The Rise and Rise of the Private Art Museum

Georgina Adam

Hot Topics in the Art World

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This series of short, thought-provoking and sometimes controversial books debates key issues of current relevance to art-world professionals working in both the private and public sectors. The texts give wider visibility to some critical areas of professional art-world practice, considering what disruptors are challenging the status quo and how the art world is likely to be transformed over the next decades as a result.

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Foreword

There has been a pronounced shift of power within the art market ecosystem in response to global financial pressures and the policies designed to deal with them. The ongoing contraction of cultural sector funding has seen museum acquisitions and operations budgets steadily compromised. Ever-increasing global art market prices have also undermined the ability of museums to renew and refresh their collections. With their inevitably strained resources, public museums often struggle to satisfy the substantial demands of the collector/patron communities on which their collections, and institutions, very much rely.

Against this backdrop, the very nature of art philanthropy has been steadily shifting. It is the collectors themselves who have been increasingly taking on the essential caretaking roles and responsibilities for cultural artefacts. With collectors increasingly keen to closely control the future legacy of their hard-won, and much cherished, art collections, they are increasingly turning to bespoke Private Museum solutions. In more newly developing regions, private patrons, and their museums, can harness enormous power to build and transform a city, region and even a nation's cultural landscape – providing the crucial cultural foundation that many governments cannot, or choose not to fund or support.

In *The Rise and Rise of the Private Art Museum*, Georgina Adam deploys her unparalleled art-world knowledge, analytical clarity, and scrupulous research to shine a light on this important paradigm shift of our times.

Jeffrey Boloten and Juliet Hacking, June 2021

Acknowledgements

On 11 February 2020 I was due to fly to China and Australia on a research trip for a book about private museums. That trip never happened for obvious reasons and, although I had already visited over 50 of these institutions, my plan to see many more was curtailed by the pandemic.

As a result, I am so grateful to the many people who subsequently talked to me over Zoom or other platforms, as well as those I had already interviewed before the pandemic struck. My thanks go to Adrian Ellis, Alain Quemin, Alex Petalas, Anita Zabludowicz, Bomi Odofunade, Catherine Hickley, Charles Saumarez Smith, Diana Wierbicki, Doug Woodham, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, Elizabeth Neilson, Gail Lord, Grace Ai, Gordon Elliott, Grażyna Kulczyk, Han Nefkens, Howard Rachofsky, James Carleton, Kenny Schachter, Laurent Le Bon, Lisa Movius, Sir Mark Jones, Marta Gnyp, Martin Bailey, Maxwell Anderson, Mera Rubell, Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Philip Dodd, Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani, Rebecca Wei, Sébastien Montabonel, Steven Kettle, Ziba Ardalan and others who wished to remain anonymous.

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and Tim Schneider for talking me through the initial framing, and the authors of three books – Georgina S. Walker; Cristina Bechtler, Dora Imhof and Chris Dercon; and András Szántó – for writing texts that were immensely helpful. I am not a museum specialist and this is an outsider's view of the subject; I hope it will be judged as such.

My thanks also go to my editor Lucy Myers of Lund Humphries for bearing with me, to Jeffrey Boloten and Juliet Hacking of Sotheby's Institute of Art for initiating this series, to Michela Parkin for exemplary copy editing and, as always, to the team at *The Art Newspaper* for their insights. Any errors are mine alone. My husband Christopher and my family continue, of course, to be the best support structure anyone could hope for.

Introduction

Private art museums have become a cultural, social and economic phenomenon of this century. They have proliferated geographically in the last two decades, with new ones being thrown up across the world as I write, from China and New Zealand to Argentina or Iceland.

The number of such museums is growing all the time and, while the 2020–21 global pandemic temporarily froze many projects, several new institutions are set to be opened after 2021. Some are more personal, such as the Srihatta – Samdani Art Centre and Sculpture Park being built in Sylhet, Bangladesh by Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani; some are huge, such as the vast corporate museum for the Fondation Cartier due in 2024 in Paris, France, or GES-2, an immense power station transformed by a Russian billionaire into an art space in Moscow, Russia. Or there is the small Longlati Foundation, lodged in the 'Art Tower' in West Bund, Shanghai, China; or the Kunsthalle Praha in Prague, Czech Republic, housed in a converted former power substation.

These institutions are the way deep-pocketed collectors give the public access to their art treasures or offer a platform for art and artists – sometimes in spectacular, architect-designed buildings, more occasionally in their own homes. They are a way of 'giving back to society' through educational and outreach programmes, bolstering the cultural credentials of the region, supporting local artists – and leaving the legacy of the founder's name and public-spiritedness for future generations.

They can revive a declining city or even a region (the 'Bilbao effect',[1] as seen in Hobart, Tasmania with the Museum of Old and New Art), foster new artistic practices with a nimbleness that more slow-footed, publicly funded institutions cannot always match and organise blockbuster exhibitions that public museums cannot always afford. They are also a way for large companies, notably in the luxury goods sector, to 'brand' themselves as not just profit-obsessed corporate behemoths but as progressive, socially committed entities offering something back to the community.

All this comes at a time when publicly funded museums are under unprecedented pressure on many fronts. (See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the definition of public and private museums). Their very role as storehouses of artefacts, their traditional mission of collecting, conserving, researching, explaining and displaying the objects of the past and present, are under unprecedented strains. These strains range from the ethics of sponsorship to accusations of racial injustice – both in staffing and in the works displayed – decolonisation issues and the environmental cost of the exhibitions they put on, involving as they do crating, handling and shipping works around the world. Indeed, the very definition of a museum today is contentious. Add to this the hammer blow of the 2020–21 pandemic, which left many museums teetering on the brink of financial wipe-out, as revenue from ticketing, shops, restaurants and gala events simply disappeared.

In addition, philanthropy has changed. It is much more impact-based than in the past; donors today are often looking for measurable outcomes when they decide where to put their charity dollars, euros or pounds. 'Philanthrocapitalism' – when donors apply the business techniques they honed in their professional lives to charitable giving – has made a major impact on how the rich choose to give money, and to what causes. These 'new philanthropists', writes Paul Vallely in his book *Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg*, are 'driven by the quirks and flukes of their own life story, personal experience, political conviction or business interests'.[2] And he continues by noting the shift from traditional philanthropy to philanthrocapitalism, reflected in the way wealth was acquired. In the past it was often inherited; today it is mostly self-made. Today's mega-rich want to do more than just write a cheque for a good cause; as successful entrepreneurs, they want to be more hands-on, and they often have the skills and acumen to do so.

But the problem is that philanthrocapitalism is an uneasy fit with culture, which has always struggled to prove its worth in a way that can be quantified. As the cultural consultant András Szántó notes: 'This has left us with, in a way, a more personally-driven, as it were connoisseur funder, who is supporting the arts not because of measurable impact or other foundation or policy priorities, but because they're simply passionate about art – and this is how they want to spend their money.'[3]

As a result, collectors are establishing their own spaces, to showcase their treasures, preserve the integrity of their collection and at the same time fulfil their philanthropic purposes. Their motivations are complex, as we shall see in Chapter 2. They vary from the laudable desire to share their good fortune with the public, to wanting to contribute to the cultural discourse of the age and improve the cultural offer of their city or region. But there is also distrust of public institutions, and in some cases more problematic aims: self-aggrandisement, hyping the value of their collection, getting better access to desirable art and getting whopping tax breaks. Indeed, one of my interviewees, a former museum director, dismissed private museums as merely 'tombs for trophies' and tax dodges for billionaires.[4]

The picture is far more complex, as we shall see in the following pages. Private museums give the public access to works of art they might otherwise never be able to see; fill the gap left by cash-strapped public institutions; supply educational programmes for the local community; and, in many countries, where the state cannot or will not fund contemporary art, provide a platform for local art and artists. And some accumulations will move into public ownership, just as many of the stellar collections of the 19th century also evolved into the great museums we see today.

At the same time, the current rise in the number and scale of private museums has created tension with the public sector. The colossal increase in wealth this century, and the resulting rise in the price of art, has hobbled publicly funded institutions. Billionaires have forced prices up by chasing the most desirable contemporary artists and the most sought-after historic artists, shutting out state institutions. And this at a time when state support for museums has been decreasing regularly. 'The Centre Pompidou's acquisition budget was €2 million [about £1.7 million] in 2018,' laments the French academic and art market specialist Alain Quemin. 'What can you buy with €2 million?'[5] he asks. (That figure was increased to €2.2 million in 2020.)[6]

The only way publicly funded museums can deal with this divergence in resources is to hope their board members and patrons will support acquisitions or, eventually, donate their art to the institution. This can also lead, however, to conflicts of interest, when patrons might exercise pressure on the museum to show their holdings or acquire artists in which they are themselves heavily 'invested'.

As well as the problem of rising prices, public museums may also be unable to hold the most prestigious exhibitions, simply because they cannot afford to stage them. Look at Paris's Fondation Louis Vuitton, which in 2021 was planning to bring 200 works from the fabulous Morozov collection to Paris from Russia, on loan from the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow and the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.[7] That exhibition followed on from another blockbuster show, when in 2016–17 the same private, corporate-funded museum brought works from the Sergei Shchukin collection from the same Russian museums to Paris, attracting over 1.2 million visitors.[8] How many public institutions could stage such extraordinary shows – particularly in the post-pandemic period when their finances have collapsed?

Quemin comments:

> There is a competitive effect. In France, these very blockbuster shows were rather the monopoly of the Grand Palais and the

> Réunion des Musées Nationaux [French cultural umbrella organisation], but now Louis Vuitton for example has much deeper resources. And Bernard Arnault [owner of Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy, which funds the museum] can offer exchanges from his own art collection, something that is far more difficult for the RMN.

He adds: 'A blockbuster show like the 2018–19 Jean-Michel Basquiat/ Egon Schiele shows at Vuitton[9] attracts the public, but at the same time private museums do rather undermine state institutions, because it means they can no longer do a Basquiat show.'

The opening of the Louis Vuitton Foundation is the best example in France of a private museum that directly competes with the country's most established public institutions which, until recently, had a quasi-monopoly over the most successful exhibitions. And as the museum-going public is not infinite, a sensational exhibition at a private art space can drain away visitors from the established institutions. 'Since the Vuitton Foundation opened, the Grand Palais has never had more than 500,000 visitors a year,' laments a leading Parisian museum director: 'If you add another exhibition venue, attendance will inevitably fall at other museums.'[10]

There is a greater tension as well in that private museums are often perceived, rightly or wrongly, as reflecting the gross inequalities in society today. 'Instead of being seen as a manifestation of the positive and progressive energies of civil society, private museums risk becoming emblems of inequity and billionaires run amok,' says Szántó.

Is this judgement wholly, partially, or not at all true? Are private museums a beneficial addition to the cultural landscape, despite a few less-than-honourable cases? In the following pages I examine the various forms they take, who their founders are, how they are financed and issues about their sustainability and legacy. I look also at the situation in China, where reports of a private museum 'boom' are true, but difficult to evaluate objectively. And finally, I wonder whether some wealthy collectors, with their impressive new museums, are capturing the cultural agenda as a function of their own tastes and personal interests. Can they skew the notions of the importance and value of their favoured artists, as far as their art historical and aesthetic significance is concerned?