

MoLAA reopens after renovation

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Since opening in 1996, the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach has carved out a unique niche for itself by focusing on contemporary works by Spanish-speaking artists in North, Central and South America.

For years, however, motorists driving down the 600 block of Alamitos Avenue were likely oblivious that an art force sat behind the greenery-covered fence and parking lot. Even those who ventured inside, moving past the modest atrium and lobby, would express surprise at the size and scope of what lay beyond, and made a vow to return, this time with friends, to show them this hidden treasure.

But the days of hiding in plain sight are gone. Finally, the Museum of Latin American Art, also known as MoLAA, has completed its three-year remodel and expansion, and it now sports the kind of facade that matches its reputation. Behind the facade, the physical capacity has doubled to 55,000 square feet.

And it's impossible to miss. Whether you're driving down Sixth Street or Alamitos Avenue, MoLAA's new, imposing presence pops at you from blocks away. Full of brightly colored geometric shapes - a blue cylinder, a bright pink wall with a cascade of water flowing down it into a reflecting pool - it also features tall, sand-

colored walls, with two sand-colored rectangular arches framing it all like a picture.

The very modern building is surrounded by tall palm trees, and a rocky strip around one side grows into a full rock garden, interspersed with agave cactus.

One's overall impression is of an oasis in an urban desert, which is exactly what museum officials hoped to convey with Mexican architect Manuel Rosen's design. Rosen has worked with the museum on past, smaller expansions, including the sculpture garden, which opened in 2005.

"Manuel was telling me about the challenges he faced," said museum director Gregorio Luke, who gave the Press-Telegram and others a tour of the remodeled museum last week. MoLAA has its grand opening to the public Saturday evening with a cocktail reception. A free family festival on Sunday provides a less formal introduction, with activities for all ages.

The biggest challenge, Luke said, was uniting the three very different buildings that make up the museum.

"The building is based on three existing structures - the Hippodrome skating rink, the Balboa Studios and the FHP medical building," said Luke, taking his charges outside into the sunny parking lot, where workmen were installing sculptures and other pieces near the rock garden. "To unify them, what we did was build these very tall walls. The tall walls by themselves would be intimidating, so we built these little squares into them."

The square cutouts, Luke said, are inspired by the Mayas, who would use them as elements in their architecture.

"They were called singing walls," Luke said. "As the wind moved by them, they made noises."

MoLAA's cutouts, Luke said, are a "contemporary expression of an ancient form."

The rectangular arches that frame the building, Luke said, are more than an architectural feature. They "represent bridges between North and South America."

The bridge theme continues inside the building, where the permanent collection has been renamed "A Bridge to the Americas."

Featuring 80 works by artists from Spanish-speaking countries, the collection is divided into three parts - "Mythical Landscapes," which focuses on seascapes, landscapes and still lifes, real or mythical; "Mestizaje," which focuses on the people and the ethnic blends that resulted as Europeans, Africans and Native Americans intermarried in the various countries; and "Political History," which focuses on the politics, often unstable, of Latin American regimes.

Before the public gets to the art, however, it has to leave the bright parking lot and enter a large, dark, cool atrium, much bigger than the one in the past, but equally serene.

The gift shop, which once crammed its fascinating wares (Frida Kahlo bead curtain, anyone?) into a small space off the atrium, has been given a facelift, with more room for wares, and a glass wall, folded like an accordion - and offering more display space - as its dominant feature.

On the left of the lobby, Luke shows off the small circular screening room (the Charter Communications Film-Screening Room), where visitors can see short films about the remodel as well as on Latin American culture. On one side of the screening room is a door leading to the expanded Educational Art Studio, where families can do art projects, under the supervision of a

resident artist, after they have finished touring the museum. On the other side of the screening room, a door leads to the administrative offices, which include the new Research Library, which museum officials hope will become a valuable resource for art scholars wishing to study contemporary Latin American art.

On the right side of the lobby is the gallery entrance. The gallery houses the permanent exhibits and takes visitors through a serpentine path that ends in the new Focus Gallery, which will feature changing exhibits that focus on new trends in Latin American art, Luke said. After going through the Focus Gallery, visitors wind up in the gift shop.

The gallery is still in the same building that housed the Hippodrome, but the teenage couples that once used to hold hands and giggle at each other, interrupted by much younger, screaming daredevils careening through on skates, are long gone. The wood floors and high arched ceilings remain, and make for an astonishingly good display space, easy to partition off as needed.

MoLAA founder Robert Gumbiner saw the gallery potential in the space years ago, when he bought the Hippodrome and turned it and an adjacent building into a medical center. Gumbiner, a physician, founded FHP, one of the country's first health management organizations, in the '60s. He had always liked art, and traveled extensively in Latin America, where he developed a particular interest in the art being produced by artists in Mexico and nearby countries.

"I would go to a place like Guatemala and Honduras," he said in an interview with Gregorio Luke, "and put out the word that I was buying art. The next morning the hotel lobbies were filled with art, and guys were knocking on my door all night."

That may have led to less sleep for Gumbiner, but it didn't stop

him from buying.

"Collecting is sort of an addiction," he told the Press-Telegram this week. "You run out of space after a while. I filled my house, and then bought my neighbor's house."

That filled up too, so eventually, Gumbiner decided to turn part of the medical center into a gallery. The FHP Hippodrome Gallery, like MoLAA would become years later, was considered a valuable asset to the art scene.

However, that didn't stop FHP from shutting it down in August, 1995. Gumbiner had been ousted from FHP's board two months earlier and forced to resign, and was not happy about the gallery closing.

"I will be back with a bigger and better museum," he promised in a story published by the Press-Telegram on July 25, 1995.

On Nov. 2, 1996, Gumbiner made good on that promise, opening the Latin American Art Museum at the Hippodrome.

The Hippodrome was included in the name to reflect the building's history, but proved to be a bit of a mouthful. The museum became the Museum of Latin American Art in April, 1997.

Apart from festivities this weekend, MoLAA plans to celebrate its opening with a month of partying. Architect Rosen will give a lecture on June 14. Singer Lila Downs will give a concert June 17. A dance party with two orchestras will be held June 23. At the end of July, the "Murals Under the Stars" series returns and runs until the second week in August.