IN REVIEW

Flights of Fancy: Fashion and Function in Circus Performance

Cornell University Library: Online Exhibitions
exhibits.library.cornell.edu

Reviewed by Jessica Hemmings

Frederick Whitman Glasier *Big Top Tent* 1908, glass, 8″ x 10″. Courtesy of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.

If the circus does not immediately spring to mind as a textile haven, look again at the ropes that suspend acrobats, the spectacle of performers' costumes and the tents the circus performs beneath. The circus runs on textiles. **Cirkus Cirkör**, a Swedish troupe, has even devoted an entire performance, "Knitting Piece," to the textile as a structure and metaphor that entwines.

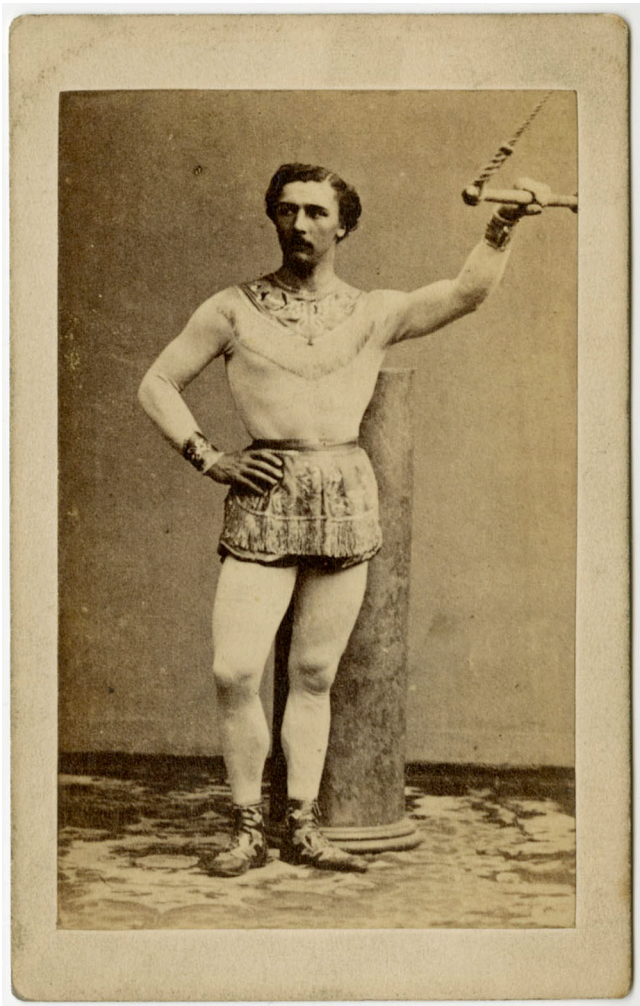
Jenny Leigh Du Puis and **Chisato Yamakawa** name "circus costume and its influence as inspiration for the fashion industry" as the starting point for curating "Flights of Fancy." The exhibition's six themes are far broader than this original inspiration: "Setting the Stage" focuses on tents; "Leotard's Legacy" considers the eponymous garment's inventor; "Aerialists Aloft" covers costumes of historical and contemporary acts; "Spectacular Storytelling" begins with the circus grand parade ('spec'); the small section "Minimalism and Movement" offer counter examples to spectacle; finally, "Exoticism and Exploitation" addresses topics such as cultural appropriation.

Betty Pasco *Chandelier Fantasy* (aerial apparatus) 1950s-1970s, black and white publicity photograph of performer. Photograph is held in the Circus Publicity Collection in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at the Cornell University Library. Photo: Maurice Seymour. Image permissions: Ron Seymour.

Digital exhibitions, particularly if planned (as this was) online from the outset, suit our pandemic times. As a reviewer, my experience is levelled with everyone who has access to an internet connection (unblocked by local settings) stable enough to stream video. But where physical exhibitions often demand ruthless editing of text and artefact, the online world accommodates volume. The problem, as **Maryanne Wolfe** confronts in *Reader, Come Home,* (2018) is that our brains may not be as adept at processing volume when the format is digital.

As digital natives, the curators assume a familiarity with web navigation which may not represent all interested exhibition viewers. Tighter editing of the six theme texts would have likely been required of a physical exhibition, but also beneficial here. Content is predominantly US-focused until the final

©2021 Surface Design Association, Inc. All rights reserved.
Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.



Jules Léotard *Carte-de-Visite* date unknown. Courtesy of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.

Karl Wallenda *Wardrobe* mid-20th century. Made by the Wallenda Family. Courtesy of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.

section, "Exoticism and Exploitation"—integration of these concerns throughout the exhibition would have been useful and I wonder if the curators tackled a huge topic late in the exhibition research.

Criticism about body norms, racial identities and animal rights are familiar concerns leveled against the traditional circus. Perhaps a less acknowledged challenge comes down to taste. Spectacle is by its very nature extreme and the fraught topic of taste is difficult to separate from expectations of appropriateness—in dress or life. To *run away to the circus* is about freedom, as much as it is about feats of acrobatics.

Both curators are Cornell students: Leigh Du Puis is a doctoral candidate researching the circus arts, while Yamakawa is based in architectural design and visual studies. Curiously absent from the exhibition is a sense of embodiment the curatorial pair were uniquely positioned to provide. Du Puis is also a professional circus costume designer and technician, and Yamakawa has ten years' experience as a competitive figure skater, including the design and production of her own competition garments. I wonder what the speed and concentration of circus performance feels like. Does repetition eventually cancel out exhilaration? In this fascinating exhibition the curators have amassed volume but omitted their own embodied knowledge.

—Jessica Hemmings is Professor of Craft at HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg, Sweden and the 2020-2021 Rita Bolland Fellow at the Research Centre for Material Culture, the Netherlands.

©2021 Surface Design Association, Inc. All rights reserved.
Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.