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## ART

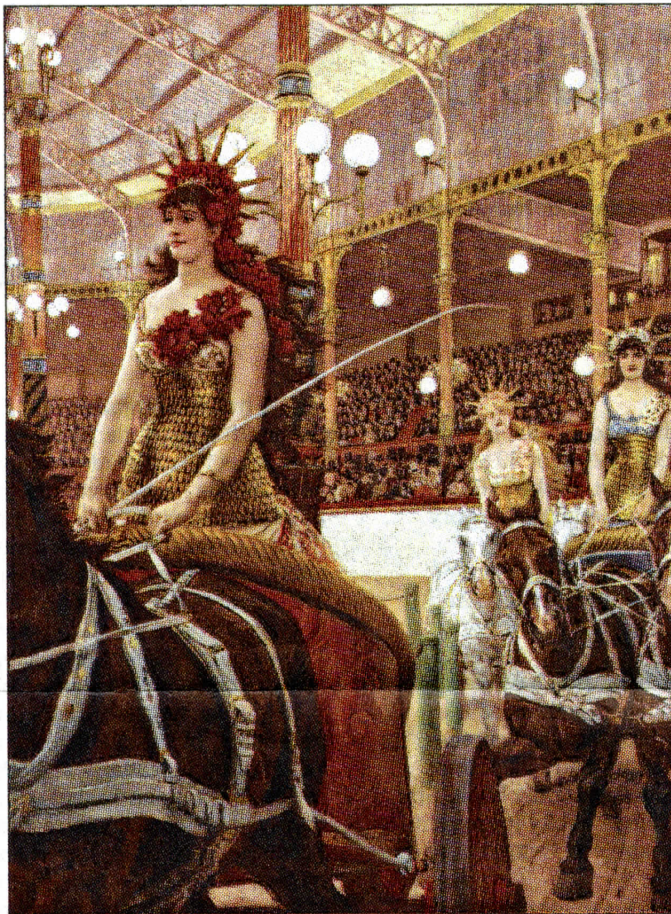
# Artists' love for the circus shows in RISD exhibit

By **BILL VAN SICLEN**  
JOURNAL ARTS WRITER

PROVIDENCE — Picasso loved them. So did Matisse. So did Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, a founder of French Post-Impressionism; Max Beckmann, a leading German Expressionist; and Alexander Calder, the American Modernist sculptor. And don't forget the Russian Cubist Marc Chagall.

What do these otherwise disparate artists have in common?

As it turns out, they all had a soft spot for the circus. As a new exhibit at the RISD Museum makes clear, circuses have been a popular source of inspiration for artists at least since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. What's more, at a time when artistic styles and standards often seemed to change with the speed of human cannonballs, circuses managed to appeal to a wide range of artists — everyone from avant-garde pioneers such as Matisse and Picasso to artists of a more traditional bent. **Cont on p. 2**



RISD MUSEUM

**James Tissot's** "The Women of the Chariots (Ces Dames des Chars)" is a standout among the 40 works in the collection.



RISD MUSEUM

**Look closely at** "The Nightmare of the White Elephant (Le Cauchemar de l'éléphant blanc)," to find the elephant balancing on a ball.

and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Nevertheless, in Chang's view, Tissot's painting of female circus performers dressed up as Roman charioteers is one of the stars of the show. "Notice how he tilts the perspective so that the figures almost seem to be riding out of the frame," she says. "It's a great effect."

While most of the artworks on display come from RISD's permanent

collection, Chang also borrowed several pieces. Of special note: A series of vintage circus posters on loan from the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Fla.

In one, a procession of elephants strolls through a vaguely Middle Eastern landscape accompanied by the words "Adam Forepaugh's \$200,000 Oriental Pageant." Another

promises viewers a "Chaste, Charming, Weird & Wonderful" experience filled with "Supernatural Illusions, Astonishing Magical Achievements, Living & Breathing Headless Bodies, Beautiful Maidens, Gruesome Gnomes and Curious Flying People."

Now that's something anyone would pay to see.

"Circus" runs through Feb. 22 at the RISD Museum, 224 Benefit St., Providence. Hours: Tues.-Sun. 10-5 and Thurs. 10-9. Admission: \$12 general, \$10 seniors, \$5 college with I.D., \$3 ages 5-18. For more, call (401) 454-6500 or visit [risdmuseum.org](http://risdmuseum.org).

"It's actually kind of amazing to see how many different artists were fascinated by the circus," says RISD print curator Alison Chang. "It's not something that you normally associate with modern art. But once you start looking for it, it just sort of keeps popping up."

As an example, Chang points to a work with the colorful title "The Nightmare of the White Elephant (Le Cauchemar de l'éléphant blanc)." Originally part of "Jazz," a famous series of jazz-inspired prints by Matisse, it initially appears to be something of a visual in-joke. For one thing, it's not very nightmarish. For another, there doesn't seem to be an elephant anywhere in sight.

"Don't worry, it really is there," Chang says.

And then, suddenly, it is: tucked away in the print's upper right corner is the faint but unmistakable outline of a circus elephant balancing on a ball. Who knew?

In all, "Circus" features about 40 artworks, including prints, paintings, drawings and photographs. Some, such as the Matisse "Jazz" print, are the work of well-known artists who were drawn to circuses and circus imagery throughout their careers. Picasso, for example, was fascinated by so-called "saltimbanques" — basically, itinerant entertainers such as acrobats, musicians and circus performers. He also loved horses, which may explain why he combined the two in "At the Circus (Au Cirque)," a wonderful 1905-06 etching of two circus performers standing nonchalantly atop a galloping horse.

Circuses also figure prominently in the work of Calder. A kind of ultimate do-it-yourself, Calder actually created his own miniature circus while living in Paris in the 1920s and '30s. Made entirely from scraps of wood, wire, paper and other castoff materials, it eventually included dozens of figures, including clowns, acrobats, animals — even a strongman.

"Calder's Circus," as it's known, isn't in the RISD show (for that, you'll have to pay a visit to New York's Whitney Museum of American Art). However, the RISD show does have one of the many circus-themed prints Calder made during the same period — a playful view of tumblers performing for a crowd that employs the same playful stick-figure style as his famous circus troupe.

What's more, the museum is screening "Le Grand Cirque Calder," a 1927 film that shows Calder performing with his circus figures. The screening, along with other circus-related activities, is part of the museum's monthly "Design the Night" celebration on Thursday, Aug. 21.

While visitors will find plenty of works by name-brand artists, some of the show's most striking pieces come from artists with a slightly less exalted pedigree. A good example is "The Women of the Chariots (Ces Dames des Chars)," a painting by the French artist James Jacques Joseph Tissot. Though well known during his lifetime, Tissot isn't nearly as famous today as some of his contemporaries, including Impressionist artists such as Claude Monet