

DOWNLOAD PDF IMAGES FROM THE WORLD BETWEEN : THE CIRCUS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN ART DONNA GUSTAFSON

Chapter 1 : Ghosts of Circus Past – Work in Progress

Images from the World Between is an engaging survey of circus imagery in twentieth-century American art. In her introductory essay, curator Donna Gustafson chronicles the history of the American circus, showing how and why it came to be an important subject for American art.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the height of the Mexican mural renaissance, much art was created in service to propaganda; many of the muralists were extremely powerful and received government-sponsored commissions to support their work. Artists not aligned with the movement had to be creative, independent thinkers, and for a woman to place herself and her art in this position was especially risky. Among the subjects Izquierdo painted during her artistic career were portraits, still-lives, and allegories. But a theme she would return to in many paintings was that of the circus. Through her bold colors and mysterious imagery, Izquierdo captures the circus tradition in her paintings, like snapshots of history. The characters she presents all seem close-knit and entirely of themselves, inhabiting a peculiar world of frozen motion and dark spaces. Essential to this analysis will be a discussion of the long tradition of the carpa, or the traveling tent show, and the circus in Mexico. The history of the circus has deep roots in Mexico. Among the Aztec, many kinds of performers would frequent the courts of the king. Titled *The Totonac Civilization*, it pictures the vast Pre-Columbian city of El Tajin in the present state of Veracruz, which flourished from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. The mural pictures an incredible landscape marked by the Pyramid of the Niches. Crowds gather in front of the pyramid to witness the feat of the voladores who are suspended from a tall pole that is erected in front of the pyramid. The entertainers fly around the pole performing their acrobatic religious ritual. After the Spanish Conquest, European ideas began to cross the ocean. During the 1800s, the European format of performing within a ring and under a tent met the earlier traditions and the carpa was born Brooke 3. The carpa was a uniquely Mexican institution. Brooke also tells us that carpas are distinguished from the purely European circus by their absence of large animal acts and a greater focus on human talent. One could go to a carpa in the late 1800s and expect to see feats of acrobatics, talented singers, plenty of bawdy humor, and a fair amount of political satire. Certain stock characters were common at most carpas. The Payaso was a clown, a singer, and a satirist all rolled into one. It was through these character types that carpa attendees could have a lighthearted laugh at political figures, their social betters, and themselves. The carpa tradition later developed into what we have come to know as the popular music halls, providing an arena for famed Mexican singers such as Pedro Infante – 57 and Jorge Negrete – To do this, one must realize that she was exposed numerous times to both the carpa and circus performances in Mexico. She painted many subjects at different times throughout her career, often painting the circus between other themes in succession. Most of her circus work was done between the years 1920 and 1930, but in 1925 and 1926 were both years she represented many circus scenes. She drew inspiration from memories of the carpa when she was a little girl in her native town of San Juan de los Lagos. In her memoirs written in the third person Izquierdo cites an early experience she had with the carpa. It was an amazing occurrence when she was kidnapped by a circus troupe that had installed themselves in a carpa in the town where the famous Virgin of San Juan was venerated. This violent act marked an impression on her spirit and was never erased from her memory or from her soul. Her childish and beautiful eyes had discovered a colorful and magical world, a world that she presented through her paintings. Her *Images of the Circus* first miracle was recorded in 1925 when a little girl who was part of a circus troupe fell to her death while performing an acrobatic feat. To this effect, Francine Birbragher has stated that the circus was one of the few memories of happiness the little Izquierdo had during her strict Catholic childhood, for Izquierdo lived as an only child in San Juan de los Lagos as well as in Aguascalientes, Torreon, and Saltillo Far in the distant solitude of her childish recollections was the festive panorama of the color and gaiety that is the circus. Throughout her life, Izquierdo remained captivated by the carpa as well as the circus. Izquierdo, who was fascinated by the feats of the performers, befriended many of them. Frequently, Izquierdo, accompanied by her friends, would attend the

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circus performances. Perhaps there she drew the circus acts that were performed, which she would later transfer to the canvas. Izquierdo painted images of the circus in her own style, full of admiration for its visual dynamics. As a theme, the circus was confined to neither Mexican art nor one period in the history of art. During the early twentieth century, an unbreakable link was forged between the world of the circus and the art world. Artists from Europe and the Americas found inspiration in the spectacle. Several artists of this era derived inspiration from circus performers, including the French painter Georges Seurat 91 , the American sculptor Alexander Calder , and Pablo Picasso . His figures are portrayed as outcasts, isolated from society due to their lifestyle. Oftentimes an even greater isolation separates the figures from each other. Picasso was fascinated by the Paris circus performers 1. The circus performers in Paris were considered outsiders and independent vagabonds, and they were close in status to the artists. As Wallace Fowlie suggests, the circus performer was a visual metaphor for an artist finding himself. Her characters, mostly female, are not isolated from each other. In her paintings are families that live and work together, in close-knit groups. In a small watercolor titled *Perros Equilibristas Acrobatic Dogs* , Izquierdo pictures two female performers looking at each other as they guide their dogs in acrobatic tricks. Dark tones give the painting a shadowy, dreamlike quality. The circus performers go about their routines, oblivious to the fact that no audience is there to see them. The characters interact with each other, and each figure performs its own part in the drama. However, the motion of the painting seems stopped and the atmosphere quite heavy. Not one person, save for the viewer, is witness to this show. The benches surrounding the ring remain dark and empty. Izquierdo attended circus shows regularly and knew many of the performers on a personal basis. Does she utilize the empty scene to emphasize the emotional content of her work or to examine the psychology of the performers? The empty theater gives a feeling of loneliness that these performers may feel day to day, living as they do on the fringes of society. It also gives the impression of a stage that is removed from the normal flow of time, as if the actors and acrobats Images of the Circus exist in their own world of color and motion. It is complex, manifesting itself in several ways. She knows them so well that she understands their inner thoughts. Izquierdo sympathizes with the separation they feel from others, and she represents this psychological element of separation as the physical absence of the audience during performances. The performers deny interaction with the viewer. These people have strong ties to each other and nothing else. They move from town to town and the only constants in their lives are the carpa and circus family. We, the viewers, are merely looking in, uninvited. Many were begun by brothers, whose families all joined the business together. All members would lend their unique talents to the good of the carpa. Many performers doubled as stage crew, seamstress, and promoter. Most carpas had to do all of their own promotion, including printing and distribution of flyers. The families traveled a circuit through Mexico, moving from town to town and staying while the money was good. Money was always tight, but the family pulled together to weather all storms. Political tensions rose during the late s, and the Mexican Revolution began early in the next century. She may have gone to see them perform when she was a child. Like so many others, the Carpa Garcia was forced further north to escape the fighting. Women had always been an integral part of the Mexican carpa and circus. They were the wives and daughters of the families. Women were asserting themselves, and the response was mixed. Some were all for the more modern, exciting clothing, others saw the change as an indication of slipping morals that the carpa also came to embody. A new stock character emerged in the carpa at this time, that of the *Vedette*. Women who fit this mold created a dichotomy of respectability and sexual expression that mirrored the view of the two factions. In the paintings, women perform without an audience, some atop costumed horses and others balancing on a tightrope. Their costumes are in sync with the contemporary notion of *Fantasia* found in the carpas. The costumes are very feminine, with ballerina shoes and ruffled skirts. *Caballista del circo Circus Bareback Rider* , Watercolor and gouache on paper. Gift of Thomas Cranfill, Certainly Izquierdo admired these women. In her paintings, the women are physically powerful and proud, but always very feminine. She is dressed in her pleated costume. The arched neck and back of the horse provides the stability for the performer. As an aficionado of the circus, Izquierdo would have been familiar with the most famous female

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performers of the circus in Mexico. The women of the carpa and the circus earned a living by performing. Neither stayed cloistered at home, dependent on a man. Like Izquierdo, the women of the circus offered the idea that a woman can fulfill all these roles and not be diminished in her femininity. The image seems to fit the rest of her series at first glance. The lone figure of a woman is shown as she performs her act in an empty tent. This is no ordinary character though, and the face betrays a secret.

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Donna Gustafson's Images From The World Between: The Circus in 20th Century American Art is something of a mixed bag. On the one hand it does offer a number of images of rare artistic works depicting or inspired by the world of the circus, from the straightforward to the surreal, from impressionist to abstract.