A circus in Islington: paintings by Thérèse Lessore

Article (Accepted Version)

Price, Jason (2020) A circus in Islington: paintings by Thérèse Lessore. Early Popular Visual Culture. ISSN 1746-0654

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/92442/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

A Circus in Islington: Paintings by Thérèse Lessore

Abstract

In this paper I consider two nearly-forgotten artistic practices: that of British painter Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) and the annual World's Fair Circus held in Islington, London which she painted on several occasions in the 1920s and 30s. Despite Lessore's significant output and the positive critical attention her artwork received during her lifetime, her career has been overshadowed by that of her second husband, the prominent British impressionist Walter Sickert. Both artists shared an interest in watching, drawing and painting popular entertainments, and even before they were married they frequently attended music halls, theatres and circuses together to gain inspiration for their work. From 1927 to 1934, the couple became regular attendees at the annual World's Fair circus, which Lessore went on to depict in several paintings. Dating back to 1883, the World's Fair, with its circus, animal menagerie, rides, and other novelties, brought the splendour of the summer fair into the Christmas period where it was sheltered from the winter elements by the glass and iron ceiling of the Royal Agricultural Hall. Despite its longevity and popularity, little has been written about the fair and the circuses it hosted. This paper begins the work of contextualising Lessore's paintings and, in the process, recuperating a circus tradition that held significance for thousands of Londoners across the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Keywords

Thérèse Lessore, Walter Sickert, Circus, John Swallow, Royal Agricultural Hall

The London Borough of Islington (Winter 1927-28)

Taking her seat in Islington's Royal Agricultural Hall for the annual New World's Fair circus in the winter of 1927-1928, artist Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) is likely to have felt a sense of personal relief and professional possibility. For years, Lessore and her colleague, close friend, and now second husband, Walter Sickert, had enjoyed attending performances of various kinds together, which they would sketch as inspiration for future paintings. Since their marriage in June 1926, however, their lives had been fraught with difficulties: Sickert had been unwell and needed time away from the public eye to recuperate, facilitating two moves – the first to Brighton later that summer, and the second to Islington the following year.¹ Back in a familiar city, with Sickert's health considerably improved, an evening out at the circus must have felt like a return to better days. The couple may have taken in some the many exhibits and pleasures of the fair – the exotic animal menagerie, for instance, or some

of the latest novelties from America that could be found on display, before entering the circus on the far western end of the Great Hall.

The circus at the Royal Agricultural Hall was a regular Christmas event in Islington, with the earliest circuses being staged there just a year after the building was completed in 1862 (Connell and Willats 1974, 7). In 1870, the famous circus proprietor Lord George Sanger became the venue's lessee and his circus became the annual Christmas show for over a decade. Starting in 1883, the circus became but one feature of a grand holiday bazaar opened by H. and T. Read and F. Bailey called The World's Fair which included fairground rides, games, an animal menagerie, and other amusements (ibid.). Each year the fair would open on or near Christmas Eve and would play until early February. The circus would be performed twice daily – an afternoon matinee and then an evening performance – and three times on Saturday. From 1920 to 1938, the fair's circus was overseen by John Swallow, a skilled acrobat and equestrian who had secured his reputation in the circus industry with his famous Broncho Bill Circus and Wild West Show which toured Britain in the late 1910s and 20s (Thomas 1980, 5). 'Swallow's Circus', as the Christmas circus under Swallow's directorship came to be known, was the highlight of the annual fair. It was Swallow's Circus that the Sickerts sat down to draw in the winter of 1927, and in subsequent winters until 1934, their final year in Islington together.

There is clear evidence that the Sickerts regularly attended the New World's Fair between 1927 and 1934.² Paintings Lessore exhibited with the London Group in 1920 and 1924, entitled, respectively, *The Gallery, Royal Agricultural Hall* and *Clown's Vaulting*, indicate that Lessore's history with the fair extends back to at least 1920, although there are no programmes or other records held in the family archive that can verify how consistent her attendance was prior to 1927.³ In addition to the two (now lost) paintings mentioned above, during this period Lessore produced at least nine other paintings of Swallow's Circus. Three

of these are simply titled *Swallow's Circus*, while a further four share the name *Islington Circus*. The two largest paintings in the collection also share the distinction of having been given unique names: *Miss Lulu and Mr Harry* and *Swallow's Liberty Horses*. All but the latter picture is undated. One further painting, entitled *The Daredevils*, depicts a scene from *Swallow's Circus*, bringing the total number of known paintings by Lessore of this particular circus to ten. While programmes, posters and a handful of journalistic descriptions of selected acts indicate who was performing and sometimes what their act may have involved, photographic or other visual material of the performers and their acts are almost non-existent. So what makes Lessore's paintings unique and historically important is that they provide rare visual documentation of acts that were performed as part of the circus at the World's Fair during this period.

In this article I take a closer at Lessore and her paintings of *Swallow's circus* in the 1920s and early 1930s. In the first section, I introduce Lessore and the wider aesthetic contexts she was working in. As her career has been overshadowed by the fame of her second husband (Sickert), this section casts light onto her work and attempts a brief resurrection. But because of its bifurcated focus, the paper can only gently, and perhaps all too simply, begin the necessary work of recuperating Lessore as an early twentieth-century artist of distinction. The following sections consider the circus at Islington – *Swallow's Circus* – and how Lessore's work documents an event that has received little scholarly attention. Drawing on a range of archival materials, the article looks to piece together a clearer sense of what Lessore was looking at and rendering artistically, and proposes dates for those pictures which until now have proven to be un-dateable.

Lessore, Modernism and the Circus

Thérèse Lessore was the third (and final) child born to artist Jules Lessore and his wife Ada⁴ on 5 July 1884 in Southwick, West Sussex. Sickert biographer Matthew Sturgis describes the atmosphere of the Lessore household as ambitious and creative, which seems to have had a positive effect on all three Lessore children (Sturgis 2005, 473).⁵ By the time twenty-year-old Thérèse reached London's Slade School of Art in 1904, she possessed a passion for painting, which her friends would recall being the almost singular topic that the usually quiet artist could speak endlessly about.⁶ In her final year at Slade in 1909, she won the prestigious Nettleship Prize for figurative composition (Haftner 2014, 45). The same year she would marry the painter Bernard Adenley and together, in 1913, they would be two of the founder members of the London Group, which both artists would go on to exhibit with regularly.⁷ The art critic for the *Daily Herald* singled out Lessore's work from the first London Group exhibition, held at London's Goupil Gallery in March 1914, for being 'really original work' that, despite suffering some strains of contemporaneity (a common lament of conservative art critics against modernist impulses), had lasting appeal (Reflections 1914, 8).⁸ These early showings also caught the attention of Sickert – at the time, also a London Group member – as correspondence between him and fellow artist Ethel Sands confirms (Sturgis 2005, 473).⁹ Later that year, when Lessore's work appeared at the Whitechapel Gallery in its exhibition on 'Twentieth-Century Art', Sickert singled her out for distinction in his review, describing her work as 'some strange alchemy of genius' of the 'highest technical brevity and beauty' (Sickert, Whitechapel 2000, 373). For her first solo exhibition in 1918 at the Eldar Gallery in London, an article Sickert wrote for the journal *Art and Letters* was re-printed as the preface to the catalogue. In the article Sickert attempted to articulate what it was that made Lessore's work unique:

When you or I are drawing, we are trying, with more or less success, to give a complete account of a street, with its windows, etc., or of a woman in repose, with all

her fingers, and with all the folds of her gown. Thérèse Lessore is drawing, not the street or the woman, but – the impulse of the bargain in a crowd, the concentration of a hearth which is, or is not, a home [...] Go home and try to draw me one or all of these things [...] I need not say I shall not attempt them myself. (Sickert, Thérèse Lessore 2000, 428)

For Sickert, then, what made Lessore's work distinctive – and perhaps what defined her personal style – was a refusal of precise or detailed realism in favour of capturing something of the essences within, or behind, the subjects she chose to paint. Her work recorded the energy of the modern world through what Sickert described as an 'economy of means', which he estimated was the 'surest source of artistic enjoyment' (Sickert, Thérèse Lessore 2000, 429).

Another source of enjoyment for Sickert, and Lessore, came from watching popular entertainment. Like other artists from this period, they were attracted to quotidian scenes and experiences, and recording those in their work. Sickert's artistic treatment of popular forms began in the 1880s. Influenced particularly by French impressionist Edgar Degas (who would become a close friend and mentor) and his work on circus, Parisian café-concerts and cabarets, Sickert began a series of paintings on popular subjects, including circus and music hall; among them *The Circus* (1885), *Second Turn of Miss Katie Lawrence* (1888), and *Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford* (1892). By the time Lessore and Sickert began drawing popular entertainments together in the nineteenth-teens, the wider modernist art movement – in Britain and elsewhere – commonly appropriated popular sources. The attraction professional artists had for popular culture forms has been variously explained as a radical rejection of classical styles and subjects (Turvey 2017, 5); a recognition that the forms represented a colourful contrast to highly-polluted industrialised urban spaces (Starobinski 2004, 16); and, in the case of the nineteenth-century circus particularly, a sense that it was an

innovative and forward-looking industry, and was therefore read as a ‘metonym for modernity’ (Arighi 2012, 169).¹⁰ So when Lessore began sketching and painting Swallow’s Circus in the 1920s, her work was contributing to an already significant volume of modern art which featured popular imagery. Arguably the best-known paintings of British circuses from this period belong to artist Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970). Unlike Knight’s circus paintings and sketches, which range from intimate, backstage scenes of circus performers¹¹ as well as performers in action¹², Lessore’s work is positioned exclusively from the perspective of the audience. Part of the reason for this is likely to be access: while both artists worked from sketches made while watching circuses, Knight developed close relations with performers and managers (including Swallow)¹³, famously working in residence with circuses and even going on tour.¹⁴ If Lessore gained behind-the-scenes access to Swallow’s Circus, there are no records to verify it and the work itself does not show it. What the artists share, however, is an impressionistic approach, although their figurative precision, sharpness and colouring preferences vary considerably. Of the two, it is Lessore’s work that seems vaguer, figuratively, and draws on a colour palette that leans toward pastels and softer tones. If we are to apply Sickert’s reading of Lessore’s work to these paintings, then we might regard these choices as attempts to record, in addition to the act itself, the energy of the experience of being present and watching. As visual records go, these paintings may not give us the clarity and detail of photographs, but they provide experiential snapshots of acts and audiences that still offer valuable insights into what it may have been like to be at Swallow’s Circus.

Swallow’s Circus at The New World’s Fair

When Lessore attended the New World’s Fair in 1927, she was taking part in an annual Christmas tradition dating back half a century. As in previous years, the fair was being hosted

in Islington's Royal Agricultural Hall. Built in 1861 to host the Smithfield Club's annual agricultural shows, since its inception the one-hundred-and-ten-thousand square foot venue – which was reported on its opening to consist of one thousand tons of iron; seven large star chandeliers (lit by some of the 4,000 gas jets); arched glass ceiling; and enjoying its own post and telegraph offices¹⁵ – had been used for a multitude of purposes, hosting cattle shows, balls, industrial exhibitions and other large-scale events. The venue's first Christmas event, which included a circus, was staged in 1863 and was reported to feature '350 performers, 100 horses and 50 suits of brass and steel armour' (Connell and Willats 1974, 6). In 1883, when H. and T. Read and F. Bailey launched The World's Fair, its circus was but one of many attractions made available for pleasure seekers. Billed as a 'Grand Christmas Carnival', the Reads and Bailey advertised the event as 'a modernized edition of the old 'Bartlemy Fair' [...] which could be enjoyed without the burden of 'wind or weather' (reprinted in Connell and Willats 1974, 25-26). The highlight of the inaugural bill included the 'Great American Lion Tamer' Captain Dudley Vane who displayed 'his highly-trained groups of savage animals' (ibid.). The fair soon established itself as an Islington Christmas institution where, from Christmas Eve until early February, people could take in its sideshows, rides, amusements, afternoon dances, and circus for little cost. Under new lessees in 1924, the fair was re-branded the 'New' World's Fair, although, apart from the name and the price, little else about the fair appears to have changed.

In the winter of 1927-28, the fair was celebrating its forty-seventh season and its circus was being overseen by John Swallow (1873-1945), who was in his seventh year as the fair's circus director. The circus programmes boast of Swallow's credentials:

Mr. John Swallow comes from a family famous throughout the Circus World for generations. He has performed and travelled his Circuses through every country in Europe, and has been with all the big shows throughout North and South America.

His name as Circus Director is a guarantee that the performance given will be high class, daring and original. (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1927)

While it is unclear whether Swallow was as well-travelled as this biography indicates, it does appear that he was a highly regarded figure in the British circus industry at this time. In way of verification we might look to the major circus histories and/or memoirs published in the first half of the twentieth century, such as those by Croft-Cooke (1950), Knight (1937) and Manning-Sanders (1952). In each of these, Johnny ‘Broncho Bill’ Swallow and his circuses are mentioned.

Swallow was the fourth of six children born to John Swallow (Sr.) and his wife Elizabeth in 1873. The Swallow children were raised in the family’s circus, which their grandfather opened in 1841 (Turner n.d.). By the turn of the twentieth-century, Swallow had gained notoriety as an acrobat and bareback rider performing in circuses in Britain and abroad (ibid.). According to historian Ruth Manning-Sander, Swallow was later signed to Barnum and Bailey’s Circus in America where, among other things, he would drive the stagecoach in the show’s wild west finale (Manning-Sanders 1952, 321).¹⁶ Inspired by his time in America, when Swallow returned to England in 1912 he opened his own show which he called Broncho Bill’s Circus and Wild West.¹⁷ His wife, Nellie Swallow, a circus trick shooter, who is said to have been able to hit twenty targets the size of a penny in just twenty seconds, was one of the star attractions of his show (Turner n.d.). Hal Thomas, who saw Broncho Bill’s Circus as a child, vividly recalls aspects of Swallow’s show: his eight, uniquely spotted liberty horses; a clown who could juggle billiard cues; the Mizumo Troupe of Japanese acrobats; and the performing elephants Salt and Saucy (Thomas 1980, 5).¹⁸ The finale, entitled ‘The Great Attack on the Stage Coach’, mirrored that of the Barnum circus that Swallow himself had performed in (Broncho Bill n.d.).

By 1920, the year before he was made the director of the circus in Islington, Swallow's Broncho Bill show had become the second largest tent circus in Britain (Manning-Sanders 1952, 321). Being appointed the circus director for a London Christmas attraction would not have hurt his business: not only did it extend his operating season into the winter months, but being put in charge of a major circus in the capital would have boosted his professional profile. The Broncho Bill show was eventually auctioned off after its final season ended in November 1930 (Thomas 1980, 7), although Swallow himself continued with the Islington Circus until 1938.

Swallow's Circus by Lessoré

There are currently ten paintings by Lessoré of Swallow's Circus the whereabouts of which are known. As noted earlier, several of these unhelpfully share the same name. I have listed the paintings with dates (if known) and measurements below.¹⁹ In such cases where paintings share a name, I have amended the title in brackets to make it possible to distinguish between them. For ease, I have chosen to use the amended titles throughout the rest of this paper when referring to specific artworks. Each painting was made using the same materials – oil paint on canvas – and all are located in the Islington Local History Centre, unless otherwise stated.

1. *Miss Lulu and Mr Harry*, 80 x 52.5cm
2. *Swallow's Circus* [Equestrian Act], 39.5 x 65cm
3. *Swallow's Circus* [Equestrienne], 30 x 20.5cm
4. *Swallow's Circus* [Man with donkey], 31 x 19.5cm
5. *Swallow's Liberty Horses*, dated 1927, 59 x 80cm
6. *Islington Circus* [Clown Entrée], 21 x 32cm
7. *Islington Circus* [Jockey Trio], 21 x 32.5cm
8. *Islington Circus* [Performing Ponies], 21 x 32cm

9. *Islington Circus* [Equestrian Act II], 21 x 32cm

10. *The Daredevils*, 91.4 x 71.1cm, Hasting Museum and Art Gallery, Hastings

During the 1927-28 circus, the Sickerts would have been able to see fifteen circus acts, including several of the acts that Hal Thomas remembered seeing in Swallow's Broncho Bill show as a child. The elephants Salt and Saucy, for instance, appeared fourth on the bill (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1927). *The Era*'s reviewer praised the animals for demonstrating 'a gift for clowning' (Agricultural Hall: Circus According to English Traditions 1928, 10). What Thomas had recalled as the 'Mizumo' Troupe appear in the programme as the 'Mizeno-Theo Troupe'. Described as 'wonderful Japanese and European equilibrists', they appeared thirteenth on the bill, right before Swallow presented his famously-spotted liberty horses (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1927). Lessore seems to have taken a particular interest in this act, as it became the subject of her painting *Swallow's Liberty Horses* (Figure 1). A liberty horse act typically consisted of an ensemble of riderless horses performing choreographies to verbal or other sonic commands. In Lessore's painting, Swallow's eight liberty horses are in motion, circling inside the circus ring. In the centre of the ring a man dressed in white sits atop a black horse, while three other men –wearing light brown – stand on the ground. Four flag poles – each containing a pink flag – are positioned around the ring, from which white, green, blue, and red bunting is suspended. In the foreground, and taking up roughly the bottom third of the canvas, are audience members, their backs to us, watching the act – a feature that repeats in all of Lessore's circus paintings. The contrast between darkened 'watching' space and the candy-coloured circus act is a striking feature of this series of images.

Swallow's Liberty Horses has been dated to 1927, although, based on the information available, I do not believe that is correct. If it is, Lessore would have seen the circus during the early days of its opening in 1927 (24 – 31 December) and painted it before the New Year – a feat not impossible for the painter, although probably unlikely. If the painting does date

from the late 1920s, then a more realistic date given the time of the circus we know Lessore saw would be 1928. At the latest, it could not be dated after 1929 as that was the last year that Swallow's liberty horses appeared in Islington before being sold with the rest of his Broncho Bill show; from 1930, the liberty horse act was presented by others, including, the programmes indicate, J. De Jonghe and 'Captain' Ankner.²⁰ Of course, it is always possible that Lessore is painting the act as it appeared between 1920 and 1926, although evidence of her attendance in those years is, as noted, scarce (and in 1926, Lessore and Sickert were living in Brighton). Given that, and the date of the painting that has currently been set, I think it is reasonable to assume that this does represent the act as it appeared in the 1927-28 circus and its likely creation date was 1928.

Another act appearing in the programme in the 1927-28 season is 'Miss May, the Dainty Lady Equestrienne' (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1927). This act also appears to be the subject of one of Lessore's paintings – *Swallow's Circus* [Equestrienne] (Figure 2). In the photograph of Miss May that appears in that season's programme (Figure 3), she wears a ballerina costume, complete with headdress and a hoop for leaping through. These features also appear clearly in the painting. While May stands as a distinct possibility, the kind of act she performed was relatively common to circuses during this period. A quick glance at other New World's Fairs during the years 1927-1934, when it is believed this painting was created, reveals other potential candidates: Ekaterina Wassilona, who appeared in the 1928-29 circus, for instance, performed 'voltige on an unsaddled horse', an act similar to May's.²¹ Other candidates from available circus programmes include: Miss Mona Connor (1929-1930), Miss Lillian (also from 1929-1930); and finally, Miss Sandrina (1933-1934). Of these performers, however, I have only been able to find evidence of Miss May using a hoop in her act, which lends weight to her being the subject of the painting. *The Era's* review of the 1927-28 circus seems to confirm May's candidacy:

Once more the fat white horse of our childhood's memories bears the 'dainty lady equestrienne' – Miss May this time – as she skips through a golden hoop, or gallops round while the dignified ringmaster keeps an eye fixed upon him. (Agricultural Hall: Circus According to English Traditions 1928, 10)

While the specific mention of the hoop is promising, the critic's emphasis on the commonality of the act continues to thwart a straightforward authentication of the painting's subject. Still, given the evidence available – the programme, photograph of the performer, and the review – it stands to reason that May stands at the top of the wider field of candidates for being the subject of this particular painting.

The Era's review also helpfully mentions an act that is not listed in the programme, but which bears resemblance to another Lessore painting: *Islington Circus* [Jockeys] (Figure 4). The description is of an act called the Veroniques, a group of comedy jockeys who performed on horseback:

[...] a group of jockeys (the Veroniques) follow at his heels before leaping one by one from the ring to horseback until they are all circling at full speed on the one white horse. But there is another white horse, and then the Veroniques take similar leaps until they are standing upon these two (Agricultural Hall: Circus According to English Traditions 1928, 10).

In Lessore's painting, three jockeys dressed in green, red and blue blouses and white trousers are shown interlocking arms and balancing themselves across two white horses. If this painting is indeed recording the Veroniques, Lessore seems to be capturing the final moments described by the reviewer.

In attempting to pinpoint the date and acts depicted in these paintings, it is worth considering their composition. Both *Swallow's Circus* [Equestrienne] and *Islington Circus* [Jockeys] seem to be drawn from similar viewpoints. When looking at the equestrienne in

Swallow's Circus, one notices that she is circling the arena, approaching one of the main entrances to the ring on the side furthest from the viewer. The jockeys in *Islington Circus* are closer to the artist, and therefore block most of the entrance out, but still a portion of the right-hand balustrade is visible to the left of the jockey in green. In the equestrienne painting, Lessore seems to capture a wider frame, as if she were standing, rather than sitting, but the artist's distance from the ring seems similar in the two works.

A look at paintings in the *Islington Circus* series reveal a number of similarities in terms of viewpoint and spatial composition. Two *Islington Circus* paintings in particular stand out in this regard as they record scenes from the same location in the venue. The first [Clown Entrée] (Figure 5) shows a somersaulting clown soaring, via a springboard, over the heads of five other performers, while four other clowns look on. In the foreground, the ringmaster can be seen standing by an open gate; while in the background, once again we see the entrance, stairs and balustrades familiar from the other paintings in the series. This could very well be the act performed by the clowns who appeared seventh on the programme in 1927, listed simply as 'Circus Entrée' (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1927).²² The other *Islington Circus* painting, [Performing Ponies] (Figure 6), shows a man in black formalwear parading four white ponies, dressed with light blue plumes and harnesses, around the circus ring; the same ringmaster from the clown entrée painting, dressed in a red coat washed out by the intense stage lighting, can be seen with his back to us; and once again, in the background of the painting, the same architectural elements found in the other two paintings are identifiable. The ninth item on the 1927-28 programme stands out as being the likely inspiration: 'The Pretty Performing Ponies', an act which involved four ponies named Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1927). The act was presented by Swallow himself, so if this is the act depicted, as I believe it is, the man in the tuxedo is likely to be Swallow, giving us a rare glimpse of 'Broncho Bill' in action.

While precisely dating some of the smaller paintings given the similarities between acts is difficult, the two larger circus paintings of Swallow's Circus, however, can be dated with greater certainty. *The Daredevils* dates to the 1929-1930 circus and *Ms Lulu and Mr Harry* (Figure 7) dates from the following year, 1930-1931. The first of these, *The Daredevils*, shows three trapeze artists suspended from the Royal Agricultural Hall's magnificent iron and glass ceiling. Dressed in pink, the artists are spotlighted from two sides, resulting in a sharp silhouette on the galleries below. The programme for the 1929-1930 World's Fair directs us to the subject of this painting. Ninth on the bill is the Wolthings Trio, who are tellingly billed as 'Dare Devils in Mid-Air' (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1929).²³ The Wolthings Trio were a Belgian trapeze act consisting of Marcel Forgeur, his wife Marie Forgeur, and Jorio Lambert.²⁴ The Worthings performed in circuses across Europe, although their appearance in Swallow's Circus in 1929 was, the programme boasts, their first in England (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1929). Newspaper reports indicate that after the Christmas season at the Royal Agricultural Hall, the trio were next performing at the London Coliseum. Later that year, the trio made their first appearance in the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus in America, which they would perform with on several occasions until the late 1940s (Wolthings n.d.).

Ms Lulu and Mr Harry (Figure 7) shows a moment from a *pas de deux*²⁵ performed by the brother and sister-in-law duo Louise and Harry Stephenson during the circus's 1930-1931 season. A publicity image appearing in *The Daily Herald* in December 1932, when Louise and Harry were performing in the Christmas circus at the Belle Vue in Manchester, England, shows the pair dressed in white, balancing gracefully atop two spotted horses, while a man in a black morning suit holding a long whip observes from the right-hand side of the ring (Circus Gaiety 1932).²⁶ Lessore's painting captures all but the horses, which suggests that Lulu and Harry's act involved movement sequences with and without horses. Harry and

Louise were both members of the Transfield-Stephenson family equestrian troupe which was overseen by Harry's father, Francis Stephenson (Circus Dogs and Horses: Highly Trained Performers at the Hippodrome 1935). Typical of circus families, the Stephensons specialised in a number of acts and skills: Louise, sometimes billed as 'Miss Louise', performed with her husband George (Harry's brother) in a trained dog and monkey act; and Harry was responsible for directing the 'Stephenson Troupe' equestrian performances, which featured George, Louise, Harry and his wife Florence. Later on, George and Louise's children, George and Florence Stephenson, would become well-known circus tightrope walkers.²⁷ Newspaper advertisements and reports from this period indicate that the Stephensons were a busy family, performing across the United Kingdom and in Ireland consistently from the 1920s to the early 1950s.²⁸ The 1930-1931 New World's Fair programme reveals that the whole of the Stephenson family were involved: Louise and Harry performed their *pas de deux*; Harry and George performed a 'Comedy Equestrian Act' dressed as clowns; and all of the Stephensons were engaged in their 'great riding act' (Pleasure Fairs, Ltd. 1930-1931). Although there are no available accounts of what the Stephenson riding act consisted of, it is worth noting the number of performers corresponds to one of the smaller paintings not yet discussed – *Swallow's Circus* [Equestrian Act I], and it is worth considering whether in addition to Lulu and Harry's act, Lessore had also been inspired by the Stephenson Troupe's equestrian performance. It is not out of the question that this could be the act that Lessore painted.

The final circuses in Islington

The last programme from the New World's Fair Circus held in the Sickert Family Collection is for the 1933-34 season.²⁹ In the 1933 circus, it was Mademoiselle Machaquito, instead of Miss May, who performed solo on horseback; Deviso and Machaquito, instead of Lulu and Harry, who performed the 'graceful pas-de-deux'; and it was Captain Ankner, instead of

Swallow, who would introduce the horse acts (Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1933).³⁰ That winter was also the last the Sickerts spent in Islington. In the summer of 1934, they moved to Kent where they lived for several years until moving again, in 1938, to Bathampton, where they remained until Sickert's death in 1942. During the years in Bath, circus would continue to be a source of inspiration for Lessore. In the 1939 London Group exhibition, she exhibited one of what would become a series of 'Circus at Bath' paintings (London Group 1939). Circus programmes held in the family archive provide two potential sources for at least some of these paintings: Rosaire's Circus and Cody's Circus.³¹ The latter circus's visit to Bath in May 1943 was unquestionably the inspiration for her painting *Mr Barratt and Patch* (n.d.), which shows a suited man and a white pony performing inside a circus tent.³² George Barratt was the equestrian director for Cody's Circus (Cody n.d.) and one of the acts he personally presented was called 'Patch, the Pony' (ibid.). The date – May 1943 – also provides a useful hint as to Lessore's location and productivity after Sickert's death. In October of that year, she would submit one painting to the London Group exhibition – a painting entitled *Walter Richard Sickert, D. Litt* – her first submission since 1939 – and for the next two years, until her death in December 1945, she would resume exhibiting with the group. Based on this evidence, then, it is likely that Lessore remained in Bath until at least the summer of 1943, after which she would relocate one final time back to London.

Equally vague are the details of the final years of John Swallow's life. After he left the Islington Circus in 1937, it is believed he helped manage and programme other circuses, including Fred Rosaire's (of Rosaire's Circus, which Lessore saw in the early 1940s)³³ and Madame Clara Paulo's Circus.³⁴ Like Lessore, Swallow died in 1945, although the month and day are not known. According to Thomas, Swallow died in the streets of Canterbury, Kent while on tour with Paulo's Circus (Thomas 1980, 7).³⁵

There remains as many questions about Lessore's life and work as there are about the circuses and performers that appeared in her art, but this starting point has already begun to fill in some of the many gaps that exist in the histories of these artistic practices. Here, in no small measure, the extant documents and practices of modern art and popular entertainment are providing a reciprocal resurrection. It is through Lessore's art that we can access the lost practices of Swallow and his circus, but also through the documents and histories of his circus that it is possible to know with greater certainty the work of this artist and the timeline of her professional output. My work on Lessore and her circus paintings continues.

¹ Both artists knew Islington well, having lived, worked and/or socialised in the London borough previously.

² Verified by the World's Fair circus programmes held in the Sickert Family Collection.

³ See London Group 1920 and 1924. Unfortunately, the location of these paintings is not known.

⁴ Lessore's father Jules was the son of French porcelain artist Emile-Aubert Lessore. Jules moved permanently to England in 1871 where he continued to work as an artist.

⁵ Lessore's siblings were also creative: her brother was an assistant to Rodin, while her sister illustrated manuscripts.

⁶ For instance, her friend and fellow artist Margaret Lilly would later recall that Lessore '[...] spoke seldom and when she did it was to talk about painting' (Lilly 1971, 113).

⁷ The London Group is a modern art society formed in 1913 by the merger of two other arts groups: the Camden Town Group and the Fitzroy Street Group. Although strongly associated with modernism in Britain, the organisation remains a genre and style-free organisation dedicated to providing opportunities for professional artists to showcase their art. For further information, see: Baron, *The Camden Town Group*, 1979 and Macdougall & Dickson, 2013.

⁸ Lessore had five paintings displayed in the first exhibition, including: *Chartes*, *The Cat* and *Washer Women*. (London Group 1914).

⁹ He would later write, in 1918, that he first became aware of Lessore's work at a 1913 Allied Artists Exhibition. In particular, he was struck by her painting *Market Day at Amiens*, a painting which has now been lost (Sickert, Thérèse Lessore 2000, 429).

¹⁰ The appropriation of popular sources in modernism is well documented. See also: Juan A. Suarez, *Pop Modernism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 3; Jeffrey Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp and Avant-Gardism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. xvi-xvii.

¹¹ As an example, see *Elise on Hassan* (1929)

¹² See *Comedy Riders* (1953)

¹³ Knight acknowledges that Swallow's Circus at the Royal Agricultural Hall was one of the first she drew in 1920. See Knight 1936, 239.

¹⁴ She travelled with Great Carmo's and Bertram Mill's combined tour in the 1929-1930 season. See Knight 1936, 321-368.

¹⁵ See Willats, 1974 for a detailed account of the building's history.

¹⁶ The Deadwood coach scene consisted of a stagecoach attacked by a fictional Native American tribe.

¹⁷ In another account of Swallow's history written in the Circus Friend's Association's periodical, *King Pole*, Hal Thomson suggests the name of the circus was inspired by Broncho Bill Anderson, one of the first cinematic representations of the Broncho Bill figure (Thomas 1980, 5). This is certainly suggested by the chosen spelling of 'Broncho', which is the same as Anderson's cinematic character, as opposed to the real-life outlaw, William 'Bronco Bill' Walters (1869-1921).

¹⁸ Interestingly, Lessore painted *Salt and Saucy* and exhibited the artwork in a London Group exhibition held from 5-26 June 1926 (London Group 1926). A partial programme held in the Sickert Family Collection also comes from a Broncho Bill show and includes *Salt and Saucy*, the *Mizumo Troupe* and the spectacular stage coach finale described here by Thomas (Broncho Bill n.d.). The existence of this painting and the partial

programme confirms that Lessore was familiar with Swallow's work even before her regular attendance at the New World's Fair circuses between 1927 and 1934.

¹⁹ All of the listed paintings, and others by Lessore, can be found here:

https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/grid/search/keyword:therese-lessore/page/3

²⁰ See New World's Fair Official Programmes for 1930-1930 and 1933-34, respectively.

²¹ A photograph of Wassilona appearing in the programmes however suggests that her act did not involve a ballerina costume, but something altogether more exotic (silk trousers, top and feathers). Visually, then, she is not a match.

²² It could also be *Clown's Vaulting*, the painting shown at the 1926 London Group exhibition; but as there are no details about the size or detail of that painting, this is difficult to verify.

²³ Another note in the programme, pinned to one of the inside pages, indicates that the price of *The Daredevils* was to be £170. It is unclear whether it sold for this much or that was the suggested price. The painting is now in the collection at the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

²⁴ Lambert performed with the trio until 1946, after which the Forgeurs' son, Fernand, who would have been five years old when the couple performed with Swallow's circus, assumed the third place in the act.

²⁵ This is a balletic dance duet. In a circus context, it is usually an equestrian act involving humans dancing with or on the backs of horses.

²⁶ A cropped but clearer version of this image was re-printed in *The Sphere* on 7 January 1933 when Lulu and Harry were performing with Bertram Mill's circus at London Olympia. See *Amphitheatrical*, 1932, p. 19.

²⁷ George and Florence Stephenson tightrope walkers and appeared in Bertram Mill's circus between 1947 and 1951. The siblings also appear in the 1947 film *Circus Boy*.

²⁸ Although it is possible to trace through newspapers a Transfield-Stephenson circus lineage dating back to the nineteenth century. The union of the two families seems to have occurred around 1904 or 1905. A joint advertisement taken out by Harry Stephenson and Florrie Transfield in *The Era* on 28 October 1905 advertising their skills as a classical bareback rider (Harry), Florrie's 'wonderful animal act', and a clown act (Transfield 1905, 26).

²⁹ Both the 1931-32 and 1932-33 programmes are missing from the Sickert Family Collection.

³⁰ As this suggests, while the performers changed out each season, the character and curation of Swallow's circus was similar from year to year. Because of this, and the limited material available on many of the circus acts that appeared in Swallow's Circus during this period, pinpointing the specific performers depicted in Lessore's often generically titled paintings will continue to be a challenge.

³¹ Rosaire's Circus, which was managed by 'Count' Fred Rosaire, toured Britain from the early 1930s until the late 1950s. For a good account of Rosaire's, see Croft-Cooke 1950.

³² The full title of this painting is *Circus at Bath, Mr Barratt and Patch*. It is held in the collection at Dundee Art Galleries and Museums.

³³ As the two programmes for Rosaire's Circus held in the Sickert Family Collection confirm.

³⁴ Madame Clara is one of only a few women in Britain to ever own and manage their own circus. According to her daughter's obituary in *The Telegraph* in 2001, her family circus prospered during the Second World War, finally ending in 1949. Her daughter, also named Clara, was a well-known ballerina rider and revived the Paulo Circus in 1983; it ran for a decade. (Clara Paulo 2001)

³⁵ He was outlived by his famous performing elephants, Salt and Saucy, by several years. An article in *King Pole* by Swallow's son in 1952, indicates that Salt passed away of 5 October of that year at the age of 67. Saucy, at that point, still lived, although Swallow speculated that 'After being together for over 60 years and never parted for a day, it is doubtful if Saucy will long survive its friend and partner' (Swallow 1952, 24).

List of Figures

Figure 1: Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) *Swallow's Liberty Horses*. 1927. London, Sickert Family Collection, Islington Local History Centre. Oil on canvas. 59 x 80cm.

Figure 2: Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) *Swallow's Circus* [Equestrienne]. Nd. London, Sickert Family Collection, Islington Local History Centre. Oil on canvas. 30 x 20.5cm

Figure 3: "Miss May, Dainty Lady Equestrienne". 1927. *New World's Fair Official Programme, London, Royal Agricultural Hall*. London: Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (S/SFC/2/1/7/2).

Figure 4: Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) *Islington Circus* [Jockey Trio] Nd. London, Sickert Family Collection, Islington Local History Centre. Oil on canvas. 21 x 32.5cm

Figure 5: Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) *Islington Circus* [Clown Entrée] Nd. London, Sickert Family Collection, Islington Local History Centre. Oil on canvas. 21 x 32

Figure 6: Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) *Islington Circus* [Performing Ponies] Nd. London, Sickert Family Collection, Islington Local History Centre. Oil on canvas. 21 x 32

Figure 7: Thérèse Lessore (1884-1945) *Miss Lulu and Mr Harry*. Nd. London, Sickert Family Collection, Islington Local History Centre. Oil on canvas. 80 x 52.5cm

Bibliography

- ‘Agricultural Hall: Circus According to English Traditions.’ 1928. *The Era*. 4 January: 10
- ‘Amphitheatrical.’ *The Sphere*. 1932. 19.
- Arighi, Gillian. 2012. *The Circus and Modernity: A Commitment to ‘the Newer’ and ‘the Newest’*. *Early Popular Visual Culture*. 10.2. pp. 169-189.
- Baron, Wendy. 1977. *Miss Ethel Sands and Her Circle*. London: Peter Owens Publishers.
- . 2006. *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*. London: Yale University Press.
- . 1979. *The Camden Town Group*. London: Scolar Press.
- ‘Big Sale of Circus Animals.’ 1930. *Birmingham Gazette*. 5 November: 5.
- Broncho Bill. n.d. Circus Programme [partial]. Islington Local History Centre (Sickert Family Collection, Ref: S/SFC/2/1/7/2), London.
- ‘Circus Dogs and Horses: Highly Trained Performers at the Hippodrome.’ 1935. *The Journal*. August 3: 7.
- ‘Circus Gaiety.’ 1932. *Daily Herald*. 28 December: 9.
- ‘Clara Paulo.’ 26 April 2001. Accessed October 2018.
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1317238/Clara-Paulo.html>.
- Cody, Harry. n.d. *Cody's Circus and Zoo*. Islington Local History Centre (Sickert Family Collection, Ref: S/SFC/2/1/7/2), London.
- ‘Cody’s Circus and Zoo.’ 1943. *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*. 8 May: 4.
- Connell, Jim Alexander and Eric. A. Willats, 1974. *The Royal Agricultural Hall*. London: Islington Libraries.
- Croft-Cooke, Rupert. 1950. *The Circus Has No Home*. London: The Falcon Press.
- ‘Death of Artist’s Widow.’ 1945. *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*. 15 December: 12.
- Dickson, Sarah Macdougall and Rachel. 2013. *Uproar! The First Fifty Years of the London Group*. London: Ben Uri.
- Haftner, Robert Julian. 2014. *Mistress, Model, Muse and Mentor: Women in the Lives of Famous Artists*. Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu Press.

‘Fall from Trapeze.’ 1930. *The Courier and Advertiser*. 1 March: 7.

‘Glasgow.’ 1930. *The Stage*. 14 August: 2.

Knight, Laura. 1936. *Oil Paint and Grease Paint: Autobiography of Laura Knight*. London: Nicholson & Watson.

Lessore, Thérèse. n.d. *Islington Circus [Clown Entreeé]*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. n.d. *Islington Circus [Equestrian Act II]*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. n.d. *Islington Circus [Jockey Trio]*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2).

—. (n.d.) *Islington Circus [Jockey Trio]*, Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Coll, London.

—. n.d. *Islington Circus [Performing Ponies]*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. n.d. *Miss Lulu and Mr Harry*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. n.d. *Swallow's Circus [Equestrian Act]*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. n.d. *Swallow's Circus [Equestrienne]*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. n.d. *Swallow's Circus [Man with Donkey]*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. 1927. *Swallow's Liberty Horses*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: S/SFC/1/2), London.

—. n.d. *The Daredevils*. Hastings Art Gallery and Museum, Hastings.

Lilly, Marjorie. 1971. *Sickert: The Painter and His Circle*. London: Elek Books.

London Group. 1914. *London Group Exhibition Catalogue*. Groupil Gallery, London: Tate Britain Archives (Ref. 7713/6/1/1), March.

—. 1920. *London Group Exhibition Catalogue*. Mansard Gallery, London: Tate Britain Archives (Ref. 7713/6/1/20), May.

-
- . 1924. *London Group Exhibition Catalogue*. Mansard Gallery, London: Tate Britain Archives (Ref. 7713/6/1/12), May.
- . 1926. *London Group Exhibition Catalogue*. R.W.S. Gallery, London: Tate Britain (Ref. 7713/6/1/24), 5-25 June.
- . 1939. 'Special Wartime Show.' *London Group Exhibition Catalogue*. Tate Britain Archives (Ref: 7713/6/1/40), 2-25 November.
- Macdougall, Sarah, and Rachel Dickson. 2013. *Uproar! The First Fifty Years of the London Group*. London: Ben Uri.
- Manning-Sanders, Ruth. 1952. *The English Circus*. London: Werner Laurie.
- Pleasure Fairs Ltd. 1927. *New World's Fair: Official Programme*. London: Islington Local History Centre, Ref: S/SFC/2/1/7/2, 24 December.
- . 1930. *New World's Fair: Official Programme*. Islington Local History Centre, Sickert Family Collection (Ref: SFC/2/1/7/1), 23 December.
- . 1933. *New World's Fair: Official Programme*. London: Islington Local History Centre, Ref: S/SFC/2/1/7/2. 23 December.
- . 1929. *New World's Fair: Official Programme*. London: Islington Local History Centre, Ref: S/SFC/2/1/7/2. 24 December.
- 'London Galleries: A Glance Round the Principal.' 1913. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*. 9 April : 9.
- 'Reflections.' 1914. *Daily Herald*. 9 March: 8.
- 'Rosaire's Circus (Advertisement).' 1942. *Western Daily Press*. 9 October: 1.
- 'Rosaire's Mammoth Circus.' 1941. *Gloucester Citizen*. 26 July: 8.
- Saurez, Juan A. 2007. *Pop Modernisms: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Sickert, Walter. 2000. 'Thérèse Lessore.' In *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, by Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed.), 427-430. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2000. 'Whitechapel.' In *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, by Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed.), 371-373. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Starobinski, Jean. 2004. 'The Grimacing Double'. In *The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as Clown*. 15-16. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sturgis, Matthew. 2005. *Walter Sickert: A Life*. London: Harper Collins.

-
- Sutton, Denys. 1976. *Walter Sickert: A Biography*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Swallow, John D. 1952. 'Salt and Saucy were Separated.' December: 24.
- Thomas, Hal. 1980. "Broncho Bill's Circus." *King Pole*, September: 5-7.
- Transfield, Harry Stephenson and Florrie. 1905. *The Era*. 28 October: 26.
- Turner, John. n.d. 'John Swallow.' *John Turner Collection*. Sheffield: National Fairground and Circus Archive, Ref. NFA0063. Accessed 18 September 2018.
- Turvey, Malcolm. 2017. 'Comedic Modernism'. *October Magazine*. Spring, no. 160. 5-29.
- Weis, Jeffrey. 1994. *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and Avant-Gardism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 'Wolthings.' n.d. Accessed October 2018.
<http://barnum1901/be.nl/circusin1901belgischeartiesten/wolthings>.