

**The John and Mable Ringling  
Museum of Art  
the State Art Museum of Florida**

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## Getting to Know the Great American Circus: The Ringling Years

Getting to Know the Great American Circus: The Ringling Years is a lesson unit for elementary children as well as other age groups, that focuses on the concepts that can be learned through studying the history and traditions of the American circus. The lessons in this package can be used as individual instructional supplements to existing curriculum or as a comprehensive unit to introduce students to the legacy of the Ringling family circus. Each lesson includes an assessment strategy.

### **In this unit teachers and students will:**

- (1) Gain an understanding of the development of the circus over the course of early American history;
- (2) Interpret the circus as a business and link to world-wide communities;
- (3) Demonstrate an understanding of the history and development of the American circus and its relationship to the Ringling Brothers, Sarasota, and the State of Florida;
- (4) Create works of art that convey an understanding of the meaning and historical significance of the circus;
- (5) Produce writings that convey an understanding of the meaning and historical significance of the circus.

The lessons in this unit are correlated to the Sunshine State Standards for Social Studies, Language Arts, and Visual Arts for 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. Each lesson will indicate the curriculum benchmarks and numbers at each grade level.

## Before You Begin

As commitment to the high levels of student achievement in the arts, and in partnership with teachers to achieve student learning goals, this lesson unit is coded by the Sunshine State Standards. For easy reference, each strand, standard, and benchmark has been assigned a unique identification code. For example:

### **VA.A.1.1.1**

*The first two letters of the code identify the subject area (e.g. LA for language arts, SS for social studies). The third letter identifies the strand. The number in the fourth position identifies the general standard under the strand. The number in the fifth position identifies the developmental level (1= Prek-2, 2= grades 3-5, 3=grades 6-8, 4=grades 9-12.) The last number identifies the grade cluster within the standard.*

## Introduction

This lesson unit was inspired by the American circus and its traditions, history, and great performers. It was John Ringling who made Sarasota synonymous with the circus. In 1927, Ringling moved the winter quarters of the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus from Bridgeport, Conn. to Sarasota, Florida. In 1948 A. Everitt Austin, the first director of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, established the Ringling Museum of the Circus to serve both as a memorial to John Ringling and as a repository for artifacts and documents that would illustrate the history of the circus.

In 1998, the Ringling Museum of the Circus celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To mark this important anniversary, students and teachers from targeted schools in Sarasota, Hillsborough and Pinellas counties dedicated portions of the 1998-1999 academic school year to a focused study of the traditions, history, and great performers of the American circus.

The inspired teachers who joined our circus teacher team spent several weekends visiting the Ringling Museum of the Circus during the 1998-99 school year and worked with museum staff to learn about the American circus. In collaboration with museum staff, the teacher team designed the informative yet fun lessons and activities about the American circus in this unit.

It is with great pleasure that the Ringling Museum of the Circus offers the *Getting to Know the Great American Circus: The Ringling Years* education package to schools throughout the state of Florida and beyond. It is our hope that the lessons in this unit will be used by teachers in the classroom to prepare students for a visit to the Ringling Museum of the Circus. Remember the history and traditions of the American circus are just a bus trip away!

## Here Comes the Circus!

The Circus is a kaleidoscope of exciting, colorful images--a theater of breathtaking feats. Performers juggle and tumble, walk on wires, and fly through the air. They also ride on elephants and tigers. Sometimes, tigers are coaxed to jump through fiery hoops. Elephants thunder and trumpet their way around the ring, plumed horses dance, bands play, drums roll, clowns cavort, and rainbows of sequins and spangles glitter under spotlights hung high in the canvas of the Big Top.

Today's extravaganzas are an evolution of the oldest entertainment devised by man. The legacy of *children of all ages*, who have reveled in its elements, dates back at least to 2500 B.C.! Balancing acts can be traced to ancient Egypt, where excavated paintings also depict contortionists, jugglers, and acrobats. Animal training was an art in Egypt long before the first millennium. Large animal menageries were acquired by temple priests who used the animals in grand processions to honor the ancient gods. One such parade, recorded in the third century B.C., included a 600 man choir, elephants caparisoned in gold and crowned with ivy leaves; a fleet of carts pulled by elephants, goats, lions, buffalo, ostriches, and wild asses; camels hitched to chariots; a procession of gold and silver treasures; and caged birds- among other exotica! Written records also exist, from the first century A.D. describing lions, leashed like dogs, strolling with their masters.

China is credited with the first tightrope walkers, and in the twelfth-century A.D., Marco Polo told of tumblers and jugglers entertaining at the court of Kublai Khan. Far earlier, on the Isle of Crete, acrobats performed on the backs of moving domestic animals. Wall paintings in the palace of Knossos, built in 2000 B.C., show a figure somersaulting over the back of a bull into the outstretched hands of a catcher. The Greek mime of 800 B.C.- who assumed a variety of characters, including black face-was the forerunner of the circus clown. And to the Romans goes the distinction of designing the oval arena, or Circus Maximus as it was known in Rome. The oval arena was copied by towns throughout the Roman Empire for chariot races, gladiator's battles, and wild animal spectacles.

The modern circus was developed in eighteenth-century England by a horsebreaker named Philip Astley. Following a stint in the dragoons, Astley taught riding tricks in an open-air field near Westminster Bridge. In 1770, he built an Amphitheater Riding House nearby, where he gave lessons and presented entertainments. Feats by horsemen, tightrope and slackwire performers, acrobats, and dancing dogs were among the features of Astley's show, which also introduced the first clown-acrobatic act, "Billy Button and the Tailor's Ride," a comic rider skit that was a headliner for seventy-five years!

Another heart stopping headline evolved in nineteenth-century France, where Jules Leotard developed the aerial flying act. Not satisfied with tricks on the fixed trapeze, Leotard made his debut on the flying trapeze at the Cirque Napoleon in Paris in 1859 and instantly became the toast of the Continent. His name became permanently associated with the costume he devised.

America's notable contribution to the circus was the tent! Although European caravans sometimes used canvas side curtains, circuses played either in the open air or in permanent buildings until 1830, when Aron Turner of Danbury, Connecticut took out a show under a round tent ninety feet in diameter. Turner's ingenuity gave the American circus freedom to travel the countryside, setting the stage for the ultimate Big Top and THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH!

# Lesson 1: The History of the American Circus: The Ringling Years

## Objectives:

Students will:

1. Establish an understanding of the development of the American circus over the course of early American history;  
*[SS.A.1.2.1 The student understands how individuals, ideas, decisions, and events can influence history.]*
2. Establish an understanding of the contributions of John Ringling and the Ringling Brothers to the American circus;  
*[SS.A.1.1.2 The student understands that history tells the story of people and events of other times and places.]*
3. Demonstrate sequencing skills and produce a timeline of the early American circus.  
*[SS.A.1.2.3 The student understands broad categories of time in years, decades, and centuries.]*

**Time:** Two class periods, 45 minutes each

**Materials:** *American Circus Posters* book  
Circus music CD or tape (teacher's choice)  
CD player  
Circus chronology cards  
Props: microphone and hat

## Lesson 1 continued

### Vocabulary:

*Menagerie* A collection of animals on exhibition. Menageries were added to circuses in the late nineteenth century for educational value. It was a way for people to view exotic animals since most people did not travel far from home in those days.

*Equestrian* A rider on horseback. The “elite” act of the circus, started by men who earned substantial reputations as equestrians but also practiced tricks, acrobatics on horseback, and fancy riding.

*Spectacle* The traditional parade pageant of the circus within the Big Top or arena, embroidering some historical or imaginative theme with most of the performers and animals in the circus participating.

*Mud show* A show that traveled by horse drawn wagons between the towns on its route. The term applies to the show’s mode of transportation and the muddy roads they moved over.

### Planning and Preparation:

This lesson will focus on the development and history of the circus in the United States. The emphasis for students is on the *spectacle* of the circus, specifically how it brought excitement to American communities as it traveled. Students will focus on the development of the circus from a linear and historical perspective using a simple visual time line to establish a foundation. Students will discover the Ringling Circus legacy.

Begin by selecting and laminating circus poster images from the *American Circus Posters* book. Hang circus posters on bulletin board or an equivalent display space. Adding small Christmas lights around the borders of each image will aid in the visual appeal of the display. Clear a portion of the class bulletin board to make space for a working timeline.

Make a paper ringmaster’s hat or find a hat that would be suitable as a prop. Obtain a microphone from your media specialist or prepare a paper one to function as the microphone prop. Obtain a CD player or tape player and selections of circus music from your media specialist or music teacher.

Select one student to be the class ringmaster, without the other students’ knowledge. (This will be a surprise.) Before the ringmaster begins, set up the CD player and play the circus music. Prepare the student by telling her/him that she/he will be the ringmaster and will wear the hat and hold the microphone to announce to the class (in a very loud voice): “Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, Children of all ages, Welcome to the Greatest Show on Earth!” Regain the students’ attention and begin the lesson by telling them that they are about to discover the history and splendor of the Circus.

## Lesson 1 continued

### Instruction:

Explain to students that today's presentation is to show the excitement that the circus brings to people and communities as it travels. Tell students that together you will explore the history of the circus for the next couple of days and learn how John Ringling and his brothers became a part of American circus history.

Begin by leading a discussion about the circus. Ask students to think about and share their knowledge of the circus. Explain to students that the circus is a very important part of American history and that creating a time-line is a wonderful way to really view the historical developments of the circus. Use the **circus chronology cards** located in the **Teacher Resource** folder to guide class discussion. As the class discusses notable historical events, use a marker to place the date of the event on the timeline. Conduct further research with your class if you would like to get more detailed with your chronology.

### Production Activity:

#### Visual Arts

1. Break students into small groups. Pass out laminated circus posters. Ask students to find and share within each group a poster image with an example of a menagerie, an acrobat, trick riding, a trapeze artist, an animal trainer, and a wagon.
2. Ask students to think about the following question:

*How many of you have been to a circus? What can you remember about your experience? Where did you see the circus? What exciting acts do you think of when you think of a modern circus?*

Brainstorm answers and create a list of possible modern circus acts on the board. Discuss the acts proposed by students to get them thinking creatively about how an act might work and why certain kinds of acts might be popular today and historically.

3. Ask students to imagine what it would be like to put on a modern circus for their city. Have each student create an illustration for a modern day circus act. What will make the proposed circus act unique, spectacular, and exciting? Share the original circus concepts with the entire class.

### Assessment:

1. Did each student participate as a contributor and occasionally act as a leader in a group discussion?
2. Were the students able to put historical events in chronological order?
3. Were the students able to effectively communicate ideas and information about the circus in the form of a drawing?

## Lesson 2: John Ringling: Circus King

### Objectives:

Students will:

1. Identify John Ringling as a significant contributor to the civic and cultural history of Florida; *[SS.A.6.2.3 The student knows the significant individuals, events, and social, political, and economic characteristics of different periods in Florida's history.]*
2. Identify different types of primary and secondary sources as a method of retelling history (diaries, photographs, Internet sites, books, etc.); *[SS.A1.2.2 The student uses a variety of methods and sources to understand history (e.g. interpreting diaries, letters, newspapers; and reading maps and graphs) and knows the difference between primary and secondary sources.]*
3. Use a variety of reference materials (dictionary, thesaurus, encyclopedia) to gather information; *[SS.A1.2.2 The student uses a variety of methods and sources to understand history (e.g. interpreting diaries, letters, newspapers; and reading maps and graphs) and knows the difference between primary and secondary sources.]*
4. Write notes, comments, and observations that reflect comprehension from a variety of media; *[LA.A.2.2.8 The student selects and uses a variety of appropriate reference materials, including multiple representations of information, such as maps, charts, and photos, to gather information for research projects.]*
5. Organize information using a variety of tools (outline, timeline, graphic organizer); *[LA.A.2.2.5 The student reads and organizes information for a variety of purposes, including making a report, conducting interviews, taking a test and performing an authentic task.]*
6. Determine the sequence of events or information in literary and informational texts. *[LA.B.2.2.1 The student writes notes, comments, and observations that reflect comprehension of content and experiences from a variety of media.]*

**Time:** 45 minutes introductory lesson, on-going project with no time limit

### Materials:

A variety of books about John Ringling and/or the circus from the school and/or public library  
*The Ringling Brothers: Circus Family*, by Richard and Sally Glendinning (optional)  
John Ringling Chronology Cards located in **Teacher Resource** folder  
Portrait postcards of John and Mable Ringling and Cà d'Zan located in **Teacher Resource** folder  
John Ringling Biography think-along exercise located in **Teacher Resource** folder

## Lesson 2 continued

### Instruction:

Introduce John Ringling as a successful businessman who built The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida to house his vast art collection. Display portraits of John and Mable and pictures of the Museum and his Sarasota home, Cà d'Zan. Ask students if they have ever been to the Ringling grounds and what they already know about John Ringling. Ask students to think about how John Ringling might have made his fortune.

Explain that John Ringling made much of his money from the circus. Allow students to wonder aloud about how he got interested in the circus himself: he started out as a clown. Read aloud from The Ringling Brothers: Circus Family , a children's story about five brothers who started the Ringling Brothers Circus (optional). Note dates. Ask if this is a true story and how we would know. Encourage children to ask questions and to guess where they might find the answers.

Use the Ringling Biography to encourage students to ask questions about John Ringling's life. It is set up in a think-along format and might be used as a shared reading exercise.

Allow children to search through a variety of books, encyclopedias, and other print media as well as the Internet to find answers to their questions and other interesting facts about John Ringling. Start a fact file on index cards; one fact per card, each initiated by the writer. Require 5-10 fact cards per student. Note discrepancies in facts from different sources. Cite references! Discuss the difference between primary and secondary sources.

Sort the fact cards in categories. Tape them to the wall, spread them out on a large table, or use magnets to mount move them, etc. As more facts accumulate, categories may change. Invite students to organize the information into an outline. This outline might be used for a written report later.

Use the chronology cards in a center or as a group activity to order the events of John Ringling's life.

As a class project, make a large time-line of John Ringling's life, including important events in history as well as individual events in his life.

### Assessment:

1. Did each student contribute 5-10 fact cards to the class collection?
2. Did each student write notes, comments, and observations that reflect comprehension from a variety of media?
3. Did each student participate in organizing information in a timeline or outline?

## Lesson 3: Spreading the News: The Art of the Circus Poster

### Objectives:

Students will:

1. Recognize the importance of circus posters as works of art, advertisement, and historical artifacts;  
*[SSV.A.E. 1.2.1 The student understands the influence of artists on the quality of everyday life].*
2. Study and identify similarities and differences in the art of the circus poster;  
*[SSV.A.C. 1.2.1 The student understands the similarities and differences in works of art from a variety of sources].*
3. Create an original design for a circus poster;  
*[SSVA.B.1.2.2 The student understands what makes different media techniques and processes effective or ineffective in communicating various ideas].*
4. Create a three-dimensional work of art inspired by circus posters.  
*[SSVA.A.1.2.4. The student uses good craftsmanship in a variety of two-dimensional and three-dimensional media].*

**Time:** Five class periods, 45 minutes each

### Materials:

*American Circus Posters* book  
Works of art by Picasso, Seurat, Rouault, Calder, etc. to be determined by teacher  
Pencil and paper  
Rulers  
Markers and color pencils  
Fabric  
Yarn  
Wire/pipe cleaners  
Glue  
Old magazines

### Vocabulary:

*Lithography* Printing technique in which the image areas on a lithographic stone or metal plate are chemically treated to accept ink and repel water, while the non-image areas are treated to repel ink and retain water.

*Advance man* A man who attended to all the details of a show's route ahead of the show.

## Lesson 3 continued

### Planning and Preparation:

Display circus posters around the classroom. Point to the specific posters to be discussed. Tell students that they will be looking at American and European circus posters. Give students time to observe the posters. Make a diagram with four columns on the board or writing chart. Write the following words on the board or writing chart, one for each column: Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Judgement or Evaluation. Leave the columns blank to write in students' responses after discussion of the circus posters.

### Instruction:

Use one class period to introduce circus posters to students. Tell students that the golden years of the circus poster in America lasted from 1880 until 1930. Ask students to add this fact to their timelines.

Explain to students that circus posters with bright colors and fascinating images of flying trapeze artists, ladies on white horses, and wild beasts of the jungle, posters appeared on billboards, fences, barns, and storefronts to announce that the circus was coming to town. An "advance man" would arrive two weeks before the circus to "sheet up" the town with posters and heralds were posted everywhere to announce the Big Top performances. Circuses often glued their posters right on top of their competitors. Advance men often got carried away with their jobs and the resulting wallpapering of towns was known as "poster nuisance."

Today these lithograph posters are highly prized both for their historical interest, for the their unique printing technique and for their artistry. Their images also document the circus' attractions and its featured performers, as well as the imagination of circus press agents. The posters' finely detailed drawings and clever compositions were the work of skilled artists, with sometimes as many as ten working on a single lithograph. Many of the posters in the collection of the Ringling Museum of the Circus were produced by the Strobridge Lithography Company in Cincinnati, Ohio, a leading printing firm whose work was so respected that it earned the nickname, "The Tiffany of Lithography."

Divide the class into small groups and ask each group to appoint a group reporter. Give each group a circus poster image to explore. Guide the students' poster exploration with the following questioning strategy.

### Description: What do you see?

Tell students they have to discover as much as they can about the poster. Guide students to be inquisitive about what they are seeing and what they would like to know about the circus posters. Tell them to pretend they are detectives trying to find out information about the posters for an important case.

## Lesson 3 continued

Ask students:

*Who made it?*

*How is it made?*

*What is the intention of the poster?*

*What is the first thing you notice when you look at this particular poster?*

*Does it tell you about a place or time? List or mention everything that you see that tells us about this.*

### **Analysis: How is the work organized?**

This process is very detailed and technical. It is based on observation and facts. Pretend you are a scientist trying to find out information based on facts.

Ask students:

*How do two different circus posters compare?*

*How are they similar and how are they different?*

*How is the use of color important?*

*What kind of emphasis is used in the posters?*

*What is the effect of the letters in the poster?*

*Is it always necessary to have letters?*

### **Interpretation: What is happening?**

Tell students they have to find out what the artist is trying to communicate. Interpretation appeals mostly to our senses and emotions. Ask students to pretend they are newspaper reporters to find out the answers.

Ask students:

*What is the message of the circus poster?*

*What kind of mood or feeling is expressed in the poster?*

*Make a list of all the words that could be used to express the mood found in the circus poster.*

*What smell does the poster bring to memory?*

### **Judgement: What do you think of the work?**

Express your reaction to the circus poster. This process of evaluation is subjective based on your knowledge and experiences. Pretend you are an art critic judging the artwork.

Ask students:

*Does the poster communicate its intended message ?*

*Explain how this is accomplished.*

*Do you like the circus poster? Why or why not?*

## Lesson 3 continued

*Do you think it is effective? Why or why not?*

*How are circus posters like or unlike advertisements we see today?*

### **Production Activity:**

Visual Arts

1. Ask students to imagine being employed by the Strobridge Lithography Company as a graphic designer with the assignment to make a poster promoting one of the greatest circus performers.
2. Ask students to choose a favorite performer and make a circus poster to announce that the circus is coming to town. Instruct students to use elements that are important in making an effective promotion of the coming event.

### **Assessment:**

1. Did all students recognize the importance of the circus poster?
2. Did all students understand the influence of artists in our everyday life?
3. Were the students able to identify similarities and differences between circus posters?
4. Did each student create his or her own design for a circus poster?
5. Did all students participate in the classroom cooperative circus?

### **Production Activity (Optional):**

Visual Arts

This activity focuses on the influence of the circus on the work of visual artists. It also demonstrates that works of art often document popular interests of a time period and the role of artists in interpreting popular culture for the viewer.

1. Explain to students that the circus has long been a source of inspiration to artists. Animals and acrobats acts date back to 2400 B.C. Ancient Egyptian art shows that acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and long parades entertained Egyptian nobles and citizens. Almost four thousand years ago, on the island of Crete in Greece, audiences filled amphitheaters or Bull Courts to watch young Minoan men and women grab the horns of charging bulls and vault over the animals' heads. Evidence of these feats can be found in ancient Minoan fresco paintings.

In the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries artists have continued to draw on the circus, as we know it today. Artists who have been fascinated by the spectacle of the circus include Lautrec, Picasso, Mark Chagall, Seurat, Rouault, and Calder.

2. Research artists who have been influenced by the circus. Collect information on *several artworks inspired by the circus. Show a reproduction of art from famous artist such as Picasso, Rouault and Seurat or look at images of Calder's miniature circus.*

## Lesson 3 continued

Stimulate the students with the following questions.

*What influence did the artist show in this particular work?*

*Do you think the artist had a positive experience visiting the circus?*

*How do you think the circus impacted this artist's work?*

*How does the circus inspire your life?*

3. Research with class other artists throughout time who have been impacted by the circus. Invite students to focus their research on one artist and one artwork inspired by the circus. Make use of all available research tools including the school library and the Internet.
4. Have each student choose a circus act that may have impacted her/his life or that she/he has enjoyed the most at the circus and make a three-dimensional expression inspired by the circus. Invite students to use their research on circus art as motivation.

### **Assessment:**

1. Did each student understand the influence of the artist in the everyday life?
2. Did each student research and write about one artist's work influenced by the circus?
3. Did each student create a three-dimensional form of art?
4. Did all students use good craftsmanship in making the specific work of art?

## Lesson 4: Here Comes the Parade: The Art of the Circus Wagon

### Objectives:

Students will:

1. Identify characteristics of circus wagons and the role wagons played in the circus;  
*[VA.E.1.2.1 The student understands the influence of artists on the quality of everyday life.]*
2. Identify image details from circus wagons and what each image represents;  
*[VA.B.1.2.1 The student understands that subject matter used to create unique works of art can come from personal experience, observation, imagination, and themes,]*
3. Create a design for a circus wagon based on a detail of a circus wagon;  
*[VA.A.1.2.1 The student uses and organizes two-dimensional and three-dimensional media, techniques, tools, and processes to produce works of art that are derived from personal experience, observation, or imagination.]*
4. Gain an appreciation of circus wagons as an art form.  
*[VA.D.1.2.2 The student uses different approaches to respond to and to judge various works of art.]*

**Time:** Two class periods, 45 minutes each

### Materials:

Photo-reproductions of circus wagons located in **Teacher Resource** folder  
White drawing paper, 9X12  
Glue  
Pencils and crayons  
Collage materials (fun foam, felt, fur, road maps, magazines, etc.)

### Vocabulary:

*Baggage Wagon* An undecorated wagon used for moving provisions and objects from place to place.

*Parade Wagon* A wagon that was considered to be a work of art, highly decorative, and used for the gala circus parades that advertised the entrance of the circus into a town.

*Bandwagon* A circus parade wagon that carried the musicians. Large circuses might have two or three of these wagons as well as a clown band.

*Tableau Wagon* Shortened to "tab" by circus people, these wagons usually had a central theme carved or painted on their sides. Performers, including animal trainers and live animals, often rode on top of the wagons.

## Lesson 4 continued

*Cage Wagon* A wagon that contained the wild animals that made up the menagerie of the circus.

*Calliope* A musical instrument invented in 1851 by William Hoyt of Dupont, Indiana, and patented and put into commercial use in 1885 by J.C. Stoddard of Worcester, Massachusetts. There are two types of "cally." The original steam calliope is difficult to keep in tune because of the expansion and contraction of the metal whistles. The electric air calliope, a later development, is easier to keep in tune, although it produces a "thinner" sound.

*Character Wagon* A parade wagon designed for a special parade or spectacle with a specific theme.

### **Instruction:**

Display circus wagon images. Assemble art materials into small boxes for each group table area. Set desks or tables up in small groupings.

Explain to students that circus wagons were originally referred to as "Rocks of Gibraltar on Wheels." The construction of the frame, the undercarriage, and the wheels were deliberately over-engineered to withstand abuse from constant travel. Many times this included daily visits between cities. The wagons had to function in the worst possible weather or road conditions. Carriage makers became wagon builders towards the end of the nineteenth century. The wagons displayed sculptural qualities and intricate patterns of painting.

Have students identify special details and characteristics within each wagon image. Break students into small groups to discuss what they see in each image. Ask students to think about how the wagons each wagon was used and how design and decoration differentiated one kind of wagon from another.

### **Production Activity:**

Invite students to study the wagon images for details and to create their own design for a wagon using collage material resources, glue, and 9" X 12" drawing paper. Show students how to add visual and tactile texture.

### **Assessment:**

1. Was each student able to identify characteristics of circus wagons and the role wagons played in the circus?
2. Did each student use two-dimensional and three-dimensional media, techniques, tools, and processes to create a design for a circus wagon?

## Lesson 5: Exploring a Career in the Circus

### Objectives:

Students will:

1. Gain a new understanding of the variety of careers in American circuses;
2. Create a letter asking the Ringling Bros. for a position in the circus;  
*[LA.B.1.2.2 The student drafts and revises writing in cursive that focuses on a topic; has a logical organizational pattern including a beginning, middle, conclusion, and transitional devices; has ample supporting ideas; demonstrates a sense of completeness or wholeness; demonstrates a command of language including precision and word choice; generally has correct verb and noun forms; with few exceptions, has sentences that are complete, except where fragments are used purposefully; uses a variety of sentence structures; and generally follows the conventions of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.]*
3. Invent their own circus performer and circus act in addition to writing a letter of application to John Ringling inquiring about a job in the circus;  
*[LA.B.2.2.3 The student writes for a variety of occasions, audiences, and purposes.]*
4. Revise, edit, publish, and share their letters to the Ringling show.  
*[LA.B.1.2.3 The student produces final documents that have been edited for correct spelling; correct use of punctuation, including commas in series, dates, and addresses, and beginning and end quotation marks; correct capitalization of proper nouns; correct paragraph indentation; correct usage of subject/verb agreement, verb and noun forms, and sentence structure; and correct formatting according to instruction.]*

**Time:** 3 class periods, 45 minutes each

### Materials:

Application letter to the Ringling show: primary resource located in **Teacher Resource** folder  
List of circus jobs/careers  
Thesauruses  
Dictionaries  
Photograph of each student  
Paper  
Scissors  
Glue  
Letterhead and design from copy of original 1915 letter (optional)

## Lesson 5 continued

### **Instruction:**

#### *Class period 1*

Brainstorm with students the kinds of jobs people might have held with the Ringling Brother's circus. Remind students that there are many people in a circus and that it took many different jobs to keep the circus moving from place to place. As students identify jobs within the circus, discuss how each job might have contributed to the circus as a whole. Conduct research into circus jobs and skills required to perform circus jobs.

Share the Application Letter Primary Resource Document with students. Read the application letter with students and discuss the kind of job being applied for in the letter. Brainstorm with students what it might have been like to be a performer looking for a job in the circus. What skills would a performer need to be successful in the circus? What kinds of evidence could a circus performer produce to demonstrate her/his ability as a performer?

Ask students to name the essential elements of a letter including the date, greeting, body of a letter, and the closing. Have students analyze the letter to determine if it contains all the essential elements of a business letter.

Have the students choose one circus job to explore. Invite students to conduct research into circus jobs and skills required to perform circus jobs. Allow students to brainstorm in small groups and begin writing down their ideas. Ask a few students to share what they have written with the class.

Have students create a rough draft of a letter to John Ringling. Ask students to share their favorite part of their draft. Ask students to review the process they just completed. Remind them that writing is a process and takes time.

#### *Class period 2*

Read your rough draft to the class in a dull, monotone voice. Explain that words give writers power and that writing that will get another person's attention takes creativity.

Choose a word that is common or unexciting. Ask one or two students to look up that word, and/or a similar word, in a thesaurus. Have students vote on the word they like best or choose one you think is most appropriate.

Encourage students to use thesauruses and dictionaries to revise their work. Ask two or three students to share what they have written.

This might be a good time to ask students suffering from writer's block to share what they have so far with the class. Classmates can offer suggestions for improvement and/or help look up new words in the thesaurus or dictionary. Have students circle or correct any words they think might be misspelled.

## Lesson 5 continued

Review the steps in the writing process that have been completed. Inform the students that the final step is to publish the letter and share it with the class. Students will need a photograph to go on the letter. They may use a picture from home or use a school photo. Complete and publish a letter ahead of time to use as a model for the class.

### *Class period 3*

Distribute copies of the letter to John Ringling around the class. Ask the students to look again at the way the circus performer has used a photograph and expressive language in his job application letter. Ask students to think about the sample letter when creating their own letter to John Ringling.

Allow students ample time to finish up their letters and paste their photographs to the letters. Divide class into small groups. Each group may share letters. Some students may not be ready to publish right away. Allow them some extra time to refine and polish their pieces.

### **Assessment:**

1. Did each student use the writing process to compose a business letter seeking employment with the Ringling circus?
2. Did each student revise, edit, publish, and share their letters to John Ringling?
3. Did each student produce an edited final copy of a business letter?

## Lesson 6: Oral History: Making Circus Memories Come Alive

### Objectives:

Students will:

1. Research the life and work of one performer in the American circus;  
*[LA.A.2.2.5 The student reads and organizes information for a variety of purposes, including making a report, conducting interviews, taking a test, and performing an authentic task.]*
2. Draw conclusions about the life and work of a circus performer ;  
*[LA.B.2.2.1 The student writes notes, comments, and observations that reflect comprehension of content and experiences from a variety of media.]*
3. If possible, interview and document through media the personal history of a chosen circus performer. If it is impossible to locate a former circus performer, invite students to interview an individual (i.e. a family friend or grandparent) who has attended a circus performance and has strong memories of the circus performance or particular performer;  
*[LA.C.1.2.1 The student listens and responds to a variety of oral presentations, such as stories, poems, skits, songs, personal accounts, informational speeches.]*
4. Determine methods of personal investigation which lead to a successful oral history documented on tape recorder, VCR, and in writing;  
*[LA.A.2.2.8 The student selects and uses a variety of appropriate reference materials, including multiple representations of information, such as maps, charts, and photos, to gather information for research projects.]*
5. Recognize this person's point of view in print and in a visual presentation.  
*[LA.B.2.2.4 The student uses electronic technology, including word processing software and electronic encyclopedias, to create, revise, retrieve, and verify information.]*

### Time:

Ongoing—May be executed in a predetermined time frame for presentation within the classroom or ongoing throughout the school year and presented in a public presentation at the end of the school year.

### Materials:

Tape recorder  
Video Tape Recorder  
Digital Camera (if available)  
Computer  
Release forms for interviewing  
Calendar to track process

## Lesson 6 continued

### Vocabulary:

*Oral history* Historical information that is obtained in interviews with persons who have led significant lives and that is usually tape-recorded.

*Utterance* An oral or written statement.

*Transcribe* To make a copy of dictated or recorded matter in longhand or on computer.

### Planning and Preparation:

This lesson focuses on the importance of documenting and preserving the personal histories of individuals who have lived through and experienced important times in history. Circus performers and individuals who have been impacted by the great American circus are vast resources for information about our past. There is a vast difference between reading a book about circus history and getting to know someone who has experienced the height of circus popularity in America as an audience or as a circus participant, whether it be a trapeze artist, the ringmaster, or the person setting up the tents. Each has his/her own story to tell about why the circus has become a way of life and how the circus impacts our local and national history. "Becoming a part of history" allows the student to share with others this unique and fascinating historical event called "A CIRCUS!"

Collaborate with your media specialist to tape record or videotape as well as to transcribe the oral history interviews. Remember to obtain a signed release agreement from all participants.

A suggestion for preparing students to familiarize themselves with implementing an oral history is to pair up students and allow them to interview each other. Let them learn by discovery in asking questions after a brief overview of the "who, what, when, where, why" method. Each student then presents the other's personal history to the class. Creating a positive attitude towards peer evaluation will enhance the final outcome of this project since each student will feel empowered to aid her/his fellow classmates in a positive manner.

### Instruction:

Allow students (groups of 2-3 suggested) to interview one circus performer, circus worker, or individual that has experienced the circus. Conduct research into circus jobs and skills required to perform circus jobs. Have each group keep a separate notebook, copy these notes, and keep as written document to which to refer. Invite students to cooperatively determine outcomes for a class oral history project.

## Lesson 6 continued

Ask students:

*What would the students already know about this person and his/her act, responsibilities, or experience?*

*What would the students like to know about this person and his/her act, responsibilities or experience?*

*How would the students go about setting up and doing an oral history/multi-media presentation to document their chosen performer/worker/individual?*

*How would the class like to do a final presentation, whether simply in class or as an end-of-year presentation, inviting dignitaries from circus, community, press, and other distinguished visitors?*

Brainstorm questions to ask during an oral history interview. Remind students to think about questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer. Ask each group to write its questions in a neat format on large lined paper. Have each group present its questions to the class and post question sheets around the classroom area. Review questions with students, combine, and edit over the next few days.

Invite the class to decide what questions to use during the interview process and to think about how to properly phrase the questions for clear interviews. Have students write down or type final questions for easy reference.

Questions may include:

*Tell us your name, profession, age, and place of birth.*

*What is your family history?*

*Describe your first memory of a circus.*

*Did you have any responsibilities in circus? If so, what were they?*

*What special practices or training required was required?*

*What inspired you to become...?*

*Did your childhood influence your decision, if so, how?*

*What was the most thrilling moment of your/event of your career?*

*What was the scariest incident in your experience with the circus?*

*What was the funniest incident in your experience with the circus?*

*Describe a normal day in your circus life.*

*What do you do outside your circus responsibilities?*

*What one person influenced you the most? How or why?*

*What would you like the public to know about being a circus member?*

### Assessment:

1. Did each student interview one classmate?
2. Did each student read and organize information for conducting an oral history interview?
3. Did each student listen and respond to a variety of oral presentations?

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This publication and other circus resources may be purchased through the Ringling Museum of the Circus Gift Shop. For more information, contact the Ringling Museum Gift Shop: Phone (941) 359-5738 / sales@ringling.org.