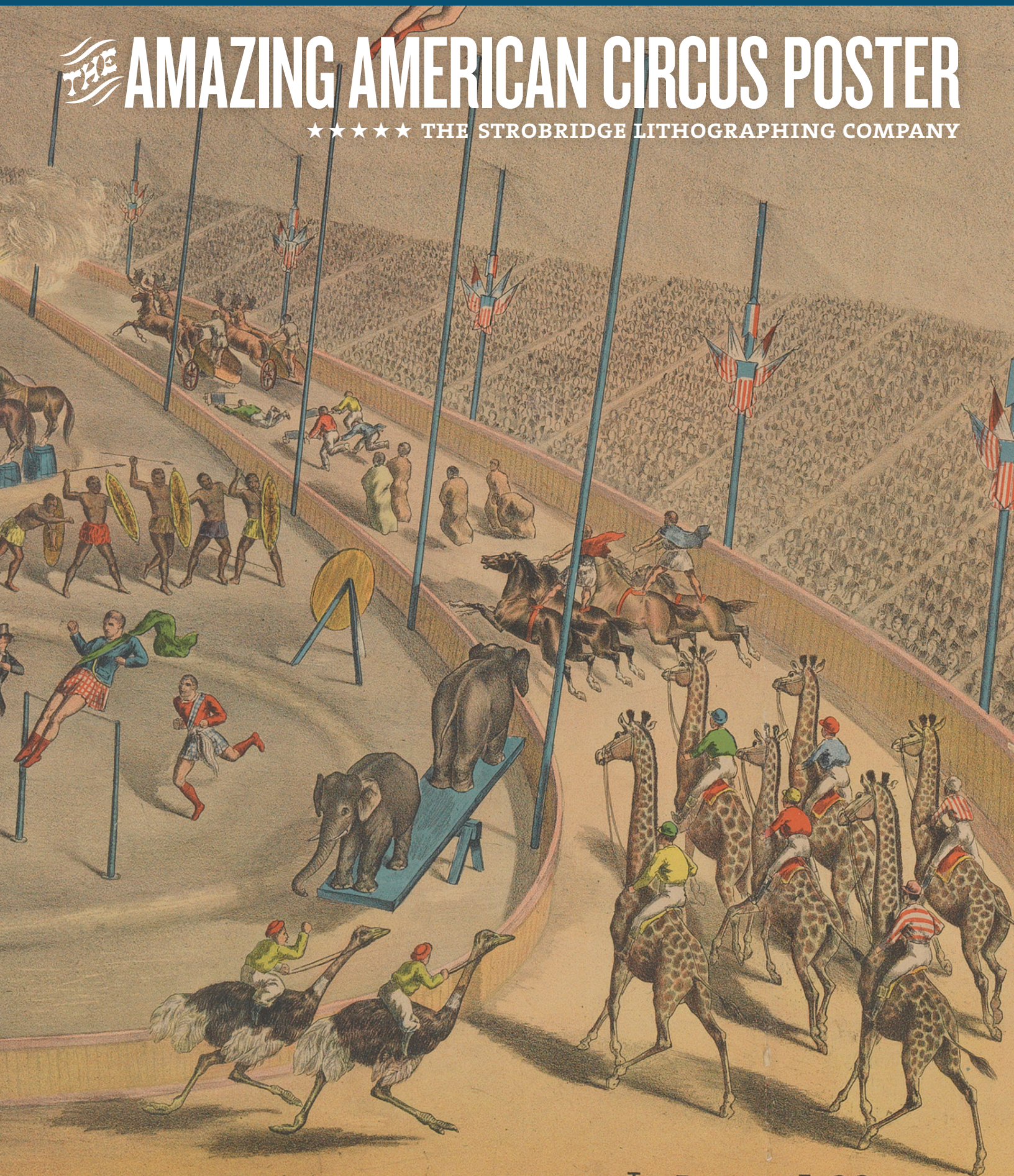


THE AMAZING AMERICAN CIRCUS POSTER

★★★★★ THE STROBRIDGE LITHOGRAPHING COMPANY



THE CIRCUS IN AMERICA

Today many American families eagerly look forward to their annual excursion to the “Big Top.” The circus has been a leisure-time tradition in American culture with few historic rivals. Since the country’s infant years, the circus has evolved alongside an ever-changing and modernizing nation. In nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America the circus was more than a passing entertainment; it was a traveling world of marvel and the occasion for entire towns to treat Circus Day as a holiday. The circus and its advertising delivered the exotic and rare, the extremes of human and animal potential, new technologies, animalized humans, and humanized animals that audiences were unlikely to see anywhere else. Elements of the modern circus can be traced to antiquity: Paintings from ancient Egypt portray various balancing acts, while writings document menagerie-like displays and processions of wild and exotic animals. Circus clowns have their origins with the Greek mimes of 800 B.C. The huge Circus Maximus of Rome, home to horse and chariot races, staged battles, and wild animal displays, was the precursor to the circus.

The modern circus originated in late eighteenth-century England when Philip Astley, a British sergeant major and trick rider, built a circular arena. Before this innovation, exhibition riders galloped back and forth before the audience. The ring enabled the audience to see a rider’s every move up close, but more important, it contained and intensified the dramatic energy of the show, and created a relationship between performer and audience. In 1770, Astley added musicians and other performers — including tightrope acts, acrobats, and the first clown-acrobat—thus giving birth to the circus we know today. The circus soon found its way to America, with the first documented performance held in John Bill Ricketts’s Philadelphia amphitheater April 3, 1793. In 1825, Joshua Purdy Brown revolutionized the circus industry when he conducted the first performance under a portable canvas tent, making it possible for the circus to travel. The steam-powered railroad, introduced in America in 1830, soon expanded into a network of rail lines across the country. In 1872 the first special circus train was commissioned, and soon the industry began to adopt rail as preferred transportation over wagon or boat. This innovation made the circus more easily transportable, allowing it to carry more performers, more (and larger) animals, bigger tents, and more elaborate costumes, props, and rigging. The railroad circus soon became a widespread sensation that would sweep the nation.

The addition of a second show ring in 1873, then a third ring in 1881, accommodated larger audiences and expanded the number of acts in a show, which in turn attracted more circus-goers. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the peak of the American circus; in 1900, more than a hundred different shows crisscrossed the country. This increase in circus size, number, and popularity coincided with the introduction of steam-driven lithographic presses capable of printing more than 1,000 pieces a day. The circus and the printer depended on each other for their mutual business success.

THE STROBRIDGE LITHOGRAPHING COMPANY

At the end of the nineteenth century Cincinnati was the third largest printing center in the country. Cincinnati's Strobridge Lithographing Company, formed in 1847 under E. C. Middleton, harnessed the new technology of lithographic steam printing to build its reputation as an international supplier of color posters. In addition to its work on theater and other entertainment industry promotions, Strobridge became the foremost printer for the leading circuses of the time. The printer had established a reputation for talented staff artists, quality printing, and efficient distribution. In total, the printer produced the largest number of circus posters in the U.S. For the Barnum & Bailey show alone, in 1911 the company printed a total of 121,600 posters, utilizing 1,474,800 individual sheets.

Lithography, the printing process employed by Strobridge to print circus posters, was invented in 1798 by the German actor and playwright Alois Senefelder (1771–1834) in a quest to devise an inexpensive way to print his writings. Lithography is based on the characteristic repulsion between water and grease. A lithograph is created by drawing on limestone or plate with a greasy material. Chemical treatment on the surface ensures that the drawn image is able to accept the greasy ink. The blank areas when kept damp repel the ink. Color lithography utilizes the same process, but each color is printed separately. Commercial lithographic printers offered lower costs, larger sizes, and more efficient distribution for circus advertisers than the earlier color woodcut posters.

(detail)

The Barnum & Bailey
Greatest Show on Earth:
*Déjà, The 3 Lieners, The 3
Arleys*, 1914, printed by the
Strobridge Lithographing
Company, color lithograph
poster. Cincinnati Art
Museum, Gift of The
Strobridge Lithographing
Company, 1965.873.





GRAND AGGREGATION OF PRISTINELY PRINTED POSTERS: THE POWER OF ADVERTISING

The circus poster was the primary advertising medium for all the great American circuses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a time before the Internet, television, and radio, these posters had the difficult mission, through a two-dimensional and static medium, of luring the masses to the circus performance with their message. In the weeks before a circus's arrival to town, teams of "advance men" would post "bills"—what we call posters today—in storefronts and on sides of barns, temporary fences, and any other vacant space, even covering the posters of rival circuses. The concept of saturation mass advertising was born as a result of these circus campaigns. In their advertisements, circuses

developed brand recognition that distinguished them from each other. Advertising tactics included using the portrait of the circus impresario, or owner—for example P. T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, or the Ringling Brothers—as the "face" of the circus, thus emphasizing the circus brand's trustworthiness and family values. Many of the circus industry's advertising strategies became precursors to such modern marketing practices as organizational branding and saturation advertising.

ABOUT THE POSTER

The *Equestrienne and Clown* poster represents a design used by the Barnum & Bailey European tour from 1897 to 1902. As a cost-saving tactic, poster designs were reprinted from year to year, adding to any given company's brand recognition. Poster designs were printed in various sizes, measured in sheets, as determined by the size of the lithograph stone. In the 1880s an individual sheet measured 30 x 40 inches. Multiple-sheet posters could range from two sheets all the way to a billboard-sized 48-sheet display. When posters were hung they would have been accompanied by a "date sheet" with the specific date, location, and time for any given venue.

The goal of the poster was to build excitement and lure the masses to the upcoming performance. Designs had to be clear and compelling, to show potential circus-goers what they could anticipate and help them justify the purchase of a ticket for such an event. This lithograph poster, with its vivid image of the graceful rider and the whiteface clown, both iconic circus symbols, and the identifiable title would have been easily recognizable from a distance.

This poster was designed by native Cincinnati artist Edward Potthast (1857–1927), who trained at Strobridge and worked at the company for many years. Potthast, an American Impressionist, is best known for his paintings of coastal scenes. His works are represented by several paintings in the Cincinnati Art Museum's collections and can be seen in the Cincinnati Wing.

(detail)

Edward Potthast, American, 1857–1927.

The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth: *Equestrienne and Clown*, 1895/1908, printed by the Strobridge Lithographing Company, color lithograph poster. Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of The Strobridge Lithographing Company, 1965.849.

VOCABULARY

- advance man
- bill
- brand
- equestrienne
- impresario
- leisure
- lithography

(previous page)

Edward Potthast, American,
1857–1927.

The Barnum & Bailey
Greatest Show on Earth:
Equestrienne and Clown,
1895/1908, printed by the
Strobridge Lithographing
Company, color lithograph
poster. Cincinnati Art
Museum, Gift of The
Strobridge Lithographing
Company, 1965.847.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Art:

Introduce students to the elements and principles of design. Have students design their own advertising posters for a school event such as a theater performance, sports event, or science fair, incorporating the students' new understanding of design elements and principles.

Math:

Choose a wall in your classroom and have students calculate the number of standard poster sheets necessary to cover the wall. Choose a poster design, and based on the calculated number of sheets, grid the poster design to be scaled up to cover the entire wall, each sheet representing a different piece of the original poster design.

Science:

Have students investigate the chemistry behind the lithographic process—based on the properties of water and grease/oil. Search YouTube or other video websites for videos of the process.

Language Arts:

Discuss advertising slogans. Search through magazine, newspaper, online, and television advertisements and dissect the language used. Compare these with the language of circus posters. Consider the various writing strategies used, such as alliteration or personification. Have students create slogans to go with the class's poster designs.

Social Studies:

The circus in America marks an important development in the concept of leisure time. Have students research other leisure-time activities in nineteenth-century America and their historic origins. Create a class-wide timeline of their findings.

CRITICAL THINKING

What challenges did circus advertisers face in the late nineteenth century that do not exist today?

Is today's advertising more or less impactful than that during the circus's "Golden Age"? Why?



STROBRIDGE LITHOGRAPHING CO.
ENTERED AT STATIONERS HALL.

PRINTED IN AMERICA.



(detail)

P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth & The Great London Circus: *Our Great City of Tents*, 1882, printed by the Strobridge Lithographing Company, color lithograph poster. Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of The Strobridge Lithographing Company, 1965.686.76.

COLOSSAL CITY OF CANVAS: THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN

The arrival of the circus was a momentous occasion for all ages and classes. “Circus Day” meant the closing of businesses and schools, a truly democratic affair. Crowds filled the streets to witness a free preview of events to come: the Circus Day street parade. A multitude of costumed circus performers rode floats, wagons, or gleaming horses, accompanied by herds of elephants, caged animals, and beautifully carved circus wagons carrying bands, sparking curiosity and excitement about what was in store for the crowds under the tent. Circus posters graphically portrayed what the public could expect to see at the circus, and the experience was judged against the posters.

ABOUT THE POSTER

The size and efficient operation of the circus was a source of amazement for many. A poster for the Ringling Brothers circus suggested that it traveled with 100 railway cars filled with performers, animals, and various circus workers. Because of their short stays at each venue, the circus as a production was highly efficient and well-organized. The *Our Great City of Tents* poster, from 1882, taps into the public fascination with what was deemed “Canvas City.” The circus was, in essence, a traveling city in and of itself, traveling from venue to venue with provisions and essentials (with the exception of food and advertising) for all the performers, animals, and crew. This poster enables the viewer to explore “The Great City of Tents.” On the left we see the expansive aerial view of the multiple-tent setup, each tent clearly labeled with its function. The right side shows the ground plan for this space, carefully mapped out and measured for optimal usage. In the center, the artist has created an amalgamation of the various acts that the viewer could expect: equestrian acts, aerialists, and animal processions. The poster offers a threefold perspective on the “Canvas City,” its horizontal design adding to the viewer’s wonder at the enormous scope of the setup.

VOCABULARY

.....
Canvas City
Circus Day
provisions

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Art:

Many artists have found inspiration in the circus as subject matter, most notably Pablo Picasso, Georges Seurat, Alexander Calder, and Marc Chagall. Have students research various artists' interpretations of the circus and compare and contrast the styles. Based on their observations, have students each choose one of these styles to inspire their own circus-themed drawings or paintings.

Math:

With the advent of train travel, circuses were able to navigate the country with greater ease. After introducing the concept of a map scale, have students use rulers and U.S. maps to calculate distances traveled between two or more circus venues. Research train speeds at this time. Calculate travel time between venues based on the speed and distance. Compare the calculations with travel times today.

Science:

Weather considerations were important for circus productions. Precipitation, wind, and temperature were constant factors. As a class, investigate early weather forecasting methods and compare your findings with contemporary practices.

Language Arts:

Have students write a week's worth of journal entries in the first person, imagining they are a circus crew member or performer in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

Social Studies:

Discuss geography during this time period in American history. How did America's geographic makeup change during this time? What factors or major historical events caused changes in the country's composition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How did this affect industries such as the circus?

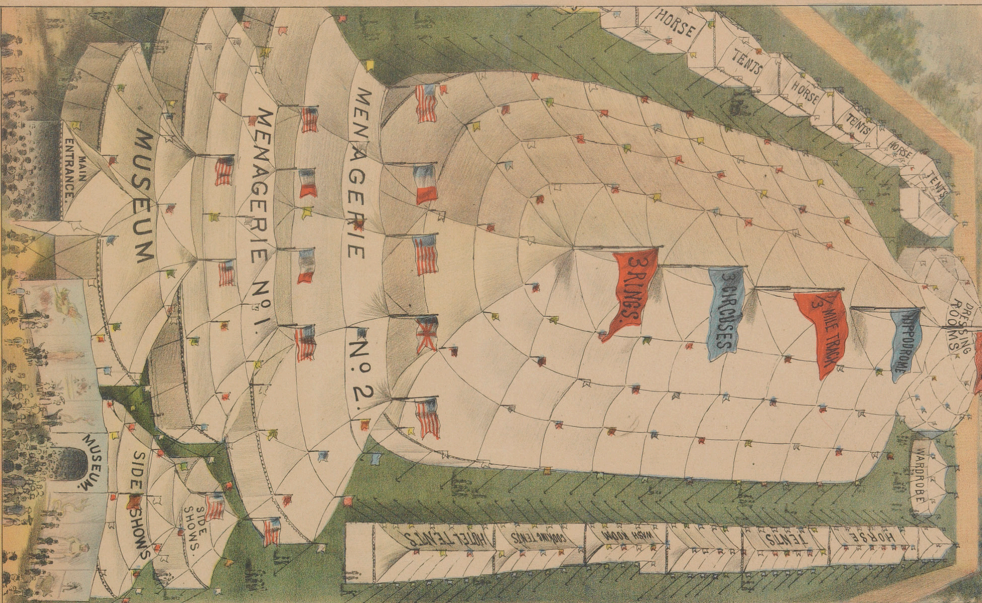
CRITICAL THINKING

What other contemporary industries, like the circus, rely on travel? What factors can contribute to their success or failure?

Why might "Circus Day" have been so important to the masses? Is there anything in today's culture that receives similar response?

P. T. BARNUM'S GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH.

EXTERIOR VIEW OF
OUR GREAT CITY OF TENTS.
 336,000 YARDS OF CANVAS
 THE LARGEST TENT EVER MADE.



ACTUAL FEATURES WITH, & SEEN ONLY
 IN THIS STUPENDOUS ENTERTAINMENT.
 EVERY AFTERNOON & NIGHT.



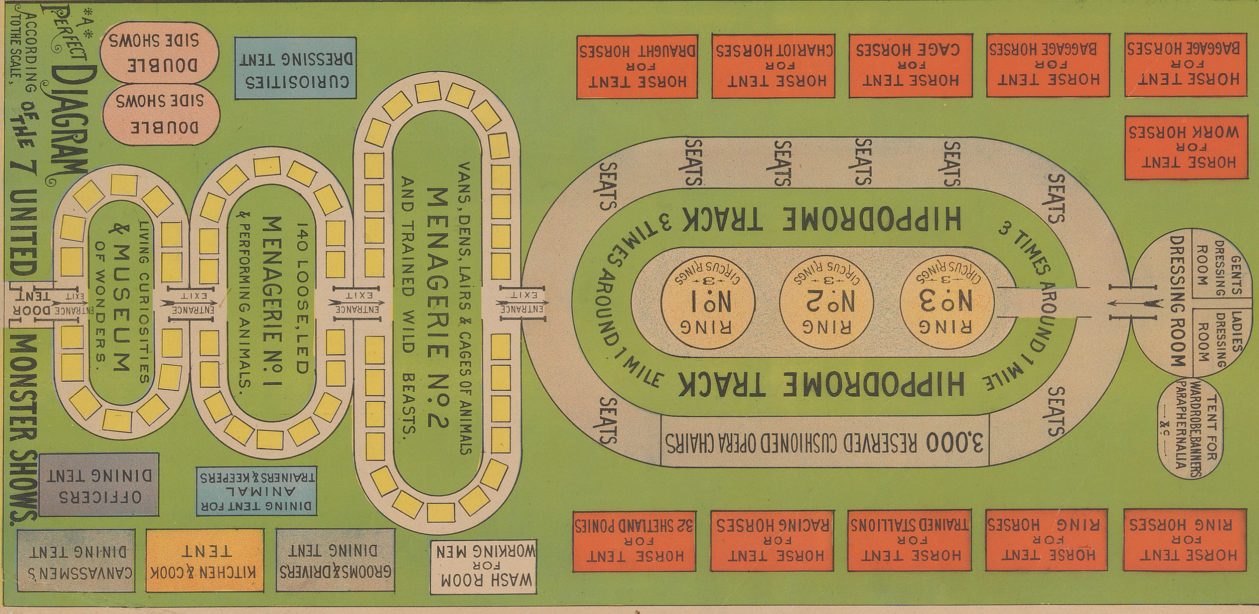
SANGGER'S ROYAL BRITISH MENAGERIE &

H. & THE GREAT LONDON CIRCUS, COMBINED WITH

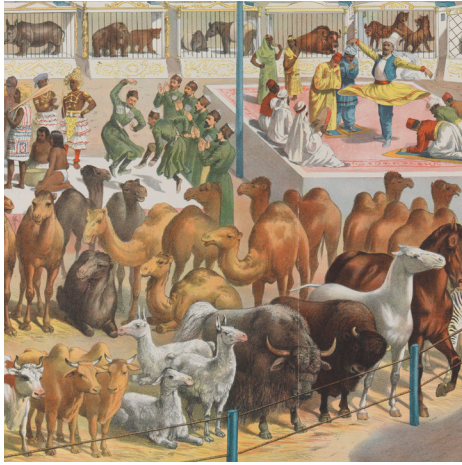
* LITERAL SCENES *
 TAKEN FROM A PHOTOGRAPH, OF THE 3 RINGS, RACING TRACK & INTERIOR VIEW
 OF THE 7 UNITED MONSTER SHOWS.
 * SHOWS *



THE SPROUDGE LITH. © G. GRIMMALL & N.Y.



& GRAND INTERNATIONAL ALLIED SHOWS.



WONDERS OF THE WORLD: AN EDUCATIONAL EXTRAVAGANZA

The American circus is unique in combining menagerie, sideshow, and Big Top. During the circus’s golden age, before entering the Big Top for the highly anticipated performances, circus-goers would visit the menagerie and the sideshow tents. Menageries exhibited wild and exotic animals including “hippopotomi,” giraffes, elephants, even American bison—a precursor to today’s zoo. The menagerie was a marvel that existed independently from the circus until the two kinds of show began to merge around 1828. In the late nineteenth century some menageries began to include humans representing foreign cultures; P. T. Barnum produced his first display of exotic peoples in 1872, a “Congress of Nations” in 1874, and an “Ethnological Congress” in 1884. The sideshow, meanwhile,

capitalized on the innate human curiosity about “freaks.” Sideshows would showcase such acts as snake charmers, sword swallows and fire eaters, and humans with some sort of deformity—either congenital, such as conjoined twins, or deliberate, such as tattoos. These shows created name recognition and celebrity status for those featured in both the menagerie and sideshow. Epitomizing this fame was Jumbo, who even today remains arguably the most famous elephant that ever lived. Bought by circus proprietor P. T. Barnum in 1882 from the London Zoological Gardens for \$10,000, Jumbo was said to measure over eleven feet tall and weigh about 6.5 tons. His three-and-a-half-year career in America brought “Jumbo mania” to the masses. Jumbo was, in essence, a pop star for his generation. When he was accidentally killed by a freight train in 1885, people across the globe mourned his death. His legacy lives today in the term “jumbo,” used colloquially to describe anything extremely large.

Circus posters illustrating the menagerie and sideshow captured the public’s increasing interest in the world beyond their homeland, emphasizing the “otherness” of these people and of the lands where strange animals roamed. For many Americans, the circus was the one time they would be exposed to different cultures. Because of this, circus proprietors were able to justify the circus as an educational enterprise.

(detail)

The Barnum & Bailey
Greatest Show on Earth:
*Sectional View of the Great
Double Menagerie: A Glance
at the Great Ethnological
Congress and Curious Led
Animals*, 1985, printed by the
Strobridge Lithographing
Company, color lithograph
poster. Cincinnati Art
Museum, Gift of The
Strobridge Lithographing
Company, 1965.807 & 808.

VOCABULARY

ethnological
exotic
menagerie
sideshow

ABOUT THE POSTER

In the two-sheet poster—*The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth/Sectional View of the Great Double Menagerie/A Glance at the Great Ethnological Congress and Curious Led Animals*—from 1895, we get an artist’s interpretation of the expansiveness of the “double menagerie.” Animals are compressed under the tent, with twenty-four elephants taking over the left-hand side, alongside other creatures that include rare or little-known animals from Africa and Asia, all in a seemingly organized display. In the background we get a glimpse into the “Great Ethnological Congress.” Indigenous peoples dressed in traditional attire perform their customary dances and ceremonies, offering circus-goers a metaphorical passport to exotic lands. The far background is outlined by cage wagons, the typical presentation of dangerous animals, but also of animals that could not be walked on a lead.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Art:

Poster designers would have had to carefully study animals in order to create accurate portrayals. For the general public, these posters would have been their first exposure to such exotic beasts. Have students research an exotic animal they have never seen in person. Using modeling clay, have students create three-dimensional representations of these animals, including as many accurate details as possible.

Math:

Choose a selection of animals represented in a menagerie. Have students research the amount of food that these animals eat in a day, week, or month. As a class, create graphs comparing these findings.

Science:

Introduce the concept of animal taxonomy and classification. Have students identify the taxonomy of one or more common circus animals such as the elephant, tiger, lion, or horse.

Language Arts:

Have students each write a visual analysis of a circus poster, including the following elements: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment.

Social Studies:

Discuss the concept of stereotypes. Explore historical social prejudices and their role in circus displays such as the menagerie and side show. Discuss how some of the stereotypes that originated with the circus still exist today.

CRITICAL THINKING

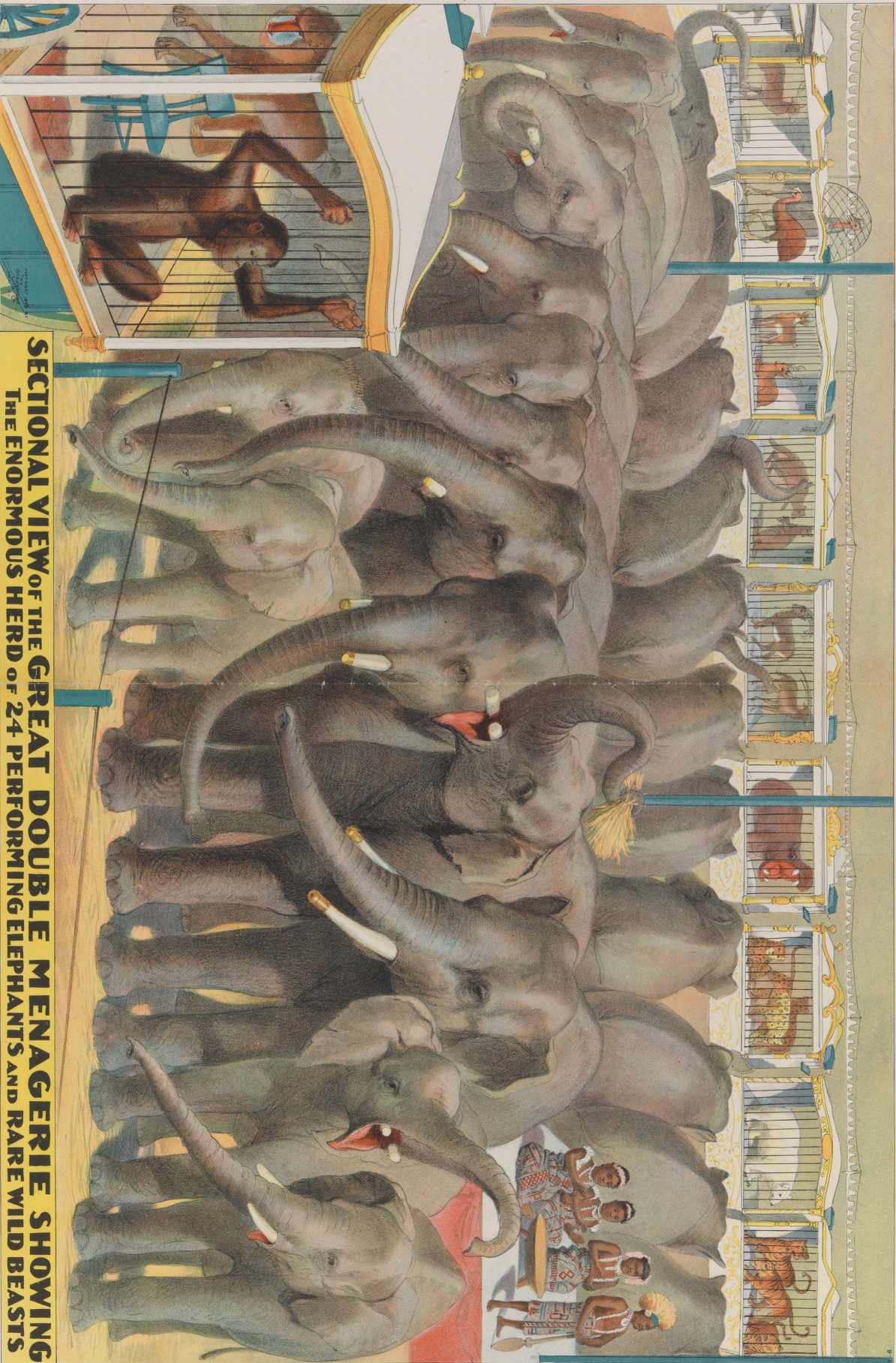
Humans are inherently curious about the “other.” How does popular culture take advantage of this curiosity?

The circus industry has been under the scrutiny of animal welfare organizations for nearly two centuries. What other historic institutions have justified immoral or unethical practices based on educational principles?

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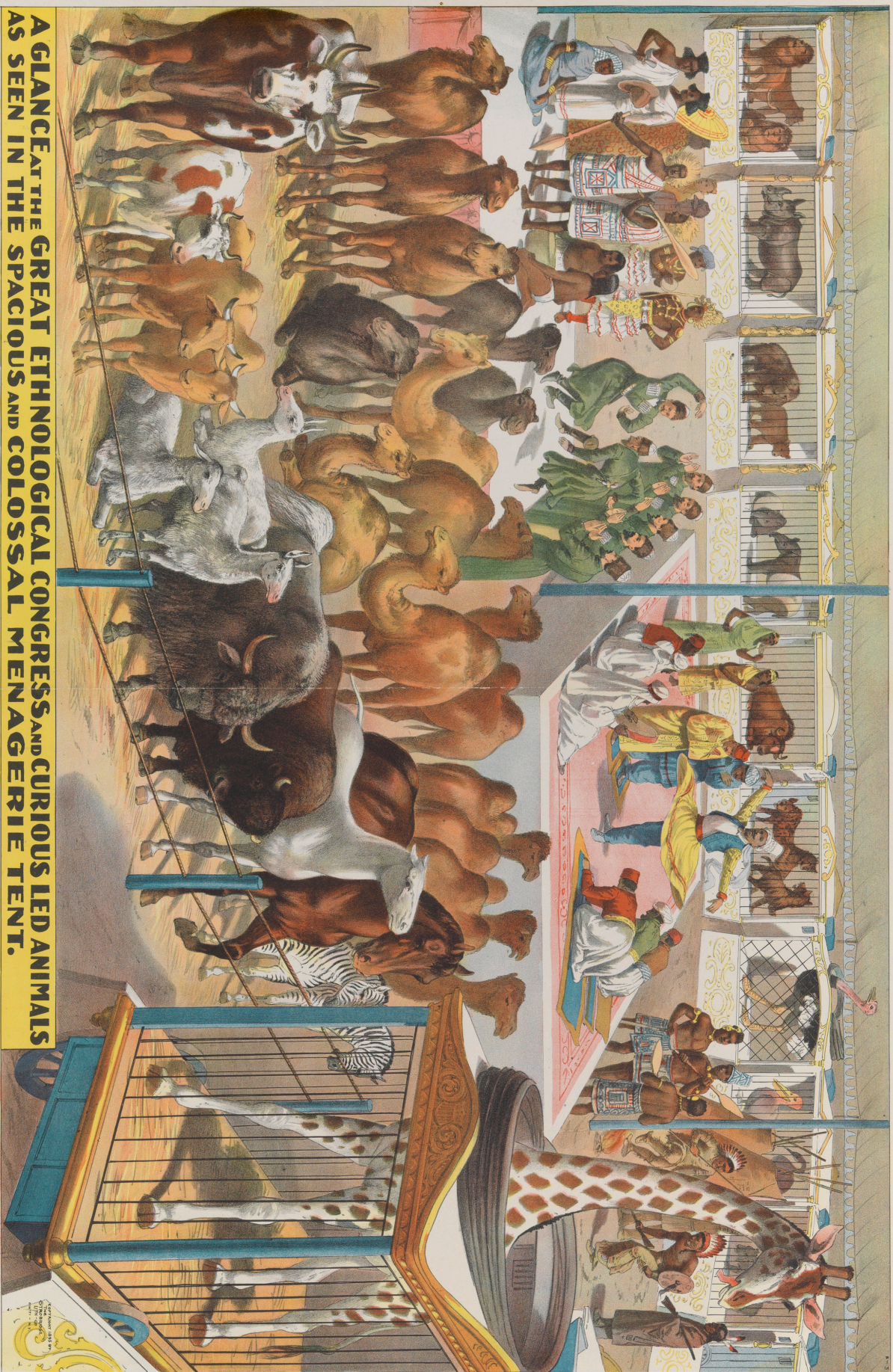
The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth



**SECTIONAL VIEW OF THE GREAT DOUBLE MENAGERIE SHOWING
THE ENORMOUS HERD OF 24 PERFORMING ELEPHANTS AND RARE WILD BEASTS**

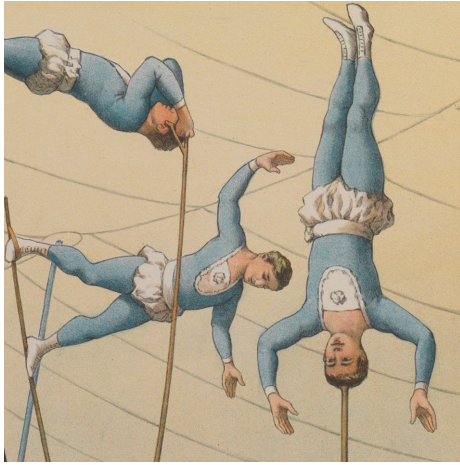
THE WORLD'S GRANDEST, LARGEST, BEST, AMUSEMENT INSTITUTION.

The Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth



A GLANCE AT THE GREAT ETHNOLOGICAL CONGRESS AND CURIOUS LED ANIMALS AS SEEN IN THE SPACIOUS AND COLOSSAL MENAGERIE TENT.

THE WORLD'S GRANDEST, LARGEST, BEST, AMUSEMENT INSTITUTION.



(detail)
 The Barnum & Bailey
 Greatest Show on Earth:
*Déry, The 3 Lienerts, The 3
 Arleys*, 1914, printed by the
 Strobridge Lithographing
 Company, color lithograph
 poster. Cincinnati Art
 Museum, Gift of The
 Strobridge Lithographing
 Company, 1965-873.

TREMENDOUSLY TERRIBLE TEMERITY AND ILLIMITABLE INTREPIDITY: UNDER THE BIG TOP

After experiencing the menagerie and sideshow, circus-goers would enter the canvas Big Top to view the main performance. These included: the spectacle, clowns, ground acts, trained animals, aerialists, equestrian acts, and daredevils. Spectacles, or “specs,” were full theatrical performances, usually on a historical, biblical, or patriotic theme; for example, the lavish spec *Columbus and the Discovery of America* reinforced feelings of patriotism as the United States emerged as an international presence. Clowns, a contemporary icon of the circus, smoothed the transitions between acts; one of their early roles was to provide comic relief from the suspenseful and dangerous aerial, big cat, and daredevil acts, such as Desperado’s terrifying

eighty-foot dive. Ground acts performed seemingly impossible acts of strength, balance, and skill, including the Ringling Brothers’ performer Hillary Long, who descended a staircase on his head. In addition to their role in the menagerie, some animals performed under the Big Top. Strobridge posters often featured animal acts that mimicked human activities, such as a group of elephants playing baseball, or the “goodnight horse” that climbed into an oversized bed and pulled up the covers with its teeth. A chimpanzee named Charles I emulated human behavior by riding a bicycle and playing cards as part of his routine. Aerialists, like the ground acts, performed astonishing feats but at dangerous heights, including trapeze and tightrope routines. Equestrian acts sustained the circus’s traditions in trick riding, during which performers would execute headstands and somersaults on horseback, often at a gallop. Daredevil acts included such extreme stunts as the human cannonball and loop-the-loops in an automobile. These performances also often introduced new technologies and inventions, including the pioneering use of electric light in the Big Top and designs for future air travel. Each of the varied performances offered excitement and intrigue, and all were used in some capacity in circus poster promotions.

ABOUT THE POSTER

The 1914 poster *Déry, The 3 Lienerts, The 3 Arleys* responded to the public’s delight and awe over ground acts and aerialists alike. In the center the “3 Lienerts” walk upside down on a glass ceiling, while to the left the Déry perform a balancing act using stacked chairs, and to the right the “3 Arleys” balance using tall poles. While these three acts would not have been performed simultaneously, the designer incorporated multiple acts into a single design to promote the variety of acts one might see at the show. This poster is an example of a design that was reworked—renaming the specific troupes and even altering the gender of the performers from the previous season. This was one of the budget-minded strategies of the circus. Because of the quantity of posters being produced, having the ability to reuse designs saved both time and money. The year of this performance, 1914, Barnum & Bailey printed more than two million sheets. This design would have been printed in two different sizes: a one sheet or a 20 sheet. In the upper left-hand corner note the Barnum and Bailey portraits, the identifiable brand trademark tied to “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

VOCABULARY

- aerialist
- Big Top
- ground act
- spectacle
- daredevil

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Art:

In this poster the artist has depicted movement. Look at other examples—in books, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet—for depictions of movement. Have students practice portraying movement in a drawing, painting, or digital design.

Math:

Using protractors and printouts of circus poster examples that portray aerialists and daredevils, have students measure the angles of the performers. Investigate the optimal angles for a specific performance (such as the human cannonball).

Science:

Investigate the physics of movement and its relation to circus performances (including centripetal acceleration, projectile motion, and Newton's laws of motion). As a class, view and discuss the videos on <http://www.pbs.org/opb/circus/classroom/circus-physics/>. Assess students' understanding of these physics concepts by having them choose one and explain or demonstrate to the class how the concept applies to a real-world scenario.

Language Arts:

Review or introduce the elements of a story, including characters, setting, and plot. Read one or more stories about the circus and have students identify its elements. Have students write their own short story with the circus as the setting.

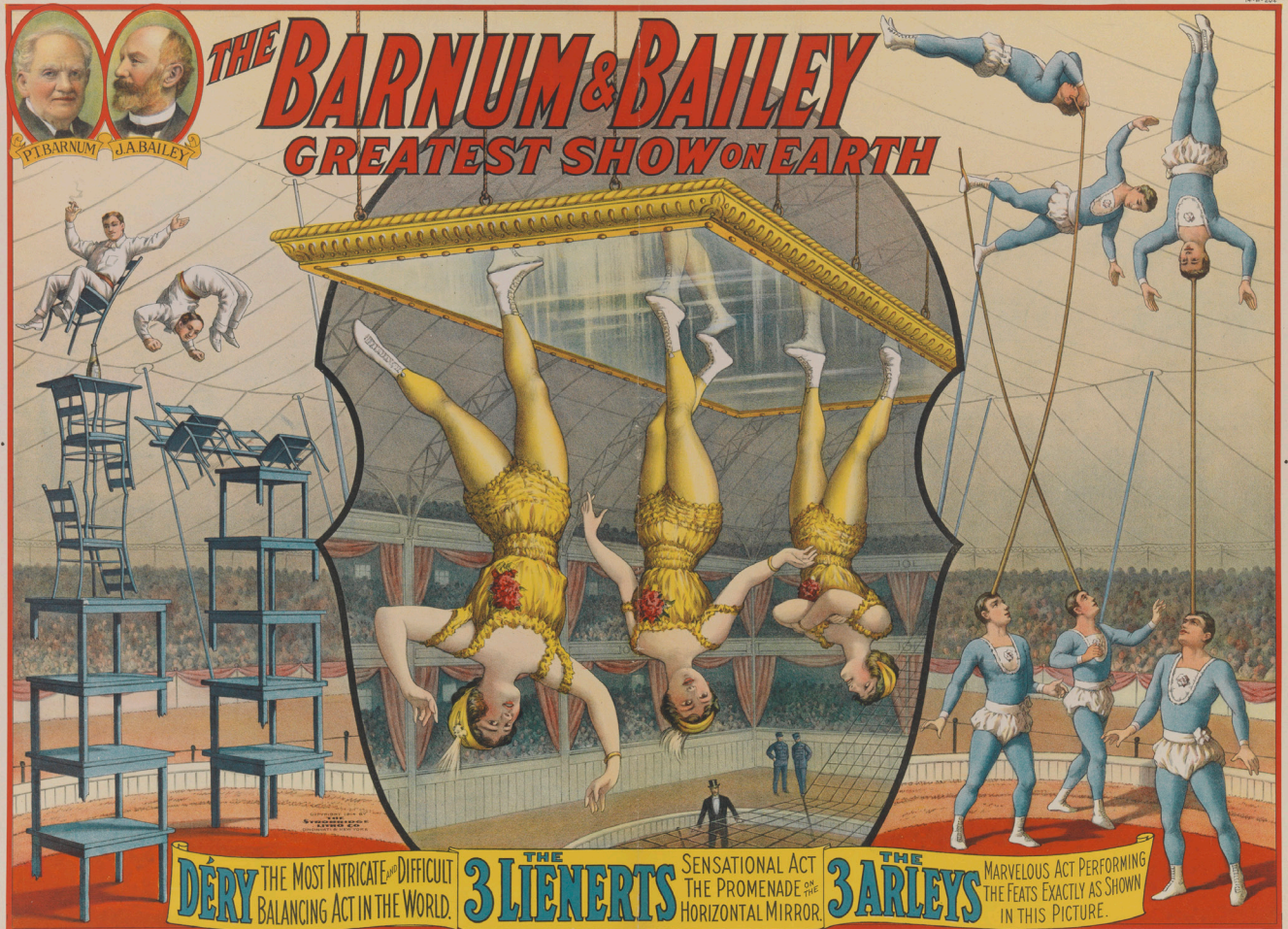
Social Studies:

Introduce the difference between a primary and secondary source. Are circus posters primary sources? Why or why not? Assign students to two groups and have them debate the validity of considering a circus poster as a primary source.

CRITICAL THINKING

Why are so many people fascinated by dangerous and/or seemingly impossible stunts? Discuss items in today's popular culture that fascinate and amaze us. Why?

How does the circus offer us a window into better understanding American culture?



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THE BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH



DEFT THE MOST INTRICATE & DIFFICULT
BALANCING ACT IN THE WORLD.

3 THE LIENERTS
SENSATIONAL ACT
THE PROMENADE ^{ON} THE
HORIZONTAL MIRROR

3 THE BARLEYS
MARVELOUS ACT PERFORMING
THE FEATS EXACTLY AS SHOWN
IN THIS PICTURE.

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Front cover (detail):

P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth & The Great London Circus: *Our Great City of Tents*, 1882, printed by the Strobridge Lithographing Company, color lithograph poster. Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of The Strobridge Lithographing Company, 1965.686:76.

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<http://www.bigapplecircus.org/about/history/circus-study-guide.aspx>

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**THE AMAZING AMERICAN CIRCUS POSTER:
The Strobridge Lithographing Company**

February 26 through July 10, 2011

Organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum and The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art



953 Eden Park Drive
Cincinnati OH 45202

cincinnatiartmuseum.org