23161139

ARTD 3066

3/8/17

**George Seurat's *Circus Sideshow* (Question #1)**

When I first entered the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I didn't know what I was to expect. First off, the trip there and back took five hours -- and secondly, I didn't realize that, though Georges Seurat was the star of the eponymous *Circus Sideshow* exhibit, there weren't nearly as many pieces by him displayed in the exhibit. There are, however, many other pieces in the exhibit, by different artists in different parts of the 19th Century. What pulled them together was the subject matter: lots of *en media res* depictions of circus performers being watched on the job by an audience. Circuses had a captivated following back in the 19th and 20th Centuries (even though a lot of their shticks were con-jobs, but I digress), so it would make sense to have so many famous works drawing inspiration from them. My guess as to why Seurat's painting was the main one being compared, however, was as good as anyone else's.

After looking at all of Seurat's featured works as one group and the rest of the exhibit's pictures as the other, I felt like I had come to a conclusion on what makes Seurat's *Sideshow* the alleged outlier. Circuses, in the traditional sense, are supposed to be light-hearted, colorful and humorous; they're supposed to have lots of talented and interesting-looking people and animals to marvel at and cheer for; the overall vibe is supposed to get people excited and ready to be entertained. Seurat's circus life...isn't really any of that.

The *Circus Sideshow* painting has a lone performer visible onstage -- a willowy trombonist before or after playing a song in front of a disengaged, distracted audience. Sure, by definition a sideshow is a *smaller* circus -- but the size of a single performance shouldn't be what elicits how interested an audience is by itself. Behind the stage looks to be a line-up for other musicians -- from the left, there looks to be a tuba, a clarinet, trumpet and possibly another trombone. The other possibility is that the five of them are part of a band, as the latter musicians seem to have their instruments to their mouths. This would mean that this is an all-brass-and-woodwind band, with a trombone lead soloist, at this circus, which doesn't exactly *scream* "circus" to me.

There's just something off-putting about this scene to me: it's not a very happy or energized circus, it's pretty melancholy. The frequency of dark blues in the foreground, mixed with the bright contained whites and yellows of the overhead lights, tell the eye that this scene is at night, which only further confuses me. Of course I've heard of circuses at night, they're usually just not outside.

Now, don't misunderstand, I like this piece a lot -- the pointilism does its job to both sharpen and blur figures as needed, and the deep blue stippling does a good job telling my brain to calm down when I look at this image. But as far as circuses go, it's just plain eerie to me. Perhaps this is just a regular band who just happens to be playing at this circus this evening, but that's unlikely. Circuses usually traveled as troupes and didn't do the whole "special guest" thing that's such a craze nowadays.

This isn't the only Seurat piece in the *entire* exhibit, but most of the same can be said about the other works in terms of tone and mood for scenes expected to be full of life and invitation. For example, his piece *Sidewalk Show (Une Parade)*, a piece made between 1883-1884, is at least clearer in terms of the roles the performers play: two clowns onstage with a horse or donkey standing behind them. That being said, the stage presence of the clowns is very awkward and sort of reluctant. Their mouths are open, as if they're singing or talking to the audience, but their eyes tell the audience they're not sure they want to be there. Another piece, *At the Divan Japonais* (1887-1888), has a little more energy in it -- there's a can-can dancer in the middle of a high-kick -- but the tones are so gray it's hard to pick out the figures, and the stippling is so coarse it might as well have been a frottage of a relief sculpture of this exact event.

The reason I keep bringing up the word "energy," of all things, is that that's one of the first words I even associate with the circus. When you have exaggerated pancake-makeup faces wearing colorful suits, playing caricatures while they get animals to do tricks with them, in an unironic circus it would be very hard to be entertaining if your acting and the way you carried yourself didn't match the level of silliness your clothes did. And conveniently enough, the orchestrators of the *Sideshow* exhibition found some very high-energy pieces to compare with Seurat's pieces.

A great example of stark contrast in mood for Seurat is a one Honoré Daumier. Daumier must have been considered an avant-garde artist of his time: his exaggerated expressions and postures, mixed with under-detailed faces and widened, rounded eyes made me think as far-forward as the cartoon style of the Fleischer Brothers (who made Betty Boop famous). In the Daumier collection *The Sideshow (La Parade de saltimbanques)* (1860s) is where I found my preconceived idea of a circus: loud emotions and straddled postures. Pelez's *Grimaces and Misery - The Saltimbanques* (1880s) was another good example -- the poses were more reserved than Daumier's, but the manipulated facial expressions, brought to life by the Norman Rockwell-esque shading and colors (and all *that*  on top of what everyone is wearing and where they are setting-wise), is just objectively more convincing of a circus to me than Seurat's *Sideshow*.

I suppose that what it all comes down to, after looking so long at what's going on, is to focus on why it was made this way. The biggest divide between Seurat's depiction of a circus and everyone else's is mood and tone, which play a very big role firsthand with subject matter and secondhand with physical execution. I have a couple of theories as to why Seurat's circus scene is so moody; one of these theories is it might be a reflection of how he feels about circuses in general. In the other artists' paintings not everyone is necessarily depicted as completely happy and comfortable, but there's still some degree of humor that's trying to be visible. Unless there's some sort of sarcastic or very, very dry humor I'm not seeing, there's no real lightheartedness to be found here.

Another idea I considered to be what makes Seurat's *Circus Sideshow* such a serious piece is that he's trying to show the performers as less of clowns and more of serious musicians. Clowns are almost always seen as something to laugh at, but music isn't, so maybe Seurat's message was to show circus performers some respect at the end of the day. They're paid to make people laugh, but maybe for one they'd rather make their audience *feel* through the music they're playing, they'd rather touch the hearts and minds of just that one hypothetical person who needed to feel some sort of cathartic artistic relief through a public meeting, as it had been so long ago in the times of the ancient Greeks.

Or maybe Seurat just wanted to draw a trombonist at night, I don't really know. It's not like I can ask him, I'm pretty sure he's passed away.

Whatever the reason: Georges Seurat's version of the circus is unlike most the world had seen before. *Circus Sideshow* has a grainy, unkempt feel to it that puts one in the mood of passive acceptance or apathy. A lot of the figures facing the viewer seem lost or just otherwise uncomfortable. Of course, a lot of this is built on subjective opinion, but there's no debating there isn't a pretty glaring difference between Seurat's work and the works it's being compared to at the Met. But that's the wonderful thing about there being so many artists working at one particular time on the same theme or subject matter: it's all becomes personalized in the end based on how one chooses to go about portraying one thing or another. Opinion and perspective play a big role in how a work of art is even conceived, and whether Seurat meant for *Circus Sideshow* to be social commentary or just a captured moment of a night out, his personal view on the setting was unique enough to be a comparing point to several other artists at once, which is a very impressive feat within itself.

