

Finished and unfinished museums

Public collecting

Bendor Grosvenor muses on the crisis in British art institutions – and proposes at least one solution

The first day of an art fair, even the celebrated Tefaf at Maastricht, can be an unpleasant place to appreciate art, let alone buy it. Indeed, speaking as a recovering art dealer, fair openings can be unpleasant places to sell art, too. There are too many people, for a start. The corridors heave with “liggers” – those who attend events for the sole purpose of consuming as much free food and drink as possible.

But the rarest sight at Maastricht, indeed any art fair, is the acquisitive British museum director. The historian Sir David Cannadine concludes in a new report for the Art Fund – “Why Collect?” – that buying new works is “no more than a marginal activity” for the majority of British museums. Cannadine blames reduced government funding (there’s been a 13 per cent cut for English museums over the past 10 years) and warns that museums which don’t continue to add to their collections risk becoming – in the words of the 19th-century US museum director G. Brown Goode – a “finished museum”. “A finished museum,” Goode wrote, “is a dead museum.”

While I agree with Cannadine that British museums’ collecting zeal has been damped by budget cuts, in my experience the problem goes beyond money. Buying an artwork requires institutional energy, which not all



From left: restorer Luana Casaglia tests a work supposedly by Amedeo Modigliani; Rembrandt’s ‘Minerva in Her Study’ (1635), from the Leiden collection — Luana Casaglia/AP

museums possess. Museums are one of the last unreformed public services in Britain, where almost everything is decided by committee, and decisions can take an age, if they are taken at all. A few years ago I sold a portrait to a national museum for what should have been an easily digestible £8,000. But the process took more than six months (which is fairly standard). I wouldn’t be surprised if the museum spent more on staff time than on the picture.

But if an energetic curator gets behind an acquisition, miracles can happen. The most daring British museum acquisition of recent times was the purchase by Derby Museums of two landscapes by Joseph Wright at auction in New York in 2016. Despite only being aware of the pictures nine days before the sale, staff at the museum raised enough (including a contribution from the Art Fund) to cover a final bid of \$233,000. What

A recent report concludes that buying new works is ‘no more than a marginal activity’ for most museums

made the acquisition even more remarkable was that Derby Council was (and still is) threatening to remove all the museum’s funding.

The Derby example shows that museums don’t just need money to collect, they need gumption. Cannadine has called for an urgent increase in government funding for museums, to boost collecting. But there will be no more taxpayers’ money for museum acquisitions, not least because politically it’s a hard sell: Britain is struggling to pay for its hospitals, its defences and its Brexit. One of the reasons Britain’s councillors

can so easily cut museum funding is because they know they won’t be voted out for it. Our rulers’ antipathy to culture merely reflects our own.

If museums can’t buy their way out of Cannadine’s collecting crisis, might they instead borrow their way out? In Britain there is a long tradition of those lucky enough to own masterpieces lending them to public institutions. Today, a number of the best-known pictures at the National Gallery in London are in fact long-term loans; Petrus Christus’ extraordinary 1446 portrait of Edward Grimston has been on loan from the Earls of Verulam since 1927.

And yet, such loans are being increasingly questioned by many in the museum world, thanks to a series of scandals. Earlier this year, an exhibition of Russian avant-garde art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent was hurriedly closed, after claims that every



‘St Catherine and the Angel’ (c1560-70) by Jacopo Tintoretto, a picture that once belonged to David Bowie, at the Rubenshuis museum in Antwerp — Ans Brys

work on display was fake (and, it is alleged, bad fakes too, if a misspelled “Kandinsky” signature is anything to go by).

Similarly, in early 2017 a Modigliani exhibition at the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa was closed after all but one of the exhibits were judged to be fake. Even loans of genuine pictures can be controversial; in 2015 the owner of a £30m portrait by Pontormo negotiated the sale of his picture while it was hanging in the National Gallery, breaking a written promise that he wouldn’t do so.

Critics claim that museums are being used by lenders to enhance the value of their work, and that it would be safer if only publicly owned works were displayed. Caveat collector, they say. It is true that in some circumstances a period on loan can make an artwork better known, and thus more saleable. And there are other benefits to lending,

too; the former National Gallery director Sir Nicholas Penny points out that museums can offer collectors the “double service of a free safety deposit with a shop window”.

But the suggestion that a period of museum display can transform an artwork’s value is overblown; certainly, it’s nothing compared with how a period of museum display can transform an artist’s value, and we seem to have no problem with that. And while there undoubtedly are unscrupulous art owners, most collectors are driven not just by a passion for art, but by a passion to share it, too (disclaimer, this includes me; I have lent artworks anonymously since I started collecting, over a decade ago). The US collector Thomas Kaplan explicitly sees his Leiden Collection – which contains a Vermeer, 11 Rembrandts and countless other masterpieces – as a “lending library”, and has

lent some 170 works to more than 40 museums.

It would be a shame, therefore, if some museums’ bad experience of loans stopped other institutions from embracing this source of free masterpieces, because the benefits are clear. At the Rubenshuis museum in Antwerp, which has only a small collection of its own and an even smaller budget, the well-publicised loan of a Tintoretto that once belonged to David Bowie helped increase visitor numbers by 30 per cent. And when Thomas Kaplan and his wife lent a work to the Louvre – “Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well” by Ferdinand Bol – they thought the picture was so at home there that they donated it to the museum.

It is time for museums to become the liggers of the art world, and borrow as much free art as they can. There’s a good chance they’ll get to keep it.