

Report
Of The Special
Citizens Committee

on

The Ringling Museum
of Art

Sarasota, Florida

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YOUR COMMITTEE met at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday, March 12, 1957, at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, under the temporary chairmanship of Mr. Hollis Rinehart of the State Board of Control, and with Mr. James J. Love, also of the Board, in attendance. Except for a luncheon break, it remained in session until 5:00 p.m. The committee elected Governor Doyle Carlton its Chairman. Within the obvious limitations of a one-day session, it examined in detail the status, the operation and the future needs of the Museum of Art, the Asolo Theater, the Ringling Residence and the Museum of the American Circus. Its members have since then had the opportunity to study additional material furnished to the committee by the Board of Control and the Museum staff.

In drafting this report, your committee decided first to make general comments on the various components of the Ringling Museum operation and then, in a second section, to make specific recommendations for the future.

Before proceeding to the report proper, however, the committee desires to pay tribute to the work accomplished at the Museum by the late A. Everett Austin, Jr., its director, who was in the hospital at the time of the committee meeting with what proved to be a fatal illness. Mr. Austin had taken over the museum at its lowest point, and its present stature in the art world, as well as the physical condition of the buildings and their contents, are due in large measure to his efforts.

The committee would like to urge the Board of Control either to authorize the placement of a memorial plaque, privately subscribed, to Mr. Austin's memory in the entrance hall of the Museum of Art or itself to dedicate the Asolo Theater Building to his memory.

The committee would also like to thank Mr. Kenneth Donahue, Curator of the Museum, for his able oral presentation as Mr. Austin's substitute and for the careful and detailed written reports which he furnished. It would like to express its appreciation to the staff members of the Board of Control for their cooperation during the meeting.

GENERAL

1. THE JOHN AND MABLE RINGLING MUSEUM OF ART

In a report dated January 12, 1953, on this Museum, a committee headed by Francis Henry Taylor, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, wrote that, "The Ringling collection is without doubt the most comprehensive collection of works of art in the South, one of which the older and more established cultural centers in the country would be proud."

Referring specifically to the six-year period between 1946 and 1952, during which the Museum staff, under the direction of A. Everett Austin, Jr., had concentrated on reconstruction of galleries and the restoration of paintings

and other art works which had deteriorated over ten years of neglect to the point where many were on the verge of disintegration, the committee commented, "One cannot fail to be impressed with the prodigious accomplishment performed by Mr. Austin and his staff in transforming . . . this woefully neglected private collection into a great public museum."

Four years later, in the opinion of your committee, these words are as true as the day they were written and have, if anything, gained in validity.

During the course of its daylong meeting on March 12, 1957, the committee toured the Museum of Art, the Asolo Theater, the Ringling Residence, and the Museum of the American Circus. In the Museum of Art, it found that with the exception of one of the great Rubens cartoons, work on which is about to start, the tedious job of restoration has been substantially completed on all works now hanging in the galleries with the exception of some 25 paintings which are "exhibitible" but which, because of their deteriorated conditions, are now stored in the Museum's vaults. Future restoration will consist of general normal preservation and maintenance of the collection.

It found that the work of reconditioning the galleries to minimize the effects of dampness and other adverse conditions had made great progress. New lighting was being progressively installed in the various galleries. Work was in progress on repair to the Museum roof, long in bad condition, with the prospect that before long it will be weather-tight and good, with normal maintenance, for many years.

It found, in short, that the over-all job of restoring what had once existed, and which need never have deteriorated except for the unusual circumstances surrounding the Ringling bequest to the State of Florida, was nearly over, and that it was high time for the attempt to establish an operational policy for the future aimed at consolidating and expanding the value of this great art collection to the people of Florida and the nation as a whole.

It found that the Museum, thanks to the considerable publicity it has received and to its policy of participating in loan exhibitions elsewhere, enjoys a solid and growing prestige both in the United States and abroad. There is every reason to believe that this prestige in the art world will continue to increase as long as the Museum has competent professional direction and proper supervision by the State.

It found that the Museum represents a cultural and educational asset of incalculable value to the State of Florida which is possibly much better recognized outside its boundaries than it is by the people of the State themselves. It believes that by building on the start already made a sound base of public relations within the State can be established, thus greatly enhancing the Museum's value to the people.

2. THE ASOLO THEATER

It can perhaps be argued that construction at a cost of \$274,000 of a building to house this 18th century theater should have been deferred in favor

