Teachers’ resource: Circus

V&A
I ran away to the circus in the 1970s when I first became ‘Zippo the Clown’. At that time I had no knowledge of the fabulous history behind the circus, or Philip Astley, let alone that he invented the modern circus and its magical 13m diameter circus ring 250 years ago. I became a clown because I loved entertaining. Circus embodies the idea of entertainment and fun just for the sake of it. There may be a story (narrative) but there often isn’t, circus is about the sheer joy of the wonderful clowns and athletes who perform for us, and the fantastic publicity stories (some of them even true …) that set the circus out as a very special place.

Circus artistes are not there for a job, it’s their way of life. Even if, like me, you are a ‘Josser’ (circus slang for someone who ran away to the circus), the circus is one big travelling family with constant new and old friendships made and re-made at the beginning and end of every season as artistes meet, re-meet and part from friendships made in the circus ring.

For every circus artiste ‘the show must go on’. All circus artistes just want to make every show the best it can possibly be. They are travellers, often through the night. Imagine an empty park near you and one morning you wake up to see a circus tent (Big Top) there. And then a week later it disappears in the night and all that is left is a magical ‘fairy ring’ where the 13m circus ring once stood. So I still wake up every morning excited and happy to be part of the circus, in whatever form it takes.

I am delighted that the V&A is celebrating this important birthday with a Learning Pack for a new generation of circus goers who are still able to visit a circus and enjoy lasting family memories. Happy Birthday to the CIRCUS!

Martin ‘Zippo’ Burton, Founder of Zippos Circus and Cirque Berserk.
February 2018.

With thanks to Sue Mayne, Alexandra Primary School, for suggestions and comments.
Modern circus owes its existence to Philip Astley who, in 1768, first roped off a circle and displayed his skills of horsemanship. A highly gifted and resourceful horseman and entrepreneur, he was able to establish a successful art form in a relatively short period of time; one that would soon sweep the country and then the world.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen! Boys and girls! Roll-up, roll-up and witness the most astounding, the most incredible, barely believable beginnings of… The Circus…’

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY:

As pupils enter the room, to set the mood, play ‘traditional’ circus music.

- Accompany this with images on the interactive white board of circus from this section of the resource and other modern images from the pack. (Alternatively, pre-prepare paper copies for small groups to look at).
- Teacher welcomes the group (in-role as circus master/mistress to add extra drama) and invites them to guess what today’s lesson is about.
- A key question to explore with the group is – do they think the ‘old’ pictures they’ve just seen, are the same thing as the ‘new’ pictures?
- Take a show of hands for a quick vote, ‘yes’ or ‘no’? Discuss reasons.
- ‘Yes, they are both the same thing, and how we got from one to the other, is what we’ll be exploring today/this week/half-term’.

PHILIP ASTLEY AND THE BIRTH OF CIRCUS

Teachers’ Summary

Modern circus owes its existence to Philip Astley who, in 1768, first roped off a circle and displayed his skills of horsemanship. A highly gifted and resourceful horseman and entrepreneur, he was able to establish a successful art form in a relatively short period of time; one that would soon sweep the country and then the world.

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(Quick check) Has anyone been to/seen a circus? What did you see? Did you like it?

- We need to go back in time to see where circus began, but before we do this:
  - Ask small groups to list various types of things we could gather and use as evidence, if we wanted to find out what things were like in the past. ‘What could we use today to find out about now?’ – (Brainstorm/record.) We could start with text messages, Instagram, Facebook posts, blogs, photographs, sound recordings etc. How trustworthy do we think these are? (Is a ‘selfie’ always an accurate picture of what was going on when the photo was taken?).
  - What do you think we’ll have for the early years of circus? (What might we not have? Record suggestions).
  - ‘Well, we need to go back in time to a very special date in circus history…”

Show/refer to the image of Philip Astley.

Philip Astley leaves home aged just 17, joins the 15th Regiment of Light Dragoons (a cavalry regiment mounted on fast horses) and takes part in the Seven Years’ War in Germany (1759–63).

An excellent horseman, he becomes a corporal and trains with rider, fencing master and swordsman Dominico Angelo (who describes Astley’s skills as ‘astonishing’).

Astley impresses his peers in battle at Emsdorf in Germany. He becomes a sergeant-major in 1763, marries the horsewoman Patty Jones in July 1765, and at his request, leaves the army in 1766, with the present of his white horse named Gibraltar. Astley is just 24 years old.

In April 1768 on a plot of wasteland in Lambeth, South London, known as Halfpenny Hatch, I first roped off a makeshift ring and opened my own outdoor riding school and exhibition of horsemanship.

Shows were so popular I opened my first Amphitheatre Riding House in 1770, at the southern end of Westminster Bridge.

For extra income I stabled and trained horses. Adding covered seating for spectators in 1775, and a ring measuring 42 feet in diameter, Astley’s became the first purpose-built establishment for the exhibition of horsemanship.

I added a Merryman, or clown, and fairground entertainers including acrobats and rope dancers, and...

Modern circus was born! (Though I never called it that!)

Activity for English at Key Stage 2:

Look at the images in this section. Imagine you are present at one of those early circus performances. Nothing quite like it has ever been seen before. Write a letter to a friend describing your experience. What things seem new to you? What noises do you hear, what can you smell, how do you feel when watching the show, are you scared, excited?

English statutory requirements for Key Stage 2: Pupils should be taught to: (write) narratives, considering how authors have developed characters.
This page, top:


Next page:

The latter years of the 18th century saw circus begin to establish itself around the UK and then Europe. Astley was instrumental in developing new acts and pioneering new technology. Others were quick to exploit the popularity and success of this new art form.

Astley took his company to Ireland for six months, opening in Dublin in December 1773. Like celebrity magazines today, newspapers tracked Astley’s trips around the country:

- In December 1774 he visited Edinburgh.
- In October 1776, Norwich: ‘if the weather permits’.
- In December 1776, Birmingham.
- In January 1777, in Derby, where he exhibited his ‘celebrated Automaton Figures’ including those of ‘the Grand Sultan and Sultana’.

EUROPE:
From 1772 Astley and his group of performers regularly travelled to Paris, where he first performed in an open-air riding school.

His trips to Paris were ended by war but he opened two theatres in two years:

- In July 1782 the Manège Anglais.
- And in October 1783 an imposing roofed circular amphitheatre, Amphitheatre Astley, under the patronage of Marie Antoinette.

IRELAND:
- In 1788 he received a full dramatic patent licence for a theatre in Ireland.

LONDON:
- In 1789 he built his Royal Amphitheatre in Dublin’s Peter Street, where he tried out productions for London, and where from 1790 he rented the grand Molyneux House.

Activities for History at Key Stage 2:
- Print out and divide the information above into separate bullet-points, mix them up then ask pairs to put them in the correct year order. Do you notice anything about how close the years are together? What might this tell us about the speed of circus’ development?

- Ask small groups to think about the idea that, in Astley’s time everyone had some experience of working with horses. List all the forms of transport you can think of today.

- In the UK, how popular are horses today?

- What about in other countries?

- What other forms of transport, which might be rare today, could Philip Astley have been able to use in the 1760s?

- Why do you think good transport links were useful for circus to grow?

Programmes of Study Link: Pupils should ‘understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, similarity, difference and significance... and use them to make judgements...’
CIRCUS INNOVATIONS

Teachers’ Summary

The key ingredients of circus that we tend to think of today as its bedrock actually developed over time. Philip Astley was involved in initiating several of them, including developing the role of ringmaster, establishing the standard size of the ring and parading before the show to excite interest in an audience. Other artists took up the tenting and parade aspects of circus which were crucial to its popularity.

HORSES:
• Circus with horses or ‘hippodrama’ were very popular in Astley’s circus.
• In the early 19th century, the circus became more spectacular and ambitious.
• Like living-newspapers, circus recreated real-life battles, with horses trained to work with the sound of gunfire and fireworks.

THE TENT:
• Most people think of traditional circus today with performances in tents, but the British equestrian Thomas Taplin Cooke brought the first American circus tent to Britain in 1838.
• The invention of the circus tent made travelling circus far easier.
• Philip Astley performed in a structure called The Royal Tent at Liverpool as early as 1788 but auctioned off the materials at the end of the season. He then performed on subsequent visits to Liverpool at the Theatre Royal.

THE PARADE:
• The circus parade is associated with American circus, but Philip Astley laid the foundations for that too: Astley travelled through towns before the circus was due to perform, often wearing military uniform to announce impending performances.

Activities for History for Key Stage 2:
• Discussion Point – Have the pupils experienced similar things today or these elements seem part of our past? E.g. do we see many horses on our streets? Do we still have parades today? What might these changes say about the popularity and influence of circus?
• Ask small groups to find old pictures online of their own city/town or villages from the 19th century. What differences and similarities can they see between then and now? Why might circus parades have been so attractive to people who lived at this time?

Programmes of Study Link: Pupils should understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, similarity, difference and significance... and use them to make judgements...
Activity for Design and Technology for Key Stage 2:

• Looking at the poster of Hughes’ Great Mammoth Establishment 1847, and the photograph of Sanger’s Circus design a modern-looking parade wagon that could be used by a travelling circus today.

Subject content link: Design: Use research and develop criteria to inform design of innovative, functional, appealing products that are fit for purpose, aimed at particular individuals or groups.

• Discussion Point: How many of the posters contain animal acts? Are there reasons we might not be comfortable watching these acts today? What might this say about our changing views of animals’ rights?

Next page, clockwise from left:

1. Isaac van Amburgh (1808-1865) after Edwin Landseer (1802-73) in a cage with lions, tigers and leopards, about 1847. Coloured print. S.1402-2010.


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CIRCUS' POPULARITY SPREADS

Teachers' Summary

In many ways, the 19th century was the century of circus. Its story echoes the way the internet today develops in response to advances in technology and audience demands. Just as early silent cinema was able to appeal to all audiences, circus was incredibly popular with the working-class poor and royalty alike.

‘Make way, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, for the astounding years of the 19th century! Where circus achieves international stardom and fame!’

Just as cinema and television did in the 20th century, circus spread around the country:

- 1787: Tom Swann opened Swann’s Amphitheatre in Birmingham’s Livery Street.
- 1788: Jones and Parker’s Circus opened in Edinburgh.
- 1790: Thomas Tinkler opened the Christian Street Circus in Liverpool.
- 1792: Benjamin Handy adapted a Riding School as a circus in Limekiln Lane, Bristol.
- 1793: The New Circus opened in Chatham Street, Manchester.

These are just some of the earliest of the hundreds of circuses that sprung up around the country at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century.

CIRCUS CONQUERS THE WORLD!

- The Circus Cinicelli, Russia’s first brick-built circus, was built in 1877 and still stands today.
- America and Canada:
  - John Bill Ricketts, born in Bilston, near Wolverhampton, took the circus to America.
  - He opened a riding school in Philadelphia in October 1792.
  - He opened another amphitheatre in New York in 1795 and built the first circus in Canada, Rickett’s New Amphitheatre, in 1797.
- Australia:
  - Individual acts appeared in New South Wales from the 1830s.
  - Another British settler, Robert Radford, opened Robert Radford’s Royal Amphitheatre in Tasmania in 1847, based on those built in Britain.
- China:
  - Circus reached China in 1854 with the French equestrian Louis Soullier, who managed a circus in Vienna.
  - Returning to Europe in 1866, he bought Chinese performers with him. They introduced Chinese acts to Eastern audiences, including perch-pole balancing, diabolo-juggling, plate-spinning and hoop-diving.

Activities for History for Key Stage 2:

- To begin a class timeline, divide the group so that small groups can find out three further facts about each country.
mentioned (Russia, America, Canada, Australia and China) during the years listed. e.g. Moscow in 1830. What was also happening in the UK at the time? Do all countries have kings or queens as heads of state, for example?

Programme of Study Link: (Pupils should) regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance.
Teachers’ Summary

The story of 20th century circus is one of adaptation in response to changes in audiences’ taste and developments in technology, such as the growth of television. Circus could not avoid the impact of two world wars: the decades leading up to the end of the 1960s saw something of a decline in traditional touring circuses (although 1950s circus offered Britain a welcome change of mood from war and austerity). From the 1970s through to the end of the century, circus reinvented itself for a modern audience.

‘And so we say 'Welcome to the twentieth century!' The future of circus worldwide seemed assured. Tenting circus was represented around the globe: in America Barnum and Bailey’s Circus undertook a mammoth tour in the UK and Europe from 1897 until 1902.’

• Circus opened up around the country and abroad until the First World War.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR:

• At first the British Government considered the entertainment industry a boost to national morale, but many performers volunteered for military service.

• Thousands of men were conscripted (you will need to explain this word) after January 1916. Many never returned.

• Horses and even elephants were used for war work, and after May 1916 the newly-imposed Entertainment Tax meant that circus owners lost much of their ticket money to the War Effort.

• Government regulations on the size of posters reduced the effectiveness of publicity; foreign circus workers were imprisoned, and Sanger’s circus in Glasgow was taken over for war work.

AFTER THE WAR: RECOVERY:

• Example name: Bertram Mills.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE 1950s:

• Example names: Tommy and Bobby Roberts, Chipperfield’s Circus, Billy Smart.

THE 1960s: TELEVISION:

• Although people feared the advent of television as a threat to live entertainment, it proved an ideal medium for circus, screened as early as 1937.

• The BBC first televised Billy Smart’s Circus in 1947.

• It opened its first night of colour television in December 1967 with Billy Smart’s Christmas Spectacular, specially made for broadcast.

• It was shown annually by ITV until 1979 and the BBC until 1982.

THE 1970s AND 1980s:

• Example names: Chipperfield’s Circus, Gerry Cottle’s Circus, Cirque Imaginaire, Circus Oz, Archaos, Cirque du Soleil, NoFitState Circus, Zippos.

• Some local councils in Great Britain voted in the early 1980s against allowing circuses with performing animals on their land.

• Other circus owners continued with animals, visiting areas without a ban, while still others looked for ways to reinvent circus.
The 1990s:
- Example names:

- By the end of the 20th century, circus was alive and well in a host of diverse forms, with well-established circus schools teaching the skills once handed down the generations in circus families.

Activities for History Key Stage 2:
- Give groups of 4 to 5 pupils copies of the posters/pictures in this section of the resource and ask them to organise them in the order they think they were first produced.
- Discuss what has helped them make their decision. You might mention type style, and colours.
- Visit the website of modern circuses like Cirque de Soleil: cirquedusoleil.com and look at their posters. What are the differences and similarities between these posters and the ones in this section? What might this tell us about how circus has changed?
- Discussion Point: Why do you think television was thought of as a threat to circus?
- Extension Activity: Find out more about the key names that were mentioned in this section. Did they develop new acts for the circus or were they popular for a particular style of circus?

Programme of Study Link: To explore ‘changes in aspects of leisure and entertainment in the 20th century.’

Next page, from top left:


Teachers’ Summary

Circus in the 21st century defies easy categorisation. Should we wish to experience circus today, we have the choice of big shows, with big ambitions and big budgets (and often big ticket prices to match.) Or we can see something of a return to the spirit of Astley’s circus with locally-focused family-friendly circuses that even feature horses, as they did in Astley’s day. Like other performance disciplines, it has diversified into areas of learning and social inclusion, where circus skills are used to foster and improve group cohesion and dynamics and self-confidence. It has travelled a very long way, literally and metaphorically, since 1768.

‘And so, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to circus in the 21st century! It’s more diverse than ever, and adapts to survive.’

• Example names (UK):
  • Giffords Circus, the Gandey Organisation, Nikki and Robert (Bob) Fossett, NoFit State Circus, Zippos Circus, Blackpool Tower circus, Great Yarmouth Hippodrome.

• Example names (outside UK):
  • Cirque du Soleil, Cirque D’Hiver in Paris, Nikulin Circus in Moscow, Riga Circus in Latvia, Monaco’s International Circus Festival, Circus Knie in Switzerland, Circus Krone in Germany, The Moscow State Circus, Chinese State Circus, Circus Oz, Netherlands State Circus.

DIVERSITY OF CIRCUS:

• Circus skills are increasingly valued for educational purposes, for confidence-building, mobility and dexterity.

• Circus250 is formed to commemorate the anniversary of circus and to work throughout the country to support their work, to develop new audiences, and make circus in 2018 in all its forms more accessible and popular.

Activities for History Key Stage 2:  

• Look at the pictures in this section and also give small groups a selection of five to six posters from circuses today (or have a list of links to websites.) Ask the groups to summarise the acts they include. For each circus, thinking about and linking to other things they have learned, which ones would they describe as ‘contemporary’ (define) or ‘historical’ (define)?

• Do some circuses fall into both categories? If so, what might this indicate about circus today?

• If you could name your own circus company today, what would you call it and why? What acts would you include and leave out?

• From what you have discovered about circus, think how one might look in 50 years’ time. Which acts may have changed, and how, and which may have stayed very similar? Will Artificial Intelligence be a part of future circus, for example?

• If you are able to visit a circus venue near to where you live, go along to a show and see if you can work out which of the acts have direct links to the past.

Programmes of Study Link: Pupils should ‘understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, similarity, difference and significance... and use them to make judgements...’


Costume has always been an important part of the visual appeal of circus and a key aspect of its deserved reputation for spectacle. The making of costumes encouraged and supported jobs around the country from tailoring to boot-making. Costume designers were quick to seize on the possibilities offered by the invention of new materials such as Lycra and Velcro.

**The Ringmaster:**
- As a retired army sergeant-major, Philip Astley appreciated the impressive appearance of a military uniform. He wore it on horseback to advertise shows.
- The first ringmaster to wear the huntsman’s ‘pink’ tailcoat, top hat, white shirt and gloves was the elephant trainer and ringmaster George Claude Lockhart in 1914. This ringmaster outfit became a trademark of circus.
- The great American ringmaster Jonathan Lee Iverson of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus wore dazzling, colourful, gem-encrusted tailcoats and waistcoats. Their cut and style drew inspiration from Lockhart’s.
- Norman Barrett, ringmaster at Zippos Circus today, wears a more traditional version of the outfit that has been adapted by ringmistresses including Yasmine Smart and Nell Gifford, and by pop stars including Taylor Swift and Britney Spears.

**Costumes for horses!**
The earliest circus acts in Astley’s amphitheatre were with horses. Male and female riders performed on horses cantering around the ring, wearing costumes inspired by the rudimentary stories their acts portrayed.

**The Aerialists:**
- The French performer Jules Léotard, who invented the flying trapeze act at the Cirque Napoléon in Paris in 1859 and brought it to London’s Alhambra in 1861, realised the importance of a comfortable, fitted costume for mobility.
- His skin-tight one-piece costume was adopted by future aerialists.

**The Acrobats:**
Costumes for today’s acrobats and aerial performers are made from a wealth of new washable, durable and flexible fabrics, especially Lycra. Invented in 1959 by the American chemist Joseph Shivers who originally called it ‘spandex’ (an anagram of the word ‘expands’). It was given the brand name Lycra by scientists at the Du Pont and US Rubber Company who started its full-scale manufacture in 1962.
- Many contemporary acrobats have their own costumes, while others wear costumes designed by the circuses in which they are performing.
- Press studs, or snap fasteners would have been used in costume after 1885 when the German Heribert Bauer invented ‘snap fastenings’ for men’s trousers.
- Another useful aid to quick-change for circus costume today is Velcro, the hook and loop fastening patented in 1955 by the Swiss engineer George de Mestral and named by combining the French words velours (velvet) and crochet (hook).

**The Clowns:**
- The clown is one type of performer most readily associated with circus, and was one of the earliest characters that Philip Astley added to his shows.
Philip Astley’s Mr. Merryman’ was there to annoy the ringmaster, obstruct the performers, banter with the ringmaster, and even amuse the audience by pretending to ride badly on horseback, which actually takes great skill.

Clown costumes today:
• Today’s clowns adopt a wide range of different personas which is reflected in their costume.
• The clown of Zippo’s Circus in 2017 was a clean-cut over-eager type in dark-rimmed glasses, bow tie and braces, while Gifford’s Tweedy with his trademark tuft of red hair wears a range of comical costumes loosely based on the themes of the show, many accentuating his long, lean body to comic effect.

Activities for Design and Technology for Key Stage 2:
• Ask pupils to look through the images and choose an act to focus on. List the kinds of physical activities that might be involved in carrying out the act – e.g. climbing onto a horse.
• What ideal physical properties would a costume need to have to be a good material for the activity? (i.e. strong, flexible, easy to clean).
• Design and make simple sleeves and trouser pieces out of a variety of fabric: cotton, lycra, silk and try them on, physically, on the body.
• Note which seem stronger, more comfortable to wear.
• Report (evaluate) back to the group which materials seem best-suited for the activity and why.
• (Pair work): Think of a new circus act that could work in outer space for example. What special skills would this act have?
• What challenges would working in outer space have? (for example: how would the person breathe?).
• Generate ideas for the costume for performers in this act, using three of the elements in this section; e.g. similar style, colour and shape and produce annotated sketches and diagrams explaining how the costume works.

Programme of Study Link: ‘build and apply a repertoire of knowledge, understanding and skills in order to design and make high-quality prototypes and products for a wide range of users’ and to ‘critique, evaluate and test their ideas and products and the work of others.’

Opposite page from top left:
Teachers’ Summary

Perhaps above all else, circus is about movement. There is speed of movement and elegance which, when combined with dramatic lighting effects and extraordinary costume, inspires artists to want to capture its essence, either realistically or in abstract form. There is great scope for pupils to experiment with a variety of art styles and materials using circus as a starting point.

• Images of jugglers and acrobats feature in Egyptian wall-paintings of the Beni-Hassan tombs of 2000 BC.

ADVERTISING AND PRINT:

• Playbills, like the Astley one in this section, were an innovation in advertising at the time. The images communicated directly to those who couldn’t read and they enlivened the text of the small, thin ‘broadside’ posters pasted on street posts or handed to passers-by.

CIRCUS AND PAINTING IN THE 19TH CENTURY:

• Circus became a subject for aquatints following the publisher Rudolph Ackermann’s perfection of printmaking that imitated watercolour.

• Example names:
  • Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Georges Seurat.

THE 20TH CENTURY:

• Example names:
  • Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, Bernard Buffet, Laura Knight.

Activities for Art and Design Key Stage 2:

Look at the posters advertising Astley’s Royal Amphitheatre. Ask pupils to devise their own list of performers (real or imagined) and produce posters in the same typographical style.

• Look at Con Colleano: Landing after a Forward Somersault. Why do you think the artist has chosen this moment to show us rather than any other moment? Using elements of the same style, ask the group to produce their own drawing/paintings of significant moments – of pauses before action in their lives. (Examples may include resting after a run, waiting for a story to be told, being engrossed in a game).

• Using Picasso’s style as demonstrated in the lithograph, produce your own study of animal movements, trying to capture their essence. Use your own pets or pictures of animals in action.

Programme of Study Link: Pupils should be taught to improve their mastery of art and design techniques including drawing...with a range of materials (for example, pencil or paint).

• Looking at the details in Our Artist’s Notes at Hengler’s Circus ask the group to create quick sketches of movement and action as seen in their own playground, for example, and produce their own book of ‘artist’s notes’.

Programme of Study Link: Pupils should be taught to create sketch books to record their observations and use them to review and revisit ideas.

• Extension activity: Find out more about the artists highlighted in this section. Examine their style, what interested them about the circus and how they represented the circus and its performers.

Programme of Study Link: Pupils should be taught about great artists, architects and designers in history.
Opposite page, clockwise from top left:


Teachers’ Summary

The literature in this section highlights the interesting contradictory nature of responses to circus as a theme. It is an exciting world but a dangerous one; a feast for the senses but also an illusion; there is glamour but there may be exploitation. It offers rich starting points for pupils to explore ideas around contrast and antithesis.

CIRCUS IN 19TH CENTURY NOVELS:
- Example names:
  - Jane Austen mentioned the circus in *Emma* as did Charles Dickens in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Bleak House*, and *Hard Times*.

CIRCUS IN POETRY:
Circus inspires the wide range of emotions that poetry can convey. The slow, measured pace of the blank verse in the 1929 poem *When I Went to the Circus* by D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930) brilliantly reflects the timorous audience and the emptiness perceived by the poet:

> The trapeze man, slim and beautiful and like a fish in the air.
> Swung great curves through the upper space, and came down like a star.
> And the people applauded, with hollow, frightened applause.

[D.H. Lawrence, *When I Went to the Circus*]

CIRCUS IN 20TH CENTURY FICTION:
Circus lends itself brilliantly to illustration and is very popular for children’s books.

20th century circus annuals published simply written but gripping stories for children such as *Cinderella at the Circus* featuring Betty, the girl who practises tightrope walking in secret, and saves the day when Flora the tightrope walker is unable to perform.

More recent authors have turned their attention to circus, with unforgettable results.

Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, 1984, although not a book for children, brilliantly conjures up the late 19th century of Colonel Kearney’s Circus. When the tiger escapes:

> ’It came out of the corridor like orange quicksilver, or a rarer liquid metal, a quickgold. It did not so much run as flow, a questing sluice of brown and yellow, a hot and molten death.’

[Nights at the Circus’ ‘Petersburg’, chapter 2]

CIRCUS IN 21ST CENTURY FICTION:
Sara Gruen’s action-packed novel *Water for Elephants*, 2006, inspired by the work of circus photographers of the 1920s and ’30s, mixes fact with fiction. It is set in the seedy world of the Benzini Brothers’ ‘Most Spectacular Show on Earth’ as it travels America by train, struggling to survive in the Depression of the 1930s. But it isn’t the most spectacular, as August tells Jacob:

> ’It’s nowhere near. It’s probably not even the fiftieth most spectacular show on earth... The whole thing’s illusion, Jacob, and there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s what people want from us. It’s what they expect.’

[Water for Elephants, chapter 7]

Le Cirque de Rêves that opens at nightfall and closes at dawn – a magical, monochrome circus with towering black and white striped tents – is the star of Erin Morgenstern’s 2012 novel *The Night Circus*. It arrives without warning.
‘No announcements precede it, no paper notice on downtown posts and billboards, no mentions or advertisements in local newspapers. It is simply there, when yesterday it was not.’

[The Night Circus]

**Activities for English Key Stage 2:**

Use sections from the D.H. Lawrence poem *When I went to the Circus* to inspire new poems by the group: ‘The trapeze man… with hollow, frightened applause.’ Discuss, as a group:

- Why might the applause be ‘hollow, frightened’? Isn’t applause supposed to be a good thing?
- Working in small groups of two or three, ask the group to complete the poem keeping its mood and developing it.

**Programme of Study Link: Writing – composition:** Pupils should be taught to draft and write by, in narratives, describing settings, characters and atmosphere and integrating dialogue to convey character and advance the action.

- Use the opening ‘No announcements precede it… It is simply there, when yesterday it was not’ from *The Night Circus* to also inspire storytelling. There is a real sense of mystery and intrigue in this piece of writing and pupils can be encouraged to sustain this mood.
- Perform their story to the group.

**Programme of Study Link: Reading comprehension:** Pupils (should be) preparing poems and plays to read aloud and to perform, showing understanding through intonation, tone and volume so that meaning is clear to an audience.

- Discuss Angela Carter’s description of the tiger moving like ‘orange quicksilver’ and ‘a questing sluice of brown and yellow.’ Ask pairs to come up with descriptions of other animals they know; how might their movements be described in similar ways? A snake, for example, a cat or a bear?

**Programme of Study Link: Writing – vocabulary, grammar and punctuation:** Pupils should be taught to develop their understanding of the concepts set out in English Appendix 2 by:

- Recognising vocabulary and structures that are appropriate for formal speech and writing.
MUSIC AND THE CIRCUS

Teachers’ Summary

Music has accompanied circus from its very earliest days. It has been used to rally crowds to ‘roll-up, roll-up’ and form an audience, to introduce acts, add tension, drama and humour to shows. It has taken its inspiration from the music of the times, incorporating many musical styles and adapting them along the way from polkas and opera to rock and pop.

MUSIC AND THE CIRCUS IN THE 18TH CENTURY:
• Music was essential part of the proceedings in Astley’s Amphitheatre Riding House, his first covered building, opened in 1779. Clowns and equestrians played instruments themselves.
• As time went on, orchestra pits began to be built in theatres to allow for live music to be performed.

MUSIC AND THE CIRCUS IN THE 19TH CENTURY:
• As circuses took to the road in the 19th century, music became a cornerstone of their street parades.
• When Barnum & Bailey’s Circus toured the UK in 1896, it included no less than five band wagons and another containing a steam organ or ‘calliope’, well-known for its ear-piercing volume – ideal to be heard above crowd noise or horses’ hooves.
• George Leybourne’s 1867 music hall song The Flying Trapeze with music by Alfred Lee, got everyone singing about the great trapeze star Jules Léotard. It remains one of the most famous circus-themed songs.

MUSIC AND THE CIRCUS IN THE 20TH CENTURY:
• One hundred years later, popular musicians still found the circus an inspiration: Smokey Robinson and The Miracles’ Tears of a Clown and The Beatles’ Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite, were both released in 1967.

MUSIC AND THE CIRCUS IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
• Example names:
  • Take That, Britney Spears.

Activities for Music Key Stage 2:
• The beating of drums to attract an audience is one of the simplest uses of music in circus. Ask small groups of three or four pupils to work in a group and use simple percussive sounds and rhythms to evoke a variety of moods and responses in the listener. Perform short two to three minute performances. Explore how we need to change volume and tempo to achieve different effects; how can we build tension with volume and rhythm?
• List types of circus acts from acrobats to clowns to tightrope walkers. Discuss the various moods that you might want to create to help support the performance and to give the audience a sense of what is happening – is our mood comic, suspenseful, light and breezy or dark and heavy? Ask small groups of three to four pupils to choose an act and produce a short piece of music that fits the style of performance and affects the mood of the listener. Some may choose to perform a short solo piece.
Programme of Study Link: Pupils should be taught to improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the inter-related dimensions of music.

Programme of Study Link: Pupils should be taught to play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression.

Below:


Opposite page:


OVER TO YOU!

Teachers’ Summary

Many circus skills can claim their roots in the human instinct to play and experiment. This is one of the reasons we find them so appealing: the circus artist takes the potential of the human body and, through a combination of natural ability, rigorous rehearsal, discipline and resilience, elevates it into an art form that looks effortless, although we know it is anything but.

JUGGLING

- Juggling is said to be one of the most ancient skills, linked to the human instinct for play. Its earliest depictions come from images in wall frescoes in the Beni Hassan tombs dating to approximately 4600BC, showing women juggling.

TYPES: The basic movements of juggling are showering, in which objects follow each other around in a circle, and cascading or crossing, in which objects are thrown alternately by both hands and cross each other in mid-air.

HULA-HOOPING

- Manipulating a hoop for exercise or fun is another skill that can be seen in ancient images.

TYPES: Many performers find rotating the hoop in one direction around the waist easier than the other, for right-handed people, counter-clockwise, and clockwise for left-handed people. The preferred direction is called the ‘first direction; or ‘in-flow’.

ACROBALANCE

- Balancing is another physical skill that people have experimented with throughout the ages, and is also depicted in medieval images. Balancing acts can be performed individually, or with one or several partners. Acrobatic balancing or ‘acrobalance’ today means the combination of adagio lifts and hand balancing.

TYPES: Acrobalance uses balance and counterbalance, in which a partner’s weight is used to assist movement, to achieve a variety of moves, lifts and poses. Adagio consists of partner lifts, often performed by a man and a woman, in which the man lifts and supports his partner in various balancing positions, or throws and catches his partner. The supporter is called the base, while the flyer does the poses. Solo hand balancing in which the performer changes his movements or does a stationary pose balanced on one or two hands can be performed on the ground or on other objects, such as the property harpsichord on which the performer worked with Giffords Circus in 2017.

TUMBLING

- Tumbling acts were a great attraction in 18th-century circus, when ‘Ground and Lofty Tumbling’ was advertised in playbills.

- As it did then, tumbling provides the basic training for all circus artists, and like many circus skills is best started when children are young.

TYPES: Handsprings, or flip-flaps, are also basic tumbling arts. For a handspring the body is flung forward onto the hands and the legs are thrown up over the body, while the flip-flap is the same movement performed backwards. Forward and backward somersaults are also basic moves that can be performed either balled-up, with the arms hugging the knees to the chest, or laid-out with the body and legs extended.

- Using spring-boards allows greater elevation for somersaults and circus performers often combine aerial somersaults with catching and balancing acts in which an acrobat thrust into the air from a springboard performs
somersaults in the air before landing on the shoulders of a bearer, or a column of bearers.

**BALANCING OBJECTS ON THE BODY**
- The age-old art of balancing objects on the body has been practised ever since we have fashioned objects, and is a skill practised today by a variety of performers, including Tweedy of Giffords Circus.

**TYPES:** While performers balancing lightweight objects such as hats will move slightly to maintain the centre of gravity, the act of balancing multiple objects on various parts of the body at the same time has been called a Statue trick, since performers remained perfectly still while assistants placed a variety of objects on their bodies.

Statue tricks became popular in the early 20th century, and the Italian juggler Enrico Rastelli (1896–1931) added static balancing tricks to his energetic expert juggling in the 1920s, taking balancing tricks to a high degree of difficulty.

**ROPE WORK**
- Aerial rope is an aerial circus act consisting of climbing, wrapping and dropping from a single rope or corde lisse hanging vertically from the ceiling.
- Corde lisse is French for ‘smooth rope’, usually made from soft cotton.
- Corde volante or ‘Mexican cloud swing’ is another rope work technique, in which performers swing on a U-shaped rope rigging.
- Aerial silk acts are closely related to aerial rope and are performed on aerial silks or tissues – two long strands of colourful fabric rigged from a single point in the ceiling or circus tent.

**TYPES:** In rope work, no safety lines are used, and like many circus acts, a considerable amount of strength, flexibility, skill and grace is needed for the positions and moves achieved. Using a brittle kind of yellow resin on their hands and feet to increase their grip, artists work singly or in pairs holding a brittle rope on the body at the same time. Gradually increase the height and speed of this simple act.

(Pair work) Ask pupils to stand facing each other. One has one object in their right hand. They throw it to their partner. They catch it with their left hand, throw it to their own right hand and then back to their partner, who catches it with their left hand. Continue until the movement is smooth and practised.

- Try two or more hoops, around the waist.

- Try two or more hoops, around the waist. Also try hula hooping using the arms and/or legs only and practise until two or more parts of the body can sustain the skill at the same time.

- Balancing objects on the body is also a skill which many young people may already have explored. Begin by balancing lightweight objects in the palm of the hand and then on the back of the hand. Try the same with both hands at the same time. Gradually try moving the objects up the length of the arm and on the elbows, for example, to explore centres of gravity and how to maintain balance.

**Activities for Physical Education at Key Stage 2:**
- As a starting point, ask small groups to look at the images and decide which skills they think are being demonstrated.
- (Individual work) Ask pupils to explore the basic movements involved in juggling. Begin by holding one soft object in on hand, such as a tightly-rolled up piece of paper and throw it from one hand to the other. Gradually increase the height and speed of this simple act.
- (Pair work) Ask pupils to stand facing each other. One has one object in their right hand. They throw it to their partner. They catch it with their left hand, throw it to their own right hand and then back to their partner, who catches it with their left hand. Continue until the movement is smooth and practised.

- Hula hooping is a fun activity which, with practice, can gradually increase in complexity to develop the physical dexterity of students.
- (Individual work) With a hoop each, ask pupils to find their preferred hoop rotation direction and practice how long they can maintain rotations before the hoop falls. Ask students to practice the rotation direction they find more difficult until they are able to switch from one direction to the other with ease.

Programme of Study Link: ‘Pupils should be taught to use running, jumping, throwing and catching in isolation and in combination’ and ‘develop flexibility, strength, technique, control and balance…’
Further Information:

Online Resources

http://www.circopedia.org
https://www.britannica.com/art/circus-theatrical-entertainment
http://circushistory.org/index.shtml
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca
https://www.circusfriends.co.uk/

Select Bibliography


Richley Steven B., *The Posters of Billy Smart’s Circus*. Doublecrown Books Ltd., 2015


Left: Tweedy the clown in *The Painted Wagon*, Giffords Circus 2016. Photograph by Graham Brandon © V&A.