

**The Ringling Project 2002**  
**Museum & Ca 'D' Zan**  
**by**  
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Entrepreneur, showman, visionary, dreamer, cultural icon, collector, patron of the arts, are all applicable titles for John Ringling. In his pursuit to establish a monument to himself and his wife Mable, Sarasota was endowed with a museum of art remarkable for such a city at that time. Calling on his circus experience Ringling used familiar marketing techniques to promote Sarasota to wealthy northerners as a winter destination where culture and the arts held a prominent role.

John Ringling was born in McGregor, Iowa on May 31<sup>s</sup>, 1866. It was not until 1882 that he joined his brothers in the circus. The Ringling Brothers became the leading circus in the land by 1907, when they bought out their major competitor, Barnum & Bailey Circus. In 1905 John Ringling married Mable Burton, and the two dreamed of magnificent projects that eventually became their museum of art and the bay front home Ca' D' Zan (in the Venetian dialect of Italy it means "House of John"). In 1909 Ringling visited Tarpon Springs and traveled by boat to Sarasota for the first time. This trip set the wheels turning in John's mind. The beauty of the waters and beaches had the entrepreneur planning and plotting how this pristine location could be developed. However, it was not until 1911 that the Ringlings would buy a home on Shell Beach from Ralph Caples and spend several months there every year. Soon, John's brother Charles bought a property adjacent to John's.

A short time later Ringling met New York art dealer Julius Bohler and a friendship began which would last the rest of their lives. Bohler not only bought artwork throughout Europe for John, but also coached the willing pupil in art appreciation. Ringling became quite proficient in a

relatively short time and could hold his own on the subject. Although often relying on Julius for his selections, Ringling attended auctions alone and bid on some pieces that caught his fancy, often paying very little for works later seen as masterpieces.

Ringling met architect John Phillips as the latter was working on a project for Ralph Caples. Ringling told Phillips to draw up some plans for the museum of art. Having spent a number of years in Italy, Phillips designed an Italian Villa of the Tuscan style encompassing Northern Italian Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Ringling was intrigued by Phillips' cardboard model and authorized the design. John and Mable, lovers of all things Italian from their many trips abroad, especially to Florence and Venice, readily agreed to the heavy Italian influence throughout the Museum and Ca 'D' Zan. Many of the statues, sculptures and artifacts that reinforced the Italian theme of the museum came from an early, ill-fated hotel project. In 1927, the final design was chosen and the museum was completed in 1929.

The collection of over 600 paintings purchased over a six-year time span included the famous "cartoons" of Baroque master Peter Paul Rubens. On the grounds was a bronze casting of Michelangelo's famous statue of David. John and Mable were very involved with even small details of their project from the outset and went to great lengths in personally selecting and outfitting of the museum and grounds.

The museum officially opened in 1930, but for one day only. Due to cataloguing difficulties, the official dedication of the museum was delayed until 1931. The Ringlings had succeeded in bringing to the people of Sarasota an exhibition of the arts that would enrich their lives forever.

Mable Ringling died in 1929 in New York City and John died in 1936. The Circus fell on bad times and creditors had been hounding Ringling since he became seriously ill in 1932.

John eventually willed to the people of Sarasota the Museum with its \$14 million collection.

The residence officially came into the hands of the people of Florida in 1946.

John Ringling's involvement was obvious in the museum but in Ca'D' Zan he gave free rein to Mable and she was more than up to the task. The Ringlings traveled constantly, and their original homes were apartments in New York and Chicago, railroad cars, and hotels. They did have a summer home in New Jersey and there Mable enjoyed her rose garden on the 100 acre estate that later became Palisades National Park.

In 1924 John Ringling authorized architect Dwight Baum to design and construct the beautiful Italian Palazzo style waterfront residence known as Ca'D'Zan. Features include a 61ft. tower and Venetian glass windows. It was a totally unique and comfortable home, as well as a showplace designed to impress Ringling's various business contacts. Mable worked hard to maintain authenticity to the Italian Palazzo style she so much admired. Terra Cotta blocks were used inside and out, along with poured concrete and bricks. The roof featured red barrel tiles from Barcelona, Spain. The house sports 32 rooms and 15 baths. The main living area centers around a two-and-a-half story courtroom. The house was constantly swamped by Ringling's acquisitions, from furnishings bought from other estates such as those belonging to the Astors and the Goulds to additional Italian treasures. A personal touch worth noting is the painted ceilings in the ballroom and playroom. The playroom paintings include the Ringling's in Venetian Carnival Costumes (perhaps a reminder of the circus background). The exterior of the house has an elaborate marble balcony that leads down to the bay front docks where John kept his yacht, Zalophus (Sea Lion). Terra cotta balustrades in all 8000 square feet of area define the terrace.

Over time Ca'D' Zan deteriorated and needed a complete modernization. In 2002 a \$15-million restoration was completed that featured intense research into the structure. Major challenges included the installation of air-conditioning units as unobtrusively as possible along with the replacement of many furnishings and drapes that had faded or disintegrated completely. Original manufacturers in Europe and elsewhere had to be tracked down and their expertise brought to bear on the project. Today's finished product is still the magnificent gift that John and Mable Ringling intended.