

# SAWDUST AND SPECTACLE

UNDER THE BIG  
TOP IN SMALL  
TOWN AMERICA

**Southern Ohio Museum** *October 17, 2009-January 6, 2010*

**Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery** *February 4-April 21, 2010*

**Massillon Museum** *May 15-August 15, 2010*



# CIRCUS DAY!

by JEAN ROBERTSON

In our wired, globally connected world, it is hard to imagine the excitement that greeted the arrival of a traveling circus in communities like Portsmouth, Ohio. Everything else came to a halt. People rose before dawn to see elephants descending from railroad cars and burly men setting up circus tents. Everyone gathered to watch the downtown parade of ornately carved and painted circus wagons carrying lions and tigers, followed by exotically costumed performers, horses in fancy harness, jugglers, clowns, and elephants. Later, people thronged the midway, enticed by the prospect of seeing sword swallows, snake charmers, freaks, and other sideshow wonders. They bought tickets to enter the big top with thousands of other spectators of every age and social class. Ringside, they marveled at spectacular acts of skill, daring, and comedy: trapeze artists flying through the air, a lion tamer sending snarling animals through rings of fire, clowns performing antics in pantomime. As American writer Hamlin Garland (1860-1940) wrote, "In one day—in a part of one day—we gained a thousand new conceptions of the world and of human nature."<sup>1</sup>

In an era before airplane travel or television or the Internet, the circus seemed to bring the world in all its imagined strangeness to people's backyards. For a day or two each year, normal existence was suspended and people entered a magical world of athletic prowess and daredevil risk performed by sleek bodies in spangled costumes. They observed breathtaking stunts, unfathomable physical differences, and unconventional sights, smells, and behaviors. The circus provided the sensory overload and on-the-spot thrill of live entertainments of many kinds. You could see with your own eyes a beautiful girl in tights dangling by her teeth from a wire; you could stare at people riding horses standing up; you could gawk at the skeleton man or the two-headed calf; you could smell the elephant scat.

The circus has been around for over two thousand years, with precedents from the chariot races and gladiator fights of ancient Rome to the traveling troupes of medieval Europe and later. The circus as it evolved in the United States amalgamated various entertainments into one grand extravaganza:

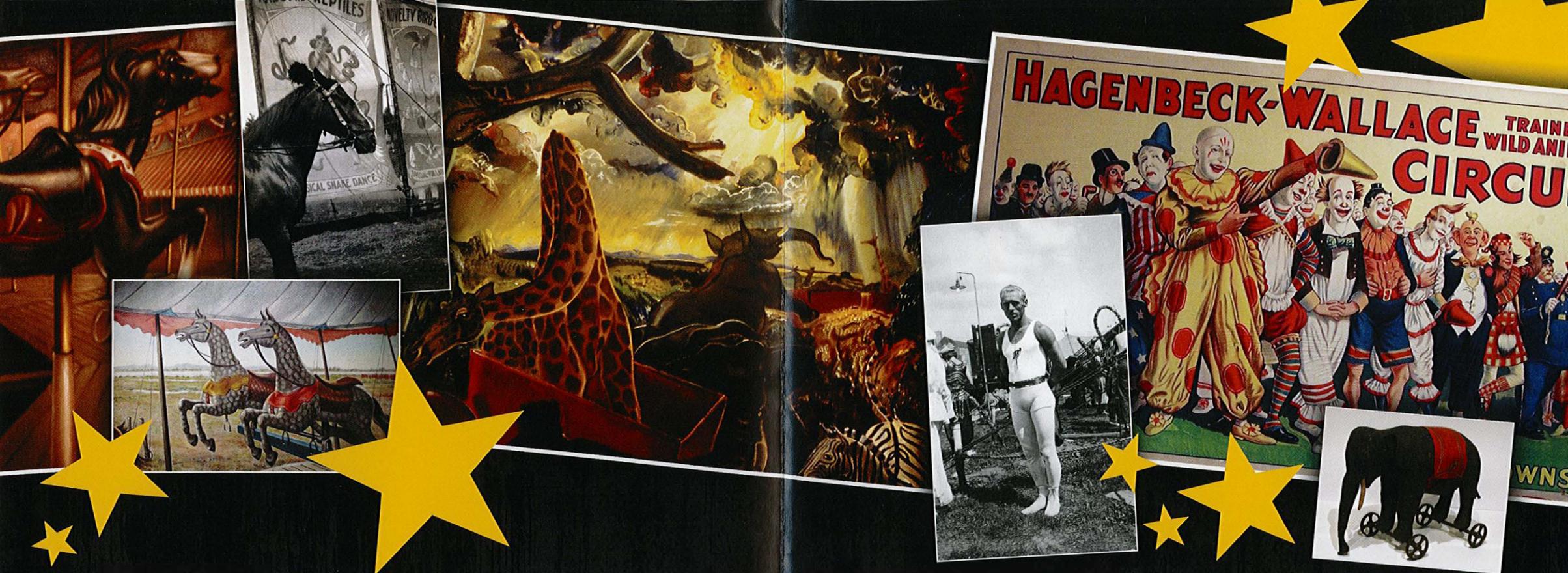
British equestrian shows and other trained animal acts, exotic animal menageries, acrobats, aerialists, clowns, and jugglers, and the exhibition of oddities in a sideshow—the latter promoted by the greatest showman of them all, P.T. Barnum. Originally moving from town to town in horse-drawn wagons, the traveling circus increased in size and geographic reach when railroads began to crisscross the nation after the Civil War. The traveling railroad circus expanded to three rings under an enormous canvas big top, with a complex division of labor that maintained its nomadic existence with clocklike precision. Circus workers literally rebuilt a movable city in a matter of hours.

*Sawdust and Spectacle* concentrates on the glory days of the traveling circus in the United States from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, focusing on its popularity in Midwestern states such as Ohio. Like the circus itself, the exhibition is a hybrid that freely mixes genres and frames of reference. Included are actual circus artifacts such as sideshow banners, advertising posters, and vintage postcards, along with documentary photographs, fine-art paintings, drawings, and prints, circus-themed toys, and a set of folk art dioramas.

As the title implies, *Sawdust and Spectacle* evokes the public side of the traveling circus along with the less visible world behind the scenes. During the season circus folk lived an itinerant life and carried their public and private selves and worlds in close proximity. Various artworks in the exhibition show the grit behind the glamour: clowns applying makeup before their act; camels tethered behind tents; circus workers laboring backstage; the daily dramas of a self-contained society on the road. Sonny King's thirteen polychromed clay dioramas effectively capture a full range of scenes, from thrilling public spectacles to intimate private spaces, drawn from childhood memories of traveling with Silver's Circus & Zoo in Australia in the 1940s and 50s with his father, the lion tamer.

Innovative advertising fueled the anticipation of circus day, as this exhibition demonstrates with original posters from three circuses that

<sup>1</sup> Garland, Hamlin. *A Son of the Middle Border*. New York: Penguin, 1995 (1923), p. 111.



toured Ohio: Cole Brothers, Hagenbeck-Wallace, and Sells-Floto. Such posters were the lifeblood of circus advertising, and advance teams saturated a community with them weeks or even months in advance to generate excitement and publicize the show date. They are marvels of bold design and dramatic concept, ahead of their time in their reliance on color printing and eye-catching graphics, dealing in superlatives and promising novelty, size, and splendor. Usually produced from drawings rather than photographs, they allowed artists room for exaggeration. Red, gold, orange, and other brilliant colors along with ornate typefaces added to the impression of excitement on the horizon.

Another artful form of circus advertising, the sideshow banner, festooned the midway to tempt spectators to pay extra to see the startling sights within. Fine examples by two of the best banner painters, Snap Wyatt and Fred Johnson, prove their power. Circuses originally were aimed at adults not children. But by the turn of the twentieth century, children had become a prominent part of the circus audience. Circus-themed toys soon followed. Examples in the exhibition include clown and animal figures from Schoenhut's popular Humpty Dumpty Circus and stuffed circus animals on wheels by Steiff.

This exhibition, happening as it does in an art museum, revisits the big top through paintings, drawings, and prints by more than two dozen artists. Happily the circus as a theme attracted many wonderful artists over the years, including Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, and Georges Rouault among the important European artists beguiled by the circus. By great good fortune the golden age of the traveling American circus coincided with a period when many artists of verve and talent began recording people, places, and events that seemed uniquely American. Working in a variety of styles from precise realism to expressionism, they strove to capture images, moods, and emotions associated with American life in local communities all over the country. The artists in *Sawdust and Spectacle* loved the American circus and responded to it with compelling works of art.

Circus images by Clarence Holbrook Carter, native son of Portsmouth, deservedly receive center ring treatment in the exhibition. Carter's varied career began at the Cleveland School of Art and included a lengthy stint in the middle decades as an American Scene painter in Ohio and Pennsylvania. In 1933-34, he appears to have devoted his efforts almost exclusively to circus subjects. Carter's works in the exhibition show his particular fascination with backstage scenes, which he rendered in his precise style of realism that gives a dreamlike atmosphere to an empty carousel or the back lot of the circus.

Also well represented are the portraits of circus people by Walt Kuhn, a New York painter receptive to the influence of modern European artists such as Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne. Kuhn would pose a circus performer in costume alone in a shallow space against a monochromatic background, masterfully evoking an attitude of reverie and psychological introspection through his ability to render minute facial expressions.

Other Ohio artists in the exhibition include Clarence Carter's colleagues from the Cleveland School: Henry Keller, one of Carter's teachers (and for a while a circus poster designer for the Morgan Lithograph Company) and Paul Travis, whose lifelong fascination with Africa accounts for his dramatic record of animals escaping from a circus wreck.

Artists ranging well beyond Ohio include New Yorkers Gifford Beal and Yvonne Twining Humber; Wisconsin native Paul Lewis Clemens, who made his way to California; Pennsylvania-born Frank Anderson Trapp; James Gantt, who worked in a circus as a young man and later studied at the Kansas City Art Institute with Thomas Hart Benton; Philadelphia's painter-teacher Angelo Pinto; Nebraska's Robert Weaver; and Japanese-American Yasuo Kuniyoshi. Their paintings, prints, and drawings illuminate multiple aspects of the circus: the powerful interconnectedness of humans and animals, the potential to overcome physical laws such as gravity, the spectacular diversity of human and animal bodies, and the routines of backstage life. As a whole, their works reveal the strange mixtures of real happenings, fantasy, and magic that the circus brought to town, in both its spectacle and its sawdust spaces.

In the spirit of yesterday's utterly transported circus audience, we offer thundering applause for the sponsors who emboldened this ambitious undertaking, for the lenders who jumped headfirst onto our bandwagon, and for a few eagle-eyed colleagues who voluntarily pointed us toward some incredible additions to the show. It takes a village to raise a child, a barn, a circus tent and, yes, an exhibition, and we are exhilarated to share the result of so much cooperation across so many networks. *Sawdust and Spectacle* was organized in celebration of the Southern Ohio Museum's 30th anniversary but along the way it became its own reason to celebrate. Let's!

Sara Johnson, Director, Southern Ohio Museum  
Exhibition Curator

**Gifford Beal (1879-1956)**

*Bareback Act, Old Hippodrome, nd*  
lithograph  
Collection of The Butler Institute  
of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

**Clarence Holbrook Carter (1904-2000)**

*Aerial Performer, 1931*  
aquatint  
Southern Ohio Museum  
Gift of Dorothy W. Miller in memory of  
James B. Miller

**Behind the Tents, 1945**

graphite, chalk  
Southern Ohio Museum  
Museum Purchase: James and  
Tabitha Pugh Trust, Scioto Foundation

**Behind the Tents, 1945**

oil on panel  
Southern Ohio Museum  
Gift of the Artist to Portsmouth  
School Children

**Circus Figure, 1933**

pastel  
Collection of The Butler Institute  
of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

**Circus Horses, 1933**

oil on canvas  
Cleveland Museum of Art  
Gift of Lillian M. Kern, 1980.302

**Merry Go Round, 1944**

oil on canvas  
Southern Ohio Museum  
Gift of Dorothy W. Miller in  
memory of James B. Miller

**Over and Above #23, 1965**

pastel on scintilla paper  
Southern Ohio Museum  
Gift of Mrs. Norman Kobrovsky  
in memory of her husband

**Post Office, Pine Valley,  
New York, 1931**

watercolor  
Wasserman Family Trust Collection

**Riderless Racers, 1935**

drypoint print  
Southern Ohio Museum  
Gift of Dorothy W. Miller  
in memory of James B. Miller

**Riderless Racers, 1936**

oil on canvas  
College of Wooster Art Museum  
Gift of Jean Carnwath

**White Tiger, 1965**

gouache on scintilla  
Collection of James Dalton  
and John Turjoman MD

**Paul Lewis Clemens (1911-1992)**

*Circus at Night, 1935*  
watercolor  
Collection of The Butler Institute  
of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

**James Gantt (1911-1984)**

*Side Show, 1937*  
tempera on panel  
John and Susan Horseman Collection

**Fred Johnson**

*Human Pincushion, nd*  
oil on canvas  
Collection of Denny and Beth Griffith

**Scavengers of the Battlefield, nd**

oil on canvas  
Collection of Denny and Beth Griffith

**Yvonne Twining Humber (1907-2004)**

*Carnival, c. 1938*  
Oil on canvas  
Courtesy Jason Schoen, LLC, Princeton, NJ

**Henry Keller (1869-1949)**

*Circus Scene, nd*  
pencil  
Collection of The Butler Institute  
of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

**Circus Folk, nd**

oil on canvas  
Collection of The Butler Institute  
of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

**New Shoes for the Show, 1934**

oil on canvas  
Collection of The Butler Institute  
of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

**First Show at Two, 1934**

oil on canvas  
Cleveland Museum of Art  
Gift of Mrs. R. J. Frackelton, 1944.238

**Make Ready for Your Cue, 1928**

oil on canvas  
Collection of William R. Joseph

**Sonny King (b. Sydney, Australia, 1940)**

*Advance Man Billing  
(Phillip St. Leon), 2006*  
*Back Door/Stage Door, 2004*  
*Carrying Act with Emily Kear  
and Mervyn Nairn, 2007*  
*Clown in Dressing Tent  
(Les James), 2006*

*Comedy Bull Fight Routine  
with Les James, 2006*  
*Dental Act with Emily Kear and  
Jonas Zalinskas, 2005*

*Four Horse Act with  
Colin Ross, 2005*  
*Men's Dressing Tent, 2005*  
*Mervyn King, Lion Act, 2005*  
*Shipway Twins, Horizontal  
Bar Act, 2006*

*Telescope Gag Comedy  
Routine, 2006*

*Unicycle Juggler  
(Viggo Christensen), 2006*  
*Wire Act with Alice  
and Don Grant, 2004*  
All: wood, polymer clay and led lighting  
Courtesy of the Artist

**Walt Kuhn (1877-1949)**

*A Circus Master, 1939*  
oil on canvas  
On loan from the Springfield Museum of  
Art, Gift of Mrs. Victoria Cooper

**Gold and Blue Bolero, 1946**

oil on canvas  
Courtesy Franklin Riehman Fine Art

**Veteran Acrobat, 1938**

oil on canvas  
Columbus Museum of Art

**Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1893-1953)**

*Tired Clown, 1946*  
casein on paper  
Courtesy Jason Schoen, LLC,  
Princeton, NJ

**Angelo Pinto (1908-1994)**

*The Dart Thrower, 1933*  
oil on canvas  
Courtesy Jason Schoen, LLC,  
Princeton, NJ

**A. Schoenhut and Co. (1872-1935)**

*Characters from the Humpty  
Dumpty Circus, c. 1904:*  
articulated wood, fabric, paint  
On loan from the 1810 House,  
in celebration of its bicentennial

**Yeteve Smith (1888-1957)**

*Harlequin, c. 1934*  
oil on canvas  
John and Susan Horseman Collection

**Steiff (Germany, 1880-)**

*Circus Animals, c. 1930*  
mohair, glass eyes, excelsior, felt,  
embroidery, iron wheels  
On loan from the 1810 House,  
in celebration of its bicentennial

**Paul Anderson Trapp (1922-2005)**

*Circus, 1949-50*  
oil on masonite  
Collection of The Butler Institute  
of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

**Paul Travis (1891-1975)**

*Circus Detour, 1940s*  
oil on canvas  
Collection of Mr. and  
Mrs. Richard A. Zellner

**David C. "Snap" Wyatt**

*Monkey Aviators, nd*  
oil on canvas  
Collection of Denny and Beth Griffith

## *Lenders to the Exhibition*

The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio  
Cleveland Museum of Art  
College of Wooster Art Museum  
Columbus Museum of Art  
James Dalton and John Turjoman MD  
Beth and Denny Griffith  
John and Susan Horseman

The 1810 House  
William R. Joseph  
Sonny King  
Franklin Riehlman  
Franklin Riehlman Gallery  
Jason Schoen LLC, Princeton NJ  
Southern Ohio Museum  
Springfield Museum of Art  
Wasserman Family Trust  
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Zellner

Young George Clayton  
with Clyde Beatty,  
Portsmouth, c. 1935  
photograph  
On loan from George  
and Margaret Clayton

Side Show Announcer  
Woman with Snake  
Circus Drummer and Trumpeter  
Poster for Downie Bros. Circus  
Circus Performers  
Ora Loretta  
Clown  
Roy Leonbart  
Clowns Making Up  
Mess Tent  
Harry Ballard (cook) of Louisville  
Horse and Sideshow Banners  
Acrobat Billy Pape  
Marion Shuford  
Dixie Starr  
Senorita Theresa Morales  
Woman at Clothesline  
Elephants with Trainer  
Elephants with Riders  
Roustabouts  
Camels Resting  
All: silver gelatin prints, 1933  
From the Clarence Carter  
Snapshot Collection  
Southern Ohio Museum,  
Gift of Blake and John Carter

Preparing to Unload the Wagons  
Circus Wagons  
Circus Train  
Horses and Circus Train  
Roustabouts Begin Setup  
Roustabouts with Tent Poles  
Elephants  
Dignitaries with Elephant  
Elephant  
Elephants Unloading Equipment  
From the Carl Ackerman Collection,  
Southern Ohio Museum,  
Gift of Carl and Dorothy Ackerman

## *Posters:*

Cole Bros. Circus  
Cole Bros. Circus with Clyde  
Beatty, Binghamton, May 30  
Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus,  
An Army of Clowns  
Hagenbeck-Wallace Trained  
Animal Circus, Cristiani Troupe  
Sells-Floto Circus, Buffalo Bill's  
Wild West  
From the Immel Circus Collection  
of the Massillon Museum

## *Sideshow Postcards:*

Frank A. Lentini,  
Three Legged Man  
Armless Man Shaves Himself  
Ada Mae Moore, Serpent Lady  
Grady Stiles, Lobster Boy  
Zip, Barnum's "What Is It?"  
Zip in Suit  
Koo Koo, the Bird Girl, Dances  
While Zip Plays Violin  
Prince Randion, Living Half Man  
Jolly Trixie  
F.C. Roland, the Rubber Man  
Armless and Legless Men  
Riding a Tandem  
James Coffey, the Skeleton Dude  
Grace Gilbert, Bearded Lady  
Hugo Marcus, Armless Man,  
Smokes Cigar  
Ajax, the Sword Swallower  
Les Marechal Midgets  
Eleven Little Midgets  
Violet and Daisy Hilton,  
Siamese Twins  
Egyptian Fire Eater  
Lionel, Dog Faced Boy  
From the Immel Circus Collection  
of the Massillon Museum

With generous support from The Ohio Humanities Council, a state affiliate of The National Endowment for the Humanities,  
The Scioto Foundation, The Richard D. Marting Foundation, The Ohio Arts Council and The City of Portsmouth