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Pascal Jacob, *The Circus: A Visual History*. Preface by Marius Kwint. Translated by Augusta Dörr. London and New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018. 240 pp. Illustrations, glossary, and select bibliography. \$40.00 (hb). ISBN 9781350043107.

Review by Kimberly Musial Datchuk, University of Iowa.

Pascal Jacob undertakes the ambitious task of detailing the history of the circus from antiquity to the present in *The Circus: A Visual History*. Using poster advertisements, manuscript pages, and paintings to tell the story, he ties the circus's development from prehistoric hunters' ritual dances to today's modern spectacle. The richly illustrated volume reveals a new picture with every turn of the page, and as such has appeal for both general audiences and scholars. Many of the artworks date from the nineteenth century, but some are from as early as the thirteenth century. Jacob's precise language gives his writing a specificity that manages not to get lost in the details (he even includes a glossary for those unfamiliar with circus vocabulary). He credits his readers with intelligence without abandoning them to jargon or unnecessary flourishes in his prose. Situating the various early iterations of the circus in historical moments, he relates changes in the circus to developments in trade, social concerns, and the never-ending quest for order and power. However informative the socio-political context is to understanding the circus's transformation, the unfortunate absence of footnotes and presence of only a brief bibliography limit the text's usefulness to scholars.

In 240 pages, Jacob presents a logical and clear narrative of the circus. The breadth of topics covered in these relatively few pages means that he frequently moves from one time and location to another, a maneuver he nimbly performs. Because he does not have the space to analyze subjects deeply, one finds oneself with a basic understanding of the key historical conditions that shaped the circus's development and the major players as they formed a more or less teleological progression from the Ancient Roman circus to that of today. Jacob would surely acknowledge that the events and people that molded the circus into its current state did not move in unison toward a singular goal, although one would find it difficult to articulate the circus's more complicated history from this text alone. However, such a detailed history is not the purpose of this book. Indeed, the text can seem secondary to the beautiful illustrations (and the book is subtitled "A Visual History").

Although Jacob ostensibly wrote a complete history of the circus throughout the world from antiquity to the present, he emphasizes Western European and American circus traditions and skews toward the eighteenth century onward. Jacob does not avoid Eastern Europe and Asia entirely—he explains the Indian origins of the Romani and Gypsies in chapter one and devotes

sections of the last chapter to the former Soviet Union and China—but he does not give them equal treatment. In such a book, one must make choices to focus on certain aspects of the circus's history over others; and undoubtedly, the holdings of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which houses most of the artworks reproduced, contributed to Jacob's decisions.

In the introduction, Jacob suggests the circus is an innately human entertainment. He views it as a microcosm of the human experience, "a metaphor for the world" with its richness, risk, conviviality, pleasure, and danger (p. 13). At moments like these, Jacob's passion for the circus shines, although it may blind him to the particularity of his passion, causing him to overstate the impact of the circus on the casual circus-goer or reader.

In each chapter, Jacob covers significant ground, but none so much as in the first chapter. Spanning antiquity to 1770, he begins with the origins of the circus in Ancient Rome where rulers capitalized on the popular entertainment to build support for themselves in often brutal and bloody public sport. Although the Roman performances occurred regularly and in the same place, most of the circus's history involves travel. Trade routes, especially the Silk Road, allowed performers to move to new venues and exchange ideas. Early notable itinerant performers include those from Turkey, who blended animal handling with healing and fortune telling, and a group from the lowest caste in northern India, many of whom escaped persecution in their country (around 1000 CE) by performing throughout Europe and Asia. The latter group, who became known as Gypsies or Romani, met renown and fear for their acrobatic skills and ability to train animals. From the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century, touring circuses found enthusiastic patrons at fairs and markets, but concern for fairs' potential to fuel discontent and revolt led to their downfall in the eighteenth century.

Chapter two, "1770-1880: Impact and Domination," finds Jacob examining how circuses shifted from making do with the space allocated to them to constructing their own spaces. It was at this time that Philip Astley introduced the most recognizable feature of the modern circus: the ring. Astley, an accomplished equestrian with business acumen, developed the standard width of the ring (forty-two feet), erected a wooden amphitheater around it, and charged admission. He not only built amphitheaters in England, but also established the first permanent circus structure in Paris, the Amphithéâtre Anglois in 1782 on rue du Faubourg-du-Temple. These buildings made traveling and set up easier for circus troupes. The troupes often centered on a family. Family dynasties had always been a part of circus life, but Jacob notes they gained new importance in the circus world during this period: they had the concentrated knowledge, authority, and wealth to erect permanent performance structures in major cities. Even though equestrian acts drew audiences to the circus, troupes expanded their offerings to include acrobats, tightrope walkers, and clowns. A variety of entertainers gave troupes flexibility, as did the actors and musicians who amused the crowd between routines. Throughout the nineteenth century, performances grew more elaborate, from pantomimes to historical dramas to aquatic acts. Acrobats, trapeze artists, and clowns—especially white face and auguste clown duos like Footit and Chocolat—also increased in popularity.

From 1880 to 1930, the circus underwent major changes to its acts and space. When lawmakers in France altered a statute regulating who could speak during performances, ringmasters grew in importance. They introduced performers, entertained audiences, and unified the presentation. By the time ringmasters found the spotlight, equestrians had begun to fade into the background. Lions, tigers, bears, and elephants became the most popular

attractions. The modifications left many troupes yearning for more: new locations, bigger audiences, and death-defying stunts. Therefore, the circus returned to its itinerant roots. The big top, which Joshua Purdy Brown introduced in 1825, became a mainstay in traveling circuses. Jacob criticizes the grueling travel schedule and blames it for disrupting performers' ability to refine their acts and innovate during this era. He frames the move from permanent buildings to big tops as "an abrupt shift, from integration to intrusion" on communities (p. 154). Railroads allowed American circuses such as P.T. Barnum's Great Travelling World's Fair to cover large distances and increase their influence. When Barnum merged his circus with rival James Anthony Bailey's circus, he expanded to three rings. Barnum and Bailey's European tour at the end of the nineteenth century left European circuses scrambling to compete. When it joined with Ringling Brothers in 1906, it became a behemoth in the circus world.

For anyone under the impression that the circus has not changed much from the early twentieth century, Jacob provides evidence from across the world of its dramatic transformations from 1930 to 2015. In the U.S., the Great Depression hobbled Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, not least due to the expensive acquisition of the American Circus Company in 1929. Through cost-cutting measures scaling back performances and travel, it managed to remain a family company until 1967. As the American circus suffered, Soviet and Chinese circuses experienced a revival. The Soviet circus nationalized in 1919. By 1937, the Soviet Union had nearly one hundred circuses throughout the country, and within twenty years, Soviet troupes toured Europe. By nationalizing the circus and investing in performance spaces and living quarters for human and animal performers, the Soviet Union created stability that fostered creativity. Likewise, the Chinese government invested in the circus and embraced its political possibilities. Although the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties cast suspicion on acrobats, the Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai saw their potential after he invited acrobats to Beijing in 1950. The Soviet and Chinese governments' investment in the circus led to worldwide acclaim for their performers and served as a powerful propaganda tool. However, when the Soviet Union collapsed, funding for the circus disappeared. Performers dispersed throughout the West. Rather than presenting a variety of acts, they tended to focus on the troupe's strength (acrobatics, for example) and formed the rest of the show around it: dancing, music, lighting, and sets. In this way, troupes emerging from the former Soviet Union prefigured the new circus format that would take hold in Europe and North America.

The final chapter examines the downfall of the big top circus in the U.S. and the rise of new spectacular circuses, including Cirque du Soleil and Circus Oz. Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey never recovered from the Great Depression, and by the 1950s labor disputes and increasing costs made its touring schedule untenable. After its last big top show in Pittsburgh on July 16, 1956 (which concluded with a recorded rendition of "Auld Lang Syne," the orchestra having already been cut), the troupe slashed its production, eliminating its big top, menagerie, and curiosities. John Ringling North maintained control of the company until 1967 when he sold it to a group of businessmen led by Irwin Feld with fitting flourish—they signed the contract in the Roman Colosseum with a lion cub as witness. As the American big top tradition faded, circuses returned to what first attracted modern audiences: the thrill of stepping into another world. Circuses like Circus Roncalli used nostalgic sights, smells, sounds, and tastes to immerse audiences in the circus experience. Others carved unique identities for themselves. Big Apple Circus, for example, focused on public programming and outreach through efforts like the Clown Care Unit, education programs, and assistive programming for

those with visual impairments to enjoy the performances; Circus Oz in Australia embraced the rebellious spirit of rock 'n' roll, pushing the circus arts to new death-defying heights in a raucous atmosphere. As more focused strands of the circus emerged, training and performing achieved greater inclusivity and acclaim in Europe. Two new circus schools opened in Europe in 1974 and welcomed all. That same year, peers lauded their most talented colleagues at the inaugural Monte Carlo International Circus Festival. With all the challenges and changes in the twentieth century, the circus has reinvented itself. As Jacob notes, the “extraordinary richness of the ‘circus arts’” gives the circus its strength and resilience (p. 228).

Throughout the book, Jacob includes many one-page synopses of families and individuals who contributed to the business or art of the circus. He highlights the Franconi Dynasty, Pauline Cuzent, Jules Léotard, Footit and Chocolat, Hans Stosch Sarrasani, Claire Héliot, Phineas Taylor Barnum, Roger Lanzac, Margarita Nazarova, Karandash, Xia Ju Hua, John Ringling North, and Annie Fratellini. The sections, visually set off from the rest of the chapter with a different color, occur at random intervals and include up to three pages of illustrations. The sporadic placement, often in the middle of a chapter's subsection, can disrupt the text's flow, but the feature offers the reader greater insight into the people who shaped the circus. The acclaim they received and struggles they faced (physical and financial) in their declining years humanize the narrative.

Lastly, I would be remiss not to mention the physical book itself. Although the content of *The Circus: A Visual History* is separate from its cover and binding, these physical aspects are part of the overall experience of the book. A book's physicality is especially important for books such as this one in which illustrations play a crucial role in its consumption. During the two months I have had the book, I have set it on my desk, stacked it with other books, put it in my bag, and read it—typical activities. Yet, the spine has almost completely detached from the back cover, and it is starting to break free from the front cover. Thankfully, the interior binding appears intact, but it is a shame that the exterior has not held up to routine use.

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