

Clown Alley

by Linda Granfield

Circus legend has it that a collection of eggs painted with the faces of famous clowns was tragically destroyed by fire long ago. Linda and Leon McBryde of Virginia have honored this egg-painting tradition by creating their Department of Clown Registry, a collection of more than six hundred eggs that documents for history the faces of male and female clowns from around the world. Linda paints each face on a goose egg and then completes the decoration with a variety of materials. It takes up to a week to create one egg portrait.



Throughout history there have always been people who can make other people laugh. Early clowns, from the *stupidus* of ancient Rome to the court jester, often both offended and delighted listeners with their comments and songs. They were not the silent performers seen in today's circus rings. Clowns lost their voices when the large dimensions of three-ring circuses made it impossible for the audience to hear them.

There are different categories of circus clowns. Walk-around clowns use an animal or a prop, like a huge rubber hammer, as part of their routines. A carpet clown mingles with the audience and performs while the acts change in the rings. Then there are acrobatic clowns, riding clowns, juggling clowns and others. They all join in the charivari [shiv-uh-ree], the noisy entrance of the clowns.

Everything a clown does looks easy, but it's not. Making people laugh can be hard work.

Clowns must be in good physical condition to prevent injuries. Each slapstick¹ move is carefully timed and well-rehearsed. Most clowns have also been trained as acrobats, jugglers or aerial artists, and many incorporate such skills into their acts.

Clown alley—from the old ringmaster's² call, "Clowns, allez" [ah-lay] (French for "go")—is the name of the dressing area where the clowns put on their makeup and costumes.

¹ **slapstick:** funny and exaggerated

² **ringmaster:** a person who introduces the acts in a circus ring

This area is usually near the entrance to the arena because of the frequent number of costume changes, the many props to grab, and the need for the clowns to be ready at all times to hustle out into the ring.

Generally, there are three categories of circus clowns—whiteface, auguste [oh-gust] and character. Each has a specific makeup style and costume. Each has a typical act as well.

The neat whiteface is usually a strict, in-charge character who sets up the punch line for the joke with a partner who is typically an auguste. His facial features are neatly detailed in red or black, and his outfit looks something like loose pajamas with a ruffle around the neck.

Circus legend has it that the auguste clown got his name from a German nickname for someone who is clumsy. The auguste wears light-colored makeup, but white is used around the mouth and eyes, and there's a big red nose. This clown performs a great deal of slapstick humor. An oversized suit or baggy pants with suspenders allows freedom of movement for all the clumsy tumbles he takes. He also wears big shoes.

Character clowns perform as different personalities—cowboys, scarecrows, grandmothers or symphony conductors. The most famous character clown, however, is the tramp. Tramps wear different styles of makeup and costumes that are torn or shabby. Some tramp clowns are happy-go-lucky. Others are extremely sad. Still others act like gentlemen who just happen to be out of money.

Making Faces

Entertainers have been wearing makeup since ancient times. In the early days, the face was sometimes whitened with flour to emphasize large, dark eyes and bright red lips, so everyone in the audience could see each exaggerated facial expression. (Legend has it that a French clown who was a baker by profession was the first to perform with his face white from his job!)

A clown today whitens his face with greasepaint. All the makeup can be ordered from companies whose catalogs advertise everything from “age stipple” and “crepe wool hair” to clown white makeup (often the choice of performers who entertain at a fast-food restaurant).

A closeup look at a clown's face frightens some people because the eyebrows aren't drawn where they naturally grow, lips are lost in a sea of red, and the hairline is often gone completely. But the face is meant to be seen fifty feet above the ring, and from this distance every feature looks right.

It takes clowns a great deal of practice to create their performance faces. A clown's face is a protected trademark and is never to be exactly copied. It's also considered bad taste for a clown to appear in public partially out of costume, or for a clown to do “normal” things, like eating lunch, while in character.

Clowns have a long and interesting history and use serious techniques. However, the children and adults at the circus don't need to know these facts to get ready for fun when they hear “Bring in the clowns!”

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