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Temples of delight

Museums the world over are doing amazingly well, says Fiammetta Rocco. But can they keep the visitors coming?

MUSEUMS USED TO stand for something old, dusty, boring and barely relevant to real life. Those kinds of places still exist, but there are far fewer of them, and the more successful ones have changed out of all recognition. The range they cover has broadened spectacularly and now goes well beyond traditional subjects such as art and artefacts, science and history (for a sample of oddball specialities, see the list on the next page).

One of the biggest draws is contemporary art.

To be sure, museums remain showcases for collections and repositories of scholarship, but they have also become pits of popular debate and places where children go for sleepovers (pictured at the British Museum). They are no longer places where people look on in awe but where they learn and argue, as they would at universities or art schools. Sir Nicholas Serota, director of Britain's Tate galleries, describes the museum as "a forum as much as a treasure box".

The statistics suggest that these new-look museums are doing something right. Globally, numbers have burgeoned from around 23,000 two decades ago to at least 55,000 now. In 2012 American museums received 850m visitors, says the American Alliance of Museums. That is more than all the big-league sporting events and theme parks combined. In England over half

the adult population visited a museum or gallery in the past year, the highest share since the government began collecting such statistics in 2005. In Sweden three out of four adults go to a museum at least once a year (though not all Europeans are equally keen). The Louvre in Paris, the world's most popular museum, had 10m visitors last year, 1m more than in 2011. China will soon have 4,000 museums—still only a quarter the number in America, but it is racing to catch up.

A world of choices

On the face of it, that success seems surprising. People now have more choices than ever before in how to spend their leisure. Many travel to see the world, but mostly the world comes to them, often via television and the internet, conveniently delivered to their laptops or smartphones. So why would they want to traipse round museums if most of the stuff they can see there is available at the click of a mouse?

Some of the new enthusiasm for museums is explained by changes in demand. In the rich world, and in some developing countries too, the share of people who are going on to higher education has risen spectacularly in recent decades. Surveys show that better-educated folk are a lot more likely to be museum-goers. They want to see for themselves where



CONTENTS

- 5 Cultural centres**
The Bilbao effect
- 6 Contemporary art**
On a wing and a prayer
- 8 China**
Mad about museums
- 9 Future strategies**
Feeding the culture-cultures



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The Bilbao effect

If you build it, will they come?

A THRIVING CULTURAL sector is an essential part of what makes a city great, along with green spaces and immigrants who bring renewal and vigour to city life, according to a recent study by McKinsey, a consultancy. The opening of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in northern Spain (pictured) in 1997, 20 years after the Pompidou Centre, shows how an imaginatively designed museum commissioned by an energetic mayor can help turn a city around.

Visitors' spending in Bilbao in the first three years after the museum opened raised over €100m (\$110m) in taxes for the regional government, enough to recoup the construction costs and leave something over. Last year more than 1m people visited the museum, at least half of them from abroad. This was the third-highest number ever, so the building continues to attract visitors even though the collection on display is modest. Other cities without historic cultural centres now look to Bilbao as a model for what vision and imagination can achieve.

Over the next decade more than two dozen new cultural centres focused on museums are due to be built in various countries (see map, previous page), at an estimated cost of \$250 billion, according to a study by AEA Consulting, a New York firm that specialises in cultural projects. Contracts have been signed and concrete is already being poured on some of them.

The most talked about are Saadiyat Island, a museum complex in Abu Dhabi that will be home to local offshoots of the Guggenheim and the Louvre, and the West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong, which will house M+, the new museum of Chinese contemporary art, Hong Kong's answer to London's Tate Modern.

M+ has secured two large collections of Chinese contemporary art through a mixture of gifts and purchases. One is a large holding built up by a former Swiss ambassador to Beijing, Uli Sigg; the second was accumulated by a mainland businessman, Guan Yi. The decision to award the 38 pieces to Hong Kong rather than to a mainland museum ruffled feathers in Beijing. With four years to go before M+ opens, it is already set to become the leading institution of its kind in the region.

Plans are also well advanced for new cultural hubs centred on museums in Saudi Arabia (Mecca), Australia (Perth), Albania (Tirana) and Brazil (Belo Horizonte). And what will be Europe's largest museum, the Mystetskyi Arsenal, with 50,000 square metres (540,000 sq ft) of exhibition space, is due to open fully in Kiev, Ukraine, next year.

Belo Horizonte, in south-east Brazil, is the town closest to a remarkable art and sculpture park known as Inhotim, founded in the 1980s by Bernardo Paz, a mining magnate. More than 20 galleries are filled with

contemporary art, and hundreds of other works, many of them specially commissioned, are spread across 2,000 hectares of lush parkland. Inhotim has become an international art destination, with more than a quarter of a million visitors a year. The new cultural hub will make the city of Belo Horizonte itself part of the draw.

Such cultural hubs need a clear vision of what they can offer if visitors are to come more than once. The new centre in Perth, an expanded version of the existing Western Australian Museum, is relaunching itself as the museum of the Indian Ocean and is already planning exhibitions in collaboration with museums in Mumbai, Muscat, Abu Dhabi and Nairobi. The Mystetskyi Arsenal will open next year with a magnificent show by Ukraine's best-known artist, Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935). But it is not clear how it intends to fill its vast spaces after that.

The example of the new Ordos Art Museum in Inner Mongolia, beautifully designed by a firm of Beijing architects, suggests that just building a terrific museum is not enough to ensure success. The city of Ordos has sprung up fast and is relatively rich, thanks to discoveries of oil and gas, but the museum has no collections and precious few plans for exhibitions. No wonder it is devoid of visitors. There may be a lesson here for the new cultural centres about to be built in other parts of the world.

That remains its aim. But whereas in Gilman's day curators reigned supreme, now they have to enchant visitors rather than lecture them. Museums offer narratives in their exhibitions, provide a context for objects by linking them to other people and other places, work with digital experts to enable visitors to participate as well as watch and listen, and create innovative public programmes to bring in the young and the inexperienced.

According to Kenneth Hudson, a British museum trend-spotter and author of "Museums of Influence", "the most fundamental change that has affected museums is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public." Some people may turn up their noses, fearing that some of what

goes on in museums these days is getting too close to being mere entertainment. But modern visitors like being entertained, and are likely to drift away unless museums can connect with them both intellectually and emotionally.

The money for all this comes from a variety of sources. Some institutions were privately founded and continue to be privately funded, others are entirely state-financed. In recent years public funding throughout the developed world has been squeezed, so museums have had to become more adept at raising money themselves, and the barriers between the two traditional funding models have become more fluid. Most institutions in Europe, America and Australia now live on a mix of

public, corporate and individual support. Even in Germany, where culture has traditionally been seen as the responsibility of the state, the climate is getting harsher. The main museums in Berlin are now expected to raise at least 8.5% of their annual operating budget in ticket sales and sponsorship.

One handy source of income is to make loans of artworks to galleries abroad. Berlin's Gemäldegalerie has been able to raise €1m (\$1.3m) by lending its two Vermeers to museums in Japan. The Picasso Museum in Paris raised €30m of the €50m it needed for its current makeover from lending works to museums abroad. Axel Rüger, director of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, says he has a list as long as his arm of foreign museums clamouring to borrow some of his most famous paintings.

A big institution such as the BM costs about £100m (\$160m) a year to run, of which 40% goes on staff alone. Every pound from the Treasury is more than matched by a pound the museum raises itself. Admission charges for public museums in Britain were scrapped by a Labour government in 2001, though museums mostly ask for voluntary donations. But the BM has also made great efforts to strengthen its marketing and fund-raising and to sell its expertise. One way of doing that is to provide consultancy services to new foreign museums; a contract with the Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi, which will open in 2016, is thought to be earning the BM as much as £10m a year.

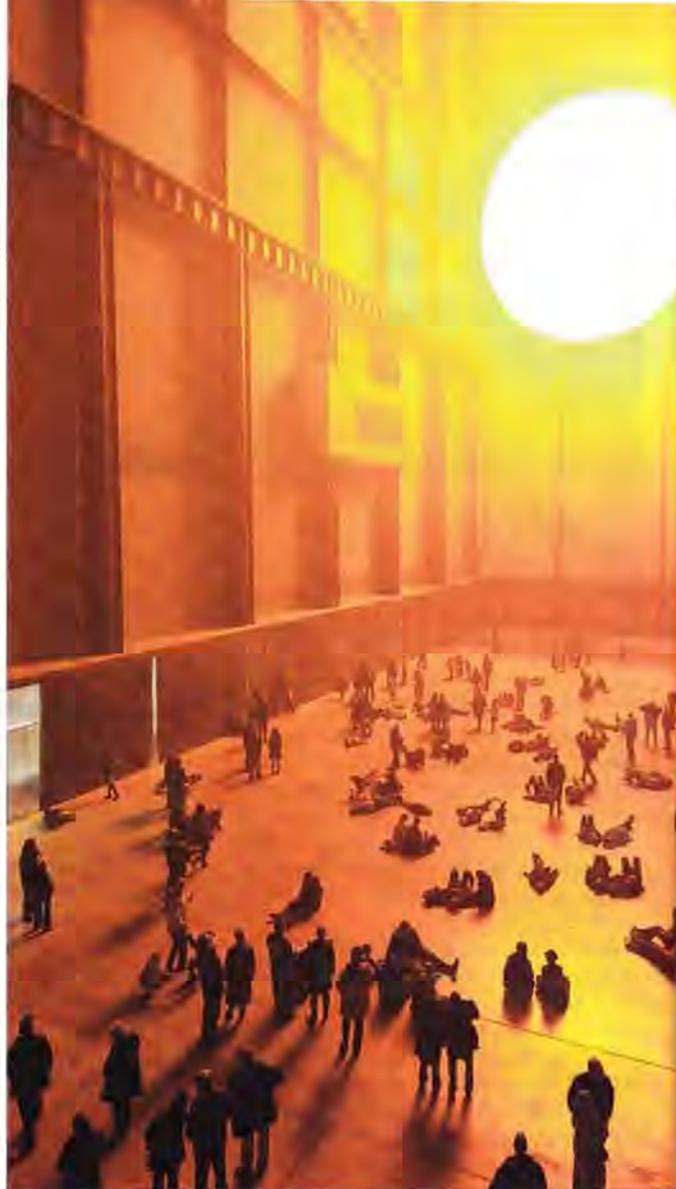
How to win Friends

Museums in America have traditionally been supported by rich individuals offering private endowments, but even there museums enjoy some state largesse in the form of tax breaks for donors and lenders, as well as rules favouring not-for-profit organisations (see main chart earlier in this article for a breakdown of America's museum finance). Other than in New York and Chicago, entrance fees as a source of income are becoming increasingly insignificant. When at the Dallas Museum of Art they shrank to just 2% of annual income, the trustees approved the launch of a radical new scheme: visitors sign up to a membership programme known as DMA Friends that gives them free admission if they provide their names, e-mail addresses and zip codes. Since January 35,000 people have joined, and they are signing up at a rate of 800 a week. The personal information they provide is overlaid with details from the census, allowing the museum to work out who their visitors are and exactly where they come from. Philanthropists love the scheme because it makes the use of their money more transparent.

Not all museums are doing equally well. Landmarks such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the BM, the Louvre and the newly refurbished Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam steam on at full capacity. Small local museums also enjoy strong support from their communities. But historic houses and history museums are less popular than they used to be, and museums that cater for young visitors now have to compete with an array of other attractions.

And all museums, whether privately financed or funded by the state, are affected by the economic cycle. In Spain, for example, public funding has been slashed, so the many new museums that have been built in the past two decades are now struggling to cover their running costs. And in cities whose economic fortunes have declined, museums suffer too. Detroit has \$18 billion-worth of debt, and on December 3rd was granted protection from its creditors. One proposal being considered for raising money is that it sell its fine collection of paintings by Bruegel the Elder, Van Gogh and Matisse, valued at \$1 billion a decade ago.

Even so, new museums are still being opened every day, and in the West most of them are for contemporary art, because that seems to be the biggest draw just now. ■



Contemporary art

On a wing and a prayer

Why so many museums are venturing into new works

IT WAS A dark, damp winter in 2003 when Olafur Eliasson came to London. The 36-year-old Danish-Icelandic artist, who specialised in large-scale sculptures and installations, had a plan for Tate Modern: the "Weather Project" (pictured). He covered the ceiling of the Turbine Hall with a mirror and filled some humidifiers with a mix of sugar and water to create sweet-smelling mist. Visitors lay on the floor to watch a giant sun made out of hundreds of yellow lights rise out of the gloom, arranging themselves in distinctive groups to see their small reflections on the ceiling. Over the five months the installation was open, more than 2m people came to bask in a glow that was at once primeval and warmly communal.

The "Weather Project" made the global reputation of Tate Modern, which opened in 2000 to a mixed reception. Though its building was vast and impressive, its collection was small and

unremarkable. Mr Eliasson's work was a perfect example of what the museum was trying to do: create an experience in which the visitors themselves play a big part by harnessing technology to an artist's imagination. This was the new contemporary art, and the public loved it.

Most significant new museums or museum wings built in the rich world over the past decade have been for contemporary art. (The few exceptions include Alice Walton's enormous Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, which concentrates on the 19th century.) Several dozen such new buildings have been completed in the past two or three years alone in cities as diverse as Buenos Aires, Cleveland, Cracow, Rome, Oslo and Sydney.

Contemporary art seems to be what the public wants—and artists, their dealers and museums are happy to supply it. Since the 1960s art-lovers have become accustomed to accelerating change. As veterans of cinema, television and more recently computer games and the internet, they are used to mixing visual languages and receptive to new ideas, however off-the-wall. "The interest in contemporary art is much broader, much richer and much deeper than it was when I started out 30 years ago," says Paul Schimmel, a Los Angeles curator-turned-dealer.

Among museums, grand institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York are seen as stuffer than the *Kunsthallen*, the not-for-profit municipal art galleries found in many German cities. Earlier this year the Ludwig Museum in Cologne opened a retrospective by Andrea Fraser with a video of the artist having sex with one of her collectors. Los Angeles-based Ms Fraser is well represented in public collections in Britain, France and Germany, but considered too daring for an American retrospective.

The rise of contemporary art is closely related to the growth in the art market, which has become global in its reach. Successful sales at the main international auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's, generate a vast amount of publicity. This makes life easier for dealers who need to persuade collectors that contemporary art is worth huge sums. Jeff Koons's "Balloon Dog", a ten-foot-high shiny steel sculpture, comes in an edition of five, each a different colour. All the owners are world-class collectors such as Eli Broad and François Pinault. When the orange one was sold at Christie's in New York last month it fetched \$58.4m, a record auction price for a work by a living artist.

Collectors want to be sure that the art they are buying is of museum quality and widely sought after, and that it is part of a long art-historical tradition. To reassure them, dealers increasingly turn their showrooms into museum lookalikes. When Larry Gagosian, a famous dealer, showed a series of Richard Serra's massive steel sculptures, "Torqued Toruses", in one of his galleries in London in 2008, he presented each one on its own in a white-walled room. The settings echoed the artist's 40-year retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007 and a show at the Grand Palais in Paris a year later.

In the past three decades thousands of people have become super-rich, many of them in the financial sector in New York, London and Hong Kong and in natural resources in Australia and Central Asia. Since the 2008 financial crisis, investment consultants have taken to advising wealthy clients that art is a good way to diversify their portfolios. Contemporary art has become the universal benchmark for the new rich.

An early ambition for many of them is to join a museum board. In America the unwritten rule is to "give or get out of the kitchen"; board members are often a museum's biggest donors. In exchange, membership of a museum board offers them entry to exclusive social circles and marks them out as serious art col-

lectors. This is part of a long tradition: wealthy benefactors were responsible for starting many museums in the 19th century.

The Art Institute of Chicago has 50 trustees and 49 former board members who are now life trustees. Its director, Douglas Druick, says that keeping the trustees happy takes up at least a quarter of his time. He expects to be out with them four nights a week and recently had a record run of 14 nights in a row.

Being attentive has paid off. When the board decided that the Art Institute needed a new contemporary art wing, trustees agreed to cover a significant part of the \$300m cost. It is now

Contemporary art seems to be what the public wants—and artists, their dealers and museums are happy to supply it

open, and Mr Druick (who likes to remind people that his institute was the first American museum to show Picasso) thinks that it has encouraged donors to hand over or promise more than 300 works, including several "pivotal private collections", which would not have been forthcoming without it.

Perhaps understandably, museums want the setting they provide for their contemporary displays to be as new as the art itself. In Los Angeles Eli Broad's new museum will open late next year and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has big renovation plans. In New York the Whitney Museum of American Art is building a new outpost designed by Renzo Piano, an architect of the Pompidou Centre, close to the fashionable High Line park in Manhattan. It will allow the museum to exhibit three times as much work as it does now, including its collection of contemporary art. Not to be outdone, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is separating its modern and contemporary collection from its 19th-century European paintings and giving it a new home of its own: the building the Whitney is due to vacate.

In Britain, even the grand 330-year-old Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which used to house the stuffed body of the last dodo in Europe, is planning to build itself a new gallery for contemporary art. In July it announced a partnership with two renowned American collectors, Andrew and Christine Hall. To start with, Sir Norman Rosenthal, a controversial curator and art historian, will be putting on three displays from the Halls' collection at the Ashmolean. Both sides hope the relationship will become closer. ■

Superstars

Ten most popular modern art museums*, by 2012 visitors, m (Opening year)



Sources: The Art Newspaper, individual museums

*Holding mainly 20th-century and later

China

Mad about museums

China is building thousands of new museums, but how will it fill them?

THE RED BRICK CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM can be found beyond Beijing's fifth ring road, in an area so recently urbanised it is still called Hegezhuang Village. The street up to it is wide and dusty. Opposite, two dogs lie panting outside the Orchard restaurant where workmen have put down their tools and are sipping tea in the midday heat. Despite the unpromising setting, the museum looks as if it had been lowered into place that very morning. The brickwork is shiny, the yellow lettering bright. Inside the air-conditioning hums throughout the seven exhibition spaces and all the lights are on. Yet, except for a handful of works in one small corner near the entrance, the museum has absolutely nothing on display. It is like walking into an empty Olympic swimming pool.

The Red Brick was completed more than a year ago by an up-and-coming property developer, Yan Zhijie, from Xingtai, a small town about 350km south-west of Beijing. It exemplifies what Jeffrey Johnson, director of Columbia University's China Megacities Lab, calls the "museumification" of China: a building boom so frothy it is running away with itself. Not just in Beijing and Shanghai but also in the second- and third-tier cities beyond, new museums are hatching out every day, many of them still without collections and curators. "We've seen museum-building booms elsewhere," Mr Johnson says, "but nothing of this sustained magnitude and pace."

In 1949, when the Communist Party took control, China had just 25 museums. Many were burned down during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 and their collections dispersed. But the rapid growth and urbanisation that accompanied Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" policies after 1978 also launched a museum-building boom that did far more than simply replace what had been lost. Every provincial capital now seems to be constructing a new museum, or upgrading one it has already. This is seen as a good way to kickstart a cultural programme, even if the building has nothing to display for a while. Rich Chinese collectors are also putting up private museums to show off their treasures.

According to the current five-year plan, China was to have 3,500 museums by 2015, a target it achieved three years early. Last year a record 451 new museums opened, pushing the total by the end of 2012 to 3,866, says An Laishun, vice-president of the China Museums Association. By contrast, in America only 20-40 museums a year were built in the decade before the 2008 financial crash.

Public museums have not traditionally been part of Chinese culture. The great imperial collections of Chinese jade, cloisonné and porcelain



The spirit and soul of the nation

were kept in the Summer Palace in Beijing's Forbidden City and seen by only a chosen few. In 1948-49, after the Japanese invasion and the outbreak of civil war, Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang forces shipped 230,000 of the best pieces to Taiwan, where they remained after the communists gained power on the mainland. Some of what was left behind can still be seen today in the National Museum in Beijing, but no museum in China has anything like the treasures in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

Cultivating culture

Chinese officials want to change that. They point out that the great cities of the world—New York, Paris, London—all have important museums, and China should too. They want to show off their ancient culture to locals and foreigners alike, and talk of the importance of remembering the past and of educating the younger generation.

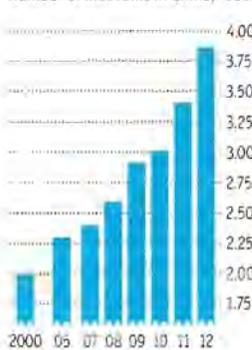
In 2009 a State Council meeting upgraded culture to the level of a strategic industry. The current five-year plan for 2011-15 spells out government policy in detail. Culture is the "spirit and soul of the nation", it says, and a powerful force for the country's development. Over time culture is to become a "pillar industry", loosely defined as one that makes up at least 5% of the country's gross domestic product. That is twice what it contributes now, even after a decade of expanding at 15-20% a year. Museums are an integral part of this policy, and they are multiplying rapidly—too rapidly in many cases. Building up and displaying collections, planning exhibitions, training curators, conservators and other museum staff, and devising educational programmes lag far behind museum-building.

In Beijing the government is planning to turn part of the Olympic park, built for the 2008 games, into a culture hub, with three new museums, an opera house and a new national library. One of the star attractions will be the new National Art Museum of China (NAMOC). The current NAMOC in the city centre was part of an earlier construction wave in 1958. Five storeys high and with 8,300 square metres of exhibition space, it is a third of the size of the Pompidou Centre and has nowhere to expand. The new NAMOC, close to the 798 art district in the north-east of the city, will be six times as big as the current museum. The winning bid for its design, by Jean Nouvel, a French architect, is based on the Chinese symbol for the number one. NAMOC's director, Fan Di'an, is thrilled with it, but construction has not yet started.

NAMOC currently holds 10,000 works, mainly Chinese art made after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The permanent display includes a selection of these, some Qing-dynasty scrolls and, on the top floor, a show of about 100 indifferent foreign paintings donated by a German collector, Peter Ludwig.

From red books to guide books

Number of museums in China, '000



Source: China Museums Association



Until recently culture was seen as strictly the party's preserve, but now the boom in public-museum building is being echoed in the private sector. Rich collectors want to put their treasures on display in expensive new showcases. Many new museums are also being built as part of new property projects to help get them planning permission. Some may never have been intended for their stated purpose.

"We Chinese are very good at building hardware," commented your correspondent's interpreter after leaving yet another half-empty museum, this time in Shanghai. "Building software is another matter altogether." In China's museum world, "software" covers everything from building up collections to actually running the place. Private museums that have succeeded in this include the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing and two new museums in Shanghai, the Aurora (a treasure trove of ancient bronzes and jades designed by Tadao Ando, a Japanese architect) and the Rockbund Art Museum (a thriving contemporary-art centre).

The best of these satisfy a growing public demand for culture. The Mao Zedong generation was taught that China's traditional art was backward and not worth bothering about. Now young Chinese are interested in both traditional and contemporary art. One area that has recently gained a following is contemporary Chinese ink painting, a new take on an old tradition by young artists. "Fresh Ink", a small exhibition of ten artists at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2010, and a bigger show, "Ink Art", which opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York earlier this month, have attracted much attention in China.

What do we do for an encore?

But the boom is still somewhat hit-and-miss. The Power Station of Art (pictured), a former industrial building similar to London's Tate Modern, was converted in less than a year (a record in Chinese museum-building) and opened in time to host the Shanghai Biennale in 2012, curated by an energetic artist and teacher, Qiu Zhijie. By the time that closed, though, the Power Station was running out of steam: it had no permanent collection to speak of and found it hard to recruit full-time curators. Now it is virtually empty much of the time.

Two huge new museums of contemporary art are about to be opened in Shanghai: one by Liu Yiqian and his wife, Wang Wei, one of Shanghai's "super-collector" couples, the other by Budi Tek, a Chinese-Indonesian collector known for his trophy pieces by Maurizio Cattelan, an Italian sculptor and installation artist. Both will open with much fanfare, but may have trouble finding a role for themselves in the longer term.

One headache is dealing with the authorities, not least be-

cause so little of China's cultural policy is made explicit. Private museums have to put up costly bonds or obtain import licences to bring in art from abroad, even temporarily. Mr Tek had hoped to place Mr Cattelan's seminal "Olive Tree", a living tree planted in a cube of earth, in the entrance to his new museum, but found himself stumped by China's phyto-sanitary inspectors when he tried to import it from Spain.

Chinese sensitivities about history and politics can also be hard to assess. Exhibitions about the Cultural Revolution, for example, are more likely to be permitted in private museums than public ones, and far from Beijing rather than in the capital; there is one in Chengdu and a smaller one in Shantou, both in the south. And when relations with Japan became fraught just before the Shanghai Biennale in 2012, the Tokyo pavilion was abruptly cancelled. At other times Japanese artists are often exhibited in Beijing's galleries.

In contemporary art, with its ironies and its multiple readings, Chinese artists test the patience of officialdom. The boundaries are fluid, but most Chinese know how far they can push them. Zhang Peili, the director of the OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shanghai, a well-established private gallery, offers a list of prohibited items: "A show about Falun Gong, the Dalai Lama or the Tiananmen Square uprising; anything that insults our national leaders; or any art that shows private parts." ■

Future strategies

Feeding the culture-cultures

What museums must do to satisfy an increasingly demanding public

MUSEUMS ARE MEANT to preserve and safeguard the collections entrusted to them, which makes them naturally conservative. Yet with public funds likely to remain tight for the foreseeable future, and private money free to back institutions that are seen as winners, they will have to do some innovative thinking over the next 20 years, both to deal with unavoidable change and to seize new opportunities.

The obvious winners will be big institutions in the main capital cities that attract high-spending tourists, though even some of those could do much better. The Louvre, for example, is overcrowded, badly lit and poorly signposted. Up to 30,000 people a day head for the "Mona Lisa", so her smile gets lost in the crush. And the pickpocketing round I.M. Pei's pyramid entrance has become so notorious that in April the staff went on strike.

By contrast, the ten-year revamp of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has turned out to be worth the wait. The great paintings of the Dutch golden age are displayed alongside weaponry, ships' models and felt hats. The lighting may well be the best of ▶▶

For rainy days

People who have visited a museum or gallery in the past 12 months
% polled, 2013



Source: Eurobarometer

its kind, allowing visitors to see exactly how Vermeer painted ermine or to pick out the many shades of white that Pieter Jansz Saenredam used in his pictures of church interiors.

Small, niche museums with imaginative leadership are also likely to retain a devoted following. Ask museum directors to pick a favourite, and many give the same answer: the Chichu Art Museum on Naoshima island in southern Japan. Designed by Tadao Ando, the building is itself a work of art. Inside there are a few carefully selected installations. Visitors arrive by boat and are encouraged to stay the night so they can see James Turrell's "Open Sky" installation at sunset.

Second-tier museums that try to be encyclopedic on limited funds will have a hard time. The outlook for public funding of museums, especially in Europe, is bleak. Many provincial institutions in America may also suffer. Museums there are registered as not-for-profit organisations to take advantage of state and federal tax concessions. But this arrangement is now coming under pressure because some see it as a way of using poor people's tax money to pay for rich people's cultural pastimes.

Preaching to the converted

Museum visitors in Europe and America are still overwhelmingly well-educated, white, middle-aged and middle-class, though London's V&A proudly points out that last year 19% of the visits made to its three museums were by people from ethnic-minority backgrounds. At the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, one of the finest collections of historical paintings in Europe, it would be fairly unusual to run into a family of Turkish immigrants, concedes its director, Bernd Lindemann.

In America minorities make up a third of the population but account for only 20% of museum staff and 9% of visitors. The opening of a proposed Museum of African Art in Manhattan has been postponed five times for lack of funds. Last summer the board changed its name to the New Africa Centre and expanded its remit in the hope of attracting the money it needs to finish it.

In about 30 years only half of America's population will be white. If museums are to be relevant to their local communities and keep up the flow of visitors, especially in western and southern states, they will have to appeal to radically different audiences and rethink their relationships with those who will be voting on public funding for museums in future.

Today's museums are acutely aware that their visitors have more and more choices about how they spend their time and money. Elizabeth Merritt of the Centre for the Future of Muse-

ums in Washington, DC, calls it the "unbundling of cultural experiences". Even museum enthusiasts may not necessarily have to visit the building. A film of a recent exhibition about Pompeii at the BM has been screened in more than 1,000 cinemas in 51 countries.

Consumers of culture now prefer to decide for themselves how they want knowledge and information served up to them, as testified by the growing popularity of pop-up museums and crowdsourced projects. "They want the opportunity to play in our sandbox," says Ms Merritt. Curators, who used to be seen (and saw themselves) as experts, are now having to act more like facilitators or mentors.

To keep the public coming and ensure their own survival, museums need to try much harder to give their visitors what they want. Many institutions in the West already understand that. Now developing countries are waking up to the idea as well, and not before time. In India, for instance, most museums are moribund. The National Museum in Delhi has been without a director for the past seven years. In Kolkata's Indian Museum, the region's oldest and biggest, it is not just the bear that is losing its stuffing; the whole collection is in such bad shape that in September it closed down until further notice.

But there is one shining exception: the century-old Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai, which now has a tongue-twisting new name—the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya—that abbreviates to CSMVs. Until recently the CSMVs was dilapidated as the rest, but today the museum has over 1m visitors a year, a handsome government subsidy and a devoted group of private fund-raisers. What saved it was a decision in 2007 to do things differently. When its energetic director, Sabyasachi Mukherjee, asked his staff what it should be doing, chief among the ideas put forward was to reach out far more, not just to Mumbai city-dwellers who would normally never think of visiting a museum but to other museums around the world. Now the CSMVs has partnerships with the BM, the Getty and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Such international partnerships are about much more than money. Neil MacGregor, the BM's director, believes that museums can be a force for nation-building and peace. This month his institution sent its famous Cyrus cylinder (pictured) to Mumbai as part of a journey that has already taken it to Iran and America. The 2,600-year-old clay cylinder is covered in cuneiform script proclaiming that Cyrus the Great, the emperor of Persia, would allow anyone who had been imprisoned or enslaved by his predecessors to return home, and that the statues of their different gods could be returned to their original shrines to be freely worshipped. No ruler before Cyrus had done anything like this. This sort of show—about man's common humanity—captures the public imagination. Museums which can do that still have a bright future. ■



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