

The Show Must Go On: The Ringling Circus [C1]

Oltre 150 anni di spettacoli che hanno incantato il pubblico per generazioni. Magia, fantasia e creatività racchiuse nel più grande fenomeno circense del mondo.



The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is a 66-acre museum complex in Sarasota, Florida. **Established** in 1927, the art museum was built by famed circus impresario John Ringling (1866-1936) as a legacy to the citizens of Florida. In addition to antiquities and classical paintings, sculptures and artef **acts** from around the world, the museum also **boasts** an extensive collection of materials related to the history and evolution of American circus. To find out more, Speak Up contacted Jennifer Lemmer Posey, the Tibbals Curator of Circus at the Ringling Museum. As she explains, the Ringling Circus was significant in that it brought together different circuses over its 150 years of life. In 1871, P. T. Barnum and his partner James Bailey had **come up with** what they called The Greatest Show on Earth. Inspired by this, in the early 1880s, five Ringling brothers, Alfred, Charles, John, Al and Otto decided to radically expand their small comedy company to create a circus **troupe** to rival Barnum & Bailey. The first step was to introduce groundbreaking **acts**. **Jennifer Lemmer Posey (American accent):** The circus is best known for

having all kinds of [acts](#). It's one of the points, is to take all of the various disciplines and the kind of amazing accomplishments of the human body and animals and apparatus and put them together into one show. If you go back to the very beginnings of circus in general, it starts with the horse and a rider. The circus ring is actually defined by the needs of a person riding [bareback](#) on a horse. So having the diameter of that ring at 42 feet gives the horse enough of a circumference [to build up speed](#), so that the rider can balance on top with centrifugal force. So in some ways, circus had its start with its definition with horses or animals, and then those were combined immediately with acrobats and clowns and these other various disciplines that have been added in over the years. [...]. As bicycles become more popular, suddenly you get [loop-the-loop acts](#) with bicycles, and then early 1910s, you get the automobiles doing these amazing [flying leaps](#) off of ramps. And as our world changed, the circus responded to it and incorporated those elements in [sic – ed.].

A SITE OF LEARNING

In 1906, the Ringling Bros. bought Barnum & Bailey Circus. Evolution, however, was still required to keep audiences coming, as Lemmer Posey explains. **Jennifer Lemmer Posey:** The circus does constantly evolve to [meet its moment](#) and to meet the audiences that it wants to sell tickets to. You have to provide people with what they want to see. So, for instance, early on the circus in America carried a [menagerie](#) that showed all kinds of exotic animals, that also usually had a sideshow with it. And that meant it was displays of people quite often based just on their physical difference. As we, as a society, changed our values and our codes, those became less popular to the public. It's kind of interesting because with those shows, the [menagerie](#) and the sideshow, the circus was a site of learning. It was an opportunity for people to be exposed to something they would never see out in the world. As we got other resources, better access to television, to printed materials, and now, of course, the internet, we can learn in different ways. We now understand, we understand the position that we're putting those individuals in, because we have changed our values in that sense. So in

those ways, the circus really lives in the moment and is a great way of reflecting where we are as a culture.

FIRE HAZARD

The circus faced many difficulties over the years. In 1944, a major tragedy occurred when the [big top](#) caught fire. **Jennifer Lemmer Posey:** The Hartford fire is one of the most well-known of circus disasters. And that happened in 1944, when the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey [big top](#) burned, in just a matter of minutes. It was an afternoon show in Hartford, Connecticut. In that time period, of course, many of the men were off at war or working because it was an afternoon show. And so the [tent](#) was largely filled with women and children. And so the deaths there was far more than a hundred people who died and that incident [took a huge toll](#) on the general population, but also the circus community. But the [hardship](#) of circus life is there all the time: there are [train wrecks](#), [blow downs](#), where just bad weather comes up and literally blows down [tents](#), and they just had to be ready to respond to it and be resilient and [bounce back](#).

SOMETHING UNIQUE

For a while, circus appeared [to fade](#) from fashion, but suddenly it's back and more popular than ever. Why is that so? **Jennifer Lemmer Posey:** I think that it's the wonder that we feel watching individuals accomplish something that we can kind of understand what it takes to do. A lot of times you sit and watch someone performing in the circus and even when you fully realize that you yourself maybe can't do that, you understand what's involved, the training, the strength, the [fearlessness](#) sometimes to get there. And so to be able to celebrate that moment, to feel the joy and to share it with the audience that's there with you is very special. We recognise that sharing moments together and physical proximity is something unique.

www.ringling.com

Glossary

- **come up with** = venire in mente
- **acts** = numeri
- **took a huge toll** = avere un impatto
- **bounce back** = riprendersi
- **boasts** = vantare
- **troupe** = compagnia
- **train wrecks** = incidenti ferroviari
- **blow downs** = abbattimenti dovuti al vento
- **to fade** = svanire
- **hardship** = difficoltà
- **fearlessness** = temerarietà
- **to build up speed** = prendere velocità
- **loop-the-loop** = giro della morte, a 360 gradi
- **flying leaps** = salti volanti
- **menagerie** = serraglio
- **big top** = tendone
- **tent** = tenda
- **Established** = fondato
- **bareback** = senza sella
- **meet its moment** = cogliere il momento