

CIRCUS

RESEARCH



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FROM HISTORY TO THE PRESENT

INTRODUCTION TO HISTORY¹

We can gradually work our way up to the knowledge of the history of circus and performing arts thanks to artistic performances and craftsmanship, which form the basis of today's form of circus. These are a remnant of original forms such as gladiatorial games, Dionysian festivals in ancient Greece, clown groups wandering around medieval European cities, or carnivals.

Tomi Purovaara in his book "Contemporary Circus – Introduction to the Development of Circus Art" recalls: "Everything comes from the artist, the starting point of circus is the physical art of the individual." Based on this idea, it can be considered that the traditional tent, forming a strong visual connection with the circus, is only a minor part of the history of the circus. Despite the fact that the tent does not form the full essence of the circus, this building form has become a stronger symbol than the art forms themselves.

HISTORY OF MODERN CIRCUS²

ORIGINS

Philip Astley (1742 – 1814) is often considered the founder, the father of the modern circus. In 1768, he founded Astley's Riding School in London, where he taught horseback riding in the morning and performed his own equestrian exhibitions in the afternoon. The determination of the ideal diameter of the circus manege is attributed to Astley, it is a diameter of 42 feet (approximately 12 meters). This dimension allowed him to effectively use centrifugal force to maintain stability while standing on the horse's back. He began to gradually supplement and enrich his programs and performances with numbers of jugglers, rope climbers, acrobats, clowns and strongmen.

His competitor Charles Dibdin (1745-1814) was the first to use the word "circus". Even by opening The Royal Circus, he imitated the concept of dramatic equestrian performances.

In 1795, Astley founded the Royal Amphitheatre after his previous building burned down. The auditorium was designed so that the spectators would sit in the immediate vicinity of the manege.

In 1803, however, the wooden building was again destroyed by fire and the amphitheater was rebuilt. In 1804, the third version of the building was created, with each subsequent reconstruction bringing a more lavish and decorative interior.

Circus artist Andrew Ducrow (1793 – 1842) took over the management of the amphitheater in 1824. The performances included spectacular scenes with changes in decorations, exquisite costumes, and dramatic theatrical effects, such as imitating the sound of thunder. The amphitheater also brought dramatized processing of current events, such as the performance of News from the Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815).

VICTORIAN PERIOD

In the middle of the 19th century, there were hundreds of circuses operating in Britain. New kinds of performances appeared, including the „water circus“, where the manege was flooded with water. The popularity of the circus reached such a level that many theaters presented circus performances, and when visiting a variety show (an entertainment venue combining elements of cabaret and circus), you could just as likely see jugglers or aerial acrobatics as in a circus.

The fact that they traveled directly to the audience also contributed to the spread of the circus. From the end of the 18th century, they visited smaller towns, and in the 19th century, the boom in railway transport allowed them to reach an even wider area.

Richard Sands is credited with introducing the type of circus tent that we associate with the circus today, and it was his tent that was subsequently imitated.

The first traveling circuses were often small family businesses. The short performance was repeated several times a day, from noon until evening.

In 1892, circus owner Charlie Keith (1836 – 1895) constructed and patented the first portable circus building. It consisted of wooden boards nailed to each other and a canvas roof that could be dismantled and transported. Temporary circus buildings from the early

19th century were often hastily built and dangerous.

THE ROAD TO THE CURRENT CIRCUS ARCHITECTURE³

In the 1970s, a new artistic movement was formed in France, which began to connect the circus with other artistic disciplines such as theater (non-verbal, puppet and drama), dance, live and recorded music, and visual arts. By combining these elements, a new aesthetic was created, which was based on the tradition of classical circus, but at the same time consciously defined itself against it. The original form was gradually referred to as a traditional circus, while the new form was named a new or contemporary circus.

The basis of the artistic character of the new circus became the creative individuality of the performer, the artist, who is the bearer of meaning and the main mediator of communication with the audience. His personality and expression become an integral part of the work. Strong theatrical tendencies represented a key distinguishing element between traditional and new circus. The theatre became an inspiration for circus dramaturgy, direction and scenography. The scenic space began to change dynamically, the circular manege was no longer a necessity and the circle acquired a rather symbolic meaning associated with tradition. The frontal stage scene has come to the fore, which is less financially demanding and allows for a wider use of decorations, more complex scenography, better lighting and hiding props. While the frontal arrangement offers the audience a unified view of what is happening, the circular manege limits the possibilities of scenographic solution and can weaken the resulting artistic effect. As a symbol of the nomadic way of life, the tent has accompanied mankind since time immemorial and is distinguished by its versatility and mobility.

The circus tent was born in the American environment, where it was inspired by nomadic communities using temporary tents or covered wagons.

1 BJÖRFORS, Tilde. 2026. From cirkus to nouveau cirque to contemporary circus [online]. [seen 22. 2. 2026]. < <https://www.cirkor.se/en/from-cirkus-to-nouveau-cirque-to-contemporary-circuss/> >.

2 VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, London. 2024. The story of circus [online]. last revision 17. 4. 2024. [seen 22. 2. 2026]. < https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-circus?srsId=AfmBOoqZCat_EXT8UTkInpSFO4q9XrDBsp4D9dT9UlnraBY2NRQICha#slideshow=58613815&slide=20 >.

3 ŠTEFANOVÁ, Veronika. 2010. Současná cirkusová architektura: příklady moderních cirkusových staveb odkazujících k reformátorským tendencím nové cirkusové vlny. Theatralia [online], vol. 13. [seen 22. 2. 2026]. < <https://digitilib.phil.muni.cz/sites/default/files/pdf/115587.pdf> >.

and choosing a specific location, he becomes not only a creator, but also a kind of urban planner, geographer or observer of space.

Creating an open-air performance does not just mean transferring the production from the interior to the street. It is a process in which the artist reacts to the character of the district, embodies its shape and atmosphere, highlighting the architecture, streets and the movement of people and cars. The aim is to allow residents to look at their surroundings from a new perspective.

Art projects are an effective way to reflect the symbolic level of urban transformations. Long-term reconstruction can bring traffic restrictions, noise or economic complications, but a cultural event can suppress these negative aspects and instead emphasize the identity and social dynamics of a particular neighborhood.

Working in the streets is not about finding a way to put on a show on the street, it's about creating a show together with the street. Art can help to better understand the place where a person lives. When implementing such projects, it is important to remain permanently temporary, to bring temporary artistic interventions into the space. Temporary events in abandoned buildings can highlight their potential and contribute to the revival and appreciation of the entire locality or city district.

