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John Ringling: Story of a Capitalist

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This work is dedicated to two places that both the author and the subject of this work found much of their life’s inspirations, the great boot-shaped peninsula of Italy and Sarasota’s mesmerizing Gulf-lined coast.
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ABSTRACT

This work will examine John Ringling’s impact on the urbanization of Sarasota while exploring his marginalization in the history of American museums. After living in the Midwest, Ringling decided to move to Sarasota and transform it into a cultural destination. A great museum was a central component of his vision. Scholarship that mentions Ringling describes him as either the circus man or art collector, but not both; however, the two personas were inextricably linked. The same qualities that made him a success in the business world made him an excellent art collector. Compiled and designed to be Ringling’s lasting legacy, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, was given to the State of Florida upon his death, a gift unprecedented in the state’s history. Ringling’s museum bequeath was meant to serve as his lasting legacy. By doing so, Ringling wanted to reserve a permanent place for himself in history among the great businessmen and art patrons he revered.
“[the circus] is the only ageless delight that you can buy for money.”
--Ernest Hemingway

Amazement is not the word that conveys to the intelligent mind that any one man could accomplish in a lifetime, what the late Mr. John Ringling exhibits in his magnificent collection. When we stop to consider his other various colossal business interests, combining the great Ringling Circus, oil wells, railroads, real estate developments in Sarasota and elsewhere, and numerous other ventures, it is both inconceivable and incomparable. It compels respect, admiration, and much thought for this one-man achievement.\(^1\)
--Jonce McGurk

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

John Ringling was best remembered for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus; however, that was not his intention. Instead, he wanted to go down in history for his cultural contribution to the city of Sarasota and the state of Florida. Assembled and designed to be his lasting legacy, John Ringling bequeathed a major museum of art, a gift unprecedented in the state’s history. Ringling anticipated Sarasota’s potential for growth and wanted to transform his adopted home into a cultural destination for the fine arts.

John Ringling’s story as a one-time circus clown turned successful financial capitalist, is typical of other successful Gilded Age businessmen. The American people, the press, as well as many of Ringling’s business equivalents and financial peers consistently identified him as the man “who used to drive a circus wagon,” yet he owned the largest circus conglomerate in history.\(^2\) Yet, John Ringling is also the quintessential model of how early twentieth century highbrow and lowbrow culture merged. He successfully blended his affinity for the circus and his love for fine arts to create one of the most comprehensive and extensive public art collections in American history.

As he quietly began to amass his collection, many wrote him off as another “collector,” nevertheless, John Ringling viewed himself as a patron of the arts for the public. According to John Ringling’s nephew, John Ringling North, the museum “was part of a long-range plan…”

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give the state of Florida a memorial to Mable and himself that would be as magnificent and much more useful than the pyramids.”  

Built on Ringling’s own land, adjacent to his private home on Florida’s West Coast, his museum was located well beyond the physical boundaries of the traditional art world at that time. Upon completion, it was the largest museum in the country located south of New York City.

Ringling acquired the majority of his collection in rapid succession, obtaining over 500 works of art, many of them well known, in less than a decade. While Ringling’s name appeared in print for some of his purchases, many seemed to go unnoticed. In May of 1928, American Magazine of Art published an article stating “so quietly had Mr. Ringling done his collecting and his building that news of the erection and establishment of this art museum comes like a bolt out of a clear sky.” Today, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is the official art museum for the state of Florida and the largest university art museum in the United States.

Descriptions of John Ringling’s character are extremely diverse. In 1936, his obituary in the New York Times characterized him as liking “to have people about him, but was not talkative and had nothing of the traditional showman.” The business world believed Ringling to be aloof and on occasion described him as arrogant. Known to drive a hard bargain and notoriously tightfisted, his associates and competitors found Ringling to be both egocentric and acquisitive.

Circus historians, Fred Dahlinger and Stuart Thayer described Ringling in their work, Badger State Showmen, as “a true metropolitan, impeccably dressed.” Those who knew him, claimed he was, “giant in stature, kindly of eye, quiet and dignified.” Perhaps, the New Yorker depicted Ringling in his truest form, “a tall, powerful figure… seen standing in the lobby or prowling about back-stage [of the circus], bending a sharply critical glance upon the arrangements…

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4 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 12.
8 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 11.
behind whose solemn comedian’s face is the genius for organization… including a personal fortune said to be one of the largest in the country.”

Pat Ringling Buck, John Ringling’s grandniece, notes in her work *The Ringling Legacy* that contemporaries did not often credit Ringling’s imagination, sense of vision, keen visual sense, marvelous memory and inquiring intellect, he became a lifelong student of things that interested him, including fine art. What is certain is that while alive, Ringling’s uncanny ability to memorize remarkable amounts of diverse information both impressed and astounded those who knew him. While a self-made man of no formal education, Ringling valued the importance of knowledge and had an insistent desire to know everything about anything he found interesting. He had a penchant for both the spectacular and dramatic, maintaining “larger than life” existence, a scale that he grew accustomed to throughout his life.

By the time he died, Ringling’s financial portfolio was far more diverse and went well beyond his circus roots. Yet, he was never able to grow beyond his origins in the eyes of the public. The press, for instance, referred to him by those roots until he died. On his 1905 marriage license, Ringling listed his occupation as “capitalist,” a much more accurate characterization than circus man or any of the other titles the press and American society gave him. Still, John Ringling’s expansive business portfolio of investments were, of course, all only possibly due to the success of the brothers’ circus. Furthermore, when Ringling bought out the American Circus Corporation in 1929, he undoubtedly made himself the most successful circus owner in history. The *New York Times* reported that the “man who started as a clown now controls the entire big top industry.” While his life story allowed the public to embrace and identify with his humble beginnings, those same roots made him an outcast among the more established echelon of American aristocracy of whom he became a financial equal. While the circus remained at the center of Ringling’s attention and true passion, his need to display to the business world his success became exceedingly important. Ringling’s abundant wealth acquired through his circus provided financing for his extensive art collection and compelled Ringling to demonstrate his monetary success through the development of Sarasota.

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Ringling saw the potential for the transformation Florida’s West Coast in the same manner that Henry Flagler saw the possibilities for the East Coast. Successfully acquiring nearly all of Sarasota’s offshore keys, the gulf-front as well as thousands of inland acres, Ringling was able to physical alter the look of Sarasota. The formation and physical layout of the city is almost solely in conjuncture with John Ringling’s original plan, much of Ringling influenced architecture is still apparent, as well. An intricate part of his plan for the future of Sarasota was the placement of his art museum, center to what he believed could be a cultural center for the southern United States. Ringling further changed Sarasota when he brought the circus’ winter quarters to the area in 1926, forever altering the heritage and economy of the city. The imprint of the Ringlings are everywhere in Sarasota, a lasting physical tribute to the man who wanted his museum, not his famous circus conglomerate to be his legacy.
CHAPTER 2
THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM

Throughout the Nineteenth century, American museums were considered vastly inferior to their European contemporaries because they contained inexpensive copies of masterworks. Noted museum professional Edward Alexander, explained in *Museums in Motion* that American museums during the first part of the Nineteenth century were under the direction of unprofessionally trained persons who typically collected stuffed beasts and serpents, waxwork figures, and electrical machines. They also presented farces, songs, dances, and similar vaudeville acts. Hence, museums served often as entertainment for a popular audience. “Cabinets of Curiosities” has become the term widely associated with these emerging museums, comprised of one individual’s collection of unrelated objects.

Perhaps the most famous first museum creator in the United States is Charles Wilson Peale. An American artist, Peale formed his design for a museum of the Objects of Natural History in 1785. His goal was to develop America’s first national museum in scope. He noted in his article, “To the Citizens of the United States of America” that “all the splendid Museums of the great European nations have risen from the foundations laid by individuals. America has in this a conspicuous advantage over all other countries, from the novelty of its vast territories.” Peale set the precedent that American museums would serve democratic purposes by disseminating knowledge to general audiences. Peale’s museum also included some items that border-lined on the spectacular, which he believed would draw in greater numbers of visitors. By increasing attendance, Peale hoped to attract state funding for his institution, a goal that was never realized. As a result, his museum survived solely on admission. After his death, the stockholders insisted that the museum be able to make a profit.

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19 Peale, “To the Citizens of the United States of America,” 130.
to sustain its future and as a result, the new owner transformed the museum into more of a live animal show than a center for learning. Peale’s ambition was to create a museum that was both devoted seriously to education and popular amongst visitors.\textsuperscript{21}

Widely considered by historians to be the first American museum opened to the public, much of the Peale family collection was purchased by P.T. Barnum as part of the “American Museum” in 1841. Shortly after this, the word museum began to change, boundaries blurred between education and entertainment in the minds of the American people.\textsuperscript{22} Although Barnum added some historical elements to his museum, he focused publicity on the objects with entertainment value, like his authentic mermaid skeleton.\textsuperscript{23} After suffering a series of devastating fires, Barnum decided to leave the museum field and concentrated solely on his circus by 1870.\textsuperscript{24}

Throughout much of the Nineteenth century, American museums were vastly inferior to their European counterparts, partly because they did not receive money from the federal government. In contrast, European governments often funded national museums. America’s budding industrialists decided to fill the gap. They saw the development of American culture as a means to assert the country’s world importance. According to Nancy Einreinhofer, “wealthy industrialists who viewed the collecting of art as a symbol of prosperity, wealth, and power for themselves and for the new nation.”\textsuperscript{25} Almost all of America’s art museums trace their roots to wealthy capitalists who spent much of their vast finances on art collecting and civic pursuits.\textsuperscript{26} These men viewed themselves as the “kings of industry” and believed their cultural beneficiaries would serve as a tangible way to ensure their lasting legacy in American history.\textsuperscript{27}

The ultimate success of an American capitalist at this time was to be a patron of the arts; collecting was a pastime considered proper for a person of certain financial means.\textsuperscript{28} Many

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Schwarzer, Riches, Rivals & Radicals, 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Alexander, Museums in Motion, 14.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Nancy Einreinhofer. The American Art Museum: Elitism and Democracy. (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), xi.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} John Coolidge. Patrons and Architects: Designing Art Museums in the Twentieth Century. (Fort Worth: Amon Cartern Museum, 1989), xii.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Einreinhofer, The American Art Museum, 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 6.
\end{itemize}
nineteenth century industrialists viewed the Italian Renaissance as the pinnacle of high society and they wanted to become the contemporary equivalent of their fourteenth century Medici predecessors. ²⁹ These capitalists embraced the era’s concept of “firsts,” and viewed it as the quintessential example of a time in which the arts and national building were combined. ³⁰

Famous museum director, John Cotton Dana wrote that early American museum founders followed the museum ideals of European cities, making “vast collection of objects which are ancient, rare, and often beyond price. These collections give prestige to the cities which possess them, are visited by tourists from other countries.”³¹ He described the museum boom of the late nineteenth century, when American capitalists created “made-to-order museum collections imitating similar collections in Europe.”³² Yet, as Lawrence Levine notes by quoting Joseph Choate, one of the Metropolitan Museum of Art founders, capitalists did not view museum making in only personal terms. Choate implored his fellow millionaires to think about the importance of the development of the American museum for the future of the American nation: “[that art] in its higher forms of beauty would tend directly to humanize, to education and refine a practical and laborious people.”³³

In the decade following the conclusion of the Civil War, industrialists pioneered a new era of museum making. Within six years Boston (Museum of Fine Arts), New York (American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and Philadelphia (Museum of Art) all erected major museums and while the financiers who backed each institution were different, these institutions set the precedence for relying on individual donors. This confirmed the validity of the Philanthropist-Capitalist at the turn of the Twentieth century.

The names of the early founders should be familiar to students of the Gilded Age. Morgan, Rockefeller, Whitney, Guggenheim, Getty, and Carnegie all built their museums as they would a corporation, with a Board of Directors, officers, and a Chief Executive Officer.³⁴ The founders of the Metropolitan Museum of Art were all self-made men who created their

³⁰ Ibid., 1-3.
own fortunes, unlike those of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts who were men of established familial wealth. The American Museum of Natural History (1869) traces its foundations to the Roosevelt family and aid of John Pierpont Morgan. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection, started in 1872, was “seeded” by railroad magnate, John Taylor Johnson. Chicago’s Field Museum, created as part of the Columbus Exhibition, traces its earliest financial origins in 1906 to department store mogul Marshall Field. After the Metropolitan Museum of Art refused Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney’s collection American art of more than five hundred works, she founded the Whitney Museum was founded in 1930.

However, there were no guaranteed successes. The Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its doors with a huge financial deficit. Morgan’s solution to this problem, which has been used ever since, was to fill all empty slots on the museum’s board with millionaires, including Frick and Baker, whom he believed would readily be able to fix the financial crisis. Whenever a financial deficit would occur within the museum, Morgan would simply stare across the table until those who were present had given enough to make up the difference. As a result, a lasting precedent was set in which wealthy individuals would not only establish these museums, but also often be responsible for their financial welfare for decades. For instance, the Morgans, Rockefellers, Whitneys and Sulzberfers have held positions on the board of the Metropolitan Museum of Art since this time, often transitioning from one generation to the next.

The longstanding relationship that many of these families have with the Metropolitan Museum is not unique; many American museums have patron families that maintain a venerable role on the development and basic function of the museum. For instance, the Rockefeller Family has had a long-standing relationship with the Museum of Modern Art that has influenced its growth and defining the institution’s mission. Einreinhofer’s work, The American Art Museum, elaborates on this extensive relationship: a Rockefeller “participated in the conception of the idea of the museum; a Rockefeller gave the land for the museum; the building resulted from Rockefeller donations, and the collection was built in large part with

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35 Ibid., 40.
36 Schwarzer, Riches, Rivals & Radicals, 43.
37 Ibid., 46.
38 Alexander, Museums in Motion, 52.
Rockefeller support. Additionally, since inception, there has always been a Rockefeller on the Museum of Modern Art board.\textsuperscript{40}

Other than the Morgans, the Rockefeller Family may have had the most visible impact on the museum community in the twentieth century. Besides their initial ties to the Metropolitan Museum of Art John D. Rockefeller, Jr. bequeathed the museum his collection of Medieval art objects and later assisted in the construction of The Cloisters as a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to hold his donation.

Across the country, museums at the turn of the twentieth century served not only as new spaces of culture for their cities, but were also part of the civic beautification movement.\textsuperscript{41} Museums in Europe, from their inception, were housed in magnificent buildings of grandeur to impress visitors as well as citizens.\textsuperscript{42} American museums took almost all their inspiration from their European counterparts. They borrowed techniques for layout and exhibition, architecture, and even inspiration of popular works; however, the basic function and whom it should serve were changed.\textsuperscript{43}

From Reconstruction through the beginning of World War II, museum architecture tended to favor the past. The majority of museums built during this time were modeled after notable buildings in world history; they were meant to symbolize endurance.\textsuperscript{44} This favoritism toward all things Eurocentric proliferated throughout the entire museum community from the architecture to the collections. Gerard Nachman of the San Francisco Chronicle stated, “I realized it must be the American reverence for all things European and our tendency to take for granted all things quintessentially American. I thought we were over that but it’s too ingrained; we’re patriotic about everything but our art.”\textsuperscript{45} The Metropolitan Museum of Art set the precedent of securing a park location for these “palaces for the people.” After the Metropolitan Museum announced that it would be situated adjacent to Central Park, the Boston Museum of

\textsuperscript{40} Einreinhofer, The American Art Museum, 163.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{44} Schwarzer, Riches, Rivals & Radicals, 30.
\textsuperscript{45} Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, 1-2.
Fine Arts selected Back Bay Fens, the Cincinnati Museum chose Eden Park, and the newly created Lake Park (later renamed Grant Park) became home to the Art Institute of Chicago.\[46\]

A desire to create lasting monuments motivated architects of the twentieth century.\[47\] According to John Coolidge’s *Patrons and Architects*, monuments are the expression of man’s highest cultural needs.\[48\] As such, these museums represented civic pride, often serving as examples of architectural feats while at the same time they symbolize the magnificence of the men who paid for their construction and filled their galleries. While this is true of the exterior of these structures, their interiors serve as examples of the American nation’s interest and desire to learn of other cultures, lands, and times.\[49\] These developing museums were under the direction and control of small, socially prominent upper class. For the founder and patron, the opening of his or her museum served as a symbol of their social status.

Beyond representing the greatness of individual industrialist, the American museum functioned as a source of education for the people.\[50\] These museums confirmed and reinforced the paradox of elitism and democracy. Throughout the early twentieth century, the term culture began to solely refer to high art.\[51\] While admission to this nation’s early museums was often free, it was never officially reserved for certain classes or categories of society, the structures were often imposing to marginalized populations.\[52\] For many, these imposing architecturally daunting buildings, built on public parks and which contained millions of dollars worth of objects was often overwhelming. In addition, while open daily to visitors, museums as well as many public parks at the time were often considered “off-limits” to people of color and were often difficult to get to for much of the general populous.\[53\]

The development of American collections was forever changed in 1909, when Congress passed the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act. This ended the heavy tax levied on all imported art into the United States that was over twenty years old. The act allowed all works of art to enter the country duty-free, serving as an enormous aid to American museum collections and just as an

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47 Coolidge, *Patrons and Architects*, 123.
48 Ibid., 123.
51 Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 231.
52 Ibid., 230.
enormous detriment to the Europeans. Many of the Act’s critics cited John Pierpont Morgan’s influence, who along with many other art museum trustees testified in favor of the Act. Morgan was considered by many at the time to be the most powerful man in America and was singlehandedly credited with bailing the banking system out of “The Panic of 1907.” The members of Morgan family are by far one of the most prestigious patrons in the history of American art museums. First, they were major benefactors to the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, their hometown, and later to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. To many Americans, the Act served as a personal thank you to Morgan and his financial equals, which allowed them to import their collections, often held in Europe, into the country. Morgan alone spent more than $60 million on art between 1902 and 1913.

Additionally, at the end of World War I museums focused solely on actively increasing the size and scope of their collections. Many of the European nations were in deep financial crisis. Not only were European governments on the brink of financial disaster but many members of the aristocracy were looking for a way to replenish their emptied bank accounts. As a result, many of the private collections never seen by the public before, let alone for sale, were available for the first time. American museums and their benefactors seized the opportunity to acquire some of the world’s greatest works for their collections. The American Art Dealer’s Association claimed that by 1923, Americans and American Museums had spent approximately $250 million on art, one third of which was on Europe’s Old Masters including Titian, Bellini, and Rubens. German museum director, Wilhelm von Bode warned European art collectors their prominence would be lost if they were not careful and restricted in their sales. American museums, he believed would soon “equal or surpass the great museums of Europe.” All of America’s twenty-first century notable museums can trace their founding to the first half of the twentieth century.

In addition to industrialists’ creation of museums for cities, others created museum they named after themselves. Isabella Stewart Gardner along with her legendary art dealer Bernard

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54 Ibid., 74.
56 Schwarzer, Riches, Rivals & Radicals, 74.
57 Ibid., 74.
58 Ibid., 13.
59 Ibid., 75.
Berenson, are credited with the creation of the original “period museum” within the United States.\textsuperscript{60} Gardner inherited $2.75 million, which she devoted to assembling a collection of Old Masters.\textsuperscript{61} Completed in 1903, Gardner’s home Fenway Park; upon her death in 1924, was left to the city of Boston, which she outlined in her will could never be changed from its original form.\textsuperscript{62} Gardner was the first of many who “established museums in their own names as a public monument to their private tastes.”\textsuperscript{63} Gardner’s personal museum has many followers, the Frick, the Johnson Collection, the Walters, the Phillips, the Crocker, the Norton Simon, and the Getty.\textsuperscript{64}

While indisputably one of the most well-known museums in the world today, the Smithsonian Institution, founded in 1851, did not follow this same pattern of support. The Smithsonian was seeded by an Englishman, James Smithson, who had never stepped foot on American soil. The initial purpose of the Smithsonian was not solely display or education, but rather that of research.\textsuperscript{65} While American industrialists did not create the Smithsonian, they influenced its expansion. The Cooper Hewitt, a unit of the Smithsonian Institution, administered by the Cooper Union until 1968, is still housed in the Carnegie Mansion in New York City. Similarly, the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery was a gift of Charles Long Freer, a Detroit manufacturer and collector of Far Eastern art, who gave his extensive personal collection to the Smithsonian in 1904, a collection that was formerly on exhibit in a museum annexed to his house.\textsuperscript{66} American investment banker John H. Hirshhorn, donated the Hirshhorn Museum, which the Institution’s contemporary art facility.\textsuperscript{67}

The Smithsonian’s neighbor, the National Gallery of Art was a gift of Pittsburgh financier Andrew Mellon and opened in 1937. After which others followed Mellon’s example, Samuel H. Kress and Chester A. Dale, for instance, donated a generous amount to increase the

\textsuperscript{60} Bazin, \textit{The Museum Age}, 250.
\textsuperscript{61} Coolidge, \textit{Patrons and Architects}, 4.
\textsuperscript{62} Bazin, \textit{The Museum Age}, 250.
\textsuperscript{63} Schwarzer, \textit{Riches, Rivals & Radicals}, 73.
\textsuperscript{64} Coolidge, \textit{Patrons and Architects}, 14.
\textsuperscript{65} Levine, \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow}, 156.
\textsuperscript{66} Bazin, \textit{The Museum Age}, 259.
\textsuperscript{67} Einreinhofer, \textit{The American Art Museum}, 55
museum’s permanent collection and, in 1942, Joseph E. Widener donated his substantial collection of paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts. 68

The result of this museum building was a shift in power from Europe to the United States. As Nancy Einreinhofer explains, “the larger European Old Master holdings of many art museums were tied directly to a vision of American equaling the Old World in artistic property” and as a result were being purchased in record numbers. 69 Kenneth Hudson, museum historian, described these early collectors as “They knew and loved art were as savvy and passionate about it as any Renaissance tyrant.” 70 These new members of the emerging American business aristocracy saw their art museums as an example of the country’s development as an advanced culture “ready to assume a leadership role among world powers.” These art museums solidified the view that America was now a nation “rich in treasures, money, culture, and learning” and the art symbolized “wealth, power, and prestige” to the collectors. 71

William Randolph Hearst, the epitomy of new American wealth, believed that money was no object in the world of art collecting that anything he wanted he could eventually buy. 72 He and collectors of the same mentality confirmed the belief that was prolific among Europeans that Americans were driven to the world of art collecting solely for social status. French forger Jean Charles Millet bragged to the press in the 1920s that “you can sell anything to Americans. They know nothing about art… All you have to go is ask a fabulous price.” 73

At the beginning of the twentieth century, America was undergoing striking transformations in its quest to become an industrial powerhouse. Cities were growing due to a large increase in immigration, leading to rapidly diversifying population. 74 Additionally, America’s wealth continued to abound at the end of the Great War. As a result, American society benefited from the country’s success. Throughout the 1920s, a museum opened every 11.4 days in the United States. 75 Between 1928 and 1930, the museums across the country were opening at

70 Schwarzer, Riches, Rivals & Radicals, 72.
72 Schwarzer, Riches, Rivals & Radicals, 73.
73 Ibid., 73.
74 Ibid., 3.
75 Ibid., 14.
a record rate, one every two weeks. According to the *New York Times* article, “Art Gain in Year in Spite of Slump,” the American Federation of Arts reported that there were well over 1,000 art museums opened across the United States. In 1933, President Herbert Hoover reported that every American city with a population in excess of 250,000 had a museum. Art historian, Harold Stark was quoted in 1934, saying, “There are probably more square yards of painted canvas, more tons of bronze and marble, more cubic feet of [museum] architecture per person in the United States than in any other country in the world. The growth of our museums has been phenomenal.”

Ringling acquired his vast art collection at the same time as the industrialists-capitalists, planning for his collection to parallel and continue the line of philanthropic contribution started by those before him. As such, his decision to assemble a museum to serve as his lasting legacy was not a new concept; however, his choice to be so involved with the composition of his collection as well as the building, down to the last minute elements is of note. The conscientious choice to place his museum in the South, away from the traditional museum community, the fine detail in which he paid to every aspect of the museum, and the personal interest he took in the compilation of this collection sets his museum apart from the other museums of the time.

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76 *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 35.
77 Ibid., 35.
3.1 The Origins of the Ringling Brothers

A son of immigrants, John Ringling along with his brothers became the greatest circus proprietors the world had ever known. As a result, the success of the circus would prove to be consequential in shaping the future of the Ringlings. The financial and business success that he established through the formation and success of the Ringling Brother’s circus would fuel many of John’s personal ambitions throughout his life. The way in which the brothers ran their operation would prove to impact the way which John Ringling would approach further business ventures, including the development of Sarasota and later his personal art museum.

Born in 1866 to German immigrants in McGregor, Iowa, Johann Nicholas Ringling was the sixth of seven sons. The family moved around a great deal as August, the Ringling family patriarch, searched of work; consequently, the Ringling children spent their formative years in the Midwest. While it is unknown exactly how the “Ringling boys” first were introduced to the circus industry, there is no doubt that they were pulled heavily in the direction of the entertainment world. In 1882, five of the Ringling brothers including John organized the
foundation of what later became the Ringling Brothers Circus. Their act consisted primarily of a variety and comedy show. The brothers ran their own small show for several years before collaborating with veteran showman, Yankee Robinson. Upon Robinson’s death in 1884, the Ringling Brothers owned their first travelling show.\textsuperscript{81} The brothers’ show began to gain in popularity in the following years and by 1890, they were yielding $15,000 annually in profits.\textsuperscript{82} Additionally, with the rapid expansion of the railroad industry, the Ringling Brothers outfit was reaching a more diverse and abundant audience than ever before. By the start of the twentieth century, after several consecutive seasons of profitable runs, the Ringling Brothers Show was able to buyout many of their competitors, becoming one of the largest circus organizations in the country.

Robert, Charles Ringling’s son, was quoted that “perhaps it wasn’t that the uncles were so smart, but that there were so God-damn many of them.”\textsuperscript{83} In contrast, Fred Bradna, long time Ringling circus Ringmaster and Equestrian Director, described the brothers as “… sort of a Hydra, with five heads rather than nine, who could look everywhere at once… they succeeded ultimately in crushing virtually all their opposition.”\textsuperscript{84} In reality, they were both abundant in number and perceptive in business. Additionally, the brothers ran their circus without official contracts, relying instead on their bond as brothers. They split all profits equally amongst themselves.\textsuperscript{85} In 1907, the Ringling Brothers’ organization was successful enough to purchase the Barnum & Bailey Show and consequently the brothers became the most powerful circus men on earth. Functioning as a corporate monopoly, they controlled the largest circus the world had ever known. The brothers became “a dominant force in the American circus scene and were crowned the ‘Circus Kings of All Time.’”\textsuperscript{86} However, the circus was seen by other financial titans of the time to be a source of “lowlbrow” culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ringlings’ circus travelled across America and for many served as the only source of information about the world beyond ones hometown or region.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{81} Weeks, Ringling: the Florida Years, 9.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{83} Walk, “Legacy of a Circus King- Three Rings of Records,” 34-5.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{86} Walk, “Legacy of a Circus King- Three Rings of Records,” 34.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 34.
The actual figures of the Ringling Brother’s total wealth was never made public, nor was it known by anyone who worked for them. In a profile by *The New Yorker* in May of 1926: “The Ringlings today are millionaires, patrons of the arts off and on, and real estate kings. They own most of the west coast of Florida.”88 Yet the article also suggested that since the brothers were “proprietors of a [former] country minstrel show” this new wealth had not made “them high-hat, or persuade[d] them that the circus business is a trifle lowbrow.”89 Unlike many other wealthy men of the Gilded Age, Ringling did not run in the “museum” circles of his peers. To many he would never be an accepted member of American high society, despite his believed limitless finances. The Ringlings were “still circus men first.”90

In contrast to other financial tycoons of the time, Ringling had never surrounded himself with a group of trusted individuals or any form of advisory board. The Ringlings built their business from the ground up as a family, believing that the bond of blood was enough to trust and all they needed to succeed. As a result, one could argue that Ringling had few close friends and confidants outside his family. A complex and intensely private man, Ringling gave only one public interview to the *Christian Science Monitor* in June of 1928. Little of his personal

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89 Ibid., 19-20.
90 Ibid., 19-20.
papers are left and even less is known of the man. However, John Ringling’s knack as a successful and coy businessman is legendary. Early into the circus venture, he adopted a country-boy persona in all of his business dealings. He loved to pass himself off as nothing more than a hick from Wisconsin.  

His business dealings were all done on his own time-table and terms. He would often schedule meetings for late at night, a conscious choice, which he believed gave him the upper hand. Others would all be tired after a full day’s work and he would be clear-minded and sharp because he did not rise until noon.

In Mark Ormond’s introduction to *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector* the author comments on the Ringlings’ intense desire for privacy, “Mable [Ringling] gave only one known press conference and quotations by John about his projects in Sarasota scarcely appear.” There is very little correspondence left of Ringling and it is not believed that he or his wife kept any form of personal journal. In an article published by *The New Yorker* in May of 1926, the Ringlings were described as “belong[ing] to that rare species which really does not care for publicity.” They were “very elusive about interviews…. Especially so when it comes to discussing their own.”

This practice did not change from the older generation to the younger, when reporters approached the Ringlings “too rashly, they are politely evaded by the elder Ringlings, and they are told by the younger: ‘You’ll have to ask my uncles. You see that’s a personal family affair.’

As the last surviving original Ringling Brothers, John Ringling purchased the American Circus Corporation in 1929, virtually ending all serious circus competition. This business decision resulted in Ringling being crowned “king of the circus,” a nickname he would use himself in later years. Originating from humble beginnings, Ringling built his circus into “the

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91 Dahlinger and Thayer, *Badger State Showmen*, 78.
92 Dahlinger and Thayer, *Badger State Showmen*, 78.
93 *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 9.
94 The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art holds the most extensive collection of John Ringling’s personal papers known, however, while business correspondence and news clippings of the man are readily available there is very little that characterizes the persona behind the circus king. John Ringling, as the man, continues to elude scholars.
96 Ibid., 19-20.
97 Ibid., 19-20.
greatest amusement empire in the world’s history.” While never classified as a “robber baron” by historians due to the nature of his investments, Ringling’s wealth was of the same caliber as the well-known financial capitalists that came before him. The circus tycoon, it became obvious, was determined to demonstrate his wealth at every opportunity.

3.2 The American Circus in the Early 20th century

Throughout the 19th century, the American circus and the developing amusement industry such as museums and menageries all capitalized on the same things: exotic animals, people, and artifacts from unknown, foreign cultures. The American circus industry, tracing its history to 1793, reached its peak during the 1903 season, during which approximately ninety-eight circuses and menageries were travelling across America. The circus’ extensive growth throughout the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century paralleled that of the growing transportation routes, which began to crisscross the nation. The uniform, transcontinental railroad, completed after the Civil War, allowed circuses to travel easily across the country, reaching an audience at a rate that was never possible before. Historian Robert Wiebe characterized this time as an era “when a provincial ‘national of loosely connected islands’ was giving way to an anonymous, modern, urban, industrial society.” What this meant for the circus is that it ceased to be a localized experience and instead became a uniform encounter.

Fig. 3. Ringling Bros. parade line-up on the lot at Rockford, Illinois in 1889. Photo courtesy of Fred Pfening III. Circus Historical Society.

100 Davis, The Circus Age, 199.  
101 Ibid., 7.  
102 Ibid., xii.  
103 Ibid., 22.  
104 Ibid., 7.  
105 Ibid., 14.
According to historian Janet Davis, the circus’ growth was similar to the expansion of big business and of the industrial workforce.\textsuperscript{106} While the circus paralleled the expansion of corporate America, it was in itself an international business. It also owed much of its success to European Colonialism.\textsuperscript{107} The prolific and risky animal trade depended upon the political stability of European colonies in Africa.\textsuperscript{108} When colonial rebellion rose, the animal trade all but disappeared. Animals were not the only imported commodity. Performers originated from over twenty-two countries including the Wallendas and Lou Jacobs from Germany, the Cristiani Family from Italy, and several other acts from Poland, Russia, and England. For many, the circus represented America’s role in the world to its audience.\textsuperscript{109}

John Ringling, as a performer, became one of the shows most popular acts. He did Irish and German character sketches, assisted in playlets and was considered exceedingly amusing to crowds.\textsuperscript{110} When the time called for it, Ringling left behind the circus acts to become the show’s advance man, a role that he prized and excelled at. Months before a show, “advance men” toured the nation serving as contractors, advertising agents, and billposters assessing and deciding upon future markets. Advance men would often arrive in railroad cars, painted in typical circus splendor, designed to advertize their upcoming show. They were responsible for all contracts for the circus, including fuel, animal feed, water, and food. They “inundated future markets with colorful lithographs and handbills.”\textsuperscript{111}

At a young age, Ringling held his own with advance men from other shows. They knew him to be ruthless. He would often use his boyish looks, especially his round face, as a tool to get his rivals to temporarily forget that what he lacked in age, he made up for in experience and knowledge.\textsuperscript{112} From the beginning, the Ringling Brothers advertised that their show was open to all; “a show for the rich; a show for the poor; a show for the old; a show for the young; a show for everybody.”\textsuperscript{113} In the decades to come, Ringling would use the same wide-reaching and inclusive approach to target an audience for his museum.

\textsuperscript{106} Davis, \textit{The Circus Age}, 28.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 195.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 195.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., xiii, 5.
\textsuperscript{111} Davis, \textit{The Circus Age}, 43.
\textsuperscript{112} Harlow, \textit{The Ringlings}, 102.
\textsuperscript{113} Wilton Eckley. \textit{The American Circus}. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 17.
John Ringling was not doing anything new. For decades circus owners sold themselves and their businesses using popular iconography of the self-made man. P.T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, William F. Cody all capitalized on their humble beginnings in selling their shows. They championed their hard work as the true source of their millions.\textsuperscript{114} The Ringling Brothers did the same.

Yet, they also tapped into a new idea. They marketed their circus as a mirror of their own morality. They sold their entertainment as being, “wholesome,” a reflection of their “Sunday School” reputation.\textsuperscript{115} The Ringling Show notably forbade games of chance. They began referring to themselves as the “New School of American Showman” in 1891. Their press agents adopted the slogan “Sunday School” in association with their circus, placing these restrictions on their employees as well.\textsuperscript{116} By the turn of the century, the Ringling worker’s contract had fifty-one different rules. Additionally, infamous Pinkerton agents kept an eye on worker’s behavior.\textsuperscript{117} The humorist George Ade, once commented seriously on the brothers that, “they found the business in the hands of vagabonds and put it into the hands of gentlemen. They started with nothing whatsoever in a little town up in Wisconsin, and became the circus kings of the world by adopting and observing the simple rule that it is better to be straight than to be crooked.”\textsuperscript{118}

\textit{Billboard Advertising}, considered the circus to be the first American industry to perfect the use of the “poster” in advertising. A fin-de-siècle railroad circus poster was typically comprised of at least six different colors; some were uniquely designed as puzzle pieces in an overall larger work. One in particular was comprised of thirty-two separate posters and when combined was an estimated seventy feet long. The Ringling Brothers spent $128,000 for advertising posters in 1896.\textsuperscript{119} According to circus historians, the Ringlings’ advertising became increasingly sophisticated in the Twentieth century. Furthermore, the Ringlings took into account a varying amount of factors when selecting routes in order to schedule a season that would yield the most profitable net income.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{114} Davis, \textit{The Circus Age}, 52, 59.  
\textsuperscript{115} Davis, \textit{The Circus Age}, 59.  
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 61.  
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 76.  
\textsuperscript{118} Harlow, \textit{The Ringlings}, 122.  
\textsuperscript{119} Davis, \textit{The Circus Age}, 45.  
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 42.
The circus parade is considered by many to be the “most powerful advertising ever devised by man.”\textsuperscript{121} In 1903, the Ringling circus purchased the U.S. Bandwagon, built specifically for the brothers, at a cost of $1,500.00.\textsuperscript{122} Ringling was accustomed to spending money in the form of art, through their use of animal wagons, calliopes, and bandwagons for their circus as well as limitless advertising for the show. According to Charles Philip Fox’s work, \textit{A Ticket to the Circus}, of all of the circus owners, the Ringlings paid the most attention to detail.\textsuperscript{123} The physical planning and organization of a circus parade was like a travelling museum and, one could argue, was perfect practice and preparation for John Ringling to assemble his own.

Without a doubt, the Ringling Brothers owe much of their business success to the greatest circus proprietor of the Nineteenth century, the legendary showman Phineas T. Barnum. Capitalizing on the circus industry throughout the 1800s, Barnum became synonymous with the word circus as his outfit travelled the greatest distance in the industry’s history. While the Barnum & Bailey Show toured Europe from 1897 to 1902, the Ringling Brothers ambitiously took control of the American circus scene. While the two rivals had an understanding to route their shows so that they did not draw business away from the other, the Ringling Brothers took this opportunity to establish themselves as rivaling the great Barnum & Bailey Show.\textsuperscript{124}

After Barnum’s death, John almost singlehandedly arranged to buyout the Barnum & Bailey show from James Anthony Bailey. In 1907, the enormous and well-known organization sold their circus to the Ringlings for the bargain price of $410,000. Harlow states that the family considered John’s decision to be a risky reckless move. Only one brother, Otto, supported the purchase, but not whole-heartedly.\textsuperscript{125} John Ringling, even in his youth, was described as self-confident, but a firm believer in chance and luck.\textsuperscript{126} For many within the Ringling enterprise, his decision to go ahead with the merger was the quintessential example of these qualities.

The merger prompted many circus owners to accuse the Ringlings of trying to monopolize the circus industry. E. Sherman Dandy of the Hagenbeck circus accused the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Charles Philip Fox. \textit{A Ticket to the Circus: a Pictorial History of the Incredible Ringlings}. (New York: Bramhall House, 1959), 30.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Fox, \textit{A Ticket to the Circus}, 30.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 56.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Davis, \textit{The Circus Age}, 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Harlow, \textit{The Ringlings}, 145.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Eckley, \textit{The American Circus}, 21.
\end{itemize}
Ringling “trust” of bribing railroad contractors for routes and sabotaging other, smaller circuses with extensive advertising.\textsuperscript{127} Al Ringling, claimed that the brothers were acting as a family and that the circus business was nothing more than “survival of the fittest.”\textsuperscript{128} According to an article from the \textit{New York Herald Tribune}, John Ringling believed that “circuses were made to be consolidated, to be the biggest, the best, the most stupendous, the only spectacle in the world.”\textsuperscript{129} In 1918, Henry Ringling died before his fiftieth birthday; while Alfred followed him only a few months later at the age of fifty-eight.\textsuperscript{130} As a result, the remaining three brothers ceased operating the circus conglomerate as two separate shows, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, at the close of the 1918 season.

When John Ringling set out to obtain a new act for the circus, cost and location were not important, only the best would do.\textsuperscript{131} Ringling often travelled to Europe to find hundreds of animals and additional acts for the show.\textsuperscript{132} By the mid 1920s, virtually all of the circuses in Europe were gone, which made recruiting acts for his show even easier.\textsuperscript{133} On average in the 1920s, a full-grown giraffe cost about $8,000 dollars.\textsuperscript{134} By 1928, the \textit{Wall Street Journal} reported that the Ringling Circus was spending around $1,000 per month to “bathe and launder their elephants.”\textsuperscript{135} In 1920, the \textit{New York Times} reported that the circus at the season opener at Madison Square Garden reported a total of 1,500 men and women, 735 horses, about 30 elephants, and around 1,000 other animals.\textsuperscript{136}

During the 1920 harbor strike in New York City, Ringling took no chance that his circus would suffer for supplies, so he personally took “a squadron of motor trucks and went shopping for a week’s supplies… The normal daily consumption by the circus in New York city was about 1,500 pounds.”\textsuperscript{137} Ringling informed the \textit{New York Times} that “he would make arrangements

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{127} Davis, \textit{The Circus Age}, 41.
\bibitem{128} Ibid., 41.
\bibitem{129} Eckley, \textit{The American Circus}, 22.
\bibitem{130} Harlow, \textit{The Ringlings}, 155.
\bibitem{135} \textit{Wall Street Journal}, March 14, 1928, pg. 2.
\bibitem{137} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
which would insure that the lions, tigers, and other animals would not go hungry, and the army of circus workers would be provided for.”

In order for Ringling to maintain his “circus king” title, he kept the best of the best in his circus.

Characterized as reckless and exceedingly superstitious, many felt that Ringling had to be “regarded with a rather cautious eye.” Alvin Fay Harlow’s work, The Ringlings: Wizards of the Circus, characterizes John in this way, claiming: “[you] couldn’t always predict what John was going to do, and he wasn’t quite as unselfish and scrupulous as the rest.”

Ringling had few close friends; however, he was completely devoted to those within his inner circle. A quiet, studious man, he was most often described as flamboyant and outspoken; a personality many believed he “put on” for the benefit of the show.

Today, it is hard for one to understand the societal importance that the circus played throughout the country. As the show rolled into town on “Circus Day,” normal life ceased. The circus was considered a holiday, schools were closed and business shut down. A New York Times editorial upon the close of the 1938 season stated,

“The circus, at its best is a first-class example of the old American way of doing things- noisy, blaring, rich with color, rolling all history into a hodgepodge, smelling of prairie earth and New England barnyards, yet redolent of the perfumes of Araby. We didn’t invent it, but it is steeped in our tradition. Streamlined or knobby, may it recover from its slump and once more come into its own-the delight of youth, the solace of old ago. We need circuses as well as bread.”

One thing is certain, that throughout his life, Ringling’s first love, the circus, never waned. The circus would always serve as the financial generator behind Ringling’s life; however, his other investments afforded him the prestige the ambitious man longed for throughout his life. While John Ringling’s immense wealth originated from the internationally known and successful circus managed by the Ringling Brothers. As the circus began turning out a larger profit, Ringling began to diversify his business ventures by investing in oil, real estate, and railroad interests, as well as serving as an early board member and large shareholder of Madison Square Garden.

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138 Ibid.
139 Harlow, The Ringlings, 108.
140 Eckley, The American Circus, 200.
3.3 Mable Burton Ringling

Fig. 4. Mable Burton Ringling. Courtesy of Ringling Museum of Art, website.

John Ringling’s wife, Mable Burton Ringling, was often seen at her husband’s side throughout their marriage. Exceedingly fond of each other, it is apparent that Mable was one of the only people Ringling ever completely trusted in his life. Her early life is still a mystery to scholars. She was born Armilda Burton, in rural Ohio in 1875, where she spent the majority of her childhood. The exact conditions in which she and John Ringling met are unknown, a mystery that many find intriguing. Known for her elegant appearance, Mable is sometimes reputed to have at one time been a performer in her husband’s circus, but the claim has never been supported through evidence. Often overlooked for her flamboyant, larger than life husband; she had a deep love and natural gift for horticulture, maintaining several gardens on the Ringling’s extensive property.143

Mable Ringling travelled extensively with her husband and the circus, riding in their luxurious private train car that was nicknamed JoMaR, named after the couple- JOhn and MAble Ringling. She accompanied Ringling on his trips to Europe to obtain more animals for the circus as well as later on to add to his art collection.144 Once construction began on their winter residence, Ca ‘d’Zan, she spent much of her time in Sarasota, overseeing every element of construction. Mable helped Ringling with the plans for the museum and spent much of her time

143 Buck, The Ringling Legacy, 13.
144 Murray, Ringling Museums, 33.
entertaining her husband’s guests in their palatial estate when it was completed.\textsuperscript{145} As one of the city’s most respected and admired residents, Mable became extensively involved in the social scene of Sarasota. The Ringlings sponsored the Pageant of Sara de Soto and Mable was very involved in the local Garden Club.\textsuperscript{146} Throughout her life, Mable remained close to her family throughout her life, two of her sisters, Dulcey Schueler and Alma Reid, lived in a residence on nearby St. Armands Key.\textsuperscript{147}

Mable Ringling died in New York on June 8, 1929 from a “short illness of acute diabetes.”\textsuperscript{148} In actuality doctors believed her death was caused by Addison’s disease, an affliction she long suffered from, although her husband was unaware of until her death. Her obituary in the \textit{New York Times} claimed that Mable was “greatly interest in art, she nearly always accompanied her husband on his trips abroad to collect old masters and other works of art.” After Mable’s death, Ringling sold their estate in Bergen County, New Jersey, which was converted into a suburban park.\textsuperscript{149}

Mable served as not only Ringling’s wife, but his best friend and companion. It is well documented that Ringling was overwhelmed by Mable’s death, soon after which he became entwined in countless unfortunate personal, financial, legal, and business circumstances that would follow him until his death.\textsuperscript{150} The museum was meant to serve as a lasting legacy not only for John Ringling, but for his wife Mable, as well. Ringling did marry once more, his second marriage to Emily Haag Buck was extremely turbulent and the couple divorced after a few years.

John Ringling’s personal background affected every aspect of his future. His well-publicized circus roots provided capital for future investments, but also type casted him solely as the former circus clown. While Ringling remained proud of his humble beginnings and his accomplishments, they also provided much contention for him in the future. There is no proof that Ringling ever waivered from his initial love for the grand and spectacular show, instead he chose to spend much of the second half of his life focusing on his legacy that would not pay homage to these roots.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 3.  
\textsuperscript{146} Murray, \textit{The Ringling Museums: a magnificent gift to the State of Florida}, 13.  
\textsuperscript{147} Buck, \textit{The Ringling Legacy}, 26.  
\textsuperscript{148} “Mrs. John Ringling, Art Collector, Dies: Wife of Circus Owner and Oil Developer Ill Only a Short Time.” \textit{New York Times}, June 9, 1929, pg. 27.  
\textsuperscript{150} Murray, \textit{Ringling Museums}, 3
CHAPTER FOUR  
JOHN RINGLING, THE ART COLLECTOR

Throughout Ringling’s life art remained at the core. His background as an “advance man” with the Ringling circus provided him with an appreciation for art, which he would pursue later in life. Through the assistance and guidance of respected art dealer, Julius Böhler, Ringling would amass one of the largest collections of Old Master paintings in the world. Unlike many other collectors at the time who viewed collecting solely as a business investment, Ringling acquired works based on as much in personal tastes as potential profits.

4.1 Julius Böhler

Julius Wilhelm Böhler came from a line of prestigious merchants from the art world; his father was also a noted Munich art dealer. Albert Keller, managing director of the New York Ritz Carlton introduced Ringling and Böhler in 1925. Böhler had already established galleries in Munich and Lucerne and now had set up a space in the Ritz Carlton Hotel in New York to serve as an American office. Highly respected and skilled in his field, Böhler became Ringling’s advisor on almost all of his art transactions. The pair became a common sight at the auctions of New York and London, of which several times Ringling was the “largest purchaser.” It is evident through their correspondence that Ringling and Böhler, or “Lulu” as he instructed Ringling to call him, shared a close personal and professional relationship. Ringling, a man who kept very few close friends beyond his family, trusted and often implored Böhler’s advice on a variety of subjects.

While many of his critics believed that Ringling’s collection was the result of prodding by Böhler or Mable Ringling, the reality was that John’s art collecting prowess was spearheaded by himself. Ringling told an interviewer that living in New York City and having friends like famed architect Stanford White stimulated his interest in collecting. He began accumulating art

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152 Thomas, John Ringling: circus magnate and art patron, 150.  
156 Julius Böhler to John Ringling, 1927. Julius Böhler Papers, Ringling Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
when the circus first began to make a profit and he “had a little money to spend for the things I wanted.”\textsuperscript{157} He also “followed most of the established rules of aspiring American collectors of the early twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{158} He acquired the majority of his collection through auction, not uncommon at the time.

Ringling’s 1928 \textit{Christian Science Monitor} interview reported how his collecting taste evolved, “People were buying French paintings most in those days. I was very pleased with them at first. But I was looking about and I discovered the old masters; then it seemed to me I had been wrong about my first purchases; so they lost meaning to me. So I gave them away.”\textsuperscript{159} Ringling also explained that art first began to fascinate him long before he began collecting. Instead it was when he was planning the circus poster campaigns: “I had artist chaps in different conference to design the posters… It seemed to me that every now and then they missed something in the action of the galloping horses- something that missed the grace and spirit of a lion at bay, the Hogarthian line of beauty in the pose of a gymnast,” incredibly precise for the man who was later merely described as “the former clown.”\textsuperscript{160} In order to assist the artists with their hope of producing more realistic portraits of the animals, Ringling began to buy fine paintings of animals.”\textsuperscript{161}

Unlike many other great art buyers of the day, Ringling taught himself to be a great art connoisseur. While he encouraged the advice and assistance of Böhler, Ringling had final approval of all purchases. There are a handful of instances where Ringling located works on his own and only brought Böhler in at the end to act for him. In all other recorded transactions, Ringling personally purchased the rest of his works including the famous Rubens tapestries.\textsuperscript{162} He collected artwork that appealed to him as a man, not as a collector looking for a profit.\textsuperscript{163} Ringling chose to go against the grain, not collecting what was popular at the time, but rather works that he desired “to develop a collection as nearly universal as opportunities and purse would allow.”\textsuperscript{164} As a result, according to David Week’s work, \textit{Ringling: the Florida Years},

\textsuperscript{157} Buck, \textit{The Ringling Legacy}, 28.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector}, 56.
\textsuperscript{159} Buck, \textit{The Ringling Legacy}, 28.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 27-8.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{The New Yorker}. November 30, 1929, p.20-21.
\textsuperscript{162} \textit{John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector}, 67.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 12, 15.
“the Ringling collection retains the stamp of his personality. Few others [collections] can be so closely identified with their owner.”\(^{165}\)

4.2 Ringling the Collector

Ringling’s role as an art collector did not happen overnight despite what many critics of the time believed. Ringling’s love and knowledge of art was the result of decades of study. An amazing amount of information on Ringling as a collector is evident through his comprehensive collection of art books and journals.\(^{166}\) Ringling’s acquisition of price catalogues is well documented and can be interpreted as part of his long established and well-known bargaining persona.\(^{167}\) These catalogues, typically given to him by auction houses after sales, were comprised of purchase prices and the names of all buyers. However, when price catalogues were unavailable to Ringling, he simply went about making his own. Böhler often commented that Ringling spent almost all of his spare time studying and memorizing all details of these sale records.\(^{168}\)

Ringling delighted in his ability to amaze others with his ability to recall every detail of the provenance and prices of numerous works of art.\(^{169}\) In addition to studying price catalogues, Ringling compiled a vast and extensive collection of art books, which he used to further his self-education as a collector in the art schools and artists in which he was specifically interested. Many other capitalists and philanthropists of the time, including Henry Clay Frick, John Pierpont Morgan, John Jacob Astor, Henry Elkins Widener, Henry E. Huntington, and Robert Hoe III all had extensive historic book collections.

Upon Ringling’s death, his executors found over 1500 books on the subjects of art and art history throughout his estate including his bedroom, office, living room, the museum office, and a storeroom near his garage.\(^{170}\) While the provenance of the majority of Ringling’s works are well documented, the origins of his extensive book collection is more mysterious. While some

\(^{166}\) *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 77-8, 113.
\(^{167}\) Ibid., 67.
\(^{168}\) Ibid., 57.
\(^{169}\) *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 57.
\(^{170}\) Ibid., 21.
are inscribed as gifts to Ringling from the author, the rest are unknown.\textsuperscript{171} In 1929, \textit{The New Yorker} reported that Ringling’s collection of art books was “one of the most complete extant.”\textsuperscript{172}

Additionally, because of the First World War, many European museums and private collectors were in need of capital and out of desperation began selling their collections at reduced prices.\textsuperscript{173} Recent legislation by British Parliament played heavily in this development. It allowed landowners to dispose of their properties and collections. Collectors like J.P. Morgan, William Randolph Hearst and George Blumenthal all were quick to take advantage of this opportunity. Luckily, for Ringling, during this time, his personal wealth was at its peak.\textsuperscript{174} The majority of Ringling’s collection, compiled in just three short years, was stored in New York City warehouses or left in Europe until his museum was completed.\textsuperscript{175} However, he did display three of his “pictures” temporarily in his Sarasota office.\textsuperscript{176} Due to the compact timeframe in which he acquired his collection, many critics believed that Ringling was purchasing work en masse.\textsuperscript{177}

By the 1920s, art from old European collections was moving, in large quantities, across the Atlantic. As a result, many of those in British Parliament, as well as the public, did not agree with the government’s decision. As a result, an underlying “anti-yankee” movement developed, seen often in auction house catalogues. The few times Christie’s catalogue mentions Ringling during this time, he was always given a sarcastic epithet, “the Modern Barnum.”\textsuperscript{178} However, by 1931 and about half a million pounds later, Christie’s published, “Mr. Ringling also put in a welcome appearance… he is astute enough to have many good pictures to exhibit to the American public.”\textsuperscript{179} In contrast, the French remained hostile to Ringling no matter the amount of money he flooded into their country. The notable French art dealer, Rene Gimpel, for instance, referred to Ringling as “the one-time clown.”\textsuperscript{180}

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{172} \textit{The New Yorker}. November 30, 1929, p.20-21.
\textsuperscript{173} Thomas. \textit{John Ringing}, 122.
\textsuperscript{174} \textit{John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector}, 63.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{176} De Groft, “John Ringling In Perpetua Memoria,” 130-1.
\textsuperscript{177} Buck, \textit{The Ringling Legacy}, 30.
\textsuperscript{178} \textit{John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector}, 63-4.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 64.
During this time, with the assistance of Böhler, Ringling obtained an extensive collection of Old Masters’ works including Rubens, Van Dyck, Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, Velazquez, El Greco, Tiepolo, Gainsborough, and Reynolds.\textsuperscript{181} Ringling and Böhler extensively communicated about an overall master plan for the museum as evidenced by a telegram from Böhler to John Ringling. Undated but believed by the Ringling archivists to be from the summer of 1929, Böhler wished to, “congratulate you this was a glorious day awfully tickled you bought Rembrandt because it really might be one top additions to Museum marvelous we really now are one hundred percent.”\textsuperscript{182}

In addition utilizing Böhler’s help in the amassing his collection, Ringling and Böhler communicated with Sir Joseph Duveen, considered one of the most prominent players in all art acquisitions of the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{183} In a letter from Böhler to Ringling in the summer of 1927, Böhler talks about meeting with Sir Joseph Duveen, whom he refers to familiarly as “Joe”. He also implores Ringling to come to Europe specifically for two auctions: that of J. Ross of Montreal and the Holford Collection. Böhler informed Ringling that he already had Christie’s send him a catalogue. To further convince Ringling of the importance of this trip, Böhler offered that “after the sales we could go to Hamburg via Holland and you could get your great animals.”\textsuperscript{184}

Arguably, Ringling’s most famous purchase was that of Ruben’s famous cartoons in 1926. Rubens intended these cartoons to serve as models for a succession of tapestries for the Archduchess Isabella Eugenia, the Governess of the Netherlands and the sister of the King of Spain.\textsuperscript{185} The series, which depicted the Holy Eucharist, were intended as a gift to the convent in Madrid that the Archduchess had lived in as a child.\textsuperscript{186} Ringling purchased four of the eleven paintings with the belief that they would solidify his goal to emulate the “old museum of Europe.”\textsuperscript{187} Of the remaining tapestries, two are held in the Louvre in Paris, four were lost to fire, and one was owned by a private party in England since 1842. The last, obtained by the

\textsuperscript{181} Wetenhall, \textit{A Museum Once Forgotten}, 13.
\textsuperscript{182} Julius Böhler to John Ringling, n.d. John Ringling Papers, Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
\textsuperscript{183} Schwarzer, \textit{Riches, Rivals & Radicals}, 71-2.
\textsuperscript{184} Julius Böhler to John Ringling, 3 June 1927. John Ringling Papers, Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Ringling Museums}, 8
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 8
\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Ringling Museums}, 8
Ringling Museum in 1980, was unveiled to the public in celebration of the institution’s 50th birthday.188

The availability of such a large quantity of quality work allowed Ringling to acquire the majority of his collection in a very short time. According to De Groft, Ringling purchased entire collections at auction; therefore, he did not bid for all of his works in person, but relied on Böhler and other agents to bid along for him. This practice prevented a scene that might have driven up the prices in auction.189 Ringling relished in the deal he would often receive on these paintings. In a telegram to Mable dated April of 1926, he boasts about his newly acquired Titian “which Böhler got at greatest bargain in history of Titians.”190

In 1926, John also purchased entire rooms from the Astor Mansion in New York City slated for demolition. Like many of his other acquisitions, the Astor purchases came with a well-respected and notable pedigree and thus, further established Ringling as a serious collector.191 The Astor name conjured up both superior social rank and endless wealth in the mind of the American public. Ringling’s purchase of the two French Eighteenth century styled rooms paralleled museum trends of the time, where almost every major museum contained at least one period room of this design.192 The Astor’s oak-paneled library was later installed in the museum, yet it is still unclear as to whether or not Ringling intended to create a museum library with his collection, unlike his public plan for an art library as part of the art school.193

4.3 Importance of Ringling’s Collection

Ringling continued to make headlines in 1928 when the New York Times reported his purchase of almost an entire collection of antiquities from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cesnola Collection.194 Prior to Ringling’s purchase of the Cesnola collection, there were no antiquities on display anywhere in the southern United States.195 This purchase further exemplified Ringling’s preference and affinity for buying notable collections, a visible

188 Ibid., 8
189 De Groft, “John Ringling In Perpetua Memoria,” 149.
190 John Ringling to Mable Ringling, April 1926, John Ringling Papers, Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
192 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 137-8.
194 Wetenhall, A Museum Once Forgotten, 13.
expression of his obsession with both rank as well as wealth. Ringling was gifted with an inherent art sense, similar to his natural ability to choose circus acts. He had the rare aptitude to select only the paintings that were truly valuable.

Art critics across the globe, attempted to discredit Ringling’s status as a serious collector. Criticism of Ringling’s taste was well documented at the time, included his affinity for large works. Many assumed that Ringling’s intent was to house his large-scale purchases in his private residence, not a museum. In reality, the enormous scale of many of Ringling’s purchases could not have fit in most buildings in America and only a specifically designed structure could accommodate them. A TIME magazine article published in October of 1931 commented that, “Mr. John is still enough of a circus man to like his pictures big… It is useless to show him modern pictures, but dealers have discovered that if they have nothing large, a religious subject is often a temptation.” While the upper crust of the highbrow art world may not have welcomed Ringling into their inner circle with open arms, many of the respected New York art galleries were elated to have Ringling as a frequent and esteemed patron.

Ringling’s purchase of the Gavet collection from the Vanderbilt’s Marble House in 1928 and 1929 serves as not only an important example of the caliber of collections that Ringling was purchasing, but also as an illustration of the shift in collecting within the United States. Alva Vanderbilt bought Gavet’s collection in 1889 to decorate her private homes but by the end of the 1920s, many collectors were donating their priceless collections to museums to be enjoyed by the public. The role of art in America had changed, as had the collectors. There was an overwhelming belief among America’s financial elite that these works belonged to all American people, rather than in a private collection.

Although during Ringling’s life the press acknowledged his museum and his activities as a collector, the majority of the news coverage remained focused on his status as the circus king “whose tastes ran to billboard-size proportions.” After Ringling’s purchases at the Astor Sale

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196 Weeks, Ringling, 175.
197 Thomas, John Ringling, 146.
199 “Ringling Day.” TIME, October 12, 1931.
200 F. Kleinberger Galleries, Inc. to John Ringling, 30 April 1927. John Ringling Papers, Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
201 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 148.
202 Ibid., 31.
were reported, *TIME* magazine claimed that many “supercilious people made bold to ask, ‘Since when have circus men been picture buyers?’ The supercilious ones were, as usual, uniformed. The Ringling Family has been for many years rich, refined.”

The opening of the heavily Rockefeller-influenced Museum of Modern Art in 1929, solidified any question that New York was the center of the art world. As such, this further isolated Ringling’s Florida museum, which had not opened yet. In an attempt to secure a prestigious reputation for his fledging institution, Ringling named an impressive roster to his Board of Directors. It included art collector Henry Walters, art dealers Langton Douglas and Sir Joseph Duveen, art historians August L. Mayer, Max J. Friedlander and Detlev Baron von Hadeln, as well as Albert Keller. However, there is no proof that Ringling ever had any intention for this board to meet or serve in an active role.

Ringling believed the museum he was creating would serve as the cultural center within the resort community he would built in Sarasota. Proving as a prestigious attractions for visitors and investors, the museum was crucial for the success of the overall vision for Sarasota. Specifically built beyond the traditional boundaries New York City, the center of the art world at the time, Ringling intended his museum to serve not only a travel destination, but to provide his new city with a cultural, established legitimacy that would continue into the future.

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204 Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals*, 42.
CHAPTER FIVE
JOHN RINGLING & SARASOTA

John and Mable Ringling visited Sarasota, Florida for the first time in the winter of 1909, the same year the Ringling Brothers purchased the Barnum & Bailey Show and five years after they were married. Two years later the couple purchased their first property, *Palm Elysian*, from Charles N. Thompson, another showman and a manager of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. A winter home situated on 20 bay front acres, *Palm Elysian*, only temporarily suited the Ringlings, whose personal ambitions would grow in the subsequent years. Only a few years prior to the Ringling’s visit, in 1902, had the city been incorporated into a town and just one year before that established a post office and electrical light system. Although Florida remained the least populous of all the southern states, there were a number of booming resort towns on the Florida’s East Coast. Yet, much of the West Coast, particularly the area south of Tampa, was undeveloped until the arrival of Ringling and his contemporaries.

5.1 Sarasota Before Ringling

A large percentage of those living in Sarasota until the mid-1920s were former Chicagoans. Most notable of these was the arrival of Bertha Honore Palmer in 1910. An international celebrity, Palmer’s interest in the area was the first that added the perception of affluence and wealth to Sarasota. She became the area’s largest landowner, owning for a time almost one-quarter of all of present day Sarasota County. Palmer, along with her sons and brother, invested heavily in vegetable, citrus, and real estate ventures throughout the area, additionally all building permanent residences as well. On her 30,000-acre ranch, Meadowsweet Pastures, she introduced modern cattle raising methods to the area, for the first time. Prior to the arrival of John Ringling, Palmer had the most prominent influence on the development of Sarasota.

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210 Matthews, *Sarasota*, 90.
5.2 Ringling the Developer

While the circus remained at the center of Ringling’s attention and true passion, his desire to display to the world his immense financial accomplishments through other venues, became extremely important. Ringling’s abundant wealth acquired through his circus provided financing for his extensive art collection. He also used it to spur the urban development of Sarasota. Wealthy business philanthropists such as Henry Flagler played a central role in the development of Florida’s East Coast. Similarly, John Ringling believed he could single handedly transform the physical landscape of Sarasota and profit from the development of his West Coast town. Ringling planned and implemented change to his city in the same fashion of Flagler, focusing on bolstering the town’s economy and physical infrastructure.211

Ringling had a firm image in his mind of what he wanted Sarasota to look like in the future. He planned for waterfront resorts, gambling casinos, bayside residences, yacht basins, and eventually inland oil wells.212 Ringling saw Sarasota’s potential to become a thriving financial investment. He also received a warm embrace from the inhabitants. Consequently, he began to think of Sarasota as his “adoptive home.”213 Devoted to urbanizing the area, the entrepreneur planned an entire Mediterranean inspired renovation for the quiet coastal town, which until the early 1920s was characterized almost entirely of wood-frame cottages. Ringling intended to transform Sarasota into a cultural destination, rivaling the established resort towns of Florida’s east coast.214

In 1912, Ringling bought 154 bay front acres. By 1917, he owned the clubhouse and grounds of the Sarasota Automobile and Yacht Club, which included 1,200 feet of frontage on Sarasota Bay and 6,000 acres of southwest Florida that he bought sight unseen for $2.25 an acre. The same year, Ringling’s brother and business partner, Charles, bought a neighboring waterfront home and additional land. By the end of World War I, Ringling personally owned all of the keys that ran parallel off the coast of Sarasota, adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico.215

By the mid 1920s, with plans for his new winter home initiated, Ringling expanded his work to the physical development of Sarasota. In order to link his offshore keys, “Ringling

212 Matthews, Sarasota: journey to centennial, 107.
213 Thomas. John Ringling, 171.
Isles,” to the mainland Ringling constructed the Ringling Causeway at the cost of one million dollars with the help of his circus elephants. He later donated the completed causeway to the city of Sarasota in 1925, which would then be responsible for its maintenance and upkeep.²¹⁶

Prior to the completion of the project, Ringling used an old paddle wheel steamboat, named “Success” to serve as both a work and transport boat. Additionally, as part of his extensive plans for the Gulf-lined keys, Ringling purchased the Worcester home on Bird Key in 1922, which he planned to turn into a “winter” White House. He invited President Harding to spend his upcoming vacation in Sarasota. However, before the President could travel to Florida’s newest resort town, he fell ill and passed away.²¹⁷ Ida Ringling North, John Ringling’s sister, later used the property as her personal home until her death in 1950.²¹⁸

In 1925, Ringling invited the Ritz-Carlton’s managing director, Albert Keller, to visit him in Sarasota. With Keller’s assistance, Ringling felt they could select the perfect location for the hotel to build property on Florida’s Gulf Coast.²¹⁹ Ground breaking for Ringling’s Sarasota Ritz-Carlton occurred on March 15, 1926. He hand-selected A. Phillips of Warren-Wetmore Inc., Architects for the design and Hergeman-Harris Company Builders to complete the construction. The Italianate inspired structure was originally financed with $800,000 of Ringling’s own money and was to be built on the twenty acres of Ringling donated land. Adjacent to the Ritz Carlton construction site, Ringling developed Longboat Key Golf Course. Chick Evans, golf champion, claimed that the course was “one of the finest” he had ever seen.²²⁰ The eighteen-hole, 130-acre golf course, which he planned to give the city of Sarasota, was valued in excess of $130,000 at the time. Soon thereafter, Ringling donated an additional 10 acres to the Ritz property, intending for the site to serve as the hotel’s vegetable and flower gardens.

In anticipation of a rapid completion of the hotel, Ringling sent by barge thousands of fittings, doorknobs and bath fixtures to the hotel.²²¹ However, with the slowing of both Florida’s and the national economy, the project was halted within months. In the meantime, the structure began to crumble and the grounds and golf course were reclaimed by the jungle-like island’s

²¹⁶ Matthews, Sarasota, 111 & 172.
²¹⁷ Thomas, John Ringling, 146. & Weeks, Ringling, 97.
²¹⁸ Weeks, Ringling, 133.
²¹⁹ Thomas, John Ringling, 150.
²²⁰ Matthews, Sarasota, 111 & 221.
²²¹ Ibid., 221.
native vegetation. The Sarasota Ritz-Carlton sat abandoned until 1962, when it was purchased by investors that later demolished the site. The site now serves as the home of the Longboat Key Club & Resort, in the same ways fulfilling Ringling’s vision for the land’s use.

In February of 1926, Ringling launched his single-family development “Ringling Estates.” The opening day sales reported nearly one million dollars. Visitors to St. Armands & “Ringling Estates” could see the first few floors of the $3 million Ritz Carlton; the island Ringling had transformed with “paved boulevards and promenades, imported statuary, street lamps, imported palms and shrubs, and miles and miles of concrete curbing.” According to a 1927 article in the Sarasota Herald, Ringling’s Sarasota assets included two luxury hotels, one open and running [the El Vernona] and one under construction [his Ritz-Carlton]. He owned

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222 Ibid., 221.
223 Weeks, Ringling, 147.
224 Thomas. John Ringling, 153.
225 Matthews, Sarasota, 111.
more than 30,000 acres of land he had yet to develop in the eastern section of the county and
several thousand acres comprised of the Lido, Longboat, and St. Armand Keys.\textsuperscript{226} Ringling
owned an extensive number of holding companies within the Sarasota area including Ringling
Isles Real Estate Development Company, St. Armand’s- Lido Realty Corporation, the Trust
Company of Sarasota, and the Sarasota Oil Company.\textsuperscript{227} It was also during this time that
Ringling brought Otto Bartik, his friend and ballet master for the Metropolitan Opera, to assist
him in planning for a Sarasota ballet.\textsuperscript{228}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{general_plan}
\caption{John J. Watson, General Plan of Ringling Isles, Sarasota, FL. November 1924. Architecture Research: Tulane University’s Southeastern Architectural Archives.}
\end{figure}

Land values in the area had doubled in value from 1922 to 1923, at the same time
building permits were issued in unprecedented numbers.\textsuperscript{229} At their peak, Sarasota land
transactions reached over $12 million per month. Sarasota’s land boom had taken off. At the
same time, the area’s population had soared from 3,000 inhabitants in 1920 to over 15,000 in
1926.\textsuperscript{230} In the two years between 1924 and 1926, the amount of real estate firms in the area

\textsuperscript{227} Matthews, Sarasota, 107.
\textsuperscript{228} Weeks, Ringling, 160.
\textsuperscript{229} Matthews, Sarasota, 113.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 113.
increased from fifteen to more than two hundred.\textsuperscript{231} By the end of the 1920s, Sarasota was the largest city on the Gulf Coast south of St. Petersburg; the main economic industry was tourism and it ranked as one of the wealthiest counties in the United States.\textsuperscript{232}

Residents saw their new citizen, John Ringling, as their personal safeguard against the unsteady Florida economy. However, by 1925, the Florida land boom had substantially died down. In September of 1926 and 1928, major hurricanes hit the coasts of Florida. The peninsular state, home to so many unfamiliar and ill equipped to deal with such natural disasters resulted in the death of hundreds.\textsuperscript{233} The 1926 storm struck Sarasota directly, devastating much of the city’s bay front as well as the shoreline keys. Additionally that year, land values across the state began to drop at a steady rate. The crash of the stock market in 1929 furthered Florida’s economic woes. By 1930, real estate values across the state fell an unprecedented forty percent. Sarasota County, a division of the large Manatee County, had not even celebrated its tenth birthday when the economic depression devastated the bustling city.\textsuperscript{234}

5.3 Ca’ d’Zan

John and Mable Ringling had originally hired local architects Thomas and Frank Martin to design their Venetian palace but by 1924, the Ringlings had decided to look elsewhere. Ringling sought out and hired Dwight James Baum to complete the project.\textsuperscript{235} Baum, a well-known New York architect, specialized in Colonial and Georgian styles, but also had a wide range of experience. Before beginning work, Baum travelled with the Ringlings to Europe in 1924. During their previous European travels in search of circus acts, the couple cultivated an appreciation for European architecture, specifically Italian. Baum recognized Mable’s extensive knowledge and love of Venetian architecture. This love continued to become more visible as Ringling, partnered with Baum, began the construction and physical development of

\textsuperscript{233} Matthews, \textit{Sarasota}, 128.
\textsuperscript{234} Matthews, \textit{Sarasota}, 130.
\textsuperscript{235} De Groft, “John Ringling In Perpetua Memoria,” 41.
Sarasota and later his museum. Similar to other successful men in the early twentieth century, Ringling used architecture to monumentalize his success.\textsuperscript{236}

Identified early as Ca’ d’Zan, the moniker translated to “House of John” in Venetian gondolier dialect. While named for John Ringling, Ca’ d’Zan, is truly the fruit of Mable’s labors. She had explicit ideas of what she wanted her home to include, the greater part of which, in the end she received.

The final plans included a tower or \textit{campanile}, similar to the original Madison Square Garden in New York City, where the Ringling Brothers Circus opened each season. Mable believed the Garden’s tower to be a remarkable architectural achievement.\textsuperscript{237} The \textit{campanile}, or bell tower, is another traditional characteristic of Italian architecture. Typically associated with the local city-state’s \textit{duomo} or church, the \textit{campanile} was typically seen as a symbol of local power, politically and economically by Italian city-states for centuries. While Ringling and Baum originally both obstinately opposed the idea, once completed, Ringling often used the tower to survey his growing and expansive real estate holdings across the Gulf.\textsuperscript{238}

\textsuperscript{236} \textit{John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector}, 137.
\textsuperscript{237} \textit{Ringling Museums}, 27
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 27
Additionally, the Ringlings fully intended for the bayside façade, which faced Longboat Key, to emulate Ca’ d’Oro and the Palazzo Ducale in a Venetian Gothic style.\textsuperscript{239}

Both of the structures had been built as a bold symbols of the prosperity and political power of Venice in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries. The created Ca’ d’Zan in emulation.\textsuperscript{240} Venetian gothic architecture was a distinctive combination of Roman, Lombard and Arab components. The classical, Islamic and Gothic met in Venice and were fused to create this distinctive style. Unlike many other Italian city-states who traditionally built from local materials, the Venetians sought out Moorish elements including inlaid surfaces and carved traceries.\textsuperscript{241} Ca’d’Zan has been described as a spectacularly decorated example of architecture derived from the Palazzo Ducale and the Ca’d’Oro, most notably for the carved

\textsuperscript{239} Wetenhall, \textit{A Museum Once Forgotten}, 10.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 79, 83.
traceries, whimsical roofline crenellation, quatrefoils, finials, gothic arches, and the glazed tile covered belvedere which decorate the structure.  

Many argue that Ringling’s home was an inharmonious conglomerate of styles and materials meant to show off his abundant wealth at the suffering of any style or taste. However, some contemporaries agreed with his approach. Marino Contarini, the owner and builder of Venice’s Ca’ d’Oro, wanted his home to make an impact solely through the lavishness and profusion of his home’s ornamentation. Whether seen as gaudy or not, the way the canal’s water dances off the elaborate exterior was considered to be magical and similar to Ringling’s Ca’ d’Zan.

Ca’ d’Zan was designed to encompass both the “whimsical and the grand” and serve as a showcase of the couple’s Venetian treasures. As a result, the Ringlings spared no expense when completing their home. Ringling had boatloads of supplies brought from Europe including Venetian glass and old red barrel roof tiles, which he kept docked in Miami and Tampa. The tiles were so numerous that after he used the tiles for his home and the museum, he then gave the rest to other homebuilders in Sarasota. The only local material used in the construction of the Ringling residence was the Florida Cypress which covered the great hall’s coffered ceiling. The home’s lavish interior also included a crystal chandelier, which originally hung in the famed Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. In addition, Ringling had antique architectural features installed in his new residence and the surrounding grounds, which he had shipped from Venice by the ton. The Ringlings wanted the interior of their mansion to echo the sentiment of the exterior, intending for their home to serve as a museum of Venetian art. In the end, the Ringling residence reflects the couple’s preference for the lavish and extravagant, with an element of the theatrical.

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243 Ibid., 92.
244 Ibid.,
246 Thomas, *John Ringling*, 159.
250 Ringling Museums, 27.
When the project was completed in 1926, Baum’s full commission included not only the residence, but also a matching gatehouse, clay tennis courts, a marble swimming pool, and an 8,000 square foot variegated Italian marble terrace extending into Sarasota Bay. After two years of construction, Ca’d’Zan stood 81 feet tall and 200 feet wide and contained thirty rooms. In total it extended over 36,000 square feet. The total cost of the project was estimated at roughly $2 million, which was equal to about one-year’s profit for the circus. Ringlings’ architect, Dwight James Baum, stated that he was unable to establish the exact cost of construction of Ca’d’Zan due to the fact that “Mr. Ringling would never give me the exact figures.” After Ringling’s death, Baum added that he believed the approximate cost of the furnishings was roughly $400,000, without including the art in the house and that about $250,000 was spent on

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the sea walls, dock, marble terraces, railings, marble swimming pool and polychrome terra cotta entrance gates alone.\textsuperscript{254}

While the Ringling’s were in residence, Ca’d’Zan was considered “central to the cultural life” on the West Coast of Florida.\textsuperscript{255} From the terrace of the Ringling residence, where guests were often entertained, one could see the causeway that John had constructed and given to the city, Ringling Isles, and Longboat Key. These all served as an unvarying visualization of the couple’s significant role in the development of Sarasota.\textsuperscript{256}

\textsuperscript{254} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{255} Wetenhall, \textit{A Museum Once Forgotten}, 10.
\textsuperscript{256} Thomas, \textit{John Ringing}, 148-9, 161.
Baum’s own feelings about his commission are unknown. Ten years after completion, Baum noted that he viewed the residence “an important achievement.”\textsuperscript{257} However, Baum never publicized his commission from the Ringlings, nor did he include their home in the published collection, \textit{The Work of Dwight James Baum}, of his works in 1927.\textsuperscript{258} Only a 2008 reprint of the work on Baum included any mention of Ca’ d’Zan. Nevertheless, Ringling’s partnership with Baum would lead to a permanent physical transformation to the city of Sarasota, visible well into the twenty-first century.

5.4 A Lasting Architectural Impact

The Mediterranean Revival style, the only architectural style to originate in the state of Florida, exploded across the state.259 The style first appeared in Florida at El Jardin, Richard Kiehnel’s work in Miami completed in 1917 for a Pennsylvania steel industrialist.260 At the same time, Addison Mizner was transforming Florida’s East coast at Palm Beach and Boca Raton in the same style. Most notable of his architectural marvels is Mar-a-Lago, which he designed for Marjorie Merriweather Post. At the same time, George Merrick was building in the same style to the south in Coral Gables. Similarly, new Florida communities marketed themselves as fantasylands, while at the same time, giving investors a false sense of durability and antiquity.

The goal of this Mediterranean inspired architecture was multifaceted. It was a distinct style, uncommon throughout northern states. It also played into the idea that Sarasota was isolated from the rest of the unexciting everyday world.261 Developers anticipated that these new destinations would compete with the sites offered by European destinations, specifically the architectural magnetism of the Italian and French Riviera.262 Another important aspect of the Mediterranean style was the inexpensive cost to construct these homes; a crucial factor since the target audience for many of these homes was the middle-class investor.263 As a result, civic, commercial, and residential buildings across the state were embracing the new, “carefree” Mediterranean style.

Among Sarasota’s many crowning jewels were its widespread, undeveloped coastline, uninhabited barrier islands, immaculate white beaches, and extensive bay front near the city’s center. Ringling believed Sarasota had a distinctive, more promising potential than the rest of Florida because of these features.264 To assist him in the design of his new city, Ringling commissioned Warren Wetmore and Dwight James Baum, renowned architects from New York, to assist in the development of Sarasota as a carefree, paradise in the Mediterranean style. Since

264 Ibid., 12.
the town was so small, much of the city was uninhabited before the 1920s land boom, the landscape was easy to alter.\textsuperscript{265} Aaron De Groft’s 2000 dissertation, “In Perpetua Memoria: The legacy and prestige of Art and Collecting”, claimed that the museum is all that remains of Ringling’s attempt at a City Beautiful Movement.\textsuperscript{266} However, the physical evidence suggests otherwise. Throughout the 1920s, Dwight James Baum built many of the area’s most notable structures, many of which are still standing. Ringling’s influence in Sarasota had provided Baum with additional commissions after Ca’ d’Zan. These works included several Mediterranean-styled villas for Ringling’s land developments on Ringling Isles as well as the mainland and most notably Owen Burns’ Broadway development. This area was comprised of a hotel, offices and an apartment complex.\textsuperscript{267} These structures would become the El Vernona Apartments (1926), the El Vernona Hotel (1926), and the Burns Realty Company (1925), where Baum established his Sarasota office.\textsuperscript{268} Other Ringling aided commissions included the Sarasota Times Building (1926) and the Sarasota County Courthouse (1927). Baum’s success in the area grew so rapidly, he set up an office in Sarasota, adjacent to the El Vernona Hotel. Baum’s design for the Sarasota County Courthouse, a present day National Registry listing, was influenced by the Californian Spanish Colonial style and was completed in 1927 after multiple delays for supplies and the hurricane of 1926 at the cost of over $1 million.\textsuperscript{269}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnoteremarker{266} De Groft, “John Ringling In Perpetua Memoria.”
\footnoteremarker{268} Morrison, The Work of Dwight James Baum, 12-3. & Matthews, Sarasota, 114.
\footnoteremarker{269} Matthews, Sarasota, 114.
\end{footnotes}
Through Ringling’s years as the “advance man” in the circus, he learned the value of proper promotion and advertising for the success of a product. He had high hopes to do for Sarasota what he had been able to do with his circus. Moreover, he used his circus as a vehicle to market Sarasota to the rest of the country. According to Davis Weeks’ work *Ringling: the Florida Years*, Ringling was pleased when the *Sarasota Times* stopped referring to him as “the well-known circus man.” While he was never apologetic about his circus career or wealth, he believed that his role as a developer in Sarasota required “a change in emphasis.” Ringling and his partners wanted the affluent to think of Sarasota as a tourist Mecca.

Similar to other Floridian cities of the time, the buildings were used as propaganda and promotion for the developing towns and resorts throughout the state. Advertisements for the area were also seen in print media throughout the country. Through their circus ventures, the Ringling Brothers were able to advertise for Sarasota across the country and well over the entire world. Sarasota had “been given three pages in the Ringling circus program.” The circus further promoted the city through “electric signs bearing the name Sarasota” that were “displayed within

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270 Weeks, *Ringling*, 77.
271 Bothwell “John Ringling’s House in Sarasota.”
the circus.” In 1926, the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that the Ringling circus alone had “brought Sarasota to the attention of 1,000,000 people.”

Ringling used Ca’d’Zan as the single largest piece of architectural propaganda in his extensive marketing plan for the city of Sarasota. Pictures, descriptions, and drawings of the Ringling’s stately home were seen in print internationally. Beyond Ca ‘d’Zan, the Atlantic Coast Line Passenger Station, the Sarasota County Courthouse and the El Vernona Hotel completed the desired Mediterranean look city developers desired. Additional publicity other than the circus included a billboard in 1925 and 1926 on Chicago’s Michigan Avenue. The billboard, supplied by developer C. Roy Kindt, advertised Sarasota real estate as a Mediterranean villa.

Similar to many other developing cities across the state, the Florida land-bust and the financial recession that fell across the state and then the rest of nation, never allowed all of Ringling’s tropical visions to be fully realized. However, Ringling and Baum’s partnership transformed the formation and physical layout of Sarasota. Ca’ d’Zan, Ringling’s Venetian palazzo is just one piece of material proof of their permanent influence on the city. A *TIME* magazine article on October 12, 1931 satirically described Ringling’s impressive and extensive reach on the development of the city as follows, “There are a Ringling Boulevard and a Main Ringling Boulevard, Ringling Causeway, Ringling Island and Ringling Trust & Savings Bank, but the town is still called Sarasota, Fla.”

### 5.5 The Circus Comes to Town, Permanently

The close of the 1926 circus season brought huge changes to Ringling, his circus, and Sarasota. He made the controversial decision to move the winter grounds of his circus from Connecticut, where it had been located since the acquisition of the Barnum & Bailey Show, to Florida. Ringling foresaw the draw his circus would have for visitors to the area. He also planned to charge an admission fee to see the acts practice at an outdoor arena during the months when the show could not travel. Confronted with opposition from both his

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273 Ibid., 1.
275 Ibid., 30.
277 *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 39.
278 Thomas, *John Ringling*, 171.
employees and the city of Sarasota, Ringling’s decision was controversial from the beginning. While employees were hesitant to relocate their homes and families, the Sarasota community and its fledging government embraced this new economic stimulus with open arms. At the time Ringling’s circus employed over 1,600 individuals, comprising a staff that nearly exceeded half of the entire population of Sarasota.279

Ringling’s impetus to move his circus to Florida served as the catalyst for the entire circus industry to relocate their winter quarters to the south.280 The city, as an incentive for Ringling’s plan, traded him 155 acres of permanently tax-free land for free advertising in the Ringling Brothers’ circus programs. Ringling believed that proper advertising and promotion was essential to the survival and future development of Sarasota.281 The slogans “Sarasota: the Land of Opportunity” and “Spend a Summer this Winter in Sarasota” were read by millions of patrons across the country every circus season.282 In 1923 alone, more than 3.5 million people attended Ringling’s circus; close to one out of every thirty people in the county.283 Additionally, Ringling had the city’s name printed on all of the circus railcars, posters, and programs for added exposure.

Ringling planned to make Sarasota “one of the sights of the South.” He designed the circus’ winter quarters like a zoo, complete with an open-air arena identical to the exact size and specifications as Madison Square Garden. He planned that on Sundays, when in residence, the acts could practice and perform before a live audience of visitors who would pay admission to the park.284 All proceeds from tickets sold at the winter facility went directly to the Ringling Community Fund.285

Throughout the construction of the winter-quarters, Fred Bradna, longtime Ringling Brothers ringmaster, noted Ringling’s excitement over the proposed structure. Describing Ringling as: “[he] had never seen a man more enthusiastic.”286 Ringling had first discussed the plan for the winter-quarters with Bradna, diagramming the entire space. Upon completion, the

280 Eckley The American Circus, 26.
283 Weeks, Ringling, 96.
284 Matthews, Sarasota, 130.
285 Thomas, John Ringling, 235.
286 Matthews, Sarasota, 131.
new winter facility was almost identical to the one that Ringling had planned. The circus’ impact on Florida is noteworthy. Before Orlando had Disney, Sarasota’s winter quarters served as one of the top tourist attractions in the state. The circus soon became as large of a draw for tourists as the beaches did.

Fig. 20. The Ringling Brothers Circus, winter quarters, aerial. & Fig. 21. The Ringling Brothers Circus, winter quarters. Courtesy of the State of Florida Archives.

The circus’ presence in the Sarasota area became undeniable. When the winter quarters were in use, you could not go anywhere without seeing the Ringling trucks and trailers. It was not uncommon to see people practicing a trapeze act or high-wire act in their backyards. With the circus into Sarasota, additionally appeared “gorillas, tigers, lions, clowns, midgets, aerialists, bareback riders, daredevils, acrobats, roustabouts, administrators, food preparers, accountants, grooms, musicians, choreographers, and composers.”

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287 Ibid., 131.
290 Matthews, Sarasota, 131.
After firmly establishing its new home in Sarasota, the circus began to participate in the annual Sarasota pageant held each spring, which included a parade. The event, enhanced upon each year soon began to draw large crowds, travelling from miles to witness the spectacle, which confirmed Sarasota’s impenetrable Ringling influence. The pageant, which continued well into the Great Depression, continued to draw record crowds who flocked to the city to see the circus wagons, clowns, and performers parade through the city.291

Ringling brought his circus to Sarasota as a way to boost the failing economy of his new hometown. The circus would remain in Sarasota for more than thirty years before it would move south to Venice, Florida for an additional thirty years.292 In 1951, Cecil B. De Mille highlighted Sarasota when he filmed the 1952 Academy Award winning film “The Greatest Show on Earth” there. Adding to the unique circus culture of the area, the first Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey “Clown College” opened in Venice, Florida in 1968.293 Ringling’s ambitious decision to bring his circus to Sarasota made the city’s name synonymous with the word circus across the world. Since the first arrival of the circus in 1926, the show had continued to add to Sarasota’s distinctive charm and personality for more than sixty years, before it officially left the area.

David Weeks describes Ringling as having three occupations a circus proprietor, resort developer, and art collector, which he tackled with equal “enthusiasm, moving confidently from one activity to another.”294 It was only through his move and interest in the development of Sarasota where all three of these aspects of his life were able to co-exist. While he continued to focus attention on his diversified interests, Sarasota became a way in which he could leave a lasting, physical mark on history. However, contrary to the way in which Ringling used the circus to aid in the development of Florida’s Gulf Coast he did not utilize it in the completion and success of his museum. Ringling’s failure to use his circus to publicize his museum, which he believed was a separate undertaking from the showmanship of the circus would prove to be his greatest misstep.

291 Ibid., 131.
293 Matthews, Sarasota, 138.
294 Weeks, Ringling, 168.
CHAPTER SIX
CONSTRUCTING A CULTURAL LEGACY

Fig. 22. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, full front façade. Courtesy of the author.

Ringling intended for his museum to be unique and grand. In 1925, he hired architect John H. Phillips to implement his vision. Phillips’ national status, combined with his love of Italian architecture, made him the perfect selection for Ringling. Mable Ringling met Phillips through Ellen and Ralph Caples, who had sold Ringlings their original Sarasota land. In 1926, Mable initially asked Phillips to design a guesthouse to Ca’d’Zan. John Ringling, upon meeting his new architect, asked what he knew about building museums and if he thought, he would be able to complete one. Previously, Phillips had assisted with part of the Central Block design at the Metropolitan Museum of Art while he was working for McKim, Mead, and White, a New York architectural firm.

Phillips believed that Sarasota was perfect for the Italian-inspired architecture that Ringling planned because he could blend the buildings into the landscape. The two men thought that the style of the building was “especially well-suited for the first museum built in the semi-tropical part of the United States.” Dredged and filled to accommodate the structure, the Ringling Museum resides on the swampy property once known in Sarasota as Shell Beach.

296 Ibid., 210.
297 Ibid., 210-211.
298 Thomas, John Ringling, 152-3.
299 Thomas, John Ringling, 219.
The structure was built parallel with the property’s southern-most boundary; as a result the museum does not line up straight with the road. Unlike other museums constructed during the same time that were built without an established collection, Ringling designed with his personal collection in mind.

According to *Ringling Museums*, a publication printed by the Museum, Ringling envisioned his museum as a fifteenth century Italianate villa. He insisted that every aspect of the structure, as well as its surroundings, appear as if they had been shipped from Italy and then repositioned on the bay front estate. The same article claimed that Mr. Ringling’s vision was to create “the most beautiful museum building in the United States.” Ringling’s goal was to make visitors feel as though they had been transported back to a different world. Construction on the museum began June 27, 1927.

Intended to emulate Italian architecture, the museum was designed to blend well with Ringling’s artistic tastes. Several famous Italian buildings inspired Phillip’s design for the museum. These included: Donato Bramante’s Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Luciano Larana’s court at the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, and Filippo Brunelleschi’s arches at the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence and included accents from St. Peter’s Square in Rome. Ringling wanted the museum’s façade to be influenced by Florence’s famed Uffizi Gallery. Commissioned by Cosimo I de Medici in 1559, the Palazzo degli Uffizi was the third civic building in Florence’s Piazza della Signoria. Due to the immense magnitude of the building, which required nearly twenty years to complete, the impressive structure is considered to be the most important Florentine building of the Cinquecento and one of the most important urban projects produced in Sixteenth century Italy.

The entrance of the Ringling Museum contains three round arches, above which Phillips allocated space for figures resembling music, sculpture, architecture, and painting. During this time, there was a growing trend in museum architecture to include ancient or antique elements in

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301 Thomas, *John Ringling*, 179.
302 *Ringling Museums*, 4.
303 Ibid., 4.
304 Ibid., *John Ringling*, 178.
305 *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 17.
new construction. Ringling embraced this idea wholeheartedly.\textsuperscript{308} Ringling left the organization of the museum to Böhler, who along with Arthur Fischer, a gallery owner from Switzerland, planned the entire museum and the expansive courtyard.\textsuperscript{309} The museum’s walls were specifically chosen, varying throughout the building, to create the preeminent backdrop for each individual painting.\textsuperscript{310} Many of the sculptures Böhler and Ringling bought in Italy were used as accents in the museum.\textsuperscript{311} Additionally, the museum terraces were constructed from the left over marble from Ca’ d’Zan’s extensive bay front terrace.\textsuperscript{312}

Ringling purchased the wrought bronze inner entrance screen from the Fifth Avenue entrance of the Astor Home as well as the two salons that he had previously bought at auction.\textsuperscript{313} One gallery, in particular, included imported Italian turquoise and gilt wood wainscot panels that were believed to have originally served as cabinet doors in the library of the Villa Palmieri near Florence. This villa was where Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the Decameron in the Quattrocento, escaping the plague.\textsuperscript{314} It appears as if Ringling meant to demonstrate through these purchases that he was a man of means and class comparable to that of the great Astor family and that he was as influential as them as well.

Beyond the initial plans for the museum, Ringling asked Phillips to include a crypt within the plans for the museum. This was to be erected underneath the bridge, which connected the museum’s two wings. According to David Week’s work Ringling: the Florida Years, the design for the Ringling tomb was of Medieval influence. The space contained a mosaic-lined chamber as well as two sarcophagi partially hidden behind an elaborate perforated alabaster screen, similar to those found in Rome’s Church of Santa Maria del Popolo. Keeping with Ringling’s love for all things Italian, this splendor was traditionally reserved in Europe for royalty.\textsuperscript{315} However, due to a lack of financial resources, this aspect of Ringling’s plans and was never

\textsuperscript{308} John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 36.
\textsuperscript{309} Weeks, Ringling, 204.
\textsuperscript{310} Murray, ed. The Ringling Museums: a magnificent gift to the State of Florida, 5.
\textsuperscript{311} De Groft, “John Ringling In Perpetua Memoria,” 225.
\textsuperscript{312} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{313} John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 20.
\textsuperscript{314} John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 18.
\textsuperscript{315} Weeks, Ringling, 202-3.
completed and the couple’s caskets were not interred on the grounds until 1992, now adjacent to Ca’d’Zan.\textsuperscript{316}

Ringling desired for the museum to be open to all who wanted to visit. He ensured this by making a provision in his will stating that the museum must be opened free of charge to the public one day a week.\textsuperscript{317} Ringling wanted his art museum to be an educational center available to students as well as for children, an experience not offered to him. He noted that all children would be admitted free to the museum when accompanied by their parents.\textsuperscript{318} Ringling, a self-educated man, believed in the necessity of formal education for aspiring artists. He thought all artists, no matter how naturally talented, would never reach the full fruition of their talent if they failed to “understand the culture and civilization in which they lived.” It was also on that principle that John and Mable Ringling planned to include an art school in the facility.\textsuperscript{319}

Concerned primarily with the planning and construction of Ca’ d’Zan, Mable left the responsibility of the museum to John. In one important aspect, however, she did not concede influence. Mable envisioned the museum as an architectural teaching tool. Despite her intention to distance herself from the museum, Ringling listed Mable on the museum’s charter

\begin{footnotes}
316 Ibid., 203.
317 Buck, The Ringling Legacy, 37.
318 Thomas, John Ringing, 221. & Murray, ed. The Ringling Museums, 14.
319 Weeks, Ringling: the Florida Years, 206.
\end{footnotes}
as a director of the institution as well as the Vice President of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of American Corporation.\textsuperscript{320}

The Stock Market Crash of 1929, Florida’s slowing economy, and the collapse of the real estate market brought construction to a standstill.\textsuperscript{321} Throughout much of the construction, Phillips believed that Ringling controlled an unlimited quantity of wealth, a belief Ringling promoted throughout his life.\textsuperscript{322} However, not long after construction started on the project it became clear that Ringling did not possess the quantity of money it would require to build the museum to the original specifications. Ringling utilized over 300 members of the circus winter crew, including many skilled artisans, as part of mandatory cutbacks on the project.\textsuperscript{323} Strapped for cash, Ringling abandoned both of his other projects, the Sarasota Ritz Carlton and the Ringling Estates, in order to complete, his legacy, his museum.\textsuperscript{324}

Upon completion, Ringling’s museum served as a fine example of a man who allowed his personal taste to dictate his collection. The \textit{Sarasota Herald} reported in November of 1931 that Ringling was “reputed to be among the very richest men in the world” and when asked what his collection was worth he responded, “As to their value, they are priceless; since they cannot be duplicated. For me to say what they cost me, would seem unbecoming.” The article then claimed that Ringling’s collection cost him $35,000,000 to $40,000,000.\textsuperscript{325}

Fig. 24. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, interior courtyard and loggia. Courtesy of the author.

\textsuperscript{321} Wetenhall, \textit{A Museum Once Forgotten}, 13.
\textsuperscript{322} Weeks, \textit{Ringling}, 199.
\textsuperscript{323} Weeks, \textit{Ringling}, 199.
\textsuperscript{324} Thomas, \textit{John Ringling}, 183.
\textsuperscript{325} “John Ringling Details Facts on Art Museum.” \textit{Sarasota Herald}, November 4, 1931.
The only art museum of its kind in the south, the museum solidified Ringling’s objective, establishing Sarasota as a permanent cultural center. The museum’s location was essential since John planned all along to bequeath the museum and Ca’ d’Zan to Florida upon his death. Placed adjacent to Tamiami Trail, an early thoroughfare through downtown Sarasota, allowed the museum to be easily accessible to visitors, serve as an entrance to the city, and guarantee Ringling’s legacy in the future.  

Ringling’s art museum, its scope previously unseen in the state of Florida or even the greater southeast, gave Sarasota the intellectual and cultural center that the area had previously been missing. The cultural precedent Ringling established influenced the artistic future of Florida’s West Coast. He saw his museum as a way for the Sarasota community to stand out and be different from the East Coast resort towns he originally tried to emulate. Ringling believed that the museum would serve the community as a cultural anchor forever. The museum and the art school were to serve as a magnet for the cultural community, enticing artists from across the world. Ringling hoped that in time, a “Sarasota School” would develop to rival the Hudson River School and even went on to hope that “perhaps in time, the School would equal the famous Barbizon School in France.” Ringling was innovative in his plan for his museum to attract “cultural tourists,” an idea that did not penetrate the rest of the museum community until the mid-1970s.

When Mable died in June of 1929, Ringling was more determined than ever to complete the project, including founding an art school, in honor of his wife. His latest idea, the formation of a John Ringling University became impossible due to financial constraints and his lack of personal experience in higher education. Ringling’s boundless finances, which had for decades been veiled in secrecy, made endless headlines in print across the nation when they appeared to be diminishing rapidly. These articles often were printed with more fanfare than those in relation to his pending museum. He was forced to borrow money from his associates and abandoned construction on his hotel. In the end, he had to build a less grandiose version of his museum than

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326 Buck, Corbino and Dean, A History of Visual Art in Sarasota, 27. & Thomas, John Ringling, 179.
327 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 6.
328 Ibid., 15.
329 Schwarzer, Riches, Rivals & Radicals, 50-1.
330 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 25.
331 Ibid., 39.
he originally intended. He omitted the art school that would have been made in the interior courtyard square and a surrounding sculpture garden.\footnote{Thomas. \textit{John Ringling}, 183. & Wetenhall, \textit{A Museum Once Forgotten}, 45.}

\section*{6.1 The Opening}

The museum conducted a one-day opening on March 31, 1930, allowing the public and Ringling’s guests to view his entire collection for the first time. At this event, the paintings were specially arranged in triple-hung salon style, allowing visitors to see in excess of 500 works at once, a figure more than double what is traditionally on display now.\footnote{Ibid., 23.} A little less than a year later on March 2, 1931, the museum opened again, but only for a week due to Ringling’s growing impatience with the lack of a catalogue.\footnote{Ibid., 23.} Until this was completed, only friends and special applicants were admitted into the museum. Joe Mitchell Chappelle, publisher and writer, as well as a friend of Ringling’s, visited the site in 1932. The \textit{Sarasota Herald} reported that Chappelle was amazed at the amount of information Ringling knew about his collection. He “knew every detail of every canvas… when, how, and where the art trophy was secured. He knew the value of each picture and just where the artist’s signature was placed… a complete catalogue in his head.”\footnote{Quoted in \textit{John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector}, 24 from the \textit{Sarasota Herald}, October 4, 1931, 2.}

![Fig. 25. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, aerial. Courtesy of the State of Florida Archives.](image-url)
The museum opened again to the public in October of 1931. The *Sarasota Herald* reported over 15,000 in attendance and the event received international attention as well as a full-page spread in the *New York Times*.\(^{336}\) It was reported that The John and Mable Ringling Museum housed the finest collection of art in the South, housed in a structure “reminiscent of those erected by the great turn-of-the-century collector-barons such as J.P. Morgan and Henry Clay Frick.”\(^{337}\) A *TIME* magazine article on October 12, 1931 reported that Ringling “has assembled the largest private art collection in the U.S. with the exception of William Randolph Hearst’s.”\(^{338}\) Additionally, the *New York World* quoted “On the northern edge of this little Florida town, John Ringling, who used to drive a circus wagon, has built one of the finest museums of art in all the world.”\(^{339}\)

For several reasons, the traditional flourish that would have accompanied a museum opening of this magnitude did not occur. First, the museum sat at a great distance from the traditional American art center, New York City. Second, other than Böhler, serious museum professionals were absent from the museum’s staff. Third, the museum did not have membership in important industry organizations including the American Association of Museums. For all of these reasons, the museum, received little press attention upon its opening. In addition to these technical issues, the museum’s reputation had been hampered by the public’s perception of the man himself. To the world, Ringling was the most famous of the Ringling Brothers, the circus kings, who had compiled the largest circus the world had ever known. He seemed an improbable personality to assemble a vast collection of fine art.\(^{340}\)

Ringling’s excitement for the museum opening, despite the other problematic aspects within his personal life, was evident to those around him. In a letter from Böhler in March of 1932, he congratulated and wished Ringling and his new art school well, “I hope the School will be successful and have a good start in spite of these bad times…. With your museum as a foundation the School ought to do well.”\(^{341}\) In the same letter, Böhler reminds and confirms to Ringling the long lasting importance of what he is doing for Sarasota with the establishment of

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\(^{336}\) Buck, Corbino and Dean. *A History of Visual Art in Sarasota*, 16.

\(^{337}\) *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 26.

\(^{338}\) “Ringling Day.” *TIME*, October 12, 1931.


\(^{340}\) *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 27.

\(^{341}\) Julius Böhler to John Ringling, 12 March 1932, John Ringling Papers, Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
the Museum and the art school. He states they “will accomplish for Florida and the whole South, what you intended for it. It much become the Center of Art for the whole South.”

6.2 The Battle for a Collections Catalogue

As the delay for a true opening continued, many critics began to suspect that Ringling owned “nothing but copies and works of indifferent quality.” In 1928, *Art News* reported about the “mysterious” nature surrounding the museum. He began loaning pieces to exhibitions held by prestigious galleries, including the Reinhardt Galleries in 1925, Kleinberg Galleries in 1929, and the Detroit Institute of Art in 1930. In addition, Ringling loaned paintings to major collectors including Andrew Mellon and John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

He relied on Böhler to accomplish this task. Ringling was well aware of the important role Böhler’s advice and knowledge played in the successful future of his museum and legacy as an important American collector. In a June 16, 1929 telegram sent to Böhler, Ringling stated, “of help to accomplish a great achievement which from now on means so much to me and which could not be realized without your generous guidance and wonderful knowledge.”

Furthermore, Böhler wired Ringling at the end of October 1930 that he was going to be unable to be in Sarasota until January, “shall sail January third to be there for opening and finish catalogue.”

Ringling knew that without a catalogue the museum would not be able to achieve any real status within the museum community. Ringling’s desire for such a catalogue is evident throughout his correspondence with Böhler. In the late 1920s, art and architecture magazines frequently featured the openings of new art museums. Often these articles highlighted the collection and architecture of these new institutions and were completed with the permission of those with authorization at the museums. However, there is no record that Ringling gave his permission or personally penned any of these articles, nor did his appointed museum curator

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342 Ibid.
343 *John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector*, 22.
344 Ibid., 22.
345 Ibid., 23.
346 Ringling Museum Archives, Ringling Correspondence: FF#: May-June 1929
347 Julius Böhler to John Ringling, 29 October 1930, John Ringling Papers, Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
348 Weeks, *Ringling*, 204.
and often spokesman, Julius Böhler. Ringling was a man with extensive promotional and marketing experience gleaned through his years with the circus; however, when it came to his museum little was done to publicize its existence. Ringling realized that while he knew a great deal about the field, that the greater art community would not readily accept him into their close-knit world. It appears as if he left the majority of the correspondence to Böhler, his connection to the respected art world. Böhler, however, did little to further the publicity of Ringling’s museum.

A man with established and well-known art background and titled curator at Ringling’s museum, Böhler was the logical contact. He received correspondence from art magazines and the American Association of Museums (AAM) but there is no proof that he responded. Helen Works Hathcock, Membership Secretary at American Association of Museums sent a letter to Böhler on November 22, 1929. She informed Böhler of AAM’s intent “to publish a ‘Who’s Who in Museum Work’ which will present biographical sketches of museum staff members and trustees who hold office.” The original blank form is still attached to the letter at the Ringling Museum’s Archives, apparently never used. As a result, Museum News, AAM’s publication, responded to the Ringling’s opening in a short, concise paragraph as opposed to other comparable openings at the time, which received several pages and often pictures, or museum plans in the periodical. The Ringling Museum was not even mentioned by the publication for the next five years, until it published a notice of Ringling’s death. Despite a complete lack of publicity on behalf of the Ringling Museum, a 1932 issue of Architectural Forum highlighted the facility as one of the eight art museums featured.

In a January 1931 letter to Ringling, Böhler addressed the issue of the completed catalogue, referring to it as “the most ticklish question” and an issue that the two did not agree on. While it appears as if Ringling wanted Böhler to rapidly complete the project, Böhler was adamantly hesitant. He claimed, “it is by far the most important, as it concerns my reputation as a

349 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 35.
351 Helen Works Hathcock to Julius Böhler, 22 November 1929. Julius Böhler Papers, General Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
352 Ibid., 41.
353 Ibid., 40.
354 Julius Böhler to John Ringling, 6 January 1931, Julius Böhler Papers, Ringling Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
connoisseur.” Böhler continued to reassure Ringling that he wanted nothing but the best for the museum and that any rash project could land them in with the other “great disputes and criticisms” of the time by art dealers.\textsuperscript{355} Böhler wanted to get the best art critics of the time, including Walter Friedlaender and Hermann Voss, to examine Ringling’s collection despite that this would mean it might take an additional three to four years to complete.\textsuperscript{356}

Böhler apologized to Ringling, ‘I am awfully sorry, my dear john, but I am afraid the catalogue cannot possibly be ready for the opening.” He then implored Ringling to seek out an author to write the forward. Böhler stressed the importance of Ringling’s collection, “the history of the collection [and] of your intention to endow the South with a Museum, where Art could be studied without having to go far away.” Additionally, Böhler wanted Ringling to emphasize that the collection was “formed not following the trend of modern taste and fashion alone, but with a view to make available all schools and periods of paintings to the students.” More interesting though is the admission that Böhler wanted Ringling to inform the public of his plans to expand his already vast collection and to “complete the collection judiciously as things still missing in it would turn up in the market.” That this present body of works was only an “initial effort to fulfill your intentions and realize your dreams… makes the wonderful achievement already accomplished still bigger, when you make people think that this is considered by you just a start!”\textsuperscript{357} In a later telegram, dated February of 1931 to Böhler in Berlin, Ringling confirmed that he was “to have him [the esteemed German art critic Hermann Voss] as my guest and stay at my house” as Voss’ input and confirmation of important attributions of Ringling’s works was detrimental to the speedy completion of the catalogue Ringling so longed for.\textsuperscript{358}

Knowing Ringling’s marketing abilities it is incomprehensible to understand why there was such a lack of advertising used in marketing the museum without tracing much of the absence to Böhler. The Ringling Museum Archives’ collection of Julius Böhler’s papers contains an extensive collection of lists of artists, artist biographies, list of works, lists

\textsuperscript{355} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{357} Julius Böhler to John Ringling 6 January 1931, Julius Böhler Papers, Ringling Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
\textsuperscript{358} John Ringling to Julius Böhler, 29 February 1931?. Julius Böhler Papers, Ringling Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
containing the schools, and a draft catalogue none of which were ever published.\textsuperscript{359} One cannot help but wonder the impact a catalogue would have had on Ringling’s museum if one would have been made available to the public.

The financial and personal downfalls that Ringling experienced during the completion of his museum would prove to be devastating in the overall success of the project. His reliance on Böhler’s catalogue hindered a promising future for this museum and as a result the museum was never able to achieve the sensation within the museum world Ringling anticipated. The initial underachieving performance and reception of Ringling’s museum represents fully the dichotomy of this complicated man, both a successful businessman and self-conscious museum entrepreneur. Unlike the other successful ventures in the past, the missteps that Ringling took relating to what he believed would be his lasting legacy exemplified his weaknesses; he was not a good “museum maker.”

\textsuperscript{359} Julius Böhler “Catalogue Notes & Draft,” [ca. 1930], Julius Böhler Papers, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
CHAPTER SEVEN
A POST-RINGLING MUSEUM

Ringling’s financial decline did not improve with the onset of the Great Depression. Upon his return from Europe in August of 1929, he learned that the Ringling circus’ longstanding tradition of a month opening at New York City’s Madison Square Garden was no longer available. The Garden’s new manager, William Carey, had reserved every Friday for one of their most profitable events, prizefighting boxing matches. Ringling was furious at the turn of events and refused to sign any contract for the circus at the Garden. The New York Times reported Ringling as having an “ethical issue” upon which he based on his belief that “circuses and prizefights are on different planes.” Shortly thereafter, Ringling was informed that Carey had signed a contract with American Circus Corporation to perform at the arena on the nights that had traditionally belonged to the Ringling Brothers. Left with no other option but to admit defeat and relocate his season opener, John Ringling bought the American Circus Corporation. The decision proved to be reckless, perpetuating him further into debt. It was his last business decision as the proprietor of the Ringling circus.

While Ringling’s circus continued to net more than $1 million a year in profits and attract sold out crowds through the 1930s, the man was at the height of his financial troubles. He owed unpaid taxes to the federal government, city, and county of Sarasota, and about a hundred creditors were suing him. In a personal letter from Ringling to Böhler, dated July 15, 1935 Ringling comments on his difficulties, “it took every cent I could scrape up to keep going.” Yet, he goes on to state that “I have everything except a few stocks which I had when the panic struck and will in a couple years be on east street.” Ringling concludes with, “If I could collect what is legitimately owing me, I could pay what I owe several times and be in Europe buying pictures besides.”

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360 Weeks, Ringling, 217-8.
362 Weeks, Ringling, 218.
363 Davis, The Circus Age, 40.
365 John Ringling to Julius Böhler, 15 July 1935. Julius Böhler Papers, Ringling Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
Even while in dire financial straits, however, Ringling never sold a single painting. Although, the thought did cross his mind. Ringling composed a letter to Böhler in July of 1935 inquiring as to the possibility of “any pictures in my collection which you think you could see in Europe as it would be great advantage to me if I could sell a few hundred thousand worth of my pictures now and buy examples by the same artists back a little later when I am all straightened out.” He also requested from Böhler a financial figure for what he was believed Ringling’s collection was worth. Böhler responded in November of 1935, “actual value your collection should be four million at least but impossible for me to give exact valuation having no catalogue nor photos… present sale value more difficult.” In the end, he could easily have sold a piece in his vast art collection, but refused. During his time of financial hardship, Ringling believed that his monetary set back was only temporary and continued to research auction catalogues for “future purchases” for the museum.

At the same time in a July 15, 1935 letter to Böhler, Ringling admitted to the strained relationship that he had with many of his family and business associates. Outlining his regained health, he wrote “as for myself, instead of dying as they [Fuchs(his secretary), William Greve, Sam Gumpertz, Mrs. Charles Ringling, and John Kelley(his attorney)] thought and wished I would, I am glad to say regained my health, in fact I am better physically then I have been in years.” Up until the end of this life, Ringling continued to believe that the majority of his business partners and many of his family members were conspiring against him to take control of the circus.

John Ringling succumbed to pneumonia on December 2, 1936 in New York City. His New York Times' obituary described the eccentric, extremely private capitalist as “a plain, common-sense man of large frame and great physical vigor.” The Times reported that in his later years, he preferred to be known “as an art connoisseur as well as a circus owner.” Upon his death, Ringling’s collection comprised over 500 paintings. Additionally, he was the owner of the

366 John Ringling: Dreamer, Builder, Collector, 55.
367 Julius Böhler to John Ringling, November 1935. John Ringling Papers, Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
369 John Ringling to Julius Böhler, 15 July 1935. Ringling Correspondence, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.
370 Weeks, Ringling, 254.
largest collection of Rubens’ works in the world.\textsuperscript{372} While at the time of his death many believed that Ringling was broke, the state’s audit reported that despite his multiple business mishaps and misguided financial decisions in the last years of his life, Ringling’s estate was valued in excess of $22 million.\textsuperscript{373}

7.1 A Gift to Florida

When Ringling died in 1936, the museum, his 32 acres on Sarasota Bay, Ca’ d’Zan, and a $1.2 million endowment were transferred to Florida, a gift valued at $20 million.\textsuperscript{374} When Ringling died, flags flew at half-mast across the city and his body laid in state at the art museum in order for the community to mourn and pay respects.\textsuperscript{375} Despite extensive disagreements near the end of his life, many of the Ringling family attended John Ringling’s funeral; however, not one member of Charles Ringling’s family came to pay their respects.\textsuperscript{376}

Legal issues kept the property from being reopened to the public for almost ten years. The state was fighting Ringling’s creditors in order to keep the entire estate intact, including the museum and its collection.\textsuperscript{377} In 1946, the official deed was transferred to the state of Florida’s Board of Control, the same governing body that oversees the state’s university system.\textsuperscript{378} Ringling dedicated the art museum to the state for “the artistic and spiritual development of Florida and the nation,” opened to the public in December of 1946, over 10,000 visitors were present.\textsuperscript{379}

\textsuperscript{372} Cash, “Ringling Museum becomes part of FSU,” 1.
\textsuperscript{373} Buck, The Ringling Legacy, 59.
\textsuperscript{376} Weeks, Ringling, 257.
\textsuperscript{377} Wetenhall, A Museum Once Forgotten, 15.
\textsuperscript{378} Murray, ed. The Ringling Museums, 4.
Many believed and it was even reported in his obituary that Ringling’s wife, Mable, was the impetus behind his collecting. His obituary states that it was through Mable that “he took an interest in art” and “bought pictures to please her.” The evidence does not support these assertions. Instead, the idea was John Ringling’s.\footnote{\textit{“John Ringling Dies of Pneumonia at 70.”} \textit{New York Times}, December 2, 1936, 27.} Although the source of his fame and much of his fortune the circus proved to be a problematic aspect late in his life. While never ashamed of his roots, Ringling chose to distance himself from his circus persona, aiming instead to be recognized as the diverse financial capitalist that he was. His peers and the press of the time, however, could not accommodate this request, as a result, Ringling’s museum never received the accolades of many other’s museums and collections at the time. Additionally, the belief that John’s wife or his good friend Julius Böhler were the sources behind his passion only further diminished Ringling’s magnificent collection and contribution to America’s art museum community.

There were a few, however, who recognized his contribution to the greater art community. Karl Freund’s forward of the “Appraisal of Contents” composed for the State of Florida in 1938 noted the importance of many of Ringling’s purchases, specifically the Cesnola
and Greau Collections originally given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by John Pierpont Morgan. The items that comprised these purchases, Freund explained “[were] now practically unknown in the art markets of the world… increasingly rarity of such early objects.”  

Freund concluded: “Mr. Ringling has rendered to this country an invaluable service. He has acquired the type of art which will appeal through the ages to come.” When the museum appraisal was completed in 1938, Jonce McGurk commented in his forward “there is nothing in the history of the Art World ever appeared wherein an appraisal of this kind is recorded, that compares in such vast proportions…”

Theodore Low’s 1942 article “What is a Museum?,” considered innovative in its day, challenged museum directors to not only be active in their community, but rather to serve as a place for scholarship and research. The Ringling Museum’s Art Library was comprised of thousands of art books and auction catalogues, the largest of its kind in the southeast United States. Hence, the Ringling Museum served not only a repository of art but as a cultural center that was on the cutting edge of the museum field in the time. The museum was an artistic oasis in the city, which encouraged all art forms as a cultural force within the greater community of Sarasota.

### 7.2 Chick Austin & Museum Expansion

The first outside director of the museum was A. Everett “Chick” Austin, Jr., the former director of the Wadsworth Athenaeum. Hailed by *New York Times*’ author John Russell as “one of the most brilliant and inventive American museum men of his day,” Austin brought numerous connections and notoriety to the emerging art community in Sarasota. Austin is credited with the introduction of modern art to the United States through his Surrealist and Picasso exhibitions in the early 1930s and the design of the Wadsworth Athenaeum’s Avery...

According to Eugene Gaddis’ work, “Chick Austin: The Ringmaster at the Museum,” Austin’s love of the circus yielded from his belief that the great spectacle “created a fantasy world of unending entertainment.”\footnote{Ibid., 151.} An art connoisseur and lover of all things circus related, Chick appeared in public costumed as a ringmaster on multiple occasions.\footnote{Ibid., 150.} The theme of the circus was present in his life and work at Wadsworth, long before he began working at the Ringling Museum.\footnote{Ibid., 151.} Until his death, Austin maintained a close friendship with many of the performers at the winter-quarters, based on what he believed was a close kinship he felt to the show people in the circus.\footnote{Ibid., 158.}

The lack of director from the time of Ringling’s death in 1932 to Austin’s appointment in 1946 had dire consequences on the historical significance of Ringling’s museum. The museum’s structure was in disrepair and greatly damaged. Strapped for cash while completing the project, Ringling had contractors cut corners during the museum’s construction. The humidity of Florida’s Gulf Coast climate also damaged the building. Another hit to the museum’s credibility and historical importance came as the facility fell into financial ruin towards the end of the twentieth century. Austin would physically transform Ringling’s museum.

Austin seized the possibility to concentrate more fully on the circus roots of the Ringling Museum. He proposed the creation of a circus museum on the extensive Ringling grounds.\footnote{Gaddis, “Chick Austin,” 154.} Singlehandedly, Austin gathered up circus material on his own, designed a model for the institute and renovated a small space on museum grounds to create the circus museum complete with a wooden entrance, which resembled a circus tent.\footnote{Ibid., 154.} Included in the facility were the gold and red painted panelings that Ringling had purchased from the Astor Mansion
and never used.\textsuperscript{395} Austin’s Circus Museum contained a collection of vintage circus posters and handbills, photographs, masks, costumes, and a gilded horse-drawn circus wagon provided by the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Show.\textsuperscript{396}

The Museum of the American Circus opened to the public on March 27, 1948. Austin claimed it was “the first serious museum in country devoted to the history of the circus.”\textsuperscript{397} Throughout his tenure as director of the museum, Austin continued the expansion of the Circus Museum’s permanent collection. Under his direction, an eighteenth century peep show, a calliope, a mechanical doll in the form of a music box, prints, woodcuts, photographs, books, a miniature eighteenth century French circus, a model of Astley’s Amphitheater in London, as well as a complete working model of the Ringling circus were added to the facility.\textsuperscript{398} The collection, according to a museum publication, “affords a nostalgic… when the circus was our country’s most popular entertainment.”\textsuperscript{399} Austin’s goal was for the Circus Museum to appeal to not only fans of the circus, but researchers, artists, and writers who focused their work on the area.\textsuperscript{400} Additionally, in 1951, the museum added to its permanent collection with by purchasing the Chambers Collection, comprised of 25,000 items; it is the largest collection of printed circus material in the world.

It is unclear if Ringling intended for a circus museum to be included in his vast museum facility. When the state assumed control of the museum, it worried about whether the thousands of visitors who came to Sarasota to see the Ringling circus’ winter quarters would come to the museum.\textsuperscript{401} The circus museum is comprised of items solely from outside donors. While he was alive, he never collected circus material and did not plan to include a facility of this sort on the grounds of his museum. Pat Ringling Buck’s \textit{The Ringling Legacy} argues that “emphasis and attention focused on the circus facility diluted the reputation of the art museum and has confused the public as to the nature of John Ringling’s collection ever since.”\textsuperscript{402}

\textsuperscript{395} Ibid., 154.  
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., 155.  
\textsuperscript{397} Ibid., 154-5.  
\textsuperscript{398} Ibid., 155.  
\textsuperscript{399} Ringling Museums, 29.  
\textsuperscript{400} Murray, \textit{The Ringling Museums}, 11.  
\textsuperscript{401} Buck, \textit{The Ringling Legacy}, 37.  
\textsuperscript{402} Ibid., 37.
In 1950, Austin added another physical addition to the property, the eighteenth century Asolo Theatre. Purchased from a Venetian antiques dealer, the theatre originated from a village north of the city. Austin hailed the Asolo, built in 1798, as the heart of his museum. He described the space as “one of the most important exhibits in a museum noted for its dramatic and spectacular collection, part of the cultural advantages the Ringling Museum offers to students of fine arts and to the public.”

Because of Austin’s tireless work with the museum, a 1950 issue of *Art News Annual* featured the facility. Editor Alfred Frankfurter wrote of Ringling and his collection, “… he far outstripped, in originality and vitality of taste, multiple and munificent patrons of art who were symbolic of the American aesthetic approach in the first third of the twentieth century. Ringling collected the masters of his own favorite Baroque, then utterly disdained in smart circles in favor of the early Renaissance and the Impressionalists. Against all the others who insured their purchases with the certificates of famous experts or who hired their own private advisors to make their collections orthodox, Ringling followed his own nose and his own instincts exclusively.”

By the 1960s, the museum attracted more than 250,000 visitors a year, two-thirds of whom were tourists to the area. It was also during this time, the Ringling Museum of the

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404 Ibid., 39 & 41.
Circus was formally renamed the Museum of American Circus. The museum was dedicated not only to Ringling’s legacy in making Sarasota famous, but also to displaying the evolution of the circus industry from the “Rome of the Caesars.”

The endowment, provided by Ringling upon his death, should have multiplied over time, guaranteeing the competitive success and future expansion of the institution. In reality, while many of the museum’s competitors were expanding, the Ringling Museum was at a standstill and in desperate need of additional facilities. The local Sarasota community felt that the museum, governed by the state, was the responsibility of Florida and did little to contribute financially to the museum’s preservation. By the 1990s, with little money to continue basic maintenance, the estate fell into disrepair. Ca’ d’Zan was physically in ruins and the dock was unsafe for use. The art museum’s extensive collection and its architecture were threatened due to multiple roof leaks and an archaic security system. The art storage facility was over capacity and ill equipped, located in a room barely above sea level on the bayside property. In addition, the building housing the Asolo Theatre was condemned.

7.3 The Florida State University Cultural Complex

On July 1, 2000, Florida State University took governing control of the Ringling complex. The university’s new acquisition included the art museum, Ringling mansion, circus museum, and 62-acre bay front estate. It was a logical step since FSU already managed the Asolo Theatre Company and Sarasota Ballet, which had come under university control in 1995 also. The acquisition also made sense since Florida State University and the Ringling Museum already had a long established relationship. In 1948, the museum first its “Annual Symposium,” under the guidance of Adolph Karl, the head of FSU’s Art Department. In 1949, Karl implored the university’s theatre director, George McCalmom to assist with an added theatre component to the Symposium’s line-up. This partnership became the Asolo Theatre Festival. Additionally, in the 1960s, the Asolo Theatre Company collaborated again with the university, developing a Masters of Fine Arts program in Sarasota.

407 Murray, ed. The Ringling Museums, 11.
408 Wetenhall, A Museum Once Forgotten, 27.
409 Ibid., 15.
410 Cash, “Ringling Museum becomes part of FSU,” 1.
However, the financial responsibility that the university’s administration acquired with the property was a concern. Within months of obtaining governance over the estate, FSU secured almost seven million dollars in order to restore all of the institution’s holdings to their former grandeur. Additionally, under FSU’s control, the Ringling complex began implementation of the institution’s Master Plan originally formulated in the 1980s. The Master Plan proposed the addition of four structures: the Circus Museum expansion, Visitors Pavilion, Education Complex, and additional Art Galleries. These four new buildings cost in excess of fifty-six million dollars and doubled the size of the FSU-Ringling Cultural Complex, making

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the institution one of the twenty largest art museums in North America.\textsuperscript{415} Today, the Ringling Museum’s collection contains more than 10,000 objects worth approximately half a billion dollars and is one of the top forty most attended museums in the country.\textsuperscript{416}

\textsuperscript{415} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{416} De Groft, “John Ringling In Perpetua Memoria,” 245.
CONCLUSION
RINGLING’S LEGACY

Those outside of Florida’s Gulf Coast remember John Ringling as the world’s undisputed “Circus King,” highlighting his everlasting impact on the circus industry. John Ringling was not simply a circus king; rather he was the circus king. Similar to the mystery that has always surrounded the life within the subculture of the circus, the same analogy applies to Ringling, himself. A notably private man, when in public he appeared as a larger than life character who was often the face of the entire circus operation. Ringling helped to create and continued to perpetuate this larger than life likeness throughout his life.

While his legacy within the circus industry is well documented, often unknown were his contributions to the cultural and artistic worlds in American history. An editorial from the Sarasota Herald on October 26, 1925, astutely observed “some day Florida and the nation will awaken to the fact that Sarasota on the gulf is the most splendidly and esthetically built city in America.” The sleepy fishing village that Ringling fell in love with has undoubtedly fulfilled his vision as a cultural destination for artists from around the world. Due to the established cultural center at the art museum, by the end of World War II, Sarasota had become a magnet for artists from across the globe. Always welcomed by the museum, circus administrators on the winter grounds and numerous developing art schools, many artists felt both embraced and at ease in the community.

Sarasota capitalized on its Ringling roots soon after the circus relocated, advertising itself as the “winter home of Ringling Brothers- Barnum & Bailey Circus and the Ringling Art Museum.” The city, described by the New York Times in 1950, “whose Ringling Art Museum is the finest concentration of high art in the South, winter quarters of the Ringling Circus, and fifty miles of beach.” While the Sarasota Chamber of Commerce retired the “Circus City” moniker in the early 1960s, the city selected to assume instead “Unique Sarasota” in an attempt to capitalize on its long established and diverse cultural appeal. In 1961, a New York Times article highlighted the belief that Ringling would have been proud of the “smartly attired resort

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417 Weeks, Ringling, 115.
city,” home to “six first rate art schools, two theatre groups, one of the finest art museums in
the country, and the seventy-five piece West Coast Symphony Orchestra.”

The cultural affects of Ringling’s circus can be seen throughout the area. The “Sailor
Circus” developed by Sarasota County Schools in 1949 as part of the physical education
program, became famous from the program’s onset. Reported by the New York Times in the
mid 1950s as “its major sport not a football or baseball team, but a circus troupe of students
who give traveling shows.” The Sailor Circus was nicknamed “The Greatest ‘Little’ Show on
Earth,” a moniker approved by the Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus.

By the 1960s, there were over sixty circus families from across the globe that lived
permanently in Sarasota. The circus added as much to the city’s distinctive culture as the
museum and art community did. Today, in a tribute to the circus’ long-lasting impact on the
area, Circus Sarasota currently performs in the city and is produced by several members of the
“great old Sarasota circus families,” all brought to the area by Ringling and his circus.

While not all of Ringling’s imprint remains within the city, an overwhelming presence of
the man who dreamed of a seaside cultural paradise remains. All that remains of the 200-acre
site that the Ringling Circus called its winter home is a historical marker. Now covered in
homes, built there in the 1960s, the space bears no resemblance to the fanfare that once graced
the area. The Ringling School of Art & Design, although established independently from the
museum and housed on an off-site location, continues to bear the Ringling name, accounting
for the vision of its namesake.

John Ringling’s cultural and architectural influence extended well into the mid-twentieth
century and evolution of the Sarasota School of Architecture. Developed after World War II, the
Sarasota School is considered the most successful attempt to regionalize the International Style
within the United States, an extremely important model in the history of Modern design within
the country. Blending high-tech ideas with environmental sensitivity, the only other place with

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421 Ibid.
425 Cool, Circus Days in Sarasota and Venice, 61.
a comparable Modernist legacy in the United States is Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{427} Ralph Twitchell, credited with being the founder of the Sarasota School of Architecture, had been practicing in the area since the 1920s, but it was his groundbreaking work in the 1930s for which he would become famous.\textsuperscript{428} The impetus for Twitchell’s move to Sarasota was a request made by Dwight James Baum to assist with the development of the Mediterranean Revival style throughout the city.

Additionally, Ringling’s St. Armands Circle, memorializes its founder through the use of bronze circus wagon wheel plaques which line the interior circle’s park, known as The Circus Ring of Fame. The Sarasota County Arts Council still offers two grant programs bearing the name of Ringling, a performing arts and visual arts fellowship as well as a historic preservation grant, providing monetary support to Sarasota natives in their pursuit of continuing the flourishing of arts in the area.\textsuperscript{429} The demolition of The John Ringling Towers in 1998, which Preservation Magazine listed as one of the 25 greatest defeats for preservation

\textsuperscript{427} Ibid., 68, 70.
\textsuperscript{429} Sarasota County Arts Council Programs & Services, “Grant Programs,” Sarasota County Arts Council, http://www.sarasota-arts.org/grant_programs.cfm
in the Twentieth century, would yield one of Ringling’s unfulfilled dreams.\textsuperscript{430} After Ringling’s initial attempt to develop a Sarasota Ritz-Carlton property failed in the 1920s, the same famous hotel corporation opened its Sarasota property downtown in November of 2002, on the grounds of the former John Ringling Towers.\textsuperscript{431}

The museum, seen by Ringling as a way to sustain the Ringling name and legacy in Sarasota long after his death, is his most notable contribution to Florida’s Gulf Coast. Ringling’s museum bequeath to Florida was his final attempt to place himself among the great businessmen and art patrons he reverred, but was never equated to during his lifetime. Ringling viewed his art purchases as tangible proof of his monetary success and power and was immensely satisfied when his ‘social superiors’ and friends were amazed at his collection.\textsuperscript{432} Nevertheless, John Ringling and his museum have been left out of the great historical museum

\textsuperscript{430} Ossman, “Is Preservation Dead?,” 67.
\textsuperscript{432} Thomas. \textit{John Ringing}, 147-8.
narrative. Lightly glanced over or omitted completely, the circus king’s collection rivaled if not superseded many of the men he respected and emulated.\textsuperscript{433}

The omission of Ringling from history serves in contradiction to the overwhelming, adamant need he felt to leave a permanent mark on history. Those that do mention Ringling chose to split his persona into the circus man or art collector, rather than acknowledging that the same gifts he acquired as a circus showman were the same qualities that made him an excellent art collector.\textsuperscript{434} While numerous works have contained information on Ringling, they concentrate on him as a circus magnate only with no regards to the other aspects of his life.\textsuperscript{435} Placed in a subcategory of “circus,” labeled unlike the other business industrialists in his day, Ringling spent his entire life attempting to demonstrate his success to the outside world. When he was unable to do that through investment only, he instead chose tangible proof. Craving the acceptance of his professional peers, Ringling spearheaded the development of Sarasota, obtained one of the most impressive art collections of the day, and built an estate unlike any of its kind on Florida’s West Coast.

The Ringling School of Art and Design’s 2007 general bulletin may have best summed up their namesake’s lasting effects on Sarasota,

“For more than 100 years, some of the world’s most creative minds have settled here. One of them was circus entrepreneur and art collector John Ringling, who recognized Sarasota as the ideal place for young artists to be inspired. When he founded Ringling School in 1931, he began the legacy that has earned its reputation as the jewel of Florida’s Cultural Coast.”\textsuperscript{436}

At the dawn of the Twenty-First century, Sarasota is home to an opera house, several theatre companies, a symphony, art and historical associations, a world-renowned botanical garden, and the art school first envisioned by Ringling all of which can trace their roots back to Ringling’s museum.\textsuperscript{437} Today, more than 350,000 people live in Sarasota and it remains the

\textsuperscript{433} Alexander, \textit{Museums in Motion}, 30-34.
\textsuperscript{434} Weeks, \textit{Ringling: the Florida Years}, 173.
\textsuperscript{435} De Groft, “John Ringling In Perpetua Memoria,” 6.
\textsuperscript{436} Ringling School of Art and Design, 2007 General Bulletin, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{437} Cool, \textit{Circus Days in Sarasota and Venice}, x.
second wealthiest city in the state of Florida. Additionally, almost five million people visit the Sarasota Gulf Coast annually, sustaining much of the area’s local economy with an estimated one billion dollars. With Ringling’s aid and vision, Sarasota became a “unique combination of the cultural resources of a large city and the atmosphere of a small town artists’ colony, all in the setting of a tropical resort.”

![Fig. 35. The Sarasota Bay front and John Ringling Causeway. Courtesy of the author.](image)

440 Ringling School of Art and Design, 2007 General Bulletin, 188.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Amanda Ellen Meter was born January 16, 1985 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but spent much of her childhood in Sarasota, Florida. In the spring of 2007, she completed her Bachelor’s degree in History and American & Florida Studies at The Florida State University. During her time at FSU, Amanda spent a summer studying abroad in Florence, Italy; a decision that undoubtedly change her career ambitions and life goals. Under the advisement of Prof. Jennifer Koslow, in spring of 2009, she obtained her Master’s degree, also from the Department of History at FSU, in Historical Administration and Public History with an emphasis in Museum Studies.

Upon graduation, she plans to pursue a career in development and fundraising for non-profits, specifically within the museum community.