

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.
<http://www.wsj.com/articles/guess-co-founder-maurice-marciano-is-opening-las-newest-museum-1480349760>

CULTURE

Guess Co-Founder Maurice Marciano is Opening LA's Newest Museum

Three years ago, the prolific art collector bought a deserted Masonic temple that he has been converting into the Marciano Foundation



COLOR FIELD | Maurice Marciano with Dan Colen's 2014 flower-filled piece, Killed by Death. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

By Kelly Crow

Nov. 28, 2016 11:16 a.m. ET

ONE OF THE MOST mysterious buildings in Los Angeles is a midcentury Freemasons' temple that sits like a white-marble albatross on Wilshire Boulevard a few miles west of the city's downtown. It is covered with cryptic symbols and takes up an entire city block. Built in 1961 as the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, it has hosted secret meetings between Hollywood honchos, late-night boxing matches and a nightclub. But for the past decade it has sat, locked and empty, wreathed in wire fencing.

Maurice Marciano, the ebullient, snowy-haired co-founder of denim juggernaut Guess, has the keys now, after buying this 110,000-square-foot building three years ago for \$8 million with his brother Paul. The Marcianos plan to open it in the spring as the Marciano Art Foundation to display their 1,500-piece collection of contemporary art.

"Imagine—a room just for wigs," Marciano says as he pushes open the doors during a recent visit and weaves around construction equipment to join architect Kulapat Yantrasast inside the main gallery—a cavernous room that once served as the temple's Broadway-scale theater.

In the 1960s, more than 10,000 men in Los Angeles—including film pioneers like producer Darryl F. Zanuck—belonged to a subset of the Masons called the Scottish Rite,

the vestige of an 18th-century social club that emphasizes networking and self-improvement and gives its members medieval-sounding monikers like Knight of the Brazen Serpent or Elu of the Fifteen. To advance through the rite's 33 ranks, members are required to perform in secret historical dramas or morality tales while dressed in ornate costumes. When Marciano bought the space, he discovered dust-covered velvet jackets and powdered wigs. In the rafters, he found 65 scenic backdrops worthy of *The Wizard of Oz*.

"I kept everything," Marciano says, grinning. He plans to preserve some of the artifacts as a Masonic archive, but the rest, he says, "I'm leaving for the artists' imaginations."

—Kulapat Yantrasast

It is
temptin
g to
draw
compari
sons to
the

city's other new art museum, The Broad, a gleaming cube that real-estate billionaire Eli Broad opened last year several miles east. Like Broad, who is from the Midwest, the Marciano brothers came to Los Angeles decades ago with little. Originally from Algeria, they arrived by way of Marseille, France, and built a fashion empire out of stonewashed, skinny jeans and sultry advertisements starring Claudia Schiffer and Anna Nicole Smith (and more recently, Gigi Hadid and Hailey Baldwin). Both Broad and Maurice Marciano, who are friends, have steadily climbed the ranks of the city's artistic elite, with Broad helping to found the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and Marciano now serving as the co-chairman of that institution's board.

Broad methodically amassed a collection he always intended to give away or exhibit publicly, buying internationally recognized postwar trophies by Roy Lichtenstein and Cy Twombly and housing them all in a long-planned futuristic art pod designed by architect Elizabeth Diller. Spend time with Marciano, 67, and you almost get the impression he's opening his museum on a lark—because he finds the challenge invigorating. Since he retired from Guess in 2012, art has been his creative outlet. He's not even sure he wants to call his space a museum, though in terms of square footage, it's as big as MOCA and The Broad.

The artist Alex Israel, known for his pastel-colored self-portraits, acted as the building's accidental real-estate broker. He spotted a for-sale sign on the temple a few years ago and insisted the collector take a look. "I said, 'Wait, before you buy anything else—you have to check out this building on Wilshire,'" Israel says. "It's unlike any other space."

The temple will offer a rare chance to see the Marciano Art Foundation's collection. Though some impressive pieces have been displayed in Guess's slick headquarters in downtown L.A., much of the work has not been exhibited publicly. Aside from lending a few pieces to museums, the brothers have kept their collection discreet—until now. Maurice and Paul, 64, pool their fortunes to buy art for the foundation, but Maurice is primarily in charge of their more recent choices destined for the museum.

A closer look reveals they admire artists who rose to fame in the '90s and beyond, such as the puckish German painter Albert Oehlen, who at one point was using his fingers to paint riotously colorful abstracts. The Marcianos own 17 Oehlens as well as examples by the current generation of art stars influenced by his playful processes, including Rudolf Stingel, Wade Guyton and Seth Price. Lately Maurice has also gravitated to L.A.-based artists like Israel and mixed-media artists Paul Sietsema and Kaari Upson. "We're all waiting to see what he has," says collector Howard Rachofsky.

L.A. native Doug Aitken, an artist whose films have been shown at New York's Museum of Modern Art and Washington, D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum, says Marciano's carefree approach has led him to take risks while building his collection. "A lot of private museums are interested in checking off lists, but they don't create any helpful



Marciano plans to fill a Masonic temple in Los Angeles, which he bought for \$8 million, with some of the 1,500 pieces of art he and his brother have collected for the Marciano Art Foundation. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE



Mark Grotjahn with a 2009 work. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

disruption,” says Aitken, who had long been intrigued by the temple. “I’d been dying to get in there my whole life. The first time I went in there it was pretty creepy. It was like opening up the pyramid of Tutankhamen.”

The Marcianos have earned courage points among the local cognoscenti for tackling the temple, an eyesore that had been vacant since 1994, says Philippe Vergne, MOCA’s director. Its revival has been hailed as proof that this fresh-faced city has history to preserve. The temple could also give

“We don’t need another MOCA or Broad or Hammer Museum. It has to be different.”

—Maurice Marciano

L.A. a hulking, alternative art space similar to what London has with Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall or New York has in the Park Avenue Armory. “I’m slightly jealous,” Vergne says after getting a tour.

Los Angeles cultural circles have grown weary of being compared to New York; here, a midcentury building counts as historic, and the funkier its backstory, the better. “This is

a guy who looks to Los Angeles as a barometer rather than the old model of New York,” says L.A.-based dealer David Kordansky. “Maurice is on the ground here.”



BUILDING HOPES | Mai-Thu Perret's sculpture Black Balthazar in a future gallery. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Like the fraternal society that built the temple, Marciano has been acting largely in secret, conspiring on renovations with Yantrasast, 48, a protégé of minimalist master Tadao Ando. Yantrasast made his name with projects like the sleek Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan and the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky. “I’ve never worked like this,” says Yantrasast of collaborating with Marciano. “The process involved art at every level.”

Before any work began, Marciano invited video artists Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch to come by for a peek. The pair and their friends arrived with tents and cameras—some strapped to drones—and camped in the temple for three months. The frenetic, horror-movie spoof they produced, 2014’s *Ledge*, will be shown under a tent in the museum’s inaugural show, *Unpacking: The Marciano Collection*, organized by guest curator Philipp Kaiser, a former director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, who recently organized The Broad’s Cindy Sherman survey.

Jim Shaw, a Los Angeles-based artist known for painting fantastical murals, also spent several days poring over the temple’s theatrical backdrops, making sketches for a possible future show.



Kulapat Yantrasast, the project's architect. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“Artists are turned on by stories of secret handshakes,” says another local sculptor, Analia Saban, who is fascinated by the building’s Masonic mystique. Saban, who has used household items like kitchen countertops in her work, was invited to the temple to rummage for furniture. She selected a dining room chair that became the piece *Cane Back Chair (With Back Weaving*

Rubbing), now part of Marciano’s collection.

Marciano has done his own digging, compiling books about Masonic history and acquiring a few pieces that dovetail nicely, including Cindy Sherman's 2010 self-portrait wherein she's dressed in a Masonic costume. He also bought Yael Bartana's 2013 film *Inferno*, which features robed figures from a Brazilian neo-Pentecostal church attempting to build a scale replica of Solomon's temple.

"Maurice is an honorary Mason now," says Yantrasast. His challenge has been to salvage elements of the building's architecture while reconfiguring it to flow as a public museum. For starters, he took out at least 2,200 theater seats and the theater's mezzanine as well as transformed the former backstage into a sunken space where Marciano intends to display Adrián Villar Rojas's clay-and-cement rendition of Michelangelo's *David*, with the iconic figure arrayed in a horizontal, sleeping pose.



Painter Mary Weatherford with her 2014 piece *La Niña*, also in the collection. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

The theater's upper-level balcony is now a second-story landing so that visitors can stand along a glass railing and peer down at the art. Yantrasast redesigned two of the building's three passenger elevators but intends to keep the last as is, in all its gold-speckled, Camelot-era glamour. On the museum's upper floors, Yantrasast has converted the former ballroom into an airy gallery, its kitchen areas likely reserved for exhibiting videos. Nearby, in a space where Masons once held meetings, Marciano hopes to show a Mike Kelley sculpture that evokes the lost city of Kandor, of Superman fame, as well as a stalagmite-like sculpture by Sterling Ruby. The courtyard outside will showcase Oscar Tuazon's cement wall adorned with tree branches and a basketball hoop.

Several murals and mosaics pop up throughout the temple—on the second-floor landing and in the former ballroom above—that were created by the building's original architect, Millard Sheets, who was also a well-known California regionalist painter. These have been freshly conserved by Sheets's son, Tony. Meanwhile, a mural by Israel will be installed in the mezzanine overlooking the lobby. "It's an amazing opportunity," says Israel. "Not a lot of collectors will buy a mural, or a Masonic temple to put it in."

"Architecture sometimes gives up the story to be clean and timeless," Yantrasast adds, "but you lose meaning that way. Here, the stories keep giving."

That extends to the Marcianos, whose own saga is nearly as far-reaching and unusual as that of the Masons who once hung out here. Saban, the artist, says, "Only after going through so many twists do you come to a building like this. It takes a long path."



SELFIE MADE | Artist Alex Israel, here with a 2012 work, helped Marciano find the temple. "You have to check out this building on Wilshire," he said. "It's unlike any other space. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

In August 2015, Maurice Marciano sold his nearly 20,000-square-foot Bel Air mansion in L.A. to casino magnate Steve Wynn for \$48 million. This past spring, he spent around \$20 million on a smaller, minimalist home in Trousedale Estates. On a clear day, his backyard views can stretch to the Pacific Ocean.

Whatever the weather, he's also got a backup view of the Santa Monica surf across a wall in his new living room. Israel, the artist who tipped him off to the temple, created this billboard-like work by pairing stock photographs of the city with phrases conjured by *American Psycho* author Bret Easton Ellis. Marciano's sunset scene reads, "Somewhere in the empty house Jen could hear the Eagles singing 'Hotel California,' its deep and hidden meanings revealing themselves in waves."

"You can't be more classic L.A.," Marciano says.



Jonas Wood in the museum with his piece Grid Pot With Pink Plant, which is part of the Marciano foundation collection PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

At first glance, the same could be said of the art on display, such as a painting of plants by Jonas Wood over the stairwell, an abstract work by Mark Grotjahn in the hallway and a Bambi-giving-birth-to-Snow White sculpture by Paul McCarthy in the kitchen.

But look harder and there are hints of Marciano's past, such as Moroccan-French artist Latifa Echakhch's piece in which she dipped a canvas in indigo dye and turned the whole thing upside down, letting the color ooze. Marciano said the work reminds him of seeing bunches of yarn drying and dangling outside homes in Marrakech, where his rabbi father was born. Downstairs, near his prized Bordeaux cellar, there's also New York installation artist Jim Hodges's abstract from 2013, *When the Spirit Takes Center Stage*,

featuring gold leaf sprayed atop a patchwork of denim—the material he used to make his fortune. Marciano says, “How could I resist?”

Growing up, Marciano had no plans to build a life in fashion, or in art. Born in Algeria in 1948, he fled the Algerian War with his parents, his three brothers and his sister when he was 7 years old, resettling in Marseille, where his dad taught in a local synagogue. There was no art in their home, and he says he quickly discovered in class that he was “terrible” at drawing. As a teen, he took a school field trip to Paris and surprised himself by immediately falling for everything hanging in the Musée d’Orsay, from Paul Cézanne’s fruit to Claude Monet’s waterlilies.

After he graduated from high school, he and his brothers Armand, Georges and Paul opened a few fashion boutiques in southern France under the name MGA. Their top seller: unisex jeans. In 1978, he and Georges moved to Los Angeles to see if they could pull off a similar feat, borrowing a mottled wash they’d noticed on jeans in an Italian laundromat. (At the time, jeans came only indigo blue or bleached.)



OPEN STUDIO | Sculptor Kaari Upson, whose work Marciano will display in the museum. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Armand and Paul soon followed them to California; Georges came up with their company name after driving past a McDonald’s billboard asking drivers to guess which eatery had the biggest cheeseburger. Marciano says, “Georges came home and said, ‘I think I found our name. Guess.’” Marciano tossed up ideas until he got exasperated, and finally his brother clarified himself.

Guess, with its red triangle patch, stonewashed denim and signature zipper sliding up each ankle, was officially launched in late 1981 and proved an immediate hit. In just one year, sales through Bloomingdale’s and Guess’s Beverly Hills store hit \$6 million. Georges designed the clothes, Maurice handled the finances and sales, Armand oversaw distribution, and Paul created the ads.

Marciano said one of the first pieces of art he and his brothers bought after launching Guess was a painting of a pergola with a view of the sea by French impressionist Henri Martin that reminded them of Marseille. “I think we were homesick,” he says.

During their regular trips to Paris, they started shopping at galleries, bringing home examples by postimpressionists like Gustave Loiseau. At that point, Marciano says, they never paid more than \$150,000 apiece for any work. On November 10, 1988, they made their first leap into contemporary art by paying \$1.3 million for Roy Lichtenstein’s 1974 painting *Sailboats III* at Sotheby’s in New York. It was estimated to sell for only up to \$600,000. After that, they bought works by Yves Klein, Willem de Kooning, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Andy Warhol and others.

Then in early 1990, the art market crashed. Over the next few years, Marciano hired appraisers and got valuations that were roughly half what they had paid for their art. “It was kind of depressing,” he says. The brothers decided to keep a handful of favorites, including a Klein, but started offloading pieces such as Lichtenstein’s *Sailboats* in 1998, which they sold for around the same price that they had paid for it a decade earlier. Looking back, he wishes he’d just packed it up in storage and ridden out the doldrums.



STATUS SYMBOLS | The former temple's marble facade retains traditional Masonic inscriptions. PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Four years ago, Sotheby's resold the same painting for \$11.8 million. "We learned the hard way," he says.

Guess went public, and Marciano redoubled his focus on the company as its chairman and CEO, later sharing the role with his brother Paul. (In 2015, the company had revenues of \$2.2 billion, with over 800 stores worldwide.) Yet he realized he missed art. "It's so personal," he says, "but when you live with art, it becomes your environment. You see it every day, and I realized I felt an emotional attachment."

In May 2005, he plunged back in, attending a Christie's auction in New York where he paid \$3.4 million for a 1962 Richard Diebenkorn, *Untitled (Santa Cruz I)*, well over its \$2.5 million high estimate. In 2009, he went to his first Art Basel Miami Beach and took a side trip to tour the private art warehouse of Miami collector Rosa de la Cruz, a space he cites as an inspiration for his own. The following year, dealer-turned-museum director Jeffrey Deitch convinced Marciano to join MOCA's board. He retired officially from Guess in 2012, assuming the role of director and chairman emeritus, and two years later became co-chairman of the MOCA board.

Nathalie de Gunzburg, chairman of the board of the Dia Art Foundation and a fellow collector, says she has watched Marciano come into his own in the contemporary art world, aided by his collection manager and foundation director, Jamie G. Manné. "The more he learned, the more excited he got," de Gunzburg says. His enthusiasm is shared by one of his three daughters, Olivia, who once worked at New York gallery Luxembourg & Dayan and is planning to help run the foundation and museum.

Marciano disappeared from the art circuit for a few months last year after a car accident in May 2015. Speculation swirled about the fate of his temple. But Marciano, who injured his right leg, eventually recovered—and artists around town once again started seeing him pop by their studios.

These personal interactions with artists drive Marciano's collecting now, pushing him into more experimental areas like video and bulky installations. His frequent studio visits to L.A.-based artists have heavily influenced his collecting. At a time when every collector, including Broad, is yearning for global holdings, Marciano's focus on his adopted hometown seems refreshingly counterintuitive.

"I love artists' thought process—how everything around them becomes art," Marciano says. "I don't want this to feel like a regular institution. We don't need another MOCA or Broad or Hammer Museum. It has to be different, or why do it? We want to be an incubator for artists."



Sculptor Analia Saban used a chair from the temple to create this piece, Cane Back Chair (With Back Weaving Rubbing).
PHOTO: SPENCER LOWELL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Copyright ©2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.