

In the background, "Hoovering," one of dozens of new pieces by Los Angeles artist Jim Shaw created for the new Marciano Art Foundation museum.

## Marciano Art Foundation: LA's bold new museum is now open

*It showcases contemporary art—and occult artifacts*

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY [ELIZABETH DANIELS](#)

**G**eorge Washington sits regally on a cloud, a vacuum protruding from his groin like a phallus, sucking up “us poor saps—the consumers,” says Jim Shaw, the Los Angeles-based artist who created the larger-than-life, black-and-white, cartoon-style cutout entitled “Hoovering.”

It's one of 65 pieces ranging from screenprints to a bejeweled shopping cart that comprise Shaw's audacious installation on the first floor of LA's newest museum, the [Marciano Art Foundation](#). The museum opens to the public today for free.

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“We live in a consumer's society rather than a producer's. First you lose your job, then your ability to consume, then you have no identity left. I was trying to create a Boschian hellscape, and had a nice hellscape to work with,” Shaw says.

The Marciano's inaugural exhibit sprawls across the cavernous former theater of the [Scottish Rite Masonic Temple](#) on Wilshire Boulevard in Windsor Square. The mens-only fraternity left many ornate relics behind after selling the gorgeous temple to Guess Jeans cofounders Maurice and Paul Marciano four years ago.

### How to visit

The Marciano Art foundation is located at 4357 Wilshire Boulevard. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday and Friday and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday. Admission is free, but tickets must be [reserved online](#) in advance.

Shaw, who works out of a studio in Altadena and is fascinated with cults and conspiracy theories, selected huge stage backdrops and wacky wigs from the temple's theater and basement before the Marciano brothers got to work repurposing the building into a museum. Those objects are now interspersed among Shaw's art.

"I haven't found anything that explains why there'd be a three-headed, glitter-covered snake on a backdrop of hell with naked adults running away from them. Those don't seem to relate to any of the particular initiation rituals for the different degrees, but, like I said, I'm not a Mason," Shaw says. "What they do is secret ... That's why it's been the subject of so many conspiracy theories over time."



The Scottish Rite is “like graduate school” for Freemasons, says Susan Aberth, an art history professor at Bard College in New York. While Freemasonry has three degrees, the **Scottish Rite offers 32**, each of them attained by participating in **theatrical one-act plays**.

“The various degrees propel men to consider things or to avoid things like selfishness and prejudices and to push them to higher moral ground,” Aberth says. “It’s one thing to sit in a classroom and be a passive receptacle of knowledge, but when one enters a ritual and participates ... the experience is more profound.”



To outsiders, those dramatic productions remain one of Freemasonry's biggest mysteries. Not everything about the fraternal order is secret, says Aberth, but the origins of the clandestine ceremonies might be explained by a theory that the Freemasons arose from medieval guilds when stonemasons wanted to protect their trade secrets while designing ornate Gothic cathedrals. Many Freemason symbols, such as levels and compasses, and ceremonial garb, such as aprons, relate to architecture.



Wigs are a symbol of authority, says Shaw, adding: "I don't quite believe in authority."

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Today, many **modern lodges and temples** are beautifully ornate. The spectacular Wilshire Boulevard building was designed in 1961 by **Millard Sheets**, a painter, muralist, and architectural designer best known for creating Southern California's mosaic-embellished **bank buildings**.



"Biblical and historical quotations over the entrance reflect the Masonic values of liberty, equality, fraternity, and devotion," says the [Los Angeles Conservancy](#).

In an [oral history recorded at UCLA](#), Sheets [described](#) the marble and travertine fortress as being like its own city, with lounges, a library, a 2,000-seat auditorium, and a 1,500-person dining room with an "excellent view of the city." The face is embellished with symbols, impressive sculptures, and mosaics. There are original mosaics inside, too: pretty gold drinking fountains and ribbons of gold-glazed mosaics on the lobby walls.



Fourteen-foot-tall figures sculpted from travertine tell the story of the history of the Masons, says the conservancy.

That transformation, which opens the temple to the public for the first time, was led by architect Kulapat Yantrasast and his firm wHy. They kept many of the lower floors' architectural details intact but removed a large fresco in the lobby. They opened up the third floor, turning it into what Los Angeles Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne has described as a "white cube," to showcase the Marciano's personal collection.



The restored lobby and the mezzanine, emblazoned with murals by [Alex Israel](#).

Their collection, acquired over the last two decades, includes pieces by Mike Kelley, Christopher Wool, Albert Oehlen, and Jonas Wood; it doesn't deviate too far from offerings at The Broad and Museum of Contemporary Art.

Shaw's fun, provocative installation, which touches on themes of (Anglo-Saxon power and corruption, as well as mythology and politics, is the star. It's a perfect fit, not only because of the topics, but because Shaw is considered an "appropriation artist," perhaps best known for his "Thrift Store Paintings," where he altered works plucked from the garbage, garage sales, and flea markets.

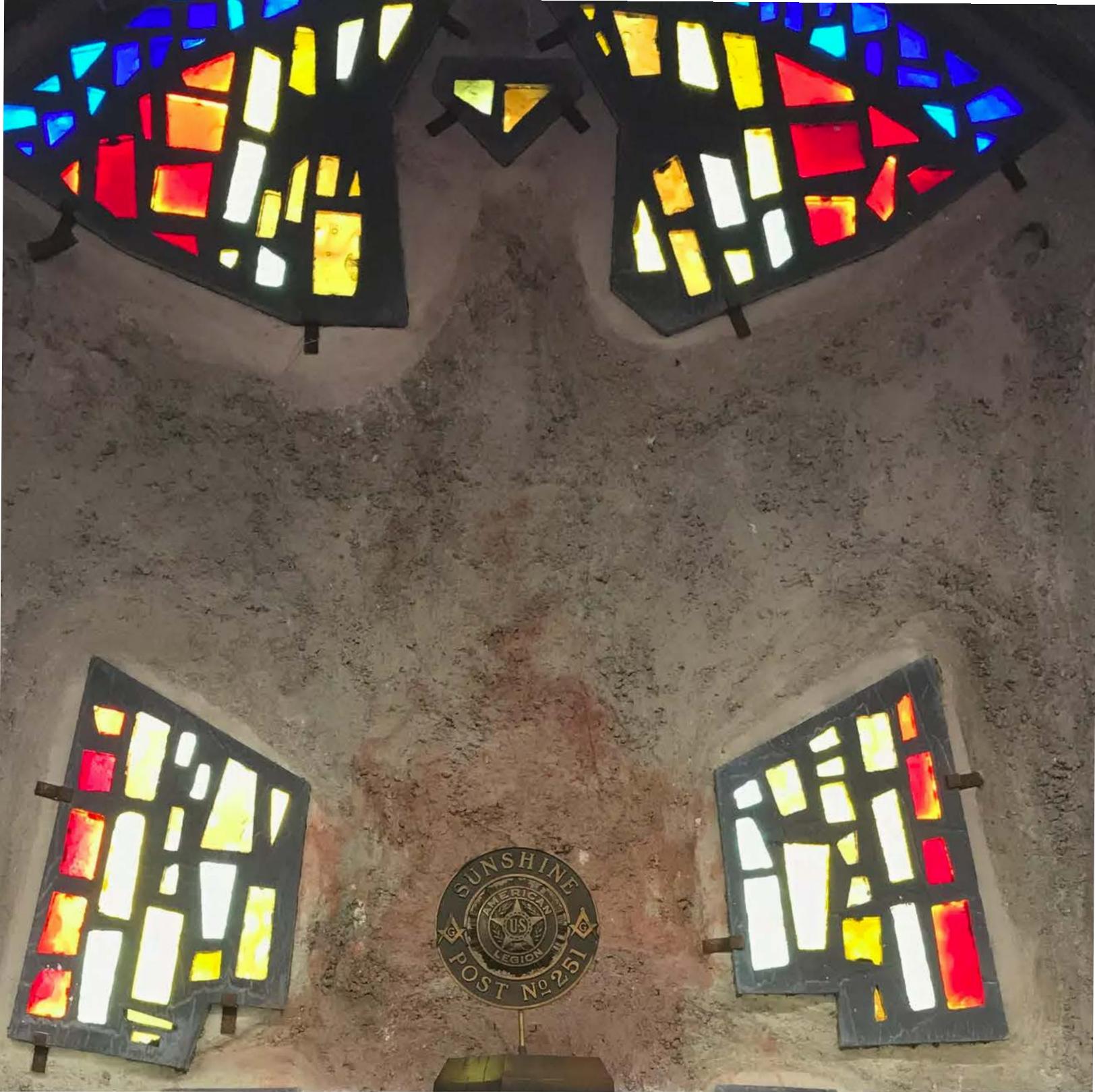
“Jim Shaw: The Wig Museum” is not permanent. The first floor of the Marciano Art Foundation will be used for temporary exhibits, with Shaw’s presentation on display through September 17.



The entire museum is devoted to contemporary art, with the upper floors devoted to the Marciano brothers’s personal collection.

The Marcianos, however, have devoted an entire room on the mezzanine to Freemasonry artifacts from velvet-and-fringe aprons (Maurice Marciano says they are his favorite item in the Relic Room) to satin banners. It was curated by Aberth.

Freemasonry, she says, “is one of the most important aspects of the history of the United States, yet it is consistently ignored, particularly its visual culture. Everywhere lodges are closing, their contents are auctioned off with no respect ... and that is a real shame, because the tenets of freemasonry are very positive, about democracy.”



Stained glass windows from the American Legion Post No. 251, established in 1925. The windows were made by local artisans and are a testament to the community's craftsmanship.





Stained glass surrounds the Scottish Rite emblem of the double-headed eagle, an ancient symbol suggesting equilibrium and unity. The row of hats are for 32nd Degree members, the highest degree, and are decorated with the double-headed eagle.

Shaw says he believes the Masons hold too many secrets and too much power, but he says he loves their “tchotchkes” and infatuation with symbols, even if he doesn’t know what they all mean.

“In my art, I could glue together a bunch of imagery that I thought was cool,” he says. “I like for there to actually be a meaning behind it ... I’m making a commentary, [but] once it leaves your hand, people interpret it the way they want.” ■