

TEMPLE, UNPACKED

## wHY subtly transforms historic Masonic Temple to house Marciano Art Foundation

By MICHAEL FRANKLIN ROSS • August 2, 2017

Most of the exterior travertine-clad portions of the building were retained in the stealthful renovation. (Courtesy Yoshihiro Makino)



Rather than donating artworks to large, existing institutions, it is becoming more and more common for wealthy art collectors to create their own museums for displaying their extensive collections.

In Los Angeles, we have the Getty Museum; the Broad Museum; the Hammer Museum; and the Norton Simon Museum, for example. This arrangement allows the collector to assure that the works he or she

acquired will be displayed in a manner that they control and won't get lost within a much larger institution.



The Marciano Art Foundation (MAF) is accessed primarily via an adjacent parking lot, which is flanked by a sculpture plaza. (Courtesy © Marciano Art Foundation)

In New York, Ronald S. Lauder opened the Neue Galerie, and of course, in 1959 further up Fifth Avenue, the Guggenheim family opened their museum, designed by [Frank Lloyd Wright](#). Sometimes these museums are very successful and draw visitors for years after their initial opening.

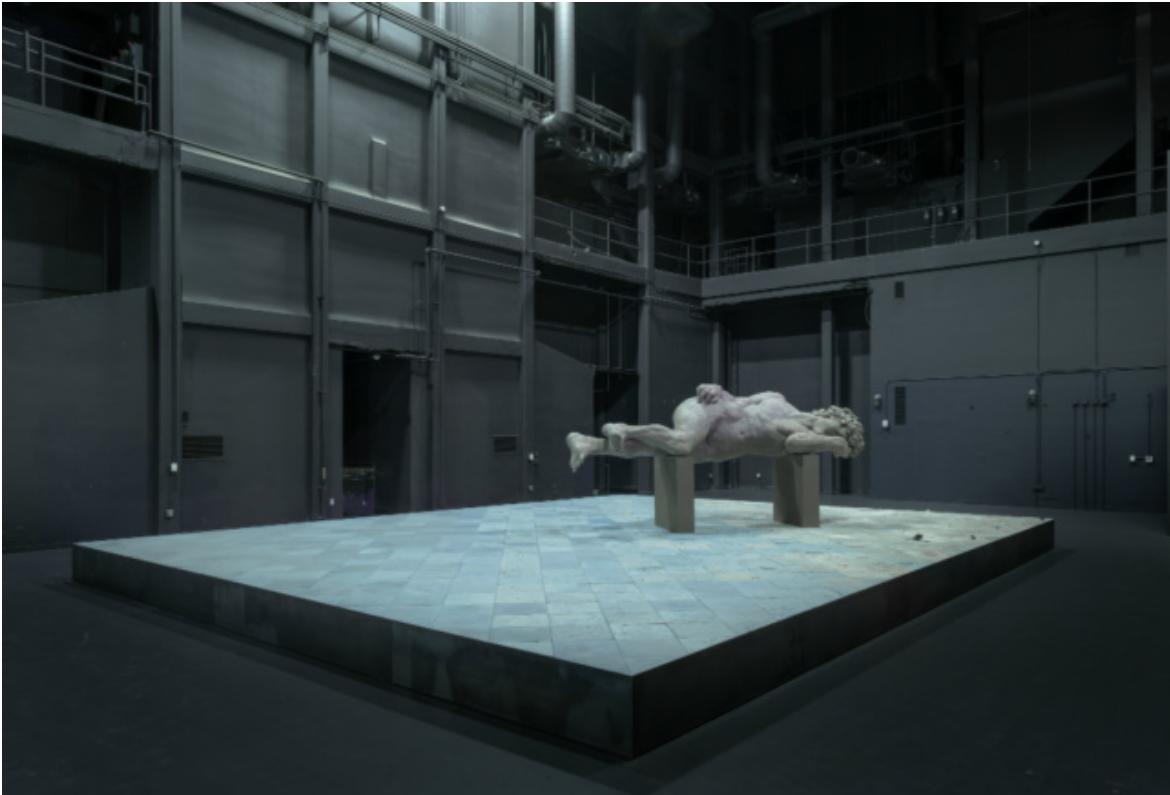
Adding to the trend, the [Maurice & Paul Marciano Art Foundation](#) (MAF) recently opened in Los Angeles to display some of the 1,500 art objects that the brothers have collected. The Marciano brothers made their fortune by creating and marketing Guess Jeans. For the last seven years, they've been working closely with MAF Deputy Director Jamie G. Manné to acquire a very diverse and often innovative collection. It was always their intent to create their own museum and four years ago the artist Alex Israel noticed that the large Scottish Rite Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard was for sale. He told his friend—Manné—who also thought it had great potential. Manné told Maurice and he decided to buy it for \$8 million.



The building's entry lobby features scene paintings and restored hanging lamps from the original Masonic Temple. (Courtesy © Marciano Art Foundation)

The Masonic Temple was designed by artist and architect Millard Sheets. It opened in 1961 to serve the growing population of the Masons of California, a fraternal order whose mission was to “foster personal growth and improve the lives of others.” The Masons had noble goals but maintained a very private organization, which is reflected in the Millard Sheets design. It is a large and imposing 110,000-square-foot travertine structure on Wilshire Boulevard with essentially no windows; in other words, a big white box.

Three years ago the Marciano’s retained architect Kulapat Yantrasast and his New York and Los Angeles-based firm [wHY](#) to convert this white elephant into a museum that would engage the community, welcome the public, and display a wide range of art objects in a variety of media. wHY was an informed choice—they have extensive experience designing museums both new and old, including the Grand Rapids Museum in Michigan; the Speed Museum in Louisville, Kentucky; the Pomona College Studio Art Hall in California; and the interiors for the Art Institute of Chicago and Harvard Art Museums.

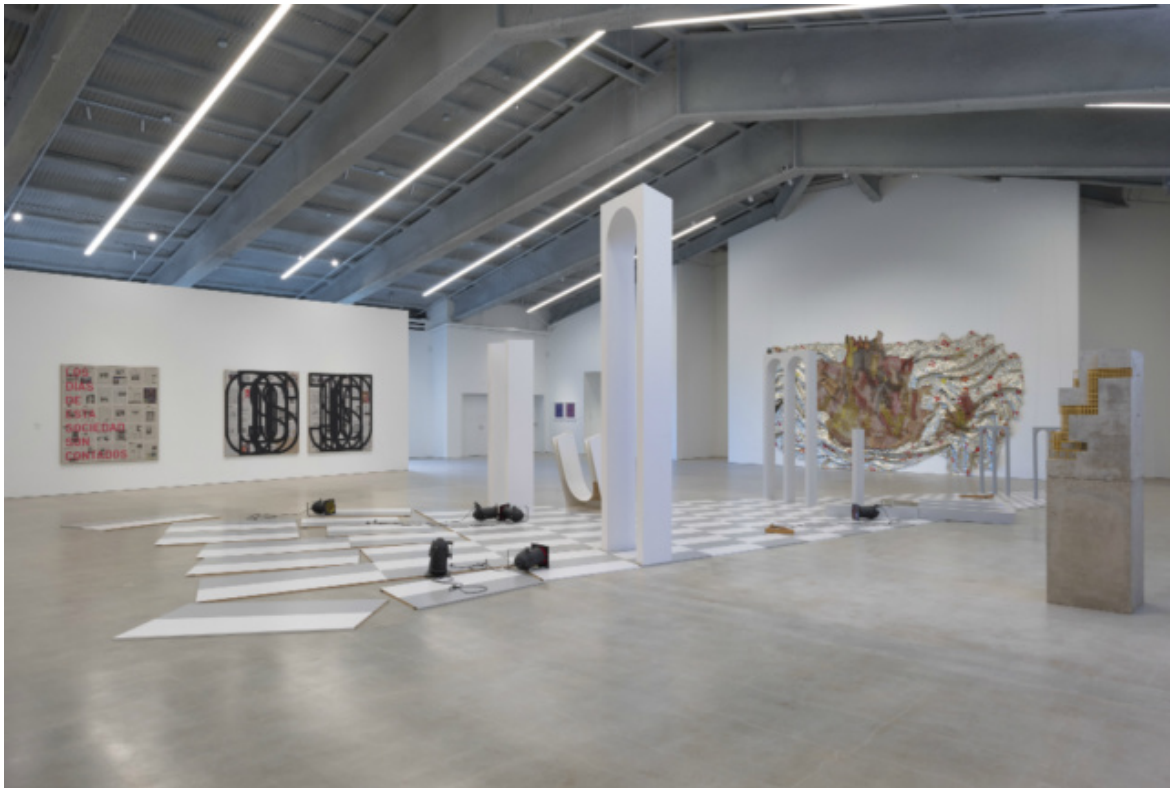


The Masonic Temple was originally used to host ecstatic theater performances. The building's former stage area has been repurposed as a repository for art, here showing a sculpture by artist Adrian Villar Rojas. (Courtesy © Marciano Art Foundation)

The design approach within their practice is based on collaboration, both externally and internally. Externally they work with the owner and engage the community to develop their design approach. Internally they integrate the firm's four studios, each of which is named for its focus: "buildings," "objects," "grounds," and "ideas." Yantrasast said, "We intentionally work together from the beginning; architects, landscape architects, planners, and interior designers. We create a group of thought leaders, with the ideas workshop as the glue." Yantrasast sees himself as the conductor of a group of "the best musicians."

With MAF the goal was to respect the architecture of Millard Sheets while transforming his very private, enclosed box into a welcoming and engaging environment to experience contemporary art within. For the most part, they have achieved their goals with a few shortcomings.

wHY created a sculpture garden courtyard to welcome visitors who may approach by car from the rear or as pedestrians. This works well. The entry foyer is flanked by a bookstore and lounge, leading to the lobby, where they have saved and restored two beautiful light fixtures and three elegant elevator cabs.



View of the inaugural exhibition, *Unpacking: The Marciano Collection*, curated by Philipp Kaiser. (Courtesy © Marciano Art Foundation)

The galleries comprise essentially two levels and a mezzanine to display the very diverse Marciano art collection. On the ground floor wHY converted the former 2,000-seat auditorium into a spacious 13,600-square-foot exhibition hall, with all interior lighting; essentially a vast black box that includes 65 pieces by the L.A.-based artist Jim Shaw. The former stage has been transformed into a dramatic sunken sculpture court, with Adrian Villar Rojas's reinterpretation of Michelangelo's *David* lying in repose.

While the mezzanine is also dark and filled with video art, the top floor holds the most dramatic spaces. Yantrasast removed the hung ceiling from this floor to reveal the bold structure that supports the roof, creating a large 12,000-square-foot gallery to display major pieces of the Marciano collection. By stripping away a portion of its rear travertine elevation and replacing it with glass, the gallery is filled with waves of natural north light. This move also offers a pleasant promenade overlooking the city and the famous Hollywood sign. One unfortunate detail is that a beautiful Millard Sheets mosaic mural has been preserved, but a full height wall has been erected only six feet in front of it, making it virtually impossible to truly appreciate Sheets' artwork.

Yantrasast believes that architects who design art museums are a “matchmaker between the art and the people,” and that the building “must support the art,” he said.



View of the inaugural exhibition, *Unpacking: The Marciano Collection*, curated by Philipp Kaiser. (Courtesy © Marciano Art Foundation)

It’s a delicate balance creating inviting spaces to exhibit art and making buildings that enhance their environment. In essence, wHY’s architecture becomes a subtle, quiet partner and does not dominate the art. At the MAF, generally wHY has succeeded as a “matchmaker.” They have created flexible, spacious galleries to display the extensive and diverse art. The inaugural exhibition, labeled *Unpacking: The Marciano Collection* and curated by Philipp Kaiser, formerly with L.A.’s Museum of Contemporary Art, works well in the newly re-imagined building and includes the work of 44 artists.

Maurice Marciano seemed quite pleased with the result. He said, “We’ve been really blessed to give back to the artists’ community, and to share our passion with everybody.” In an ironic turn of events, the MAF has given new life to the Masonic Temple and extended the Masons’ goal to “improve the life of others.”

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