A Cultural Treasure in the Heart of Lake Worth

Historical Overview of the Building

Located at 601 Lake Avenue, Lake Worth, Florida

When *The Palm Beach Post* announced on July 1, 1939, that a new theater would soon be constructed in Lake Worth, it stated that the owners planned to make the 1,000-seat house “one of the finest in South Florida.” The announcement heralded the arrival of a structure that – seven decades later – is still making news in the midst of Lake Worth’s Historic Old Town Commercial District.

The announcement about the new theater – to be built by Florida Theatres, Inc., operator of 110 theaters in the state – was made on behalf of E.J. Sparks, the company’s president, by R.R. Thomas, local Sparks’ theater supervisor. “The new structure and its equipment will cost approximately $75,000. It will be erected on company property at Lake Avenue and L Street,” the article said.

“The new theater will be of the most modern design…and it has been especially designed to embody the latest features of sound and moving picture projection,” the story continued. “There will be 800 seats in the orchestra section with an additional 200 seats in a special loge balcony above the theater doors. All seats will be of the newest de luxe spring edge type with deep upholstery.”

Architecturally, the theater would reflect the popular Art Deco influences of the day: “The structure…will have a front of modernistic design trimmed with stone, glass and stucco and will be ornamented with sidewalk marquise of porcelain enamel and stainless steel. The entrance foyer will be heavily carpeted and the walls will be treated in the latest wall design.”

It was also noted that “careful study has been given to ventilation…so that the theater will be properly ventilated and cooled to the satisfaction of patrons.” The building was designed by architect Roy A. Benjamin, who, according to Sharon Koskoff’s 2007 book, *Art Deco of the Palm Beaches*, “was born in Ocala and moved to Jacksonville in 1902. He is credited with designing other theaters in the Southeast” – including the Florida Theatre in Jacksonville.

Construction was slated to begin in August with completion scheduled in time to “afford the public of Lake Worth the benefit of the new theater before the winter season.”

The new Lake Theater officially opened on February 29, 1940, according to Beverly Mustaine’s 1999 book *On Lake Worth*. Alex R. Nininger was the manager, and the theater showed only “highclass motion pictures,” she wrote.

Details about the Lake Theater’s next 40 years are sketchy. In the 1960s, “the theater turned into an eatery called the Pizza Palace,” according to Koskoff. Retired *Palm Beach Post* columnist and historian Bill McGoun told the Post’s historical writer Eliot Kleinberg in 2006 that the Lake Theater “became an Italian restaurant showing old movies.”

In the late 1970s, the building “was a disco that had black walls with revolving mirrored balls,” noted J. Patrick Lannan, Sr., in the *Palm Beach Daily News*.

Lannan, a well-known financier, entrepreneur and part-time Palm Beach resident, would breathe new life into the former theater. In 1980, he purchased the building to house his extensive – and acclaimed – collection of contemporary and modern American and European art. “When
Lannan’s collection was shown to the public in his home, it was written about in magazines,” Donald Miller wrote in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in 1983. “One of the collection’s most unusual aspects was the display of large abstract paintings flat on ceilings.” According to the Lannan Foundation, “Included in his collection were important early works by emerging artists who went on to develop international reputations.”

The February 7, 1983, edition of the Palm Beach Daily News, noted that, “The official celebration of the opening of the Lannan Foundation Museum in Lake Worth, which will benefit the Palm Beach Festival, will take place at 7 p.m. March 6.” Tickets for the “world premiere” cost $125. The event was slated to begin with tours of the collection, champagne and seafood cocktails. “A formal dinner will follow and chairmen of the event, Mrs. Robert Dodge, Mrs. J. Bradford Greer, Mrs. Lee Olsen and Mrs. Jim Lyons are planning a gourmet repast.”

On March 6, 1983, the Lannan Foundation Museum hosted the gala opening, which was underwritten by J. Patrick Lannan. “This is the greatest place in the world for contemporary art,” said Richard Madigan, director of the Norton Gallery of Art, as quoted in the Daily News. “He is such a brilliant and creative man.”

The guests included artist Dale Chihuly, Bruce Helander (described as “a newcomer to Palm Beach”), Dale Heapps, managing director of the Palm Beach Festival, and Mark Hampton, “the architect who transformed what was once a disco into a powerful museum for Lannan’s collection.” The Daily News’ photos from the event showed Lannan, Ann Light, Marilyn Hoadley, Lee Olsen, Corinne Barr, Nell Hight, Marlene and Salomon Finvarb, Erminia Landau, Frank Garro, Alex and Kathryn Hurvitz, Nancy Gardiner, Mary McFadden, Blaine Rubin and Diane Lyons.

According to Donald Miller’s article, “The new installation … takes advantage of the existing building elements with a series of carpeted levels, half-walls and mezzanines. Two paintings are affixed to the ceiling.” It was noted that 400 works, “which are one-tenth of the art (Lannan) owns,” were on view. “Lannan has an eye for both delicacy, as seen in fine drawings, glass and ceramics, and strongly challenging idioms, such as bizarre sculptures and heavily colored canvases. The works are provocative and frequently surprising.

“I have not seen a more provocative assembly of art,” Miller wrote. The collection was free and open to the public on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Attendance does appear to have been limited, however. As Skip Sheffield wrote in 1991 in the Boca Raton News, “At the old Lannan, only seven visitors were allowed at a time for security reasons.”

While its primary focus was to exhibit Lannan’s remarkable collection, the Lannan Museum also became a venue for a wide array of cultural pursuits. Earlier in 1983, in fact, the Palm Beach Daily News reported that dancer Pamela DeFina was teaching the Isadora Duncan style of dance at the Museum. In April, the Daily News reported that Gordon Getty’s song cycle The White Election, based on the poems of Emily Dickenson, had been performed there as part of the Palm Beach Festival. In October, pianist Shigeru Asano was scheduled to perform a concert at the Museum to benefit the Palm Beach County Chapter of the American Red Cross.

On September 27, 1983, J. Patrick Lannan Sr. died unexpectedly of heart failure in New York at the age of 78. The family announced that it was planning a local memorial service.
“In 1986, the Lannan Foundation received a substantial endowment from (Lannan’s) estate. Under the leadership of J. Patrick Lannan, Jr., the foundation continued its expansion of the collection and instituted national programs for grant making in contemporary visual and literary arts,” the Foundation’s website states.

However, in 1986, “the board of directors elected to relocate the foundation’s headquarters from Lake Worth, Florida, to Los Angeles, California.”

And, according to the August 12, 1988, edition of the Miami Herald, “The Lannan Museum in Lake Worth, home of one of the most important modern art collections in America today, will cease to exist April 1.” The next chapter in the old Lake Theater’s history was about to begin.

The Lannan Foundation website explains that, “The Lannan Museum in Lake Worth was donated to Palm Beach Community College. In addition, the foundation donated a collection of more than 1,000 American craft objects, approximately 20 works of kinetic art dating from the 1960s and 1970s, and a Tom Otterness frieze, Battle of the Sexes, which had been commissioned especially for the building.”

In February 1991, Skip Sheffield wrote in the Boca Raton News, “The building is still the same: a striking ‘art moderne’ structure that opened in 1939 as The Lake Theatre, but the landmark edifice at 601 Lake Ave., Lake Worth, is now known as the Palm Beach Community College Museum of Art.” It had been closed for a year and a half to allow for the transition, he continued. New Museum Director Kip Eagan, who had come from the University of Cincinnati, “has hired a receptionist who greets one and all. He has also created a permanent education center, where visitors can learn more about the artists through written materials and video tapes.”

The article noted that “the lobby frieze … and two large sculptures, “Spread” and “Stretch” by Peter Sheldon, remain from the Lannan collection, but almost everything else has changed.”

In 1999, the building would change hands once again. “The Palm Beach Community College Foundation board recently voted to sell its Museum of Contemporary Art in Lake Worth, Fla., to local philanthropists and museum trustees Robert and Mary Montgomery for $500,000,” Art in America reported in its June edition. “The Montogmerys will receive both the building and the entire contents of the museum, which includes some 1,200 glass, ceramic and kinetic sculptures by artists such as Dale Chihuly, Len Lye, Peter Voulkos, Beatrice Wood and Viola Frey.”

After purchasing the building and the art it housed, Robert and Mary Montgomery moved forward with the creation of a new institution, the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art. According to its website, “The PBICA was founded on the premise that contemporary art is a vital means of understanding ourselves and our culture. Artists have often been called the prophets of our time and we believe it is the artist’s voice that can speak most eloquently to our minds and our hearts. PBICA is intended as a place of pleasure and significance, a place where large questions are posed and investigated. It is a venue for major national and international art in all media and a meeting ground for the diverse populations who live in and visit the Palm Beach region.”

PBICA was popular and exciting. In 2002, readers of New Times named it the “Best Museum in Palm Beach.” The publication wrote, “PBICA has quickly established itself as an institution willing to take enormous risks. Among the highlights: a New Media Lounge and two inaugural shows in 2000 – a landmark examination of film and video as art and a provocative exhibition that
wrenched design elements from their context and repositioned them as art; and last year’s large group show of artists from Brooklyn.”

Very quickly, PBICA established a reputation for being daring and cutting-edge. During his time with the organization, Director and Chief Curator Michael Rush curated BROOKLYN!, with Dominique Nahas; Sculpture Now; Video Jam, with Galen Joseph-Hunter; and Japan: Rising, with Dominique Nahas, as well as innovative solo shows of Marjetica Potrc, Sue Williams, Günter Brus, and the Smiths (David, Kiki and Seton). Other exhibitions included Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle’s Video Installations; Imperfect Innocence, from the private photography collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl; and See Through, video art by Hannah Wilke, Karen Finley and Alix Pearlstein. Kara Walker-Tomé, the founder and curator of Showtel, served as the PBICA’s education director.

Unfortunately, although critically acclaimed, PBICA was unable to attract board members and large-enough audiences to sustain it. In March 2005, Art in America wrote, “After a five-year run, the privately funded Palm Beach institute of Contemporary Art will close its doors on March 27.” The museum’s final exhibition was “I Feel Mysterious Today,” a group show guest-curated by Dominic Molon of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

Although the former theater, museum, educational facility and performance venue has stood shuttered since 2005, hope has remained alive that it would once again occupy a place of prominence in Palm Beach County’s cultural landscape. Now, it appears this will soon be the case.

More than four years ago, the Palm Beach County Cultural Council’s strategic plan articulated the importance of securing a new physical location for the organization, which offers programs serving more than one million people annually, including services to cultural organizations, artists, citizens and tourists. It was strongly felt that Cultural Council should own, rather than rent, this building – and that it should be centrally located within the county.

The Council has envisioned a facility that not only enhances the success of its existing efforts but also allows for the expansion of its services. It is hoped that the new location could encompass a visitor center for distribution of tourist-related materials, an exhibition space for Palm Beach County artists, meeting space where non-profit cultural organizations can hold board meetings and other functions and space for training and professional development programs.

With the announcement that the Palm Beach County Cultural Council will make its home in the venerable Lake Theatre, the Council’s vision is becoming a reality – and this storied building is preparing to enter a new era of cultural significance in Lake Worth, Palm Beach County and, indeed, the nation.