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## Laguna Art Museum basement shines with new renovations

By **FAITH E. PINHO**  
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A couple explore the lower level of the Laguna Art Museum during a celebration Thursday after restoration of the original floor from 1934. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

Laguna Beach Art Assn. founding member Frank Cuprien paid just \$1.50 to have his name inscribed on the floor of the organization's new basement gallery in 1934.

Eighty-five years later, the name of the Laguna sea painter gleams under a fresh coat of floor finish after a \$500,000 renovation of the lower level of the Laguna Art Museum.

The museum celebrated the year-long project to refinish its lower-level galleries with a cocktail hour and ribbon cutting Thursday night. About 80 city officials, museum trustees, donors and staff members gathered in the brightly lit basement, murmuring above glasses of champagne and peering at the names etched in the gray concrete floor tiles of the Segerstrom Family Gallery.

The engravings honor some of the first donors to the Laguna Beach Art Assn., which opened a gallery in 1929. The organization didn't have enough money at the time to create a lower-level gallery, so it kicked off a fundraising campaign in which people who donated \$1.50 would get their names inscribed in the floor.

"Ever since I came to the museum seven years ago, I felt like these galleries ... there was something a bit dingy and uninviting about them, because they looked like they were in need of finishing," said the museum's executive director, Malcolm Warner.

With a half-million dollars from the city's Cultural Facilities Improvement Matching Grant Program, the museum set to work improving the basement. Under the direction of architect Anders Lasater, the lower-level gallery space increased by about 20%, Warner said.

Before, visitors who descended the stairs into the Brief Gallery had to pass through a narrow doorway to enter the main Segerstrom Family Gallery. Lasater removed the concrete wall separating the two — a feat that required replacing a load-bearing wall with a steel beam in the basement ceiling to support the floor above.

His design also transformed a back office into a third room of the Segerstrom gallery. Each space, separated by shiny white walls, is tied together by the gray concrete tile floor.

“The biggest opportunities the museum had was to turn this into someplace that allowed for a good relationship with the art, a good sense of proportion and space,” Lasater said. “A lot of my thinking had to do with creating a sense of arrival ... you arrive in this floor lobby that starts to establish your experience, then you turn and find, oh, there’s a whole other space behind the corner that you don’t quite see but you perceive.

“It was a sense of unfolding and letting you discover the space as well as the art.”



Project architect Anders Lasater and his wife, Cynthia, stand on the newly restored floor of the lower level of the Laguna Art Museum on Thursday. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

A major aspect of the renovation was restoring the original floor. Many tiles bear marks from years of carpet glue and other wear and tear. Workers sanded the floor, buffed it and gave it a clear finish that draws out the tiles’ original hue.

“We did talk a lot about how rough and distressed-looking the surface should still be,” Warner said. “All of that is part of the story.”

Lasater, who designed City Councilman Peter Blake’s art gallery on Ocean Avenue, completed his designs for the museum project for free.

“Being a lover of art, being a lover of the community of Laguna Beach, wanting to actually affect change, I realized the best way to do that would be to donate my

services,” he said. “I benefit too, because I’ve had a great time doing this.”

The renovation is the second of three projects that the art museum, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2018, has planned with the city’s matching grant program. In 2016, Councilman Bob Whalen led the charge for a grant program to fund facilities improvements at the Laguna Art Museum and Laguna Playhouse. The city is authorized to give each nonprofit \$1 million over four years, as long as the organization matches the installments with its own fundraising.

In December, the City Council unanimously approved allocating \$449,125 of the matching grant program to the Laguna Playhouse for renovations to the Moulton Theatre exterior.

“Our objective was to inspire others to see the same value that we saw in these institutions that have been here now, in the case of the museum, for 100 years,” Whalen said Thursday. “We’re very pleased with the improvements.”

The Laguna Art Museum chose as its first project overhauling its heating and cooling system and redoing the roof, which was completed in 2017 with \$250,000 from city funds.

The second project, the lower-level renovation, effectively cost two years’ worth of the city grant.

With the remaining \$250,000, the museum plans to update the exterior of its building at Cliff Drive and North Coast Highway, Warner said.

“This has been a story about how the museum has grown since its origin. It is a community effort,” museum board Chairman Lou Rohl said.

The lower-level galleries, which have been closed since early 2018, will open an exhibit with new art collections March 3.

As guests milled about the space Thursday night, Warner reminded them of the floor tiles in the Brief Gallery.

“We’ve just created new squares there that don’t yet have names on them,” he said.



The name of Laguna Beach Art Assn. founding member Frank Cuprien is on the restored floor of the lower level of the Laguna Art Museum. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)