

# Big Top Circus



The Red Baron's Flying Dachshunds dazzle the crowd.

Instead of running away from home to join a circus, James H. Hillestad has created a diorama capturing all the excitement in miniature

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

Last winter, my wife Carol and I visited the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Fla. We were bowled over by the mammoth miniature circus by Howard Tibbals on display in the U.S. institution's Circus Museum.

Tibbals spent 50 years creating the replica of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus circa 1919 to 1938. It encompasses more

**RIGHT:** Circus acts include a polar bear trained to balance on a ball.

**BELOW, RIGHT:** A daring young man on the flying trapeze high above the crowd.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** A band made by Martin Ritchie leads the circus parade.

**BELOW:** A glittering ringmaster stands ready to fire a daredevil from a cannon.



**RIGHT:** Working with a net, a high-wire act performs for the crowd.

than 42,000 objects and covers 3,800 square feet. There are eight main tents, 152 wagons, 1,300 performers, 900 animals and a 55-car circus train. It's awesome!

### BIG TOP PROJECT

When we returned home to Cresco, Pa., I was inspired and set about creating a big top diorama for The Toy Soldier Museum. Though my display would be of more modest proportions, I wanted to capture the excitement and diversity of the circus.

The completed diorama's big top is filled with spectators and performers, high-wire acts, flashing lights and circus music. The diorama is 5 feet long and 30 inches deep.

The performers and animals were made by CBG Mignot, Bob Emmons and Martin Ritchie of U.S. Military Miniatures. The figures also include a generous number of Preiser conversions by the very talented Stan Stanton.

The diorama is on display at the museum. Popcorn is supplied, free of charge. ◊



**ABOVE:** Uncle Sam walking on stilts amazes a mother and child.

**RIGHT:** Panoramic view of Jim Hillestad's circus diorama.

**BELOW:** Details include a popcorn vendor and ticket booth.





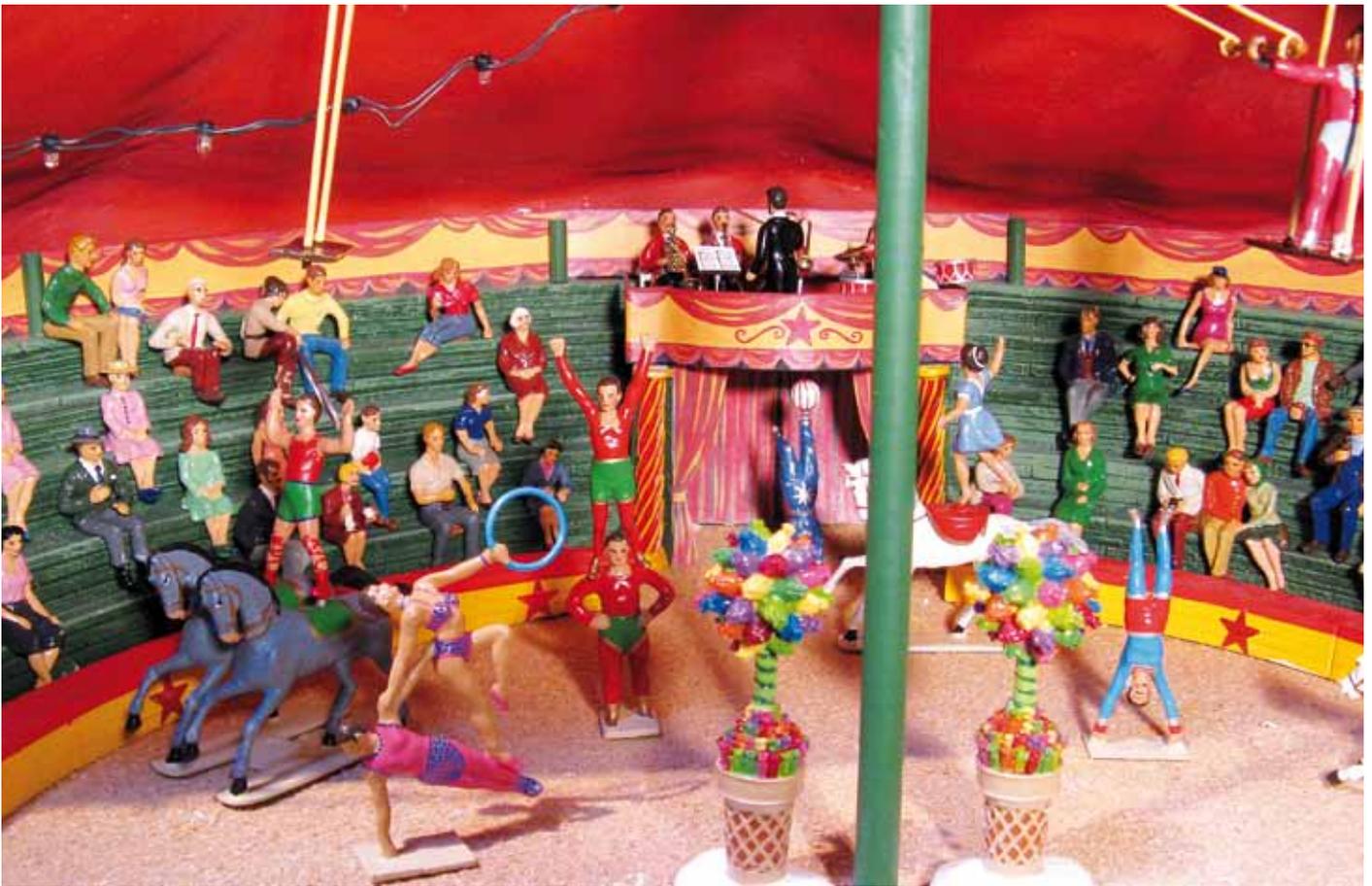
**TOP:** Each sideshow performer's poster was specially painted by an artist.

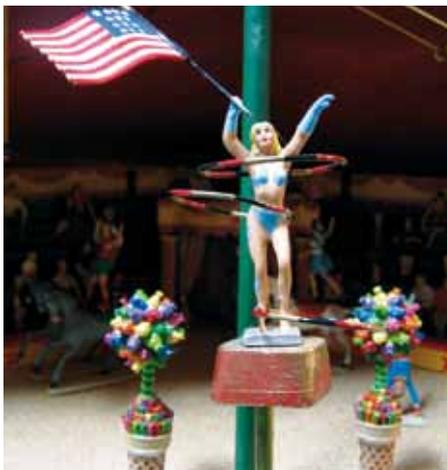
**ABOVE:** Trained elephants strut their stuff.

**LEFT:** A knife thrower takes aim at his beautiful assistant.

**TOP, RIGHT:** A circus orchestra plays in the tent packed with performers and spectators.

**RIGHT:** Dalmatians race up and down ladders.





**ABOVE:** A hula hoop artist shows the American flag.

**RIGHT:** A sword-wielding magician hopes his lovely assistant doesn't get the point.

**BELOW, RIGHT:** Clowns assist a child performing a balancing act.

**BELOW, INSET:** An acrobatic couple performs one of their tricks.

**BELOW:** Circus truck carrying a giraffe made by Mignot.



## Clowning Around

"Clown" originally meant clod, and the word was used to denote a clumsy country bumpkin.



**ABOVE:** Boxing clowns put up their dukes.

## about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.



## Celebrating the Circus

The circus is an ancient art form, with roots found throughout the world in all civilizations.

While the word "circus" comes from the Latin for a ring or a circle, the circus performance comes to us by way of the Greek gymnasium.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, groups of traveling entertainers began to appear across Europe. Troubadours with their dancing bears and trained dogs, acrobats, and jugglers caused great excitement in the small towns they visited.

In 1768 England, a retired British cavalry officer, Philip Astley, brought together performances of horsemanship with acrobatics, balancing, juggling and comic acts. The modern circus was born!

The "Golden Age" of the American circus was 1870 to 1938. By 1919, the American circus presented spectacular displays of artistry, and transformed life in towns across the country into something magical, exotic and wonderful -- at least for as long as the circus stayed in town.

--James H. Hillestad

