

Museums for Sale: The Louvre and Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi

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In 1992 a branch of the Guggenheim opened in Bilbao, Spain. The success of this project resulted in an alarming trend: the branding of museums. In 2013 the first branch of the Louvre museum will open abroad. Many experts, who feel that there are risks in exporting national cultural heritage and selling museum names, have criticized this decision.

In the 1980s, acting director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim foundation in New York, Thomas Krens (he held this position from 1988-2005; currently he works as the museum's foreign affairs advisor), asked a simple question: Why should large amounts of artwork sit in depositories unused and unseen? Finding no sufficient answer, he decided to change the way museums did business. Abandoning the concept that a museum should be tied to a specific location, he began to export the Guggenheim brand abroad. Just like Louis Vuitton, who has offices in Paris, London, New York and Prague, the Guggenheim now has museum branches in Bilbao, Berlin, Venice and soon, Abu Dhabi. Krens radically changed the definition of a museum and in doing so unleashed a fury of copycat policies, despite its many criticisms.

This trend is the continuance of a process that began in the second half of the 18th century. Artwork created for

a specifically designed space, such as a church or private residence, was moved to museums, newly established in response to the wave of nationalism that washed over Europe. Through this move, the pieces lost their natural context but became tied to national identity. During the 20th century museums became the target destinations of modern art. Increasingly artwork is treated as any other consumer item that can be sold or rented anywhere in the world. The advocates of this expansive process argue that in sharing national treasures, museums are building bridges of understanding between countries and cultures. The question remains whether the export of national artwork causes the work to lose any of its meaning or substance.

The consumer market model has reached European museums. Jean Clair, the former director of the Picasso Museum in Paris, art

historian and author – and one of the main critics of the museum-businesses, which he likens to museum-McDonald's – described Thomas Krens as a manager without any wider cultural awareness, a self-made man who often made vast amounts of money but rarely brought prestige to American artwork.³³ The fact of the matter is that during Krens' leadership investment in the foundation increased from 20 million to 118 million dollars. However, at what cost?

The price was the commercialization and vulgarization of museums, as noted by Philippe de Montebello, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. An art historian and long-time critic of the Guggenheim approach, de Montebello condemned the system of *loan fees* (and the paid rental of collections) along with the

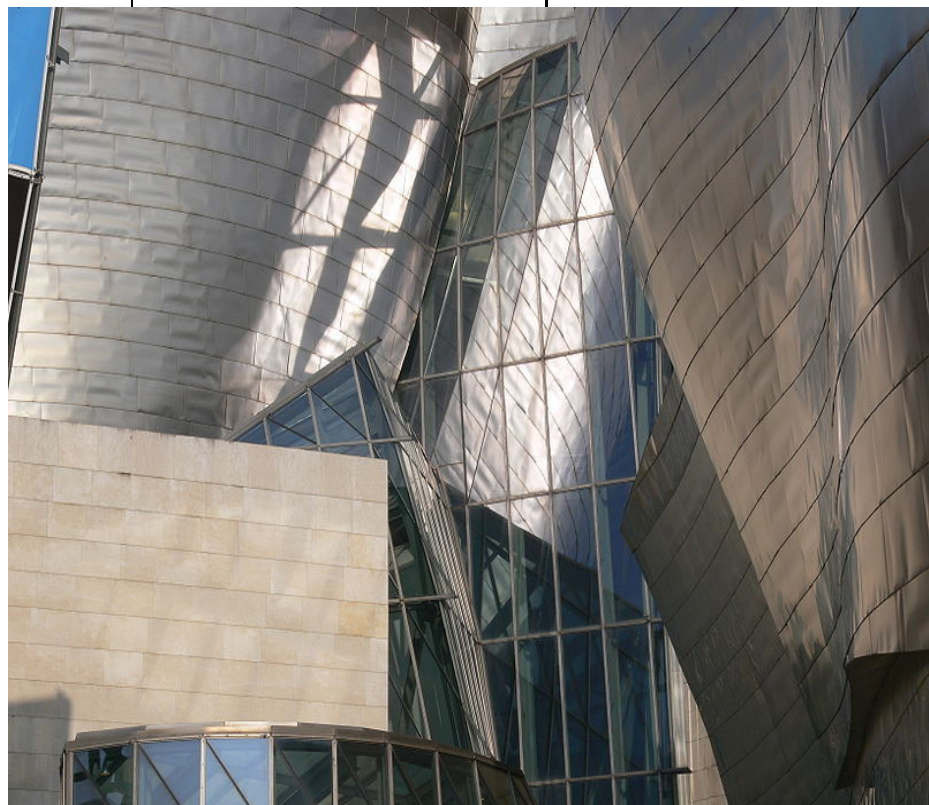
³³ Jean Clair, *Malaise dans les musées*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007, s. 67. This book is the source of other citations and quotes of Jean Clair in this paper.

tendency of museums to become “culture markets” or “amusement parks.” He warned that this sort of policy leads to the loss of the museum’s spirit and mission. He noted that if culture is supposed to become Disneyland, Disney is much better equipped for the purpose.

Cities and countries attract the world’s attention with their museums and cultural centers. This was the case in Bilbao, Spain. In the late 1980s, it was a city without a future, coming to terms with failing industry and political violence, a combination that almost brought the city to collapse. The former Basque president José Antonio Ardanza decided to counteract the city’s decline through cultural means. He wanted to transform the city into a sacred place and to give the city a new direction. In 1991 he met Krens and presented a proposal to open an unprecedented museum of modern art in cooperation with the Guggenheim. Ardanza did not have art collections or a building, but he had money. This proposal coincided with Krens desire

to bring the Guggenheim into the international arena. Krens agreed to loan artwork from New York depositories and Ardanza organized the construction of a building like no other. In many ways, the actual art was not nearly as important as the architecture of the museum and the prestigious Guggenheim brand name. Architect Frank O. Gehry was selected to build the museum, and in 1992 he constructed the most

The museum created 4,500 job opportunities in the city. Investors estimated that 500 thousand visitors would visit the museum annually. Once opened, the museum welcomed doubled this number of visitors (Guggenheim Bilbao is visited by 900 thousand to 1 million viewers every year, 70 percent of which are foreigners). The large influx of tourists, as Ardanza has hoped, transformed the city. The establishment of the



Guggenheim Bilbao museum branch.

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significant piece of the entire collection: the building itself. The museum fulfilled Krens’ dream. The art religion, as described by art theorist [Wolfgang Illrich](#), was blessed with a spectacular new cathedral.

museum was undoubtedly beneficial for Bilbao. However, the question remains whether it has been so for the Guggenheim.

According to French art historian Didier Rykner, the Guggenheim collection

compared to others is not very noteworthy and thus loses the significance it does have when it loans its collections to other institutions. In 1999 the Guggenheim was forced to sell part of its collection (for \$10 million dollars) to finance its plans to expand to other locations. In 2000 it sold a further \$4.55 million dollars worth of art, and at the beginning of 2003 the foundation announced that due financial difficulties it would not continue with its \$950 million dollar plan to build another branch in New York. Since more branches have opened, the original Guggenheim museum has reduced its budget and programming and cut its staff.

Krens tried to solve these financial woes by increasing museum cooperation. In 2001 he joined forces with the St. Petersburg Hermitage Museum to open a Guggenheim Hermitage Museum in Las Vegas. The new project did not survive. The Guggenheim had such low attendance, it closed only 15 months after opening. The entire Guggenheim Hermitage project was cancelled in 2008.

Further projects in Tokyo, Salzburg, Mexico and Brazil were abandoned as well. In 2008 the British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid was asked to construct the Guggenheim Hermitage

Vilnius Museum, which is scheduled to open in 2011, however, there are doubts that the project will be realized. Even former President Ardanz is skeptical about repeating the Bilbao success.

Nevertheless, Krens will not be discouraged. He already opened relatively successful branches in Berlin and Venice and intends to move on to Abu Dhabi where he hopes to open a Guggenheim branch in 2012.

France was inspired by the export of cultural heritage and began renting its national collections as well. In 2006 the Louvre opened its first branch abroad in Atlanta, Georgia. In exchange for 13 million Euros it loaned treasures from its depositories for a three years period, creating nine long-term exhibitions. The new Louvre Atlanta, designed by Renza Piana, is yet another example of the current trend: build a spectacular museum first, find the collection to showcase later. With the increased willingness of museums to rent their collections, this has become an easy task.

Atlanta, however, was just a test. On 6 March 2007 the French Minister of Culture, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, and Sheik Sultan Bin Tahnoun Al Nahyan, chairman of the Office for Culture, Historical

Monuments and Tourism in Abu Dhabi, signed a contract for a long-term loan of artwork from the Louvre and other French museums, to be presented over the next thirty years in the United Arab Emirates metropolis Abu Dhabi. The names alone, *Louvre Abu Dhabi*, will cost the country 400 million Euros. France will make approximately 1 billion Euros through this agreement.

Ninety-five percent of the United Arab Emirates territory is uninhabited and 80 percent of its food and consumer goods are imported. The Emirates became a wealthy territory in the 1960s when it began to extract oil and natural gas. Enormous profits have made it one of the richest countries in the world. Much of their ever-increasing capital has been invested in seaside resorts, sports, culture and education. Western universities were contracted to open their branches in the Emirates. In 2006 a branch of the Sorbonne opened in Abu Dhabi. Today this campus hosts over 2,000 students. New York University followed and opened its gates to new students this year.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi will not be built directly in the city but on a nearby island – Saadiyat, which means happiness. Millions of dollars were invested in the development of this island.

This image is in the public domain



The Louvre in Paris

The island covers 2,700 hectares and is populated by the guests of 30 luxury hotels and the owners of 8,000 luxury villas. It boasts a 19-kilometer beach with fine sand, golf courses, three ports capable of accommodating thousands of boats, and a ski slope with artificial snow. It seems this paradise has been created for yacht owners and jetsetters (their happiness is only slightly tainted by the Human Rights Watch reports that cite hundreds of human rights abuses to the workers on the island).

The Louvre Abu Dhabi will cover 24,000 square meters. Six thousand will be dedicated to permanent exhibitions and 2,000 to temporary exhibitions. Artwork from the Louvre as well as other French museum (Musée d'Orsay, Centre Pompidou, Musée du Château de Versailles, Musée du Quai Branly and

Musée Guimet) will be transported to Abu Dhabi for a period of ten years. Along with this, the agreement states that France will supply the Louvre Abu Dhabi with four temporary exhibitions a year for the next 15 years. Finally, it has agreed to help the museum build its own collection, which will eventually replace the artwork on loan. This means that the French Louvre will help its counterpart acquire artwork.

This task is in contradiction with the mission of French museum employees, who should acquire the best pieces for French national collections and not for a foreign country. Jean Clair points out that the collection at the Louvre Abu Dhabi will in essence be a private collection owned by one man – the Emir of Abu Dhabi. No other state has given its collections to one individual. This policy has

no precedence and deprives the French public collections of significant artwork that they could have obtained for their own museums.

The French parliament has agreed to these long-term loans. The decision, which will influence the future cultural development of France, was made without consulting art and culture experts, who are the main critics of the transaction. Art historians were surprised that politicians, whose influence is insignificant in comparison with French tradition and culture, have decided on a project that will influence the nation's heritage so greatly. On 13 December 2006 the French daily *Le Monde* published a protest written by three highly renowned cultural experts – Jean Clair, Françoise Cachin (former director of the Musée d'Orsay and later director of Musée de France) and Roland Recht (art historian and professor at the Collège de France). In their article titled "Museums are not for sale" they argue that the main mission of a museum is to assemble a collection, organize educational programs, and complete scientific research to improve art conservation – not loan collections without any justification. They ask why 600 thousand citizens of Abu Dhabi should enjoy French national collections at the expense of French citizens and visitors to

France (seven million people visit the Louvre in Paris every year).

It is important to note that the opening of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi contradicts the International Council of Museums Code of Ethics which states that “museums are institutions without profit-making interests...museum collections are created for society and they can under no circumstances be treated as financial assets.” In light of this, Rykner joined in the protest against the export of national collections and initiated a petition published in prestigious publications such as the *New York Times* (it has been signed by more than 5,000 people).

A temporary exhibition, which aims to present works of art from various parts of the world, is something very different than a collection of European art presented without any deeper meaning on the other side of the globe. Advocates of art-export argue that these types of arrangements will export French culture and language abroad. A new section of Islamic art will open at the Louvre in Paris at the same time the Louvre Abu Dhabi opens its doors to the public. The organizers believe that this will create a bridge of understanding between both countries. However, while France is not bound by any censorship towards Islamic art, Islamic conservatism can

hardly accept European art in its full scope. Notwithstanding the negative attitude of Arab culture to figurative imaging as such, the artwork on loan cannot depict naked bodies or any Christian or Jewish motives. These restrictions limit the possibility of forming a bridge of understanding.

It is natural that experts are against this policy because they are in essence losing work. Their interpretations will not be necessary if brands become more important than the work itself. So are museums that loan their works interested in cultivating greater cultural understanding for the public? Or are there other motives that warrant the risks of loaning great works of art? A major concern of the new “satellite museum policy” is the fact that the artwork – entire depositories – are constantly moving somewhere. Every move is connected with a number of risks, which simply cannot be put into monetary terms. Any loss or damage would be irreplaceable for future generations.

Europeans and Americans live in a period of relative wealth and leisure. Abu Dhabi wants to feel a part of this lifestyle, to build a paradise out of desert and oil – a cultural center. Culture, however, requires money. Where would Florence be without the

Medici family? But, to what extent can one purchase culture? Is this really about bridging cultural understanding or is it simply an attraction for the millions of tourists investors hope to attract?

The average person cannot understand how with seven million visitors a year the Louvre does not make enough money to sustain itself and acquire new works. But it is important to know that the market is dominated by modern art, which overshadows the work of old masters. If a museum wishes to sustain itself, it has to present modern art exhibits. Museum budgets are often not large enough to procure new artwork (such as Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst). “Earlier, museums and art history used to influence the market”, says Gérard Goodrow, the director of the art fair in Cologne, “today, it is the other way round.”³⁴

Contemporary art can be defined as a product that lends itself to speculation. No one can define what art is, let alone, what constitutes good art. Therefore just about anything can be sold for any price imaginable. But it is not just about what we see, but also about what we know. Critics, theorists, gallery managers and advisors do not influence

³⁴ Rauterberg, H. *Und das ist Kunst?! Eine Qualitätsprüfung*. Frankfurt am Main, 2008. p. 53.

this knowledge; it is influenced by the market – and by the price. On 4 May 2010 Picasso's *Nude Green Leaves and Bust* sold at Christie's auction house in New York for an incredible \$106 million dollars. No one knows who the new owner is, however, it is certain that the amount of money he or she paid set the standards very high for the price of modern and contemporary art.

Most collectors wish to retain their complete collection even after their death. They prefer to turn to museums and donate the collection under a certain set of conditions than leave it to relatives, who might sell the individual pieces and split up the collection. If museums lose their role as a guarantor, it is likely that a donor's trust will turn elsewhere. This is what happened to the Guggenheim in 1998 when collector Elaine Dannhauser, shocked by Krens' policies, withdrew her \$10 million dollar collection from the museum and donated it instead to the Museum of Modern Art. Similarly, the main patron of the Guggenheim, Peter B. Lewis, who has donated \$77 million dollars to the foundation since 1993, resigned from his administrative presidential post in January 2005 because of this opposition to the museum's direction.

On the other hand, museums are more and more under the thumbs of collectors. This is especially applicable to museums of modern art. Collectors influence exhibition programs as well as purchases. Hedge fund managers treat art as a profitable commodity and actively take part on the market. Gallery

owners, collectors and traders use museums as shop windows, which provide contemporary art with the necessary acclaim and quality guarantee, that in turn increases the price of the artwork. The sum acquired for loaning art can help the museum with competitiveness on the market. However, is it a balanced business? Does the purchase of Damien Hirst's shark in formaldehyde (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*), which will eventually disintegrate anyway, justify the possible damage or loss of paintings from the Italian Renaissance?

Minister of Culture is a post not usually taken very seriously by politicians. Nevertheless, culture relates to wealth and power in a way that cannot be calculated in monetary terms. It took the Louvre a lot longer to assemble its collection than it took the Emirates to acquire one billion Euros. Art is and has always been a symbol of status and power, which explains why collectors are willing to pay an incredible amount of money for Beuyes' *Badewane*, which for an ordinary person simply is a dirty old bathtub. They are not just buying a bathtub, but also a certain status. Similarly, the Arabs are not just opening a museum, but are exhibiting their power. A business deal like this, can only lead to profits.

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