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*(Philip) Astley's Amphitheatre in London as drawn by Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus Pugin for Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* (1808-11)*

The modern-day circus is a town without a zip code, a traveling menagerie of international performers, artists, animals and vendors who transform empty parking lots or fields - if only for a week or two - into a magical place where trapeze performers defy gravity, nimble jugglers defy logic, and wild animals and their human trainers defy expectations.

But the evolution of this insular community, rife with its own traditions, myths and superstitions, has always been vulnerable to cultural and historical whimsy, having to adapt quickly to the ever-changing political and ethical climates that swirl just outside of

the tent. To stay afloat for the several centuries that the modern-day circus has been alive, owners and performers have had to continuously adapt to a changing world.

Many of the acts we see in the circus today have roots in societies that flourished thousands of years ago: Acrobats and jugglers were popular in ancient Egypt and China; traveling entertainment troupes criss-crossed the Roman Empire; and physical performers entertained crowds at fairs that sprang up throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. Many of these fairs were built around the Catholic calendar, but as the Protestant Reformation ushered in an era of moral reform, these fairs - especially in England and France - began to fold.

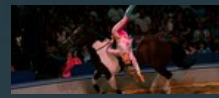
"That was a major source of income for these entertainers," says Janet Davis, PhD., author of "The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top," and an associate professor of American studies and history at the University of Texas. "As you see the rise of protestant moral piety, the fairs dissolve and the entertainers coalesce into circuses," she says.

A Ring Plus a Horse Plus a Comic Character

The modern-day circus was the brain-child of Englishman Philip Astley, who had honed his horsemanship skills in the Seven Years' War, and, upon leaving his military service, decided to make use of his trick riding skills by opening up a riding school in London. By day, Astley taught horsemanship, but in the evening he'd exhibit his own skills and other notable trick riders of the era for an audience.

"Astley's school featured a circular arena that he called a 'circle,' or a 'circus,' which would later be known as a 'ring.' Trick riders had devised the ring some years earlier. Besides allowing the audience to keep sight of the horsemen ... the ring proved ideal for generating the centrifugal force that helped trick riders balance when they stood on the backs of their galloping horses," writes Circus Historian Dominique Jando in his book, "Big Apple Circus: 25 years." By 1770, Astley began augmenting his equestrian shows with jugglers, acrobats, ropedancers and clowns, who were meant to entertain the audience between riding tricks. This equation: a ring plus a horse plus a comic character equaled great success for Astley who expanded his business and opened the first Parisian circus in 1782, The Amphitheatre Anglois.

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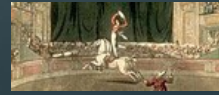
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HISTORY OF THE CIRCUS



It was only a few years later that the European circus concept would reach the fledgling United States. In 1793, equestrian John Bill Ricketts opened a one-ring circus in Philadelphia, and the attraction was so popular that word spread and President George Washington rode into town to see the show. Ricketts' production was closely modeled after Astley's circus in that it featured a single ring and one entertainer at a time. But several cultural and monetary shifts would soon morph the traditional circus into a singularly American production.

By the early 1800's, the tantalizing idea of Manifest Destiny - that the United States was meant to expand across the breadth of the continent and control lands from the Atlantic to the Pacific - hung in the air like incense. Americans were loading up wagons and horses and heading west, and the American circus followed along. In 1825, businessman Joshua Purdy Brown made the circus even more portable when he developed a canvas tent to house the entertainment, rather than the traditional wooden circus buildings that were laborious to tear down and transport. And as the railroad began connecting the cities and small towns all over the nation, the circus became an itinerant and popular form of entertainment.

Even as the circus migrated from town to town to entertain people, its good reputation began to slide.

"The 1820s and 30s were an intense time of reform and religious piety ... and the circus took a beating," says Davis. "It was banned from certain states and (heavily) taxed in others. Circus showmen learned that they had to re-cast themselves. They added educational aspects to the show like animal menageries, and they de-emphasized the roles women played in the circus."

'Why Send Out a Minnow When a Whale Will Do?'

But the bellwether moment in the evolution of the American circus came in 1871 when Phineas Taylor Barnum and William Cameron Coup debuted P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie & Circus.

"P.T. Barnum came from a museum background, and because of the bad press the circus was getting, the owners were always trying to promote it as an educational institution," says Deborah Walk, curator of collections for the Ringling Museums. "They had exotic animals from the four corners of the earth, and you had to go through the menagerie first and then you went to your seat in the big top. There was no way to miss the menagerie - it was all part of the educational outreach to get people to go to the show."

Soon, Barnum and Coup were turning away people who flocked to see the exotic animals, sideshow oddities and performances of strength and agility. To remedy this problem, they added a second ring in 1872 and a third ring in 1881, allowing more people under the big top at any given performance. This format increased their profits and inflated the size of their show. Now, Barnum and Coup needed twenty elephants instead of two to fill the three rings at once. They needed 10 clowns instead of one, and though clowns traditionally had had speaking roles, the performers fell silent because their voices couldn't carry in such a large venue. Every act grew bigger and more flamboyant.

"Philosophically, the explosion of the American circus, the bigness of it all, is the American gift to the circus," says Walk. "If you have one tent, why not two? Or three? Space wasn't a problem, so why not add a menagerie? Some say this was a detriment to (the art) of the circus because there's so much going on at one time, but it is the extravagance of the American circus," she says.

"Barnum's philosophy was, 'why send out a minnow when a whale will do?'"

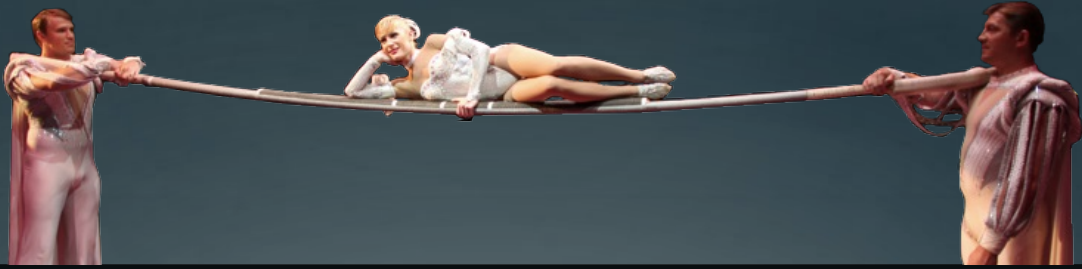
Through a series of mergers and acquisitions, Barnum teamed with James Anthony Bailey to create an even bigger circus featuring Jumbo, advertised as the largest elephant in the world. When Barnum died in 1891, Bailey continued his work with the circus, embarking on a large European tour in 1897. After Bailey's death in 1906, the Ringling Brothers bought the Barnum & Bailey Circus, merged it with their own popular circus, and ran the business successfully into the 1920s.

Today, the circus is still popular, though it has again had to re-invent itself to better meld with the mores of the day. While exotic animals once drew large, gape-mouthed crowds, the animal rights movement of the 1970s and 80s pressured the circus to re-think its relationship to exotic animals. Shows like Cirque du Soleil don't include animals at all and many others, including the Big Apple Circus, work exclusively with traditionally domesticated animals. Also, there's a renewed emphasis on the artistic presentation of an act over spectacle, though there's still a sizeable market that loves the traditional three-ring animal circus.

"There's something thrilling about seeing things live," says Walk. "There is that immediacy, the electricity in the air, the idea that real people are doing real things in real time. The ring is primitive and embedded into our psyche. A community gathers around the ring and the fire is in the middle, and this has been true from prehistoric times. Comedy is the root of our humanity, and the circus pulls these constantly enduring elements together," she says.

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