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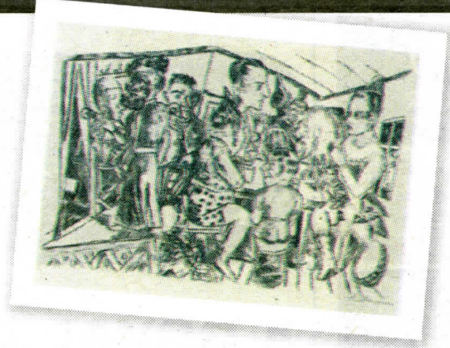
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Art



ANXIETY DREAM
Beckmann's
Behind the Wings.

LIFE IS A CARNIVAL

THE RISD MUSEUM'S "CIRCUS" GOES BEHIND THE BIG TOP

BY GREG COOK

➤ To run away with the circus — it's a glamorous metaphor for "leaving a dull life for a colorful one," as the wise gurus at wikihow, whom I turn to for all my life advice, inform me. It speaks of merry tricksters and rule-defiers, people who might just as well seduce you as rip you off. To say it is to dream of liberation, to dream of escaping into a world of brighter lights and darker shadows and a friendlier embrace of kinks and freaks.

I was thinking of these things when visiting "Circus," at the RISD Museum (224 Benefit St, Providence, through February 22), a small, but rich, two-room exhibition of century-old advertising posters and fine art paintings and prints of the spectacle, organized by Alison Chang.

I kept thinking about the "colorful" part. An 1895 color poster for Barnum & Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" advertises its "Great Ethnological Congress," showcasing lions, camels, giraffes, bears, and hyenas alongside Pacific islanders, whirling dervishes, Russian Cossack stomping, drumming Africans, and dancing Native Americans in feathered headdresses.

Race and ethnicity were among the featured entertainments of the circus — and still are. The Western circus has long been, by turns, a spectacle of United Nations multiculturalism and an orgy of Western colonial ogling that enforces racial stereotypes — see exotic, primitive specimens of critters and people from around the world!

Artists were entranced by the circus' mingling of races and its fantasies of other ways of living. August Sander photographs a group of white and black performers sitting next to a circus caravan in 1926; Max Beckmann's 1922 circus etching shows a woman dancing to the music of black musicians; in 1910, Max Pechstein depicts black women doing a Somali dance to drums and pipes.

"Like many other German artists of his time," a sign



TRAPEZE ACT AS FILM NOIR Curry's *Missed Leap*.

explains, "Pechstein embraced African and other non-European art as an uncorrupted and more authentic antidote to the stultified refinement of German society."

The circus was also one more antidote to the starved academic realism of painters like French artist James Tissot, represented here by his canvas of women in crowns riding chariots before a crowd of men in top hats and women in gowns inside Paris's modern Hippodrome de l'Alma, all glass and steel illuminated by electric lights. Tissot impresses with his verisimilitude, but these "amazones" seem stiff and posed. He painted this in 1885 as the French Impressionists were scurrying across hayfields to break the old realist rules and bring back visions of the countryside in accumulations of short, dashed brushstrokes.

A quarter-century later, Pechstein's purposely "primitive" woodcut is part of a line of Western aesthetic thought, running back through Pablo Picasso's cubism and Paul Gauguin's Polynesian sexcapes, that imitated (caricatured?) the styles of Africans, black Americans, Pacific Islanders, ancient Mediterranean cultures, children's drawings, and the art of the mentally handicapped to let loose, go wild, and break through to fresh ways of making art. French artist Fernand Leger's book of lithographs, *Cirque* (1950), is cubism as colorful children's doodles of acrobats, horses, and clowns. As an artistic move, "primitivism" was successful but, like the circus, it seems mainly to have left racial divides firmly in place.

Picasso and other artists in France turned the circus into a metaphor for themselves — avant-garde artists as dazzling, romantic outcasts. But then there's Max Beckmann's 1922 portfolio of etchings, *Annual Fair* — a tight-rope walker shrouded under a sheet balances high above a Ferris wheel; too many performers crowd into a too-small room; a topsy-turvy carousel of bulls and boars seems to spin off the rails. People keep looking over their shoulders as if fearing they're being watched. The prints are an anxiety dream pulled from Germany's collective unconscious. He turns circus sideshows into metaphors for the sordid, claustrophobic, traumatized society after its World War I defeat.

That psychological darkness pervades American works from the Great Depression. John Steuart Curry's 1934 lithograph *Missed Leap* turns a trapeze act into film noir. Martin Lewis's 1933 drypoint shows a crowd gathered outside circus tents at night at the edge of town. The world feels exhausted, but the glow emanating from under the big top is a tantalizing offer of relief, of escape from the drudgery — if only for one sequined night before the itinerant show travels on. ©

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CARAVAN Sander's *Circus Artists*