ASIAN STEREOTYPES IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE: Looking at Circus Posters from 1850 to 1950
WELCOME!

Circus posters can serve as a unique and lively mechanism for a study of Asian stereotypes in American popular culture. The hundred year period considered here, from 1850 to 1950, covers the growth of the circus as an American entertainment institution and a tumultuous period of American history when ideas about Asia and Asians were political and social issues.

These units present American circus posters alongside other visual and written resources to explore historical (and contemporary) attitudes toward Asia and Asians. This guide is not meant to be sequential, but can be used to foster discussion and activities concerned with Asian stereotypes in the U.S. While circus posters are attractive and interesting visuals, not all topics raised by their use may be appropriate for young children. Each unit features one circus poster and one or more other visual artifacts that together provide context for a particular theme.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand and use basic terms regarding the concept of stereotypes
- Learn to recognize evidence of stereotypes in visual and verbal texts
- Increase awareness of issues regarding cultural stereotyping
- Increase sensitivity to historical conditions that may affect present-day attitudes
- Examine ways in which stereotypes are perpetuated
- Critically examine the influence of media and popular culture on shaping American cultural attitudes
- Study primary source documents reflecting American attitudes toward race and ethnicity

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TOSHIBA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

This resource and activity guide was developed as part of a grant to present programs, exhibitions and other learning opportunities exploring cultural stereotyping of Asians in the U.S. that was awarded to The Ringling during the 2016-2017 funding cycle. The Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO) strives to contribute to enhanced international understanding of Japan by promoting cultural exchanges, including the organization and sponsorship of symposia and seminars. TIFO supports exhibition of Japanese arts and culture held at museums and galleries, and other activities that introduce Japanese arts and culture to communities outside of Japan.
INTRODUCTION
AMERICA AND THE CIRCUS, 1850-1950

The circus has long been an important component of American popular culture. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Americans in small towns and big cities alike attended traveling shows in great numbers, establishing circuses – and the brightly colored posters that were hung to advertise them – as early and unique forms of mass media. In many ways the circus affected and reflected the changing interests and ideas of the American public.

The period from 1850 to 1950 is one that saw many changes in both American culture and its circuses. The country’s population swelled through immigration, and new ideas and inventions changed the American landscape and the lives of its inhabitants. As the country grew, so did the size, scope, and geographic reach of the American circus, with more than a hundred different circuses traveling through the country at the beginning of the twentieth century.

During this period, a curious confluence of forces brought Asian laborers to America to work on the completion of a transcontinental rail system, which in turn enabled circuses to more easily crisscross the country. These circuses frequently presented Asian performers or cultures to the American public. In doing so, they incorporated values prevalent at the time while also presenting their own particular ideas of difference and “otherness.” The circus therefore provides a good lens through which to examine America’s changing notions of Asia and Asian people, and how cultural stereotypes become embedded in a society. As a pervasive entertainment venue, the American circus was one of a multitude of forces – including schools, families, peers, and other media images – that impacted how Asians were perceived by the American public.

The physical images of Asia that were included in circus posters and performances created mental images of Asia which, in turn, affected public consciousness. Since nineteenth- and twentieth-century circus posters still exist as readily available visuals, they provide a rich instructional tool to explore American attitudes toward Asia, both in a historical context and in relation to ongoing concerns about stereotyping.
ABOUT THE POSTER
This Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus poster is indicative of Americans’ perception of Asia in the first half of the 20th century. It includes many popular symbols associated with Japanese culture: snow-capped Mt. Fuji in the background, The Great Buddha at Kamakura (a well-known tourist site) on the left, and wisteria and gnarled pine trees filling the outer edges. The main portion of the poster is filled with geisha, Japanese women in kimonos with fans, while performers in elaborate costumes fill in the sides.

CONNECTIONS TO POPULAR CULTURE
In the early 1900s, many Americans viewed Asia as a place that not only existed on the opposite side of the world, but also represented everything “opposite” to our way of life. The region was viewed as a land filled with peasants toiling in villages and mysterious warriors engaging in romantic adventures, in contrast to the U.S., where people worked in factories and enjoyed modern leisure pursuits. The very term “Far East” suggests the vast perceived distance between those cultures and our own.

THINKING ABOUT STEREOTYPES
How do we define Asia? While the region is made up of very distinct cultures, Americans in the past lumped them together as “oriental” (which originally meant “from the East or Eastern”). This term served a function when knowledge of the region was limited, but it is now generally acknowledged to be offensive. In the past, stereotypes of Asians in the U.S. seesawed between benign, submissive characters and evil villains who schemed to take over the world. Popular imagery depicting Asia as an exotic foreign continent would have only strengthened these stereotypes, which played into American fears of the unknown and were probably instrumental in the development of such policies as the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.
Have students work in small groups to brainstorm stereotypes they have heard related to different groups of people, completing the following sentences:

- Men are...
- Girls are...
- Chinese people are...

Following the brainstorming session, discuss as a group:

Are such generalizations true for all members of these particular groups? Why might people make such statements? Then, pass out or display the following list of common stereotypes of Americans that are held in other parts of the world.

Working again in groups, have students read the statements and decide if they agree with them:

- Americans are overweight or obese.
- Americans eat at McDonald’s all the time.
- Americans are rich and live in big houses.
- Americans want to control the world.

As a group, discuss:

How does reading these statements make you feel? What would you say to people who believe them?

Show students this Japanese woodblock print. On the board, create a Venn diagram comparing the circus poster and the print. What elements of Japanese life and culture are depicted in both images? (ex: Mt. Fuji, women in kimonos)

How do the two images differ in their presentation of Japan? (ex: action in the background, composition)

Discuss as a group:

Why might an American artist’s interpretation of Japan look different from a Japanese artist’s image of his own country? How might posters like this one have contributed to American concepts of Asia?

Point out to students that Hollywood films are a major source of information about American culture for many people living outside the U.S. Show students the movie poster (at left), and have them discuss in groups:

If this image was your only point of reference for America, what would your concept of American life be?

Distribute poster board and markers to students, and have them work in their groups to create posters advertising an imaginary circus show entitled “America,” to be performed around the world. They should base their poster imagery on American stereotypes and images of the U.S. as seen in popular culture. Have groups share their posters with the class, and discuss: What is the danger in using generalizations, popular symbols, and stereotypes when talking about your own culture or others?
PEOPLE ON DISPLAY

ABOUT THE POSTER
Ethnological congress was the term used by circus impresario P.T. Barnum for displays of foreign people within the circus. These “congresses” presented people from around the world to the American public, as we see here. While their stated purpose was to be educational, their manner of presentation – both in person and in poster imagery – suggested that foreign peoples were less civilized by visually associating them with the animals that shared their exhibition space.

CONNECTIONS TO POPULAR CULTURE
During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American interest in the wider world grew as technological innovations and improved travel provided opportunities to become familiar with other cultures. A series of world’s fairs and expositions, such as the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, brought people from foreign countries to the U.S. as living exhibits. These displays were sometimes characterized as “human zoos,” with part of their purpose being to distinguish between “civilized” countries (like the U.S.) and “savages” from other parts of the world.

THINKING ABOUT STEREOTYPES
When members of particular ethnic groups are lumped together as “savage tribes” and presented as curiosities alongside animals, viewers may feel a strong sense of otherness toward the groups in question. The idea of “yellow peril” likely evolved from such understandings of Asian societies. This concept, prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, held that East Asians as a group were poised to attack and take over America in order to destroy Western civilization. It was used to justify controls on the immigration of Asians into the U.S., since they were seen as a threat to the American way of life. More recently, the concept has been revived and revised in terms of economic competition from Asian countries.
Review with students the importance of word choice when communicating meaning in a text. Present them with two familiar words or phrases that differ only slightly in meaning, such as “walked away” and “stormed off.”

Ask:
Why might an author choose one over the other? Explore the use of the word “strange” in the circus poster.

Have students work in small groups, dividing a sheet of paper into two columns. In the first column, they should list things they think are strange; in the second column, they should list things they think are unfamiliar. As a class, compare the items in each list.

Discuss:
Why do you think this poster artist chose to use the word “strange” when referring to people from other countries? How does that word choice affect the message of the poster?

Show students this poster of Chang-Tu-Sing, a nearly 8-foot-tall Chinese performer who was also known as Change Woo Gow and Chang the Chinese Giant. What characteristics has the artist emphasized to highlight Chang’s “otherness” compared to the people around him? (ex: Chinese clothing, unrealistic height difference) The text on the poster says Chang is “an educated and refined gentleman, speaking 28 languages fluently.”

Discuss:
Why do you think the poster artist included that statement? What does it suggest about Americans’ assumptions regarding Asians more broadly?

Discuss as a group:
How representative do you think Chang is of Chinese people in general? Why might the poster artist have focused on making Chang seem different, both from his audience and from other Chinese people?

Have students write essays comparing ethnological congresses and the images that advertised them with voyeuristic television shows of today, such as My 600-lb. Life and Little People, Big World.
MYSTERIES OF THE EAST

ABOUT THE POSTER
At a time when most people did not have the opportunity to travel beyond a relatively small geographic area, the circus provided exposure to customs, abilities, and creatures that fell outside Americans’ everyday experiences. This poster depicts the performer Blacaman (likely the stage persona of an Italian illusionist), who is shown controlling a group of lions through apparently spiritual power. Blacaman is dressed (or undressed!) in a way that is meant to exaggerate his special supernatural hold over the beasts. His abilities are defined through his characterization as not just any hypnotist, but as a “Hindu” hypnotist.

CONNECTIONS TO POPULAR CULTURE
The religious traditions of India have long held fascination for Americans. From the early nineteenth century, such writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were attracted to spiritual ideas from India, incorporating them into the American philosophical tradition of transcendentalism. As their written works were disseminated, the association of India with ancient wisdom and the divine spark within humanity became part of mainstream American consciousness.

THINKING ABOUT STEREOTYPES
India and South Asia have been viewed by some Americans and Europeans as the ultimate in foreignness, seen as home to masses of people mired in timeless mud-hut villages of poverty, castes, and mysticism. Because India’s religions, particularly Hinduism, incorporate the active worship of physical icons and complex ritual practices into their vibrant traditions, outsiders may have the impression of a primitive society. In fact, Hindu philosophies and concepts have existed for more than two thousand years, considerably predating Western civilization as we know it.
Show students the poster of Blacaman alongside the similar poster advertising a performance by Kar-Mi. Kar-Mi was the stage name of an American magician who adopted the persona of an Indian conjurer prince. Have students analyze and compare the visual elements used in each poster, focusing on:

- The way a sense of danger or excitement is created through composition, pose, and facial expression.
- The way the artist uses line to suggest each man's mystical power.
- The use of color to create a mood or grab the viewer's attention.
- The depiction of each performer's physical attributes and dress.
- The way each image is composed to draw attention to the performer.

Discuss as a class:
Why might American or European performers have taken on supposed Indian identities for acts that claimed to work through supernatural power? What does that say about nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American views toward the religious or spiritual traditions of South Asia? Can students think of any examples from today's popular culture in which individuals from India or South Asia are depicted as having special psychic or spiritual abilities?

Ask students to brainstorm facts they already know about the religious traditions of India and South Asia. As answers are shared, create a mind web (right) on the board showing related concepts. There may be disagreement or uncertainty regarding some facts that students offer - include them in the mind web anyway.

Once the brainstorming session is complete, have each student select a concept from the web to research further. Students can then use reputable online sources to learn more about their selected concept.

Discuss as a class:
Do any of the “facts” we listed need revision?
ABOUT THE POSTER
This poster from the 1930s depicts an exaggerated view of Padaung women of Burma, a Southeast Asian country that is now called Myanmar. The Padaung, or Kayan Lahwi people, are an ethnic minority in Myanmar whose women maintain a tradition of wearing stacked metal neck rings, thereby lowering their shoulders and giving them the appearance of having very long necks (though not nearly as long as the poster would suggest).

By this point in time, ethnological congresses presenting “typical” examples of foreign cultures had given way to circus shows displaying individuals with what would have been considered “peculiar” bodies or cultural practices. Examples included these Padaung women and the so-called Ubangi tribal people from Africa with artificially extended lips. These representations fed the concept of “exotic otherness,” the idea that some customs held by peoples in other parts of the world are inherently “weird.”

CONNECTIONS TO POPULAR CULTURE
In the early twentieth century, public display of individuals with uncommon characteristics went beyond ethnographic exhibits like the Padaung women. Before its offensive and often degrading nature was acknowledged, a popular form of entertainment in the U.S. and elsewhere was the “freak show,” in which people with extreme physiques or deformities were exhibited to the public. Whether cultural or anatomical, images of difference became commonplace in the realm of American entertainment and popular culture.

THINKING ABOUT STEREOTYPES
Who decides what is “normal”? And under what circumstances is it acceptable to spread images of individuals who are not “normal”? To the individuals featured in circus attractions and freak shows, their cultural traditions and physical features were just a part of life. “Normal” is a relative term that depends on location, lifestyle, and historical context. Indeed, the tattooed men that were once considered freaks to be put on display would today cause little reaction walking down the street of the average American city! Focusing on particular customs or bodies that we deem strange has the effect of stripping away individual worth and undermining an essential truth about humanity—that we are all different in our own ways.
Show students the circus poster of the Giraffe-Neck Women from Burma.

Ask:
What words used on this poster seem particularly significant to you?
Point out the terms “educational” and “giraffe-neck.” Have students discuss in small groups: What are the positive or negative connotations for each of these terms?

Share as a class, and then discuss:
Why might circus promoters want to advertise this attraction as “educational”? Do you think that was its true purpose? What does the term “giraffe-neck” imply about the Padaung women? How does the vertical format of this poster contribute to the visual idea of difference that it is trying to convey?
Next, pass out images from contemporary American fashion magazines, such as the ones shown below.

Have students work in pairs to determine the following:
• What physical characteristics shown in this image seem “normal” to you? Which seem not “normal”?
• Could any of the clothing or accessories shown here cause discomfort, pain, or physical problems?
• What overall message is conveyed by the image’s visual elements (composition, lighting, pose, etc.)?

Have students share their findings with the class.

Discuss as a group:
Are restrictive or painful fashions from our own culture that different from the neck rings of the Padaung?
As a homework assignment, have students keep a diary for one day detailing every activity they undertake. Instruct students to read over their logs, circling any activities that might seem unusual to someone unfamiliar with American cultural practices (e.g., jogging, putting in contact lenses, making a protein shake).

Back in the classroom, discuss as a large group:
What lessons about difference can we take away from this?
RACE AND WHITENESS

ABOUT THE POSTER
The white elephant featured on this poster was one of several elephant “celebrities” advertised by circuses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Shown surrounded by bowing attendants and Asian-inspired architecture, Pawah, “the world-famed sacred white elephant of Burma,” appears to have the pale hide that made such elephants highly prized possessions. In the Southeast Asian kingdoms of Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, kings possessed white elephants as symbols of their power and the prosperity generated by their rule. In Hindu mythology, Indra, the god of rain, rides through the heavens on a white elephant named Airavata, who was designated the king of elephants.

American circus impresarios, though not necessarily aware of the potent symbolism of white elephants among Southeast Asians, did recognize their appeal as attractions. P.T. Barnum and his rival Adam Forepaugh engaged in a stiff publicity battle to have the most impressive white elephant specimen, and other circuses followed suit.

CONNECTIONS TO POPULAR CULTURE
For most Americans, the phrase “white elephant” is most commonly associated with an unwanted gift rather than an exotic beast. The myth of the useless white elephant comes from stories of the kings of Thailand, who supposedly gave elephants as presents to nobles they disliked. The elephants were a complicated gift, favorable as a sign of the king’s recognition, but expensive to own since they ate such large quantities of food. Today’s understanding of a white elephant as an unnecessary, possibly bothersome possession contradicts traditional Southeast Asian views of the creatures. Interestingly, the modern connotation also represents a change from notions of the value of “whiteness” that were prevalent in
popular culture at the time. For Americans and Europeans, part of the attraction to Pawah and his kind may have been rooted in beliefs about the superiority of white skin.

THINKING ABOUT STEREOTYPES
The century from 1850 to 1950 marked an important period in relationships between races around the globe. As the science of evolution developed, various (now discredited) theories arose espousing the superiority of the white race over others. The implications of these spurious theories played out in a variety of ways, from the public fascination with white elephants to the practice of colonialism, in which Europeans and Americans gained control of lands with substantial non-white populations and exploited their resources for the benefit of the “mother” country. Discussions of race, purity, and whiteness played into political and economic policies that were being carried out throughout the world.

ACTIVITY
A person’s physical features do not necessarily provide a clue to his or her birthplace, personality, or abilities. Often, when we make judgments about people based on physical appearance alone, our assumptions will prove to be incorrect.

Show students the four images below.
As you read the short biography for each individual, see if students can match the description with the individual. Then, discuss the answers students came up with.

After revealing the correct answers, discuss as a class:
Which identities surprised you? In which instances were your guesses probably based on stereotypes about particular ethnicities, genders, or other physical attributes?

A) This person was an education reformer who founded a progressive school that emphasized creativity and the free exchange of ideas.
B) This person wrote a novel that spent 22 weeks atop The New York Times Best Seller List and received a Pulitzer Prize.
C) This person took the first-ever photograph of DNA using x-ray crystallography.
D) This person was a civil rights activist and award-winning music producer who worked with such acts as Billie Holiday, Count Basie, and Aretha Franklin.

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVEL
Middle or High School

TIME NEEDED
30-45 minutes

MATERIALS
• Reproductions of posters shown at left
• Images and biographies of people shown below
• Internet access
• Paper and pencils

LEARNING STANDARDS
LAFS.K12.SL.1.1
SS912.S.5.4

Key (from left): C) scientist Rosalind Franklin; D) music producer John Hammond; A) educator John Dewey; B) author Alex Haley
WORDS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW

CULTURE
Patterns of thought, beliefs, and behavior, and a shared view of the world, that can unite people, usually those living in proximity to each other.

DISCRIMINATION
Behaviors toward another group that are unfair and unjustified.

DIVERSITY
A variety of people or objects that reflect different personal characteristics.

ETHNICITY
A term used to describe a shared cultural heritage.

ETHNOCENTRISM
A view of the world and other cultures that results from an emphasis on a person’s own cultural context.

MELTING POT
A cooking metaphor that was used in the past to describe the U.S. since, as a nation of immigrants, it was becoming a mixture of people from places around the world. This metaphor implied that people had to lose their unique characteristics to become American. Instead, other food metaphors such as vegetable soup or salad more closely identify a whole (nation) in which its individual parts (cultures of origin) contribute to the diverse (and delicious!) complex result.

POPULAR CULTURE
In modern times, a set of everyday cultural practices that are often defined by prevalent media – film, television, radio, newspapers, social media, billboards; common views held by citizens. Through its mass appeal, it occupies a central place between a formal “high” culture and idiosyncratic folk cultures.

PREJUDICE
An attitude, opinion, or judgment, usually negative, regarding a particular group of people resulting from a stereotype.

RACISM
Acting or thinking negatively toward a particular set of people based on physical characteristics such as skin color originating from a false notion of superiority.

SOCIALIZATION
The ways we learn patterns of behavior that fit our social context; enculturation.

STEREOTYPE
A belief about general characteristics of a specific group or type of person that has been accepted by certain others. It ignores the uniqueness of individual behaviors and reduces the complexity of humans to oversimplified generalizations.
FOR MORE INFORMATION

FOR TEACHERS


FOR STUDENTS

American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang, 2008. (graphic novel, grades 7-12)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


http://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/dswenttowar/index.html#ark:bb4471849n

SUPPLEMENTAL IMAGES
The Ringling has provided additional images relating to Asia and Asians in the American circus that can be used to supplement the selection included here. See: link to website

FEEDBACK REQUESTED
If you use any of these in the classroom, please provide feedback to the Education Department of The Ringling so that improvements and adjustments can be made. We thank you in advance.
IMAGE AND POSTER CREDITS:

**Cover:** Big United States Circus: Nula Delavanti. Ink on paper, 36 x 36 in. (91.4 x 91.4 cm). Tibbals Digital Collection