

*The following text was written by Chrissy Kruger-Gruendyke, on behalf of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art for the text celebrating the Sesquicentennial for Foundation Trustees in Sarasota, Fl.*

## **Welcome to The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Fla.**

### **A Must See in Sarasota**

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is the remarkable legacy of circus entrepreneur, collector of art and financier John Ringling and his wife Mable.

The 66-acre estate includes the Museum of Art of internationally praised European, American and Asian art; the Venetian-Gothic *Cà d'Zan* mansion, winter-residence of John and Mable Ringling; historic grounds and gardens; the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Historic Asolo Theater and the Circus Museums, including the home of the world's largest miniature circus at the Tibbals Learning Center.

### **A Legacy**

Born in poverty but blessed with entrepreneurial genius and spirit, John Ringling (1866-1936) lived the great American success story. For the world, he and his brothers produced *The Greatest Show on Earth*. For the people of Florida, he and his beloved wife, Mable (1875-1929), created their greatest vision, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. Upon his death in 1936, John Ringling left his estate and art collection to the State of Florida.

### **A Passion for Art**

European travel kindled the Ringlings' passion for art. John Ringling sought out the advice of savvy art dealers and purchased masterpieces by Rubens, van Dyck, Titian, Velázquez, El Greco, Gainsborough and Reynolds. Ringling purchased a collection of Cypriot antiquities from the Metropolitan Museum of Art among other fine works. He dreamed of building his own museum to transform Sarasota into a cultural destination.

In 1925, Ringling engaged architect John H. Phillips to design a palace for his treasures, a museum that would emulate the footprint of Florence's Uffizi Gallery, echoing its graceful colonnades and opening onto an Italianate garden. In October 1931, "The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art" was officially dedicated and opened to the public. The Old Master paintings, which are among the rarest and most celebrated in the United States, are the most important of the Museum's holdings.

The Museum's collection continues to grow and was greatly enhanced with two gifts of comprehensive Asian collections. In 2002, The Koger Collection of Chinese ceramics, which features utilitarian and decorative pieces, was acquired by the Museum. Then in 2006, Dr. Helga Wall-Apelt, noted art collector and philanthropist made a combined pledge of funding to support the future Dr. Helga Wall-Apelt Asian Art Gallery and her collection of jades, stone figures and bronzes.

Opened in 2007, The Ulla R. and Arthur F. Searing Wing for traveling exhibitions was inspired by a design approved by John Ringling himself. The new wing provides the

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space needed to accommodate major traveling exhibitions as well as to display rotations of the permanent collection.

John Ringling's collection included a small treasury of books. This part of Ringling's collection has developed into one of the most important art history collections in the southeastern United States, now numbering 70,000 holdings. The Library is an enduring testament to Ringling's passion for collecting.

### **A Palace Fit for a Circus King**

Frequent travel to Europe in search of circus acts led John and Mable to appreciate the continent's culture, treasure and architecture. They fell in love with the romance of Venice, and determined that their home on Sarasota Bay would emulate the grandeur of the Doge's Palace, combined with the gothic grace of the *Cà d'Oro*. *Cà d'Zan*, completed in 1926, soon became the epicenter of cultural life on Florida's west coast, attracting such luminaries as New York Mayor Jimmy Walker, entertainer Flo Ziegfeld, comedian Will Rogers, and many others. Their vision, to be known through Venetian dialect as the "House of John," was befitting a Circus King.

### **A Wonderful Delight**

Established in 1948, the Ringling Museum of the American Circus was the first museum of its kind to document the rich history of the circus. With so many circus people living in the immediate area, the collection grew quickly. Because of this, the Ringling Museum has a fine collection including rare handbills and art prints, circus paper, business records, wardrobe, performing props, as well as all types of circus equipment, including beautifully carved parade wagons, sturdy utility wagons, tent poles and massive bail rings.

*The Howard Bros. Circus model* is an authentic replica of *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus* during the late 1930s, when the tented circus was at its largest (circa 1919-1938). Complete with eight main tents, 152 wagons, 1,300 circus performers and workers, more than 800 animals and a 57-car train, the model is a 3/4-inch-to-the-foot scale replica and occupies 3,800 square feet in the Tibbals Learning Center. The "largest miniature circus in the world" was created over 50 years by master model builder and philanthropist Howard Tibbals of Tennessee and Florida.

### **A Jewel Box of a Theater**

The Historic Asolo Theater is thought to be the only 18<sup>th</sup>-century theater in America. It was originally built in 1798 by architect Antonio Locateli in the Castle of Caterina Cornaro in the Italian town of Asolo near Venice.

The theater was purchased by the Ringling Museum's first director, A. Everett "Chick" Austin, Jr. and reinstalled on Museum property in the early 1950's when theater, opera and music performances helped distinguish Sarasota as one of the nation's leading

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cultural centers. Today the theater makes available a diverse schedule of theater, dance, music, film and lectures.

### **An Aging Gem**

For nearly ten years after John Ringling's death, the Ringling Museum was opened irregularly and not professionally maintained. *Cà d'Zan* was used privately and remained closed to the public, while the State of Florida fought with creditors over the fate of the estate. By 1946, the State had prevailed, as title at last transferred to the people of Florida. The Museum opened under the leadership of Austin.

Under normal circumstances, the \$1.2 million endowment that John Ringling left with his estate would have grown over time, its proceeds preserving the estate and its treasures. It even might have attracted more donors, creating a basis of wealth to enhance the Museum's collections and further its educational mission. But it did not.

Managed by government, the funds languished without the benefit of strategic investing. Meanwhile the local community, convinced that the Ringling Museum was the State's responsibility, did little to support the Ringling Museum. Gradually, the care that historic buildings require – weatherproofing, mechanical upgrades, and occasional refurbishing – was put off or handled piecemeal. As neglect led to crisis, private supporters came forth to keep the Museum open, while dedicated and under-funded staff struggled to fulfill the Museum's vast potential. But over time the challenge became overwhelming.

By the late 1990s, the decay from deferred maintenance had reached a critical point. The *Cà d'Zan* mansion was falling apart, the roof of the Museum of Art leaked, and the building completed in 1957 to house the Historic Asolo Theater was condemned. Antiquated security systems no longer provided adequate protection for art. Weathered footpaths and cracking roads gave the once venerable estate a tired look of ruin. The future of the Ringling Estate was uncertain.

### **The Rebirth**

By 2007, the Ringling Museum completed a six-year, \$140 million Master Plan. It was an extraordinary transformation that re-established the Ringling as a world-class destination.

In 2000, governance was transferred from the State of Florida's Department of State to Florida State University establishing the Ringling estate as one of the largest museum/university complexes in the nation. Through the forward-looking vision of the FSU President, the local Board of Directors, and Senate President John McKay –funds were secured to restore the original Ringling buildings and later, through public and private partnerships, to construct four new buildings on the Museum's Master Plan: the Tibbals Learning Center, the John M. McKay Visitors Pavilion, the Education/Conservation Building and The Ulla R. and Arthur F. Searing Wing.

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When FSU assumed governance, Ringling's original \$1.2 million endowment had hardly grown to \$2 million. In 2002, when \$42.9 million was provided through the State for new buildings, it came with a condition that the Ringling board raise \$50 million in endowment within five years. Impossible as the task then seemed, more than \$55 million was donated or pledged by 2007.

### **The Dream Continues**

Over time, the wisdom and accomplishment of the Ringling's master plan will be measured not by cost and square footage, but by the quality of exhibitions and cultural programs that the Museum provides. New educational spaces host an adult institute for cultural studies, making the Museum a destination point for cultural tourism and in-depth learning. Plans for a children's cultural camp during summers are also developing, in collaboration with FSU's nationally ranked Department of Art Education. Graduate semesters for museum studies have already begun, utilizing the museum as a laboratory for institutional "best practices" and as a springboard for students to begin museum careers. Programming in the Historic Asolo Theater has extended the Museum's cultural reach, generating collaborations among Sarasota's exceptionally strong performing arts community, and bringing theater, music, film and dance to the Ringling estate. Intrinsically, the mission-driven activities that most major museums pursue – mounting important exhibitions, refining collections, publishing, engaging visitors, educating school children, and reaching out to underserved populations – continue with new energy, inspired by a rejuvenated environment.

The momentum of the Museum's recent success has also accelerated plans for additional buildings. Recent gifts have made possible two important initiatives for art, and preparations are underway for the next phase of the Circus Museum.

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