

Dashing Diagonals



VISIT THE BMA to see Pechstein's acrobats along with a tentful of other circus performers in the BMA's current special ticketed exhibition, *A Circus Family: Picasso to Léger*, on view through May 17, 2009.

The Circus Max Pechstein

All eyes are on two daring acrobats as they dash around the circus ring, perfectly balanced on the backs of a pair of snowy-white horses. Row upon row of spectators stare in awe. How strong these acrobats are! How skilled! How brave! The mustachioed acrobat braces himself on well-muscled legs, straddling the galloping horses as his coattails fly out behind him. Leaning back and grasping the reins with one arm, he holds his dazzling counterpart aloft as she strikes a spectacular pose, her arms and legs extending into thin air. How long can these acrobats hold on? Will they collapse and fall? Everyone in the audience holds his breath.

Max Pechstein has created a painting of enormous energy. Part of the drama comes from his choice of brilliant red for the acrobats' costumes and the horses' blankets. But the artist also depends on a not-so-obvious tool: the diagonal line. Diagonal lines have a way of suggesting movement, action, and excitement. Instead of standing upright and motionless (like a vertical) or lying down flat (like a horizontal), diagonals seem to be on their way somewhere—slipping, sliding, climbing, dashing around. In this picture, the ringmaster's whip slants upward, establishing a strong diagonal repeated by the two horses as they gallop forward. The angular bodies of the acrobats also lean diagonally backwards and forwards, making us fear that their apparent balance may not last a moment longer. Teetering somewhere between the vertical and the horizontal, Pechstein's diagonal lines make us feel delightfully precarious as we imagine ourselves performing dangerous feats of skill along with the acrobats at the circus.

Challenge for Students

Use diagonal lines to create an action-packed circus picture of trapeze artists flying through the air or clowns shooting out of a cannon.

Print the image on page 2 for your students.

THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART



Max Pechstein. *The Circus*. 1918. Oil on canvas. 55 x 39 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Mrs. Ralph Booth. BMA 1947.318. ©2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Pechstein Hamburg/Toekendorf/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn