

This set of images includes many fine examples of circus posters from the early 1880's when American entrepreneur and cultural icon P.T. Barnum first negotiated the merger of his circus to form "P.T. Barnum's and Great London Combined." The circus posters are significant artifacts of an American cultural institution that has its roots in colonial days on the North American continent and in Europe. In 19th Century America, the circus stands out as one of the most publicly accessible art and performance venues witnessed by a diverse and widely dispersed population. The posters depict famous Barnum acts of the day including female aerialist Zazel, Brustad the Giant with Chemah the Dwarf, and exotic animals like sea lions and baby elephants. All posters were published by the famed Strobridge Lithograph Company of Cincinnati, Ohio.

The printing of the poster sheets from this golden age of the circus has ties to long extant circus marketing traditions as well as the growth in printing technologies during the second half of the 19th Century. In America, "show printing" was one of the earliest specialties in the commercial printing industry when handbills, broadsides, and programs were produced to advertise equestrian shows and circus troupes. The development and improvement of lithography and machine-powered printing techniques by 1880 ushered in a new era of circus advertising when printing methods allowed for the mass, rapid production of beautifully colored posters and readily available date tags that could be affixed to them. The Strobridge Lithograph Co. of Ohio was one of the premiere lithography companies in the United States that did show printing for circuses and was well known for its quality of design and craftsmanship. P.T. Barnum capitalized on the exciting images produced by Strobridge when circus advertising crews pasted posters throughout a region by hand before the circus came to town. His particular preference was for the "single feature style" of poster that focuses on a single performer, animal, or event instead of depicting a large pageant or spectacle; many examples of this poster type can be seen in the library's collection.

From the history of their production to the people and scenes they depict, the posters provide researchers in diverse areas of the humanities and social sciences with rich opportunities for study. Research interests extend beyond the obvious realms of circus history and American folk life and include: marketing techniques and the development of advertising in America; women performers; performer biographies and genealogies; perception and treatment of animals; societal norms and cultural perceptions and depictions of race, ethnicity, and disability; consumer and audience culture and tastes; American and European perceptions of Asia and Africa; and, the study of lithography and print making.

From examining images of similar posters housed at other repositories and through inspection during the conservation assessment, the History Center had determined that these posters used to be bordered on three sides by standard script reading: "P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth & The Great London Circus Combined With Sanger's Royal British Menagerie & Grand International Allied Shows." At some point before the library acquired them, these posters were trimmed down to the "picture portion" of the posters which are on display in this exhibit.