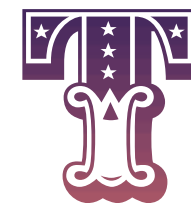




THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

Circus impresario and business tycoon John Ringling left behind a world-class art museum and estate in Sarasota—as well as a reputation as quite a gentleman.



hough most famous for his circus, John Ringling was a man of many interests. Pass through the grand entryway into the Ringlings' 66-acre waterfront estate in Sarasota, which incorporates the Museum of the Circus as well as the impressive Museum of Art, affiliated with Florida State University, and you'll soon realize that the circus was just one part of who John Ringling was.

Under the Big Top

After a devastating hurricane hit the west coast of Florida in 1926, circus impresario Ringling decided to move the winter quarters of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus from Bridgeport, Connecticut to Sarasota to boost the local economy. Gone were the cold winter snows and Nor'easters. Instead, Sarasota offered balmy days and cool nights, waving palm trees and serene white-sand beaches. When Ringling coined the phrase, "Come spend a summer this winter in Sarasota," he certainly knew what he was talking about.

When Ringling moved the circus' winter quarters to Sarasota, many of the performers followed suit. As such, the area became rich with circus tradition. Over time, it became apparent that the colorful history of the circus should be documented. The Ringling Museum of the Circus first opened its doors in 1948. Today, the museum holds one of the finest collections of circus memorabilia in the world, including rare handbills and art prints, wardrobes, performing props and intricately carved original parade wagons, recently restored to their original beauty.

Next door to the circus museum, one man has been working every day for nearly 50 years on what will be a fantastic addition to the museum. Since the age of 20, Howard Tibbals has spent at least a couple of hours a day working to realize his dream of building a "fairly exact replica of shows in the '20s and '30s, when work was done by muscle, both human and animal"—a tribute to the circus he remembers from his childhood.

Entering through the back door of the still-under-construction, 30,000-square-foot exhibition hall, I catch the skilled worker at his craft. At the moment, he's painstakingly building a model railroad track that is but one of thousands of pieces of the finished product that will go on show when his dream is realized and the Tibbals Learning Center opens on the grounds of the John and Mable Ringling Museum in January 2006.

The main draw of the center will be the extensive scene depicting circus life in meticulous detail, with more than 80 train cars, exotic animals, performers, sideshows, spectators and 7,000 folding chairs, all intricately carved by Tibbals and a team of



**FEATURE
SARASOTA CIRCUS**



volunteers on a scale of one-sixteenth life-size. In addition to life under the big top, the center will house the extensive collection of circus art, posters and memorabilia that Tibbals has collected over the years. The exhibit will incorporate the extensive collection built by Tibbals' mentor, Harold Dunn—a 148-foot-long parade of carved figurines and floats.

The Ringling Museum brings to life the magic of the circus and is a treat for young-at-heart circus fans of all ages.



Step into the Ringling Museum of Art, and you might feel you are stepping into a European museum. Designed by Ringling in the style of an Italian villa, with soaring ceilings and open spaces, the 21 galleries of the museum hold an impressive collection of European and American art. The first two galleries showcase the works of Rubens, which are among the most beautiful of those found in any museums in the US.

Proceed through the museum and you will find some fine examples of Baroque and Renaissance masterpieces by Velázquez, Poussin, Van Dyck and others. From 1925 through 1931, Ringling consulted with art dealers the world over to select the pieces that would hang in his museum. Today, visitors are encouraged to take a closer look at the techniques and subtleties used by these great masters. In addition to the permanent collection, traveling exhibits by the likes of photographer Ansel Adams (until April 10) are showcased in a separate wing of the gallery.

"John Ringling was someone who wanted to leave behind a legacy of art," explained Dr. Aaron De Groft, curator of collections. "And above all else, he wanted to be remembered as a gentleman."

Step onto the terrace of the museum and let your gaze rest upon the Venetian Gothic mansion overlooking Sarasota Bay. Cà d'Zan, meaning "House of John", was built between 1924 and 1926 and is a testament to John and Mable Ringling's love of art and architecture. The well-traveled couple decided to fashion their Florida home after the palaces and hotels found along the canals of Venice.

Throughout her extensive travels with her husband, Mable Ringling collected sketches, postcards and photos of the hotels, palaces and architecture that she and John so admired. When the time came to begin building their home in Sarasota, Mable met with architect Dwight James Baum. She worked closely with Baum and oversaw the construction of the house, down to the very last detail. In 1926, the Ringlings moved into their four-story, 32-room and 15-bathroom mansion.

In its heyday, Cà d'Zan welcomed many of the Ringlings' family and friends. Guests stayed for weeks at a time, enjoying the beauty of the surroundings, from the views across the bay to Mable's secret garden and the blooming rose garden. The size of the house could be a little daunting for some, as guest Will Rogers reportedly found for himself when he said to his host, "John, I got awfully hungry. It took me two weeks to find the kitchen!"

During their journeys, the Ringlings collected furnishings and decorative objects from the 17th through to the 19th centuries. After extensive restoration and conservation, today's visitors will find the Cà d'Zan just as the Ringlings left it. Walk into the decadent dining room and imagine the feasts served to guests in decades past, watch the light play off the crystal chandelier from the original Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York and imagine the music that was played on the Aeolian organ, whose 2,289 pipes are hidden by tapestries on the second-floor balcony. When sunset nears, take a seat on the marble terrace and watch as the Cà d'Zan is bathed in golden light.

When you experience for yourself the opulence and beauty of The John and Mable Ringling Museum you will discover Ringling's lasting legacy—that of a true gentleman.

For more information:

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art—www.ringling.org
Sarasota—www.sarasotafl.org