

A full-page photograph of Marissa S. Hershon, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless dress, standing with her arms crossed on a wooden balcony in a grand, ornate hall. The hall features a high ceiling with intricate wooden beams and painted decorations, and a large chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The background shows arched windows and a balcony with a decorative railing.

Marissa S. Hershon

Curator of the
Ringling's Ca' d'Zan
and Decorative Arts

Marissa was named Curator of Ca' d'Zan and Decorative Arts at The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art in May. "I'm excited about researching arts and past eras, styles, and craftsmen. I rediscover the lives of artists with amazing products and place a work in view with a new perspective."

John and Mable Ringling collected fine art from around the world as evidenced by their impressive collection in the Ringling Museum of Art and Ca' d'Zan, their home on Sarasota Bay. Not only were they collectors of paintings, but they also collected decorative arts that are displayed at the museum and mansion. Marissa Hershon, a respected and experienced professional, was named Curator of Ca' d'Zan and Decorative Arts at The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art in May.

"I am a curator and art historian with specialty in decorative arts," says Marissa. "The term decorative arts includes a huge variety of media such as silver, glass, ceramics, and furniture that are beautiful, but also utilitarian and functional. Decorative arts researchers study material culture especially craftsmanship, design, and manufacture of objects. I want to research the maker's mark, ownership history, where the object came from, and where it might have been previously exhibited. Ringling has 6,047 decorative art objects including all of the furniture and items in Ca' d'Zan and accessioned art pieces. I'm excited about researching arts and past eras, styles, and craftsmen. I rediscover the lives of artists with amazing products and place a work in view with a new perspective."

Marissa's title infers her responsibility as the curator for Ca' d'Zan, the lavish mansion built by John and Mable Ringling that was completed in 1925. The 36,000 square foot Venetian Gothic mansion with 41 rooms and 15 bathrooms is a reflection of the architecture of homes on canals in Venice, Italy. The home's interior showcases art, objects, and furniture that are original to the home.

"My role regarding Ca' d'Zan is to preserve and maintain the contents and architectural integrity of the home. I am excited about documenting the furnishing plan—what is original and what has been added over the years by a different curatorial vision—especially the change in fashion and taste. The Ringlings collected decorative arts and there were future gifts such as the Kotler donation of studio glass. After I research and document the collection, I want to collaborate with the education department to integrate new findings into programs, gallery talks, and tours. We may plan thematic exhibits with objects and what else is on view at the time," she explains.

Marissa says that on top of present efforts at Ca' d'Zan on cleaning and treatments of artwork and objects, a goal is to restore the Aeolian organ that dates from the 1920s. Even though The Ringling has the paper rolls, the project is a huge undertaking as the pipes are in the wall. Funding for the project would provide music in the mansion that is indicative of the era when the Ringlings lived there.

Marissa's love of art runs deep. "I've always loved art. I was an art history major and did internships in museums including the National Museum of Women in the Arts 20th anniversary. I decided on objects—decorative arts—in graduate school. A couple things influenced me. I was raised in Charleston, South Carolina, and love the regional historical architecture. Secondly, I spent a semester in college in Rome where I saw the real thing—churches, galleries, statues—all things Italian. I see that Italian

influence in Ca' d'Zan."

As a specialist in decorative arts, design, craftsmanship, and architectural history, Marissa was an independent curator and art historian in the Charleston area, a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, a Luce Curatorial Research Fellow at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk with a focus on glass, and a Luce Curatorial Assistant at the Cincinnati Art Museum with a research focus on Cincinnati period silver.

She says her work at these museums were broad in scope with emphasis on exhibitions, acquisitions, and publications. Her expertise is in research of material culture, art history, architectural history, logistics for installation of permanent collection exhibits and gallery rotations, authoring articles and papers, public speaking, and gallery talks.

Regina Palm, Ph.D., Associate Curator, American Art, San Diego Museum of Art, says, "I had the pleasure of first meeting Marissa over eight years ago. At the time, we were both working as research assistants at the Cincinnati Art Museum and, as a result, have come up through the industry together. Marissa has a passion for the decorative arts that is contagious. Her sincere desire to share her love of these objects and the stories that they tell about us and the world more generally is one of the many reasons that Marissa is one of the people in this field who I most respect and admire. Her passion is matched only by her humility. Marissa is an accomplished scholar who has published and lectured widely, but she'll be one of the last people to ever tell you that. Her main concern is simply helping people to understand the historical value that objects hold and enlivening this history in such a way as to make clear how the decorative arts relate to the world we live in today. These objects serve as the visual narrative to history and Marissa's ability to bring them to life is an inherent talent that cannot be taught."

When asked what motivates her, Marissa says that she holds herself to a high standard and wants to rise as an academic, a researcher, and someone who makes art accessible to all. She believes art is for everyone and a goal is to be welcoming to everyone. During tours, her reward is seeing eyes light up when a person sees something new for the first time that sparks interest. She finds balancing time between reading, research, and being present for museum events a challenge. Marissa describes herself as detail oriented, a lifelong learner, curious, strong work ethic, and collegial.

Born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, to a homemaker mother and orthodontist father, Marissa received Bachelor's degree from Tulane University and Master's degree from The Smithsonian Associates and the Corcoran College of Art and Design.

Throughout her career, she says, she has focused on women artists to elevate them and introduce to collectors. She cites Mable Ringling as someone who collected art by female artists. Since female artists are not given their due in the history books, she looks for pieces attributed to women. She wants to make the written record more available and help people rediscover the art of female artists. 📍

📖 STORY: Carol Darling

📷 IMAGES: Evelyn England