

# Shirley Manfredi

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My paintings, though not all, are narrative. I am interested in the history of women from the hidden heroine of the Revolutionary generation to the obscure and bygone performers of the Wild West. These daring pioneering women, though invisible in history books, lived during extraordinary times that will never be repeated. They transformed the notion of female identity and the popular perception of acceptable roles, thus breaking through the limitations of social convention to explore and conquer new realms. Through my paintings, I hope to shed some light on those forgotten women.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the American Circus and Sideshows was one of the main entertainment venues. While many early female circus performers were born into performing families, some circus women left unhappy marriages or their families to escape poverty. These adventurous women were the first to perform unique acts never seen before and overcoming the odds on the way to success. This narrative of women has continued to frame the stories of famous women performers throughout the 19th and 20th century.

One select group of women who became prominent in the American Circus were the Tattooed Ladies. They began performing as sideshow acts in the mid-nineteenth century. The original tattooed lady, Nora Hildebrandt, made her debut in 1882. In many ways the women who chose to become Tattooed Ladies not only stood up for their God-given right to do what they wanted with their bodies, but they also paved the way for women's rights and equality. The phenomenon of tattooed women continued until the last Tattooed Lady, Loretta Fulkerson, retired in 1995. It marked the end of an era of Dime Museums to big-name Circus Sideshows, which gave women and men an extraordinary life to travel the world and an opportunity at fortune and fame.