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THE RINGLINGS IN SARASOTA:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY
by Susan A. Duckett

Known primarily for their work with the circus, John and Charles Ringling made significant contributions to Sarasota. The only two survivors of the original five-member team, the brothers’ rivalry, aptly displayed in their Florida activities, became especially apparent once the others had passed from the scene. Ralph C. Caples, agent for the New York Central Railroad, brought the Sarasota area to John Ringling’s attention in 1909. By the 1920s, John and Charles led the boom in Sarasota along with Owen Burns, Ralph Caples, Joseph Lord, and Arthur B. Edwards; their contributions took the form of building hotels, developing property, and cultivating local business interests.¹

John Ringling purchased his first parcel in Sarasota from Charles Thompson, one-time manager of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. John and his wife Mable lived happily in the frame house which stood on the bayfront property until their return in 1923 from a trip to Italy. Mable aspired to living in a mansion, and John obliged her. Thus began his Florida empire with the construction of Ca’ D’Zan, or “House of John” in Venetian dialect. Completed in 1926 and located on Indian Rocks Beach on Sarasota Bay, the mansion was built at a cost of approximately $1.25 million. Like the house’s furnishings, the concrete lions which guard the entrance were brought by John Ringling from Europe. The marble, tile, and colored glass windows were also imported. The main hall contains an Aeolian organ which alone cost $50,000. Charles installed a similar instrument in his own Sarasota mansion, located just north of the Ca’ D’Zan. John Ringling sought (successfully) to create a palace as ornate as Henry Flagler’s Whitehall in Palm Beach and James Deering’s Vizcaya in Miami.²

Before his home was finished, John Ringling began construction of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art to house the fruits of his European buying spree of 1923. Marble columns, hand carved doorways, and a bronze replica of Michelangelo’s David, along with numerous Renaissance paintings, were placed in the museum which started construction in 1927 and eventually was willed with the Ca’ D’Zan to the State of Florida in 1946.³

Other projects undertaken by Ringling did not fare as well as his mansion and museum. He began constructing the Ringling Causeway in 1925 in order to connect the mainland and Longboat Key, where he planned to build a luxurious hotel, the Ritz-Carleton. The causeway alone cost him $750,000 and took two years to complete. The economic boom burst, however, and work on the Ritz (into which Ringling poured $650,000) stopped in 1926. Instead, Ringling chose to purchase the already operative El Verona Hotel from Owen Burns and rename it the John Ringling Hotel.

Charles Ringling followed his brother to Sarasota in 1910, creating winter-vacation homes for himself and his daughter Hester. Costing $880,000 and $750,000 respectively, the two homes, also on Indian Rocks Beach, were connected by an arched walkway, built in Mediterranean style. While Charles’s home and furnishings followed English designs, Hester’s home reflected those of the Mediterranean. Charles Ringling died in 1926. After the death of his wife Esther,
Charles’s house was sold to Gerald Collins in 1953 ($200,000) and to Fred Wynans of Pennsylvania in 1958 ($300,000). New College later acquired the building for $400,000. Hester died in 1965 whereupon New College acquired her twenty-two room house and named it after the school’s founder, A.W. Cook.⁴
John and Charles Ringling.

Photographs from *Those Amazing Ringlings*. 
A poster advertising the Ringling Brothers’ circus at the turn of the century.
Aerial view of the Ringling properties. The Ca’ D’Zan stands in the background; the Charles Ringling mansion is to the right, close to Sarasota Bay.

Photograph courtesy of New College Library.

John Ringling built an eight-thousand-square-foot terrace onto the west side of his home, which was modeled after the Doge’s Palace in Venice, Italy. The roofing tiles were imported from Barcelona.

Photograph from *Yesterday’s Sarasota.*
The west side of Ca' D'Zan. Named after a mansion he saw while in Madrid, John Ringling’s home was completed in December 1926 at a cost of approximately $1.25 million. Dwight James Baum designed the building.

Photograph courtesy of the John and Mable Museum of Art.

The Ca’ D’Zan’s formal dining room. The ceiling was made of inlaid black walnut. The mansion contains thirty rooms and fourteen baths.

Photograph courtesy of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.
Front entrance to the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. Begun in 1927, the property was donated to the State of Florida in 1946. John H. Phillips designed the building.

Photograph courtesy of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

John Ringling collected 27 tapestries and over 600 paintings for his museum. His favorite artists included Cranach, Rubens, Poussin, Hals, Van Dyck, and Guercino.

Photograph courtesy of the Manatee County Historical Society.
The completed courtyard of the Ringling Museum. John Ringling purchased the property from Sarasota in 1912.

Photograph courtesy of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

While in Europe in 1923, John Ringling went on a buying spree of Renaissance art. Pictured here is a bronzed copy of Michelangelo’s David, which stands twenty feet high.

Photograph from That Amazing Ringlings.
Entrance to the E1 Verona hotel. John Ringling renamed it the John Ringling Hotel after purchasing it from Owen Burns, the original owner.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota Historical Archives.
John Ringling eventually abandoned his Ritz-Carleton project on Longboat Key and settled for the Ringling Hotel to rival Charles Ringling’s Sarasota Terrace.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota Historical Archives.

The open-air courtyard dining room of the John Ringling Hotel. Designed by Dwight James Baum, it was originally named after Burns' wife.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota Historical Archives.
Swinging door leading to the dining room of the John Ringling Hotel.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota Historical Archives.
Two views of the courtyard outside the John Ringling Hotel.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota Historical Archives.
Decorative water fountain located behind the John Ringling Hotel.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota Historical Archives.
Front view of the Charles Ringling mansion, located north of the Ca’ D’Zan on Sarasota’s Indian Rocks Beach. The tile was imported from Cuba.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.

West side of the Charles Ringling mansion. The house stands on a lot 900 feet wide and 2,000 feet deep.

Photograph from Those Amazing Ringlings.
Charles Ringling modeled his home and furnishings after English designs. Most of the furnishings, including these eighteenth-century living room pieces, were imported from Sheraton and Hepplewhite of England.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.

The music room of the Charles Ringling mansion. Like John, Charles had an Aeolian player organ built into the north wall of the room. The floor is made of teakwood planks and the wainscot of American walnut. The design is Italian Renaissance.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.
The front gate to the Charles Ringling property.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.

View from the front entrance to the Charles Ringling mansion down the 2,000-foot driveway.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.
Charles Ringling built an arched walkway in Mediterranean style between his home and that of his daughter Hester.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.

Hester Ringling’s home during construction. It was built in Mediterranean style at a cost of $750,000.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.
The west side of Hester Ringling’s home. Following her death in October 1965, it was sold to

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.

The living room of Hester Ringling’s home is only one of twenty-two rooms.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.
Dining room in Hester Ringling’s home.

Photograph courtesy of the New College Library.

Charles Ringling was instrumental in designing Sarasota’s Courthouse, which was built on the land he donated after Sarasota seceded from Manatee County in 1921. Dwight James Baum designed the structure which was finished in 1927 and paid for by a bond issue of $500,000.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota Historical Archives.


3 Ibid. 154.

4 *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, May 2, 1976; *Through the Ages* 8 (August 1930), 3-9, in Sarasota Historical Archives.