

WHITNEY



Interior Madison Square Garden

CALDER'S CIRCUS AND ITS CONSERVATION STRATEGY

Alexander Calder's great master work, his miniature *Circus*, which the Whitney acquired in 1983, has been a candidate for special attention ever since conservation was made a priority at the Museum in 2001. In that year the Whitney, by appointing Carol Mancusi-Ungaro as associate director for conservation and research, took the first steps toward building the Whitney Conservation Department into the widely emulated model it is today.

Interdisciplinary research of the history of *Calder's Circus* and physical state began in 2006, and the strategy that evolved included the following recommendations:

- to preserve all items of *Calder's Circus*, including miscellaneous items whose purpose remained unknown;
- to preserve all films and film footage as primary evidence of his *Circus* as a performance work of art;
- to search for remaining unidentified files, films, photos, and other documents to broaden and complete our understanding of *Calder's Circus*;
- to match figures and all ancillary items, music, and sound effects to their respective acts;
- to preserve and transcribe audio and musical vinyl records to more permanent media;

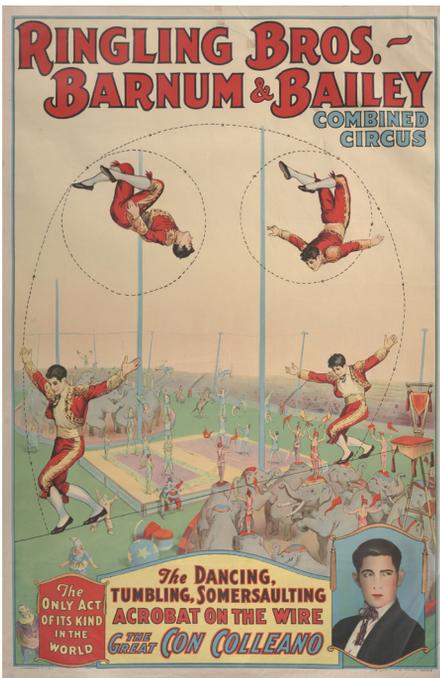
to treat *Calder's Circus* in a minimal and reversible manner, by preserving the worn aspect of the items as evidence of original use and age; by judiciously treating them or, as a last resort, replacing them if their condition became unsustainable;

to perform scientific instrumental analysis of selected materials that Calder used to make his *Circus*, giving priority to the ones most prone to deterioration such as paper, leather strings, threads, and fabrics;

to search the market for contemporary matches for these materials to be used for testing and future treatments; and

to name all items using Calder's vocabulary.

The conservation of *Calder's Circus* has been comprehensive and interdisciplinary in ways that were unimaginable at the start. Part I of the research began for the exhibition *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926-1933*, which opened at the Whitney in 2008 (and subsequently traveled to the Centre Pompidou in 2009), where, for the first time, characters that played together were reunited by acts, and the mechanisms Calder engineered for setting his figures into motion were identified and installed with the ensemble. Part II of the research continued with grants from the Getty Foundation, The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation, and the Robert Lehman Foundation. This multi-year, international initiative has required the expertise and ingenuity of a broad spectrum of scholars and experts, the deep resources and generosity of institutions, archives, and laboratories on both sides of the Atlantic, and a widespread coordination of effort. Following Calder's own odyssey, the journey of conserving his *Circus* has been transcontinental, exploratory, and innovative, leading to exciting new directions for scholarship.



Circus Poster, *Con Colleano the Dancing Acrobat on Wire*, n.d., ink on paper, Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection, Sarasota, FL



Cover of the 1925 *Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey program*, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY

CALDER'S CIRCUS CONSERVATION TEAM

CAROL MANCUSI-UNGARO, *project director*, assembled the project team, with whom she devised the comprehensive preservation of *Circus*; and orchestrated and oversaw its completion. Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro holds a joint appointment as Associate Director of Conservation and Research at the Whitney and as Founding Director of the Center for Technical Study of Modern Art at the Harvard Art Museums. She has written on the techniques of Jasper Johns, Brice Marden, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Barnett Newman, and pursues research documenting the materials and techniques of living artists, and other issues pertaining to the conservation of modern art.

ELEONORA NAGY, *conservator*, specialized in the treatment of modern and contemporary art; acted as chief conservator and the lead conservation/technical researcher for the project. Ms. Nagy holds Masters in Fine Arts and in Art Conservation. Along with directing Modern Sculpture Conservation, an LLC with notable institutional and private clientele, she has been a consulting sculpture conservator for the Whitney Museum of American Art since 2000. Her past long-term institutional experience includes the Guggenheim Museum and the Canadian Conservation Institute. Recognized for inventing new conservation methods, and taking on and resolving unusual projects, her expertise includes pioneer research in industrial processes and materials used for making modern art, and in particular Minimalist art. She has also published and lectured extensively on these topics. Her interest focuses on the works of Donald Judd, Alexander Calder, David Smith, and David Hammons. Her recent project for the Whitney was the conservation of works in the *Paul Thek: Diver, A Retrospective* exhibition (2010–11). Ms. Nagy has worked with the Calder Foundation for the last 15 years and is a founding member of the Conservation Committee of the Donald Judd Foundation.

JOAN SIMON, *chief art historical researcher*, focused on movement in *Calder's Circus* by searching French, U.S., and British moving pictures of the period and discovered in these (as well as in contemporary circus posters) the precise reportorial aspects of his *Circus*, initiating a profoundly new understanding of this iconic work's formal and engineering inventions. Ms. Simon is an independent curator, writer, and arts administrator based in Paris. As curator-at-large for the Whitney Museum of American Art (2004–09), she organized *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933* (2008), with Brigitte Leal, in a partnership with the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and *Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer* (2009), the first comprehensive retrospective of the work of cinema's first woman director and studio owner, whose careers in France and the U.S. spanned 1896 and 1920. Simon was a contributor to the catalogues *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure* (2007) and *Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect* (organized by the MCA Chicago and the Beyeler Foundation), which traveled to the Whitney 2010. Simon has published extensively on contemporary art for numerous books and journals, including *Parkett* and *Art Press*, and *Art in America*, where she is a contributing editor. Her book, *Ann Hamilton: An Inventory of Objects* (2007), was named one of the Outstanding Academic Books of the year by *Choice Magazine* and honored by the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts).

ANITA DUQUETTE, *archivist*, acted as the research liaison between curator and conservators, procuring and securing films, newsreels, photographs, digital files, books, and publications to complete a *Calder Circus Archives* for future researchers. Ms. Duquette managed outside research, secured rights, developed research contacts, and discovered new documents, including vintage photographs. She has been the Manager of Rights and Reproductions at the Whitney since 1973. Duquette safeguards Museum copyright and arranges freelance photography of the collection and exhibitions. She assisted author,

curator, and donor Jean Lipman with her books *Alexander Calder and his Magical Mobiles* and *Calder Creatures, Great and Small*. She has secured and licensed images for encyclopedic projects such as the two-volume Whitney exhibition catalogue, *American Century: Art and Culture 1900–2000*, and its website. She also gained rights for use of photographs and films in the *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933* exhibition, publication, and website.

SELECTED CONTRIBUTORS

CONSULTANTS

STEVE BERGER, *musician*, transferred music from Calder's original records, which were played during performances of *Calder's Circus*.

KEN BERKELEY, *acrobat*, improved our understanding of movement, and performed in documentary film.

GINA BIANCO, *textile conservator*, assisted in evaluating the condition of *Circus* items and sourced replacement fabrics.

ANNIE COHEN-SOLAL, *professeur des universités en délégation, CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), Paris/Research Fellow at Tisch School of the Arts, NYU; former Cultural Counselor to the French Embassy in the U.S. (1989–93); author (Sartre: A Life, Painting American, and Leo & His Circle)*, contributed to the catalogue, *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933*.

MATTHEW CUSICK, *acrobat*, contributed to our understanding of movement, and performed in documentary film.

BILL IRWIN, *actor and clown*, graduate of Oberlin College and Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey's Clown College, and recipient of MacArthur Genius Grant, contributed to audio guide for *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933*.

JONATHAN NOSAN, *acrobat/contortionist*, explained Calder's acrobat act seen in the archival films.

PEPE KARMEL, *associate professor of fine arts, New York University; author/editor (Picasso and the Invention of Cubism, Jackson Pollock: Key Interviews, Articles, and Reviews)*, contributed to the catalogue, *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933*.

HENRY PETROSKI, *Aleksandar S. Vesic Professor of Civil Engineering and professor of history at Duke University, author (The Essential Engineer: Why Science Alone Will Not Solve our Global Problems; The Evolution of Useful Things, How Everyday Artifacts—From Forks and Pins to Paper Clips and Zippers—Came to be as They are)*, contributed to the Whitney exhibition catalogue, *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933*.

ARNAUD PIERRE, *professeur en histoire de l'art contemporain à l'université de Paris Sorbonne–Paris IV, author (Calder, mouvement et réalité and Calder, la sculpture en mouvement)*, contributed to the exhibition catalogue, *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933*.

MARVIN SCHWARTZ, *photographer, actor, and comedian*, photographed Calder's *Circus* and Alexander Calder at the Whitney Museum in 1970 for the book and exhibition *Calder's Circus, 1972*, images that were instrumental in research for this project.

CAROLINE SIMONDS, *clown; founder/director of Le Rire Médecin; author, with Bernie Warren, of Le Rire Médecin: Journal du docteur Girafe (The Clown Doctor Chronicles)*, contributed to audio guide for *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926–1933*.

INSTITUTIONS

THE CALDER FOUNDATION ARCHIVES, NEW YORK

The following individuals made significant contributions to this project: **Alexander S.C. Rower**, *president*; **Jessica Holmes**, *deputy director*; **Terry Roth**, *senior researcher*; **Alexis Marotta**, *director of archives*; **Lauren Barach**, *archivist*; **Susan Dam**, *researcher*; **Alec Cumming**, *IT administrator*; **Lily Lyons**, *assistant to the director*.

ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, WASHINGTON, DC

Repository of Calder's scrapbook, including early reviews and other documents of his performance of *Calder's Circus* in Paris and New York, and throughout Europe, in particular reviews by French circus critics Fréjaville and Legrand-Chabrier.

BIBLIOTHÈQUE KANDINSKY/CENTRE DE DOCUMENTATION ET DE RECHERCHE DU MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE-CENTRE DE CRÉATION INDUSTRIELLE, PARIS

The following personnel made significant contributions to this project: **Agnès de Bretagne**, *head of periodicals*; **Didier Schulmann**, *curator at the Musée national d'art moderne*; **Anne-Marie Zucchelli**, *head of archives*.

BRITISH PATHÉ, LONDON

Repository of documentary circus footage of the 1920s and 1930s.

CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS

Calder's Circus was largely made and often performed in Paris between 1926 and 1931, and the work was a key element in the show and its preparatory research. The following staff members made significant contributions to the exhibition, *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926-1933*, co-organized with the Whitney Museum of American Art: **Alain Seban**, *president*; **Alfred Pacquement**, *director*; **Brigitte Leal**, *chief curator of historical collections*; **Didier Schulmann**, *head of collections management*; **Quentin Bajac**, *chief curator, department of photography*; **Nathalie Ernoult**, *historian*.

CANADIAN CONSERVATION INSTITUTE, OTTAWA, ONTARIO

The following conservators contributed greatly to the research: **Carol Dignard** and **Janet Mason** advised on leather treatments; **Lyndsie Selwyn**, *senior conservation scientist*, advised on white corrosion product on wire.

GAUMONT PATHÉ ARCHIVES, PARIS

Repository of documentary footage of French and American circuses of the 1920s and 1930s. **Manuela Padoan**, *Director, Gaumont Pathé Archives*.

GRAND RAPIDS HISTORY & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ARCHIVES, GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC LIBRARY, MICHIGAN

Tim Gleisner, *archivist, history and special collections*, advised on archive of the Bellclaire Brothers who performed a vaudeville act that was the basis for Calder's "Two Acrobats act."

LEATHER CONSERVATION CENTRE, NORTHAMPTON, UNITED KINGDOM

The following conservators participated in the project: **Yvette A. Fletcher** advised on leather testing methods and conservation options; **Anne Lama** analyzed leather samples.

LES DOCUMENTS CINÉMATOGRAPHIQUES, PARIS

Brigitte Berg, *director*. Instrumental in providing access to Jean Painlevé's films as administrator of the Painlevé estate.

MUCEM (MUSÉE DES CIVILISATIONS DE L'EUROPE ET DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE [MUSEUM OF CIVILISATIONS FROM EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN], PARIS (soon-to-be based in Fort Saint-Jean, France)

This archive includes the collections of the former Musée nationale des Arts et Traditions Populaires (Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions) in the Bois de Boulogne; the archives of the sisters Marthe et Juliette Vesque, including their collection of Notebooks (1904–47) documenting circus performances and their related circus drawings, in particular drawings of the Fratellini brothers trio of clowns that permitted identification and sources for certain elements of Calder's "Little Clown." **Mme. Christophe**, head, *historical document department*.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Scott Gerson, *paper conservator*, assisted in evaluating *Calder's Circus* items and performed treatment on one of the figures.

NEWSFILM ARCHIVE, THOMAS COOPER LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Ben Singleton, *production manager*, assisted in locating Fox Movietone newsreels pertaining to Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus.

ROBERT L. PARKINSON LIBRARY AND RESEARCH CENTER, CIRCUS WORLD MUSEUM, BARABOO, WISCONSIN

Peter Shrake, *Archivist*, assisted in locating early circus films.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

Andrew Lins, *conservation scientist/metals specialist*, advised on wire production from the 1920s.

JOHN AND MABLE RINGLING MUSEUM OF ART, SARASOTA, FLORIDA

The following individuals made significant contributions to this project:

Fred Dahlinger Jr., *curator of circus history*; **Heidi Taylor**, *assistant registrar*, *Tibbals Digital Collection*.

STRAUS CENTER FOR CONSERVATION AND TECHNICAL STUDIES, HARVARD ART MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Narayan Khandekar, *senior conservation scientist*, analyzed leather, and advised on analytical methods.

TOY & MINIATURE MUSEUM OF KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

Kristie Dobbins, *curator*, advised on the "Humpty Dumpty Circus" toy (c. 1900), manufactured by Albert Schoenhut.

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

The following staff supported all phases of this project: **Heather Cox**, *conservation coordinator*; **Lauren DiLoreto**, *exhibition coordinator*; **Kate Hahn**, *exhibitions assistant*; **Barbi Spieler**, *senior registrar*; **Beverly Parsons**, *former senior registrar*; **Joshua Rosenblatt**, *head preparator*; **G.R. Smith**, *art handler, supervisor*; **Caitlin Bermingham**, *art handler*; **Graham Miles**, *art handler*; **Melissa Cohen**, *assistant registrar*; **Marianna Pegno** and **Berit Potter**, *former rights and reproductions assistants*; **Julie McKim**, *curatorial assistant/photo editor*; **Stephanie Schumann**, **Anya Bondell**, **Marisa Sanchez**, **Molly Epstein**, *research assistants*; **Eloise Owens**, *intern*, performed archival research on the pivotal 1925 performance at Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus, matching up real performers with Calder's creations based on newsreels and film documentaries.