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ART & DESIGN

A Bigger Closet for Their Art

Maurice and Paul Marciano, of Guess Jeans, Plan a Museum

By IAN LOVETT AUG. 25, 2013

LOS ANGELES — The Guess clothing headquarters downtown here — once a humble distribution center, where stonewashed jeans were shipped around the country — looks more like an art gallery these days. Paintings by luminaries like Sterling Ruby and Carroll Dunham hang beside the famously sexy Guess billboard ads. And Mr. Ruby even stopped by to install a sculpture personally.

There is much, much more art at the nearby homes of Maurice and Paul Marciano, two of the four brothers who founded Guess in 1981. After several years of frenzied buying, they have run out of space to display their growing art collections.

“A lot of art we have in storage,” Maurice Marciano said, laughing and shaking his head, “which is not the best thing at all, definitely not what you want.”

Having transformed workaday denim bluejeans into must-have items of high fashion at Guess, Maurice and Paul Marciano are now seeking to remake their own legacies as pre-eminent patrons and aggressive collectors of contemporary art.

Last month, the Maurice and Paul Marciano Art Foundation paid \$8 million to buy an opulent former Masonic temple on Wilshire Boulevard, which they plan to turn into a private museum. In addition to housing their collection, Maurice Marciano said the museum would also host exhibitions by

local artists with the hope that they will design work especially for this space. And work space may be created for an artist in residence.

“There is such a vibrant, vibrant art community in L.A., with so many artists living here,” Mr. Marciano added. “Artists who would not necessarily have a big exhibition at a well-established museum. That really inspired us to have a space where we could give a forum to these young artists to exhibit their art.”

With some of the top art schools in the country, a forgiving climate, cheaper rent than in New York and a quality of light that has enticed creative types for decades, Los Angeles has in recent years become a hub for young artists.

The museum is a declaration of the brothers’ growing ambition and influence in the city’s art scene — a bold step for the family, which has shunned the limelight in recent years (Paul Marciano would not speak for this article), following an ugly fight with investors over control of Guess in the 1980s and prolonged public criticism of the company’s labor practices in the 1990s.

“Los Angeles has this amazing creative energy right now, and Maurice’s project is going to be part of it,” said Jeffrey Deitch, who recently resigned as the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. “I think this will become one of the most important spaces for contemporary art in the whole country. This is making a big statement about our time.”

Certainly, the space will be a striking addition to the contemporary art landscape in Los Angeles. The Masonic temple was designed by Millard Sheets, the Southern California architect and muralist. It served the Masons from 1961 to 1994, and has been on and off real estate market since. With 90,000 square feet over four floors, it is almost as large as the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The brothers hope it can be open within 18 months, once they have finished renovating the first floor of the building, which fell into disrepair.

But who will be able to visit the Marciano museum, and when, remains unclear. At least initially, Maurice Marciano said, it will not be open to the public daily, which would require a sizable staff. Instead, he said, the museum might be open by appointment.

Despite general enthusiasm here about the prospect of another major contemporary art space, several artists and collectors expressed concern about the growing prevalence of private institutions, which are harder for the public to access.

“I think it’s great — or potentially great,” John Baldessari, a venerated Los Angeles artist and former teacher at the University of California, Los Angeles, said of the Marcianos’ project. “It might be a great place for young artists to get exposure. I hope that happens.”

But he added that he hoped the Marcianos’ space would not become a trend among Los Angeles art patrons.

“We’ll see if it sets off a chain reaction, and more people start to do that,” Mr. Baldessari said. “Then I think it’s not such a good idea, because these private institutions all have conditions on going into their spaces.”

Pam Smith, the chairwoman of Fellows of Contemporary Art, a nonprofit devoted to helping Los Angeles artists, said a trend toward private institutions was already under way. They include the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, the François Pinault Foundation in Venice and the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul.

“We’re seeing a very different philosophy than we did, for example, in New York when all the major museums were founded,” Ms. Smith said. “People are looking for different ways to preserve and show their art than they ever have in the past. If they donate to a museum, that’s it. They’ve given up all control.”

The four Marciano brothers were born in Algeria and Morocco but grew up in 1950s Marseilles, France, in a devoted observant Jewish family. Their father was a rabbi, as were a grandfather, and a great-grandfather. The Marciano brothers — Georges and Armand, along with Maurice and Paul — began a very different kind of family business, moving more than three decades ago to Los Angeles, where they founded Guess.

Maurice and Paul began collecting art around 1990. They started with Impressionist pieces but soon moved to the contemporary art market and sold the older works.

“If we had collected only Impressionists, today we would have only a few

pieces, instead of hundreds of pieces,” Maurice Marciano said.

They own about 1,000 works, among the brothers’ personal collections, the joint collection they share, the Guess collection and, now, their art foundation’s collection. But who’s counting?

Apparently not Maurice Marciano, who estimated that he and Paul owned only half as many works as they in fact do. (His assistant corrected him.) He said they view their collections as largely shared.

But friends across the Los Angeles art world said it was Maurice Marciano who had driven their push to collect.

“I do most of the research, because he’s busy running the company,” Maurice, who stepped down from daily Guess operations last year, said of Paul. “For 80 percent of the collection, he is on board, but I recently bought some pieces that he said, ‘Eh, don’t count me in.’ ”

Paul Schimmel, the vice president of the Hauser & Wirth gallery here and the former chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, said Maurice Marciano’s interest in art was revived when he toured a Takashi Murakami show at the museum in 2008.

“For Maurice, I know that show really reignited his interest,” Mr. Schimmel said. “He feels a very deep connection to the art being made now.”

After that, Maurice began buying pieces from Mr. Murakami and other giants of contemporary art, as well as investing in emerging local artists, like Analia Saban. He also began taking on a more public role in the city’s art community. He joined the Museum of Contemporary Art’s board last year, and has donated work to the museum, including one of Mr. Ruby’s stalagmites. (Another one juts up from the floor at Guess.)

Several people noted his strong rapport with artists. He frequently stops by local studios, and Thomas Houseago, a British sculptor based in Los Angeles, recently visited Mr. Marciano’s home to pick out the right spot for one of sculptures. (They decided the front yard would be best.)

“Twenty years ago, they were collectors,” Mr. Schimmel said of Maurice and Paul Marciano. “Now they are real patrons. I think they see their role as more civic and comprehensive now.”

This year, Alex Israel, a local artist, suggested the Marcianos look at the abandoned Masonic temple, just up the street from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

“It was a beautiful building, but we were completely overwhelmed,” Maurice Marciano said of his first trip there with his brother. “We left saying, ‘No way.’ ”

Over the next few months, though, they decided they could renovate the building in stages. They plan to start with the first floor, which will become gallery spaces. The second floor will have offices and a library.

They gave some of the furniture the Masons left behind to artists, hoping they could use it in their work and so might one day return to the museum.

“I don’t think they see the end as a major museum with their name on it,” Mr. Schimmel said. “I still don’t think they know what the endgame is, and I find that very exciting about them.”

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