



Bluejeans moguls to turn Masonic lodge in L.A. into a private museum

The co-founders of clothier Guess have bought the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard, and they plan to turn it into a private art museum.

July 24, 2013 | By Roger Vincent

Bluejeans moguls Maurice and Paul Marciano have bought one of Los Angeles' most notorious real estate white elephants, the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard, and they have plans to turn it into a private art museum.

The imposing marble-clad edifice, which has seen little use since 1994, will undergo a major renovation to house the Marcianos' contemporary art collections. It will be operated for the most part as a private property, with occasional exhibitions open to the public.

There is plenty of room to work with — nearly 90,000 square feet — in the temple conceived by artist Millard Sheets, one of Southern California's best-known designers.

The four-story building, which traverses a full block of Wilshire between Lucerne and Plymouth boulevards, sports white marble and travertine that Sheets personally selected in Italy. It is decorated with intricate mosaics depicting historical scenes and larger-than-life statues of important Masonic figures including George Washington.

The Maurice and Paul Marciano Art Foundation bought the property from the Masons for \$8 million, according to public title documents. The Marcianos are co-founders of clothier Guess Inc.

"We have been looking for a home for the collection," said William F. Payne, a spokesman for the Beverly Hills foundation. "It's a legacy project for the family."

It's unclear when the museum will be finished and how much it will cost, he said, but Sheets' vision will remain.

"Millard Sheets' design, we think, is something extraordinary, and it's our intent to preserve that architectural design in our reuse of the space," Payne said.

Culver City firm WHY Architecture is working on the new design, he said, and the museum "should be up and running in a couple of years."

Maurice Marciano rejoined the board of trustees of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in October and was recently named one of the world's top 200 active art collectors by Artnews magazine. MOCA said Marciano has donated or promised three works for its collection: a sculpture by Sterling Ruby and paintings by Wade Guyton and Tauba Auerbach.

The Marcianos' drive to renovate the old temple has been in the works for months, but the parties involved kept mum while the Marcianos worked on plans and consulted with homeowners in the prosperous Windsor Square neighborhood where the building is located.

Previous owners of the nearly windowless temple, the Masons, also have a long history of keeping secrets about their centuries-old fraternity, which has included such members as Washington, Henry Ford, Mark Twain and Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The organization has also been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories, often suggesting that it controls world governments.

The script of the 2004 adventure film "National Treasure," starring Nicolas Cage, revolved around a fictional long-running Masonic conspiracy, and part of the movie was filmed in the Wilshire Boulevard temple. However, the fraternity has been shrinking for many years.

Masons leader Frank Loui, past grand master of the Grand Lodge of California, said membership in the state peaked at nearly 245,000 advanced-degree Masons in the mid-1960s. Now there are about 62,000 Masons of all levels in California.

When the Wilshire Boulevard temple opened in 1961, he said, it was home to more than 10,000 Scottish Rite Masons. Members of the Scottish Rite branch hold advanced Masonry degrees, which require mastering a series of moral lessons. In its heyday, the building was the largest of several local Masonic lodges and one of the largest Masonic centers in California.

With only about 1,000 Scottish Rite members left in Los Angeles now, "it was an economic decision to sell" the building, Loui said.

It has been on and off the real estate market since 1994, when the Masons reluctantly closed the temple because dwindling membership made it too expensive to maintain. It was also difficult to rent out for other uses because of zoning restrictions on that stretch of Wilshire Boulevard largely surrounded by single-family residential neighborhoods.

Complaints about parking, noise and trash problems related to events held by commercial groups at the temple also led to the Masons' decision to close it. For many years the block-long building was encircled with a chain-link fence.

More recently the property was rented to a commercial tenant that sponsored events that neighbors found disruptive, and in 2005 the city revoked the building's certificate of occupancy, rendering it useless as a source of income to the Masons.

The fraternal order started a new campaign to sell the building this year and among the most interested potential buyers were residential property developers, said real estate broker Dan Bacani of NAI Capital, who represented the Masons.