



American Federation of Arts

For Immediate Release

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THE CIRCUS IS THE FOCUS OF MAJOR TRAVELING ART EXHIBITION
Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art

(April 2001)—An exhibition of approximately 100 works depicting the circus in twentieth-century American art, begins a three-city tour at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, where it is on view from October 19, 2001, through January 6, 2002. It will also be presented at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida (February 1–April 14, 2002) and the Austin Museum of Art, Austin, Texas (June 7–August 19, 2002).

The exhibition, organized by the American Federation of Arts, includes work in a range of mediums—including paintings, prints, sculpture, photography, and video—by artists whose bodies of work reflect a sustained or significant interest in the circus, such as Diane Arbus, Rhona Bitner, Alexander Calder, John Steuart Curry, Charles Demuth, Walker Evans, Kimberly Gremillion, Walt Kuhn, Mary Ellen Mark, Reginald Marsh, George Segal, and Everett Shinn.

Donna Gustafson, chief curator at the AFA and curator of the exhibition, cites the literary critic Heinz Politzer as having described the circus as “a world between.” “Indeed,” she says, “the circus is much more than popular entertainment. It is an alternative to everyday life, proof of man’s tragic failings, as seen in the often bittersweet performances of the clowns, and a vision of his rich potential, symbolized by the daring and skill of the acrobatic performers.”

The fascination with the circus as a subject for modern art began in late nineteenth-century Paris, where three permanent circuses played an integral part of the cultural life of the city. Avantgarde writers, theater critics, and artists like Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, Georges Seurat, and James Tissot included images of the circus, cabarets, and racetracks in their on-going investigation of modern life.

At the turn of the century, the realist artist and charismatic teacher Robert Henri (1865–1929) exhorted his American colleagues to search out new subjects based on their investigation of American life. Henri and others identified the circus, the theatre, and vaudeville houses as ideal subjects, in part because he saw them as microcosms of modern, transient, urban society. “To an extent that Henri could not have predicted,” writes Ms. Gustafson in the publication accompanying the exhibition, “American artists have seen all in the circus: proof of America’s cultural coming of age; an opportunity to explore a symbolic space of mystery and bliss; a mirror of society; and evidence of social disarray.”

While some American artists focused on the darker side of circus life, the danger inherent in many of the performances and the allure of the grotesque, others memorialized circus stars such as trapeze artist Alfredo Codona, animal trainer Clyde Beatty, sideshow celebrity Baby Ruth, and acrobat Lillian Leitzel. Still others invested circus performers with symbolic attributes, transforming them into representatives of the artist, or Everyman.

Ms. Gustafson concludes, “The circus is distinct from the theater in that the dangers the performers face are real, not imagined; a momentary lapse of judgment, a failure of skill, or a chance occurrence can cause serious injury or even death. As the acrobat swings from a great height, the partner of the knife-thrower takes his or her place, the animal trainer enters a cage to face a group of big cats, the audience is by turns awed, moved, frightened, and relieved. Marking progress by circular movement [and] never in a straight line, each self-contained, individual act comes to a climax and a successful close. Life is affirmed, control is maintained, and art triumphs.”

NATIONAL TOUR

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art October 19, 2001–January 6, 2002
Hartford, CT

John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art February 1–April 14, 2002
Sarasota, FL

Austin Museum of Art June 7–August 19, 2002
Austin, TX

PUBLICATION

A fully illustrated catalogue, published by the MIT Press and the AFA, accompanies the exhibition. *Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art* includes essays by: Ms. Gustafson, providing an overview of the circus in twentieth-century American art; Ellen Handy, Director of Studies, Christie's Education, exploring the depiction of the circus in twentieth century photography; Eugene R. Gaddis, archivist, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, regarding the collection and exhibition of circus-themed paintings by A. Everett "Chick" Austin; Karal Ann Marling, professor of art history and American studies, University of Minnesota, on the postwar revival of interest in circus motifs in popular culture; and Lee Siegel, writer and contributing editor for *The New Republic*, ruminating on the circus in twentieth-century literature. Softcover; 9½ x 11 inches, 184 pages, approximately 94 colorplates and 55 black-and-white images; softcover \$29.95, hardcover \$39.95.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

The American Federation of Arts is the nation's most comprehensive non-profit art museum service organization. Founded by an act of Congress in 1909, the AFA produces traveling art exhibitions and educational, professional, and technical support programs developed in collaboration with the museum community. Through these programs, the AFA seeks to strengthen the ability of museums to enrich the public's experience and understanding of art. Please visit our Web site at www.afaweb.org.

** As museum schedules are subject to change, please confirm dates before going to press. **