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## ARTICLE

# From here to eternity: The rise and fall of global art worlds and the contemporary private museum

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## Abstract

The process of converting a private collection into a public museum is often presented as a means of ensuring a collection's future by transforming it into an enduring asset for future generations. This case study assesses contemporary collection models as well as entrepreneurial investor-collectors and their respective museum-building strategies by addressing two fundamental questions: (1) What is the role of the contemporary art collector and private museum and (2) How do their interactions with art markets challenge the established protocols and hierarchies of the global art network? It shall be argued that private collection museums often have a limited lifespan. Furthermore, the future of private collections and museums is often determined within the lifetimes of their creators. This can play out in one of four ways: first, collectors may offer artworks at high-profile auction houses; second, they may sell the art collection and close the museum or collector's exhibition space; third, they may sell the museum or exhibition space. Alternatively, private collectors, along with their museums and art collections, can play an important role on the global stage. However, more rigorous planning is necessary for these collectors to distinguish themselves, expand the cultural landscape, and ensure their collections endure within or beyond their creators' lifetime.

**Keywords:** Contemporary private museum; Art collectors; Private collection; Contemporary art; Global art worlds; Here to eternity

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## 1. Introduction

In the past, individual collectors determined their “philanthropic” gesture and the future of their collection, private museum, or mansion museum toward the latter part of their lives. Earlier benefactors often gifted and endowed their museums to the public upon their death; for example, Henry Clay Frick, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and Dominique de Menil transitioned their art and museums to the public through private non-profit foundations. In doing so, they memorialized their cultural achievements and ensured their respective art collections remained intact beyond their lifetime, albeit at considerable personal expense. The process of converting a private collection into a public museum is often presented as a means of ensuring a collection's eternal future, transforming it into an enduring asset for future generations. However, this study shows

that contemporary private museums often have a limited lifespan as collectors are intent on shaping their personal narratives within their own lifetime. This is because contemporary entrepreneurial collectors make their fortunes earlier than their predecessors, thereby using their newly created wealth to assemble large collections and enhance their cultural credentials within elite international art networks. Moreover, constructing their private art museum allows them to craft their public persona while maintaining control over their art collections.<sup>1</sup>

This paper addresses two fundamental questions: (1) What is the role of the contemporary art collector and private museum and (2) How do their interactions with art markets challenge established protocols and hierarchies of the global art network? It does not seek to offer a comprehensive assessment of public funding streams or the complex international tax and legal structures available to wealthy individuals.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1. Overview

In 2023, the University of Amsterdam's publication of *Private Art Museum Report* and *Beyond the Global Boom: Private Art Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* that is led by Olav Velthuis provides a much-anticipated overview of the current museum-building boom that has emerged since 2000. The authors shed light on recent shifts by mapping expanding geographic regions that have embraced the private museum model. The *Private Art Museum Report*, published by Larry's List, suggests that there are currently 446 private contemporary art museums in the world. A significant number of these are in Germany (60), the United States (59), South Korea (50), Greater China (30), and Italy (30).<sup>3</sup> The University of Amsterdam's research asserts that 76 private museums have closed, with a further 24 transitioning into the public sphere or being overseen by independently operated art foundations, thereby raising concerns regarding the long-term future of private museums. Moreover, the report notes that "financial issues" underpin 34.2% of the closures, followed by "insufficient interest from the public," which accounts for 15.8% of the reasons given for closing museums. Other reasons include difficulties with the building, legal issues, and a lack of government support, among others.<sup>4</sup> These observations support my earlier findings in *The Private Collector's Museum: Public Good Versus Public Gain* (2019), in which I argued that "maintaining them [private museums] and their holdings intact, indefinitely, continues to be the biggest challenge facing many contemporary art collectors and benefactors."<sup>5</sup> This study shows that private museums are largely defined by their founders' personal circumstances, wealth, and cultural visions and thus do not adhere to a single model of the private art museum.

In an essay published in the *Financial Times* (2014) entitled "The art world we deserve?," contemporary German collector Harald Falckenberg wrote that art museums and institutions must balance financial and time constraints and are thus less inclined or able to build in-depth permanent collections, instead shifting their focus to temporary exhibition programs. Falckenberg argues that this is why there are so many private museums. Such an assessment represents more established models of cultural benefaction and does not reflect the diversity of today's new investor-collector. I would add that the stimulus for many international collectors entering the art world is more closely aligned with the market rather than public institutions. Falckenberg expands further on private museums: "But that is a solution limited to only few collectors, personally and financially and the desire of so many collectors to leave behind a monument of their long-term engagement with art is a dream far beyond the reality of the current art world."<sup>3</sup> When I asked Falckenberg if private museums could maintain large collections of art beyond the founder's lifetime and without substantial endowments, his response was clear: "Usually it is not for a long time. Private museums usually have a limited lifetime, unlike public museums."<sup>5</sup>

This paper reveals the different ways in which 21<sup>st</sup>-century collectors are building significant art collections, managing their cultural, art market, and global reputations, and forming complex inter-relationships between private and public while remaining financially solvent. My findings show that this can take place in one of four ways: collectors may offer works from their collection at high-profile auction houses when facing economic challenges (for example, Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei, Long Museum); they may sell the art collection at auctions and close the museum or "museum-like space" (for example, Thomas Olbricht, *me* Collector's Room); or they may sell the collection and the museum-like space when long-term plans are hindered (for example, Guy Ullens, The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA)). Alternatively, independent collectors can play an important role on the global stage. The assessment of Harald Falckenberg, Budi Tek, and Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi illustrates that more rigorous planning is needed if collectors are to distinguish themselves in their quest to expand the cultural landscape and ensure that their holdings can endure within or beyond their lifetimes while securing their financial positions.

## 2. The present is the future

### 2.1. Private art collections and high-profile auction houses: Long Museum, China

The Chinese collector couple Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei has attracted international attention with their

acquisitions, which included a US\$45 million 600-year-old silk wall hanging in 2014 and US\$170.4 million Amedeo Modigliani's painting *Nu Couché* (1917) in 2015. In the same year, they spent US\$42.8 million on Modigliani's painting *Paulette Jourdain* (1919). In *A Modern History of China's Art Market* (2023), Keija Wu notes that the Long Museums "house thousands of artworks in Liu's permanent collection,"<sup>6</sup> although the exact number of works is not specified. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to assess the depth of the Long Museum's holdings. However, Liu and Wang are part of a growing group of entrepreneurial investor-collectors who have benefited from China's economic growth, capturing global attention through their acquisitions of traditional Chinese, modern, and contemporary international art.<sup>6</sup>

While Liu and Wang made international headlines with their extravagant purchases, they also attracted attention when they offered their holdings to Sotheby's Hong Kong on October 5, 2023. The auction featured 39 works of art from their collection. Promoted as "the largest from a single owner that the auction house has held in Asia,"<sup>7</sup> the high-profile sale was titled "A Long Journey: A Selection from the Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei Collection" (Lots 8501 – 8540). The title "A Long Journey" not only implied an extensive collecting history but also referenced the three Long Museums that Liu and Wang established in Shanghai and Chongqing since 2012<sup>8</sup> and the symbolic value associated with both the collectors and their private museums.<sup>7</sup> Liu and Wang closed the Long Museum in Shanghai Pudong in 2023, and remained closed for much of the year and at the time of writing. Similarly, the museum in Chongqing ceased its exhibition program, leaving only the West Bund site open to the public without interruption.

Sotheby's toured the collection to five destinations before returning to Hong Kong. The first exhibition was held at Sotheby's Shanghai office in late August, before moving to Beijing, Taipei, and Seoul and concluding at Fong-Yi Art Gallery, Taichung, from September 20 to 21, 2023.<sup>9</sup> Sotheby's heavily invested in marketing the sale on social media, producing extended videos that featured glowing testimonials about both the artworks and collectors, and impressive gallery installation views that displayed the works in the most favorable light. A comprehensive catalog included photographs, artist biographies, detailed descriptions of each piece, and historical comparisons with world-famous artworks to enhance Liu and Wang's holdings and the collection's provenance and uniqueness.

As previously noted, in 2015, Liu and Wang paid US\$42.8 million for Modigliani's painting *Paulette Jourdain* (1919); in October 2023, they sold the painting for only US\$35 million, which was well below the collectors'

purchase price less than a decade ago. The auction included works by Rene Magritte and David Hockney, with Sotheby's estimating the auction would raise between US\$95 and US\$135 million. However, the sale fell short of this estimate. The overall result, including premiums, was US\$69.5 million, with a sell-through rate of 74% as 10 works were unsold. Sotheby's guaranteed seven works, including *Paulette Jourdain*, for approximately US\$45 million<sup>10</sup> as Sotheby's narratives amplified perceptions of artistic value, the status of collectors, and the public spending of large sums of money on art to attract international buyers.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the perception was quite the opposite as many have argued that the decision to bring the disparate works into the market appeared to lack the gravitas often associated with significant sole-owner collections,<sup>12</sup> as evidenced by the sale of the Olbricht collection discussed in the following passages.

Sotheby's sale event, "The Now Auction" in New York (November 15, 2023), offered four additional works from Liu and Wang's holdings, with each work falling below or meeting the low estimates. This included Marlene Dumas's painting *Love Your Neighbor* (1994), Kerry James Marshall's *Plunge* (1992), and Jenny Saville's large painting *Shift* (1996 – 1997). The auction house took a different approach with Gerhard Richter's monumental piece *Strip* (2015) as they were concerned that it would fail to reach an estimate of US\$2 – 3 million when they accepted New York art dealer Leo Koenig's low irrevocable bid of US\$1 million. Much to Koenig's surprise, Sotheby's accepted the offer to minimize their financial burden as all works were guaranteed by Sotheby's.<sup>13</sup> Koenig was clearly taken aback by Sotheby's eagerness to accept what may have been an unrealistic offer, shedding light on Sotheby's decision to minimize the negative impact should such a significant work fall short of the market's expectations. Overall, both the New York and Hong Kong sales delivered less-than-satisfactory results and failed to meet Sotheby's expectations.

It is unclear why Liu and Wang are selling works from the Long Museum's collection amid slow financial markets and somewhat diminished returns. Hence, many were not surprised to see several pieces being sold below the low estimates.<sup>12</sup> *Artnet Price Database* reported that the sale of works from Liu and Wang's holdings was perhaps in line with the overall underperforming market at global auctions at Christie's, Sotheby's, and Phillips. This trend is evidenced by the 22.7% decline in the first half of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Sotheby's sales drew attention to Liu and Wang's recent acquisition of all 39 works that were brought to market as they were purchased in the past 5 – 15 years, with many contemporary art pieces created in less than a decade.

Richter's panel *Strip* is one such example, which was created in 2015. It was presented in Marian Goodman's booth at Art Basel in 2016 (valued at €3 million) and later acquired by Liu at an undisclosed amount.<sup>15</sup> This brief holding period is insufficient for a collector to benefit from the appreciation of such an asset (especially contemporary art), thereby raising further questions about the collectors' financial viability and true motivation for buying it and other artworks in the first instance.

The *Art Basel* and *UBS Survey of Global Collecting 2023* report indicates that 39% of high-net-worth individual collectors noted a resale period of up to three years and 83% did so within five years.<sup>16</sup> Liu and Wang's decision to sell some of their holdings appears consistent with current market trends and other investor-collectors (including Guy Ullens). The "A Long Journey" auction sheds light on changing global attitudes and motivations in collecting and establishing private museums, where artworks are viewed as assets that can be quickly converted to cash and museums can transition to spaces for hire, thereby diminishing the symbolic value associated with both collecting and museum-building. Even so, I question the motivation to construct not one but three private museums if the value of art and the notion of museums are seen as short-term investment-collecting and museum-building strategies for creating short-term value.

## 2.2. Sell the collection at auctions and close the museum: *me Collector's Room*, Germany

German collector Thomas Olbricht began collecting contemporary art in the 1980s and established the *me Collector's Room* in Berlin in 2010 (2010 – 2020).<sup>17</sup> He also developed one of the largest private *Wunderkammer* collections, comprising 300 objects dating back to the Renaissance and Baroque periods. *me Collector's Room* presented 41 exhibitions over a decade, wherein Olbricht exhibited works from his holdings, specific artists he collected in depth, other private collections, and, more recently, international (state) collections. This included exhibitions such as "Contemporary Art from the United Arab Emirates" (September 13 to October 29, 2017) and "Indigenous Australia" from the National Gallery of Australia (November 17, 2017, to April 2, 2018).

In May 2020, Olbricht announced the sudden closure of *me Collector's Room*, and by the end of September, approximately 500 works from his *Wunderkammer*, modern, and contemporary art collections were presented at the Van Ham auction house in Cologne.<sup>18</sup> Van Ham's promotion of the sale "From a Universal Collector: The Olbricht Collection" was not dissimilar to Sotheby's

marketing of Liu and Wang's holdings, emphasizing the cultural capital, impeccable provenance, and prestige associated with Olbricht's significant collection of old and new art. The appeal of this collection was broad, attracting 1,300 bidders from 31 countries, including new and online bidders.<sup>19</sup> The collection's appeal was clear as the sale of 370 artworks and objects from the *Wunderkammer* collection generated a total of approximately €3.4 million above the estimate. The total estimate was around €4.9 million, and the overall result (including premiums) was €8.4 million.<sup>20</sup> Notably, works from Olbricht's collection continued to sell well after the inaugural auction of 2020. Parts III – VI auction lots commenced in October 2020 and continued through June 2021 and June 2022.

It is unlikely that Olbricht needed an instant cash injection as he is the heir to the Wella Corporation. However, it remains unclear why he chose to sell much of his collection, which comprised approximately 2,000 works. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was thought to have prompted the temporary closure of *me Collector's Room*, it does not explain the permanent closure and subsequent sale of the collection. I would argue that the final exhibition entitled "*moving energies – 10 Years me Collector's Room Berlin*" (February 29 to May 17, 2020) provided some clues as to what lies ahead. The art space draws its name from the exhibition title, expressing Olbricht's desire to share his art with the public. The final exhibition looked back over time and was thus "partly monographic and partly thematic" and set up as private "staged sets" that mapped the collector's "inspirations and ideas" over time. Presented as a collector's retrospective, the curators showcased a complete display of Gerhard Richter's editions, including over 170 works, to demonstrate Olbricht's comprehensive approach to collecting and amassing a single artist's works in depth.<sup>21</sup> This was not the only artist represented in such a comprehensive manner, which added to its appeal. Olbricht's collection was viewed as unique and of significant artistic and cultural value to the market.

The *moving energies* exhibition presented personal insights into Olbricht's collection, recreating private spaces and serving as a farewell to that chapter of his collecting history, which ended in 2020. The closure seems to align with the findings presented in *Beyond the Global Boom: Private Art Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* report, which observed, "10 years is the period that most museums were in operation before closing."<sup>24</sup> Even so, the swift decision surprised the market and sent a strong message to other private collectors and their museums when planning the future of what they had created.

### 2.3. Selling the collection and its art brand: The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, China

In 2007, Belgian collector Guy Ullens established the “museum-like space” UCCA (2007 – 2016) as the first art institution in China founded around a single private collection. It was also the first to move to the 798 Art District in Beijing. The opening exhibition, “85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art, was soon followed by Christian Dior and Chinese Artists”, where a special exhibition featuring 100 haute couture pieces from Dior’s Paris collection created a dazzling narrative and fashion gala event. Scholar Shuchen Wang notes that this distinction set UCCA apart, making it “the landmark of Chinese Contemporary Art (CCA) in mainland China.”<sup>22</sup> The collection quickly grew to approximately 1,700 works, and UCCA’s robust exhibition program included (but was not limited to) works from the founder’s holdings of Chinese Contemporary Art.

Within the 1<sup>st</sup> decade, Ullens began selling pieces from his collection as he realized that his personal and entrepreneurial ambitions would not be met. Thus, he began extracting himself from UCCA and China around 2011. As Wang notes, this shift was prompted by an earlier decision to restructure UCCA between 2003 and 2010 and transition the museum-like space from a non-profit entity to a for-profit art business, although it had always been registered as a for-profit organization in China. The plan was to generate €6 million annually to cover UCCA’s operating costs.<sup>22</sup> This strategy proved unfeasible, and Ullens began auctioning parts of his collection that were owned by his private foundation as early as in 2009.<sup>23</sup> The process gained momentum in 2011 when 106 works were auctioned at Sotheby’s Hong Kong on April 3, 2011, under “The Ullens Collection: The Nascence of Avant Garde China”, followed by a further 90 works at Sotheby’s auction on October 2, 2011, under “The Ullens Collection: Experimentation and Evolution.”<sup>24</sup>

This process continued in 2017 when 32 artworks were sold at Poly International in Hong Kong (June 4, 2017), with the auction house facilitating the private sale of an additional 22 works from Ullens’ holdings.<sup>25</sup> These sales conveyed the message that Ullens’s plan to sell his contemporary Chinese art collection and UCCA either to the government or privately could not be realized. He failed to garner sufficient financial or “philanthropic” support to cover UCCA’s operating costs, and his works proved financially unsustainable in the long term. More importantly, he appeared to lack the desire and willingness (both financial and personal) to continue his commitment to Chinese contemporary artists and his privately founded Center in Beijing. For these and other reasons, Ullens

sought to distance himself from his financial obligations to fund the UCCA’s operations. However, his approach arguably did little to enhance his public reputation in China as he appeared to be profiting from the sale of a collection originally perceived as part of a “non-profit” institution; despite his earlier impression of intending to gift the holdings to the state.

In 2016, Ullens officially announced plans to sell UCCA and his remaining holdings. By late 2017, UCCA had been sold to a private consortium led by Chinese advertising billionaire Jason Jiang (founder of Future Edutainment), investors (Focus Media), and a group of local patrons and shareholders registered as the UCCA Group. UCCA transitioned into a newly formed private foundation seeking further financial support to offset its annual operating costs. This quickly signaled a new model for private museum-like spaces as the sale did not include the art collection or even the museum itself but access to the “UCCA” naming rights and the symbolic value associated with it. According to Philip Tinari, Director of the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art and CEO of the UCCA Group, many were initially confused about what was being sold as UCCA had few remaining assets, and the art collection had already been sold. Essentially, Ullens was selling a brand, the position, location, and the history of UCCA, which included important exhibition archival material.<sup>26</sup> As Wang points out, “Ullens built his own art authority through UCCA—a quasi-museum with customary social functions such as research, exhibition, and education (but not collection). Ullens attempted to make UCCA an established venue itself in China by having it headed by reputable directors and collaborating with luxury fashion and high-end brands.”<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Private museums, collectors, and complex inter-relationships

My research has shown that private museums often struggle to endure beyond the founder’s lifetime. As a result, many have sought to secure their museum’s future by establishing private–public partnerships. With that in mind, I conclude my analysis by examining how collectors such as Harald Falckenberg, Budi Tek, and Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi have constructed complex inter-relationships between private and public, private and commercial, and private and state stakeholders, both within their respective nations and internationally, to take control of their cultural legacies.

#### 3.1. Private and public: The Falckenberg Collection, Germany

Harald Falckenberg began collecting in 1994. In 2001, he started exhibiting his collection in a 62,000-square-foot

converted rubber goods factory in a suburban neighborhood of Hamburg, which he acquired in 2007. The following year, the Phoenix factory permanently housed and exhibited the Falckenberg Collection, which today comprises approximately 2,200 contemporary works by 450 artists.<sup>27</sup> Referring back to Falckenberg's earlier statement that private museums do not last as long as public museums, he also questioned the limitations of public institutions and their willingness to accept personal collections.<sup>28</sup> He believed that "the problem lies in the antagonism that exists between private collectors and museums, a result of new perceptions of their respective roles."<sup>29</sup> Such observations inform how he has gone about supporting artists, his collecting philosophy, and his motivation for staging innovative exhibitions while ensuring that the Falckenberg Collection remains publicly accessible, both during and beyond his lifetime.

In 2011, Falckenberg partnered with Hamburg's Deichtorhallen. His collection was made available on a long-term loan, as was the Phoenix factory exhibition space, which displays works from his holdings, including large installation works. The partnership was initially based on a contract between the city of Hamburg and Falckenberg, which was set to expire in 2023. The original agreement included the city's contribution of €570,000 per year to cover exhibitions and staff costs, with any additional expenses borne by Falckenberg.<sup>29</sup> The agreement has been extended to 2032, although the details of the new contract have not been publicly disclosed. This arrangement was especially significant because Falckenberg passed away on November 6, 2023.

Falckenberg and other German collectors have sought to secure complex long-term loan agreements with key exhibition spaces and public art museums, even though they have established their own private collection museums.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, they have sought more permanent solutions to ensure that their private museums and collections remain intact through such partnerships with the public sector. This reflects Falckenberg's belief that "private museums usually have a limited lifetime, unlike public museums."<sup>28</sup> I have argued that such arrangements might counter the current perception that the creation of a private museum is a natural step toward securing the future of a collection—a step that provides some form of guarantee that the collection will remain intact indefinitely.<sup>31</sup> However, it should be noted that public institutions are often reluctant to agree to such binding agreements due to declining government funding, rising operating costs, and increasing demands placed on public institutions. These institutions must also uphold their obligations to their collections and curatorial missions to avoid compromising their integrity.

This raises important questions about how future private-public partnerships might be shaped.

### 3.2. The global art world and private museums: Yuz Museum, China

After nine years, the Yuz Museum vacated the vast converted airplane hangar in Shanghai's West Bund cultural district and relocated it to a new suburban facility shortly after the Chinese-Indonesian founder and collector Budi Tek passed away in March 2022. The new venue opened in May 2023. Located in Shanghai's ancient town of Panlong, the museum is built on a scenic green area containing rivers, paddies, and bamboo forests. The formation of the Yuz Foundation and Yuz Museum reflected Tek's overarching ambition to perpetuate his collection, museum, and personal legacy beyond his own lifetime, to memorialize his legacy. The inaugural exhibition "A Journey" (May 18 to August 13, 2023) celebrated the foundation's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary by showcasing 40 works from the Yuz collection.

Tek's grand cultural vision was to transform the Yuz Museum into the public sphere. When this approach proved unsuccessful, he considered an alternative path by partnering with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 2018 – 2019. This partnership would create a "joint-venture foundation to oversee the bulk of his collection while giving the Yuz Museum access to LACMA's holdings."<sup>32</sup> Tek's untimely death accelerated the arrangement between the Yuz Foundation and LACMA, ensuring that the Yuz Museum (now somewhat reduced in scale and presence) and Tek's 1,500-strong collection of contemporary Chinese and international art remain in China. The museum will now operate as a distinct entity under the joint management of the Yuz Foundation and LACMA. Furthermore, this strategic partnership will include exhibition exchanges and possible funding contributions from the Qatar Museums Authority, which is overseen by the Qatari ruling family.

This partnership represents transcultural collaboration between a private museum (Yuz Museum), a private/public institution (LACMA), and the Qatari state authority, forming a hybrid model that is geographically and culturally diverse in its formation. As stated on the Yuz Museum website: "This collaboration was established to jointly develop and share exhibitions and cultural programs across these prestigious institutions, effectively creating a multi-site exhibition program with a truly global perspective."<sup>33</sup> The exhibition "Watering the Desert | Contemporary Art from Qatar" (November 8, 2023, to March 3, 2024) features 37 Qatari and Qatar-based contemporary artists exhibiting in China.<sup>33</sup> The partnerships will also allow contemporary Chinese artworks from the Yuz Museum to be displayed

internationally. The Yuz Foundation and the new Yuz Museum are now managed by Budi Tek's daughter, Justine Alexandria Tek, who is determined to continue her father's legacy while ensuring the project's ongoing financial sustainability. Furthermore, she is keen to develop cross-cultural exchanges, co-curate traveling exhibitions across the three institutions, and leverage LACMA's vast expertise in curatorial, collection, and museum practices to benefit the Yuz Museum.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.3. Global art networks: Barjeel Art Foundation, United Arab Emirates

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi is intent on changing the narrative and established perceptions of the Arab world and the Middle East by making Barjeel Art Foundation's (Barjeel) holdings freely accessible to new audiences. Openly sharing knowledge and educating the public about the historical, social, and political developments in Arab art is key to Al Qassemi's cultural ambitions. The emphasis on exhibitions, publications that support the collection, and collaborations with museum and university partners informs the basis of the Foundation's *raison d'être*. To better appreciate Al Qassemi's broader vision, one needs to consider why he established the Barjeel in 2010, his motivation to collect art from the Arab world, and his decision to make his private art collection publicly accessible. His holdings include artists from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia regions, artists from different ethnic groups within the Arab world, and Arab diaspora artists.

In 2008, the government of Sharjah acknowledged Al Qassemi's formal request for an exhibition space, making the 470 square-meter gallery (Maraya Art Center) within the newly renovated building in the Al Qasba district of Sharjah available (rent-free, but not "cost-free" as Al Qassemi notes) to the Foundation.<sup>35</sup> Again, we can see how governments and independent art organizations work together to build an expanding cultural ecosystem. In one decade, the Barjeel Art Foundation curated a total of 29 exhibitions: 16 were hosted at the Maraya Art Center, 11 were in collaboration with international and regional institutions, and the remaining 2 exhibitions were held at the Sharjah Art Museum and Emirates Palace in the UAE.<sup>36</sup> The Maraya Art Center was home to the Foundation's art collection and robust curatorial program until 2018. Although the closure of the Maraya Art Center signaled a shift in the Barjeel's trajectory and cultural plans, it also led to a partnership and long-term loan arrangement with the Sharjah Art Museum (2019 – 2023), which was renewed in September 2023. Private organizations such as the Barjeel can access the space for exhibitions that they curate and organize independently of the Sharjah Art

Museum. This arrangement allows art associations and foundations that do not have permanent exhibition spaces in Sharjah to utilize some of the museum's galleries. Barjeel is responsible for temporary displays and rotates/updates exhibition programs accordingly. As a government-run institution, such agreements are centrally approved by the Sharjah Museums Authority.

Al Qassemi recognizes the importance of staging temporary exhibitions, lending works, and forming strategic collaborations with art galleries and universities, along with their art museums in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. This allowed him to tell the "Arab story" at a time when few spaces were exhibiting modern and contemporary Arab art. Although it may not always be possible to control the interpretation and reception of works of art tied to a particular geographic region when they leave their original context, the exhibition "Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary" at the Whitechapel Gallery (September 2015 to January 2017) was a significant milestone for the Foundation, shedding new light on Arab art. This is because the artistic practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Arab region often escaped the attention of scholars in both the Arab and Western worlds. The Barjeel Foundation seeks to fill these historical gaps by ensuring that Arab art is not forgotten and that it is accurately documented by scholars and practitioners working in and within the region.

More recently, Al Qassemi has partnered with Christie's London and Lempertz Berlin auction houses to further expand their mission. In 2023, we can observe a move into the commercial art sector as Barjeel's collection was exhibited at both Christie's London and Lempertz Berlin. The exhibition "The Jewels of my Career: Works by Marwon" presented paintings by renowned Syrian-born artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934 – 2016) and was organized in collaboration with Lempertz Berlin (June 2 – 30, 2023). The exhibition was promoted as the "Masterpieces of Marwan Kassab-Bachi from the collection of Barjeel Art Foundation," highlighting significant works in their holdings.<sup>37</sup> We can thus observe the language adopted by auction houses when praising collectors and publicly endorsing their holdings with terms such as "The Jewels of my Career" and "Masterpieces," even when the artworks are not offered for sale. Although it is unusual for private collections to be exhibited in auction houses when the works are not for sale, the art market and auction houses are increasingly adopting museum practices by curating loan exhibitions and employing museum curators and scholars, thereby merging what is traditionally understood as a museum and auction house.

For example, Dr. Ridha Moumni, formerly a historian of Art and Archaeology at Harvard University and currently Deputy Chairman of Christie's Middle East and North Africa, curated the loan and selling of exhibitions titled "Kawkaba: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation and Emirati Art Reimagined: Hassan Sharif and the Contemporary Voices". These sections were part of the larger "Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World" exhibition displayed in London (July 20 to August 23, 2023).<sup>38</sup> The exhibition was a three-way collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and Youth, the United Arab Emirates, the Barjeel Art Foundation, and Christie's London. Barjeel is registered as a commercial entity in the UAE as the notion of independent non-profit institutions does not exist under UAE law.<sup>35</sup> Al Qassemi is also a part-owner of a commercial gallery in Dubai, so we can see how the private, public/state, and commercial sectors intersect. Iconic works from Al Qassemi's holdings, such as those by Marwan, play an important diplomatic role as they are prominently featured in Barjeel's many traveling exhibitions intended to raise awareness of Arab artists. The exhibitions and the rationale underpinning them are thus deeply rooted in a desire to enhance perceptions around a select group of artists, thereby emphasizing their artistic value and importance within not only Al Qassemi's holdings but also the broader narrative of Arab modern art.

#### 4. Conclusion

This case study assessment is set out within a distinct typology to emphasize the individual trajectories and approaches that contemporary collectors have embraced when seeking to shape the future of their cultural assets, private museums, and "museum-like spaces" alongside their personal wealth. It has been shown that many entrepreneurial collectors have done so with one eye on the art market and the other on their global art networks, strengthening what they have created without compromising their legacies as important collector-patrons. Some collectors adopted a short-term investment-collecting and museum-building strategy for short-term value creation, whereas others embraced what Wang referred to as "transnational art enterprises".<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it has been shown that contemporary art collectors, their private museums, collections, and museum-like spaces can have a limited lifespan, and their destiny is often in the hands of their founders and creators.

The conventional philanthropic path for wealthy collectors has been to donate works of art or money to existing museums or to establish their foundations and museums, such as the Frick and Menil Collections and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Established legal

and tax systems have supported such initiatives in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and parts of Europe. The Falckenberg Collection's longstanding collaborative partnership with the city of Hamburg and Hamburg's Deichtorhallen provides an alternative chapter to conventional collector journeys. However, it raises questions about the desirability of private-public partnerships as endowments are required to support the ongoing care, research, and display of gifted works. In 2016, the People's Republic of China formed new laws—such as updates to the General Rules of the Civil Law, Charity Law, Non-state Education Promotion Law, and Enterprise Income Tax Law—to address private sector support for the arts and culture by providing a legal framework for the registration, management, and tax guidelines for non-profit institutions.<sup>22</sup> The delay in implementing such cultural policies and regulations might explain Guy Ullens's opportunistic approach in turning his museum-like space into an art business, despite UCCA being promoted as a non-profit when it was always registered as a for-profit entity in China. Wang suggests that "Ullens built his own art authority through UCCA".<sup>22</sup>

Al Qassemi's role as a collector is unique as he adopts what he refers to as an "activist approach" on the international stage, pursuing various opportunities and partnerships that allow him to voice his and the Barjeel Foundation's cultural ambitions: "Our role is very different in the sense that we are very, very proactive".<sup>35</sup> In addition, Al Qassemi's promotion of art as a tool for soft power is immensely effective and has been well-received by international audiences. Building collaborative partnerships and cultural bridges across distinct geographic and cultural borders is a key to private collectors and their respective cultural endeavors. Here, art is used to educate and communicate ideas beyond the esthetic value ascribed to a work of art or the prestige associated with creating a private museum or exhibition space and owning and collecting expensive artworks. With that in mind, I conclude with Harald Falckenberg's cautionary advice to contemporary collectors:

"When it comes to collecting, you need a method and philosophy. For the rich, art is, indeed, an investment – there is talk of a general flight to material assets in times of low interest rates – but, first and foremost, art is seen as a luxury accessory and status symbol. To create something new all one's own, while remaining in the game, is a balancing act that only a few succeed at mastering".<sup>39</sup>

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

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