



The Art of Money Getting

P.T. Barnum

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Americans have loved traveling circuses for generations, and none represent the country's love for entertainment quite like the most famous of them all, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Circus promoters have long been viewed as somewhat shady hucksters, but none could top Phineas Taylor Barnum, who used a blend of traditional circus entertainment, freak show exhibits, and outright hoaxes to create "The Greatest Show on Earth". Barnum introduced America to Jumbo the Elephant, one of the most legendary acts in the history of the circus, as well as "exhibits" like Joice Heth, an elderly African American woman Barnum advertised as a 161 year old who nursed George Washington. He also notoriously perpetrated hoaxes with General Tom Thumb and claimed to have a live mermaid, so it's no surprise that Barnum is often apocryphally quoted as saying, "There's a sucker born every minute." While he didn't actually say that, he said something similar: "Nobody ever lost a dollar by underestimating the taste of the American public."

In fact, Barnum had specialized in circus entertainment decades before traveling circuses were truly a national sensation, particularly thanks to the popularity of the Barnum American Museum in New York City. Barnum's museum offered something for everyone across its different halls, from poetic readings to animal exhibits, and all the while, Barnum was defiant when confronted by criticism, reminding people, "I am a showman by profession...and all the gilding shall make nothing else of me." Of course, Barnum was selling himself short by calling himself merely a showman, because during the course of his adventurous life, he was a shrewd businessman, a politician, and the country's most famous and notorious promoter of both entertainment and himself.

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