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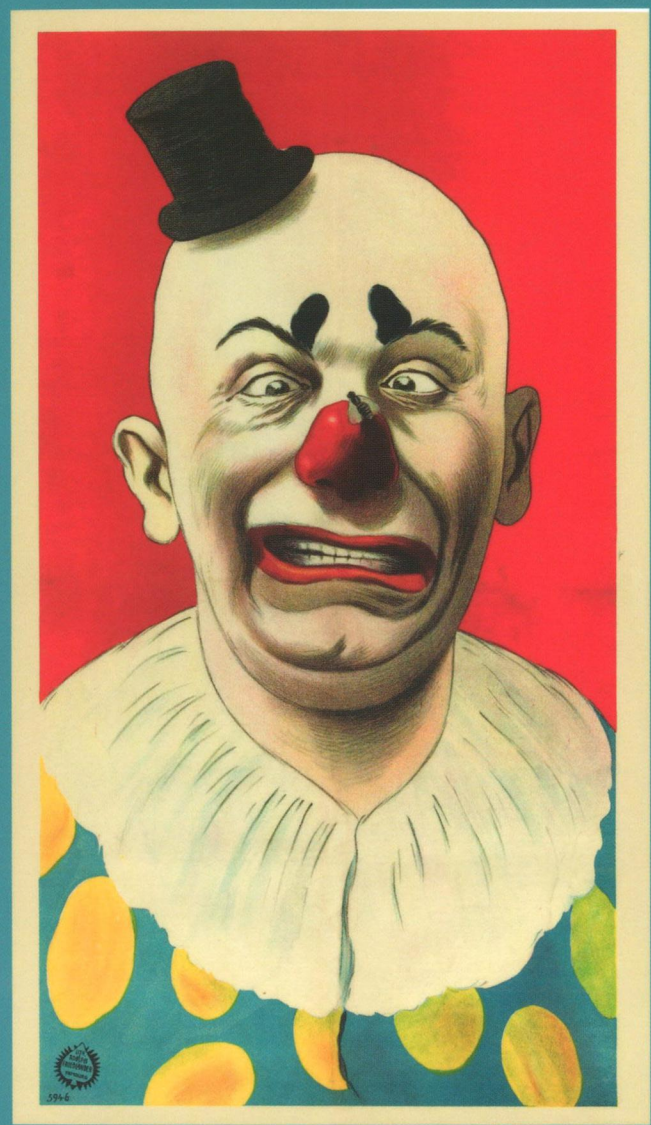
The Best of Best

The unique circus collection of Jaap Best

DICK H. VRIELING

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Circus heritage from the Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam

WILLEM RODENHUIS



On October 3, 2016, the Jaap Best circus collection was officially transferred to the Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam (UvA). As Dick H. Vrieling described earlier, the collection had first been moved to the Teylers Museum in Haarlem after Best's death. Approximately 9,000 posters and 7,000 photographs were conserved, recorded and digitized. In 2005, the website www.circusmuseum.nl went online, making Jaap Best's estate famous among circus lovers and researchers around the world.

The transfer to the Special Collections of the UvA ensures the collection of circus objects now gets even more international attention. Best's extensive collection has been added to two other large circus collections, those of K.D. Hartmans and of the Theater Instituut Nederland (TIN) (Netherlands Theatre Institute). The Amsterdam circus heritage measures up to renowned international collections, such as that at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris), the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Theatre Collection of Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts) and the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (Sarasota, Florida). The Jaap Best collection has already been discussed; I here want to highlight two other circus components of the Special Collections, and explore the possible methods for studying this amazing material.

Hartmans Collection

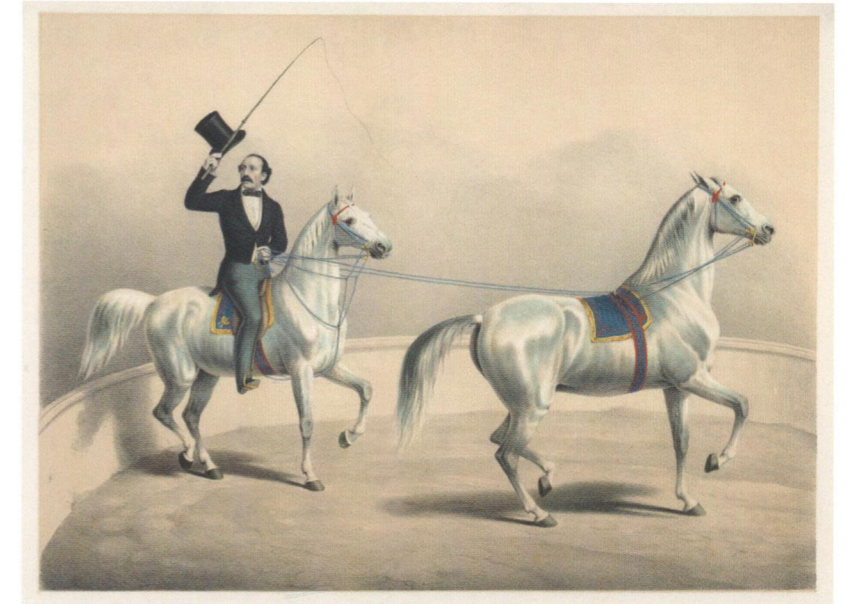
The collection of circus literature belonging to K.D. ('Kees') Hartmans (1906–1963), who worked as a librarian at the Amsterdam City Archives, was left to Amsterdam University Library in 1964. His collection comprises works on the history of the circus, manuals on animal training, books on clown and acrobat skills, and memoirs of artists and circus directors. The children's books on the circus form a special part of the collection. The collection also contains memorabilia, such as programs, posters, picture books, photographs, flyers to recruit new artists and picture postcards. Hartmans also left the university 10,000 Dutch guilders for the preservation of his collection and the expansion of his circus library.

In 1968, a catalogue of Hartmans' circus books was published, comprising 2410 editions, compiled by librarian Marja Keyser. This catalogue made the circus material at the Amsterdam University Library available to a new audience. Through the years, the Hartmans Collection received various small donations from collectors: the



Engraving Suite des Différents exercices d'Equitation des Sieurs Franconi, 1810. Special Collections department of the University of Amsterdam

Print Arabeska und Mac-Donald in der hohen Schule geritten von Herrn E. Renz. H. Litfas. Special Collections department of the University of Amsterdam



collection of journalist Andreas Schelfhout about his father, horse trainer Bob Schelfhout (1916–1999); objects collected by publicist and agent Jo van Doveren (1901–1961), press officer of the circuses Strassburger and Sarrasani; and the collection of graphologist Bartele Stapert.

Compared to other collections, the circus collection at the Amsterdam University Library had been quite unknown, but this changed at the start of this century. Thanks to the Metamorfoze Project, a national project for the preservation of printed heritage, the collection could be digitized. This work was done after a first thorough selection and reorganization, repacking the items and repairing damage.

In 2007, the Special Collections were moved from the University Library at the Singel to their current location at the Oude Turfmarkt 129. The digitization of the circus collection was completed in 2013, and parts of the collection can now be searched on the Special Collections website.

TIN Collection / Linssen Collection

The drastic cutbacks by the First Rutte Government resulted in the Theater Instituut Nederland (TIN) and the Muziekcentrum Nederland (MCN) (Dutch Music Center) having their subsidies withdrawn from January 1, 2013. The TIN had important collections in the fields of drama, dance, mime, puppet play, opera and the circus, while the MCN housed four unique archives. The University of Amsterdam realized that the collections of the TIN and MCN might become inaccessible, and decided to transfer them to their Special Collections in January 2013.

A very special section of the TIN circus collection is formed by the Herman Linssen collection (1934). This former notary had been fascinated by the circus since he was a child, and, like Jaap Best, became an avid collector. His collection, started in 1950, comprises 2,700 books, 12,000 programs, 17,000 posters, 100,000 photographs, lots of prints, clippings and magazines – almost too much to count. This renowned collection was donated to the TIN in 2011 (see the video ‘Herman Linssen and his circus collection’ on YouTube) and



Painting Kätchen Carré naast paard in stal. Otto Eerelman. Theatre collection of the Special Collections department of the University of Amsterdam

Painting Oscar Carré. Emil Volkers, 1887. Theatre collection of the Special Collections department of the University of Amsterdam



transferred to the Special Collections two years later. Parts of it were also physically moved to Amsterdam, parts are still with the original owner. Painstaking (analogue) recording ensured that the material can now be used for publications, TV programs and movies. This new section of the Special Collections is currently being digitized.

In addition, the TIN had a number of smaller circus collections: by photographer Heinz Baudert, industry magnate Bernard van Leer – circus lover and founder of Circus Kavaljos – trapeze artist Marius Serierse, horse trainer and circus teacher Valesca Wilke and singer Ria Kuyken. Paintings by animal painter Otto Eerelman and a portrait of Oscar Carré by Emil Volkers form a part of this collection, as do a number of lithographs on circus life.



Research

Because of the expansion of the rail network, the circus took a flight in the nineteenth century. They could easily move around the country and also visit smaller cities. The number of performances per year went up dramatically, which had a positive effect on the business-side as well.

The imperialist attitude of European powers at the time meant that there was a huge interest in exotic cultures and animals, something the circus was able to exploit, for example by presenting large groups of wild animals which would put on a show. Visitors experienced this as a metaphor of how the Europeans ruled the rest of the world. With the same Eurocentric haughtiness, performances by Berbers, Indians, Bantus, Pygmies and Bengal fakirs were put on – the nineteenth-century Europeans couldn't get enough of it!

The circus reacted to world news, which was disseminated through newspapers and magazines which had become more widely available. Natural disasters, wars and other big events were played out as 'pantomime', short spectacular intermezzos in between the circus acts, allowing the artists to show a different side of, primarily, dressage. The Friedländer posters are a rich source of information for research into this form of applied theatre.

Logistically, the circus is also an interesting and educational research object – it was no mean feat to organize tours for such a large group of people and animals, requiring transport and supplies during a 'campaign' which could last months on end. The circus business has also always been at the forefront of technical innovation. The techniques used for tent building are a good example, but the circus was also one of the first to use electric lighting, spotlights and serial light connections. Hydraulic techniques for tent and tribune building and computer-based light and sound designs mean that the circus is still at the technological forefront.

The relationship between the circus and the movie industry is also worthy of research, as the movies have always been interested in the circus. I will only mention a few of the dozens of movies that were made on life at the circus: *Freaks* by Tod Browning (1932),

The Greatest Show on Earth by Cecil B. DeMille (1952), *La Strada* by Federico Fellini (1954), *The Elephant Man* by David Lynch (1980) and *Monsieur Chocolat* by Roschdy Zem (2016), based on the biography by Gérard Noiriel about the first black clown, who achieved national fame in France at the start of the twentieth century.

In short, the circus can serve a surprisingly large group of researchers. From (cultural) historians to movie, theatre, and music scientists, and from technicians, architects and economists – the Amsterdam circus heritage is a true goldmine.



International appeal

The collected circus heritage at the Special Collections attracts more and more international attention, as is shown by the large number of applications for visual material. The website *circusmuseum.nl*, developed by the Teylers Museum for the Jaap Best collection, will be renewed and expanded with the material from the Hartmans collection and TIN collection. As soon as this is complete, the circus database can be linked to Europeana, the European digital platform for cultural heritage. It might also be linked to the World Digital Library (WDL), an initiative of Unesco and the Library of Congress in Washington, which has the same objectives as Europeana. Both are eager to include the impressive material on circus life in their database.

All this makes our existing international contacts even more important. Under the auspices of the World Circus Federation, a group of researchers is currently informally operating with the intention to publish in the broad sense about the circus. In addition to the collections in France, England and the United States, mentioned before, cooperation is possible with the Milner Library of Illinois State University, Columbia University, the Circus World Museum in Baraboo (Wisconsin) and the Stadtmuseum in Munich, Germany. The circus heritage is as international as the circus itself.

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