

The Golden Age of Museum Philanthropy

By Nicolas Duvoux

At a time when public museums are struggling due to budget cuts and the need for renovations, the opening of many private foundations marks a shift in the Parisian museum landscape. Against this backdrop, G. Adam offers a comprehensive overview of the issues surrounding the rise of private museums.

Reviewed: [Georgina Adam, *The Rise and Rise of the Art Private Museum*, London, Lund Humphries, 2021, 104 p., £19.99, ISBN 9781848223844.](#)

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the extraordinary challenges it posed for cultural institutions, suddenly deprived of visitors and revenue, journalist and art critic Georgina Adam wrote and published a book on the forms, meaning, and challenges of private cultural institutions, which she simply refers to as private museums – despite the difficulty involved in defining the term. It refers to “a not-for-profit art space, open to the public and established and funded primarily by an art collector and destined to show their collection. It may also designate a museum funded by a company, such as the three Pinault museums, two in Venice and one in Paris” (p. 14). The definition reflects the diversity of the legal statuses of the foundations that support these private museums, both in the United States and in France.

A new form of philanthropy has since emerged, driven by individuals who have amassed vast fortunes over recent decades. The author refers to this as

‘philanthrocapitalism’¹, a term that combines capitalist and philanthropic approaches: these may include the acquisition of artworks, the creation of institutions, or support for public institutions. Alain Quemin, a renowned art market specialist whose work is mentioned here², points out that the financial capacity to acquire works (p. 10), monopolize public attention, and attract visitors in a competitive environment (p. 11) is rapidly devitalizing institutions such as the Réunion des Musées Nationaux³ (p. 12). The balance of power, moreover, is stacked so heavily against public institutions that decision-making in the arts is shifting in favor of private collectors, who impose their views even in public institutions’ programming (works by Martial Raysse and Jeff Koons, collected by François Pinault, have been given solo exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, despite the misgivings of the institution’s own experts⁴), thereby enhancing the value, in every sense of the term, of the works and artists they collect (p. 84)⁵.

While acknowledging the criticisms levelled at private museums, Adam draws on her first-hand knowledge of institutional founders and the workings of the art market, taking a global view of the subject and providing examples from China, Indonesia, and Bangladesh to go beyond a conventional and superficial approach and offer new insights into this phenomenon.

The book is structured as an overview. It begins by outlining the scope of the phenomenon, discussing the dominant models, long-term history, and current state of this form of artistic patronage, which has given rise to lasting and significant institutions such as the Frick Collection and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. We can also mention the work of the Hoffmann family in Arles, the Maeght Foundation, and the Gianadda Foundation in Martigny, in French-speaking Switzerland. Adam points out the prevalence of contemporary art in these processes, insofar as the flexibility and rapid decision-making enabled by philanthropic resources

¹ Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, *Philanthrocapitalism: How Giving Can Save the World*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2009.

² Among the works of this professor of sociology at the Université Paris 8 and member of the Institut Universitaire de France, we can cite *The Social World of Galleries. Contemporary Art, the Market and Internationalization*, London & New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024, 480 pp.

³ It is worth noting that the Réunion des Musées Nationaux was established during the Third Republic to collect and manage funds used to acquire works for national collections. Renamed GrandPalaisRMN in 2024, its mission is to make art and culture accessible to all.

⁴ The author attributes this analysis to Alain Quemin.

⁵ This point was emphasized by Jérôme Kohler, an expert in the philanthropic sector, in an opinion piece, « La recherche de mécènes ou de généreux donateurs n’est pas gratuite » (The search for sponsors or generous donors comes at a cost), *Le Monde*, November 8, 2025.

make it possible to keep pace with developments in this market, in contrast to the relative and absolute weight of historical collections in public museums. This is also the case with sculpture gardens, which form complete architectural ensembles – buildings, collections, gardens, and sculptures all bear the signature of their patrons. The decision to locate these museums in shopping malls in order to reach the public, while shocking, may also contribute to the renewal of cultural offerings, as in the case of Museum MACAN in Jakarta, created by Indonesian businessman Haryanto Adikoesoemo, for whom commercial and tax considerations seem to take precedence.

The author then focuses on donors' motivations. This classic question in the sociology of philanthropy finds rich and diverse material here, as philanthropists value the prestige they derive from the cultural institutions in which they invest. A plethora of speeches, intentions, and interpretations underlie their actions, such as creating institutions, donating works, or endowing capital. After discussing the overriding factor of wealth, she identifies traditional motivations, such as the desire to give back to society, but also the desire for legitimacy among outsiders entering the elite, or the willingness to share and introduce works and artists to a wider audience. Her argument is innovative in that it identifies donors' desire to control the purchase, sale, and display of artworks – in conjunction with the wealth of professionals and individuals (who deem themselves) competent – as the main drivers behind asserting and maintaining differentiation from public institutions.

Creating a private museum is obviously not without its drawbacks. The most widely reported issue is the tax deductions and exemptions enjoyed by these donors. This is particularly true in the United States, where the Hatch Report⁶, produced by the United States Senate Finance Committee in 2016, highlighted the misuse of these tax mechanisms (flipping, rapid resale with capital gains, tax havens, proximity of the foundation to the donor's home, and shell companies that are nothing more than tax havens). In France, the Aillagon law of 2003 sparked criticism regarding the significant tax deductions enjoyed by private institutions, to the detriment of public institutions on the one hand, and individual philanthropy – which is less incentivized – on the other. The gradual and sometimes problematic relationship between private initiatives and public authorities once again highlights donors' desire to control their resources, sometimes in the context of transfers or loans to public institutions. This need for control is often manifested posthumously – though not always with donations as large as Eli Broad's to his Los Angeles institution, the Broad, which received a \$140

⁶ Named after Orrin Hatch, United States senator from Utah and Chairman of the Finance Committee. His critical conclusions were detailed in a letter in 2016.

million donation in addition to his art collection. France stands out for its generous corporate tax reduction measures, with the Allaigon law allocating €1.7 billion in public funds to patronage in 2025, representing one-third of the Ministry of Culture's budget. These deductions ensure a transfer of resources to private actors under a limited set of constraints, and thus enable, with strong public support, the conversion of private capital into social prestige⁷ linked to the ability to promote a cultural vision. This mechanism has drawn criticism from the philanthropic community itself, as some do not make use of the deductions to which they are entitled. The waves of private museums established in China since the 1990s show that the global center of gravity for this type of institution is shifting to that country.

Cultural philanthropy — whose diverse strands, including diplomatic, have already been explored⁸ — provides a particularly fitting illustration of this point. The issue of philanthropic control emerges as the central concern, even beyond the question of the legitimacy of wealth: control over one's assets, the meanings ascribed to them, control over serialization and over the art collection⁹ as a driver of enrichment, and ultimately the ability to define collective choices¹⁰. One of the questions raised by this book is whether, beyond the sustainability of these institutions — which concludes the author's reflection — private museums are capable of integrating a critique of the power they embody, as public authorities once did at a time when such initiatives were their responsibility¹¹. The question then becomes, in what forms, to what extent, and with what implications and consequences for artists, advisors, curators, and directors, for donors, and for society as a whole — whose reference points are shifting as the private sector and wealth spectacularly (re)appropriate culture and the criteria of social distinction.

At a time when the Centre Pompidou is undergoing renovations, and public cultural institutions are facing numerous challenges relating to architecture,

⁷ A well-established process that is particularly well documented in France by numerous studies on philanthropy and its relationship with the state, but particularly prevalent since the early 1990s in the field of culture and corporate sponsorship, see Nicolas Duvoux (ed.), *Philanthropie et prestige d'État en France, XIX^e-XX^e siècles, Genèses*, no. 109, 2017/4, in particular the contributions by Chloé Gaboriaux, Anne Monier, and Sabine Rozier.

⁸ Anne Monier, *Nos « chers » amis américains. Une enquête sur la philanthropie transnationale*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2019.

⁹ Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, Paris, Gallimard, « Nrf/Essais », 2017.

¹⁰ Nicolas Duvoux, *L'avenir confisqué. Inégalités de temps vécu, classes sociales et patrimoine*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2023.

¹¹ Nicolas Heimendinger, *L'État contre la norme. Institutions publiques et art d'avant-garde*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2025; see also the Beaubourg case study.

museography, and the social and cultural projects they initially championed, the shift towards private initiatives is giving rise to a new way of addressing these issues. Can foundations offer utopian visions, like public institutions? Do they have ambitions, if not social obligations? And if they do not, should they cultivate them, at the risk of entrenching their own model? Can a genuine cultural policy emerge amid competition between public and private institutions, with all that this implies in terms of forging relationships with the public, establishing standards for the conservation and circulation of works, but also in terms of regional planning and democratic access to the resulting cultural offering? Is the private sector necessarily destined to become public, or is the public sector destined to see its space shrink in favor of the private sector? These are some of the questions raised in the book, which seeks to renew the utopia of ideas that can be transferred to these new actors, whose intentions, means, and methods must be subject to scrutiny — a prerequisite for their position at the heart of the democratic space¹².

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¹² Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Fails Democracy and How it Can do Better*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018; Nicolas Duvoux, Sylvain A. Lefèvre, “Philanthropie et démocratie : perspectives et enjeux pour les fondations au 21^e siècle,” Observatoire de la philanthropie, Fondation de France, 2023.