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THE CIRCUS, 1870–1950

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Media circus, family circus, circus catch, political circus, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and the Circus Circus casino in Vegas—yet nowhere among these usages is there to be found an actual sawdust and elephant-scat circus. Before its devolution into mere metaphor (when did you last sit ringside?), the circus was indeed the greatest show on an unwired earth. In their glory days from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the last, Barnum & Bailey, Ringling Brothers, and lesser outfits crisscrossed America bringing spectacle to the masses. This suitcase-size compendium, *The Circus, 1870–1950*, features nearly nine hundred illustrations documenting an era when sword swallows, armless ladies, Siamese twins, tiger trainers, daredevils, snake charmers, trapeze artists, clowns (yes, clowns), and almost anyone from Asia or Africa offered the very height of thrills. Under the big top, workaday Americans encountered an alternate universe in which the strange and the adventurous could be viewed in a context in which unfathomable skill and physical difference were the norm (the circus was, perhaps, the first inkling of our multicultural, globalized future). Posters were the main advertising medium, and their importance is evident. Anticipating 3-D Technicolor movies, the circus placard explodes with contorted bodies, vicious beasts, and frightening oddities—everything and everyone feels alive, poised on the brink of some disastrous or hilarious climax: A dagger slides into a young man's mouth, a tightrope-walking geisha quivers on the line, monkeys dine in tuxedos, a half-naked lovely dangles from a wire by her teeth, and a serpent curls around a pale, inviting neck. What will happen?! Buy a ticket and find out, the ads fairly shout. For many decades, "three-ring circus" was not chiefly an expression connoting something wild or confusing; it was firsthand experience—the fecund smells, the electric colors—of wildness and confusion. These riotous and sometimes disturbing images recall a time when immediacy was everything in entertainment.

—ALBERT MOBILIO