

# HISTORY OF THE CIRCUS

## The Circus Is Born

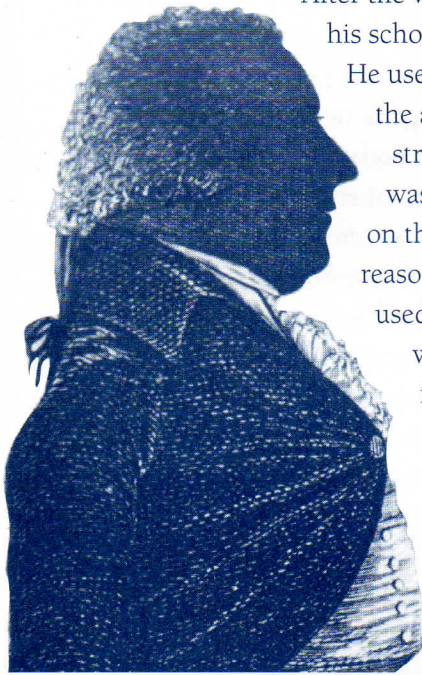
Circus-like displays have been enjoyed as popular entertainment for thousands of years in many different cultures. Circus as we know it today, however, was created in 1770 in London by Philip Astley.

Astley served in the French and Indian War, where he worked extensively with horses.

After the war, he opened a horseback riding school in London. To promote his school, Astley produced displays of trick riding and horsemanship.

He used a circular performance ring for two reasons. The first was so the audience could see everything—if the horses galloped in a straight line, they'd soon be out of sight—and the second reason was that it is easier for riders to keep their balance while standing on the back of a galloping horse if it is moving in a circle. These two reasons are still relevant to today's circuses, and the size ring Astley used, 42 feet in diameter, is now standard. It's the smallest size in which a horse can reach a full gallop. The word "circus" comes from a Latin word for circle.

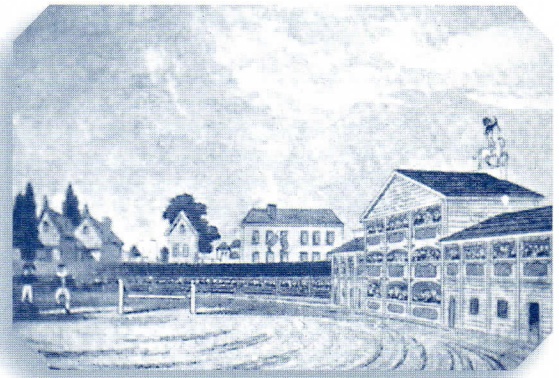
As the performances became more and more popular, (more popular than the riding school they were meant to promote) Astley added variety to the trick-riding displays by including clowns, acrobats, and jugglers, all of which were popular entertainment forms in theaters, fairs, and festivals. Thus, the modern circus, a combination of human and animal displays, was born.



*Philip Astley*

## Circus Spreads Around the World (1782-1805)

Astley's circus was so popular that he opened another in Paris. Soon imitators were producing rival shows and touring the world with them. Many of the new circus entrepreneurs were also military-trained riders, theater producers, or former students of Astley's Riding School. One former student, Charles Hughes, opened his own school and performed in Russia in 1793, introducing that country and their Czarina Catherine the Great to the young art form. A student of Hughes's, John Bill Ricketts, brought the new popular entertainment form to America, where the first circus opened in Philadelphia in 1793. President George Washington was in Ricketts' audience the first month the show was open. Shortly thereafter, Circus spread to Canada, Mexico, and around the world.



*Astley's Riding School, 1782.*