

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

PHOTO ESSAYS

Under the Big Top with a Century of Art

by Laura C. Mallonee on October 20, 2014

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August Sander, "Circus Artists" ("Zirkusartisten") (1926/1936, printed later), Edgar J. Lownes and Walter H. Kimball Funds (© August Sander) (all images courtesy the RISD Museum, Providence, RI)

Long before television or the internet infused daily life with spectacle, there was the circus. Between 1850 and 1960, this lowbrow performance art — a theater of animal riders, jugglers, acrobats, dancers, and clowns — captured the public imagination, drawing a century's worth of artists to illustrate its wondrous sights and the eccentric characters orchestrating them.

Circus, a new show at the RISD Museum in Providence, Rhode Island, invites visitors back into the big top to consider it through the lens of art. For people like Alexander Calder, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, the circus's doors (or flaps) opened onto an arresting world of garish color, mesmerizing costumes, and live human subjects ranging from the graceful (James Tissot's "Ladies of the Chariots") to the grotesque (Max Beckmann's "Behind the Wings"). In short, an artistic goldmine.

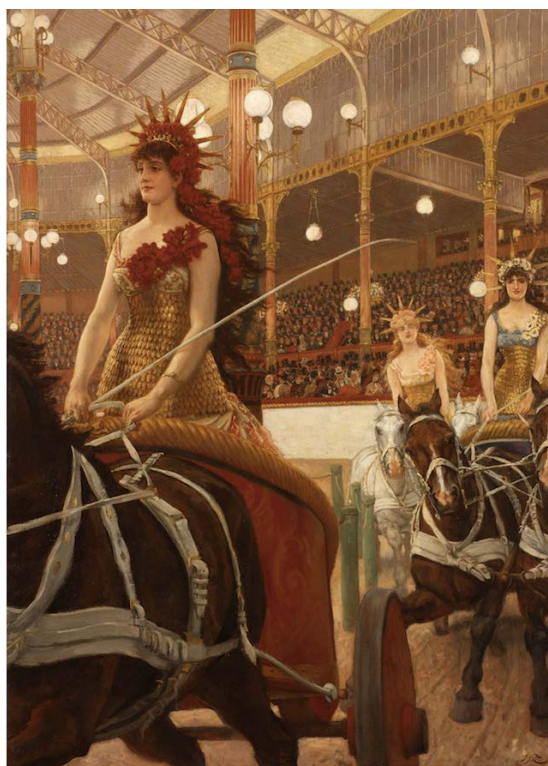
The show — which includes 40 paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs — also looks beyond the circus's aesthetic appeal to consider its historical and political significance. As a [press statement](#) explains:

Although the circus created an illusory world unto itself, it was also deeply tied to the 19th and 20th century industrialization of the United States and Europe. Enabled by rapid technological advancements, such as an expanding railroad system, the circus came to both large cities and small towns. At the same time, highlights such as menageries and ethnographic exhibitions broadened visitors' exposure to cultures from around the world, thus shaping viewers' knowledge while simultaneously reinforcing Western hegemony over colonized lands.

Take a look at some images from the show.



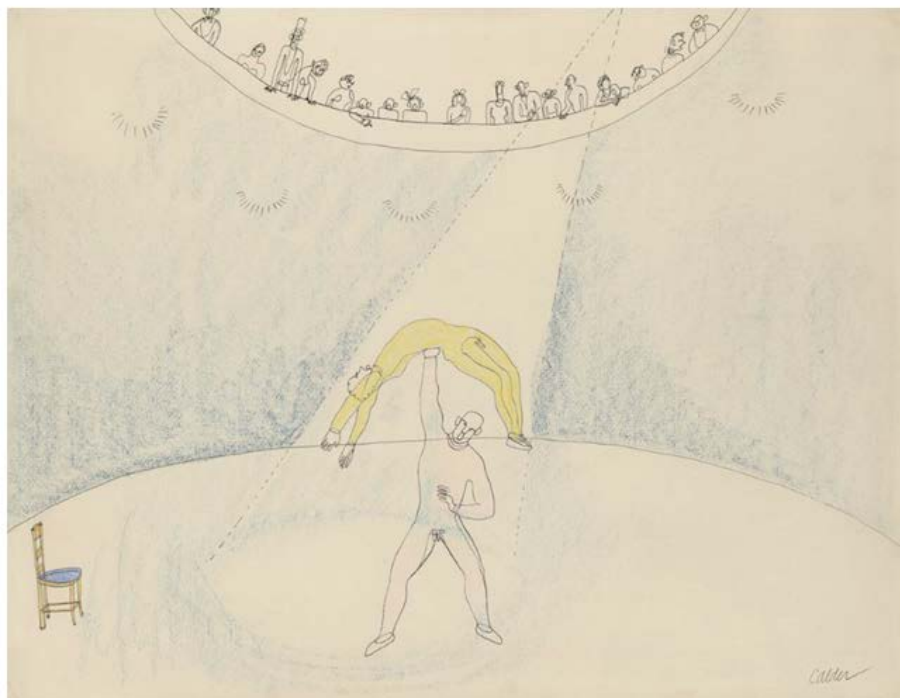
American, Circus Poster (1850–55), Museum Works of Art Fund



James Tissot, "Ladies of the Chariots" (c. 1883–85), Gift of Mrs. Water Lowry



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, "At the Circus: Bareback" (1899), Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth



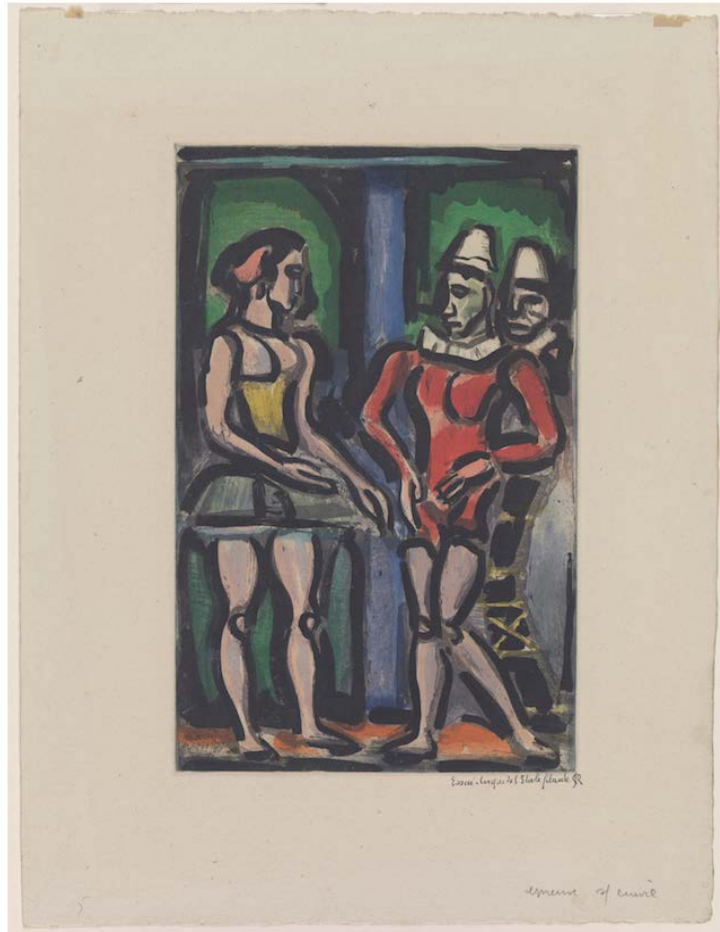
Alexander Calder, "Tumblers with Spectators" (1931-32), The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art: gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irving J. Fain (© Alexander Calder)



Henri Matisse, "The Nightmare of the White Elephant" ("Le Cauchemar de l'éléphant blanc") (1947),
Mary B. Jackson Fund (© Henri Matisse)



Charles Demuth, "Bicyclists" (c. 1916-17), Gift of the Fazzano Brothers (© Charles Demuth)



Georges Rouault, "Parade" (1934), Gift of the Fazzano Brothers (© Georges Rouault)



Max Beckmann, "The Barker" (1922), Museum Works of Art Fund (© Max Beckmann)



Max Beckmann, "Behind the Wings" (1922), Museum Works of Art Fund (© Max Beckmann)

Circus continues at the RISD Museum (224 Benefit St, Providence, RI) through Feb. 22, 2015.