EDWIN MOXON'S EMBROIDERED TRUNKS (C.1880S)

A trip to the circus

The second post in this trilogy, moves away from the formal theatrical space and elevated artistic circles associated with Terry's beetlewing dress, to examine a very different performance arena. It was prompted by a pair of vibrant blue silk 'trunks', hand embroidered with pansies, believed to date from the late 1880s and originally worn by the foot juggler and travelling circus performer, Edwin Moxon (1857-1945) **[Figure 1].**

These flamboyant shorts formed part of an ensemble which was designed to catch the eye, and capture the imagination, of the audience. They needed to make an impact. Elements of their original splendour can be traced in the now tarnished metallic braid which edges the waistband and centre front hem. This braid, like the still luminescent silk embroidery of the pansies and the blue silk satin ground fabric, would have sparkled under lighting. But both are faded and stained. The silk is shattering at the side seams, the crotch and centre front fastening are faded and worn, and the cotton lining has become discoloured, both by perspiration, and the resulting dye bleed from the blue exterior. They would have been worn over a plain full body leotard (a garment which takes its name from French acrobat and aerialist Jules Léotard [1838-1870]) and potentially with a matching decorative neck-piece, neither of which have survived **[Figure 2].** Though great care and attention clearly went into the design and construction of these shorts, these were working clothes and their current condition reflects not simply the century that has passed since they were first created, but also the physical demands, and physicality, of Moxon's performance.

As these shorts demonstrate, costumes, and circus costumes in particular, are garments designed for hard, repeated, wear and created with immediate impact and practicality, rather than long term preservation, in mind. Though the damage they accumulate through performance often detracts from their original visual appeal, these signs of wear arguably add to their historical value and interest. Joseph Roach, for instance, has identified what he terms the 'kinesthetic imagination' a 'faculty of memory' which, he suggests, provides 'a way of thinking about movements - at once remembered and reinvented - the otherwise unthinkable.'[1] Tears, sweat stains, fading and strained seams, provide tangible evidence of the physical body and movement patterns of their original wearers, which is rarely recorded in written and visual sources.[2] Costumes such as Moxon's shorts can therefore help researchers activate their 'kinesthetic imagination.' By examining them closely, and considering how and where they have accumulated damage, it becomes possible to rediscover, and reanimate, the bodies which once inhabited them.

'Strange, Instructive, Amazing and Amusing sights'[3]

The individual generally believed to have established the blueprint for the modern circus is Philip Astley (1742-1814). An ex-cavalry man, it was his expert horsemanship which first inspired the Riding School which he and his wife, Patty, built on a site near Waterloo station, London.[4] The School provided a venue for formal teaching in the morning and enthralling equestrian tricks in the evening. Racing round the 42 foot ring at speed, the Astleys used centrifugal force to help them balance on the backs of their mounts whilst they carried out an increasingly impressive and daring range of routines. Accounts of the couples performances were soon featuring in the press, and on the 30 of May 1768 the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* described how:

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[1] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)16-17.
[2] Veronica Isaac. Towards a New Methodology for Working with Historic Theatre Costume: A Biographical Approach Focussing on Ellen Terry's (1847-1928) 'Beetlewing Dress', *Studies in Costume and Performance,* 2.2 (2017): 115-136.
[3] Advertisement for Barnum and Bailey's circus, 'The Greatest Show on Earth', opening at Olympia, London, 11 November 1889.
[4] n.a. 'The Story of Circus.' Victoria & Albert Museum.

> Mr and Mrs Astley ride two horses both together at one time, and yet they only have two to ride on – she leaps the bar between two horses at full speed she rides two horses with one foot in each saddle and fires a pistol – she leaps the bar on a single horse and she exhibits on full speed the different guards made use of by Elliots Prussians and Hellian Hussars... also the manner in which Elliots charged the French troops in Germany in the year 1761 […].[5]

Further acts featuring acrobats, jugglers, rope dancers, clowns, lion tamers and strongmen (many of whom had previously performed in the fairs and pleasure gardens of London and Paris) were swiftly added to the programme.[6] As his celebrity grew Astley was reported to be earning up to 40 guineas days from his shows. and Marius Kwint notes how surviving advertisements suggest his audiences encompassed 'the 'Nobility and Gentry', as well as many more ordinary Londoners and tourists who could afford the basic sixpence for standing-room.'[7] In 1780 Astley's success had enabled him to establish 'a permanent covered 'Amphitheatre' at the foot of Westminster Bridge, a second base in the Rue Faubourg du Temple in Paris, and another in Dublin.'[8]

Two years later, however, Astley's Amphitheatre was facing intense competition from the 'more innovative and luxurious Royal Circus' which Charles Dibdin (1745-1816) opened nearby. A composer, musician, dramatist, novelist and actor, it was Dibdin who reputedly first used the term 'circus' for this form of entertainment. He also sought to turn the circus into a 'hybrid of theatre by introducing a mixed programme of pantomimes on stage and feats in the ring.'[9]

Despite continued competition from Dibdin (together with a growing range of other trick riders) and the added disaster of the two fires which destroyed the Amphitheatre in the 1790s and again in 1803, Astley's continued to flourish. The interior had become more ornate over time and the stage had been strengthened to take the weight of further horses.[10] This made the venue an attractive proposition for the famous circus equestrian Andrew Ducrow (1793-1842) who took over the management of Astley's Amphitheatre in 1824. **[Figure 3]**

At grand circuses, such Dibdin's Royal Circus and Astley's Amphitheatre spectators could expect to see a wide variety of acts and performers. The dazzling equestrian acts were the centrepiece of the show and, in addition to heart-stopping tricks and feats of strength for which the Astley's first became famous, these expanded to include spectacular dramas mounted on horseback, featuring extravagant scenery and costumes. These dramatic productions would be interspersed with appearances from clowns; acrobats; rope dancers; trained animals (both exotic and domestic) and strongmen. **[Figure 4]**

Though figures such as Astley, Dibdin and Ducrow played a significant part in shaping the evolution and identity of the circus, the fixed and grand arenas in which they performed were unusual. Most circus entertainments travelled to their audiences, with grander circuses staging parades to announce their arrival in a town and to drum up trade.[11] Printed bills, newspaper advertisements and commercial photographs were also used to publicise the imminent arrival of a circus and its celebrated performers (be they human or animal). In the 1890s, for instance, Newsome's circus promised prospective audiences the opportunity

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[5] Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, Monday, 30 May 1768 quoted in Vanessa Toulmin. 'My wife to conclude performs the rest' – Patty Astley the first lady of circus. *Early Popular Visual Culture* 16:3 (2018): 290-300.
[6] n.a. 'The Story of Circus.' Victoria & Albert Museum.
[7] Marius Kwint, 'Circus' in David Wiles (Ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 212-3.
[8] Marius Kwint, 'Circus' in David Wiles (Ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 213.
[9] Marius Kwint, 'Circus' in David Wiles (Ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 212-3.
[10] n.a. 'The Story of Circus.' Victoria & Albert Museum.
[11] n.a. 'The Story of Circus.' Victoria & Albert Museum. Web. 26 Jul 2020. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-circus

to marvel at 'daring acrobatic feats' from 'the greatest tightrope dancer in the universe' and 'renowned professors of the equestrian art' **[Figure 5]**

Several early touring circuses were run by families, with all those old enough to perform participating in multiple acts and several shows a day.[12] These family circuses tended to be smaller in scale with only a few acrobats, a clown and perhaps a tightrope walker. Whatever its size, however, the company invariably included as many horses as they could afford and it was the breath-taking equestrian acts and their 'trick riding' which set the circus apart.[13]

Whilst large canvas tents had provided temporary performance spaces from the 1820s, the American 'air-walker' Richard Sands (c.1861) has been credited with introducing the spectacular tents (or 'Big-Tops') now associated with circuses. He brought his troop over to England in the 1842 and an article in the *Liverpool Mercury* marvelled at Sand's:

> 'splendid and novel Pavilion, made after an entirely new style, with the most costly interior decorations and appointments forming at once a magnificent spacious Roman Amphitheatre and Arena of the Arts, the whole of which is erected in a few hours; and capable of holding several thousand persons.'[14]

By the 1850s the large scale tents and even portable circus buildings were touring not only Britain, but also Europe and America. The popularity, and international profile, of circuses and circus acts increased markedly from the mid-nineteenth century. Expanding railway network made travelling much easier for both performers and their audiences, and from the 1870s, huge circuses were trekking across Europe and America with two or three trainloads of equipment'[15] As importantly, audiences were not only more mobile: the reduction of the working week from 6 to five and half days meant that many also had more official 'leisure time.'[16]

A Diverse Performance Space

As Michael Pickering has observed, 'The circus was neither high nor low culture. It was a promiscuous mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous.'[17] Audiences often encompassed the highest and lowest ranks of society, and performances ranged from formal, carefully planned spectacles presented in ornate, purpose built amphitheatres, to ad hoc tricks and turns, performed to elicit coins from crowds in bustling town squares, or at public events. **[Figure 6]**

Indeed, the circus represents one of the most diverse forms of performance of this period and this diversity extended beyond the status of the venue and audience members, to include the artists appearing on circus's varied stages. Vanessa Toulmin has played a major part in highlighting the degree to which '[…]Victorian circus in the United Kingdom and Europe could provide an arena where exceptional skill prevailed and flourished despite prevailing racist attitudes of the time.'[18] Whilst laws surrounding segregation in America often exiled people of colour to backstage roles, or, all too frequently, the 'sideshow' or 'freakshow', within Britain and Europe black performers were often present in the ring.[19]

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[12] n.a. 'The Story of Circus.' Victoria & Albert Museum. Web. 26 Jul 2020. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-circus
[13] Brenda Assael. *The Circus and Victorian Society*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005, 3
[14] Quoted in George Speaight, *A History of the Circus* (London: Tantivy Press, 1980), 43.
[15] n.a. 'The Story of Circus.' Victoria & Albert Museum. Web. 26 Jul 2020. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-circus
[16] Brenda Assael. *The Circus and Victorian Society*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005, 2
[17] Michael Pickering, "Review: The Circus and Victorian Society." Victorian Studies 49.2 (Winter 2007): 384.
[18] Vanessa Toulmin. "Black Circus Performers in Victorian Britain." Early Popular Visual Culture: Celebrating 250 Years of Circus. 16.3 (2018): 284.
[19] Vanessa Toulmin. "Black Circus Performers in Victorian Britain." Early Popular Visual Culture: Celebrating 250 Years of Circus. 16.3 (2018): 278.

In *Black Victorians/Black Victoriana* Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina draws attention to the life and career of Pablo Fanque (1796-1871). Born William Darby in 1796, he initially achieved success 'dancing the tight-rope' and subsequently gained a reputation for being an extremely skilled 'equestrian artiste'.[20] In 1841 Fanque became the first black circus owner and his circuses, which drew enthusiastic crowds, toured England for nearly thirty years.[21]

Just as Fanque's career was fading Eph Thompson (1859-1909) was becoming famous across Europe. An African American born elephant trainer, his fame was built on for an act which involved up to seven elephants performing an incredible range of tricks and routines.[22] At the same time Olga Albertine Brown (1858-c.1919) was earning equal renown for her impressive performances on the high wire and trapeze. An iron jaw performer, with biceps recorded at 38.5cms in width, she could do a two-handed press with a man weighing 70 kilos hanging from her jaw. Her signature act included hanging from a trapeze upside down with a cannon weighing 150 pounds between her thighs, which was then fired![23] Edgar Degas's 1879 painting *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando,* captured Brown mid-performance **[Figure 7].** Soaring high above the ground, Brown's athletic body is suspended from a hook clenched between her teeth: as was standard practice until the late 1890s, there is no safety net to catch her should she fall.

Edwin Moxon (1857-1945)

The performer who wore the costume that inspired this post did not soar through the air like Brown, but was equally skilled. Born in Reading in 1857, Edwin (also known as Ted) Moxon literally ran away from home to join the circus when he was 17. Fortunately his career choice provided a wise one, and he went on to perform his foot-juggling act in circuses and variety theatres around the world.

Like many circus performers, Moxon had an itinerant career, moving between circuses and variety theatres to find work. This was not unusual and those unable to gain employment with a circus, might also find work in the theatre. Indeed, as the popularity of circuses grew, it became common practice for an evening show at the Music Hall to include performances from jugglers and aerial acts.[24]

Moxon performed in Russia for seven years and spoke several languages fluently – a useful skill when travelling across Europe and beyond. His numerous tours included trip to India as part of Wilson's Circus in Calcutta, where he appeared with his Magic Tom-Tom act, and alongside the Moxon Brothers in their 'wonderful balancing act' with a pyramid of chairs. **[Figure 8]**

He specialised in 'foot-juggling', which, as the name suggests, involved juggling a variety of objects with feet, rather than hands. As the poster Moxon produced to advertise his own act illustrates, jugglers regularly performed whilst balancing on another object and might appear in a group or as a solo turn. **[Figure 9].** Many variety and circus performers created their own posters which – like business cards or CVs - could be sent to prospective managers when applying for work. When successful in obtaining a position, these posters could be 'over-posted' by the performer or manager to include the name of future venues and appearance dates.[25]

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[20] Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina (ed). *Black Victorians/Black Victoriana*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, (2003), 20-38.

[21] Dash, Mike. "Pablo Fanque's Fair". 8 September 2011. SmithsonianMag.com. Web. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/pablo-fanques-fair-71575787/

[22] Vanessa Toulmin. "Black Circus Performers in Victorian Britain." *Early Popular Visual Culture: Celebrating 250 Years of Circu*s. 16.3 (2018): 273.

[23] Vanessa Toulmin. "Black Circus Performers in Victorian Britain." Early Popular Visual Culture: Celebrating 250 Years of Circus. 16.3 (2018): 273-4.

[24] n.a. 'The Story of Circus.' Victoria & Albert Museum. Web. 26 Jul 2020. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-circus

[25] n.a. 'Poster advertising the foot-juggling act of Edwin Moxon (1857-1945), colour lithograph by Creber, Plymouth, ca.1880'. *Search the Collections*. Victoria and Albert Museum.

Edwin, was not the only Moxon to join the circus. He had thirteen children and when they were old enough, the two eldest children were trained to join him in the family act, the Moxon Trio **[Figure 10].** A photograph of Moxon from c.1893 shows him standing with his eldest children. The family are wearing an array of costumes – the contrasting styles reflecting the variety of turns they could perform. Moxon's costume is particularly interesting. He has adapted a version of the 'white-tie' ensemble (with waistcoat, jacket, bowtie) then worn for formal or evening events to suit his act, substituting the straight trousers which would customarily complete the outfit, with black breeches and tights **[Figure 11]**.

This photograph of Moxon, and his stunning pansy embroidered shorts were donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum by his grand-daughter, Judy. Judy was the daughter of Moxon's thirteenth child, Eileen who, like her father, was a foot-juggler: performing in circus and cabaret using the stage name Levanda. In the 1940s, she was joined by her own daughter and the two appeared as Levanda and Van. By the 1960s Judy Moxon had begun forging her own independent career. Carrying on the family tradition, she travelled the world, performing the tricks which had been passed down from her grandfather.[26] **[Figure 12]**

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n.a. Photograph of Judy Moxon (b.1932) performing foot juggling, ca.1960. *Search the Collections*. Victoria and Albert Museum. Museum Number S.548-2014.

[26] n.a. Photograph of Judy Moxon (b.1932) performing foot juggling, ca.1960. *Search the Collections*. Victoria and Albert Museum. Museum Number S.548-2014. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283202/photograph-of-judy-moxon-performing-photograph-unknown/]

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283202/photograph-of-judy-moxon-performing-photograph-unknown/]

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1. A museum record shot of the 'Trunks' worn by the foot-juggling acrobat Edwin Moxon (1857-1945), embroidered silk with metal filigree trim, lined with calico c.1880s. © Victoria & Albert Museum. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283140/acrobats-costume-theatre-costume-unknown/

Figure 2. Hand coloured and hand tinted sepia photograph of Jules Léotard. Late 19th century. © Victoria & Albert Museum. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O237482/guy-little-theatrical-photograph-photograph-unknown/

Figure 3. Thomas Rowlandson. Astley's Amphitheatre from Microcosm of London, 1808-10. © British Library. https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/illustration-of-astleys-amphitheatre

Figure 4. Unknown artist. Poster for Astley's Circus in Westminster. 1838. © British Library. https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/circus-poster-living-lions-at-astleys

Figure 5. Poster advertising Newsome's Grand Circus, Middlesborough, c.1890 © Victoria & Albert Museum. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1168827/poster-s-w-theakston/

Figure 6. William Powell Frith. Derby Day. Oil on canvas. 1856-8. © Tate. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/frith-the-derby-day-n00615

Figure 7. Edgar Degas. *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando.* Oil on canvas. 1879 © National Gallery. https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hilaire-germain-edgar-degas-miss-la-la-at-the-cirque-fernando

Figure 8. Playbill advertising the 'Grand Viceregal Night' at Wilson's Great World Circus appearing in Calcutta, India, ca. 1880. © Victoria & Albert Museum. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283187/grand-viceregal-night-at-wilsons-poster-cambrian-press/

Figure 9. Poster advertising the foot-juggling act of Edwin Moxon (1857-1945), colour lithograph by Creber, Plymouth, ca.1880. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283178/poster-advertising-the-foot-juggler-poster-creber-theophilus/

Figure 10. Poster advertising the foot-juggling act of Edwin Moxon (1857-1945), colour lithograph by Creber, Plymouth, ca.1880. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283188/poster-advertising-the-moxon-trio-poster-creber-theophilus/

Figure 11. Photograph of the acrobat Edwin Moxon and his eldest children. c.1893. © Victoria & Albert Museum. https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283189/photograph-of-the-acrobat-edwin-photograph-atelier-wulbern/

Figure 12. Photograph of Judy Moxon (b.1932) performing foot juggling, ca.1960. © Victoria & Albert Museum. http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1283202/photograph-of-judy-moxon-performing-photograph-unknown/