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art+performance

STEP RIGHT UP

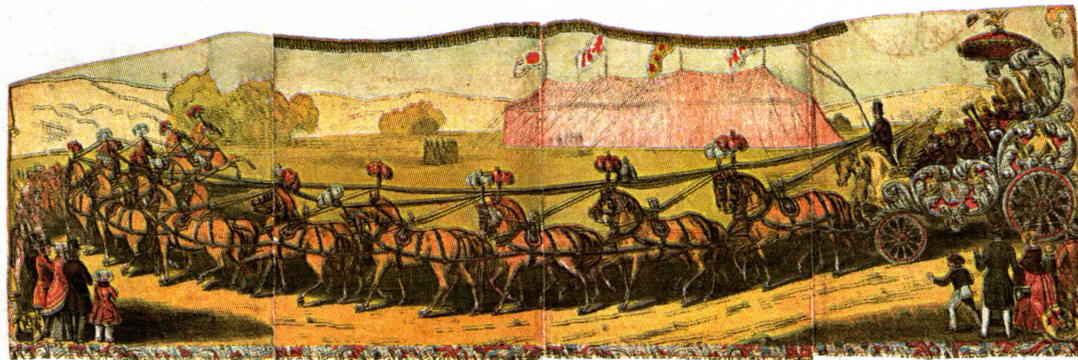
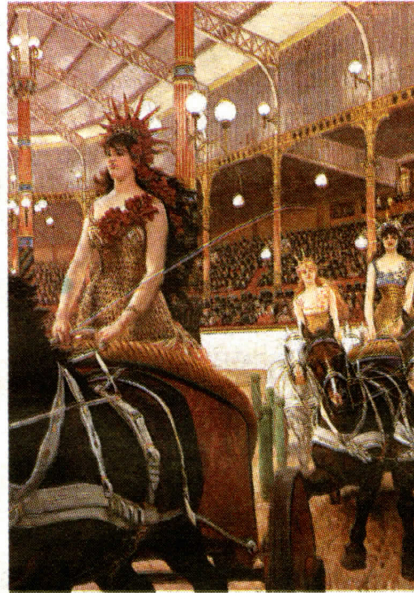
At RISD Museum,
'Circus' spans a century
of big-top thrills

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PROVIDENCE — Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, step right up! For your viewing pleasure: wonderments and freaks, feats of artistic bravado, and disturbing evidence of colonialist bigotry!

"Circus" has come to town — to Providence, that is — in a tight, engrossing exhibition at the RISD Museum celebrating the period between 1850 and the 1960s, when circuses were a premier popular entertainment. Curatorial Fellow Alison Chang has put together posters and illustrations with big-top-inspired art by such luminaries as Matisse and Toulouse-Lautrec.

The rise of circuses in the US and Europe tracks with that of industrialization. Railroads carried traveling troupes far and wide.



Clockwise (from left): An 1850s circus poster, "Ladies of the Chariots (Ces Dames des chars)" by James Jacques Joseph Tissot, Henri Matisse's "The Nightmare of the White Elephant (Le Cauchemar de l'éléphant blanc)."

PHOTOS COURTESY RISD MUSEUM

ART REVIEW

CIRCUS

At: RISD Museum, 224 Benefit St.
Providence, through Feb. 22.
401-454-6500,
www.risdmuseum.org

The world was suddenly smaller and more accessible. A Victorian-era fascination with indigenous societies arose as empires spread, and alongside the sword-swallowers and bearded ladies in circus sideshows, Africans and Native Americans appeared in native dress, purportedly dancing and performing rituals of their cultures.

We might see indigenous groups in sideshows as disrespectful, even appalling, but circus impresarios such as P.T. Barnum saw them differently. They were bringing the world to the doorsteps of ordinary Americans and Europeans, who likely had never seen, and perhaps never imagined, what a traditional African costume might look like, let alone a traditional African dance.

"Circus" taps into the light and dark sides of the circus culture: the shimmering acrobatic feats, the pomp, and the new electric spotlights, the nightmarish allure of sideshows and clowns, and the dark romance of traveling performers.

Everyone banded together to put on a good show: German photographer August Sander's "Circus Artists (Zirkusartisten)" dated 1926/1932, gathers several performers of different races in a collegial backstage shot, some in ornate costumes and some in robes, as if about to change. No one smiles. They pose, and warily appraise the camera, and us.

At the circus, everyone's an outcast. Perhaps that's why visual artists were so attracted to it. Drawing, painting, and photographing performers, they could mine extremes of beauty and oddity, and tap into the frisson prompted by outsiders.

That's what Max Beckmann did in his stark 1922 print portfolio "Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)." Beckmann had been traumatized during World War I as a member of the German medical corps, and used his art to begin to make sense of a chaotic world. His prints provided a dark commentary, using the circus as a metaphor for political and societal folly — as in "The Merry-Go-Round (Das Karussell)," a cramped spin, riders hurtling in useless circles atop frantic, empty-eyed beasts.

Beckmann lingered backstage, as well. In "The Negro (Der Neger)," a white man in costume with a horn addresses a black man, whose narrow face dominates the print. The latter's eyes are weary, nearly closed, and his arms cross, as the white

man, big mouth open, appears to yammer at him. Is that a tear on the face of the black woman behind the black man,

or just a mark? Beckmann made this print nearly a century ago, but the dynamic he portrays still stings.



PHOTOS COURTESY RISD MUSEUM

Clockwise (from left): John Steuart Curry's "Missed Leap," Max Beckmann's "The Merry-Go-Round (Das Karussell)," "Crowd at the Circus" by Edouard Léon Louis Edy-Legrand.

At the big top, there's always a whiff of danger. John Steuart Curry traveled with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for months in 1932, making studies for later paintings and prints. A trapeze artist misses her partner's outstretched hand in the lithograph "Missed Leap," and while Curry has fringed a lower corner with a net, she appears to be dropping straight toward a starred target on the floor below. Illustrator Edouard Léon Louis Edy-Legrand, in "Crowd at the Circus," depicted panicked audience members fleeing from a roaring lion in fleet ink and pencil.

Even the celebratory "Ladies of the Chariots (Ces Dames des chars)," an 1883-85 painting by James Jacques Joseph Tissot of bold women in starry crowns racing horse-drawn carts around a Parisian hippodrome, gives us a heart-racing perspective. We're on the track, hoof beats drumming past us, about to be sundered by a chariot wheel.

In the center ring, we have Henri Matisse's brassy stenciled print from 1947, "The Nightmare of the White Elephant (Le Cauchemar de l'éléphant blanc)." What a spectacle: An elephant balances on a ball, ears flying and trunk flaring, against a sun-bright yellow ground. Slashes of red pass through and around the beast, as if to lift it up or assassinate it, and a blue star twinkles from the ball. The crowd, evoked in looping, undulant networks of black, seems agape, horrified.

The print comes from Matisse's artist's book, "Jazz," which featured what he called "crystallizations of memories of the circus." This one seems more like a child's fantastical dream than a memory of something that truly occurred. It's high-pitched, brilliant.

But the circus is a pastiche of fantastical dreams. That's what the posters here advertise. There's one for Barnum & Bailey's "Great Ethnological Congress," (1895) and another for its "Chaste, Charming, Weird, and Wonderful Supernatural Illusions," (1898) including a mermaid and a "Human Spider."

Another remarkable poster, a rare surviving four-panel woodcut circa 1850, depicts the circus arriving in town in a buoyant parade, with plumed, golden horses pulling a magnificent wagon with gilded hawks and giant filigrees, in which a band plays. Townspeople stand agape. Surely, Main Street never looks like this.

That was the marvel of circuses: They were everything out-of-the-ordinary. Alongside fascination, they stirred up longing and fear. "Circus" has no tent and no rings, just art and ephemera, but it strikes the same chords.

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