



The History of the Circus and its Pioneers



Knowledge Organiser:

Vocabulary	Definition
Controversial	Giving rise or likely to give rise to controversy or public disagreement.
Diversity	The fact of there being people of many different groups in society, within an organisation, etc.
Entertainer	A person, such as a singer, dancer, or comedian, whose job is to entertain others.
Entrepreneur	A person who sets up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit.
Horsemanship	Skill at riding horses.
Inclusion	The action or state of including or of being included within a
Incredible	Impossible or difficult to believe; extraordinary.
Pioneer	A person who is one of the first people to do something.
Ringmaster	The person who introduces the performers at a circus.
Trendsetter	A person who leads the way in fashion or ideas.

Philip Astley (1742—1815)

Significant individuals

Key facts and dates

The modern circus owes its existence to Philip Astley who, in 1768, first roped off a circle and displayed his skills of horsemanship.

A highly gifted and resourceful horseman and entrepreneur, he was able to establish a successful art form in a relatively short period of time; one that would soon sweep the country and then the world.

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Pre-history	Roman	Anglo-Saxon	Viking	Medieval	Tudor	Stuart	Georgian	Victorian	Modern
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Many circus skills can claim their roots in the human instinct to play and experiment. This is one of the reasons we find them so appealing: the circus artist takes the potential of the human body and, through a combination of natural ability, rigorous rehearsal, discipline and resilience, elevates it into an art form that looks effortless, although we know it is anything but.

ROPE WORK

- Aerial rope is an aerial circus act consisting of climbing, wrapping and dropping from a single rope or *corde lisse* hanging vertically from the ceiling.
- *Corde lisse* is French for 'smooth rope', usually made from soft cotton.
- *Corde volante* or 'Mexican cloud swing' is another rope work technique, in which performers swing on a u-shaped rope rigging.
- Aerial silk acts are closely related to aerial rope and are performed on aerial silks or tissues – two long strands of colourful fabric rigged from a single point in the ceiling or circus tent.



JUGGLING

Juggling is said to be one of the most ancient skills, linked to the human instinct for play. Its earliest depictions come from images come from wall frescoes in the Beni Hassan tombs dating to approximately 4600BC, showing women juggling.



ACROBALANCE

Balancing is another physical skill that people have experimented with throughout the ages, and is also depicted in medieval images.

Balancing acts can be performed individually, or with one or several partners. Acrobatic balancing or 'acrobalance' today means the combination of adagio lifts and hand balancing.



8 Legendary Circus Performers— From Queen Victoria's favourite lion tamer to a doomed aerialist, step right up and meet eight of the most beloved and influential stars of the big top. For more information on these characters, visit www.history.com/news/8-legendary-circus-performers

1. Isaac Van Amburgh - - The Great Lion Tamer
2. Dan Rice—The King of American Clowns
3. Annie Oakley—The Peerless Lady Wingshot
4. Jules Leotard—The Daring Man on the Flying Trapeze
5. May Wirth—The World's Greatest Bareback Rider
6. Zazel—The Human Projectile
7. Charles Blondin—The Great Blondin Tightrope Walker
8. Lilian Leitzel—The Queen of Aerial Gymnasts