



There are women collectors. . . and then there are collections of women. Take, for example, Madame Giradelli, "The Celebrated Fireproof Woman," or "The Pig Faced Lady," actually a freshly shaven bear wearing a dress. Or how about "Maggie Udder in Her Titillating Incomparable Achievement," which seemed to consist of balancing herself upside down upon her breast while it rested in a vase. Titillating, indeed. There is, too, Carlotta, "The Lady with The Steel Teeth," and ZaZel, "The Human Projectile."

These resplendent women, all circus performers, once captured the American public's attention and, frankly, it's not hard to see why. As Noel Daniel in her introduction to *The Circus 1870-1950* notes, "Long before the Beat poets made 'on the road' a generation's rallying cry, circus performers personified the romance of the open road and the grit of individualism." This large-format book -- the size of a small headstone -- celebrates a time well before the tenets of political correctness and strangulated prissiness. Appetites were unbridled, and to some degree, indiscriminate. Stuffiness was out the door and an unschooled vibrancy took center stage.

Lavishly illustrated with posters and photographs, *The Circus 1870-1950* provides a picture of the circus from every angle. Weegee leans into the audience and trains his camera on people's upturned faces and sees the rapture and fear as some unseen performer twirls above them. Lisette Model sets a photograph of the legendary Wallendas in the dark heavens at the top of the tent, as the performers ride bikes across the high wire, with one balancing a chair upon which a man stands with a woman on his shoulders. Walker Evans' work appears, too, with several shots of the black minstrel shows which were usually segregated outside the main tent.

What's more interesting, however, are the many photographs documenting the performer's lives between shows. Costumes flutter on clotheslines strung between tents and the back lot is alive with children playing alongside performing chimpanzees and acrobats practicing their routines in the open air.

This treasure trove of archival material is accompanied by several essays by Dominique Jando and Linda Granfield, which, along with the captions, are translated into both French and German. Jando's essays are especially rich in detailing the minutia of circus life, and includes enough material to service even the longest running soap opera's plot lines.

This oversized book is one of the few I've seen that merits its swollen dimensions. An amazing tableau unfolds as each page is turned. The circus gave rise to a gritty pioneer spirit that has mostly disappeared, and with it a hucksterism and abandon that was as charming as it was misleading.

What these books share is the prominent role that women play in them. What they don't share, however, is the same vitality. Macleod's book tends to be academic and plodding, draining the life out of her subjects. Luckily, this mistake is not repeated in *The Circus 1870-1950*.

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