Public access description

The word 'Ubangi' is a misnomer for women from the French Congo who beautified themselves through lip enlargement. This was achieved by using wooden lip plates, inserted into the bottom lip at a young age and replaced with larger plates as they grew older.

In the early twentieth century, several of these women were exhibited in Europe and North America in sideshows and circuses managed by Barnum and Bailey and the Ringling Brothers. The women were labelled 'savages', a racist term commonly used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to dehumanise Indigenous peoples.

In the circus arena, the women would walk once around the perimeter while an orchestra played modern jazz melodies. The display would also be compered by 'Professor' Eugene Bergonier, who falsely explained the lip plates as a tactic to safeguard the women from marauders by making them unattractive.

Roland Butler, the press agent for the Ringling Brothers, labelled the women as 'Ubangis' after seeing the 'exotic-sounding' word on a map of Africa. While Ubangi itself (a river situated in West Central Africa) is unconnected to the women's origin, the word became widely adopted as a racist term for an African man or woman.

Descriptive line
Tour poster advertising 'Ubangi Savages', 1930-1931

Physical description
Pictorial and typographic.

Dimensions
Height: 76 cm poster, Width: 50.6 cm poster

Museum number
S.210-1994

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1161832/poster-we-berry-ltd/