FORUM

Have museums been too generous with naming rights?

Struggling with funding cuts, the cultural sector is increasingly reliant on private philanthropic giving. But what does it mean to put a wealthy donor's name on a museum's door – and should public institutions exercise more judgement when accepting donations?

Tanya Tikhnenko

With art institutions under intense pressure due to cuts in public funding, philanthropic giving from the private sector has become an essential lifeline. But, as ever more aggressive fundraising strategies are employed, norms are being questioned and power is constantly shifting. Are we getting the balance right between increasing demands for transparency and commercial reality?

The furore around the Sackler family, a name that has become synonymous with philanthropic activity, neatly encapsulates the dilemma and highlights the risks that are faced by institutions reliant on a single, private sector donor. Critics have called on recipients to stop accepting donations from the family, which controls a large stake in Purdue Pharma, a company that has been implicated in the opioid crisis in the US. Some are even urging them to return previous funding.

It is imperative that institutions worldwide review their position on naming rights and the due diligence they conduct when receiving and commemorating philanthropic donations.

Across cultures and time philanthropy has been synonymous with public benefit. The ancient Greeks considered it to be one of the cornerstones of democracy and the word translates literally from Greek as, 'love of mankind'. Selflessness is at the core of the act. Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish philosopher, claimed that giving anonymously to an unknown recipient ranked highest on his Golden Ladder of Charity.

These sentiments are fully in line with the ICOM's definition of a museum as 'a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public...' that safeguards the 'heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.'

Philanthropists have always brought with them their own history and set of personal motivations. For many, the philanthropic act is a chance to make their mark on the world. Numerous institutions were founded on acts of private philanthropy, such as Tate, Smithsonian, and MoMA.

Attaching a donor's name to a building, courtyard, hallway, gallery or even a restroom in return for a significant contribution has been a growing practice since the 20th century, primarily influenced by the philanthropy culture of the US. Legacy has become a product that can be bought. Institutions are able to offer their patrons something concrete in the form of a dedicated named space, rather than a pure 'intangible' such as public benefit.

Today, in a media-driven world, the practice of naming rights is pervasive. It has become a commercial transaction thriving on a new type of major donor that is especially invested in branding culture, where a name is the ultimate commodity. For these investor-philanthropists, legacy is tightly bound up with visibility.

By moving away from the anonymity Maimonides valued so highly, institutions are inviting scrutiny. If an individual wants publicity and an organisation is willing to provide it for cash, the public has a right to ask who the donor is and where their cash has come from. Tainted donations will always be detrimental to the publicly-minded ideals that museums are supposed to uphold. Institutions can only avoid being judged if they themselves apply judgement.

The field of ethics is not static, but a continuously altering arena of active concerns, responsive to social change. Institutions must ask themselves if their previous unquestioning relationships with major donors require reassessment in the light of changing mores. They must also put in place the procedures needed to give them the information on which to make those all-important judgements.

Questions of vetting and due diligence must be addressed. The Sacklers' case is particularly pertinent as it involved an international group of recipients. One asks oneself, what were the vetting procedures, if any? And what is the position of the museums and public galleries that have benefitted from the donations? Was the unethical source of funds scenario accounted for in the naming rights agreement? In the long run has their lapse of judgement cost them both economic and ethical capital?

In the current difficult political and economic climate, the smooth functioning of the exchange between private sector donors and museums is essential to the wellbeing of cultural heritage, as, so far, no realistic alternative has presented itself. However, a strong and clear position when accepting donations is vital. If the gift resulted from a disservice to society, how can it be accepted by an institution that is permanently bound 'to the service of society and its development'?

Tanya Tikhnenko is is a Director and Partner of Montabonel & Partners.