

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**PRESS PREVIEW: FRIDAY, APRIL 4, 1986
10 a.m.-1 p.m.

BAROQUE PAINTINGS FROM THE JOHN AND MABLE RINGLING MUSEUM OF ART
AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON, D.C. January 29, 1986. On April 6 the National Gallery will join the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida, in celebrating its 40th anniversary of state ownership. To commemorate this occasion, 33 masterworks from the Ringling Museum's extraordinary collection of baroque paintings will go on view from that day in the National Gallery of Art's West Building, until September 29, 1986.

Formed chiefly during the 1920s by John Ringling, the famous circus entrepreneur, and his wife, Mable Burton Ringling, and housed in a lavish villa derived from 15th-century Italian prototypes, the Ringling Museum possesses a collection of Italian and northern baroque masterpieces that is exceptional in both quality and number.

According to Laurence J. Ruggiero, director of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the reasons for John Ringling's fascination with the baroque---for him the period between roughly 1550 and 1775---are not difficult to ascertain:

"In the 1920s and early 1930s, baroque painting was out of favor, so that a new collector could carve out a niche for himself in this area at relatively reasonable cost....More to the point was the personality of the man himself. There can be little question that he had an innate sympathy for an era whose character was much like his own. The baroque was marked by epic theatricality and illusionism....moreover, he formed

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his collection on the colossal scale that marked his circus showmanship."

The 33 paintings that visitors to the National Gallery will see include 20 works by Italian artists, the area of the Ringling Museum's greatest strength, ten by Flemish and Dutch painters, and three by French masters. While each national school possesses its own identifying features, the active cross-fertilization of ideas which took place among these three geographic centers during the 17th and 18th centuries accounts for their shared adoption of the baroque manner. Under the dominant influence of past and contemporary Italian examples, this style can be broadly defined as having introduced a new directness in naturalistic observation as well as an emotive excitement which is conveyed by the activity of light on surfaces and space.

Among the Italian masterpieces included in the exhibition are the Genoese artist Bernardo Strozzi's dramatic Act of Mercy (c. 1618-1620) and the Lombard Francesco del Cairo's elegantly morbid Judith with the Head of Holofernes (mid-1630s). Both are interpretations of the revolutionary manner of Caravaggio, a key figure in the founding of the baroque style. Two works (Hagar and the Angel, c. 1637; and Augustus and the Sibyl, c. 1660) by the Roman Pietro da Cortona, the dominating master of the style in the middle years of the 17th century, exemplify the physical, visual, and emotional excitement characteristic of the baroque. At the same time, preserving the traditional values of Italian classicism, Cortona deliberately idealized the beauty of both figures and landscape.

Closely parallel in attitude are two works by the leading Italianate Frenchmen, whose formative years, in the case of Simon Vouet, or entire career, as is the case for Nicolas Poussin, were spent in

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Rome. Vouet's Mars and Venus with Cupid and Chronos (c. 1640) is a particularly beautiful example of the power of the baroque style to evoke ideas of sensuality, while cloaking them in a respectability derived from a literary moral---here the victory of time over love and beauty. Poussin's The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John (1655), characteristic of the painter's latest style, avoids Vouet's sensuous and decorative manner in favor of a severity and grandeur which nonetheless conveys powerful emotion no less strongly contained.

Further Italian paintings of exceptional importance include two works by the painter-poet Salvator Rosa (Allegory of Study, c. 1649; and Landscape with a Lake, c. 1655). These paintings exemplify Rosa's highly romanticized interpretation of both portraiture and landscape, while, in addition, his technique and use of oblique allegorical allusions convey a sense of mystery. Major Venetian works of the 18th century are Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini's The Entombment (1719) and Francesco Guardi's early panels, Abundance and Hope (late 1740s-early 1750s). All three paintings are characteristic of the effervescent handling and lightened palette which typify the late baroque.

Although the baroque masters of northern Europe, specifically Holland and Flanders, produced magisterial religious paintings such as the monumental Hagar and Ishmael in the Wilderness (c. 1662) by Karel Dujardin, it is chiefly their portraits and still lifes that astound in this exhibition. Among the former are Peter Paul Rubens' Portrait of the Archduke Ferdinand (1635) and Frans Hals' Pieter Jacobsz. Olycon (c. 1639), where the directness of contact with the viewer and the pyrotechnical handling convey the sitters' phenomenal aliveness. Comparable in painterly ambition and acute observation are Jan Davidsz. de Heem's Still Life with Parrots (late 1640s) and Willem van Aelst's

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Still Life with Dead Game (late 1660s). These are large-scale tours de force which dazzle the eye with their light-filled opulence and vitality.

Anthony F. Janson, chief curator of the Ringling Museum, has organized the exhibition and has written the color brochure with checklist which accompanies it. In addition, Dr. Janson's newly released catalogue, Great Paintings from the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, published in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc. (New York, 1986), will be available at the Gallery's bookstores.

Professor Sydney J. Freedberg, chief curator of the National Gallery of Art, and Beverly L. Brown, research curator of European painting, have coordinated the exhibition in Washington.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Neill Heath, Catherine Freedberg, Randall Kremer or Ellen Stanley, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 (202) 842-6353.