Carla Passino

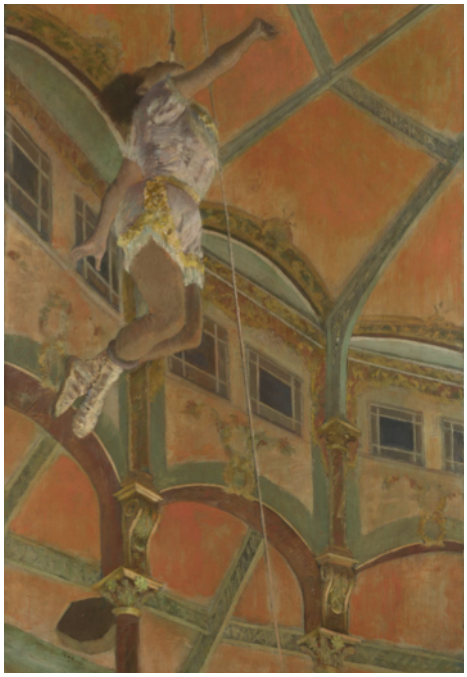
By the skin of her teeth

When Miss La La hoisted herself to the top of the circus tent by a rope clenched in her jaws, she dazzled not only crowds across France and Britain, but also Edgar Degas

MISS LA LA floated high above the crowd, the golden frills of her costume shining as she twirled upwards. Her arms pierced the air either side of her body, her legs bent at the knee. Only her teeth, clenching a leather piece at the end of the rope that hung from the top of the circus tent, kept her from plunging to almost certain death. Craning his neck to soak up every detail was artist Edgar Degas, who would later capture the scene in a painting, *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, now at the National Gallery.

Although the Impressionist is best known for his ballerinas, Miss La La, whose real name was Anna Albertine Olga Brown, was no less of an inspiration to him, as he brought her Iron Jaw act to canvas. The aerialist was born in Szczecin, Prussia (now Poland), in 1858, to a Prussian mother and an African-American father, although, to entice the public, she was sometimes presented as an African princess or even a queen.

She was only nine when she began performing as a trapeze artist and 20 when Degas watched her at the Cirque Fernando, close to his Montmartre studio, for four nights in January 1879. Shortly afterwards, Miss La La went on a tour of Britain, appearing at the Royal Aquarium in March 1879 and, later, the Gaiety in Manchester. Her feats—she spun a man by the belt she held in her mouth, before lifting with her teeth a 150lb brass cannon, to which she hung on even after it was fired mid air—wowed the British public. On March 15, 1879, *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* named her the latest acrobatic sensation, marvelling at 'a maxillary power unexampled since the days of Samson'. Her biceps were not to be sniffed at, either, at more than 15in, much to the envy of Edmond Desbonnet, founder of one of France's early bodybuilding magazines, who praised Miss La La's 'superb arms' in his book on strongmen, *Les Rois de la Force*.



Back in the spotlight: Edgar Degas's 1879 painting *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*

It can't have been easy for Degas to convey the aerialist's strength or her spiralling movement as she ascended to the top of the circus tent and he made many studies from different angles. Paradoxically, however, his greatest challenge was getting the roof right. He struggled with perspective so much that he called upon an architectural draughtsman for help, according to his friend Walter Sickert. Once that problem was solved, Degas displayed his painting at the 4th Impressionist Exhibition in Paris in April 1879.

Although Miss La La didn't appear in any other major artwork afterwards, she continued to feature on numerous posters, as befitted a top-billing star—she would go on to perform for about another decade, switching to her given name of Olga. After her double-act partner Kaira la Blanche (Theophila Szterker) fell to her death in June 1888, she married contortionist Emmanuel Woodman and had three daughters, with whom she later formed a troupe, the Three Keziahs. The family settled in Belgium, where Woodman became stage manager at Le Palais d'Eté, until his death in 1915. Four years later, Miss La La applied for an American passport and disappeared into oblivion.

The aerialist's race and gender inevitably played a part in her career—in Britain, she was a 'tawny Amazon', in France, the Black Venus and one of her acts with Szterker was called 'The Black and White Butterflies'—but also in Degas's work. Critics have since examined *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando* in the context of both the racial perceptions at the time and the artist's own biases and familial ties (his mother, Marie-Célestine Musson, a Creole, had black relatives).

Now, a National Gallery display, part of its 'Discover' series, promises to delve deeply into Degas's attitudes to race and the aerialist's racial identity, as well as examining the development of the painting through a range of material that includes previously unseen pictures of Miss La La and unpublished drawings by the Impressionist painter. Above all, however, 'Degas and Miss La La' restores the spotlight on an extraordinary woman who built her own success quite literally by gritting her teeth.

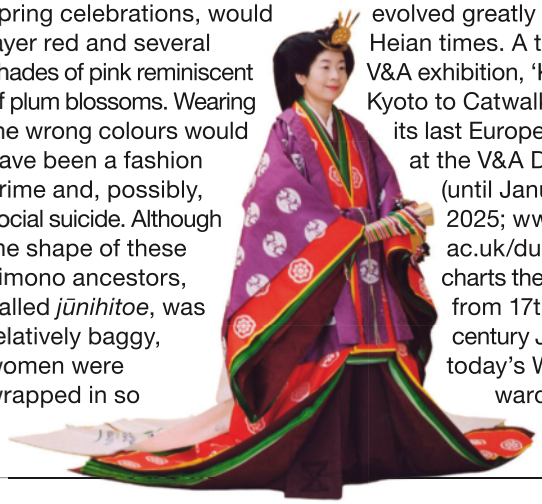
'Degas & Miss La La' is at the National Gallery from June 6–September 1 (www.nationalgallery.org.uk)

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

UPDATING antique furniture requires careful thought, particularly when it comes to upholstery. For antiques dealer William Green of family business Ron Green (www.rongreen.co.uk), this means picking 'a fabric that feels as if it has always been a part' of the furniture, as with this late-19th-century chair from the Aesthetic Movement, which has Japanese and Far East Asian influences. 'I chose Rendlesham in Cognac by Guy Goodfellow,' he explains. 'Although inspired by a 19th-century French document, it feels as if it has an element of [Far East] inspiration, similar to Japanese fashions of the late 19th century. The contrast between the light ground of the fabric and the ebonised chair frame works well. The print is on linen, which complements the delicate nature of the chair.'

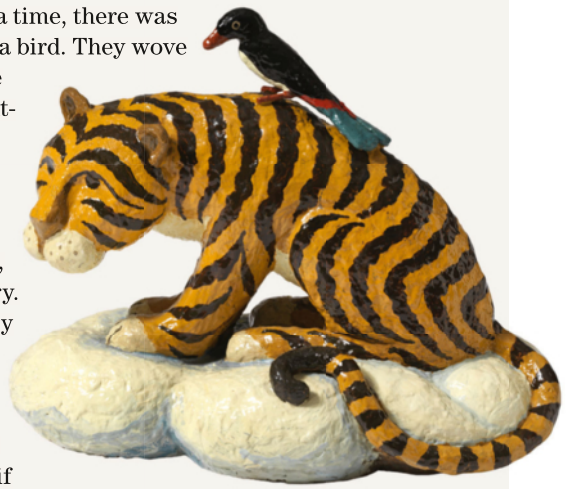
'Tis the season to get dressed

COURTIERS in Heian Japan (794–1185), especially ladies, took their seasons seriously. Not only did they write appropriate poetry, but they also dressed accordingly—no easy feat, considering that one calendar of the time identified a massive 72 different stages of the year. Silk gowns of various colours were layered to form, at the sleeves, neckline and hem, a combination of hues that suggested seasonal plants or flowers. Thus, *kobai no nioi*, worn for early spring celebrations, would layer red and several shades of pink reminiscent of plum blossoms. Wearing the wrong colours would have been a fashion crime and, possibly, social suicide. Although the shape of these kimono ancestors, called *jūnihitoe*, was relatively baggy, women were wrapped in so many layers that moving must have been a struggle, but the main purpose of the clothing was ornamental, not functional: according to Sheila Cliffe's *The Social Life of Kimono*, it was intended to attract (and keep) the eye of male partners in a polygamous society. Women born into the imperial family, such as the current emperor's sister, Sayako Kuroda (*below*), still wear *jūnihitoe* on some occasions, but traditional Japanese womenswear has evolved greatly since Heian times. A touring V&A exhibition, 'Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk', on its last European stop at the V&A Dundee (until January 5, 2025; www.vam.ac.uk/dundee), charts the journey from 17th-century Japan to today's Western wardrobes.



WEIRD & WONDERFUL

ONCE upon a time, there was a tiger and a bird. They wove in and out of the sculptures, paintings, drawings and prints by Catalan artist Ramiro Fernandez Saus, telling their story. Only, it's not very clear how it started or how it will end. The two animals are a recurring motif in Mr Fernandez Saus's work and each of his pieces feels almost like a snapshot of their never-ending tale. The latest 'instalment' is *Gold of the Tiger* (*above*), a bronze painted in oil, in which the big cat sits on a cloud, a kind, thoughtful and perhaps ever so slightly tired expression on its face, the bird alert on its back. It is, as Mr Fernandez Saus explains, 'an ideal representation of a tiger as an angel. So the tiger lives in the sky'. The bronze is on display at 'The Lightness of the Days', Long & Ryle's latest exhibition of the Catalan artist's work (until June 28; www.longandryle.com), together with *A Winter Reading*, a 2023 painting in which the tiger rests, huge and a little forlorn, at the foot of a red armchair in a library, as the bird inspects a cherry printed on a book page. What will happen next?



Take five: facts about 'The Great War: Britain's Efforts and Ideals'

AWARE that images have power, in 1917, the British government commissioned 18 artists to create a series of lithographs, 'The Great War: Britain's Efforts and Ideals'. It was one of the largest projects of the time, as much an artistic endeavour as a propaganda effort—and one that, more than a century later, is poised to raise funds for the Imperial War Museum.

1. Some of the greatest artists of the time—including William Nicholson, Augustus John and Muirhead Bone—worked on the 66 lithographs that made up the series

2. The 'Efforts' prints—nine sets, each containing six black-and-white works—captured everything from Army training (*Making Soldiers* by Eric Kennington) to aircraft construction (*Building Aircraft*, *right*, by Christopher Nevinson), which would, according to COUNTRY LIFE, 'bring home to our children's children the gigantic practical effort that was not demanded in vain of Great Britain'

3. The 'Ideals' set contained 12 colour prints intended to shore up resolve, reminding people about the values of justice (by Edmund J. Sullivan) and democracy (William Rothenstein) they were fighting for and promising the dawn of a new future (John)

4. After the Ministry of Information was closed in 1918, the prints were moved to the Imperial War Museum

5. The original limited-edition lithographs signed by the artists are once again available to buy. Abbott & Holder is hosting a selling exhibition (until July 6; www.abbottandholder.co.uk), with proceeds going into the Imperial War Museum's restricted fund for the development of its art collection

The National Gallery, London; Alamy