

**Nationalism Under the Big Top:
Historical Spectacle and the Rise of the Modern Circus**

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Circus spectacle reached new heights at the end of the nineteenth century. Acts began focusing on scenes of patriotism that fostered a sense of American superiority. The American public was fascinated by these grand performances. In 1892, the *Constitution-Democrat*, a local newspaper in Keokuk, Iowa, published a review entitled “An Immense Spectacle” that reacted to a new historical spectacle in the Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth, a performance that dealt with Columbus’ discovery of America. The article stated:

Last season and the year before Barnum and Bailey introduced into the circus the production of great spectacles...Finding it met with such universal approval, and that it delighted and instructed while bewildering and amazing the whole people, they decided upon continuing so meritorious a feature... The past successes gave them the necessary experience to perfectly produce the present one, and based upon the knowledge gained in the last two years they have undisputedly the grandest and most overwhelmingly magnificent historical, terpsichorean and thrilling spectacle the mind can possible conceive of.¹

The circus, as one of the first forms of popular culture, had a very important effect on society in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. At this time the circus began moving away from the negative connotations associated with its performances and working towards a new reputation of respectability. Through its attempts to rebrand itself it became one of the largest supporters of American foreign policy. It provided a diverse population with common ground through both nationalistic spectacle and certain sideshows.

The Circus in America: From Skepticism to Acceptance

The circus came to America shortly after the Revolutionary War when the ban on traveling shows was lifted.² Prior to this there had been performers such as jugglers and clowns who went from town to town, but no organized exhibitions. In the early days the circus did not

¹ “An Immense Spectacle,” *Constitution-Democrat*, (1892), CWM’s collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series. From “Clippings 1887-1897.”

² Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age; Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16.

travel great distances. Rather than playing in large tents, the early American circuses were performed in drafty wooden arenas.³ The locations of these designated sites were limited to urban areas. In places such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, audience numbers would cover the arena building expenses.⁴ After a performance these arenas would either be sold or used by the circus at later dates.

These shows drew crowds but it was not until the 1820s and 1830s that circuses became a significant pastimes.⁵ New modes of transportation helped the circus grow, both in the circus' ability to move its acts and in the areas covered. The circus came to visit large and small towns alike and would, in later years, travel from coast to coast. However, the popularity of the circus was largely dependant on the prevalent attitudes within the country. As it began to rise in the early nineteenth century, the nation experienced an increase in skepticism towards amusements which hindered the success of circuses.⁶ Though decades removed from the Puritans, Americans still shared some of their beliefs, among them a strong fear of idleness. Individuals with religious authority warned their congregations that "urban commercial pleasures," such as circuses, were dangerous.⁷ While advising against such forms of entertainment, some relied on an old Puritan distinction between "amusements" and "recreation."⁸ Amusements were seen as distracting people from their work, while recreation refreshed individuals, readying them for a continuation their work. People were encouraged to find more wholesome ways to spend their

³ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 15.

⁴ Ibid. 16.

⁵ Mark West, "A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (1981): 265.

⁶ Ibid. 265.

⁷ Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113.

⁸ Ibid. 113.

leisure time. Religious resorts and self-improvement resorts became popular, calling visitors to dedicate their free time to the pursuit of knowledge.⁹

Politicians and educators also spoke out against the circus. Some areas went so far as to make circus performances illegal. New York State outlawed the circus in 1819, the Michigan Territorial Legislature did so in 1827 and Connecticut had prohibited them in the late 1700s.¹⁰ The circus was seen as an immoral, low form of entertainment. People still attended the circus during these times, as laws often were not enforced, but audiences were most likely made up only of men.¹¹ It would have been seen as extremely inappropriate for women or children to attend such shows. This is interesting to consider when looking at the subject matter which the circus focused on in these early shows. Acts that the circus is now known for, such as clowns, jugglers, animal tricks and acrobats, made up the main bulk of these performances. It was the respectability the circus gained at the turn of the twentieth century that erased the negative connotations that had once been associated with these acts.

Children would have been kept away from the circuses by their parents. It was believed that the youth was particularly vulnerable to the corruptive influences of the circus.¹² Women of the time were not likely to be spending what leisure time they had in public venues. It is more likely that they would be involved in activities within the house, such as china painting or embroidering.¹³ Even the men attending would have been limited, as religion was a very powerful force at the time. In his article, "A Spectrum of Spectators," Mark West states that the population of the circus audience would have most likely been made up of men who were apathetic towards social and religious taboos against circuses, possibly recent immigrants, urban

⁹ Ibid. 111.

¹⁰ West, "A Spectrum of Spectators," 266.

¹¹ Ibid. 266.

¹² Ibid. 266.

¹³ Ibid. 266.

workers and frontiersmen.¹⁴ However, creating a conclusive picture of the circus audience of the nineteenth century is very difficult as circuses did not keep detailed records of who attended the shows.

Attitudes towards the circus shifted again after the Civil War. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw changes in the American circus. The country itself was evolving. The United States was moving towards industrialism. During the 1880s, as much as forty percent of rural townships began to disappear, while the population of bustling cities rose.¹⁵ As people flocked to the cities, attitudes about leisure time began to change. The demand for commercial amusements grew with an increasing urban population.¹⁶ The circus became part of this evolution.

The late nineteenth century had become the "first age of modern mass-spectator sports."¹⁷ No longer was the circus a small scale show of individual acts, but instead a complex enterprise with overarching themes. It had become the greatest example of the changes in the scale and management of illusion that was prepared for seated audiences.¹⁸ In the past the audience had been able to interact with performers. By the late nineteenth century audience members were spectators to the wonders of the spectacular.¹⁹ The circus was an extremely important form of popular culture at the time. Unlike theatre or opera, both of which were present in urban areas, the circus was accessible to people of all classes, which made it particularly well received.

New amounts of leisure time did not come without its problems. Having free time was in conflict with the American work ethic and this was reflected in the ways that Americans spent

¹⁴ Ibid. 267.

¹⁵ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 114.

¹⁶ West, "A Spectrum of Spectators," 267.

¹⁷ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 123.

¹⁸ Ibid. 123.

¹⁹ Ibid. 123.

their time off. As Cindy Aron states in *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*, “Working hard brought not only religious and patriotic satisfaction but material rewards.”²⁰ This belief that it was work rather than leisure that would lead to success in life effected the way Americans spent their time when not at work. Most felt that there had to be a productive aspect of their vacation to justify spending time away from their jobs.²¹ The idea of Theodore Roosevelt’s “strenuous life” was very popular. At the end of the nineteenth century the circus had become a celebration of this ideal and was at the height of its popularity.²² People had begun to notice and appreciate the work that went into acts that were increasingly seen as moral and educational.

Within a 1909 journal entitled *The Idle Record of an Idle Summer*, an anonymous woman spends a number of pages discussing the arrival of the circus in her town. She states to her reader:

You may proudly boast that you have "been to the circus," "seen the whole show." But you haven't!... I have "seen the show" from the back door, from "behind the scenes"... and I want to proclaim it, to tell you how much more interesting it is thus than when admired for visitors. But is not everything and everybody more interesting when truly busy and destitute of self-consciousness or display than when "performing."²³

The discovery of the amount of work that went into each performance made the circus even more favored by the American public. It embodied a work ethic that its audience respected. It was not just a form of possibly educational entertainment, but also a legitimate job. Working in the circus was far more respectable than it had once been.

²⁰ Aron, *Working at Play*, 8

²¹ Ibid. 102.

²² Davis, *The Circus Age*, 191.

²³ Anonymous, "The Idle Record of an Idle Summer," (Diary, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, 1909). 13-14.

In an article within the *New York Times Magazine* in 1917, George MacAdam described circus spectacle as “an arena-sized marvel of kaleidoscopic motion and color.”²⁴ There were many stages to creating successful marvels. To begin with, a theme would be chosen, a libretto written and a musical score added.²⁵ Following this was blocking the scenes and rehearsals. An artist would be called in to create a stage and scenery and a costuming artist would be hired to create historically accurate costumes.²⁶ Once the act was well rehearsed the circus would perform it throughout the country. Circus performers and employees would then bear the brunt of the effort required for the smooth performance of the spectacle. The work that went into these acts did not go unnoticed.

On May 7, 1892, *Harper’s Weekly* published an article written by Harry P. Mawson, entitled, “Get-Away Night at the Circus.” In this article Mawson took note that “the circus of today, particularly as we see it at the Barnum & Bailey Show, is as far from old-time ring shows of our school days as the two poles are apart.”²⁷ Mawson’s reaction was not only to the acts that the circus performed, but also to the efficiency with which the shows were run. It is due to the efficiency that the circus was able to create and perform such large scale spectacle.

It was not just spectators that were making note of the work going into the circus; the organization itself was also drawing attention to the labor that running the circus entailed. Within a program from the 1897-1898 season, the Barnum and Bailey Show details what occurred within the enterprise when it was not traveling. There were no shows performed from November to March, but work continued at the winter offices in Manhattan.²⁸ In addition to the general business work, the performers also spent this time rehearsing their acts, making them

²⁴ George MacAdam, “What It Costs in Money and Effort to Device a Circus Spectacle,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 1917.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Harry P. Mawson, “Get-Away Night At The Circus,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 1892, 446c.

²⁸ “Goes On All Year,” *The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Program* (1897-1898), 2.

more complicated for the next season. The Barnum and Bailey Circus had become a large-scale, proficiently run business.

This efficiency was noticed by many and often credited to the management style of James Bailey. While performing Washington, D.C. in May of 1892, an article stated, “It is a gigantic business, but under the direction of Mr. Bailey everything moves like clockwork, and there is not a hitch or jar in all the work, vast as it is.”²⁹ Audience members looked with favor on the work ethic the circus was embodying.

The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth

Of the circuses moving across the United States the Barnum and Bailey Show was one of the most well known. In 1872, P.T. Barnum, with two partners, Dan Costello and W.C. Coup, organized a circus transported by railroad cars.³⁰ Barnum had gone into the circus business previously only to be frustrated by the limitations of working with wagons. His name was already well known to the American people. Before this time Barnum had been famous for his American Museum in New York City, which mixed American history, menageries and what would later become known as side-show acts.³¹

Barnum's show quickly became a success, despite friction behind the scenes. After a few years, Barnum separated from his original partners due to disagreements.³² Barnum continued running the circus, but without any permanent partners. The circus was not the only focus of Barnum's life, despite its popularity. P.T. Barnum's interests were far-reaching, specifically extending towards American politics and foreign policy. His outspokenness in the political arena

²⁹ “World Under Canvas,” Washington, D.C., 1892, CWM's collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series. From “Clippings 1887-1897.”

³⁰ R.L. Parkinson, “The Barnum & Bailey Circus,” *Circus World Museum*, 1969, 1.

³¹ Bluford Adams. *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great American Showman & The Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 77-78.

³² Parkinson, “The Barnum & Bailey Circus,” 1.

transferred over to the circus arena. Even before the grand spectacles of the late nineteenth century, Barnum began glorifying ideas of American expansionism in his sideshows. Individuals of different races and ethnicities were put on display as curiosities. American spectators could view these sideshows and feel comfortable that, not only were they were far more civilized, but it would be an act of kindness to impart American wisdom on these uncivilized individuals. At the end of the nineteenth century, these "racial exotics" were brought to the main ring, framed in the "imperialistic narratives" of the circus spectacles.³³

P.T. Barnum's personal interests laid the foundation for the spectacles that were to come. His strong fascination with America and his love of politics created groundwork upon which historical and nationalistic spectacle could be built. Though he would not be alive as the popularity of both the circus and the spectacle grew, he had infused the circus with his politics. In addition to this, before his death he had found a man who was capable of taking his show further than it had been before, James Anthony Bailey.

In 1881, after a short, but spirited rivalry, P.T. Barnum and James Bailey, along with a third party named Hutchinson became partners.³⁴ Despite the partnership, the show was still advertised with only Barnum's name. The men worked together for four years, before Bailey ended the partnership due to disagreements.³⁵ At this point, though, Barnum understood that he was getting older and would soon no longer be able to run his circus. In 1888, Barnum offered Bailey a full partnership in the show and the name was changed to "Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth."³⁶ Three years later, P.T. Barnum died, leaving his circus in the very capable hands of James Bailey. Bailey expanded the number of people employed by the circus, as well

³³ Adams. *E Pluribus Barnum*, 164-165.

³⁴ Parkinson, "The Barnum & Bailey Circus," 2.

³⁵ Ibid. 2.

³⁶ Ibid. 2.

as the amount of railroad cars they owned, making it easier for the circus to cover more ground and put forth more elaborate shows.³⁷ Bailey kept the spirit of Barnum's circus alive.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Barnum and Bailey show, along with other circuses, worked hard to make the image of the circus more appealing to the public. In an attempt to draw in a broader audience, the circuses turned to issues of national importance. They drew inspiration from current events, as well as United States foreign policy. The Barnum and Bailey Show, in particular, used the public's interest in these happenings to its advantage, showcasing a number of historical and nationalistic spectacles. While focusing on these events, the circus began to move away from acts that were still viewed as inappropriate.

Harry P. Mawson was one of the few people of the time to lament the decrease of the "freak" show, stating, "...a bearded lady, the giants, the tattooed man, to say nothing of the lady snake-charmer and the living skeleton, or the man who prefers eating beer bottles to drinking the beer. All these freaks are missing in the modern circus, and one misses them on 'get-away night'."³⁸ Though still present, the "freak" show was done to a smaller scale in order to make the circus more moral and acts, such as historical spectacle, with supposed educational value became more prevalent.

Grand Spectacles

Acts of spectacle had been included in the circus for as long as there had been performances in America. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, circus spectacle had evolved into something very different from what it had once been. Pantomime, one of the early forms of spectacle, was first introduced into American circuses by John Ricketts, the United

³⁷ Bob Brooke, "Step Right Up!," *History Magazine*, <http://www.history-magazine.com/circuses.html>.

³⁸ Mawson, "Get-Away Night At The Circus," 447.

States' first circus owner in the late eighteenth century.³⁹ Since this introduction spectacles have taken many forms. There was the grand entry, during which performers rode horses and executed maneuvers and the tournament, in which the performers process around the hippodrome track.⁴⁰ Many of the earlier spectacles dealt with parades rather than with plot-based performances. There are some early examples of such acts, such as John Rickett's "The Grand Historical Pantomime," a satire of the whiskey rebellion in western Pennsylvania, but these acts were nowhere near the scale of later spectacle.⁴¹

In fact, the circus grew and spectacle became a staple for an unlikely reason: the decreasing cost of railroads. While, at one time, grand entries were more practical, as they required no scenery and could be presented in small arenas, the circus had reached a point in its evolution that practicality was no longer a necessity.⁴² When the circus began moving by rail they were able to move over more territory and produce bigger and better shows.⁴³ The railroad allowed circuses not only to transport more people and larger sets for their acts, but also broadened the audience pool. Due to this circuses were able to convey their messages to a greater number of people. This technological advancement created an environment in which circus spectacle could evolve. Spectacle had moved from the grand entry to the tournament and circus proprietors were now able to turn that into musical and dramatic episodes.⁴⁴

As spectacles became grander, the circus began to employ more people. It took large numbers of individuals to create the spectacle and keep it running smoothly. In some cases as many as two hundred employees traveled with the circus who participated only in the spectacle.⁴⁵

³⁹ A. Morton Smith, "The Circus Spectacle," *Hobbies Magazine*, 1947.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fred D. Pfening, Jr., "Spec-ology of the Circus," *Bandwagon*, Nov.-Dec. 2003, 4.

⁴² A. Morton Smith, "Spec-ology of the Circus," *The Billboard*, 1943, 51.

⁴³ Charles Philip Fox, *A Ticket to the Circus* (New York: Bramhall House, 1959), 73.

⁴⁴ Pfening, Jr., "Spec-ology of the Circus," 5.

⁴⁵ Smith, "The Circus Spectacle."

These employees were joined in creating the spectacle by other circus personnel who were involved in a variety of acts. Acts of spectacle were an elaborately planned central aspect of the circus performance containing an enormous cast.

Historical spectacles were often broken into three parts. It began with the Grand Procession, ended with the final ballet, and contained historical episodes between the two.⁴⁶ The spectacle performed at the turn of the twentieth century was more magnificent than anything circus audiences had seen before. Some credited this change to P.T. Barnum, though he was not alive for much of the transition. Nevertheless, an 1892 *Life* magazine article declared that historic spectacles were his legacy to the industry: "the late Mr. Barnum evidently saw that the circus had reached its limitations in the way of strictly circus performances." Mr. Barnum, the article continued, "revived the old idea of dramatic and spectacular effect in the circus ring, but on a scale never known before" in his "desire for new circus worlds to conquer."⁴⁷

In an article written for *Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, Inc.*, Fred D. Pfening, Jr. quotes circus historian Michael Means' description of circus spectacle in the early twentieth century:

They incorporated traditional display and theme into 20 to 30 miniature plays in dumb-show (pantomime) that blended theatrical elements of plot, acting, sets, costumes, and music into an almost mind-numbing experience of the story...to produce that sense, every element of the circus was employed.⁴⁸

These grand spectacles were something new for the circus. In addition to being done on a larger scale, they also tackled new material. Circuses looked, not only, at historical events which glorified America, but also began to produce spectacles of American foreign relations which mirrored actual overseas expansion.⁴⁹ In their efforts to appeal to a larger audience, circus

⁴⁶ Michael H. Means, "'The Field of the Cloth of Gold': The Ringling Brothers Reinvent Henry VIII Reinventing Chivalry," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 21, no. 3 (1998), 71.

⁴⁷ "The Reformed Circus," *Life*, 1892, 202.

⁴⁸ Pfening, Jr., "Spec-ology of the Circus," 5.

⁴⁹ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 192.

proprietors made their shows into tools of nationalism. Over the next few years acts would come to cater to ideas of patriotism and American superiority.

In “‘The Field of the Cloth of Gold’,” within the *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, Michael Means states, “The first two decades of the twentieth century have been called the golden age of the circus Grand Entrance Spectacular.”⁵⁰ While the new version of spectacle had certainly hit its stride by the early twentieth century, it was during the last decade of the nineteenth century that it started moving towards what it would become.

In 1899, James Bailey employed Imre Kiralfy to produce a spectacle entitled “Nero, or the Destruction of Rome.” This new spectacle was performed on a much grander scale than those which had come before it. The Barnum and Bailey Circus built a large stage, which replaced seats on the backside of the arena.⁵¹ The reaction to this spectacle was extremely positive. A 1947 article in *Hobbies Magazine* later described it as, “one of the all time great spectacles of circusdom.”⁵² Audiences of the time loved the wonder of the spectacle, which led the Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth to team up with Kiralfy a second time. However, the partnership was not without incident.

Creating historical spectacle was not a simple endeavor. There were times during the production of “Nero” that the immense scale of the spectacle seemed impossible to produce. In the earlier stages of production James Bailey catered to the Kiralfy brothers’ wishes, but as opening night came closer Bailey told the men that the circus would open regardless of where “Nero” was.⁵³ This was not taken well and the exchange was witnessed by a number of circus performers. One, Josephine DeMott Robinson, observed, “Mr. Kiralfy tore out most of his hair,

⁵⁰Ibid. 69.

⁵¹ Smith, “The Circus Spectacle.”

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Josephine Dermott Robinson, *The Circus Lady*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company Publishers, 1890), 156.

but Mr. Bailey for once refused to humor him, and his hysterics made no impression whatsoever on the American showman.”⁵⁴ When the show opened, “Nero” was part of the performance.

Josephine DeMott Robinson was a bareback rider in the Barnum and Bailey Circus in the late nineteenth century. In her autobiography, *The Circus Lady*, she discusses a tragedy that occurred during the 1889-1890 season. During an opening night performances of “Nero,” one of the elephants was not moving fast enough and was punched from behind to speed him up. The elephant raced forward grabbing a man in front of him and throwing him to the ground, crushing him to death.⁵⁵ The audience and some of the circus employees were unaware of the death. The performer playing Nero saw it occur and continued to play his fiddle, adding “a lot of quavers and runs to distract the crowd’s attention.”⁵⁶ Circus personnel were able to remove the man’s body during this and the show continued without more problems.



Courtesy of The Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

⁵⁴ Ibid. 157.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 157-158.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 158.

In 1891, the Kiralfy and the Barnum and Bailey Show teamed up to put on the spectacle, *Columbus and the Discovery of America*.⁵⁷ This would be spectacle on a large scale and was advertised as such. There were many different circus posters circulated to create interest in this act. One poster showcased a large number of costumed dancers in an elaborate pose outside a stone wall. The number of people included in the poster promises the audience that this will be a large scale event, advertising “300 Beautiful Male & Female Dancers.”⁵⁸ That this many people were involved, outside of the cast of the actual historical aspect of the show, would have been impressive.

An article in a Milwaukee newspaper describes the spectacle, scene by scene. Discussing the final tableau it reads, “It represents the return of Columbus, his triumphal entry to Barcelona and his reception with all honor by Ferdinand and Isabella. The arena is filled with people in gorgeous costumes, moving in a kaleidoscopic fashion.”⁵⁹ The amount of action taking place at one time in one place was unfamiliar to circus audiences. In the past they would have been able to take in everything at once, but with new spectacles it was impossible to take notice of all that was occurring. Grand circus spectacle was exciting, unfamiliar, and, as it came to be seen by some, beneficial to the audience.

In 1892 *Life* published an article entitled “The Reformed Circus,” stating, “The spectacle also has an instructive side which may teach the young American idea to shoot somewhat in the direction of the history of his own country.”⁶⁰ However, it was not only the history of America that brought people to the show. This spectacle also appealed to the curiosity Americans had for foreign life. It promised to provide a look into American past, while also showing an aspect of

⁵⁷ Pfening, Jr., “Spec-ology of the Circus,” 6.

⁵⁸ *Imre Kiralfy's Columbus and the Discovery of America*, poster presented during the 1891 season by the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth.

⁵⁹ “Barnum & Bailey’s Grand Historical, Martial, Musical and Terpsichorean Spectacle,” 1892, CWM’s collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series. From “Clippings 1887-1897.”

⁶⁰ “The Reformed Circus,” 202.

the foreign. It would give the audience a look at a mysterious “other,” while reinforcing the idea that Americans are superior. Through these acts the circus was able to alter the perception of American society towards itself. It stopped being low-brow and became a tool of enlightenment. Articles such as “The Reformed Circus” offer proof that the American population was not only taking notice of these changes, but also paying attention to the message the circus was attempting to convey. However, it was not only through artwork and newspaper articles that the circus tried to draw people to the spectacle.

Advertisements began to glorify the educational value of the performances. Audiences were told through newspapers and circus posters that if they attended a show they would come away from it a better, more enlightened person. Grand historical spectacles were best suited for this type of marketing. These acts were based on events of which most Americans would have a previous knowledge. Audience members would have known that these topics did have educational value. Therefore it would be easy to present these acts as instructive scenes despite their clearly theatrical nature.

A large advertisement, hung in August of 1892, used words rather than images to entice audiences. On it *Columbus and the Discovery of America* was described as “A vast, comprehensive and far-reaching exhibition, moral in tone, truthful in expression, grand in effect, deeply interesting to adults, charmingly delightful to children and immensely instructive to all classes.”⁶¹ Following the new style, this advertisement described the spectacle in a way that made it sound as though it would be an educational and enlightening experience. It makes a point to stress the morality and honesty of the production. In addition to these claims, it also reached out to children and “all classes” of people. Attempts by the circus to draw in such a

⁶¹ *Columbus and the Discovery of America*, poster presented on August 8, 1892, by the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth.

varied audience, especially one which included children, were a new tactic in the late nineteenth century.⁶² Circus proprietors used historical spectacle to add to the legitimacy of their shows.

Once entering the show sentiments of patriotism and American superiority were made even more obvious to the audience. The program for the spectacle included a general breakdown of the scenes in addition to an entire libretto of the show. The breakdown of the fourth scene was called “The First Landing in the New World” and consisted of three parts, “Fright and Terror of the Indians,” “Columbus Approaches in his Boat,” and “Taking Formal Possession.”⁶³ The wording of this scene alone paints Native Americans as ignorant and in awe of those coming to colonize the country.

Most Americans would view Columbus’ arrival in America as the beginning of the history of the United States. This spectacle was meant to convey the message that the ancestors of the American population came and took possession of the land from the uncivilized savages leading to the creation of one of the strongest countries in the world. American circus audiences could view this show as a reenactment of the strength upon which the country would be built. Though it dealt with history and the primary characters were not American, this spectacle still managed to play to the audience’s sense of national identity.

Audiences reacted even more favorably to “Columbus” than they had “Nero.” In an 1892 article in a Decatur paper it states, “Nero was a grand spectacle but Columbus is 100 per cent its superior... illustrating a story familiar to every child.”⁶⁴ Audiences welcomed spectacles dealing with their own history. This was also a historical moment that was on the minds of many due to

⁶² West, “A Spectrum of Spectators,” 267-268.

⁶³ Imre Kiralfy, “Columbus and the Discovery of America,” Libretto, 1892, CWM’s collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series, from “Clippings 1887-1897.”

⁶⁴ “Bailey’s Greatest; The Exhibition is Beyond Comparison – ‘Columbus’ the Triumph of Spectacular Achievements,” 1892, CWM’s collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series. From “Clippings 1887-1897.”

the fact that it was the 400th anniversary of the event and the nation was preparing to commemorate it at the coming World's Fair.⁶⁵

This spectacle was followed by many others promoting similar values and sentiments. Circus proprietors also began using current events in their shows. This was done for a number of reasons. The spectacles were made to show the superiority of American expansionism to European imperialism, thus bolstering pride in the United States. As Janet Davis states:

However inaccurately, these amusements defined U.S. expansion as a distinct counterpoint to European formulation of formal empire solely characterized by colonization and military domination, because the nation's acquisition of noncontiguous territory was predicated on an abiding sense of moral "uplift" though economic intervention.⁶⁶

In addition to making circus performances more educational and legitimate, these spectacles played upon American ideals. They looked at three ideals in particular; the humanitarian impulse to help people solve their problems, a principle of self determination applied to an international level, and a belief that other people can not improve their lives unless they are going about it in the same way as the United States.⁶⁷ Spectacles which focused on storylines where the United States brought civilization to savage lands were profitable as these were the topics that people were focused on at the time.

Circuses chose the military actions they based their performances on very carefully. The wars that were portrayed were generally thought to be popular among the American public, such as the Spanish-American War and the Indian Wars.⁶⁸ The spectacles were meant to portray the United States as a grand democracy spreading a civilized way of life. For this purpose, the circus stayed away from controversial wars, such as the Mexican War and the American Civil

⁶⁵ "An Immense Spectacle," *Constitution-Democrat*, 1982.

⁶⁶ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 194.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 194.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 199.

War.⁶⁹ These military actions reminded Americans of the presence of slavery in their past and the racial inequalities in their present. These images did not fit in with the ideal of the enlightened United States.

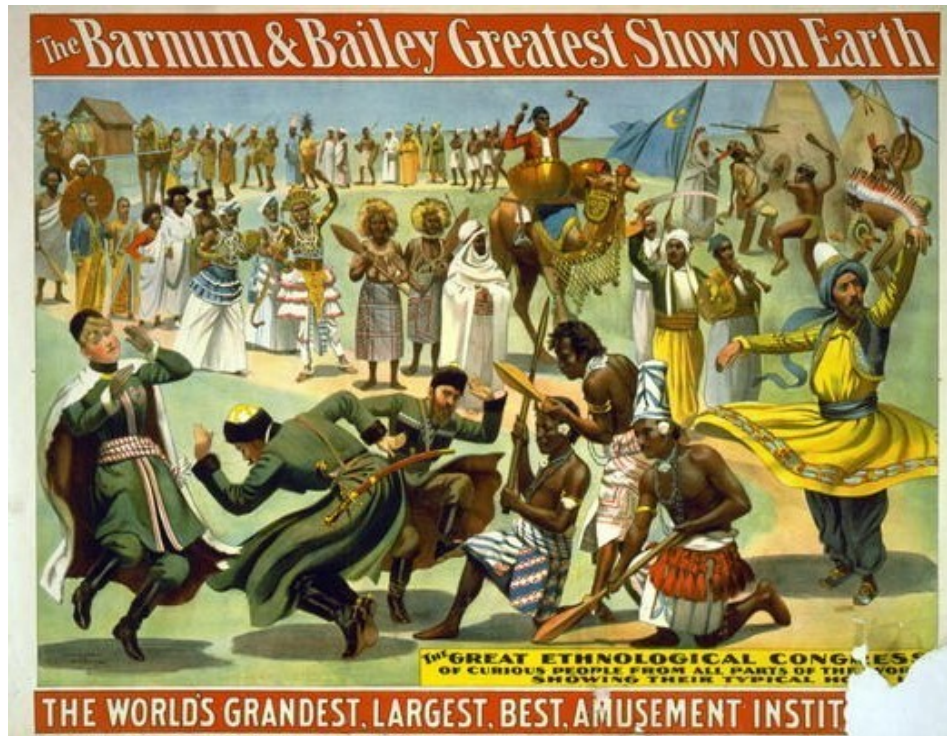
Americans vs. The “Other”

The circus was one of the first forms of entertainment that could be enjoyed by people all across the country. Large numbers of people showed up to circus performances. At a Barnum & Bailey show in Waterloo, Iowa in 1904 there are records of around 10,000 tickets being sold.⁷⁰ Due to the distance that circuses spanned, they could not rely on local issues to attract audiences and therefore had to turn to national themes. The emphasis the circus placed at this time on American overseas expansion and military actions was good for business because the subject matter was salable.⁷¹ It helped to both draw in a broader audience and foster a national unity in a diverse population.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 200.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 3

⁷¹ Ibid.192.



Courtesy of The Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

In *Circus and Culture*, semiotician Paul Bouissac states, “A circus performance tends to represent the totality of our popular system of the world.”⁷² This thought describes many of the spectacles of the late nineteenth century, which came to symbolize the way American viewed itself in the world order. Circus proprietors participated in the American expansionism through the “physical procurement of people and animals from other countries.”⁷³ In 1895, the Barnum and Bailey Show presented an act entitled “The Great Ethnological Congress.” Posters advertising the performance depicted a large line of different individuals dancing. Each of the people were dressed in various foreign garb, the words reading, “Curious People from All Parts of the World.”⁷⁴ The poster advertised the people as oddities to be watched. This attitude helped create ground upon which the diverse American population could connect. United States citizens

⁷² Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 7.

⁷³ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 194.

⁷⁴ *The Great Ethnological Congress*, poster presented during the 1895 season by the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth.

might originally come from many different locations around the world, but now they were Americans. Therefore they were better than those being displayed.

Sociologist Tony Bennett has stated that power is not gained by forcing the prevailing culture "on to the culture of subordinate groups, but by reaching into those cultures, reshaping them, hooking them, and with them, the people whose consciousness and experience is defined in their terms."⁷⁵ By providing images of "exotics" as savage, uncivilized beasts, the circus gave immigrants an "other" to point to when discussing their own American identity. They were able to reason that since they clearly were not like the person on display, they had much more in common with the average American.

These acts also worked in another way. They gave white Americans a point of comparison when looking at immigrants. The individual sitting next to them in the circus tent did not appear nearly as ridiculous as the people in the ring. The immigrants seemed to behave more like the white Americans than the people in odd clothing dancing down below. The spectacles gave white Americans something over which to bond with new American citizens. Both groups seemed to have the same enjoyment of watching the performances of strange, exotic people. Audience members who were born in the United States would find themselves sitting next to audience members who had only recently become American. Through a shared interest in the curious individuals appearing on stage a bond would be formed between the two.

It cannot be said that the circus embraced all Americans, regardless of their ethnic background. One of the ways the circus spread nationalism was to objectify those who were not white Americans. Minstrel shows got their start in the circus, and the stock characters of "Jim Crow" and "Zip Coon" would become part of the new antebellum minstrel show.⁷⁶ The circus

⁷⁵ Tony Bennett, "The Politics of the 'Popular,'" *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1986), 19.

⁷⁶ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 172.

both broke and reinforced commonly held stereotypes. In her book focusing on how cultural images shape United States policy, K. Sue Jewell states, "When race, ethnic background, gender and class are combined, a plethora of diverse cultural images emerges."⁷⁷ This was the case within circus performances.

The circus portrayed cultural images of a large number of nations. While, in historical spectacle the circus tried to maintain the basic facts of the events, in its depiction of foreign cultures there was not the same standard. The manner in which the performers dressed and acted said much more about the way that Americans viewed the culture than it did about the culture itself. The circus was not about learning about different ways of life, but about furthering the idea that the American way of life was superior. They managed to convey this not only through performances but also through accounts of foreigners' reactions to the show and performers. An article entitled, "An American Enterprise," in the May 21, 1903 publication of *The Realm of Marvels* focused entirely on the idea of the circus proving that American was greater than other countries. It states:

There is no question that the enormous tide of immigration that has been flowing toward American shores during the last past three years is largely due to the visit to Europe of the Barnum & Bailey show. The one thousand men, women and children with the show were fed entirely upon the show grounds and the dining tents were always surrounded at every meal by curious throngs, just as they are in this country. When the people saw the American show people eating their meat and generally substantial meals three times a day these people to whom a meal of meat once a week is a luxurious feast, and to many of them almost a mere tradition, asked most curiously if that was the manner in which everybody was fed in America. When they learned that it was, thousands of them returned home with the determination to seek a home in the land of the free where meat could be a daily diet with all.⁷⁸

This article credited the circus with increasing immigration to the country. Through their habits in foreign countries circus performers fostered more interest in and respect for the United States.

⁷⁷ K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Policy* (London: Routledge, 1993), 35.

⁷⁸ The Courier Co., "An American Enterprise," *The Realm of Marvels*, May 21, 1903, 5.

Circus acts glorified the white American first, followed by other American citizens. However, all Americans were exalted over citizens of other countries. The individuals on display were caricatures of the cultures they represented, because of which they sent a very strong message to the American public: Citizens of the United States had to come together to bring civilization to the savage parts of the world. When looking at these depictions of foreigners, it no longer was as important that not all of the audience had been born in the United States.

Fun for the Whole Family

Circus advertisements in the 1870s and 1880s were directed at adults, with children rarely, if ever being mentioned.⁷⁹ At the opening of the last decade of the nineteenth century it was still uncommon for children to attend circus performances. During the years that followed, the circus worked hard to reach out to family audiences. These attempts were aided by the fact that circuses were no longer under the same scrutiny from religious organizations as they had been during the earlier half of the century.

Religious newspapers ran advertisements for the circus. On April 17, 1890, *Christian Union* published an advertisement for Barnum and Bailey's production of Imre Kiralfy's "Nero, Or the Destruction of Rome." The spectacle was described as "an elegant and instructive entertainment," ending in the "dawn of Christianity."⁸⁰ Religion began to become an important aspect in some circus spectacle. The United States was often depicted as a Christian nation bringing civilization to the barbarians of foreign lands.

⁷⁹ West, "A Spectrum of Spectators," 266.

⁸⁰ "Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth." *Christian Union*, 1890, 562.

The spectacles dealing with religion often dealt with countries in which the United States had no real economic or political interests. In these acts America was portrayed as a nation “led by chaste, manly Euroamerican capitalists,” who, in addition to promoting Christian values, laid groundwork for an American capitalist culture abroad.⁸¹ These spectacles were well received by both religious authorities and politicians.

In addition to drawing attention to the religious aspects of the show, the *Christian Union* advertisement also stated, “Admission to all, 50 cts. Children under 9 years, 25 cts.”⁸² The Barnum and Bailey Show was consciously trying to convince families to bring their children to the circus. A similar advertisement ran in the *New York Evangelist* on April 7, 1892 for Imre Kiralfy’s “Columbus and the Discovery of America.”⁸³ The placement of the advertisements in religious papers indicates that the circus had become an acceptable way to spend one’s leisure time.

Circus audiences could be overwhelmed by the amount of action occurring in front of them. Deciding what aspect of the act to focus one’s eyes on was difficult. One 1895 article critiqued the Barnum and Bailey Show as being too big. It describes the scene as “The performance is going on in three rings simultaneously and the fourth enclosure in the center, a trifle larger than the rings, contains a big tank of water in which expert swimmers and water clowns have a busy half hour.”⁸⁴ The article continues on to state that the only way to see everything is to come see the show more than once, which many people did. This criticism still exemplified the popularity of the show. The audience was so enthralled with everything that was

⁸¹ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 212.

⁸² “Barnum & Bailey’s Greatest Show on Earth.” *Christian Union*, 1890, 562.

⁸³ “The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth,” *New York Evangelist*, 1892, 7.

⁸⁴ “Big Show is Here,” Chicago, 1895, CWM’s collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series. From “Clippings 1887-1897.”

occurring around them that they felt the need to come back again to make sure that they did not miss anything.

The typical circus audience was beginning to transform. While discussing the fact that the circus is too overwhelming, the 1895 article critiquing the circus focused not on the adult male who had once been the average audience member, but instead on the small boy trying to see everything at once.⁸⁵ Children at the circus were becoming the norm. In April of 1896, James Bailey opened the circus to an audience of nearly five thousand children from orphanages, Sunday schools and missions.⁸⁶ The Tenement House Chapter wrote an article for the *New York Evangelist* detailing the day's events. The article mentions the "intelligent interest the boys took and the clever little remarks they made."⁸⁷ Circus shows were providing a sense of educational growth.

In the 1830s, when the circus came to town it was common for it to be met with the condemnation of local clergy.⁸⁸ However, by the late 1890s, the circus had become a form of family entertainment. An 1897 article described the excitement of the town the circus was visiting, "Many a man and boy went to bed early Saturday night so that they might be at the Water street crossing of the Wabash road to witness the unloading of the four special trains which arrived from Danville."⁸⁹ It was now expected that circus audience would be comprised of both children and adults.

James Bailey spoke to his desire to make the circus a form of entertainment for people of all ages in "The Manager's Card," at the beginning of the program for the 1897-1898 Season.

Bailey begins the address with discussing his pride in how far the circus has come. Acts had

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Tenement House Chapter, "A Visit to the Circus," *New York Evangelist*, 1896, 19.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ West, "A Spectrum of Spectators," 265.

⁸⁹ The Barnum & Bailey Show," *Decator*, 1897, CWM's collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series. From "Clippings 1887-1897."

come to be seen as having educational value and the circus could no longer be construed as an immoral form of entertainment. He closes his thoughts with, “As such I can heartily request the attendance of the children, sure of their being profitably entertained and valuable impressions made upon their youthful minds that will serve them through life.”⁹⁰ The circus blatantly encouraged parents to bring their children with them to performances.

By the early twentieth century the circus, which twenty years earlier had not been seen as a form of entertainment meant for children, had changed its image in such a way that it had become a prime example of a child-friendly activity. On September 17, 1904 the *Topeka Daily Herald* published an article entitled “To Please the Tots,” which opened with stating:

No institution provides so much instructive entertainment for the children as Barnum & Bailey’s Greatest Show on Earth, for, with characteristic foresight, that enterprising firm recognize the fact that what amuses and educates children has an equal attraction for parents and guardians.⁹¹

The circus had become not only a popular event for families, but also one that they were encouraged to attend. The performances had lost the negative connotations that had been, at one time, ascribed to them. They had come to be described as “solid, substantial and rich...marked by the refinement that permeated the entire establishment.”⁹²

During the early twentieth century, audience members began to notice that children had come to be more involved not only in circus audiences but also with the set-up of the circus. In *The Idle Record of an Idle Summer*, the author spends a number of pages discussing the arrival of the circus in her town. Describing the opening parade, she states, “The crowd of spectators was increasing visibly from minute to minute, that the big band wagons were being uncovered and

⁹⁰ James Bailey, “The Manager’s Card,” *The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Program* (1897-1898), 1.

⁹¹ “To Please the Tots,” *Topeka Daily Herald*, 1904, 4.

⁹² “Brilliant Circus of Barnum & Bailey Shows Here Today,” 1904, CWM’s collection of Barnum Circus Titles, the Barnum & Bailey series. From “Clippings 1903-1908.”

polished and that small boys worked to ‘help’ in any way.”⁹³ Twenty years before it would have been considered inappropriate for children to attend a circus performance, but by 1909 parents had come to allow their children to help out if it was needed. The circus had succeeded in drawing in the diverse audience they had been working for since the late nineteenth century. However, this did not stop the Barnum and Bailey Show from opening the circus up to less fortunate children, a tradition which continued well into the twentieth century.⁹⁴

Barnum & Bailey Overseas

The Barnum and Bailey Circus did not limit its promotion of American ideals to the United States. In the fall of 1897 the show began a European tour after a great deal of preparation. For this trip James Bailey hired a firm in Stoke-on-Trent to construct a new railway outfit consisting of sixty cars for the circus to use while overseas, as well as building permanent winter quarters in Stoke-on-Trent.⁹⁵ During the tour they continued to convey a message of American superiority. This was done more subtly in Europe than it was in America, tempered with acts that glorified the European over other “savage” nations, such as Africa.

⁹³ “The Idle Record of an Idle Summer,” 18-19.

⁹⁴ “Orphans Enjoy the Circus,” *The New York Times*, 1912.

⁹⁵ “Barnum’s In England,” *Topeka State Journal*, Oct. 30, 1897, 4.



Courtesy of The Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

They began by appealing to a European sense of superiority. The first act of spectacle performed in England during the 1897 tour was *The Mahdi or For the Victoria Cross*. The image on the advertising poster portrayed British troops battling the Sudanese; while the British soldiers are in uniform, carrying sophisticated weaponry, the Sudanese wear only loin cloths and carry sharp sticks.⁹⁶ This poster sent out a very clear message to potential audience members: the Sudanese, though fierce fighters, would be no match for the British. The poster asserted that the Sudanese were ignorant and backward, without the benefits of new technology. This spectacle would provide a sense of national pride for the audience they would be playing to during that portion of the tour.

⁹⁶ *The Mahdi or For the Victoria Cross*, poster presented during the 1897 season by the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth.



Courtesy of The Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

Still touring Europe during the 1898 season, the Barnum and Bailey Show presented the *Total Destruction of the Spanish Fleet on the Cuban Coast*. This would become a very popular spectacle for the circus as it portrayed events that were happening at the time as part of the Spanish American War. A circus poster advertised the spectacle as “The Greatest Naval Battle of Modern Times, Truthfully Represented by Facsimiles of All the Huge Fighting Ships.”⁹⁷ These words, along with the image of the large ships fighting on the water, were meant to excite people. Audience members would want to see the “greatest naval battle of modern times,” especially when the ships would be portrayed so impressively, even if the battle was not being fought by their own navy. The circus advertised the spectacle in a way that made the initial draw the thrill of watching a reenactment of a naval battle. Once the audience was enthralled the glorification of the United States would begin.

⁹⁷ *Total Destruction of the Spanish Fleet on the Cuban Coast*, poster presented during the 1898 season by the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth.

The program given out in Olympia, London on December 26, 1898 went further in making statements about the wonder of this particular spectacle. It gave an outline for the story, along with the names of the primary characters, while also stating the accuracy of the circus' portrayal of the event. Within these descriptions the American Navy was exalted. The spectacle is said to show the "picturesque evolutions, daring exploits, dashing episodes, heroic actions, destructive gunnery and brilliant achievements of the American Fleet on the Cuban Coast."⁹⁸ From here the circus goes on to promise that while depicting these "daring exploits" they will be precise in their recounting. The program declared that the recreation is being presented with "startling vividness and astonishing truthfulness."⁹⁹ They were not being merely honest in their portrayal, but shockingly so.

The marketing of honesty, morality and education worked extremely well for the circus. It helped transform the performances from the low form of culture they had once been seen as. It also made it more difficult for the circus to retain the negative connotations that had once been associated with it. The circus was no mere form of entertainment; it was instructing the minds of its audience, both in America and in Europe, and making them more knowledgeable individuals.

The circus did earn the admiration of Europeans for both its acts and the efficiency with which it was run. In an article written for *The Ludgate*, a London magazine, entitled "Transporting the Greatest Show on Earth," Charles Henry Jones states "What strikes one as being the most extraordinary, is the enormous proportions, and the diversity of entertainment, and the truly marvelous celerity with which the monster show is dismantled, transported, and erected."¹⁰⁰ The Barnum and Bailey Show received a great welcome in Europe and went on to gain more acclaim as it toured. Jones ended his 1898 article by declaring, "It is a high-sounding

⁹⁸ "The Destruction of the Spanish Fleet," *The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Program*, Dec. 26, 1898.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Henry Jones, "Transporting the Greatest Show on Earth: The 1898 Tour of England," *The Ludgate*, 1898.

title, but there appears to be no exaggeration in Mssrs. Barnum and Bailey's proud boast that theirs is "The Greatest Show on Earth.""¹⁰¹

Though touring in Europe, the circus did still have the power to promote national identity among Americans. Though touring in Europe, the circus did still have the power to promote national identity among Americans. People in the United States were still reading stories in the newspaper about the triumphs of Barnum and Bailey overseas. They could be proud of this American organization which was garnering such praise in Europe. There were also Americans in Europe who were affected by the performances of the circus.

According to the route book being kept by the circus during their overseas tour, while the circus was playing in Plymouth there was a U.S. training ship docked nearby. On board the ship, named *Monongaela*, were 150 cadets and a similar number of officers.¹⁰² Upon hearing that the circus was nearby, many on the ship went to see the show. There is a description of their reaction to the acts, as well as the reaction of the British to the Americans:

Whenever Carl Clair's band played a national air they showed their appreciation by rising en masse, waving their flags and singing the words as the band played on. This last evidence of patriotism was heartily joined in by the British tars who were in attendance in large numbers – Plymouth being a naval station – and formed another convincing proof of the good feeling existing between the two great countries.¹⁰³

This caption speaks to the idea of the Barnum and Bailey Circus both promoting American patriotism, but also fostering a greater understanding between countries. The circus worked as a form of foreign policy that did not actually have ties to the government. It introduced and glorified American culture in a manner that entertained.

Return to the United States

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² H.L. Watkins, *Barnum & Bailey in the Old World: 1897-1901*, Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 28.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 28-29.



Courtesy of The Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

Though the Barnum and Bailey Show was in Europe for four years, circus performances were still a large part of American life. A drawing was produced in 1900 by the Courier Litho. Co. that highlighted the side show aspect of the circus. The portrait depicted men and women walking down a street with sideshow cars to the side of them. The cars consisted of various stages showcasing exotic men and women. That the circus did not limit its efforts to create a broader national identity to the main tent is illustrated by this artwork. The stages featured in this drawing contain signs proclaiming, "Japanese," "Congress of Beauty from Every Country," and "Turkish Theatre."¹⁰⁴ The individuals on these stages are not shown as performing. They are not on display due to any specific talent, but because they are different from the mainstream American culture and therefore marketable oddities. In addition to this, the artwork also shows the audience as a mix of upper class men and women, with a few children in attendance as well.

¹⁰⁴ *Crowds at a Circus Sideshow Viewing Women and Some Men Dressed in Costumes of Foreign Lands*. Artwork produced by Courier Litho Co. in 1900.

This, like the advertisements in religious newspapers, points to the circus being seen by the masses as respectable form of entertainment.

Upon returning to the United States the Barnum and Bailey Circus wished to construct models of American naval vessels for its show. James Bailey and his associates went through a number of different channels to make sure that its portrayal of these vessels was as accurate as possible. In a letter to Whiting Allen, a representative of Bailey, from John D. Long, a secretary in the Navy Department, the circus was given permission to have access to certain plans for different Navy vessels “in order to insure the absolute correctness of the models.”¹⁰⁵ This was not the last correspondence between Bailey and the Navy Department. Almost a year later the circus and the Navy were still in contact about the access to the ship plans. On January 10, 1903, Rear Admiral Francis T. Bowles, the Chief Constructor for the United States Navy, wrote the Barnum and Bailey Circus stating, “Believing it to be in the interest of public service, I have taken pleasure in furnishing you access to the plans of certain naval vessels, which would enable you to accurately construct exhibition models.”¹⁰⁶ From here the circus was able to proceed towards its goal of presenting these ships to the American public. These letters are one of the only examples of actual contact between the circus and the United States government.

The exhibition was presented to the country in 1903. The models were built on a scale of one-quarter inch to one foot and the “minutest detail, such as ropes, guns, masts, lanterns, steam winches, anchors and chains, do not deviate from the scale.”¹⁰⁷ They succeeded in glorifying America and United States foreign policy, drawing many in to see the fantastic display. The show consisted of narration of the events of the Spanish American War, while showmen floated

¹⁰⁵ John D. Long, letter to Whiting Allen, February 6, 1902.

¹⁰⁶ Rear Admiral Francis T. Bowles, letter to Barnum & Bailey Circus from Rear Admiral Francis T. Bowles, January 10, 1903.

¹⁰⁷ Jackie MacKay, “‘Remember The Maine’ Spanish American War Centennial Exhibition Now Showing in Lake County, Fla.” *Lake County, Florida*, July 6, 1998.

the ships in ringside tents, fireworks went off overhead and a brass band played “Stars and Stripes Forever.”¹⁰⁸

Within the *Barnum and Bailey Official Program and Book of Wonders Combined* there was a four page excerpt dedicated to warships. There is a section of the article which is spent discussing the history of the real ships that each of the models is based on. At the end of this segment there is also a table detailing the measurements of the actual ships and the cost to build them. Placing this information into the program would have worked to further bolster pride in the United States Navy.

Explaining the purpose of the ships within the circus, the article states, “These models were built as an expression of the appreciation of the management of this exhibition of the power and glory of the American navy as so magnificently manifested during the late Spanish-American war.”¹⁰⁹ Here the Barnum and Bailey Show is stating, very clearly, that it is supportive of and grateful for the actions of the United States government overseas. This was a more blatant message of the circus’ backing of U.S. foreign policy than the views that were implied, however strongly, through acts of spectacle.

To encourage even more excitement in the exhibit the program article goes on to declare that the ships, upon which the models are based, and the policy they enforced were responsible for making the image of the United States stronger overseas. The circus claimed to see changes in opinions on America and their spectacle on the Spanish American War while it toured. The article states, “The Barnum & Bailey Show at that time was exhibiting in Europe, and all connected with it – from the highest to the lowest – could observe the marvelous change in the attention of the public to this exhibition from one of mere curiosity to one of the most profound

¹⁰⁸ Rich McKay, “Clermont Museum’s Little Ships Come In,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, July 12, 1998, 8.

¹⁰⁹ “Models of the United States Warships,” *Barnum and Bailey Official Program and Book of Wonders Combined*, (1903) 16.

respect.”¹¹⁰ The circus was claiming that through a combination of United States military action and circus exhibitions, Europeans had come to view Americans with greater deference.

“An American Enterprise,” began with asking a question of whether there was a “patriotic American” whose heart was not “thrilled and whose mind is not filled with pride” when viewing the Barnum and Bailey Circus.¹¹¹ The article presents the circus as a shining example of what it meant to be American, a very different perspective than some opinions of the circus prior to the Civil War. The article declares:

For the five years last past Europe has been staggered by the magnitude and might of things American, as so superbly shown by the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth and the capture of the industrial and commercial markets of the world, even more than by the American victory over Spain.¹¹²

This article was going so far as to say that the circus was garnering more respect for the United States than the government’s military actions. The circus was no longer simply marketing the United States government’s policies to the citizens of the United States, it was also marketing America to the rest of the world. While doing this, it reinforced the sense of national identity that it had fostered earlier. Americans, across the country, could be proud of this “American Enterprise” touring Europe. The article was not subtle in its exaltation of the American circus, declaring:

The European press does not hesitate to give the great American Barnum & Bailey Show full credit for its share in education Europe in the knowledge and appreciation of American size, superiority, magnitude and merit, in addition to these Europe had been born anew in the faith in American fulfillment of promises and business integrity generally.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “An American Enterprise,” 1.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid. 2.

This article conveyed a distinct message to Americans: Europe might have a longer history, but the Barnum and Bailey Circus had proven that superiority and power rested in the hands of the younger nation, the United States.

The popularity of the circus was high and the Barnum and Bailey Show continued to use exhibits to which the audience reacted warmly. The warships were very well received and made it into the 1904 season. Advertisements were very flattering in their descriptions of the exhibit, but not as flattering as the circus programs themselves. In a 1904 program, exhibit was stated as being “easily the most educational, ennobling exhibit in existence.”¹¹⁴ Adults and children flocked to see the ships.

An article in *The Billboard* describes the circuses popularity in 1905. It states, “And the boyish feeling that comes over one at the announcement that the circus is in town was not limited to the small boy, and the common people, for at every state capital visited, the governor of the state with his family and his staff would attend the circus in a body.”¹¹⁵ This quote says a great deal about the changes that had occurred in the circus over the fifteen years prior. It speaks to the approval of politicians, who at one time had been among the largest critics of circus performances. In addition to this, it also shows that by 1905 the circus was being thought of first as a form of entertainment for the young.

Circus proprietors had succeeded in its mission to draw in a more varied audience. Once they had enticed the different groups into the ring, they wanted to keep them there. In an effort to accomplish this, the circus continued to provide a form of education and also a look into the events that were occurring in the world around it. Though potential audience members were reading about the events occurring overseas every day in their newspapers, the spectacles the

¹¹⁴ “All Hail! The Nation’s Hope: Defense and Maintenance,” *Programme of the Performances and Exhibitions of the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth, Madison Square Garden, New York, 1904 Season*.

¹¹⁵ “Beyond the Rockies,” *The Billboard*. San Francisco, September 30, 1905.

circus performed gave them a more intimate, though less realistic, view into American foreign policy.

In 1906, the circus explored nationalistic spectacle that did not involve dramatic battle reenactments. The spectacle of that year was entitled, “Peace, America’s Immortal Triumph,” which dealt with Theodore Roosevelt’s mediation of the Portsmouth Treaty, ending the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.¹¹⁶ Though this event did not have a significant effect on the daily life of the American public, it was yet another example of successful globalism on the part of the United States government. The structure of the spectacle is strikingly blatant in its glorification of America. There were several European countries, represented by floats, which attempted to reconcile the countries, and failed.¹¹⁷ Finally the float embodying the United States arrived in the ring. The float consisted of a enormous female statute named “Peace,” which was followed off the stage, after the solving of the conflict, by the joyous Japanese and Russians.¹¹⁸ Like many of the nationalistic spectacles, this act relied on the basic facts of the event, but portrayed the story in a very liberal manner. It ignored a number of the real consequences of the treaty and instead favored the dramatic, overly-simplified happy ending.

Following its European tour, the Barnum and Bailey Show had a strong return to the United States. Whereas the acts presented in America during the 1890s looked at historical figures, spectacles of the early 1900s venerated American foreign policy. The subject matter of these performances were based on what the country was most interested in during that time period, what the circus felt had the best chance of making a profit. As a result of these choices, the circus placed itself in the position of garnering approval for the policies of the United States government.

¹¹⁶ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 211.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 211.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 211.

The Ringling Brothers



Courtesy of The Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

The Barnum and Bailey Show were not the only circus to present acts of grand spectacle. The Ringling Brothers Circus also provided acts of nationalism for their audience. In 1899, the Ringling Brothers Show presented “Last Days of the Century or The Light of Liberty.” The poster advertising this act shows men on horseback holding various flags, the most prominent being the flag of the United States.¹¹⁹ However, it is not only the men on horseback that glorify the United States. Towards the back center of the poster is a man on a pedestal decorated with the image of the American flag.¹²⁰ The artwork of the poster implies that America is the country that is going to lead the world into the new century. Americans are going to shine the light of liberty in all the dark, uncivilized corners of the earth. This act is one of the most obvious in its glorification of America.

¹¹⁹ *Last Days of the Century or The Light of Liberty*, poster presented during the 1899 season by the Ringling Bros. World’s Greatest Show.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

The Ringling Brothers Show is tied to the Barnum and Bailey Circus because the two circuses ultimately merged, though not before fostering some competition. James Bailey and the Ringling Brothers began fighting each other for territory in the late nineteenth century. An article in a state journal states that “James A. Bailey is determined to drive the Ringling Brothers out of this territory by making it so unprofitable for them that they cannot afford to come here.”¹²¹ However, even with this competition, the two large circuses still tried for a compromise. It was decided that the Ringlings and Barnum and Bailey would split the United States. The Barnum and Bailey Show would cover from New York to Chicago, while the Ringlings would take everything to the west of Chicago.¹²² This was not before the Barnum and Bailey Show had gained some fans in the West.

For the first time, in 1905, the Barnum and Bailey Circus traveled west of Denver.¹²³ Their reputation preceded them and in many of the towns they visited there were large crowds waiting. Interestingly, Native Americans were also enthralled by the productions. In an article in *The Billboard*, it reads, “whenever it came near an Indian reservation, nearly all the chiefs would pack their families on horseback and set out for the circus, being the first ones on hand in the morning...and never failing to be the last ones off the lot at night.”¹²⁴ This is yet another example of the circus drawing together the diverse cultures of the United States. Americans, regardless of their backgrounds, found something in the circus to which they could relate.

James Bailey died in 1906 and in the year following the Ringling Brothers purchased the Barnum and Bailey Show.¹²⁵ Through this purchase the Ringling Brothers gained more than the Barnum and Bailey Show. At this point, James Bailey also owned the Forepaugh circus and

¹²¹ “Fighting Ringlings,” *State Journal*, (1896), 1.

¹²² Brooke, “Step Right Up!,” <http://www.history-magazine.com/circuses.html>.

¹²³ “Beyond the Rockies,” *The Billboard*. 1905.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*.

¹²⁵ Parkinson, “The Barnum & Bailey Circus,” 3.

controlled the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show.¹²⁶ The Ringling Brothers were now in control of one of the largest entertainment empires in the country.

The shows were not combined at this time, but both continued to run. Nationalistic spectacle continued to be performed, but it was not quite the same as it had been. There were no longer as many examples of historically nationalistic tales being told under the big top. This did not mean, however, that the circus was no longer elevating the United States. This was done, not only by extolling American characters, but also presenting other ethnicities as oddities. On April 8, 1911, William Inglis wrote in *Harper's Weekly*, "Here they come, filing into the arena, all aglitter, filling every inch of promenade and even the wide rings. See them – Egyptians, Philistines, Phunicians, Sabaenians, Africans, Arabians, Abyssinians and others."¹²⁷ This simple statement describing a parade of people speaks to the idea that the circus presented these nationalities and races as curiosities. Objectifying these individuals further strengthened the image of white American superiority.

Inglis also discussed how through the circus, Barnum and Bailey themselves lived on. He states:

What a vital thing it is, what an essential part of us! Barnum is dead and Bailey had long gone to his rest – yet the portraits of Barnum and Bailey, plump-cheeked and bright-eyed, smile at us from the programme cover. It is the circus that lives – that makes them survive among us, though their earthly bodies have long ago mouldered.¹²⁸

Barnum and Bailey not only succeeded in bringing history to life under the big top, but they also ensured their own immortality. They had built what was becoming one of the longest standing entertainment enterprises in America. It was a testament to the respect that their names garnered that the Ringling Brothers never did away with them.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ "Fighting Ringlings," 1.

¹²⁷ William Inglis, "Here's the Circus!," *Harper's Weekly*, 1911, 11a.

¹²⁸ Inglis, "Here's the Circus!," 11a.

¹²⁹ Parkinson, "The Barnum & Bailey Circus," 3.

The Ringling Brothers kept the two shows running as separate entities for nearly twelve years. However, the First World War had a great impact on the circus. In 1918, wartime conditions put a heavy burden on the circus, with labor shortages, rail traffic jams and taxes.¹³⁰ It was at this point that the Ringling Brothers combined the two shows, but they still kept the Barnum and Bailey name. In 1919, the largest traveling amusement enterprise was introduced to the United States, the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, The Greatest Show on Earth.¹³¹

Conclusion

The circus transformed itself at the turn of the twentieth century. At the end of the 1880s, the American public would not have considered taking their children to a circus performance. It was low culture, immoral and dangerous. By end of the 1890s, groups of children were attending circus shows and by 1920, the circus had become a form of entertainment that was primarily meant for families. Since that time the circus has continued to be seen as a show that is geared towards families with young children. It is easy to forget that, at one time, the audience of circus shows predominantly consisted of adult males. The way that modern society views the circus in terms of who makes an appropriate audience member is completely shaped by the changes that occurred in the circus at the turn of the twentieth century. However, despite this change in audience, after the turn of the twentieth century, circus performances were not significantly different from those of the early nineteenth century. The largest distinction being that now the shows were more focused towards children.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Circus performances at the turn of the twentieth century gave the audience something that they had not received from circuses earlier in the decade, a sense of national pride and a piece of common ground on which to relate to the other citizens of the country. This was not done accidentally, nor was it necessarily done for the benefit of the country. It was a shrewd business move which allowed the circus to move away from years of criticism and into its golden age.

According to Warren I. Susman in *Culture as History*, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "leading figures dealt directly with the tensions created between history as myth and history as ideology in a brilliant effort to make a new civilization and to make it more in directions established by a new historical view."¹³² This attitude over the importance of history in creating a new society was reflected within the circus. Historical spectacle gave history a grander appearance, complete with almost mythic characters. The events portrayed in the acts were based on fact, but were made more dramatic for the audience's enjoyment. The circus made an attempt to follow the facts of the events. However, they were not above embellishing to further their message. Within nationalistic spectacle, the circus used historical events to promote American ideologies, in an attempt to glorify American imperialism and to gain support for expansionism.

Circus spectacles as seen at the turn of the twentieth century began to peter out shortly before 1920, after the Ringling Bros. combined the shows. While acts of spectacle continue to exist, they never again reached the grandeur that they had during those three decades. Also, the subject matter changed, moving from tales of nationalism to fairy tales.¹³³ This departure from nationalistic spectacle could possibly be explained by the circus' hesitance to focus on topics surrounding World War I. Due to continuing anti-German sentiments and the bloodshed that had

¹³² Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 22.

¹³³ Smith, "Spec-ology of the Circus," 51.

occurred, battles from the war were not recreated.¹³⁴ It was not a popular war in the manner that the Spanish-American War and the Indian Wars had been.

The threat that had been posed during World War I had not disappeared with the end of the conflict and the United States began to move towards a time of isolationism. Spectacles dealing with American expansionism would not have been received with the same open arms as they once had been. The creation of the League of Nations also was not chronicled, unlike the Portsmouth Treaty, due to President Wilson's inability to obtain Senate ratification for United States membership.¹³⁵ It was during this controversial time that the age of grand nationalistic spectacles came to an end. The circus once again changed its main themes to ensure its survival. However, despite these changes in subject matter, the impact of the circus during this time period was not forgotten.

The circus introduced the nation to a form of entertainment to which they had never been exposed before. The pace at which it moved, the constant action, and the fact that there was too much going on for the audience to take in at once, changed the way that American society looked at entertainment. The audience no longer expected to interact with the performers, but was looking to be overwhelmingly entertained. It had prepared the nation for what was to come, "the ascendancy of disembodied modern media technologies: Hollywood movies, radio, television, and the internet."¹³⁶ These new technologies built upon the countries new attention span, giving them the same constant entertainment which Americans ultimately could enjoy without leaving their homes. While the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus continues to find success, businesses no longer shut down when it comes into town. It is now a form of entertainment that

¹³⁴ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 225.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 225

¹³⁶ Ibid. 228.

parents take their children to, but is no longer the focus of American popular culture as it once was.

Despite the change in the status in recent years, the impact of the circus on American society at the turn of the twentieth century should not be underestimated. As one of the first forms of mass entertainment, the circus gained respectability by bringing people together under one tent and given them common ground. People across the country could discuss the show they had seen with each other and marvel that it was the same one. Parents could bring their children with the promise that they would emerge more educated. White Americans and Americans of other ethnicities could see, even if only for the length of the show, that they had more in common than they thought. In a time when cities were growing, the population was spreading west, and the government was stretching its imperialistic wings, the circus provided a link between diverse populations. While it can not be said that the circus led to a greater understanding of the variety of cultures within the country, it did provide a stronger definition of what it meant to be American.

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