

frieze

Between 1901 and 1919, the Scottish-born American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie gave away 90 percent of his astonishing wealth (around US\$6BN in today's money) towards the public good. Carnegie was unrelenting and systematic in amassing his fortune, and equally rigorous and methodical in disposing of it – founding libraries, universities and art galleries across the US, UK and Canada. In the UK, the decentred geographic spread of Carnegie's bequests stretches from Accrington to Worthing, Motherswell to Merthyr Tydfil, Lurgan to King's Lynn.

It is a legacy that remains active to this day: many of the great libraries, museums and civic buildings of the north of England and elsewhere are Carnegie buildings. It is also one that is recalled by recent emphasis on how private philanthropy might help make up any decrease in public investment for art galleries at a national level. Within London, which, as of 2012, was the recipient of 90 percent of individual private donations, this line of argument bears a guarded verisimilitude. But what of those institutions outside the capital? Who could be the Carnegie of today? And should we be relying on philanthropists, anyway?

A number of recent initiatives suggests a growing interest in the question of how to connect private collectors and benefactors with provincial civic collections. The Art Fund and the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) have, in different ways, been doing this for over 100 years. Recently, both have been working with individual patrons and collectors to address particular imbalances in regional collections. CAS has worked with collector Cathy Wills on the Sculpture Fund, providing suites

of work to be shared between five museums in the North West, including the Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, where I am curator. In June 2015, CAS also announced the Valeria Napoleone XX initiative, with the collector pledging to help a regional museum acquire a major work by a female artist each year.

In December 2015, the Grundy was one of six venues to receive an Art Fund New Collecting Award, receiving £80k to research and buy new light-based artworks – notably under-represented in the collection of a city that attracts between three and four million visitors a year for its seaside 'illuminations'. The Art Fund's Moving Image Fund for Museums, announced in September 2015 and spearheaded by the London-based commercial gallery Thomas Dane, likewise aims to address an often-neglected area in institutions beyond the capital.

Perhaps most noteworthy of all was 'Going Public' in Sheffield, where, between September and December 2015, four leading European collections – those of Nicolas Cattelain, Dominique and Sylvain Levy (D&S Collection), Egidio Marzona and Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo – lent major works to venues across the city for a season of interlinked exhibitions. At the conference accompanying the opening, a mixture of excitement and curiosity seemed to be in the air. It was an extraordinary achievement to stage an undertaking of this scale outside of a major art centre and to galvanize the city's entire civic infrastructure behind it. However, questions were raised about the possible issues involved in moving away from European models of state funding towards a US-style

system of private patronage. Not only is the UK tax system not currently set up to incentivize private giving in the same way but, as some of the collectors themselves have queried, how do you ensure that curatorial innovation and rigour are upheld and supported?

To someone running a smaller organization in a regional town, questions such as this have a particular urgency. As I write, it has been confirmed that Lancashire County Council are to close 40 libraries and five museums. Although this does not directly affect the Grundy, which is funded by Blackpool Council with additional support from Arts Council England, it is worth noting that the gallery is one of only a very few offering a dedicated, year-round contemporary exhibitions programme in a county of 1.5 million people. As this highlights, many regional galleries are reliant on – and exposed to – local authority support. Furthermore, they are often run by small teams with limited capacity to build the relationships necessary to encourage private donations.

Recent attention to how galleries and museums outside of London can be supported is as timely as it is welcome, coming at something of a 'fork in the road' moment for many smaller spaces. If philanthropy is the answer to questions of institutional longevity, we must take inspiration from the man from Dunfermline and encourage investment in core infrastructural costs, building support structures that will enable regional collections to continue to open the doors, let alone commission and acquire contemporary work.

Richard Parry is a curator and writer. He has led the Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, UK, since 2013.

Can private philanthropy help save regional British collections?

Richard Parry

Public Goods