Ringling Museum of Art

History
Circus entrepreneur John Ringling and his wife Mable traveled extensively throughout Europe in the 1920s searching for new acts for his circus. Along the way, they developed a passion for European art and architecture. The Ringlings began building a significant collection of High Renaissance and Baroque art.

In 1925, Ringling engaged architect John H. Phillips to design and build a museum on his Sarasota property to showcase his growing collection. Construction began in 1927 but the collapse of the Florida land boom and the Great Depression nearly put an end to Ringling’s dream. He borrowed heavily in order to complete the building which he dedicated to the memory of his wife, Mable, who died in 1929. In 1930, The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art was opened to the public.

The result was a magnificent building in the style of Italian villas so beloved by the Ringlings, with twenty-one galleries, long loggias surrounding a cloistered Renaissance courtyard and adorned with early 20th century bronze and stone replicas of classical Greek and Roman statuary. Dominating the courtyard is a cast of Michelangelo’s David from the Plazzo Vecchia, in Florence. The Italian gallery features panels that were the original cabinet doors in the library of the Villa Palmieri near Florence. It is noteworthy that it was in this library that Giovanni Boccacio wrote the *Decameron* in 1352.

Upon his death in 1936, John Ringling bequeathed the entire museum and his art collection, along with his winter mansion and the surrounding 66 acres to the state of Florida. It was his wish that his legacy would establish Sarasota as a cultural and educational center. Legal challenges tied up the estate for ten years. By the time the state prevailed, there were not sufficient funds to properly maintain the museum and it fell into disrepair. In the decades that followed, Ringling would be transformed and expanded upon, with the addition of two circus museums, a library, administrative offices, a conservation lab, and a visitor’s center.

In July 2000, Florida State University (FSU) assumed governance of the museum. The state provided $43 million in 2002 to fund restoration of The Ringling and the museum board raised another $56 million by 2007.

Today the museum has been restored to its original grandeur, honoring the cultural and educational legacy of John and Mable Ringling.
The Museum Collections
Between 1925 and 1931 Ringling acquired more than 600 masterworks from the late medieval period through 1900. The museum’s collection of old masters includes, among others, works by Velasquez, El Greco, Cranach, Poussin, Gainsborough, Titian, Tintoretto and Rubens. In the first gallery the visitor encounters upon entering the museum hang four enormous tapestry cartoons from the Triumph of the Eucharist series by Peter Paul Rubens. This is the largest series of works by Rubens outside of Europe.

Ringling also purchased entire rooms including furnishings, paintings, and architectural details from the auction of the Astor and Vanderbilt mansions. In 1928, with the acquisition of works from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Ringling expanded the collection to include classical antiquities from Cyprus.

Although the works bequeathed by John Ringling constitute the core of the collection, it is by no means a static one. The museum’s first director, Arthur Everett Austin, purchased 20th century works and the museum hosts several important traveling exhibits each year, many of which are comprised of contemporary pieces, photography, and Asian art.

Bibliography


The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Owned and Operated by the State of Florida. Sarasota, 1951. Rare Book Collection.


**Internet**

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