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THE MODERN MEDICIS

Private museums are throwing open their doors to the public



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A collection of islands in the Seto Inland Sea off western Japan, three hours by bullet train from Tokyo, is home to one of the world's most extraordinary recent artistic developments. Over the past 30 years Soichiro Fukutake, a Japanese billionaire, working with Tadao Ando, an architect, has built a series of museums on Naoshima and two other islands to house his vast collection of mostly contemporary art. The works on show are unique and thoughtfully chosen: colourful, organic outdoor sculptures by Yayoi Kusama and light-filled installations by James Turrell that make you reconsider man's relationship with nature, among many, many others. Ask museum directors which is their favourite museum in the world, and the

chances are they'll say Naoshima.

More than four centuries after Francesco de Medici set up a private art gallery in the family offices (*uffizi*) in Florence, we are in another golden age of collecting – and this time the main beneficiary is the public. Naoshima is only the most extraordinary example of a trend: since 2000 more than 225 private museums of contemporary art have opened across the world.

The growth in the number of people with a great deal of money and an interest in contemporary art is driving this development, according to Larry's List, an information service on arts collectors. State-funded institutions have been priced out of the market. The only buyers at the top end are wealthy individuals, many of whom want to create a brilliant showcase for their taste and vision.

Emerging-market governments tend to focus their educational spending on schools, leaving museums to the private sector. Individuals – including Bernardo Paz, the founder of the Inhotim sculpture park in Brazil, Savina Lee in South Korea, and Wang Wei and her husband, Liu Yiqian, whose museum in Shanghai exhibits their vast collection of 20th-century revolutionary art – have been renovating old buildings and commissioning new ones to present their collections to the public. The Chinese government wants to promote culture, so developers may include a museum in a proposal to increase its chances of approval. “What the government and we have in common is a desire to share culture with the wider population,” says Wang. “This may sound surprising to people in the West, but it's the truth. It is why I am opening a third museum in Chongqing, a city without cultural infrastructure, to showcase contemporary China.”

Many of the new private museums – like the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, founded in 2008 by Dasha Zhukova, the wife of Roman Abramovich, a Russian oligarch – were created to fill the cultural vacuum that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Without a collector base to build on, the Garage has become a foundation stone for contemporary art in Russia. “The kind of museum we're running would not be state-run,” says Kate Fowle, the Garage's chief curator. “It simply wouldn't exist.”

Even in the Old World, private museums are booming, particularly in countries where the state-museum system is moribund – Italy and Greece, for example – or in those, such as Germany and the Netherlands, where private collectors fear that bequests to massive national collections will be crated up in dark basements and never displayed. Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, from a prominent family of Turin industrialists, has built up a collection of more than 1,000 works over 20 years. She is establishing a network of private contemporary-art museums that can work together on exhibitions, loans and education.

In America tax rules and a history of philanthropy encourage collectors. Institutions qualify as non-profits so long as they are “educational”. American collectors have long been at the vanguard of this movement; the Frick, the Getty and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum all began as private collections.

Some argue that Crystal Bridges in Arkansas is the most important private museum in America today, not least because of the vast sums that its founder, Alice Walton, a Walmart heiress, has poured into it since it opened in 2011 – though her taste is surprisingly conventional. More interesting is the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, which focuses on showing the work of gifted artists early in their careers. The Kramlich Collection in California is the place to see video and media art. Like many leading private museums, it was designed by Herzog & de Meuron, a Swiss firm.

Museums make statements, and private collectors can use theirs to say what they like. David Walsh, a professional gambler, wanted his Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania to challenge the “authority-driven” model of a museum. The audio guide to the 100,000-square-foot subterranean museum offers different



"handelier" by Jason Rhoades, at the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

interpretations of the works on show, including a button labelled "Art Wank". Walsh was startled to find residents of Hobart talking about "our museum". "This completely shocked me. I was putting my finger up to the establishment, saying 'fuck you'. And now I am the establishment."

FIVE PRIVATE MUSEUMS TO SEE BEFORE YOU DIE

Beyeler Foundation, Riehen, Switzerland

When Ernest Beyeler died in 2010, his personal collection was valued at \$1.85 billion. Many of the Modernist works, including Henri Rousseau's exquisite "The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope", are on display in a Renzo Piano-designed glass-walled masterpiece in the hills above the city of Basel.

The Boros Collection, Berlin, Germany

Housed in a Nazi-era concrete bunker with two-metre-thick walls, the private collection of the Boros family highlights works of contemporary art from 1990 onwards. One high point is Cerith Wyn Evans's "Untitled", a dazzling column of light tubes that illuminates the pocked and scarred walls of the bunker's interior.

Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, China

Like a transparent worm on stilts, this spectacular museum looms above the entrance of the Laoshan National Forest Park. Founded by Lu Jun, a real-estate mogul, the museum features contemporary artists from across the world, including MadIn Company, a Chinese art collective.

The Museum of Innocence, Istanbul, Turkey

Orhan Pamuk, a Nobel Prize-winning novelist, began collecting objects in the mid-1990s and wrote a novel (with the same name as the museum) based on them and the fictional people who might have owned them. A story grotto like no other.

Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al-Thani Museum, Qatar

Amid the mega-museums being built in the Middle East, such as Abu Dhabi's Louvre and Guggenheim museums, is this eccentric counterpoint to art-world conformity. It houses 15,000 artefacts from the sheikh's personal collection, including dinosaur fossils, Islamic art and vintage cars. There is little rhyme or reason here – but you can see the largest privately owned weapons collection in the world.

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