

Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

Modeling the Museum

From Abu Dhabi to Hong Kong



View of sculpture in the Grand Vestibule of Louvre Abu Dhabi © Louvre Abu Dhabi. Photo credit: Marc Damage

By  Allan Schwartzman

co-founder of AAP & chairman of Sotheby's Global Fine Arts

Published 15 March 2018 in [Allan's Intro](#)

The [Louvre Abu Dhabi](#) is the first museum of historical masterworks that has been created in these days in which those works have attained such stratospheric financial value. So, perhaps not surprisingly, how the works are displayed, how many (or few) there are per room, how they are lit and described, is embedded into the DNA of the institution and its architecture—and is inherently different than museums of the past. The viewpoint at the Louvre Abu Dhabi is cross-cultural: a cohabitation of works from different cultures and times than has traditionally been the case.

You don't miss a thing. Where previously there might have been rows and rows of objects in cases, now perhaps there are as few as eight objects in one large room. This focuses the eye. We look at new relationships between objects from East and West, and the brain is able to absorb so much more information because of the precise focus of the presentation.

And there is a flow: we don't see traditional differentiation between departments. The museum is no longer merely a repository for great works: it is theater and engagement on a level that is now central to the very understanding of what a museum can be.

Regardless of the number of visitors (and the attendance goals are high), this is a more accessible museum than those we are used to. Here in Abu Dhabi there is a different notion of commitment to the masterwork and a different process of assembling material—some bought, some borrowed.



Louvre Abu Dhabi's *Rain of light* © Louvre Abu Dhabi. Photo credit: Mohamed Somji

In these times of shifting borders and political vicissitudes, museum directors are rethinking not only funding but the nature of collaboration, ownership and engagement. There are dynamic models emerging in developing cultural hubs, while centuries-old institutions that have always functioned as islands of treasure unto themselves are attempting to deepen their offerings and reinvent themselves for new, plugged-in audiences.

What the future holds for museums was the focus of a lively panel discussion last week in London, artfully steered by [Sir Nicholas Serota](#) for the Sotheby's International Council. My fellow speakers included [Gabriele Finaldi](#) (director of London's [National Gallery](#)), [Axel Rüger](#) (director of the [Van Gogh Museum](#), Amsterdam), and [Fiammetta Rocco](#) (chief culture writer at [The Economist](#)), each bringing their own insights into the current and evolving landscape.

Each museum has its own set of challenges, yet there are clear trends developing. Dr Finaldi talked about ways in which the National Gallery is considering sharing its collection, while also borrowing from others—a topic that has come up in our [podcasts](#) with [MoMA](#) director [Glenn Lowry](#) and [LACMA](#) director [Michael Govan](#). It is worth recognizing that cultural wealth and patrimony is not as territorial as it has historically been, and that directors of many of the pantheon of the world's museums are discussing sharing.

It seems to me that there are essentially five kinds of museums today. Firstly, the traditional and longstanding museums of masterworks, such as the National Gallery, the [Louvre](#) and the [Uffizi](#) in Western Europe, as well as the [State Hermitage Museum](#) in Russia, the [Metropolitan Museum](#) in New York, the [National Gallery](#) in Washington DC, and the [Art Institute of Chicago](#). These have historically been seen as exemplars of fine art museums, mostly formed in the era when major cities had a single museum of art, gathering the treasures of history in a model derived from the European tradition of housing the collections of royal families.



Interior of the Louvre Abu Dhabi (2017). Photo credit: AP/Rex/Shutterstock

There is another European model, focused on exhibitions of recently made art and usually heavily subsidized by the government, most notably the German system of *kunsthallen* and *kunstvereins* and the French network of government-funded [Fonds Régionaux d'Art Contemporain](#).

Thirdly, there is the American grow-or-die model of museum, nowadays forever in need of market and revenue expansion. These are typically both collection—and exhibition—focused.

In an era in which art is becoming increasingly highly valued and in which museums have become larger and their spaces fuller, there is the need to create models whereby patrons feel that the collections they have accumulated will be honored with a necessary focus of time, scale and presentation. Many collectors have bypassed the problem by simply building their own museums. The rise of this fourth model, the private institution, within communities that have been traditionally been anchored by public museums has created the need for delicate recharting of the relationship between public and private.

As the privately-funded museums age, there will inevitably be a “Barnes effect”. Just as Albert Barnes’ [collection](#) was controversially uprooted from its original home in Merion, Pennsylvania and moved to Philadelphia, a number of private institutions will change, be absorbed by or partnered with existing major museums over the next 50 to 100 years. Some forward-thinking museums and collectors are getting ahead of the game by simply creating new, inventive forms of partnership, as is the case with the [Fisher Collection](#) at SFMOMA.



Funerary steles at the Louvre Abu Dhabi (2017). Photo credit: AP/REX/Shutterstock

Finally, in nations new to museum presentation, we are seeing innovation, specifically in Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. These are wild, dynamic environments in which intimate and innovative, grand—sometimes garish—concepts are being made possible, many of which aren't known about publicly yet.

We are set to see more “destination” museums opening. These institutions create distinction for themselves by building experiences that are simply unavailable elsewhere. The [Guggenheim Bilbao](#) opened the door to this way of thinking when the city made a comprehensive commitment to becoming a major cultural city. More focused on the architecture than the collection, it was designed to be a museum of the future.

For nations of new wealth looking to attract international travelers and innovative thinkers, culture is central.

We have been spending a lot of time thinking about the future of the museum. As a next step, we will be staging a panel discussion in Hong Kong on 29 March. Our speakers include Michael Govan (director, LACMA), [Budi Tek](#) (founder of Shanghai's [Yuz Museum and Foundation](#)), [Doryun Chong](#) (deputy director and chief curator of Hong Kong's [M+museum](#)) and myself, introduced by [Kevin Ching](#) (Sotheby's Asia CEO) and moderated by Charlotte Burns.

Our discussion will take in such areas as the reshaping of institutional frameworks through new models of ownership, collaboration and audience engagement; the evolving roles of nations, directors and collectors; the potential impact of the diverse innovations taking place beyond the traditional centers of Europe and the United States; and the possibilities created by virtual reality.

We hope to see you there (RSVP [here](#)).