine of New York
Life* (April 1945), 16.

Bard
Graduate
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Arts, Design
History, Material
Culture

On view

September 21, 2012–
February 3, 2013

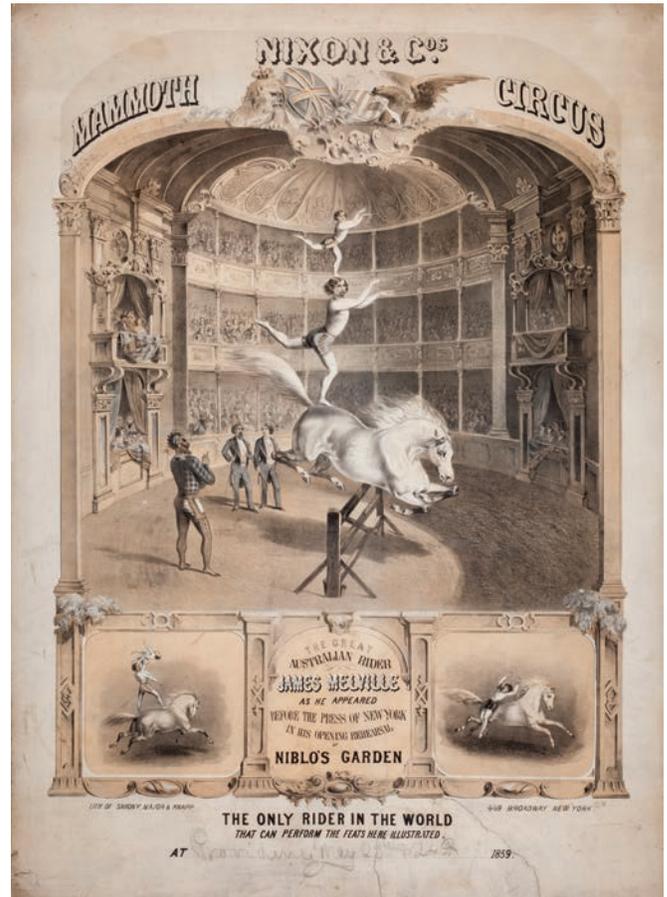
Exhibition

From September 21, 2012, to February 3, 2013, the Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture (BGC) will present *Circus and the City: New York, 1793–2010*, an exhibition that uses New York City as a lens through which to explore the extraordinary development and spectacular pageantry of the American circus. Through a wide variety of ephemera, images, and artifacts, the exhibition documents the history of the circus in the city, from the seminal equestrian displays of the late eighteenth century through the iconic late nineteenth-century American railroad circus to the Big Apple Circus of today. From humble beginnings, the circus grew into the most popular form of entertainment in the United States. By the turn of the twentieth century, New York City was its most important market and the place where cutting-edge circus performances and exhibitions were introduced to the nation.

“*Circus and the City* promises to be one of the grandest exhibitions about the American circus ever mounted,



Children at WPA festival in Sheep Meadow, Central Park, May 2, 1936. Photograph. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



“Nixon & Co.’s Mammoth Circus: The Great Australian Rider James Melville as He Appeared Before the Press of New York in His Opening Rehearsal at Niblo’s Garden,” 1859. Poster, printed by Sarony, Major, & Knapp, New York. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

and it offers a compelling look at how New York City influenced and inspired this iconic form of American popular entertainment,” said curator Matthew Wittmann, a curatorial fellow at the BGC.

Circus and the City: New York, 1793–2010 begins by looking at how the advent and growth of the American circus paralleled New York City’s rise as a cultural capital during the nineteenth century. This story began in the fall of 1793, when John Bill Ricketts, a Scotsman, opened the first circus on Greenwich Street with performances that primarily consisted of displays of equestrian skill. In the decades that followed, a variety of transitory circuses and menageries sprang up to entertain the burgeoning population. By mid-century, more permanent circus venues featuring a mix of equestrian, animal, and acrobatic acts were established. Although a succession of influential impresarios, such as Dan Rice and Lewis B. Lent, were transforming the circus business in the United States, no figure was more important to New York’s emerging popular entertainment industry than Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810–1891). Loans from the Barnum Museum illustrate the breadth of his endeavors,



"Jumbo the Children's Giant Pet," 1882. Poster, printed by the Hatch Lithographic Company, New York. Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Collection, ht2004500.

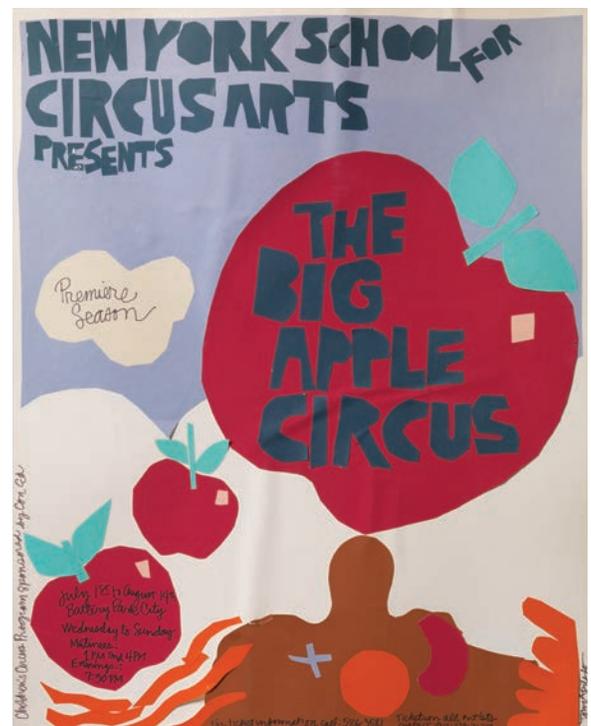
toys and books produced by the McLoughlin Bros. and other companies attests. The star of the elephant section is Jumbo, the African elephant that arrived in New York Harbor in 1882 and touched off a craze known as "Jumbomania," which was a boon to the circus business and generated a deluge of ephemera and memorabilia. Perhaps the most noted legacy of the American circus is the plethora of brightly colored posters that were put up all over the city whenever a circus was in town. Indeed, this exhibition delineates the history of show printing in New York and features many fine examples of this industrial art.

Finally, the exhibition takes the story of the circus and the city through the twentieth century by focusing on the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which once opened its season at Madison Square Garden every spring. This section consists of displays about the first visit of the Ringling Brothers to New York City in 1909; the WPA Circus during the Great Depression;

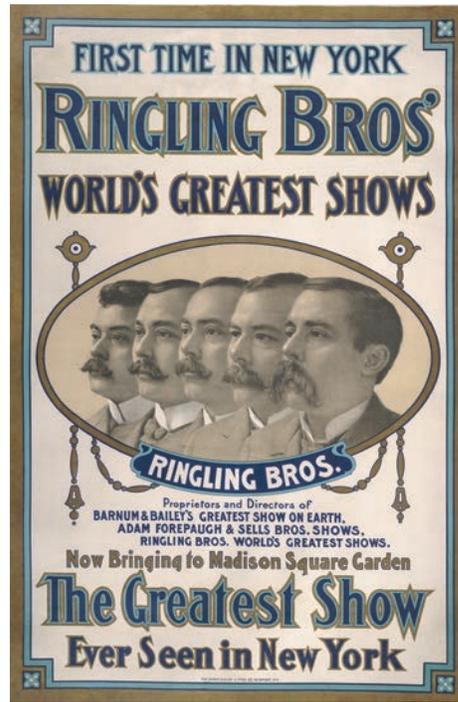
from his early years with Barnum's American Museum to his triumphant entry into the circus business in the early 1870s. Advertising and artifacts from this era demonstrate how the American circus evolved from modest beginnings into the celebrated and massive railroad circuses of the late nineteenth century and reveal the signature role that New York City played in this process.

The exhibition also features a series of thematic displays about parades, music, toys, elephants, posters, and other aspects of the circus business. These displays include wonderful prints and photographs of circuses parading through the city in different eras, as well as impressive wooden carvings by Samuel A. Robb, New York's preeminent manufacturer of show and shop figures. *Circus and the City* explores the particular appeal that the circus held for children, as the large number of

"New York School for Circus Arts Presents the Big Apple Circus." Louisa Chase. 1977. Big Apple Circus.



"First Time in New York, Ringling Bros' World's Greatest Shows, The Greatest Show Ever Seen in New York," 1909. Two-tone lithograph poster, printed by the Donaldson Lithographic Co., Newport, N.Y. Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Collection, ht2001294.



Arthur Fellig's (aka Weegee) circus photography; and works of art by Walt Kuhn, Milton Avery, and other New York City artists who were inspired by the circus. A final section of the exhibition is devoted to the performers who so thrilled New York audiences, featuring the animal trainer Clyde Beatty, the high-wire aerialist Karl Wallenda, the equestrienne May Wirth, and the clown Felix Adler.

Circus and the City: New York, 1793–2010 features more than two hundred objects and images selected from both local and national collections, including the New-York Historical Society, the International Center of Photography, the Somers Historical Society, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the New York State Museum, the Circus World Museum, the Barnum Museum, the Library of Congress, the Witte Museum, and the Shelburne Museum.

Publications

The Bard Graduate Center will publish a fully-illustrated catalogue with an extended essay by curator Matthew Wittmann tracing the history of the circus in New York City and highlighting its evolving role in the city's cultural landscape. This catalogue will also feature entries on noteworthy objects, including spectacular color letterpress and chromolithograph posters specially conserved for the exhibition and giving the history of a few of the more unusual items, such as Leonard Volk's marble bust of Dan Rice and a riding jacket fitted for a monkey equestrian act. An illustrated checklist will provide an overall look at the range of objects included in the exhibition.

In addition, the BGC is publishing with Yale University Press *The American Circus*, a collection of essays about the history of the circus in the United States. This interdisciplinary volume includes contributions by renowned experts from various disciplines that reveal the historical and intellectual complexity of the circus. Edited by Susan Weber, Kenneth L. Ames, and Matthew Wittmann, this publication ranges widely from thematic explorations of circus music and elephants to more narrowly focused studies of such objects as circus toys, tents, and costumes. With contributions from Leon Botstein, Janet Davis, Fred Dahlinger, and other leading scholars from universities and museums around the country, this publication also examines the transnational history of the American circus in Victorian Britain, the

Striped pants, worn by Dan Rice, ca. 1860s. Hertzberg Circus Collection of the Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas.



Wagon wheel, late 19th century. Painted wood and metal. Somers Historical Society, 2005.68. Photographer: Bruce White.

Americanization of the circus clown, and the government-sponsored WPA Circus of the 1930s.

“We are delighted to present *Circus and the City* in our Gallery,” said Susan Weber, BGC founder and director. “And with the publication of these two volumes we hope to make a major contribution to understanding the complex and significant history of the American circus and its impact on our culture.”

Circus and the City: New York, 1793–2010 is made possible in part with support from the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts.

Special Event

An exclusive opening preview party will be held on Wednesday, September 19, 2012. Featuring fanciful cocktails, creative foods, and circus-type entertainment, proceeds will support the BGC scholarship fund. For more information, please call 212-501-3058 or e-mail bass@bgc.bard.edu.

Gallery Programs

Lectures, study days, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and on Thursdays until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu.



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The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. The admission fee is \$7 general, \$5 senior and students (valid ID); admission is free Thursday evenings after 5 p.m. For more information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit bgc.bard.edu.

For more press information, please e-mail press@bgc.bard.edu or call 212-501-3074.