

EVENT VISUAL/BRAND SYSTEM

Top Hats & Trapeze

Well before the advent of film, radio, and television, the circus was the largest entertainment industry the world had ever seen. By 1905 during the height of the circus' golden age, there were nearly 100 circuses and menageries, each playing to mesmerized audiences of between several hundred to over 20,000 a day all over the country. On Circus Day, businesses closed and schools were let out. By the 1920s a street parade would take place after the circus trains arrived, the parade wagons unloaded, and the tents erected.

Circuses were hit hard by the stock market crash of 1929. Suddenly, circus seasons were shorter, circus employees were laid off, and the lines of townspeople wanting jobs as temporary roustabouts grew. The Great Depression was upon the country, and any leisure activities were infrequent and expensive. The golden age "boom" of the circus was over.

INSPIRATION:

Based on a romantic drama set in a traveling circus that was included in this performing arts center's Broadway season, the *Top Hats & Trapeze* fundraising event design is placed squarely in the 1930s time frame, lending an air of faded brilliance to all of the circus-themed components. Although skewing more to the glitter than the sawdust, the signs of deterioration are there; the gilding... burnished but hand-worn; the tassels... colorful but frayed; the silk... luxurious but slightly moldy. Conjuring up the spectacle of death-defying daredevils, strapping and scantily clad performers, fearless animal trainers, and a menagerie of creatures from far-flung locales, event attendees will be transported to a world of thrill and skill, grit and glamour. The gala identity applied across a multitude of pieces — from large, animated digital banners to table numbers to the announcements — was inspired by the exciting, seemingly dangerous, hyperbolic atmosphere of the circus.

TYPOGRAPHY:

Before the modernization of the circus brand, the look of the circus involved bright colors, a dependence on all uppercase letters, and an eclectic mix of hand-painted typography to scream to the viewer all the energy and magnificence within that striped tent. Using Modesto —a loose-knit family based on a signpainters lettering style popular in the late-19th and early-20th centuries—and combining it with both digitized early American typefaces and modern fonts, we've evoked the circus vibe while keeping the materials legible and contemporary.

STRUCTURE:

The first touchpoint for our event messaging is the Save the Date; a paper volvelle that the invitee is encouraged to playfully interact with upon receiving. A volvelle is a paper instrument constructed of one or more rotating discs that are marked with variables. By rotating the discs, these markings work in tandem to calculate various sorts of information, historically (from the 14th century on) relating to astronomical, navigational, or mathematical topics. Twentieth-century volvelles—often referred to as wheel charts—offer information on everything from wattage for household items to stats on the 1930s World Champion Athletics baseball team, from census numbers to screw thread sizes. Our volvelle is more playful; it calculates your circus performer name. The Save the Date sets a playful tone for the event and encourages the recipient to share with others while anticipating an evening of thrills and glamour.

The next piece to be sent to invitees is the Invitation, which serves as both a folded booklet and a flat mini circus poster. Working closely with the printer, a number of the printed pieces were reserved, uncut and unscored, to be framed and presented as gifts to committee members. Working with a non-profit, it's important to look for opportunities like this to extend the use of any materials.

The results are moments that elicited delight in recipients as they imagine running away to the circus—all the better to prompt them to support much needed arts-in-education programs for the performing arts center.