

Forrest on Thompson

Thomson, Richard, editor. *Seurat's Circus Sideshow*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017, pp. 144, ISBN 9781588396150

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It is uncommon to build an exhibition around a single work by a single artist. It is even more unusual that this would happen three times as it has for artist Georges Seurat. His *Une baignade à Asnières* (1883–84) enjoyed one such concentrated examination in 1997 at the National Gallery in London (co-organized by Richard Thomson, the editor of the exhibition catalogue under review here), as did his *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* (1884–86) at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004. Last year (2017), the Metropolitan Museum of Art focused on Seurat's *Circus Sideshow* (1887–88)—a jewel in the museum's crown since 1960, thanks to a bequest by collector Stephen C. Clark. Thomas P. Campbell, the former director of the museum, lauds this single-work approach in his foreword, noting that this was a painting of firsts: this was Seurat's first nighttime painting (he tackled artificial light); this was the first time that he drew from popular entertainments; and this was the first of his paintings to possess a “mysterious allure” (7).

The attraction represented by a series of firsts notwithstanding, the museum might productively have paired *Circus Sideshow* with a companion piece such as Seurat's *Cirque* (1891), which offers striking similarities and contrasts. One finds, for example, intriguing parallels in the undeniable technical, thematic, and compositional influence of popular art on each painting. Popular influences inform both works as well, from seasonal fairs like the *Foire au pain d'épice* to promotional posters, period photographs, caricature, fans, ceramic dishes, and even magic lantern plates. Equally intriguing would have been a comparison of two approaches to artificial lighting—indoor for *Cirque*'s stationary circus (the Cirque Fernando in Paris), outdoor for *Circus Sideshow*'s fairground traveling circus (the Cirque Corvi). *Cirque* matches the “mysterious allure” found in *Parade de cirque*: its enigmatic perspective echoes the curious blurring of inside and outside in the earlier work, as Robert L. Herbert noted in “*Parade de cirque* de Seurat et l'esthétique scientifique de Charles Henry” (1980).

Ségolène Le Men approximated such a comparative approach in *Seurat & Chéret: le peintre, le cirque et l'affiche* (2002), a publication that grew out of the 1991 exhibition she directed at the Grand Palais on *L'Affiche et le cirque*. *Seurat & Chéret* explores one research vein suggested by the earlier exhibition's incidental presentation of the thematics of circus iconography in posters. Tapping that vein involved beginning her study with *Parade de cirque* followed by a primary focus on *Cirque* and the stylistic, technical, and compositional influence of Jules Chéret's circus posters on that painting. The Metropolitan Museum exhibition shifted emphasis. Where *Seurat & Chéret* considers the iconography of the traveling circus's painted tent canvas as offering a similar technical and conceptual model to *Parade de cirque* (as Chéret's circus posters did for *Cirque*), Thomson's book treats posters as just one of many graphic sources. He considers as well caricatures, illustrations, the work of artists that one would find in Chéret's “musée imaginaire,” and the work of other artists treating similar subjects and/or using similar techniques (62). Thomson's book complements Le Men's, and his concluding insertion of Seurat's *conté crayon* portrait of Edmond-François Aman-Jean may be a nod to Le Men's important study, in which a *conté crayon* portrait of Seurat by Maximilien Luce (1890) opens the introduction: the portraits serve literally as bookends with Luce's Seurat facing left (*Seurat & Chéret*) and Seurat's Aman-Jean facing right (*Seurat's Circus Sideshow*). The two books also complement one another methodologically. Le Men explores the techniques shared by Seurat and Chéret, and Thomson the myriad historical influences he worked into his canvases—*parade* through the prism of cultural traditions, caricature, illustration, poster, painting. Seurat's objective, contends Thomson, was to apply Charles Blanc's theory of the harmony created between symmetry and disproportion in the depiction of forms and Charles Henry's theory on scientific aesthetics.

Fascinating interpretations regarding the historical place of Seurat's aesthetic and the modernity of his painting emerge in Thomson's discussions of Naturalist painting as a convention against which Seurat painted. As he notes, the *parade* was a common subject for Naturalist painters who used it as a document of a familiar event—the *foire*—featuring a bustling, socially mixed crowd in an open-air environment. Such a subject thus recalled Naturalist depictions while at the same time accentuating Seurat's own deviations, or rather deliberately juxtaposing them. Most notably, where one knows there is movement, one finds stasis; where one can, from experience, hear the noise of the crowd and the blaring of brass instruments, sound is strangely dulled; where one perceives the document's immediacy and its ability to instill an emotional reaction of the kind produced by Fernand Pelez's massive *Grimaces et Misères (Les Saltimbanques)*, one experiences also a “powerful sense of ritual” (68). Seurat played on the viewer's recognition of the Cirque Corvi to create an unsettling contrast: while one can place the ambulatory circus in a precise historical moment, the representation also paradoxically emphasizes schematic timelessness. Indeed, Seurat's succinct characterization of painterly hybridity is “Art is Harmony / Harmony is the analogy of opposites” (69). Thomson emphasizes the stylistic affinities that contemporary writers and artists shared in the realization of a

new aesthetic: “sentence structure” or “synthetic form,” and “repetitive words or dotted surface” (93). Writers and artists even shared devices: “hypnotic repetition, suggestive imprecision” (93). Seurat’s aesthetic was thus in tune with the avant-garde aesthetic of the fin de siècle.

The catalogue concludes with two short essays. Susan Alyson Stein charts the painting’s tepid reception by critics and public in its first exhibition in France and its critical welcome in America, thanks to champions like Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (the first director of the Museum of Modern Art). Charlotte Hale and Silvia Centeno examine the technical components of Seurat’s creative process. While the catalogue cannot match the visual delights provided by the exhibition itself, it compensates by immersing the reader in its cultural context, a moment on the threshold of modernity.

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