



TheRingling

# The Ringling Story

THE JOHN & MABLE RINGLING MUSEUM OF ART

STATE ART MUSEUM OF FLORIDA | FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

# The Ringling Story

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## HISTORY OF THE RINGLING SARASOTA, FLORIDA

The Ringling is home to one of the preeminent art and cultural collections in the United States. Its story begins nearly a century ago, with the circus impresario, John Ringling and his beloved wife's shared love for Sarasota, Italy, and art.

# The Ringling Story

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May 5, 1866

## John Nicholas Ringling

John Nicholas Ringling was born in McGregor, Iowa to August Ringling, a German immigrant harness maker and his wife, Marie Salome Juliar. John was the second youngest in a family of seven brothers and one sister.



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March 3, 1875

## Mable Burton Ringling

Born Armilda Burton, Mable Ringling was a woman of humble origins. She was born in the farming community of Moons, Ohio. She was one of five daughters and a son born to George Wesley and Mary Elizabeth Burton.



# The Ringling Story

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December 29, 1905

## The Marriage of John and Mable

While it is not known where or how they first met, John married Mable Burton in Hoboken, New Jersey. He was thirty-nine and she was thirty at the time of their marriage.



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1907

## The “Kings of the Show World”

In 1907 the Ringling brothers purchased the Barnum & Bailey show, which proved to be a fortuitous investment. They made enormous profits from the addition of B&B. In their first year they recovered their entire \$410,000 investment. They became circus kings of the world by adopting and observing the simple rule that it is better to be straight than crooked. In 1927 Ringling moved the winter quarters to Sarasota.



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1911

## The Sarasota Years Begin

In 1911 John and Mable purchased a house called Palms Elysian and 20 acres of land on Sarasota Bay. They began spending winters in Sarasota and in the 1920s, they became active in the community and purchased more and more real estate. At one time, John and Charles owned more than 25 percent of Sarasota's total area.



Palms Elysian

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1926

## Ca' d'Zan

New York architect Dwight James Baum designed the Ca' d'Zan. Mable played an active role in its design. It took only two years to complete at a cost of \$1.5 million (\$24,870,000 today). It is built in the style of Italy's Venetian Gothic palaces using fine materials including colored marble, glazed terracotta and stained glass. An Aeolian organ graced the central court. Ca' d'Zan is 36,000 sq.ft. and has fifty-six rooms and five floors.



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1926

## Museum of Art

John began collecting art in 1925 and concluded his acquisitions mostly by the end of 1930. He traveled the world with his dealer associate Julius Bohler to acquire works from museums deaccessioning and noble homes liquidating art to pay taxes.



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1926

## Museum of Art

He particularly was drawn by provenance, the people who owned the work prior to his purchase, including the Astors and European nobility. At the same time, he hired the architect John H. Phillips to design his museum. Phillips had designed the Caples mansion next door and designed the central section of the Metropolitan Museum and the MIT campus in Cambridge.

The art magazine Art News commented on the circus-man turned art collector: “The number of men who are active both as heads of art museums and of circuses is somewhat limited.”



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1926

## Museum of Art

It took two years to construct the museum, though John never fully completed the crypt under David, which was to be his last resting place. John's masterpiece was the acquisition of the four Eurcharist cycle paintings by Rubens. The space in which they hang, Gallery 2, was designed especially for these works and creates one of the most spectacular galleries in America.



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June 8, 1929

## Mable Dies

After wintering in Ca' d'Zan only three years, Mable passed away in New York at the age of fifty-four. She suffered from diabetes complicated from Addison's disease. Mable Ringling left a rich legacy we are fortunate to still enjoy today.



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1930-36

## John's final years

Impacts from the market crash, the sinking of his yacht Zalophus, and lawsuits from Owen Burns and others in the region and nationally, left John short on cash. But his \$2 million acquisition of the American Circus Corporation was one of his biggest mistakes. Angry that two of the American Circus Corporation's circuses had wrested Ringling Brothers time slot at Madison Square Gardens he bought the ACC outright without informing his business partners, including his sister-in-law Edith.



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1930-36

## John's final years

He quickly went into debt and eventually lost control of the Circus. His poor health due to thrombosis continued. His hasty wedding to Emily Haag Buck in 1930 soon collapsed into a protracted and nasty divorce. The divorce finally settled in July 1936.



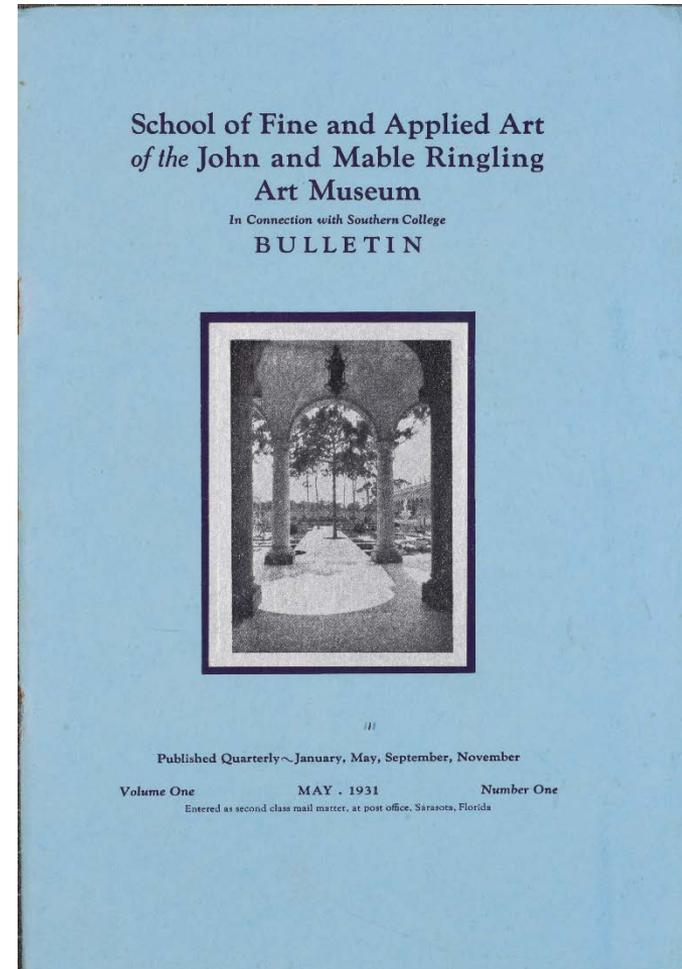
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1931

## The Art School

John Ringling envisioned an art school as part of his museum from the very beginning. The School was founded on March 31, 1931 through the generosity of John Ringling. Initially operated by Southern College in Lakeland for several years it soon became an independent art school now called Ringling College of Art and Design.



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December 2, 1936

## John dies

John died of pneumonia, at age 70, in his home on Park Avenue, in New York City. Upon John's passing the Ringling Estate is bequeathed to the people of Florida.



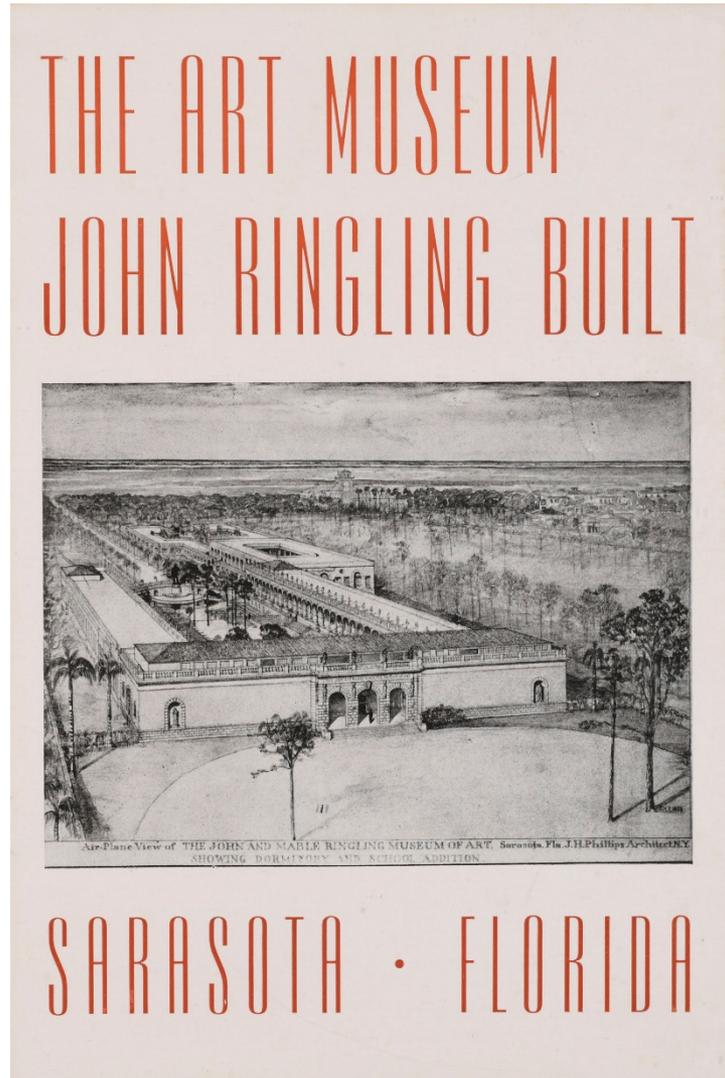
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1936-1946

## A Transition

Between 1936 and 1946 the Museum was only occasionally opened and not properly maintained. With the heat and humidity of the summer months, paintings suffered and required care that was not available. At the same time, the Ringling estate was settled, creditors paid, and the state of Florida took possession.



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1946

## Ringling Museum of Art reopens

Governance of Ringling initially resided with the Florida Board of Control overseeing higher education institutions.



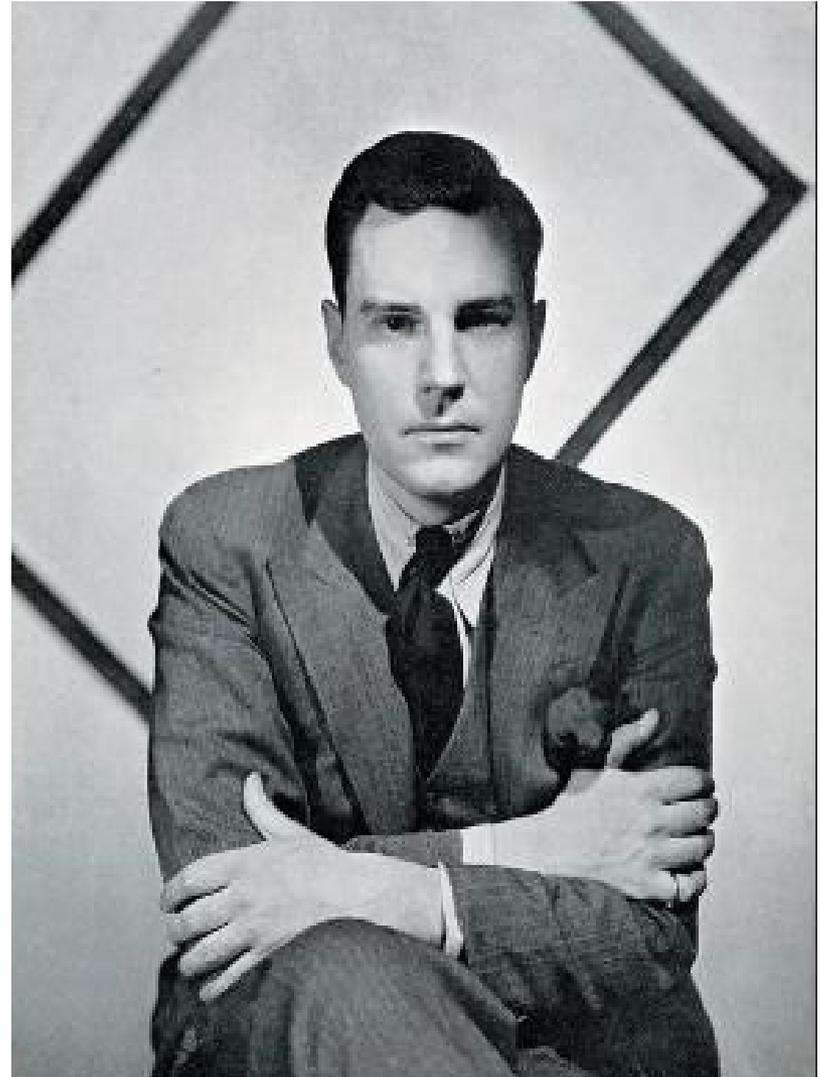
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1947 - 1957

## The Museum's First Director

In 1947 Arthur Everett "Chick" Austin, Jr. was hired as The Ringling's first director. Austin was considered one of America's top connoisseurs of Baroque art. He also incorporated Performance and Contemporary Art into the museum to make Sarasota a destination for artists and creatives. In 1947 Chick met painter Syd Solomon who became a close friend.



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1948

## Circus Museum

In 1948 Chick Austin established the Circus Museum to honor the memory of John Ringling. It was the first museum in the country to document the rich history of the American circus. The original circus collection included props, costumes and posters donated by local circus families.



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1952

## Historic Asolo Theater Opens

Chick Austin purchased the decorative elements of a theater in 1949. It was originally built in 1798 to honor Queen Caterina Coronaro who was exiled from Cyprus in the 1600s. The theater was originally located in Caterina's castle in the hill-town of Asolo near Venice, Italy.



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Late 1955-57

## The Manley Building

Chick Austin hired Marion Manley, the second female architect licensed in Florida, to design a new building for the Asolo Theater on campus. The theater became the center of the performing arts in Sarasota hosting emerging performing arts companies that would become the Sarasota Opera and Asolo Repertory Theater and presenting contemporary performances by Trisha Brown Company and Laurie Anderson in later years.



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1958

## Asolo Opening

The opening for the Asolo Theater in its new home was a celebration of the arts and brought together artists, performers, and audiences in formal attire for an evening of theater, music and dancing.



# The Ringling Story

1958

## A solo opening



THE JOHN RINGLING THEATRE IN SARASOTA IS OPENED BY THE STATE

### SARASOTA SPECTACLE

Theater brought from Venice opens with opera

In Sarasota, Fla., home of circuses, the Ringling Museum of Art recently put on a party that sparkled with the popularity of the great showman. The affair began with an opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, performed to celebrate the formal opening of the Asolo Theater (opposite page). The theater was built near Venice in the 18th Century but dismantled in 1930. Florida bought it several years ago for use on the Venetian-styled John Ringling

estate which the circus magnate gave the state. After the opera, guests dove to the Ringling mansion where they spent the rest of the evening dancing in tapatorial splendor and being entertained by fireworks, jugglers and acrobats. Couples swept around a ballroom which was strung with garle streamers and brightened by borrowed circus decorations. During the last dance a guest, admiring the spectacle, said, "John Ringling would have loved this."



PORKA DANCING in great ball feels New York City Opera square. Jacqueline Hensley and Irene Robert Roosevelt (left center) taking lively part.



ACROBATIC ENTERTAINMENT carrying out Venetian theme is provided by acrobats of Christiani Brothers Circus who do hazardous balancing act.

Christiani Brothers  
Circus performer on  
the Rolla Bolla

LIFE Magazine, February 17, 1958

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2001-2004

## The Manley Building

With the opening of the FSU Center for Performing Arts in 1989 the Asolo Theater was too small for larger performance groups and, in 2001, the theater closed for performance and was used for collection storage. Eventually it was destroyed in 2004 for construction of the Searing Wing.



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1957 – 1964 2<sup>nd</sup> Director

**J. Kenneth Donahue**

After Chick's death in 1957, his assistant director Kenneth Donahue (pointing) became director. Donahue brought significant exhibitions to Sarasota, including the Abstract Expressionists (Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and others). In 1964 he was appointed assistant director, then director, of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, LACMA.

From 1959–1969 Governance shifted to the Board of Commissioners for State Institutions. The Ringling Board was now appointed by the Governor.



Jorge Manuel Theotokopulis  
*Crucifixion with Virgin Mary and  
St. John the Evangelist*

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1965-72 3<sup>rd</sup> Director

**Curtis G. Coley**

Curtis Coley oversaw construction on the 1965 addition to the Museum of Art with galleries for special exhibitions and offices. He exhibited numerous contemporary art exhibitions including Thomas Chimes and Oscar Cahen. The young artist Sam Gilliam was exhibited as part of a group show in 1969.

From 1969-2000 Governance shifted to the Department of State



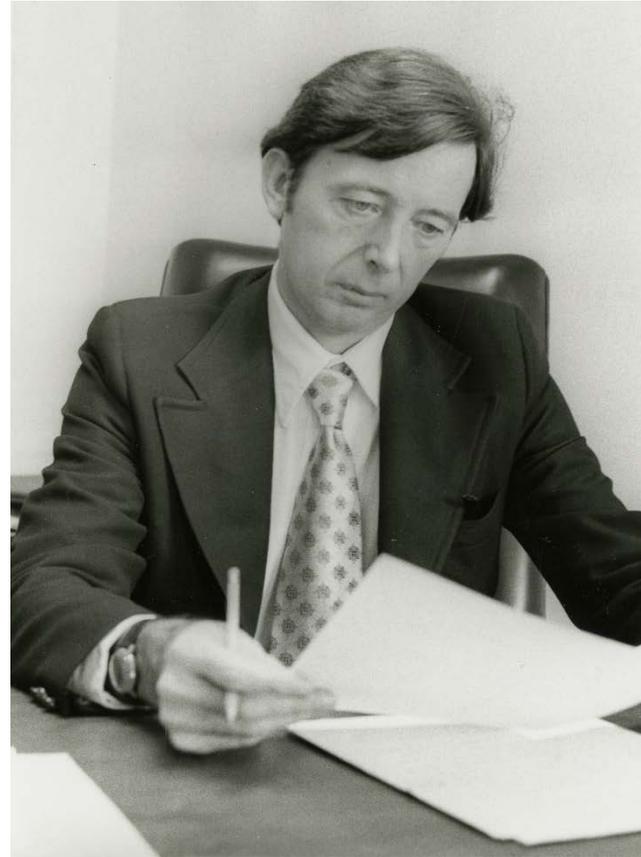
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1973-84 4<sup>th</sup> Director

**Richard Carroll**

Carroll acquired Rubens' *The Triumph of Divine Love* (the fifth painting in the Eucharist series in Gallery One) for \$200,000 and unveiled it at the museum's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration that year. He established the Archives department and the *Italian Baroque Portraiture* exhibition traveled to the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1984.



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1980-82

## Historical Recognition

In 1980 the Museum of Art was designated as the official State Art Museum of Florida. In 1982 the Estate was designated as part of the Caples-Ringling Historic District, which includes property once owned by Charles Ringling, and is now part of New College.



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1985-92 5<sup>th</sup> Director

**Laurence J. Ruggiero**

Larry Ruggiero did a major reinstallation of the original galleries, some of which is still visible today. During his tenure, the collection traveled to Washington DC's National Gallery of Art.

After leaving Ringling, Larry became director of the Morse Museum in Winter Park until his death in 2022.



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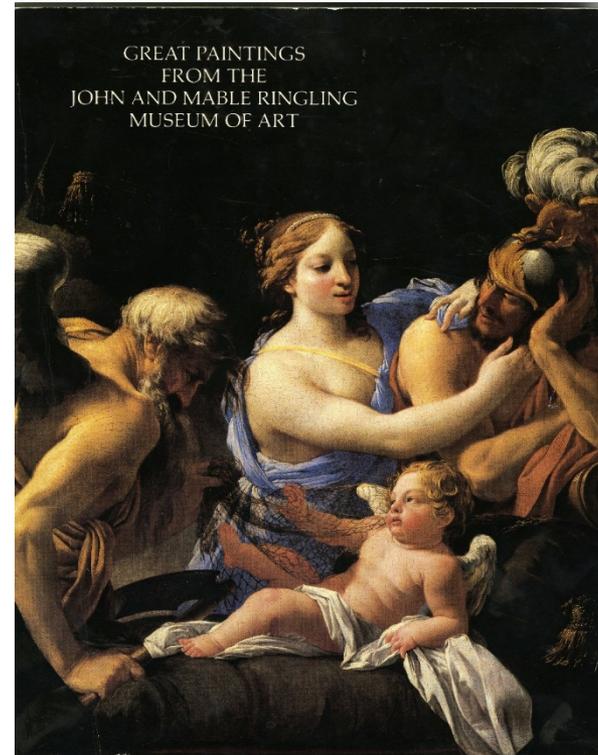
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1986

**National Gallery of Art  
Washington, D.C.**

*Great Paintings from the  
John and Mable Ringling  
Museum of Art*

156,755 visitors to this exhibition



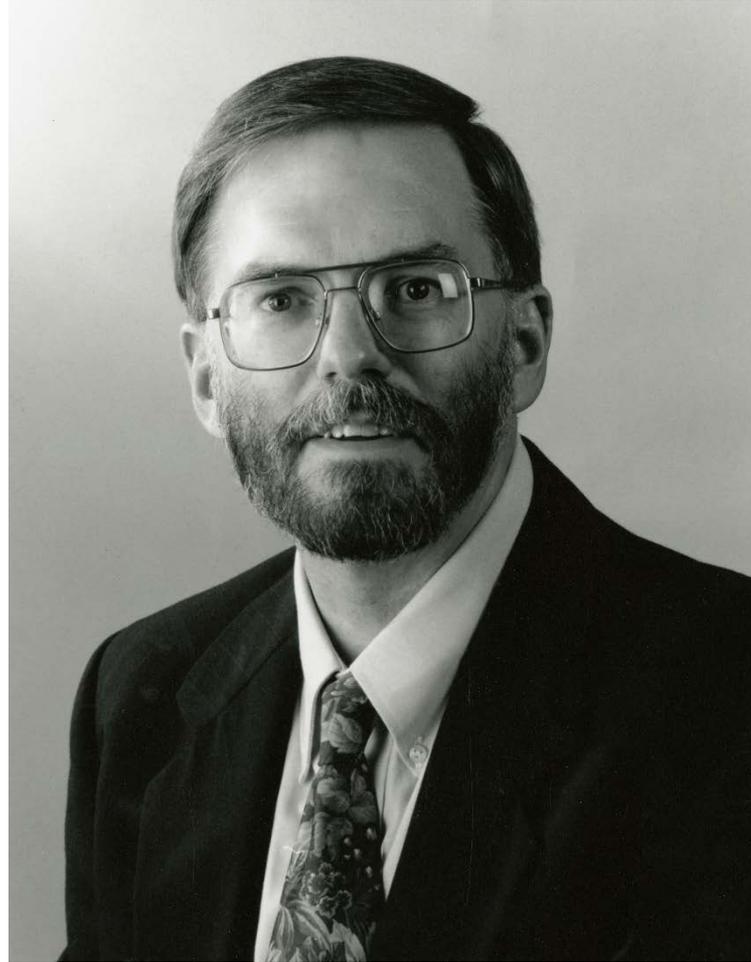
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1992-99 6<sup>th</sup> Director

**David M. Ebitz**

Despite challenges with lack of financial resources, fewer staff, and aging infrastructure with the Ca' d'Zan and Museum of Art, David Ebitz organized an exhibition of the collection to travel to 4 venues in Japan, beginning with Kyoto. In 1996, he initiated a campaign to raise money to restore the Ca' d'Zan and launched the renovation in 1998.



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1996-98

## The Ringling in Japan

The exhibition toured to Hiratsuka Museum of Art, Tobu Museum of Art, Takamatsu City Museum of Art, and The Miyagi Museum of Art, Sendai. The exhibition was a sensation in Japan and created international media for The Ringling. It created some controversy locally due to the absence of the Ringling's most important works for an entire year while in Japan.



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1998-2004

## Restoration of Ca' d'Zan

Over the years, John and Mable's mansion had fallen into a state of neglect, and by the mid-1990s, the local community acted.

Local, state, and national campaigns secured private and public funding to restore the architectural treasure. The campaign began in 1996 and saw three phases of restoration, and the mansion reopened in April 2002.



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2000

## A New Beginning

In 2000 the State of Florida passed governance of The Ringling to Florida State University (FSU). Together with the FSU Center for the Performing Arts, it is now one of the largest University art complexes in the United States.



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2001-2009 7<sup>th</sup> Director

**John Wetenhall**

Having restored the Ca' d'Zan and the Museum of Art. Additional state and private funds enabled Wetenhall and his board to undertake a major campus design and construction project that greatly expanded the campus and added four new buildings (Tibbals Learning Center, Visitors Pavilion, Searing Wing, and Education Building) by 2008. He also commissioned the James Turrell Skyspace.



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2005 & 2011

## The Tibbals Learning Center

A major new feature of The Ringling campus was the Tibbals Learning Center. Its centerpiece is the miniature tented circus that fills 10,000 sq.ft. of the building built by Howard Tibbals. Coming soon in 2023 is the immersive experience of the Greatest Show on Earth Gallery which highlights the 60 years of ownership of Ringling Brothers Barnum & Baily Circus by the Feld Family.



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1946-Today

## Conservation

In the early years of the museum, temperature and humidity controls were not available and artwork acquired by John Ringling suffered from poor conditions. Later, as technology became available, we could create a better environment for the collections. But conservation needs to be continuous.



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1946-Today

## Conservation

Beginning in 1946 and continuing today, the conservation of our collections was critical. Starting in the late 1940s, Contractual Conservators included Julius Weitzer, Ceasar Diorio, and Edward Korany. Beginning in 1979 Head Conservators were Ted Knightwine, Michelle Scolari and, since 2013, Barbara Ramsay.



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2007

## The Historic Asolo Theater

In the construction of the John McKay Visitors Pavilion room was made to reinstall the now Historic Asolo Theater. The molded and damaged panels took over a year to be cleaned and gilded by Ringling conservators for reinstallation. The theater reopened to the public in 2006.



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2011- 8<sup>th</sup> Director  
**Steven High**

High has to date launched design, construction, and the opening for the Kotler | Coville Glass Pavilion, the Center for Asian Art and the Monda Gallery of Contemporary Art; re-branded The Ringling; opened the Turrell Skyspace, Tibbals Immersive Circus Galleries, the Bolger Playspace, and re-opening of the Historic Circus Museum. He completed a \$100 million comprehensive campaign in 2019.



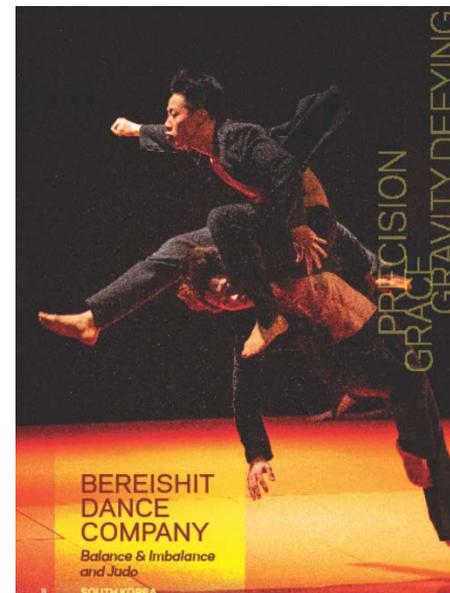
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2009 - present

## Art of Performance at the HAT

Beginning with the Ringling International Art Festival's five years of dynamic programming by Mikhail Baryshnikov as artistic director and continuing with performances of cutting-edge international artists selected by Ringling curators of performance. Recent performances of jazz by Alfredo Rodriguez and Pederito Martinez and dance by south Korea's Bereishit Dance Company reflects the international diversity of performance at the HAT.



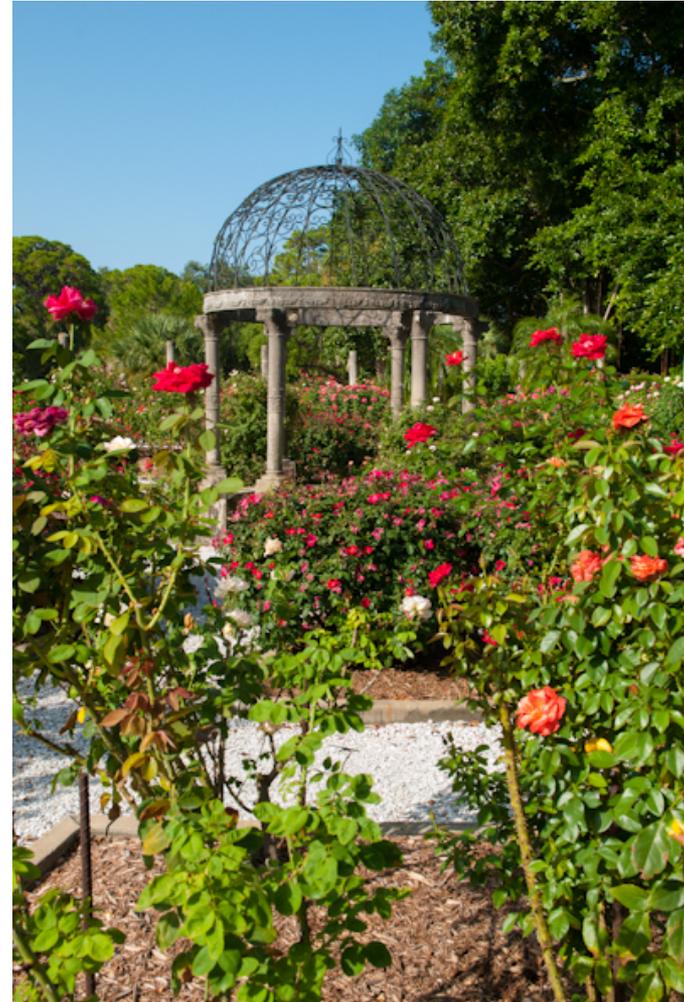
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2006-Today

## Modern Expansion

For over twenty years The Ringling has been in a state of constant expansion. During these years approximately 250,000 sq. ft. of new buildings have more than doubled the existing architectural footprint. Following is the timeline...





**Ca' d'Zan & Museum  
Restoration (1998-2002)  
\$7 million**



**Tibbals Learning  
Center Phase 1 (2005)  
\$10 million**



**Visitors Pavilion (2006)**  
**\$13 million**



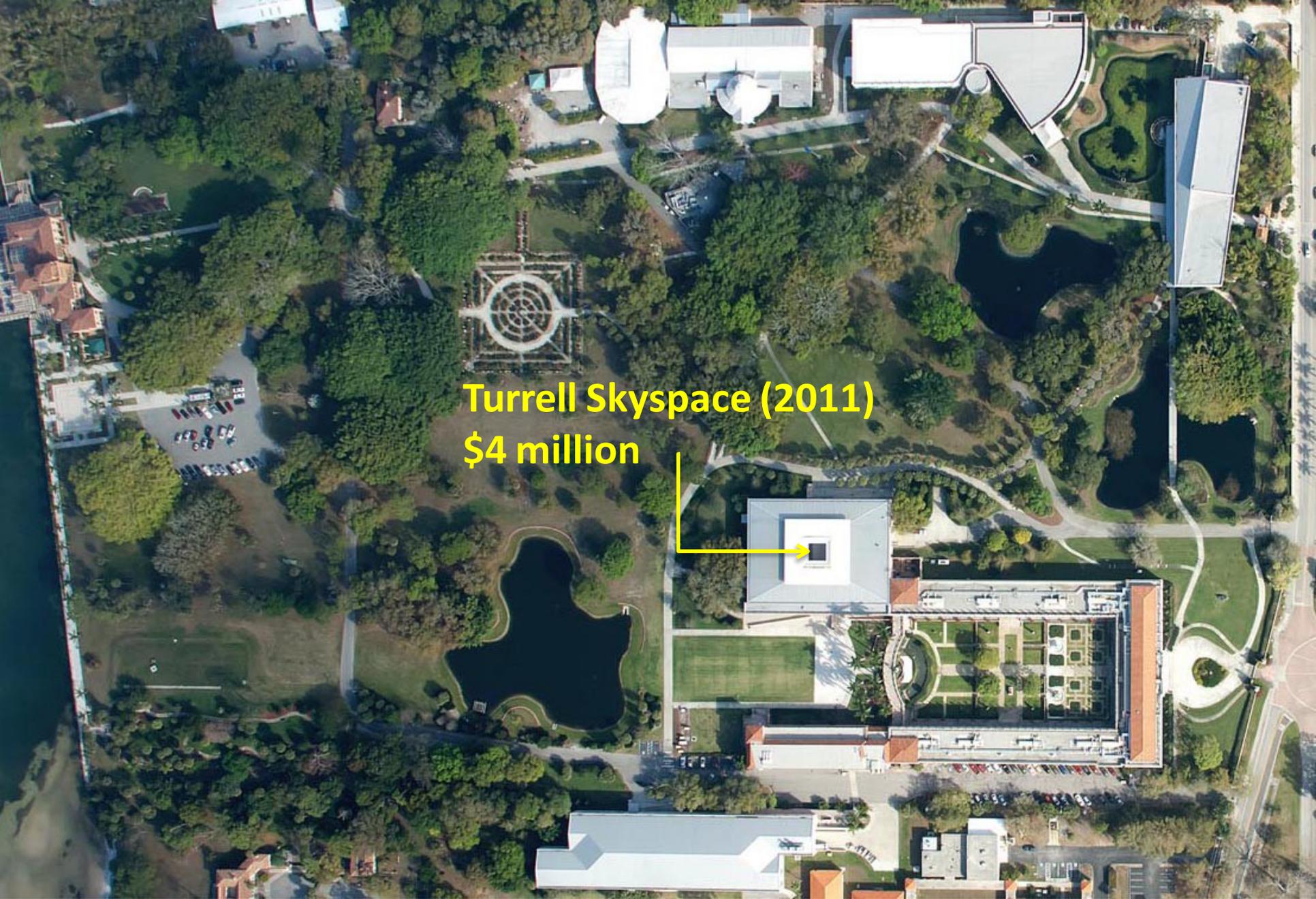
**Library & Conservation  
Center (2007)  
\$13 million**



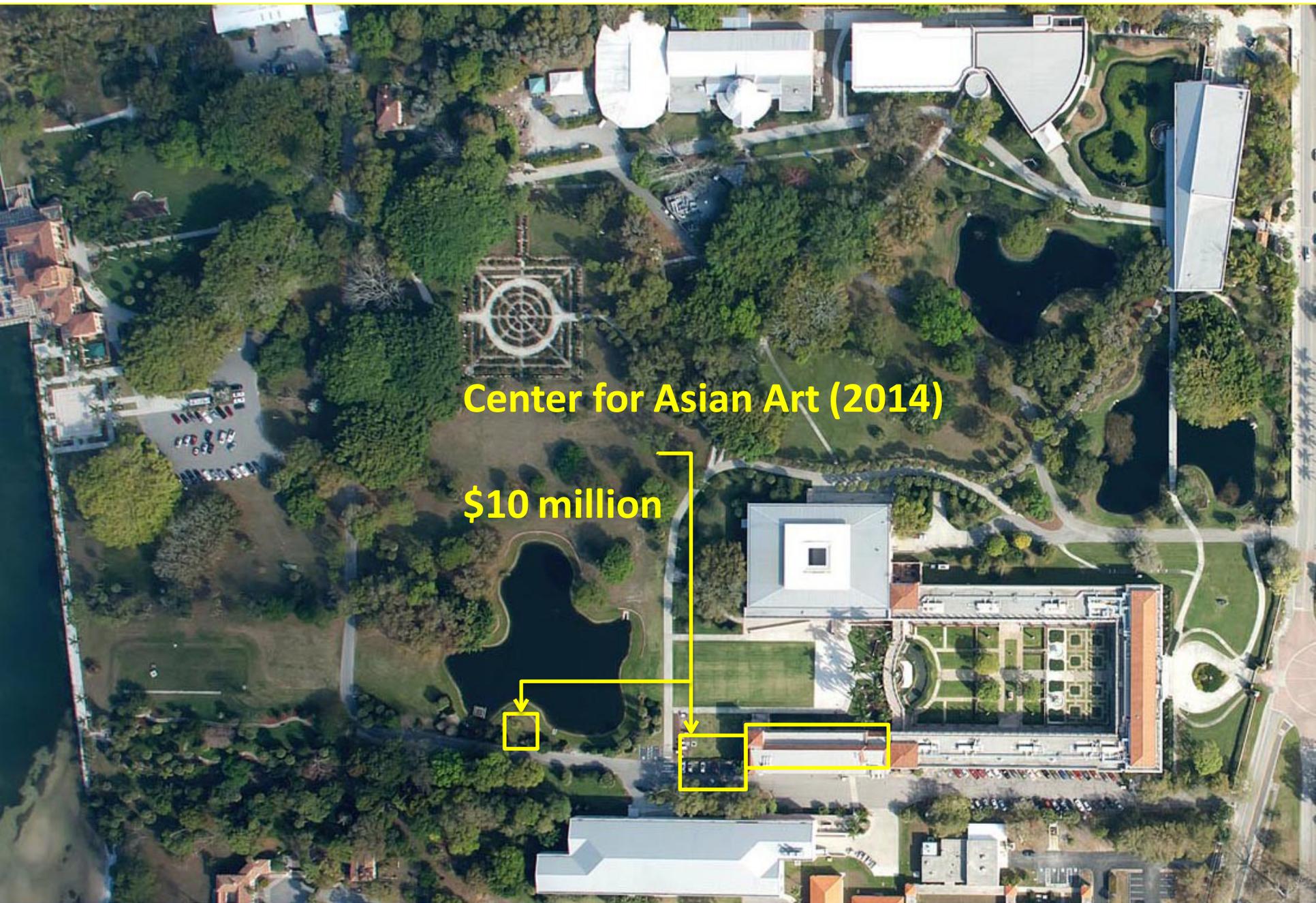
**Searing Galleries (2008)**  
**\$11 million**



**Tibbals Learning  
Center Phase 2 (2011)  
\$7 million**



**Turrell Skyspace (2011)**  
**\$4 million**



**Center for Asian Art (2014)**

**\$10 million**



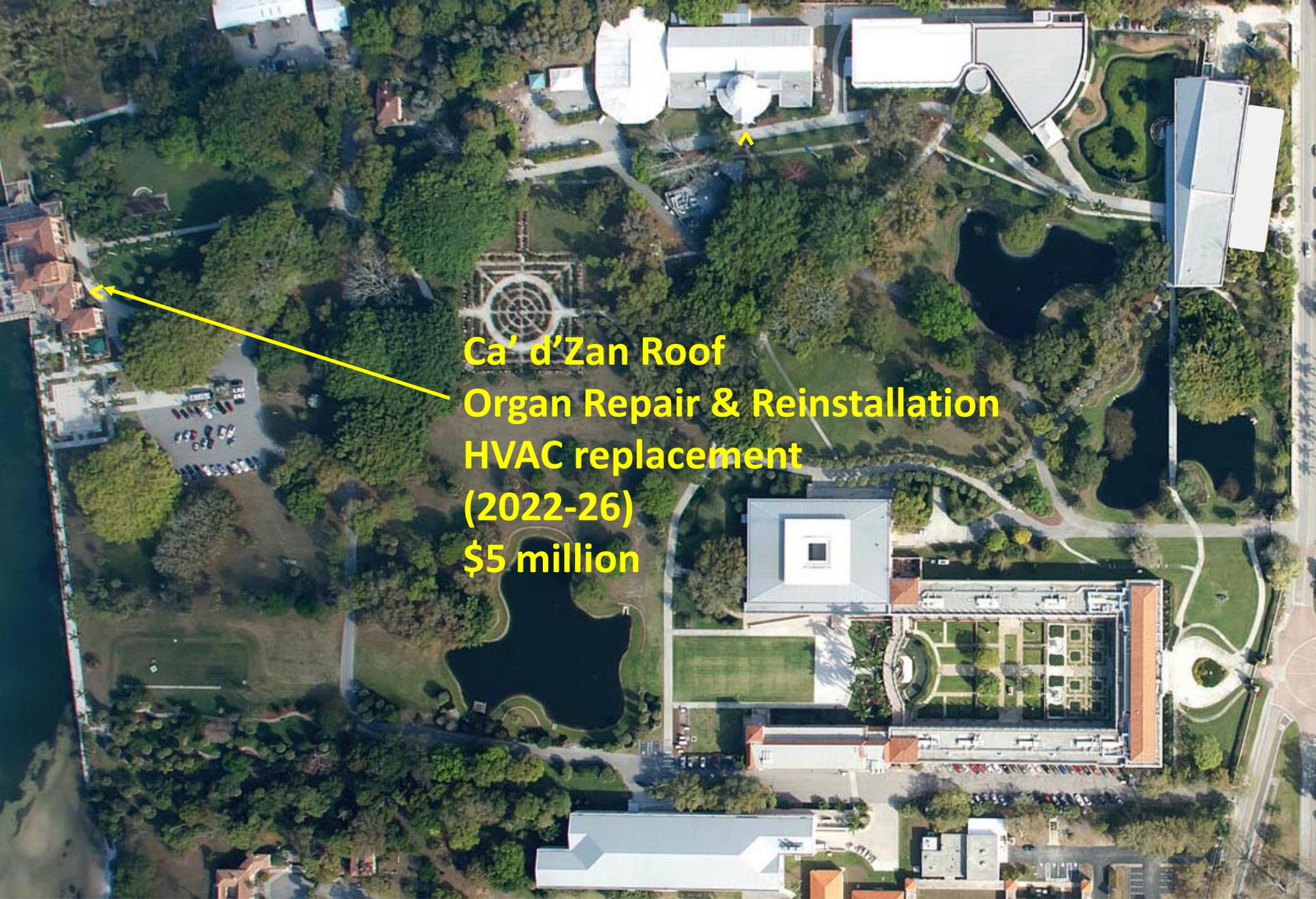
**Glass Pavilion(2017)**  
**\$4 million**



**Ca' d'Zan & Circus  
Renovation (2017-20)  
\$3 million**



**Rupp Pavilion  
Restoration  
(2022-24)  
\$2.5 million**



**Ca' d'Zan Roof  
Organ Repair & Reinstallation  
HVAC replacement  
(2022-26)  
\$5 million**

# The Ringling Story

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2007 to present

## The Ringling Library

Founded in 1946 by combining the libraries of John Ringling and Chick Austin, The Ringling Library has grown to become a world class art research library. With over 70,000 volumes of art books covering the History of Western and Asian Art, the Library is a member of the prestigious Art Discovery Group Catalogue, a consortium of fifty preeminent academic and museum art libraries in North America, Europe, and other countries.



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2011 to present

## The Ringling Arboretum

As the museum expanded, the grounds became an important component of our program. With 200 species of plants and over 2,000 individual trees, The Ringling was officially accredited as a Level 2 Arboretum in 2019. Using the database Treefinder every tree and its location is identified on a GPS map of campus that visitors can access to learn more about each unique tree.



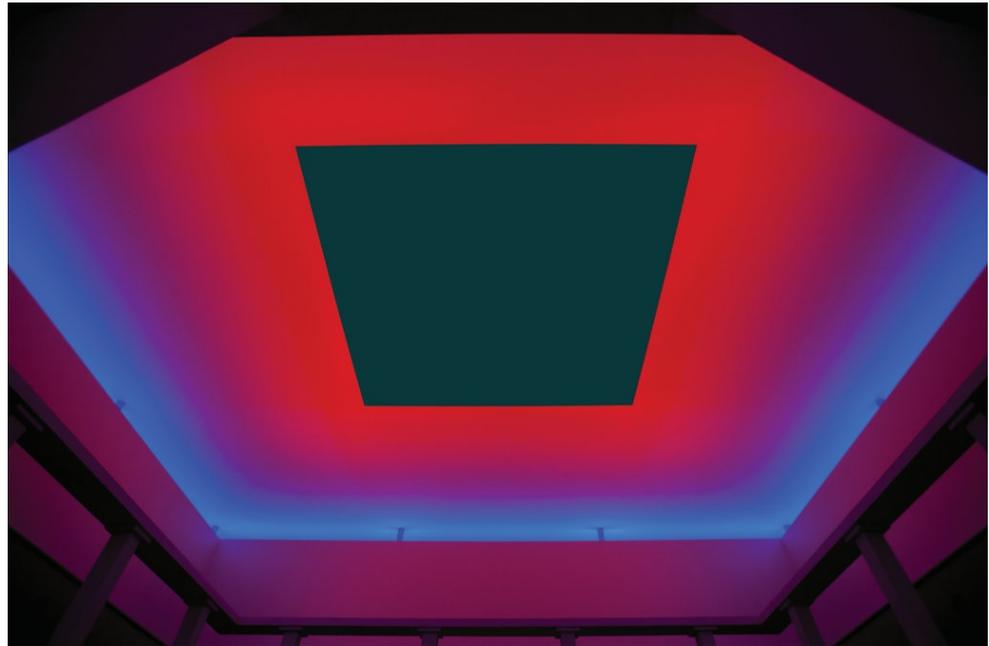
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2011 to present

## The Art of Our Time

Opening in 2011, Joseph's Coat, a Skyspace by James Turrell, signaled the beginning of a new initiative to engage with living visual and performing artists at The Ringling. Following the example of Chick Austin, *Art of Our Time* presents contemporary work by living artists and diversifies the voices and perspectives in our collections and programming.



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2011 to present

## Collection Growth

Since 2011, The Ringling has added over 12,500 artworks to the collection. This expansion featured two new collecting areas (modern glass and photography) and a focus on collecting Contemporary art and Asian art.



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2011 to present

## Collection Growth

The Ringling has focused on exhibiting and acquiring work by artists of color who have been under-represented in our collecting in the past.



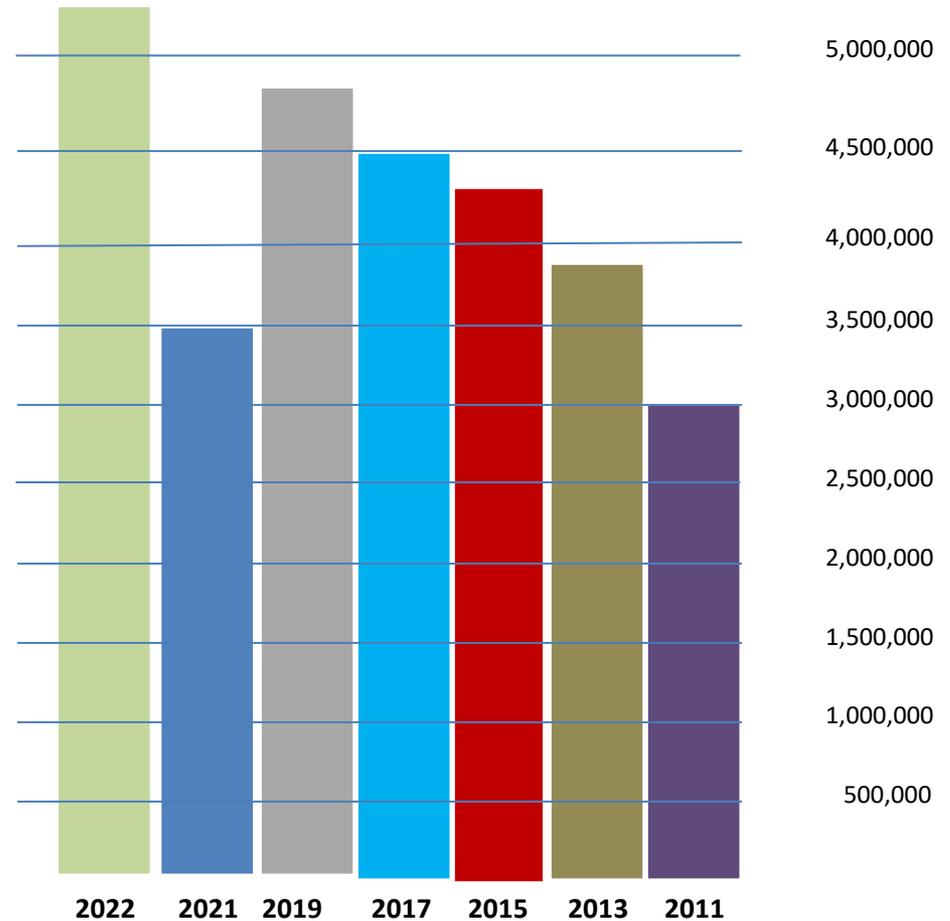
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2011 to present

## Admission & Budget Income

The Ringling has nearly doubled income from admission and its budget has doubled from \$12.5 million in 2011 to \$24.5 million in 2023





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