

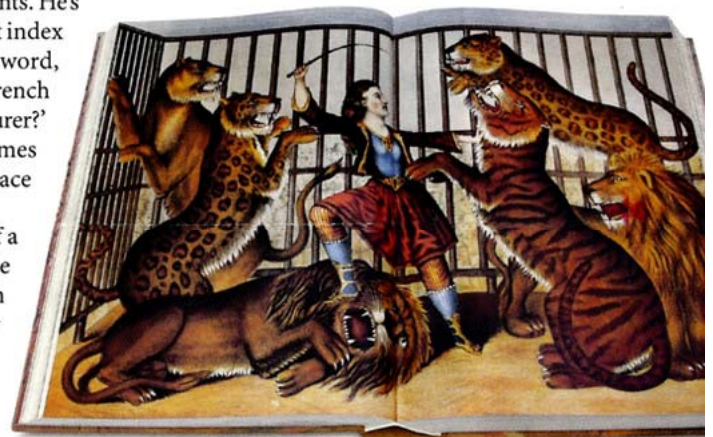


THE CIRCUS 1870-1950 (ed. Noel Daniel; Taschen, rrp £120) Behold Duncan MacDonald, 'the Celebrated Scottish [sic] Equilibrist', a 1763 lithograph of whom is included here, in this slack-jawed celebration of the American circus and its antecedents. He's negotiating a tightrope suspended above metal spikes. On his nose, left index finger and right boot toe balance a wagon wheel, a plate, 16 goblets, a sword, a pipe, two eggs, a chair and a dog. And he's playing a trumpet. And a French horn. Above, in curlicued script, is written: 'Now where's your bottle, conjurer?' Proof that subtle sleight of hand and pick-a-card-any-card parlour games have never held a candle to the dramatic daredevilry of the circus, a place of the boldest, most ridiculous of gestures.

So, for once, Taschen's mega-format makes perfect sense. The size of a doormat, and as thick as a jamb, *The Circus* is full of huge photos (see the epic shot of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey at Madison Square Garden in 1931 – a scene part Bruegel, part *Where's Waldo?* – or Charles and Ray Eames's full-length portrait of a humbug-striped contortionist) alongside brilliant, gaudy fly posters ('Rasmus Nielsen, Scandinavian Strong Man – Lifts an Anvil by his Breasts!'). True, some sights are underwhelming to widescreen-jaded eyes, such as tattooed bodies, or re-enactments of US history's most exhilarating declaration-signings. But *The Circus* always evokes the contemporary audiences' genuine wonderment – at newly discovered animals and peoples, at freaks, at the high-waisted knickers of the impossibly sexy female stars, and at the good, honest stuntsmanship of human cannonballs, loop-the-loop cyclists and Alois Peters, 'The Man with the Iron Neck'.

Of course, the circus knew how to dupe. Vitiligo-sufferers masqueraded as leopard-people. 'Study in sex' Bobby Kork was named after the device used to conceal his genitalia. And don't tug too hard on Annie Jones's beard. But the smoke and mirrors were largely restricted to the sideshow. In this book, the circus is an arena of big ideas and big influence, giving us *The Wizard of Oz* and even *OED* entries: Jules Léotard first trapeze-flew in his one-piece in 1859; Chang and Eng Bunker, the original Siamese twins, (con) joined PT Barnum's show in the 1830s. Interior design, too, has bowed to the big top: see Edward and Mrs Simpson's Paris bathroom (*WoI* May 2008), the Palacio Pereda in Buenos Aires (*WoI* Aug 2007) or La Granja in Majorca (*WoI* Jan 1993).

Racism, sexism and the other abuses of humans and animals that, with the moving image and health-and-safety guidelines, led to the circus's demise, are largely crowded out here by the razzmatazz and romance of life on the road with the 'tent city'. But the small-scale and the personal do get a look-in. We learn, for example, that The Great Peters eventually – accidentally – hanged himself to death; that Annie Jones married (men) twice; and that, though they married sisters and fathered 22 children, the Bunker brothers never really got on. *The Circus* is a big, great book on The Greatest Show on Earth ■ MARTIN HEMMING is a journalist ▷



To order *The Circus* for £108 (plus £10 UK p&p), ring the *World of Interiors* Bookshop on 0871 911 1747