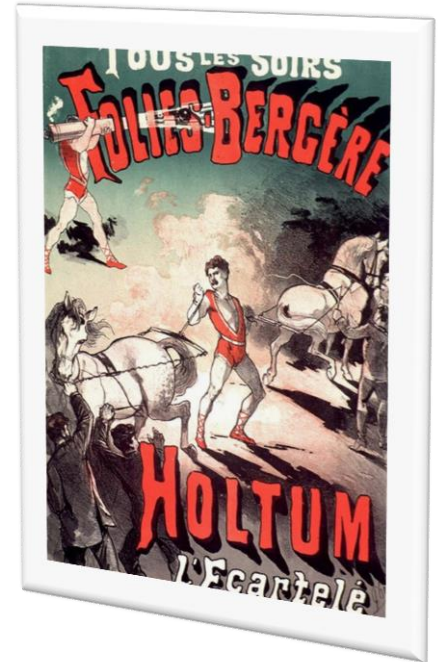


Sequins, Sawdust and Wild Animals

A small insight into circus life

I would like that the people in the audience like me. I want that they applaud and cheer me on. I know that when I please those who've come to see me, I will be able to continue for a long time, and knowing this is great for a performer.

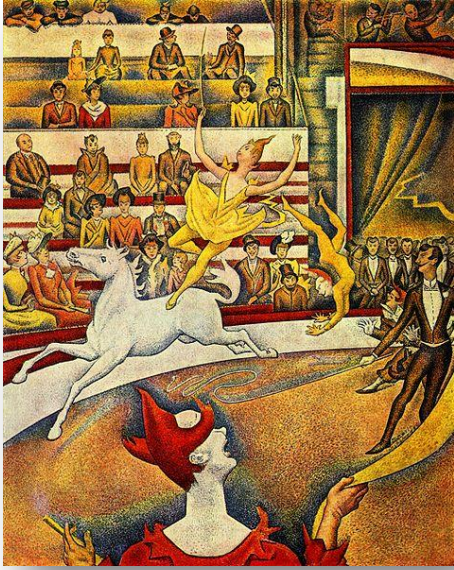
Mickey King (1905-2004), female trapeze artist



"What did people do before there was television?", we may ask ourselves sometimes. Or going back a bit further in time: What did people do before there were cinemas?
They went to the circus.



Circus in the 19th century



Le Cirque - Georges Seurat, 1891

The term circus originates in ancient times, from Latin, meaning the amphitheaters where the as famous as infamous chariot races and gladiator fights took place. Artists probably used to perform throughout all ages, mostly at the courts of kings, nobility and wealthy people, but also on the market squares of towns and hamlets. The circus as we know it though originates from the eighteenth century, had its heyday towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, until it indeed became less important due to the invention of the cinema.

Just as the movie industry today is dominated by Hollywood, the circus was nowhere as popular as in the USA. Circus culture there set the benchmark and trends for circus companies and circus performances all over the world. When we think of the circus' glory days, our corresponding notion of these days is involuntarily shaped by this kind of circus culture.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the circus in the USA attracted millions of spectators every year, and its colorful world dominated the American pop culture well into the first years of the next century. The circus was the first professional entertainment industry; its artists were the popstars, the Hollywood and TV series actors of today.

As a popular form of entertainment, the circus set standards still valid today: bringing entertainment directly to the spectator, sensational advertising campaigns, talent scouts looking all over the world for new acts and newest technology. The circus used to be Super Bowl, Olympic Games and Hollywood blockbuster, all at once, and the best thing: it arrived more or less directly at one's home, no matter how small the town in which one lived, how far away it was located from the next city.

In the small farming communities and villages, the circus usually stayed only for one day; tents that could be set up and taken down quickly and be easily transported made it possible. A great parade through the town preceded the two shows per day, and almost everybody from around went there. Businesses were closed and school was cancelled when the circus arrived: a welcome change from poor working conditions, of crowded and unsanitary living circumstances in the big cities. The circus meant entertainment for the whole family, for men, women and children.

The big allure for me was the overwhelming feeling to belong, to be a part of this astonishing, in physical respect gifted and extended family, a tough tribe of half-gypsies.

Bill Ballantine (1910-1999), clown and illustrator of circus subjects

Life in the circus appears to be a string of clichés, and yet it was exactly like one imagines. To be a part of a circus was not a job – it meant a certain way to live, in a distinct kind of culture.

The circus resembled an extended family, with own principles and rules, and there was only one limit: that of circus itself. This family was multilingual; German was just spoken as well as Italian, French (the prevalent language), Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Hungarian and last but not least English. For many artists from Europe found their way into the American circus, and quite often they had a strong family background in circus. That a runaway ends up in the circus, as frequently depicted in novels or movies, occurred often, and the proverbial superstitiousness of artists was a fact, too.



Circus poster, ca. 1899



Trapeze artists - Calvert Litho Co., 1890

But life beyond the circus ring was hardly glamorous. Torn costumes had to be mended, and hair had to be dyed, damaged saddles and ladders had to be repaired. Children had to be taken care of and often trained as junior artists. Heaps of laundry had to be washed and ironed; entire circus companies had to be provided with meals, the animals wanted to be fed and watered as well and the equipment had to be cleaned and kept in good condition. In the spare time, one played chess or card games, read to the analphabets among the artists from the newspapers, went fishing or sightseeing – or simply did nothing for a change.

There was little privacy in the circus trailers and tents; more often than not there was no running water but invasions of fleas instead – to live in the circus frequently meant continuous stress. One had to be made for this kind of life, which is why circus people then and now preferably chose their partners among other artists.

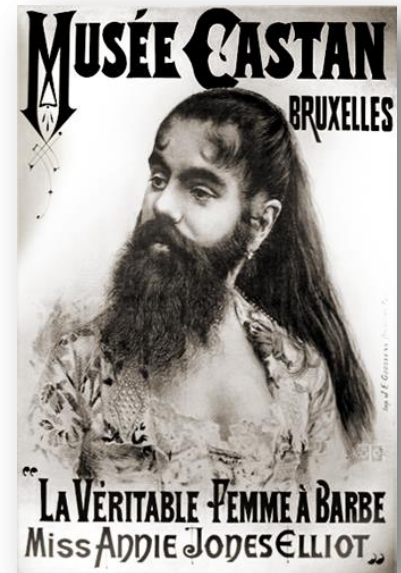
... under circumstances that would drive an average woman to insanity.
Lilian Leitzel (1892-1931), acrobat and strongwoman

A lesser known chapter in the world of circus is the role of women, and this chapter contains some quite astonishing facts.

In a period when female sexuality and physical exercises of women were declared taboo by prevalent quasi-religious conservative social conventions, the circus achieved something no other performing art managed to do: to welcome women for what they are and offering them good professional prospects in addition. Here it was possible for women to display their bodies and their physical abilities publicly without losing respectability. Women performing on stage were considered immoral – but not women appearing in the circus. Even when they were wearing the skimpiest of costumes - while their colleagues at the theater were regarded as disrespectful in exactly the same clothing.

At the circus, women were absolutely equal to men. Life on the road war hard; to survive, everybody had to lend a hand in equal measure. To make enough money for a living, everybody had to contribute to the performances, and the more professional, the more versatile they were, the better – women's contribution to the revenues included. To be pretty and sexy was not enough in the circus. Talent was the decisive basis, complemented by rigorous training, physical and mental strength and stamina.

The male lust for watching changed into wonder, even reverence for the achievements of female artists. Of course they were still perceived as sexy, but also as admirable, intimidating and remote, since they accomplished feats most of the male spectators would not even dare to give it a try.



No circus without sideshow

The circus granted woman a kind of freedom they could not find anywhere else, and without aiming at it in the proper sense, the circus was a trailblazer for women's emancipation.

A world of its own, the circus ... It has its births and deaths and weddings, its sorrows and its joys ... But for us – there is something more. There is a solidarity that we from the circus, who ventured into the world outside, haven't found in that strange place.

Josephine DeMott Robinson (1868-1948), circus rider

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