

Bandwagon

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Gunther Gebel-Williams, 1969

Robert Handley photograph

Circus Collection in Amsterdam Now Online



by Willem Rodenhuis

This meerschaum cigar pipe was made in Vienna around 1880. It was presented to Oscar Carré by the Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph, as a token of his satisfaction with Carré, who had trained Empress Elizabeth ("Sissy") to ride on horse back.

In November 2018, the website Circusmuseum.nl was launched as a platform for access to the rich circus collection of the University of Amsterdam.¹ This provided a new digital platform for researching circus heritage in the Netherlands as well as around the world.

Some history to begin with...

In 1964, the library of the University of Amsterdam acquired by bequest of the late K. D. "Kees" Hartmans (1906-1963) a collection of almost 2,000 books concerning the circus, with a special focus on children's books. During his professional career as the librarian of the Amsterdam city archives, Hartmans became friends with the librarian of the University of Amsterdam, Dr. Herman de la Fontaine Verwey, who with great enthusiasm accepted the bequest along with an amount of 10,000 guilders (about \$34,000 today) for future acquisitions. The circus collection was housed in the special collections department, where it is still located at the present time.

Library staff member Marja Keyser published a catalogue of the circus collection in 1968, and Raymond Toole-Stott devoted a volume of his paramount

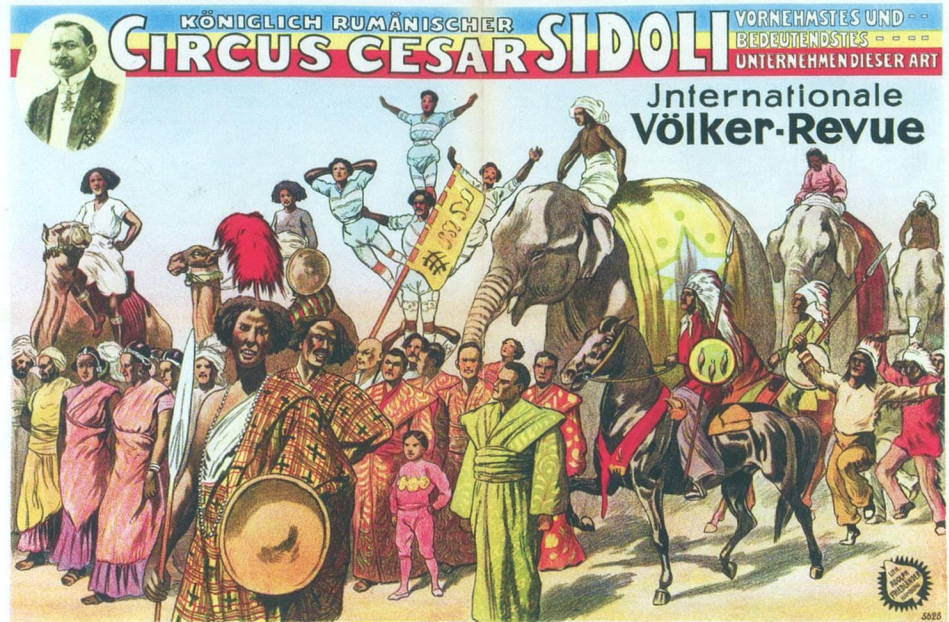


Around 1870, Otto Eerelman painted this oil on canvas titled *Amalia Carré-Salamonsky behind the scenes*. Amalia Carré, the wife of Oscar Carré, was a skilled and very athletic woman, as well as a well known circus performer. Otto Eerelman, who was a popular artist in his time, often chose horses and dogs as his subjects. He was befriended by the Carré family, allowing him access to work in the wings of the circus.

bibliography *Circus and Allied Arts: a World Bibliography* (Derby, 1958-1971) to the Hartmans circus collection. Both by the publication of the bibliographical data and additional donations during the 1960s and 1970s, the circus collection garnered more and more attention of researchers and circus lovers, resulting in several publications, television and documentary film coverage and participation in exhibitions in the Netherlands and abroad.

In subsequent years, the circus collection acquired additional books, photos, programs, letters, lithographs, posters, artifacts and paintings from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Important donations were accepted from impresario and circus historian Jo van Doveren (archives and correspondence), photographer Heinz Baudert (photos), horse trainer and ringmaster Bob Schelfhout (archives and personal diaries), and Bartelet Stappert whose collection was focused on the field of street-organs, dance hall organs, and machinery for fairgrounds and amusement parks.

For those in the United States it will be interesting to know that the Jo van Doveren (1901-1968) book collection was auctioned off in London after his death, and was then



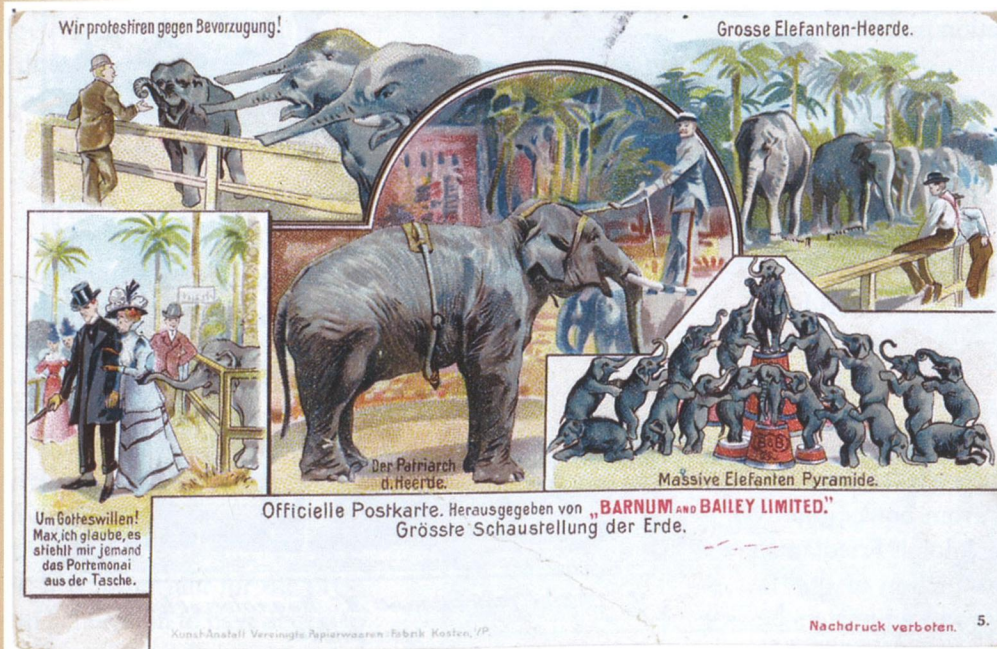
The Royal Romanian Circus Cesar Sidoli featured an international "Volker Revue" (people show) much like Barnum & Bailey had assembled with its Ethnological Congress a few years earlier. Adolph Friedländer (No. 5625), c. 1900.

sold and shipped to the Milner Library at Illinois State University.

In the 1980s and 1990s the circus collection received less attention, although the acquisition of books continued. New developments, however, occurred in the new millennium when information technology spread its wings and the notion of cultural heritage increasingly influenced the practice of curating and fostering the rare books department of the University of Amsterdam.

The new millennium and the era of digitization

The increasing power of digital equipment brought new possibilities for the retrieval, cataloguing and presentation of cultural heritage. The Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Royal Library) in The Hague launched a project, named *Metamorfoze*, meant to safeguard vulnerable, rare and precious printed materials by digitization. The Amsterdam circus collection was one of the academic collections that was selected for the project. This selection provided recognition that the circus as a variety in the field of cultural heritage was a very significant step forward toward



Souvenir postcards like this one printed in German, were sold on Barnum & Bailey's European tour 1898-1902.



A colored lithograph for the Frères Franconi provided an overview of the riding skills, stunts and spectacular show audiences could expect nearly 200 years ago.

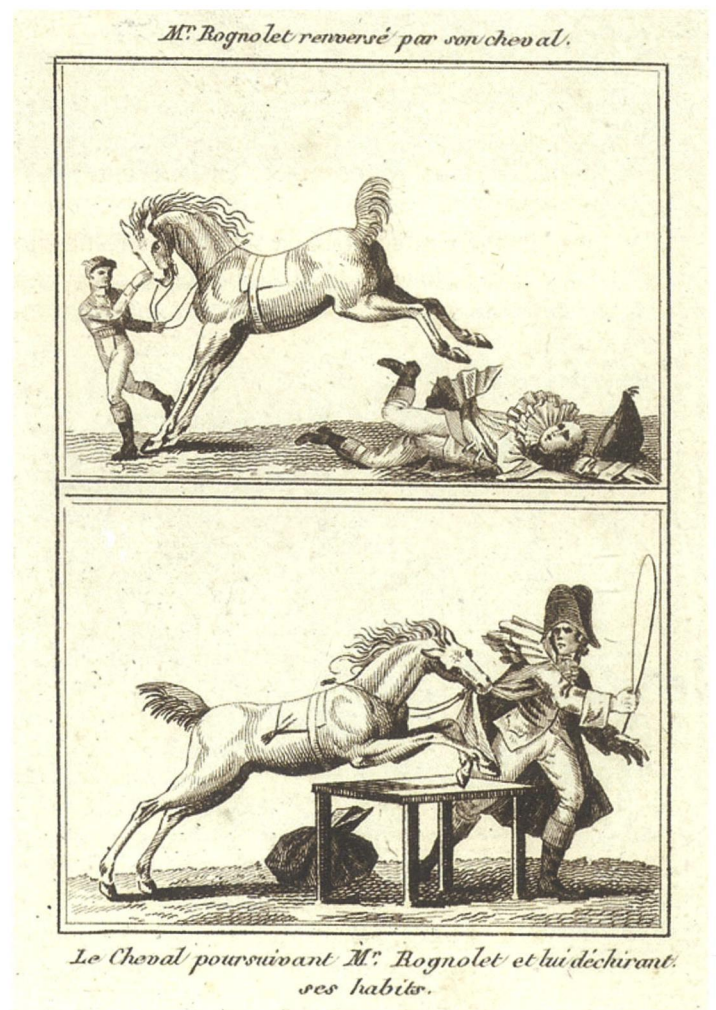
the canonical status of the circus.

However, in the early 21st century, the colorful and large sized items of the circus collection (i.e. posters) could still not be handled by the available equipment. This was because the storage capacity of the equipment fell short, the scanning process took too much of time, and lenses for scanning purposes were still not suited for the registration of the many large format posters. Consequently, the digitization project had to be postponed. That changed around 2010 when the industry had developed equipment that could meet the standards needed for academic digitization purposes.

Moreover, two major circus collections were added to the existing one. In 2012, the collection of the Theater Instituut Nederland (TIN, Theatre Institute of the Netherlands) was added, and in 2016 the renowned collection of Jaap Best² (1912-2002) was acquired. This expansion of the collection led to the need to integrate all of the items using one digital tool. The resulting solution was the installment of the device *Circusmuseum.nl* made accessible to a worldwide public in November 2018. Among several smaller, but high profile collections, the TIN acquisition included the Herman Linssen (1934-) collection, consisting of posters, programs, photos, books and magazines, systematically organized and administrated by means of a highly accurate microfiche system. The Best collection added, apart from books, photos and programs, a splendid collection of Adolph Friedländer posters, covering almost the entire production of this famous Hamburg-based printshop that produced posters between 1872 and 1933. Friedländer's company flourished for decades, contracted the best designers of his time, and it got orders for poster design and printing from all over Europe

and the United States. Friedländer was forced to close in 1933 as a consequence of the Nazi government's abject policy against Jewish owned companies.

Both the Linssen and the Best collections needed special attention and integration into the existing digital platform, as developed during the years 2012-2016. The Linssen database covers information regarding more than 4,000 circuses, their company names, management, years of operation, contracted artists, programs, posters, flyers and newspaper clippings. Playlists of these companies are to be added in near future. The Friedländers, as they are called, of the Jaap Best collection consist of more than 7,300 numbered posters, a few of them without a production number as those items were printed



This Baptiste Loiset etching, titled How a horse catches a pickpocket, dates from the late 18th century.



Adolph Friedländer printed this poster (No. 7387) in his Hamburg printshop for Circus Busch about 1905. It is an example of a "pantomime show," a re-enactment of a literary saga in a circus performance.

in the first years of the company's existence. Now that the digital platform *Circusmuseum.nl* has been launched, the full variety and richness of the composited collection can be researched and used for presentations, papers, television or film documentaries, and all sort of printed publications. And this resource meets the very objective of the University of Amsterdam, that is to draw the attention of researchers to the circus collection and to facilitate their needs for information.

Website content and illustrations

The Amsterdam circus collection ranges from the 18th century until the present day, with an emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries. Going through the items, one is struck by the richness of the available materials, testifying about human life and cultures no longer in existence. However, it is important for the present generation to have access to information and expressions of cultures of the past.

In the academic realm,

the circus had by tradition a modest reputation, if not to say, it was totally neglected. This omission has changed over the past four decades, leading to a growing activity of research, studies and publications, not only of a particular person in history, but also relevant from the point of view of ethology, psychology, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. The Fédération Mondiale du Cirque plays a vital role in this process, by uniting and stimulating academics to focus on the circus, as does the working group Popular Entertainment of FIRT, the International Federation of Theatre Research. In this regard, the digitization of the collections can be seen as a blessing for researchers, as the access to illustrations has become so much easier than in the past. And the vast historical resources are of tremendous value to researchers as well as to those who read their findings. Moreover, the bachelor theatre studies curriculum of

the University of Amsterdam offers a lecture on the basis of the circus collection, enabling students to get familiar with the items in the collection and also with the historical and theoretical themes in the field of the circus.

The selection of illustrations for this article covers some of the many forms the circus has taken in the past and also



So-called "freaks of human nature" were depicted on this Adolph Friedländer (No. 8248) *Passepartout* (master key) design from around 1910.



Heinz Baudert photographed ten acrobats performing with Chinese poles in Amsterdam during the 1960s.

emphasizes the continuity through the centuries of the circus as a form of popular amusement culture. The horse is an example of this continuity, along with the dressage of other animals, as are the acrobatic skills, clowns acts and the so-called pantomimes – spectacular shows that enacted literary themes or historical events. All of these items can be downloaded free of charge, in a resolution (300 dpi) that meets today's academic standards for digital storage and application. This format also allows reproductions of the material at a professional level. Since the launch of the website *circusmuseum.nl* we have already seen some of the Amsterdam images in publications, on instagram, but also as postcards or even jig saw puzzles, and that is exactly what the website is intended for.

However, when going through the catalogue as presented on the website one will notice that not all of the items are presented as a thumbnail. It is foreseen that the presentation of the materials will increase in future months, optimizing research potential and results considerably. This is also true for the hands-on guide that has been added in order to facilitate the research of the Herman Linssen database, i.e. the many circus performances and their venues until the year 2000. The content of the website is organized by a total of 22 windows (section *Highlights* in the homepage), covering the many genres or themes of the circus. By exploring the windows, web-

site visitors will get an overview of the items that the museum website offers. Moreover, the additional two catalogue entries, in combination with the Linssen database, offer a complete instrument for the research of the database content. The web designers are relying on the experience and skills

The vast circus collection materials at the University of Amsterdam are preserved in secure, climate-controlled "stacks."





Left, Germany's Circus Busch promised a mythical spectacle of improbable proportions. The University of Amsterdam collections includes several thousand different circus posters.

of visitors when researching, a readiness that may be expected in this digital era.

Still, curator Hans van Keulen is ready to support any visitor of the site, or deal with issues connected to the publication of the available materials. This is also true for orders of the Jaap Best booklet. Van Keulen's email address is <j.h.k.vankeulen@uva.nl>. **Bw**

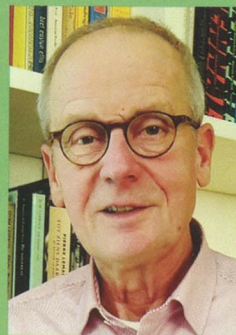
All images accompanying this article are of collection items at the University of Amsterdam. They were provided by Willem Rodenhuis.

Endnotes

1. On January 1, 2019 the Special Collections Department became a branch of the archeological museum of the University of Amsterdam, operating as Allard Pierson, the Collections of the University of Amsterdam.
2. Dick H. Vrieling, *The Best of Best. The unique circus collection of Jaap Best* (Amsterdam: Bijzondere Collecties Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2017).



In the 1960s and 1970s the Russian State Circus visited the Netherlands several times. Clown Oleg Popov was a Soviet circus celebrity, and this poster provides evidence that he was widely known in Europe in those days.



About the Author

Willem Rodenhuis is a theatre historian. He earned a bachelor degree in history from the Utrecht University and a master degree in theatre research from the University of Amsterdam. He was a subject librarian for the performing arts and media at the Library of the University of Amsterdam for 20 years beginning in 1990. In 2010, he became the curator of the Performing Arts and Media Collections at the Special Collections Department of the Library of the University of Amsterdam. In this position that he held until his retirement in 2016, he was, along with others, responsible for the circus collection and its digitization.