Since time immemorial the Circus and the circus performers have been great themes in Art and Literature. Especially in French Art the circus theme had become a prominent feature in the late 19th century. The circus was a popular place of entertainment both for artists, who found colourful and exotic subject matter for their paintings, and for wealthy patrons, who might possibly buy these paintings.

**Edgar Degas** (1834-1917) the French Impressionist artist, painted the acrobat “Lady La La”, who had caused a great sensation in Paris, at the Cirque Fernando in 1879. Lady La La is pictured suspended from the rafters of the circus dome by a rope clenched between her teeth.

![Lady La-La](image)

This circus, which later became known as the Cirque Médrano, was situated in Montmartre, which had been a popular venue and sketching-ground for artists for a long time. The Cirque was famous for its trained animal acts and especially for its equestrian acts.

During the same year, 1879, **Auguste Renoir** (1841-1919) another Impressionist artist, painted *The Jugglers* at the Cirque Fernando. (Francisca and Angelina Wartenberg)
In the late 19th century, the Parisian post-impressionist artist Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) was a regular visitor of the Cirque Médrano. For Lautrec the circus was a perfect spectacle of high and low life which, just like the scenes in café-concerts and dance halls, combined the glittering glamour of the bareback rider and the dark elegance of the ringmaster with the comic pathos of the clowns. These three components—rider, circus master and clown—reappear, in various combinations, in nearly all the artist’s circus works of this period.
During the 1890s drink became a growing problem for Toulouse-Lautrec. He suffered a mental break down at the beginning of 1899. The effect on his weakened nervous system was severe, and he was committed to a sanatorium in Neuilly-sur-Seine. While there he was able to demonstrate his lucidity and power of memory; in a burst of artistic energy, he produced from memory a brilliant series of circus drawings in order to convince his doctors he was sane. After 11 weeks he was released, but soon he was drinking again. He spent his last days in his mother’s garden, where he had often painted her, and died in her arms in 1901, shortly before his 37th birthday.

Among more than 300 lithographs produced in the final decade of his life were an album of 11 prints Le Café Concert (1893), 16 lithographs of the entertainer Yvette Guilbert (1894), and a series of 22 illustrations for Jules Renard's Les Histoires naturelles (1899). But none of these works are more significant than *Elles*, a series made in 1896, presenting a sensitive portrayal of brothel life. Toulouse-Lautrec spent long periods observing the actions and behaviour of prostitutes and their clients. The resulting 11 works revealed these individuals as human beings, with some of the same strengths and many of the weaknesses of other members of society.
ELLES
par

Lithographies
éditées par
G. Pellet
9, Quai Voltaire à Paris

Exposées à la PLUME
31, Rue Bonaparte, à partir du
22 Avril 1896
The colour lithograph below belongs to the very important série Elles. The subject is Mlle Cha-U-Kao, a dancer, acrobat and clown who worked at the Moulin Rouge, the New Circus and in Parisian cabaret. She was one of Toulouse-Lautrec’s favourite models and he depicted her several times. Cha-U-Kao owes her Japanese sounding name to the phonetic transcription of the French words *chalut*, which is an acrobatic dance derived from the cancan, and *chaos*, referring to the uproar that occurred when she came on stage.

La clownsse Cha-U-Kao [The Clown Cha-U-Kao]

The sitter is shown in the circus lobby with legs apart and arms folded, a natural and relaxed posture in which it was convenient to relax the muscles. The artist contrasts the black silhouette of the legs and the red of the bench, while the yellow of the fluffy collar adds a touch which sets off the main colour scheme.
Pablo PICASSO (1881-1973)

More than 300 paintings, drawings, engravings, sculptures or photographs of Picasso are related to the circus. From the blue and pink years until engravings of the 1960s, the circus was a recurring theme in the life of Picasso. At the turning of the 19th century, Picasso would go to the circus shows in Barcelona. In Paris, for Picasso and his friends, the circus was always an occasion to meet and to explore art. But it is only at the end of 1904 and 1905 that the circus would become the central subject of the compositions of this period of his life.

During his Blue (1901-1904) and Pink period (1904-1906), Picasso depicted the outcasts of society, including circus workers, beggars, prostitutes, prisoners and artists, in his many paintings. One aspect of 19th century romanticism is that artists were seen as undervalued, social outcasts, and martyrs of cultural refinement. This is a theme on which Picasso elaborates during his Rose Period as he begins to use circus performers as his main source of inspiration. In his work, circus performers would symbolize the artist in general and the martyrdom in particular. Mocked and marginalized by society, the circus artist would perform proudly and earnestly, in dedication to his art.

Picasso was at his peak of painting circus workers during his rose period. He was particularly attracted to circus people, many of whom were his Spanish countrymen. Their agility and pursuit of the art of illusion delighted him.

His attraction to the circus world may have stemmed also from Picasso's affair with a married model named Fernande Olivier, who adored Picasso but refused to leave her husband for him. Picasso and Olivier visited the Circus Médrano several times. Picasso was intrigued by the circus performers. Throughout the rose period, Picasso's images of the circus workers became more and more elegant and sensuous.

One of Picasso's most famous works from this period is the "Family of Saltimbanques." (1905) This painting depicts a group of circus workers who are obviously distressed and displaced. The images convey a deep sorrow and alienation, even from one another.
The French word *saltimbanque* combines the Italian use of saltare, meaning to leap or jump, and banco, meaning the bench or stage surface used by acrobats and circus performers. Picasso drew his inspiration mainly from the Cirque Médrano (formerly The Cirque Fernando), which performed in Paris and had its base in Montmartre, close to Picasso’s studio. He was fascinated by the unusual theatrics and the physical energy of the circus, and he enjoyed the clowns’ silly antics and the many colourful characters eormously. He also felt that the circus performers’ keeping together as a family-like unit while being at odds with conventional society mirrored the bohemian lifestyle of artists.

Picasso focused intensely on the piece and made several changes to it. He even included himself in the figure of the harlequin. The members of Family of Saltimbanques play their distinct roles, but there is a sombre atmosphere hanging over the group. Picasso emphasizes the contrast between circus life and real life: circus people may be able to defy the harsh reality of life, yet they cannot escape it.

Circus performers were regarded as social outsiders, poor but independent. As such, they provided a telling symbol for the alienation of avant-garde artists such as Picasso. Indeed, it has been suggested that the Family of Saltimbanques serves as an autobiographical statement.
In 1917 ballerina Olga Khokhlova (1891-1955) met Picasso while the artist was designing the ballet "Parade" in Rome, to be performed by the Ballet Russe. They married in the Russian Orthodox church in Paris in 1918. She was of high society and enjoyed formal events while Picasso was more bohemian in his interests and pursuits. Their son Paulo was born in 1921 (and died in 1975), influencing Picasso's imagery to turn to mother and child themes. Khokhlova introduced Picasso to high society, formal dinner parties, and all the social niceties attendant on the life of the rich in 1920s Paris. Their son, Paulo, [22] would grow up to be a dissolute motorcycle racer and chauffeur to his father. Khokhlova's insistence on social propriety clashed with Picasso’s bohemian tendencies and the two lived in a state of constant conflict.

Picasso had met his second wife, the Russian dancer Olga Khokhlova, at “Parade”. They pose for the camera in front of the “Parade” poster. The Chinese clown is pictured on the left.

*Parade* was a ballet with music by Erik Satie and a one-act scenario by Jean Cocteau. The ballet was composed 1916-1917 for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The ballet premiered on Friday, May 18th, 1917 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, with costumes and sets designed by Pablo Picasso, choreography by Léonide Massine (who danced), and the orchestra conducted by Ernest Ansermet.
The front of the programme shows Picasso's design of the costume for the Chinese clown, who was the leading ballet dancer in “The Parade”. Music, traffic noises, banging pistols, rattling typewriters, sirens and hooting horns...... The Parisian audience, used to Russian folklore and other exotic styles, were not amused and started booing at the performers. But the avant-garde did appreciate the performance. The illustration is the very first pochoir that was made from Picasso's work. This particular pochoir is extremely rare, because most people didn't keep the programmes after the performance.
Picasso has designed settings and costumes for six ballets altogether.

This is the costume of the Chinese Clown as it was finally made after Picasso's design.
**Fernand LÉGER (1881-1955)**

Fernand Léger is best known for his tightly constructed cubist paintings that emphasize the geometry of an object or even a person, sometimes making them more abstract than representational. Later in life, he started loosening up, becoming more fluid in his style. He especially loved the circus.

Léger joined the bandwagon near the end of his life, after his American sojourn. He created a limited-edition portfolio of 56 prints that he had begun in 1945, after returning to France. It was published in 1950 by Tériade.

![Léger Le Cirque](image)

The circus had become for him a metaphor for the joy of living.
"The earth is round, so why try to play it square? Beneath the sun and beneath the moon, in the clouds that sail gently by, everything is going round...you leave your rectangles, your geometrical windows and you go to the land of circles in action...it's human nature to break through boundaries, to grow, to push towards freedom. Roundness is free; it has no beginning and no end." (Leger Cirque)

'Cirque', published by Edition Teriade in 1950, is a sequence of lithographs which, in images and text, celebrated Leger's delight in the spectacle and the idea of the circus. Bicyclists, acrobats, performing horses, clowns, colour and light - the relationship of human beings to artefacts and nature - these are themes which Leger developed in paintings from the 1930s, culminating in 'La Grand Parade' (1954). The Circus lithographs, where movements and gestures are caught, as in stills from a film, sometimes in close up, show the enduring influence of Leger's brief experiments with the cinema in the 1920s. The compositional device of 'freeing' colour, so that bright bands are placed in front of and behind forms, is used in the lithographs, as in the paintings, to allow an exploration of space and flickering movement. 'Cirque' plays on the fleeting magic of performance and on the sense of the circus ring as eternal cycle - interests which are central to Leger's later work.
The circus offered a modern urban theme linked to the opening of new recreational facilities in Paris and other European cities, and this progressive commodification of leisure was of keen interest to Fernand Léger, particularly with regard to the machine aesthetic he developed to express the energy and advancement of contemporary experience. Cirque Médrano had opened in 1873, and its most eminent depiction was in Seurat’s final masterpiece, Le Cirque (1890-91), a work which greatly inspired Léger’s interest in this subject matter.

The great parade (1890-91)

A masterpiece of Léger, on permanent display at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, is Léger’s The Great Parade: a defining work in the artist’s oeuvre and the result of over one hundred preparatory studies. This mural-size canvas was conceived on a scale appropriate to mass viewing, a factor important both to its subject matter and Leger’s life-long quest to reach a wider public for his work. Effectively balancing the dynamic with the static, The Great Parade is an exuberant work featuring a series of interlocking figures - acrobats, clowns, dancers and riders - created with volumetric solidity and primary colours set within stark black contours. In adopting the circus as a theme, Legér referenced a popular Parisian artistic tradition, but the key impetus for his circus paintings were contemporary developments in the avant-garde, particularly in the concept of simultaneity and the presentation of multiple layers within the picture space.
Marc Chagall (1887 -1985)

Chagall saw circus people as the perfect example of artists who desire to be loved and to achieve their dreams. He identified himself with these people and the representations he made of them can be seen as self-portraits. Contrary to the view of many artists, the circus is for Chagall a happy world, a kind of happy promise. Chagall believes the circus performers to be allegorical figures. They allow him to be a painter-observer. For him painting is a way to escape reality and to experience happiness and joy. "For me, a circus is a magical spectacle, a passing and dissolving like a little world. There is a disquieting circus, a circus of hidden depths. These clowns, riders, acrobats are imprinted on my sight. Why? Why am I moved by their make-up and their grimaces? With them I travel on toward other horizons. Their colours and their painted masks draw me toward other, strange, psychic forms which I long to paint.

Circus! A magical word, a centuries old entertainment parading before us, in which a tear, a smile, a gesture of arm or leg takes on the quality of great art. And what do circus people receive in return? A crust of bread. Night brings them solitude and sadness stretching on to the following day until evening, amid a blaze of electric light, heralds a renewal of the old life. For me, the circus is the most tragic of all dramatic performances. Throughout the centuries, its voice has been the most shrill heard in the quest for the amusement and joy of man. Often it takes on a high poetic form. I seem to see a Don Quixote tilting at windmills, like the inspired clown who has known tears and dreams of human love.
“My circus pitches its Big Top in the sky.
It performs among the clouds,
among the chairs, or in the moon-reflecting windows.
In the streets a man goes by.
He puts out the lights and lamps of the town.
The show is over.”

Marc Chagall, Circus (1967)
This lithograph explores a theme of great interest in surrealist art, the mirror as pathway to another world. The presence of the clown and the acrobat at either end of the mirror also suggests that the circus is a place where we go to be thrilled by shows that we know are not true, hence the staid matron who imagines herself as a high-wire artist, hanging on to the mirror with her hands while her legs are up over her head.
Marcel Vertès - French (1895 - 1961)

Marcel Vertès was an outstanding painter, printmaker, illustrator and fashion designer. Marcel Vertes moved from his native Hungary to Paris during the First World War, where he worked for the satirical magazine Rire, and for the Gazette Du Bon Ton. His work was characterized by its economical use of line and colour. He established himself as one of the most important artistic figures of the 1920s, following in the footsteps of Toulouse-Lautrec, Boutet, and Forain. His work mainly consists of portrayals and scenes of Paris street life, women, the circus, and cabaret acts. The art of Marcel Vertès was at its height during the vibrant and somewhat wild decade of the 1920s. Vertes left a legacy of original lithographs and drawings that superbly capture the spirit of 1920s' Paris.
Shown below is the slipcase of the portfolio Le Cirque (The Circus) by Marcel Vertès. The work contains 14 full page colour lithographs plus text.