



John Stuart Curry
American, 1897 - 1946

Circus Elephants

1932

oil on canvas

overall: 64 x 91.8 cm (25 3/16 x 36 1/8 in.)

framed: 92.1 x 120 x 3.8 cm (36 1/4 x 47 1/4 x 1 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right: John Stuart Curry / 1932

Gift of Admiral Neill Phillips in memory of Grace Hendrick Phillips 1976.50.1

ENTRY

John Stuart Curry experienced severe professional and personal difficulties during the early years of the Great Depression: his work was attacked by conservative critics in Kansas, his finances were in disarray, he was drinking heavily, and his wife was terminally ill. Seeking artistic inspiration, in April 1932 he accompanied the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus on its spring tour for about 10 weeks, departing from Manhattan and traveling through Washington, DC; Pennsylvania; New Jersey; and southern Connecticut. [1] Possibly his interest in the subject was piqued by the success of Juliana Force's *The Circus in Paint* exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club in 1929, an event that critic Lloyd Goodrich had pronounced "the gayest and most original show of the season." [2]

During the three months that Curry spent with the circus he made numerous sketches that served as the basis for paintings and lithographs he produced throughout the 1930s. After returning to his Westport, Connecticut, studio he painted his two best-known circus subjects: *The Flying Codonas* (1932, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) and *Circus Elephants*. [3] This was around the time that his wife, Clara Derrick, died in July 1932, an event that plunged the artist

into what a close friend described as "an emotional crisis, the agony of which will never be known, for he tore himself away from those whom he might have taken into his confidence." [4] Noting the "desperate intensity" with which the artist painted these exotic human and animal subjects at the circus, his biographer Lawrence E. Schmeckebier wrote: "For Curry the circus was not simply an escape from life but to the contrary: it was a means of recovering that dynamic spirit and vitality which he feared the pedantic study of nature and artistic form was crushing from him." [5] Curry's second wife, Kathleen Gould, later recollected that he had enjoyed painting the circus scenes more than any other experience in his career, and that he had admired the performers as "real people" who possessed the capacity for hard work and self-discipline. [6]

Elephants were regarded as the main attraction and mark of a successful circus—the more elephants, the more important the circus. [7] Curry described the circumstances that led him to paint the elephants in an interview recorded for a children's radio program. Late one afternoon he had begun to draw a group of Ubangi—women from Kyabé village in Chad with pierced and stretched lips. When they objected to his presence and demanded that he leave, he turned his attention to the elephants. The artist's interview reveals his fascination with the animals' forms, and especially their eyes:

Elephants look easy to draw but they really are not. It is hard to get the feeling of balance and movement as well as their bulk. If you will notice elephants are always moving and swaying back and forth on their feet. . . . How should you go about drawing an elephant? Begin with the large circular shapes first: a big round egg for the body, and remember that it should be tilted up in front, for you will observe that an elephant is higher at the shoulder than the hips. Then continue with the cylindrical shapes of the legs, head, and trunk. Draw them loosely so you can get the action of the animal at once. You then can make a more careful outline of the body over these forms and even suggest shading as you go.

When you first look at an elephant you are not conscious of the animal's eyes because they are small and usually the ears take your attention. Shortly you become aware of those shining beady eyes and it is a little disconcerting to see this brilliant animation in such a

massive form. It is the same way with a pig's eyes. You don't see the eye at first but then suddenly you become conscious of its gleaming presence buried in the shadow of the ear. I have tried to show this effect in many of my paintings. [8]

When *Circus Elephants* was illustrated in *Life* in 1943, the caption explained that the subjects “fascinated Curry because their eyes reminded him of pigs’ eyes. He succeeded in conveying a feeling of balance, movement and bulk, one of the most difficult jobs he ever tackled.” [9]

Circus Elephants represents 12 elephants standing in a line under a tent eating hay. Their massive forms diminish as they diagonally recede into the background, interrupted only by two tent stays that lean toward them and divide the space. Just as Curry described, the various positions of the elephants' trunks give the scene a sense of gentle undulation. The artist captured the figures and expressions of the two elephants on the right very effectively, with the result that they have a greater sense of individual personality than their companions and seem to converse with one another. The small head of the zebra in the left foreground accentuates the elephants' enormous bulk.

Irma Jaffe made an ingenious but unconvincing attempt to interpret *Circus Elephants* as a work that indirectly reflects Curry's Covenanter religious beliefs. She noted that in 1940 a Kansas legislator likened the tornado in the background of Curry's Kansas Statehouse mural *The Tragic Prelude* (1937–1942) to an elephant's trunk. This hidden allusion to an elephant, a symbol of the Republican Party, implied that the New Dealers would be swept away when the Republicans returned to power. Conditioned by his religious disposition and familiar with certain biblical verses, according to Jaffe the artist regarded violence in nature as a form of divine retribution for his transgressions and sought to sublimate these fears by dwelling on the theme in his work. The “unmistakably phallic” tornado “represented to him the instrument of his own sinful pleasure and, he might have feared, his eventual ruin.” Jaffe concluded: “The elephant, with its enormous strength and power and its dramatic, muscular, tubular proboscis, together with the thunderous sound of its trumpeting, does indeed suggest a tornado, and *Circus Elephants* doubtless owes its genesis to Curry's recognition of this metaphoric resemblance.” [10]

It is clear from Curry's own comments, however, that he, like the multitudes of people who attended the circus, was simply fascinated by the animal's majesty and personality. As an artist he was challenged by the formal problems of correctly delineating elephants on canvas. Animals had figured prominently in Curry's art to this point, so he was sensitive to the nuances of painting them. After Kansas critics complained that a Hereford bull was standing improperly in one of his Statehouse murals and that in another work his pigs did not have their tails properly curled, Curry took measures to correct these inexactitudes. [11] There are at least two known preparatory studies for *Circus Elephants*: a nearly identical watercolor and a charcoal and conté crayon drawing of three elephants. [12] Curry also made a lithograph of the painting that was published in an edition of 250 by Associated American Artists in 1936. [13]

An exhibition of Curry's circus paintings opened at Ferargil Galleries in New York on April 3, 1933, just days before the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus opened its spring season with a show at Madison Square Garden. Critical reaction to the paintings was mixed. As Patricia Junker summarized: "Following upon the highly acclaimed and still memorable Kansas paintings, the circus subjects seemed to many critics an odd diversion for an artist whose reputation was already bound up with the idea of the Midwest." [14] The Great Depression was deepening and few of the pictures sold. In his review of the exhibition Edward Alden Jewell bluntly opined that the series was "disappointing," but when he saw *Circus Elephants* in an exhibition of Curry's work at the Associated American Artists gallery in 1947 he pronounced it an "excellent picture." [15]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

NOTES

- [1] Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows merged with Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth in 1919, forming the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. For a summary of the events of the 1932 season, called the "worst of the depression era," see George L. Chindahl, *A History of the Circus in America* (Caldwell, ID, 1959), 161–162. It is not known if Curry had any personal contact with John Ringling, the last surviving of the seven original Ringling brothers, who was a noted art collector and founder of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida. "Kansan at the

Circus," *Time*, Apr. 10, 1933, 42, reported that John Ringling had given Curry "the run of his 'Greatest Show on Earth' for a month." For a general discussion of Curry's 1932 spring tour with the circus and its aftermath see Patricia A. Junker, "John Steuart Curry and the Pathos of Modern Life: Paintings of the Outcast and the Dispossessed," in *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* (Madison, WI, 1998), 152–164.

- [2] Lloyd Goodrich, "Exhibitions in New York," *Arts* 15 (May 1929): 325. The exhibition featured representations of the circus by William Glackens, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, John Sloan, Reynolds and Gifford Beal, and Guy Pene du Bois, and the Whitney Studio Club was decorated to look like a circus for the occasion.
- [3] Other important circus subjects that Curry completed in 1932 were *The Great Wallendas* (private collection), *Baby Ruth* (Brigham Young University Museum of Art), *The Aerialists*, *The Reiffenach Sisters*, *Agony of the Clowns*, and *The Runway* (Swarthmore College Art Collection, PA).
- [4] Thomas Craven, "John Steuart Curry," *Scribner's* 103 (Jan. 1938): 40, quoted in M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, DC, 1986), 33.
- [5] Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York, 1943), 207.
- [6] Bret Waller, "An Interview with Mrs. John Steuart Curry," in *John Steuart Curry: A Retrospective Exhibition of His Work Held in the Kansas State Capitol, Topeka* (Lawrence, KS, 1970), 13.
- [7] Earl Chapin May, *The Circus from Rome to Ringling* (New York, 1930), 94.
- [8] Radio interview of May 13, 1938, quoted in Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York, 1943), 210–211.
- [9] "Speaking of Pictures . . . These Tell the Story of John Steuart Curry of Kansas," *Life*, Nov. 29, 1943, 19.
- [10] Irma B. Jaffe, "Religious Content in the Painting of John Steuart Curry," *Winterthur Portfolio* 22 (Spring 1987): 33, 36–38.
- [11] For a summary of these incidents, see M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, DC, 1986), 126–127.
- [12] The former is illustrated in Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York, 1943), fig. 239, and the latter in *American Watercolors, Drawings, Paintings and Sculpture of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, auction catalog, Christie's, New York, Mar. 15, 1985, lot 283.
- [13] See Sylvan Cole Jr., *The Lithographs of John Steuart Curry: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York, 1976), no. 28. The lithograph is also listed in Joseph S. Czestochowski, ed., *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural*

America (Cedar Rapids, IA, 1981), 102, 123, no. C 29.

- [14] Patricia Junker, “John Steuart Curry and the Pathos of Modern Life,” in Patricia Junker et al., *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* (Madison, WI, 1998), 162.
- [15] Edward Alden Jewell, “Allied Artists of America,” *New York Times*, Apr. 3, 1933; “John Curry’s Art Shown at Gallery,” *New York Times*, Mar. 25, 1947. One notable exception to the criticisms of Curry’s Ferargil circus show was Lewis Mumford, who wrote, “I cannot help thinking that the circus has a hypnotic effect on him that focuses his powers better than any other subject he has explored.” See Robert Wojtowicz, ed., *Mumford on Modern Art in the 1930s* (Berkeley, CA, 2007), 147.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, plain-weave, medium-weight fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher, a typical 20th-century, factory-produced, mass-market design. The tacking margins are intact. The artist applied thin, freely brushed, fluid paint wet into wet over a commercially prepared, thin, off-white ground. [1] The first layer of paint anticipated the location of the tent poles, which suggests that the composition had been finalized before the artist began working. To complete the painting the artist added details using thicker touches of paint applied with a nearly dry brush. The paint of the tent roof at the center right is thick, but medium-rich rather than dry. Fluorescence under ultraviolet light of the white paint in this area is yellow, suggesting it may be zinc white. The painting is in very good condition with only a few tiny holes along the top and bottom edges, where it appears that a framing element might have been attached with tacks to the front of the painting. Some grime and bumps of a waxy material along the bottom have accumulated on the unvarnished surface.

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting and that the priming was commercially prepared rather than applied by the artist.
-

PROVENANCE

(Walker Gallery, New York); purchased by Mrs. Grace Hendrick Eustis [later Mrs. Neill Phillips, d. 1966], New York, by 1939; [1] her second husband, Admiral Neill Phillips [d. 1978], Upperville, Virginia; gift 1976 to NGA.

[1] According to Peyton Boswell Jr., *Modern American Painting*, New York, 1939: 205.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1933 An Exhibition of Paintings of the Circus by John Steuart Curry, Ferargil Galleries, 1933, no. 3, as *Elephants*.

1939 Loan Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings by John Steuart Curry, The Lakeside Press Galleries, Chicago, 1939, no. 35, as *Elephants*.

1947 John Steuart Curry, 20 Years of His Art, Associated American Artists, New York, 1947, no. 12.

1981 Center Ring: The Artist: Two Centuries of Circus Art, Milwaukee Art Museum; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; New York State Museum, Albany; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1981-1982, no. 31.

1981 Persistence of Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, Cedar Rapids Art Center; Edwin A. Ulrich Museum, Wichita State University; University of Missouri Museum, 1981, no. 31, repro.

1998 John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison; M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, 1998-1999, pl. 24, fig. 8.

2001 Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota; Austin Museum of Art, 2001-2002, fig. 116.

2010 Circus! Art and Science Under the Big Top, Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, Greenwich, Connecticut, 2010-2011, no catalogue.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1936 Luce, Henry R., John Shaw Billings, and Daniel Longwell, eds. "Curry of Kansas." *Life* 1, no. 1 (23 November 1936): 28-31, color repro.
- 1940 Boswell, Peyton. *Modern American Painting*. New York, 1940: 62, 138, color repro.
- 1943 Schmeckebier, Laurence. *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America*. New York, 1943: 207, 210-211, fig. 237.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 141, repro.
- 1981 Czestochowski, Joseph S. *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America*. Columbia, MO, 1981: 56, 125, fig. 31.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 227, repro. 229.
- 1987 Jaffe, Irma B. "Religious Content in the Painting of John Steuart Curry." *Winterthur Portfolio* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 33, 36-38, fig. 16.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 155, repro.
- 1995 Kirshon, John W., and Tom Anderson, eds. *Chronicle of America*. London and New York, 1995: 656, repro.
- 1998 Junker, Patricia A. *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. Exh. cat. Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 1998-1999. New York, 1998:15, 125, pl. 24, fig. 8.
- 2001 Gustafson, Donna. *Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century Art*. Exh. cat. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL.; Austin Museum of Art, Cambridge, MA, 2001-2002. London, 2001: no. 31, pl. 116.
-

To cite: Robert Torchia, "John Steuart Curry/*Circus Elephants*/1932," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/55844> (accessed April 11, 2025).