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Circus And The City

New York 1793-2010

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NEW YORK CITY — Delight in the spectacle of the circus! It all began with equestrian displays in the winter of 1771-1772, a clown was introduced in 1786, and by the summer of 1793 the circus in New York City was a full arena of clowns, acrobats, jugglers, rope walkers and others. In the summer of 1793 — fewer than ten years after the British troops had evacuated New York City — Dubliner John Bill Ricketts came from Philadelphia, where he operated a riding school that offered amazing equestrian entertainments. He introduced an acrobat and a clown to his equestrian show and thus was born the city's first regularly scheduled circus.

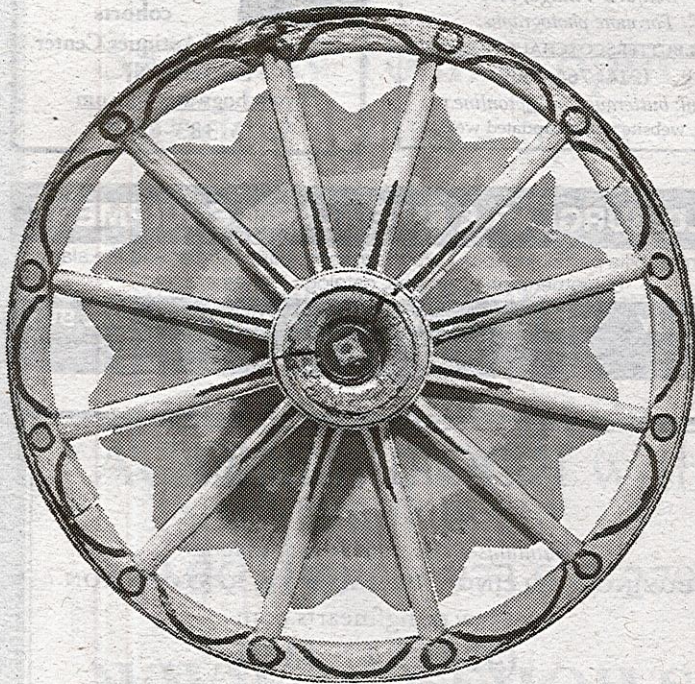
"Circus and The City: New York, 1793-2010," now on view at the Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture (BGC), traces the historic course of the circus and entertainment in New York. The exhibition remains on view through February 3.

Equestrian events and pantomime had been offered at sites around the city during the Eighteenth Century, but not on a regular schedule. Exotic animals were not new to New York — a lion was exhibited in 1728, a camel was on view at the Sign of the Horse and Cart tavern in 1739 and a monkey performed in 1751. An elephant arrived in New York in 1796 and proved so popular that the importation of other exotic animals followed.

When Ricketts came on scene, he expanded the circus, scheduling performances at five o'clock to take advantage of daylight. Ricketts' circus had its initial summer season at an open air arena, but in November 1794 he opened the New Amphitheater at Broadway and Exchange Alley. The structure had a canvas roof and was illuminated by patent lamps and candles, warmed by stoves and boasted a 42-foot circus ring. Ricketts modeled his circus on that of Philip Astley, a cavalryman in the Seven Years' War, who originated the modern circus in London in the 1770s.

For his last season in New York in 1797, Ricketts built another arena on Greenwich Street that included a coffee house that served refreshments. Ricketts, in his constant additions and subtractions from the program, capitalized on popular taste. In 1797, he presented equestrian, acrobatic, musical and pantomime events for four months until he and his troupe moved north to tour Canada and then other major American cities. By that time, the circus was

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A late Nineteenth Century circus parade wagon wheel. Somers Historical Society, Somers, N.Y.

—Bruce White photo

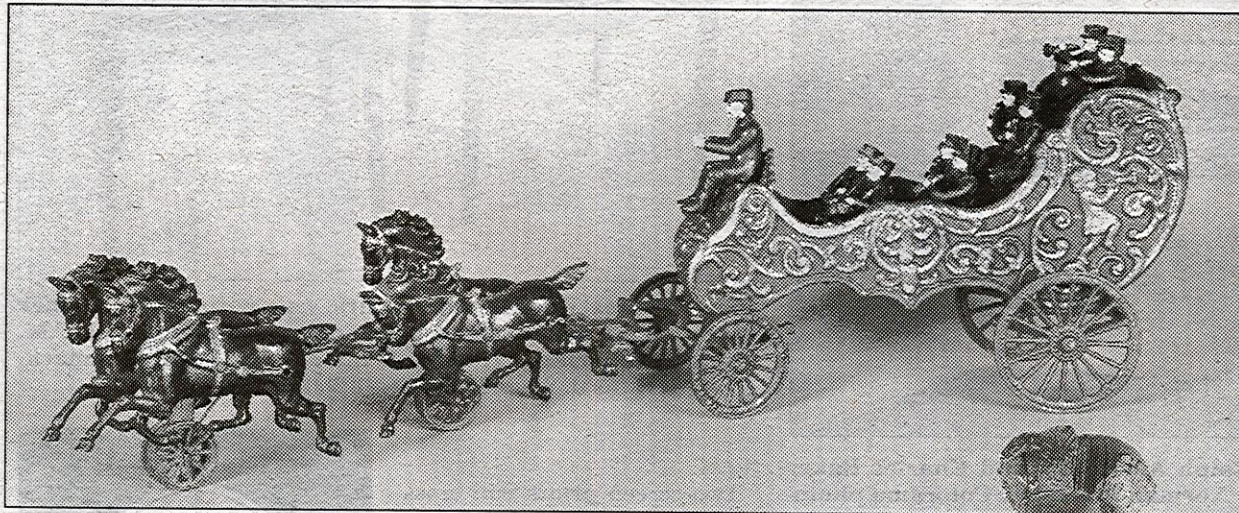


Walt Kuhn's oil on canvas portrait "The Lancer" was made in 1939. Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, N.H.

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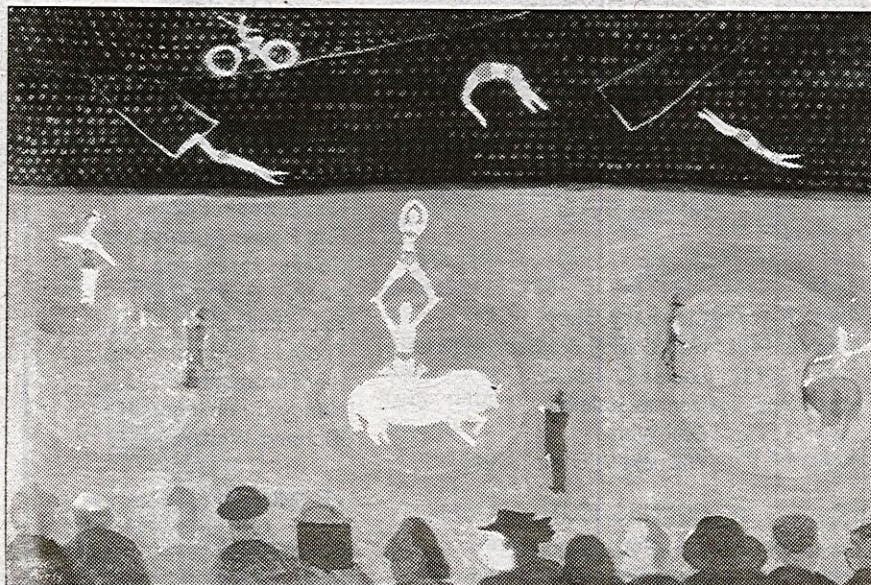
Circus-related toys and games are eternally popular. The cast iron and sheet metal bandwagon from the "Royal Circus" was made around 1925 by Hubley Manufacturing Co., Lancaster, Penn. Courtesy The Strong, Rochester, N.Y.



A stock poster "Equestriennes" was printed in 1891 by the United States Printing Company. ©Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vt., gift of Harry T. Peters Sr family, 1959.



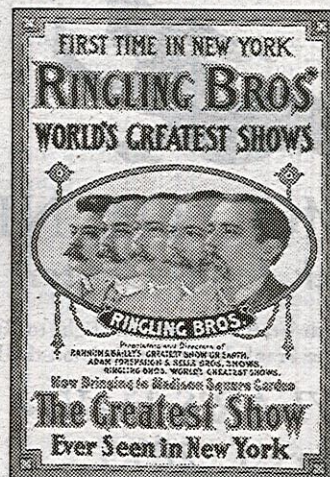
An 1871 ticket for P.T. Barnum's Museum and Menagerie. Collection of the Barnum Museum. —Paul Mutino photo



Milton Avery painted "Three Ring Circus" in 1939. Collection of AXA Equitable, New York; ©2012 Milton Avery Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York City.



The carved wood figure of a page from the shop of Samuel Robb is one of a group of figures made by Robb's shop for Barnum's tableau cage wagons between 1882 and 1883. Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vt.



"First Time in New York, Ringling Bros' World's Greatest Shows, The Greatest Show Ever Seen in New York," a two-tone lithograph poster was printed in 1909 by the Donaldson Lithographic Co., Newport, N.Y. Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Collection.

established in New York, and other impresarios arrived to produce similar events, although none to equal Ricketts until English equestrian James West appeared in 1817.

He built a performance structure, the "New Circus" on Broadway, the city's main thoroughfare and the first to have gaslight illumination, at Canal Street, where he introduced "hippodrama," a sensational blend of horsemanship and high melodrama, with horses charging up the stage and simulating horrifying death, among other delights. It proved highly popular.

In 1818, Victor Pepin opened in the same arena, by the name known as "The Broadway Circus."

Entertainment centers of the late Eighteenth and early part of the Nineteenth Century were known as pleasure gardens. They included the Columbia Gardens near the Battery, the Mount Vernon Gardens and the Vauxhall Gardens. The New Theater opened in January 1798 and was later known as the Park Theater. Competition for the latter included the Chatham Garden Theater in 1824 and the lush Bowery Theater that opened in 1826, establishing the Bowery as a site of entertainment. Hotels and concert hall also opened along Broadway and the Bowery.

James West returned to the city in 1822 with performances at the Broadway Circus. When he borrowed the elephant Tipoo Sultan and a camel from the "Grand Menagerie of Living Animals" at 452 Broadway, he laid the way for a whole new dimension of the circus: the menagerie. So great was the success of West's Broadway Circus that business at the Park Theatre suffered and its owners, Stephen Price and Edmund Simpson, decided to eliminate West and bought his circus. They made a further move to trim the competition when they spurred a riot at the African Theatre.

It was Price and Simpson who brought James Hunter from London to New York, where he was the first bareback rider seen in the United States. Around the same time clowns were introduced between equestrian acts, entertaining the audience while allowing the horses and riders a respite. The circus was evolving and the format was established: ringmaster, rider and clown.

As the circus and its diversions gained a toehold in the American landscape, the pious rose up periodically in waves of protest, and aspersions and lamentations flowed freely.

For two centuries, however, the circus and the city responded and expanded in the face of war, pestilence and financial panics. Moving north, the city became a metropolis with great trade, transportation and immigration, along with crime, disease and fire. The circus remained the meeting place of commerce and culture. In New York, it also found a ready audience in the burgeoning population and tourist trade. At the same time, advances in transportation allowed it to travel easily from one major city to another.

The 1830s saw the introduction of the elaborate circus parade, an effective means for signifying the arrival of the majestic and magical, to advertise its performances and their scope — including an impressive brass band usually aboard a colorfully painted bandwagon. Advertisements, broadsides and handbills were also essential to publicizing the circus. One technical advance, by engraver Joseph Morse around 1840, was the replacement of mahogany printing blocks with ones made of pine, which were easier to handle and considerably less costly. Vibrant advertising pieces proliferated; many survive and a fine selection is on view.

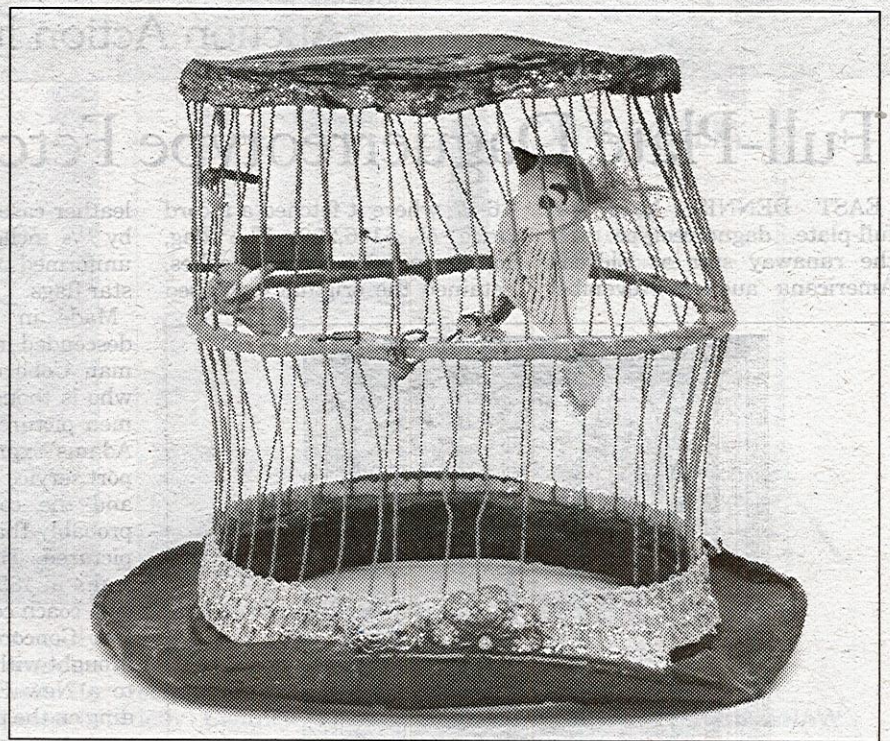
The rise of the working class was blamed for the rise of "low" entertainments, such as dance halls and saloons in the 1840s, chief among which was the emergence of minstrel shows that made caricature of African American culture. Behind the pageantry and parades of the circus lurked racism and ethnic and class tensions. African Americans were either banned from attending or restricted to certain seating areas. Blackface performers were usually of Irish descent and the drunken Irishman was a stock character at the Bowery Amphitheatre reopened in 1854 as the Stadt Theatre, specializing in German language performances.

The way was paved for Phineas Taylor Barnum of Bethel, Conn., who took up show business in 1835 and specialized in peculiarly sensationalized presentations, such as the aged African American Joice Heth whom he marketed as the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington. Barnum purchased Scudder's American Museum in 1841 and changed its name to Barnum's American Museum and placed on view skeletons, taxidermy, wax figures, suits of armor, mummies, optical illusions, aquariums and natural curiosities. A menagerie was installed on an upper floor.

Barnum introduced the Feejee Mermaid — a half monkey



Australia-born equestrienne May Wirth began performing at age ten and joined the Barnum & Bailey Circus at 16. She was billed as the "world's greatest bare-back rider," famous for her ability to somersault backwards from one horse to another behind it. Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Collection.



Clown Felix Adler joined the circus at 13. An Iowa farm boy, he wore his birdcage hat, circa 1940-1950, in his acts that involved piglets. Circus World Museum.

and half fish; Charles Sherwood Stratton, known as General Tom Thumb; Siamese Twins Chang and Eng; and a roster of dwarfs, albinos, fat people and people without limbs. Barnum brought an altogether new degree of hyperbole to his advertising — he and the penny press were made for each other. Other circuses followed his lead, and circus advertising was prodigious and profoundly bombastic in tone. It took advantage of the new media: lithography and photography; the city was papered anew and Barnum's enterprises prospered mightily.

In 1853, Franconi's Hippodrome, named for Italian equestrian Antonio Franconi, opened at Madison Square at the intersection of Broadway, Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street. A two-story brick structure with a canvas roof, it was illuminated by 1,000 gas lights. It could accommodate 6,000 and it featured a 1/6th-mile open-air course for horse and chariot races, gymnastic feats, ostrich races and performing animals. Franconi's Hippodrome was the largest circus in the United States until the arrival of the railroad circus in the 1870s.

The 1879 opening of Madison Square Garden, then at Madison and 26th Street in a former railroad depot, heralded the more or less permanent appearance of the circus at that facility as it moved around town.

Parades were more and more impressive. Isaac Van Amburgh, returning from a European tour in 1846, orchestrated a parade along Broadway of 150 horses, 50 carriages and a splendid Triumphal Car captured in print by Nathaniel Currier. In 1858, Nathans Co.'s Circus introduced an enormous calliope, drawn by a team of six elephants and whose tunes could be heard 12 miles away. Van Amburgh responded in 1867 with his Great Golden Car of Europe with a live, unfettered lion aboard.

Lewis B. Lent's New York Circus captured the market after 1865 with a permanent structure in Union Square where performances were conducted from October to March, offering matinees for women and children and establishing the circus as family entertainment with sideshows and menageries.

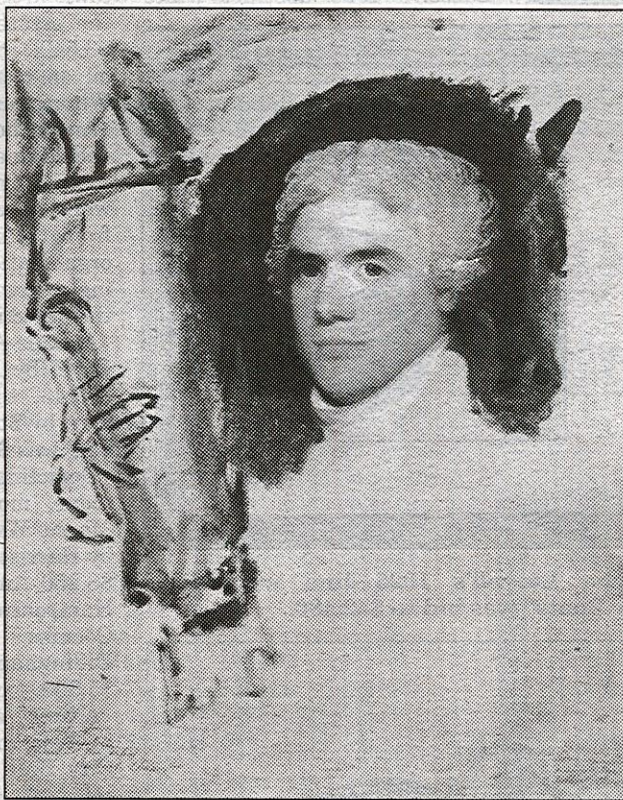
Barnum had more or less entered retirement but was approached by W.C. Coup and Dan Castello in 1870 to join a circus venture — they mostly wanted to use his name but that had been leased elsewhere. The result was P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Hippodrome that opened in April 1871 in Brooklyn and after two weeks toured the Northeast in 100 wagons, drawn by 250 horses and 275 teamsters. The next year, the Barnum circus took to the rails and for the first time billed itself as "The Greatest Show on Earth." It was transported in 65 rail cars and visited 145 towns and was the first circus to gross \$1 million in a season. Despite a devastating fire at the end of the year, the greatest show was up and running even more profitably in the next season.

By 1882, Barnum was in partnership with his one-time rival James A. Bailey and that year purchased the large African elephant Jumbo from the Royal Zoological Society in London, cashing in on the Jumbomania that ensued.

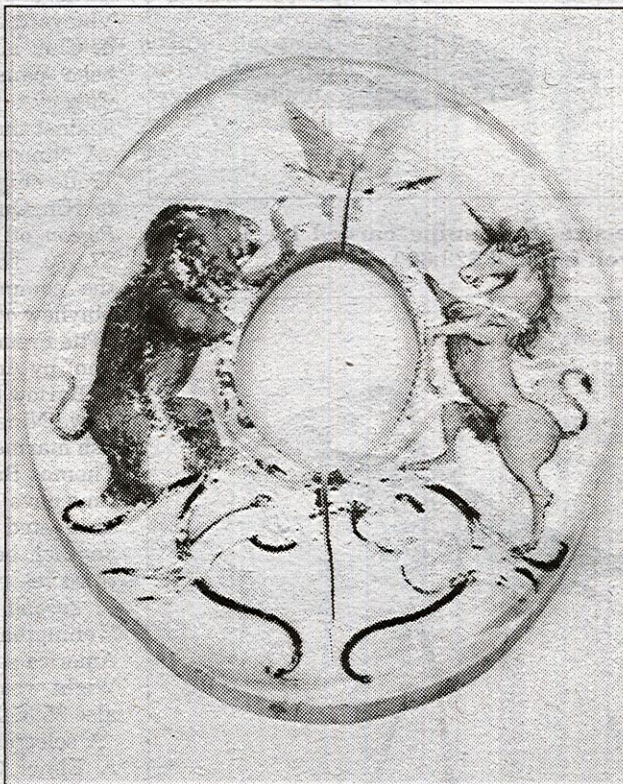
The Barnum and Bailey Circus was purchased in 1908 by the seven Ringling brothers, who only merged the two shows in 1919. By this time, traffic and construction in the city had put an end to grand circus parades of the Nineteenth Century.

The circus suffered at the end of the Depression, but by this time had become a popular subject for Twentieth Century artists — Milton Avery, Alexander Calder, Walt Kuhn. The 1939-1940 New York World's Fair marked the reversal of reversals. John Ringling North was moved to implement modifications that heightened the artistry of the show. In the 1955 season, Marilyn Monroe led the circus parade aboard a pink elephant and Milton Berle was guest ringmaster. New productions like the Cirque du Soleil and the Big Apple Circus appeared, and the roar of the crowd and the smell of greasepaint endures.

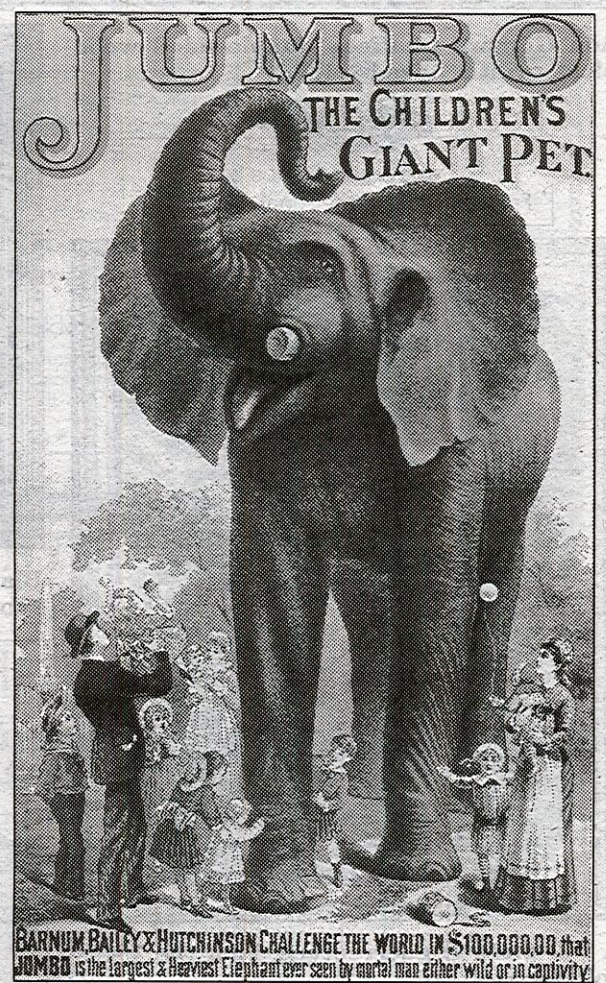
The Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture is at 18 West 86th Street. For information, www.bgc.bard.edu or 212-501-3000.



An oil on canvas portrait of John Bill Ricketts by Gilbert Stuart was made in the artist's studio sometime between 1795 and 1799, but the two clashed over the subject's tardiness and the picture was unfinished. National Gallery of Art, gift of Mrs Robert Noyes in memory of Elisha Riggs, 1942.



After the accidental death of Jumbo the elephant in 1885, his remains went to a taxidermist who preserved and mounted his skin and skeleton. At a memorial dinner, the elephant was reintroduced and guests received souvenir slices of Jumbo's left tusk. A culinary note: the ivory powder from the slicing process was used in a special jelly served at the dinner. Circus World Museum.



"Jumbo, the Children's Giant Pet" is visible in all his elephantine glory in an 1882 poster by the Hatch Lithographic Company, New York. Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Collection.



Silk satin red and white striped pants with velvet trim, circa 1860, were worn by Dan Rice, "The King of American Clowns." Hertzberg Circus Collection of the Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas.