

expect more than 60,000 visitors, up from 56,000 last year. That would be close to levels at London's Frieze Art Fair last fall and not far below the estimated attendance at last month's Art Basel Miami Beach.

The fair has come a long way from its origins 20 years ago as a small showcase of American regionalist paintings. Collectors such as Eli Broad and celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio, Barbra Streisand, Henry Winkler and Dave Grohl have prowled its galleries. The fair rang in \$30 million in sales last year.

The big question: Can L.A. keep up the momentum? Several major events will follow the LA Art Show later this month, like Art Los Angeles Contemporary, a smaller but prominent show of more than 60 galleries in a historic airplane hangar at the Santa Monica airport. That fair, entering its sixth year, has helped launch an art-focused weekend in Los Angeles at the end of January, along with the LA Art Book Fair and Paramount Ranch, a gathering of galleries and artist-run spaces started in 2014.

That's notable, given the city's sprawling geography, which makes it hard for collectors to travel between events. "In the short span of six years, Art Los Angeles Contemporary has managed to turn an otherwise anti-art-fair town into a place where both emerging and established galleries from around the world can connect with an important West Coast audience," says Joshua Roth, an art attorney based in L.A.

Despite making great strides, L.A. still doesn't have an art fair with a world-class profile. "We've had great momentum for years, with numerous artists and galleries and curators moving here, but what happens with L.A.'s art fairs is the next layer to evolve," says Bettina Korek, founder of ForYourArt, a weekly guide to the Los Angeles art world. In November, the organizers of the famous Paris-based contemporary art fair FIAC postponed the planned March debut of an L.A. iteration for a year, saying they were responding "to provide both organizers and galleries sufficient time for optimal preparation."

Some art-world insiders say that dealers and curators have had to struggle against old local prejudices against investing in sophisticated art. "Many people out West weren't raised with collections," says Kim Martindale, who founded the LA Art Show in 1994. "Or they were raised in the mind-set of the movie industry, where if it looks like a Picasso, it's close enough—it doesn't need to be the real thing."

Mr. Martindale has also tried to eliminate the regional feel of the fair's early days. The show will have about 25 galleries from the Pacific Rim and special exhibitions of Chinese ink painting as well as Korea's Tansaekhwa, or monochromatic painting, movement. The Asian presence, the fair claims, is stronger than at New York and Miami rivals.

Tokyo's Gallery Kitai is bringing works by Mizuho Koyama, an artist who incorporates text into her paintings. ME Photo Gallery from Beijing will show a number of Chinese photographers, including Liu Dadi, who prints his photos on beaded, granular surfaces. Some of Mr. Dadi's pieces at the fair will cost about \$25,000—an increase from just \$10,000 for his work at last year's fair, says his dealer, Edward Chung.

“People always say to us, ‘Why don't you show in New York?’ ” says Mr. Chung, whose gallery represents about 30 Chinese photographers. “But I've found that L.A. has been a much better place for us, as a young gallery with emerging artists, to shine. The price points are a little lower. And it's less competitive, but you still get access to top collectors. It's a chance to really stand out.”

Other galleries agree. “People do more things virtually these days,” says Jack Rutberg, whose gallery exhibits annually at the LA Art Show. “As result, we have fewer people coming into the gallery,” he says, “so it helps to have special events [like the art show] to draw them in.”

Many galleries established on the East Coast continue to put down roots out west, a trend that began a few years ago. New York gallery owner Michele Maccarone recently leased space near L.A.'s downtown arts district. Hauser & Wirth, along with curator Paul Schimmel, is renovating an old downtown flour mill to turn it into an arts center with galleries, working areas for artists, event spaces, a restaurant and a bar.

Many West Coast collectors have usually directed major gifts of art to New York institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art. But this year, Mr. Broad will open his new museum near the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall. And a retired Bel-Air entertainment mogul, Jerry Perenchio, recently said that he would donate the most significant works of his collection—including works by Monet, Picasso and Degas—to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

At the LA Art Show—which, after the benefit, will run for four more days in downtown L.A.'s Convention Center—about 15% of the art will consist of historic works. The contemporary pieces include pill-shaped jewelry by Damien Hirst, video installations from the United Arab Emirates and the Paradise Circus, a 1920s-style circus tent built by California artist JT Burke, whose work explores the place of religion in our culture. The interior of the circus tent resembles a chapel-like space, complete with an altar.

