

## Hidden from Sight, a Giant Circus Poster Is Saved

WENDI A. MALONEY

*Five Celebrated Clowns Attached to Sands, Nathans & Company's Circus* was submitted as a copyright deposit in 1856. At the time, there was little interest in the billboard-size poster—so little, in fact, that it remained sealed in the package in which it came for an entire century. When staff from the Library's Prints and Photographs Division decided to examine the poster in 1956, they found that it had become brittle, wrote John Canaday in a June 16, 1963, *New York Times* article about the division's efforts to make available "a great deal of material hitherto unrecognized as important." Previously, he explained, the division had focused on preserving photographs of wide historical interest, such as Civil War images, and prints recognized as art. To unfold the poster, staff called on Library colleagues with expertise in treating old paper.

Today, the color advertisement is the earliest surviving poster in the Prints and Photographs Division. Canaday speculated that its long neglect had saved its life: "if it had been given routine attention as an object submitted for copyright, it would most likely have been thrown out when the copyright expired and before

the importance we see in it now had become apparent." By 1963, Canaday wrote, the poster's historical and sociological significance had become clear, as had its esthetic importance as a woodcut of enormous size—it is more than 11 feet wide.

It was designed by Joseph W. Morse, who devised a system for printing theatrical posters from large blocks of wood. He was a cousin of Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph. The firm of Morse, M'Kenney & Co. registered the poster on June 10, 1856, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. Current law required those seeking copyright protection to register their works with the clerk of the U.S. District Court for their districts. The clerk was obliged to forward deposits of registered works to the U.S. State Department, the custodian of copyright records and materials.

The Sands, Nathans & Company's Circus operated from about 1855 to 1863, according to *A History of the Circus in America* by George L. Chindahl. It was noted for its two performing elephants, Victoria and Albert, and its calliope, a "robust music maker belching steam and smoke." ©

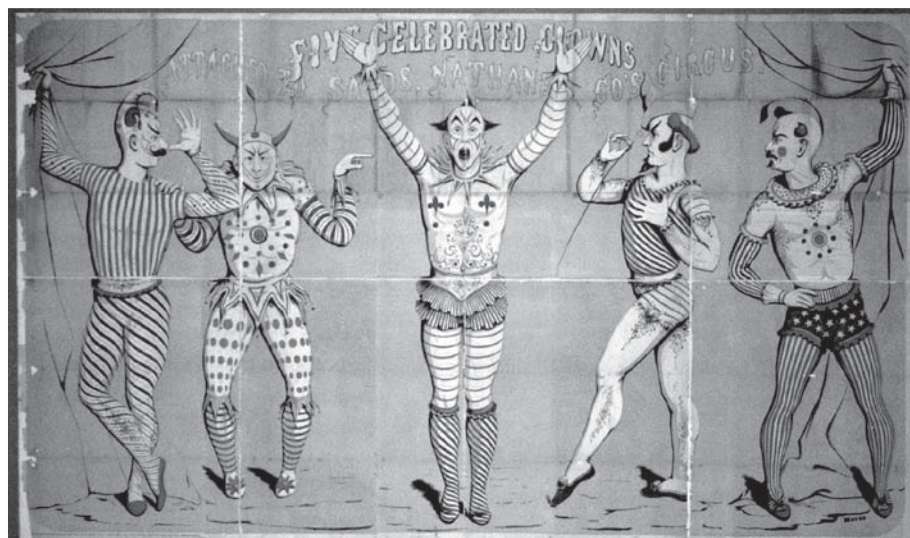


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