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Expansion starts on tripling the size of Chapman University's Hilbert Museum



Museum founder Mark Hilbert, right, talks about various pieces of art as he gives guests a tour of the exhibit, All Aboard: The Romance of California's Railroads, at The Hilbert, A Temporary Showcase of California Art on east Chapman Avenue in Orange on Thursday, December 22, 2022. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Construction has begun on an expansion of Chapman University's Hilbert Museum of California Art, which for now is calling an Old Towne Orange storefront home.

While its museum on North Atchison Street across from the city's train station is being tripled in size, the Hilbert is hosting exhibitions free to the public in the old US Bank building at 216 E. Chapman Ave.

But in a little more than a year, the Hilbert staff expect to be starting to display even more of its collection from the California Scene Painting movement, as well as movie and animation art and other surprises from [the museum's benefactors, Mark and Janet Hilbert](#), in a new 22,000-square-foot facility.

"They have come up with an absolutely gorgeous design," museum director Mary Platt said of architects Johnston Marklee & Associates out of Los Angeles.

Museum officials describe the design as paying "tribute to local Orange industrial and mercantile architecture as well as to the Orange Barrio community."

The Hilbert opened seven years ago and was attracting more than 30,000 people a year by 2019 (the last year attendance was measured), making it one of the most popular museums in Orange County, Platt said.

With its growing popularity and a more than 3,000-piece collection, an expansion was always in the plans.

Initially, the Hilbert was part of Chapman University leaders' vision for the Villa Park Orchards Association Packing House, where the school was preserving the historic building for reuse and planning new dorms.

In the end, happy already in their North Atchison Street location near where the city had just opened a new public parking garage, the museum folks ended up swapping with the university's performing arts department, which was planning a dance studio in the building next door. [Now the Sandi Simon Center for Dance, a 33,000-square-foot complex that will serve Chapman's dance majors and host performances for the community, is opening in the old packing house.](#)

And that leaves the Hilbert to expand from 7,500 square feet to nearly 22,000 square feet using the next-door building.

The buildings are connected by a courtyard, which the museum is taking advantage of to display some more California art.

The Hilbert was gifted a 40-by-16-foot glass mosaic, "Pleasures Along the Beach," created in 1969 by Millard Sheets, whose murals decorated Home Savings & Loan branches throughout the region. This one is from a bank building in Santa Monica that was going to be torn down and has been in storage – in pieces that will have to be fit back together like a puzzle, Platt said.

It will span the space between the buildings, tying it all together.

The expanded museum will have room to display more fine art exhibits and more of its movie art and illustration holdings, Platt said, but also new offerings that haven't been able to be showcased at the museum before.

In the Founder's Gallery, Native American art pieces the Hilberts have collected for many years will find a public home. Platt said the couple has a "world-class collection" of Navajo blankets, which are "amazing works of art, each and every one," and a Southwestern basket and pottery collection.

Also finding a place will be the couple's vintage radios from the '30s and '40s – a time when some of the top designers of the world were translating their visions to radios, which now offer "a mini tour of design elements" from an exciting time in America's past, Platt said.

"These are added things we have never exhibited before," she said.

On a recent Thursday after he finished one of his weekly guided tours of the Hilbert Museum's temporary space, [Mark Hilbert](#) talked about his excitement for the museum expansion, which he describes as "really a new museum."

"I think they are going to have a greater experience," he said of future visitors. "It will be a greater variety of different exhibitions that we will be able to mount and show. I think it will provide a much greater overall artistic experience for people. It's a half-acre under one roof."

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