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Public Collections, Private Benefactors and Online Audiences: Communicating the Role of Philanthropy in Shaping Museum Collections

The international financial crisis in 2008 had severe ramifications for arts and cultural institutions due to changes in the availability of public funding for the arts across Europe as many national governments imposed austerity measures.¹ Arts institutions also had to face shifting public opinion, with increased skepticism around “the value of public funds devoted to the cultural sector” in light of cuts to public services such as education and health.² In the Republic of Ireland, government expenditure on cultural services dropped from 1% of total expenditure between 2003 and 2008 to a low of 0.6% by 2010.³ From 2011 to 2018 funding rose again but failed to return to the pre-financial crisis levels of 2008 (Figure 1).⁴

The effects of these national funding cuts were dramatic when reflected in arts budgets. This trend continued well beyond 2008, with total cultural expenditure by the then-Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht decreasing by 26% between 2008 and 2013.⁵ As reflected in Eurostat data, by 2020 funding still did not match pre-2008 in real terms. For example, the Oireachtas (Houses of Parliament) grant-in-aid to the Arts Council Ireland announced for 2020 at

1 Vesna Čopič et al., *Trends in Public Funding for Culture in the EU* (Brussels: European Expert Network on Culture, 2014), 6, <http://www.interarts.net/descargas/interarts2573.pdf>; Eurostat, *Government Expenditure on Recreation, Culture and Religion (COFOG)* (Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2018), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/culture/data/database>; Copic et al., *Trends in Public Funding*, 39.

2 Lluís Bonet and Fabio Donato, “The Impact of the Financial Crisis and its Impact on the Current Models of Governance and Management of the Cultural Sector in Europe,” *ENCATC Journal of Cultural Management and Policy* 1 (2011): 7, https://www.encatc.org/media/2703-journal_vol1_issue1_dec2011512.pdf.

3 Bonet and Donato, “The Impact of the Financial Crisis,” 7.

4 Eurostat, *Government Expenditure (COFOG)*.

5 The department changed name four times during this period; Alexandra Slaby, “Whither Cultural Policy in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland?,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 37, no. 1/2 (2011): 79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41955740>.

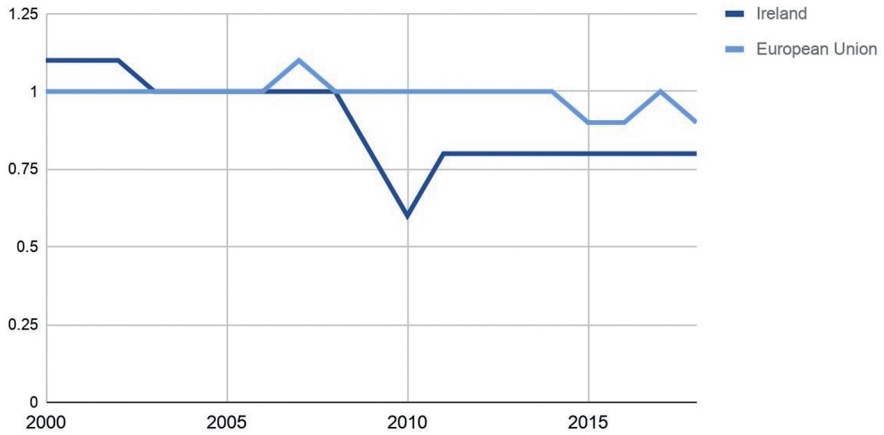


Fig. 1: Total Government expenditure on Cultural Services (as % of total expenditure) from 2001 to 2018. Line chart by author. Data source: Eurostat.

€80 m (Figure 2) represented an equivalent of €68.33 m in 2008's currency value when adjusted for inflation.⁶

These funding cuts also significantly impacted the operating capacity of cultural institutions, with Ireland's national museums explicitly referencing budget shortfalls in their post-recession annual reports and strategic plans. The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), the focus of this chapter, stated that it had experienced an “overall 48% cut in funding since 2008.”⁷ These cuts saw IMMA's Oireachtas grant-in-aid drop from a peak of €8.4 m in 2008 to €4.72 m in 2014.⁸ By 2018 funding had increased but still remained well below 2008 levels (Figure 3).⁹

While public funding reductions were first perceived in the arts as a “temporary and external constraint” from which the sector would recover, it soon became apparent that a deeper structural shift in arts funding was occurring, whereby

⁶ Ronan McGreevy, “Mixed Reactions to Budget 2020 from the Arts Sector,” *The Irish Times*, October 8, 2019, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/mixed-reaction-to-budget-2020-from-the-arts-sector-1.4044278>.

⁷ IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2015* (Dublin: IMMA, 2016), 6, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>.

⁸ IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2009* (Dublin: IMMA, 2010), 45, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>; IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2014* (Dublin: IMMA, 2015), 33, accessed February 14, 2020, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>.

⁹ IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2018* (Dublin: IMMA, 2019), 34, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>.

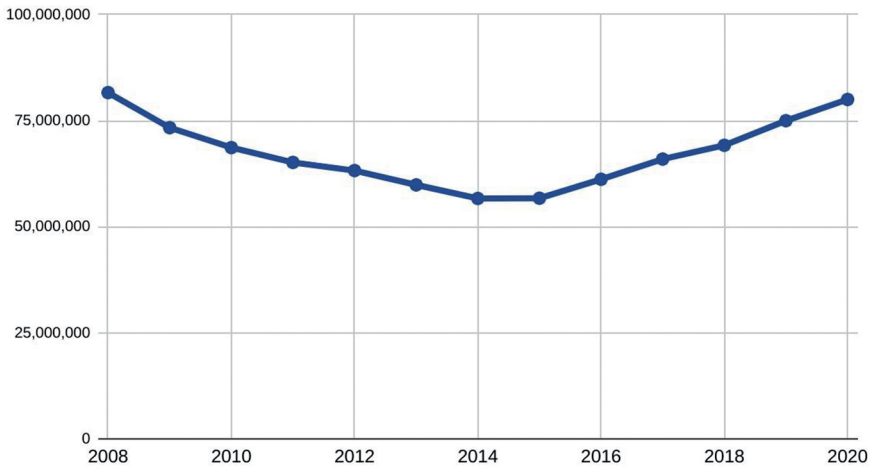


Fig. 2: Arts Council Funding 2008–2020 (€). Not adjusted for inflation.

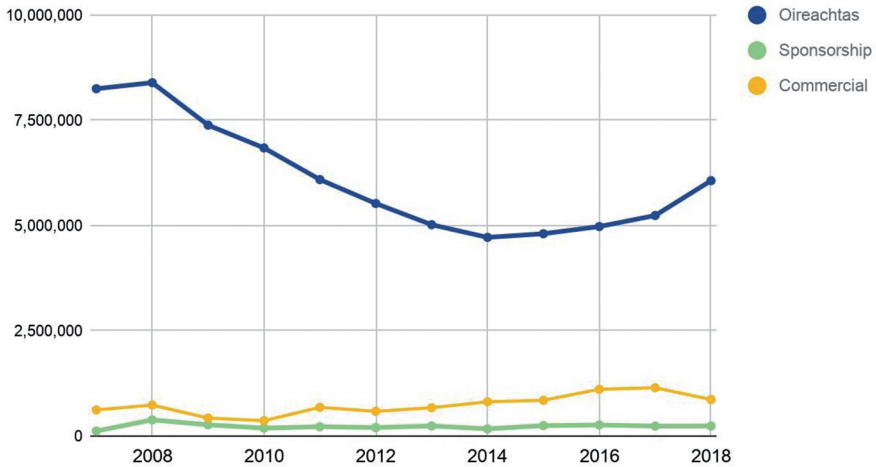


Fig. 3: IMMA Revenue Sources 2007–2018 (€). Data Source: IMMA Annual Reports.

“Public authorities across Europe [began] encouraging cultural institutions to diversify their sources of income,” with a marked focus on raising philanthropic funds.¹⁰ Accordingly, in 2012, the Department of Arts established the Philanthropy

¹⁰ Bonet and Donato, “The Impact of the Financial Crisis,” 8; Jean-Michel Tobelem, “The Arts and

Leverage Initiative which provided tiered matching funds for arts organizations able to attract private support, releasing more public funds to organizations as they raised more philanthropic money.¹¹ In the same year the Arts Council launched RAISE, a program aimed at providing professional support to develop fundraising capacity in the Irish arts sector.¹² It appeared that Irish funding bodies and arts agencies began to turn towards a traditionally American model of cultural support, looking to leverage private sources to subsidize public goods.¹³ However, this shift in cultural policy failed to accommodate the fact that private philanthropy was also affected by recessionary market forces, lagging by 12.9% from 2008 to 2009 in the wake of the financial crisis, though statistics specifically concerning arts and cultural institutions are unavailable for this period.¹⁴

While private philanthropy in museums is nothing new, from 2008 it became an imperative. Without the expected return of public funding to pre-recession levels, art museums internationally needed to raise income from private sources and, importantly, to do so visibly as a means of projecting institutional confidence to attract further support. However, alongside highly publicized museum advocacy campaigns, which called for both a restoration of public funding levels and increased private investment in the arts, came equivalent public scrutiny of museums' private funding sources. Museum fundraising and governance began to garner widespread public attention, extending to both corporate sponsorship and private donors, as audiences increasingly demanded transparency and oversight of museums.¹⁵ As seen in recent protests at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, audiences are now projecting their ethics back at museums in a reversal of the historical model of the museum as a projec-

Culture: Financial Burden or a Way Out of the Crisis?," *ENCATC Journal of Cultural Management and Policy* 3, issue 1 (2012): 54, https://www.encatc.org/media/2689-encatc_journal_vol3_issue_1_20135361.pdf/.

11 Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht, *Annual Report 2012* (Dublin: Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015), 9, last modified July 25, 2019, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/380616-annual-report-2012/>.

12 Arts Council Ireland, *Annual Report 2012* (Dublin: Arts Council Ireland, 2013), 2, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.artscouncil.ie/publications/?&Category=Annual%20reports>.

13 Tobelem, "Arts and Culture: Financial Burden or a Way Out of the Crisis?," 55.

14 Sinead Kelleher and Dennis O'Connor, *Fundraising Performance: The First Annual Report on Fundraising in Ireland*, (Dublin: 2into3, 2020), 4, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.2into3.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Final-Draft-Annual-Report-on-Fundraising.pdf>.

15 Andrea Fraser, "It's Time to Consider the Links Between Museum Boards and Political Money," *Artnet News*, May 7, 2018, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/how-are-museums-implicated-in-todays-political-mess-1278824>.

tor of “civilizing” values.¹⁶ Irish museums in the midst of expanding private support must grapple with the questions asked of their international peers: is private philanthropy a “third face of power” which represents “the ability of elites to shape the public’s preferences” through their financial support of certain forms of museums, exhibitions, and artists? Through accepting funds, do museums become complicit in the financial dealings of their donors, which may not align with the values to which certain audiences hold public museums?¹⁷ Or is philanthropy an alternative to limited, uncertain state funding, and a more sustainable method for museums to grow their collections, expand programming, and increase access? These conversations will continue as audiences and benefactors redefine their relationship with each other and with cultural institutions.

This chapter therefore highlights the relationship between private philanthropy and museum acquisitions, examining how museums communicate this relationship to public audiences through a case study of IMMA. The example of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam will demonstrate that IMMA is not unique in its reliance on philanthropy to drive acquisitions. Lastly, it discusses the possibilities for linked data in museum collections to make museum-donor relationships and custodial history more transparent. This research focuses predominantly on online collections, examining how they represent acquisitions made by means of private philanthropic gifts, i.e. IMMA’s Online Collection, using acquisition and donor data available through May 2020.¹⁸ Acquisition data was imported to Google Sheets, converted into a JSON file format, and input into D3.js, the JavaScript data visualization library to create the included visualizations.¹⁹

¹⁶ Victoria Stapley-Brown, “Philanthropy, but at what Price? US Museums Wake up to Public’s Ethical Concerns,” *The Art Newspaper*, August 28, 2019, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/08/28/philanthropy-but-at-what-price-us-museums-wake-up-to-publics-ethical-concerns>; Fraser, “Links Between Museum Boards and Political Money”; Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 576, doi: 10.1017/S1537592714001595.

¹⁸ “Collection,” Irish Museum of Modern Art, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://imma.ie/collection/>.

¹⁹ D3.js, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://d3js.org>.

The Museum-Donor Relationship

Private philanthropy is “voluntary contributions by means of money, goods, and/or time (expertise) by individuals.”²⁰ Philanthropy Ireland states that “giving is strategic, more structured and often on a longer term basis.”²¹ Private philanthropists’ involvement with institutions may therefore extend beyond giving to include board membership and peer fundraising.²² They may direct their giving at a range of programs and priorities within arts institutions including exhibitions, conservation, education programs, and capital works. This chapter focuses on a particular priority: museum collections. It considers the direct donation of artwork and to a lesser extent the provision of ringfenced funds specifically to acquire work.

If museums have frequently been critiqued “as a conduit for a dominant ideology” intended to “normalize a narrative of nation-building, imperialism, corporate power, and elitism,” then it begs the question of how private patrons influence the construction of these narratives through the artwork they donate.²³ As the acquisition of work into a collection “validate[s] art,” the artistic canon thus becomes formed, and stretched, through a social institutional process.²⁴ It is not only museum curators and directors who are involved in this process, but also private patrons. They greatly influence what works are made available to acquire through donations and loans, and have the ability to move museums in the direction of their collecting tastes.²⁵

The state also plays a significant role in encouraging donations through the provision of tax incentives. In the Republic of Ireland, donations of artwork are accounted for in Section 1003 of the Taxes Consolidation Act of 1997. This states

20 Barry Hoolwerf and Theo Schuyt, eds., *Giving in Europe. The State of Research on Giving in 20 European Countries* (Amsterdam: Lenthe Publishers, 2017), 1.

21 “Make Your Mark. The Donors Guide to Philanthropy,” Philanthropy Ireland, accessed August 29, 2022, https://philanthropy.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Make-Your-Mark_-Donor-Guide-Jan-2020.pdf.

22 May Lyn L. Cruz, “The Metropolitan Museum of Manila’s Exhibition Program from 1976–1986: Signs and Consequences of a Conflated Patronage,” *Philippine Humanities Review* 19, issue 2 (2017): 18, <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/phr/article/view/6814>.

23 Gordon Fyfe, “Sociology and the Social Aspects of Museums,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), unpaginated, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996836.ch3>.

24 Victoria D. Alexander, *Museums and Money* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 10.

25 Paul Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashion: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems,” *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (January 1972), cited in Alexander, *Museums and Money*, 10.

that, with some limitations, when donating “heritage items,” which includes artwork, private donors can claim 80 % of the value of donations against liabilities for “income tax, corporation tax, capitals gains tax, gift tax and inheritance tax.”²⁶ In 2019, the total value of donated heritage items under the scheme equaled €3.86 m (capped at €6 million annually), representing an “indirect” investment in the museum sector that uses “tax incentives to bring the action[s] of private actors in line with desired cultural heritage policy.”²⁷ While the incentives may aid in “moving important works from the private to the public sphere,” it is also important to consider how they allow philanthropists to avoid public tax liabilities, perpetuating the economic power of wealthy benefactors.²⁸

Evidently, while the museum-donor relationship may have mutually-beneficial elements, it is also asymmetrical.²⁹ Museum collections reflect the various actors who help to build them.³⁰ By examining the interplay between private philanthropy and museum acquisitions, a space opens to consider how philanthropy is involved in determining the institutional logics of public museums, and how these logics might be made more transparent to museum audiences.

26 “Donate an Artefact,” National Museum of Ireland, accessed August 29, 2022, [http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2008/act/25/section/94/enacted/en/html](https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Support-Us/Donate-an-Artefact#:~:text=Under%20Section%201003%20of%20the,liabilities%20for%20certain%20Irish%20taxes; Acts of the Oireachtas, “Finance (No. 2) Act 2008” (S.28 No. 98 of 2009, Irish Statute Book, 2009), accessed August 29, 2022, <a href=); “Donation of Heritage Items,” Office of the Revenue Commissioners, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/donations-and-covenants/donations-of-heritage-items/index.aspx>.

27 “Tax Relief for Donations of Heritage Items under section 176 of Finance Act, 1995 and Section 1003 Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997,” Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://assets.gov.ie/213137/ddb46a2e-ab36-4aae-838d-79ac9fbb0f6e.pdf>; Arjo Klamer, Anna Mignosa, and Lyudmila Petrova, “Cultural Heritage Policies: A Comparative Perspective,” in *Handbook on the Economics of Cultural Heritage*, ed. Anna Mignosa and Lyudmila Petrova (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013), 45.

28 Emily J. Folas, “It Belongs in a Museum: Appropriate Donor Incentives for Fractional Gifts of Art,” *Notre Dame Law Review* 83, no. 4 (2008): 1783–84.

29 Paul van der Grijp, “The Sacred Gift: Donations from Private Collectors to Museums,” *Museum Anthropology Review* 81, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 23.

30 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things. Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 43.

Private Philanthropy as Acquisitions Strategy: The National Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art at IMMA

As a relatively young museum, IMMA is an example of contemporary collecting practices. Older institutions such as the National Gallery of Ireland and the National Museum of Ireland were founded during a period of Victorian museum-building when the content of initial collections was often overwhelmingly determined by the interests of elite philanthropists and their peers.³¹ In comparison, IMMA was established in 1991 in the throes of new museology sentiments, as museums sought to reflect more diverse audiences and to champion collections, programs, and exhibitions that were “in service to a community, instead of the state or the elite.”³² According to IMMA’s founding Director Declan McGonagle, this model was based on “public participation” and the expansion of “public value.”³³ However, since 2008 IMMA has also been outspoken about the museum’s need to rely on private philanthropy in light of reduced public funding, launching several private philanthropic and sponsorship initiatives.³⁴

Upon establishment, the guiding parameter of the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art at IMMA was to focus on the “now,” “[representing] the present by collecting works more or less as they are made.”³⁵ Originally, this was manifested through a collections policy whereby IMMA set out to purchase only work by living artists but encouraged “loans and donations of works going back to the 1940s.”³⁶ In 1990, the museum “was given an initial budget for acquisitions [equivalent to] just over €300,000” with which to begin developing the collection.³⁷ However, a substantial cornerstone of IMMA’s collection in its early years were the

31 Zoe Hope Bulaitis, *Value and the Humanities. The Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Inheritance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 177–240.

32 Marjorie M. Halpin, “Play it Again, Sam’: Reflections on a New Museology,” *Museum International* 49, no. 2 (1997): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0033.00092>.

33 Declan McGonagle, “For Them, Not Us: ‘Turning’ the Museum in an Anxious World,” *Eire-Ireland* 52, issue 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2017): 97.

34 Aoife Barry, “How Weddings, Festivals and Hennessy are Helping Irish Art after ‘Devastating’ Funding Cuts,” *The Journal*, August 20, 2017, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.thejournal.ie/imma-hennessy-art-fund-3534924-Aug2017>.

35 Declan McGonagle, Foreword to *The Irish Museum of Modern Art: A Collection in the Making* (Dublin: IMMA, 1998), 4–5.

36 Marta Herrero, *Irish Intellectuals and Aesthetics. The Making of a Modern Art Collection* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 117, 119.

37 Herrero, *Irish Intellectuals and Aesthetics*, 128.

more than 300 pieces donated in 1992 through the personal trust of Irish art collector Gordon Lambert.³⁸ By the time the museum released their first catalogue, works donated by Lambert still “accounted for well over half the collection.”³⁹ This bequest, and its outsized initial influence on developing IMMA’s collection, underlines a tension within the museum’s founding vision. How might a collection developed through a substantial philanthropic donation from a single donor reflect this donor’s worldview, and does this influence the collection’s ability to speak to proposed values of public participation and service to community above elites?

In 2020, IMMA’s collection included over 3,500 works and the central role of donations has continued to grow.⁴⁰ In the museum’s 2017 published acquisitions guidelines two of the six listed priorities specifically highlight the role of donations as an acquisition method. Priority 4 – “Secure through donation strategic additions of works from 20th century Irish art” – suggests that additions of Irish art to the collection from this time period are likely to be done exclusively through donation, potentially reflecting the prohibitive costs of the works relative to IMMA’s budget.⁴¹ The strategy document refers clearly to the museum’s limited acquisition funds, stating that “a significant increase in resources is required to ensure that IMMA has an acquisitions budget that is appropriate for the National Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art.”⁴² These resources are outlined as potentially coming from sources including “Donor-supported acquisition of specific works identified as priorities by IMMA,” “Donations of major works capitalizing on tax incentives available to do this,” and “Private foundations.”⁴³ The proposed mix of acquisition methods listed therefore leans heavily on leveraging philanthropy to acquire artworks.

The museum’s annual reports tell a similar story. The 2008 report states that “while the number of purchased acquisitions to the Museum’s Collection was reduced considerably on previous years due to budgetary constraints, IMMA attract-

38 Marie Bourke, *The Story of Irish Museums 1790–2000: Culture, Identity and Education* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 313.

39 Rosemarie Mulcahy, review of *The Irish Museum of Modern Art. Catalogue of the Collection May 1991–1998*, by Catherine Marshall and Ronan McCrea, *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 16 (2000): 176.

40 IMMA, *Strategy 2017–2021* (Dublin: IMMA, 2017): 3, accessed 29 August 2022, https://imma.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/IMMA_Strategy_2017-2021.pdf.

41 IMMA, *Strategic Collection Development Plan 2017–2022* (Dublin: IMMA, 2017): 4, accessed 29 August 2022, <https://imma.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/The-Strategic-Collection-Development-Plan-2017-2022.pdf>.

42 IMMA, *Strategic Collection Development Plan*, 5.

43 IMMA, *Strategic Collection Development Plan*, 5.

ed a significant number of donations.”⁴⁴ The 2010 and 2011 Annual Reports continue in this vein, noting that “donations were the main source of acquisitions for the IMMA Collection in 2010,”⁴⁵ and “in recent years, due to reduced funding, additions to the Collection have largely been through generous donations by artists, private benefactors and organizations.”⁴⁶ In 2014, it was plainly stated that “there was no acquisitions budget,” a position which was “not sustainable” as “major works on exhibition at IMMA that should have been acquired for the IMMA Collection were not.”⁴⁷ This inability to purchase works also makes it unlikely that IMMA is able to pursue one of its founding purposes noted above, to continuously collect works “more or less as they are made.”⁴⁸

This rhetoric aligns with the sharp reduction in public funding for cultural institutions following the 2008 global recession. However, although IMMA’s narrative highlighting the museum’s reliance on private benefactors for acquisitions has ramped up since 2008, the idea that private philanthropy has only recently played a major role in IMMA’s acquisitions is misleading. Of the 2,688 works in IMMA’s collection who had a record in IMMA’s online collection in 2020, 55.8% of them were donated (Figure 4). Looking at trends in acquisition methods over time, there has consistently been a high proportion of works acquired through donation in comparison to other methods. Throughout most of the museum’s collecting activity, donations have outpaced other acquisition methods by a significant margin (Figure 5). Even during a time period of significant growth in government funding from 2005 to 2008, purchases still barely outpaced donations and generally, throughout the museum’s history, the majority of works added to the collection were acquired through private donations.⁴⁹

44 IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2008* (Dublin: IMMA 2009), 7, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>.

45 IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2010* (Dublin: IMMA 2011), 6, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>.

46 IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2011* (Dublin: IMMA 2012), 9, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>.

47 IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2014* (Dublin: IMMA 2015), 14, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>.

48 McGonagle, “Foreword,” 4–5.

49 “Minister Announces IMMA Programme for 2005,” IMMA, January 18, 2005, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/press-centre/minister-announces-imma-programme-for-2005/>; IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2006* (Dublin: IMMA, 2007), accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>; IMMA, *Irish Museum of Modern Art Annual Report 2007* (Dublin: IMMA 2008), accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/policies-and-reports/reports/annual-reports/>; “IMMA Welcomes Increase in Subvention,” IMMA, November 17, 2006, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/press-centre/imma-welcomes-increase-in-subvention/>.

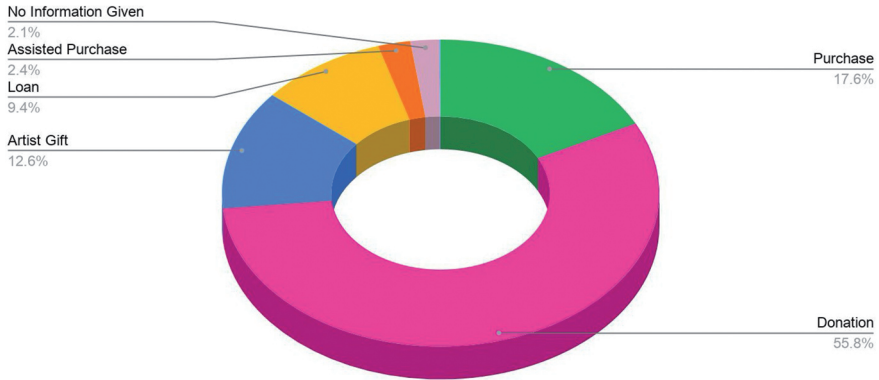


Fig. 4: Acquisition methods of artworks. Data source: IMMA online collection.

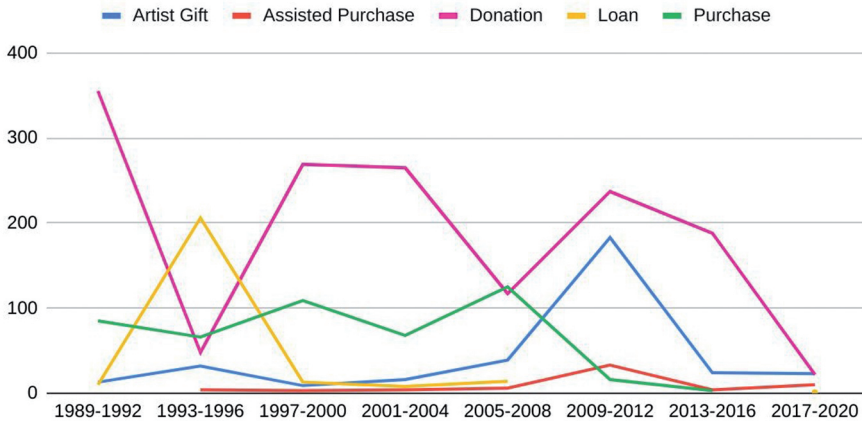


Fig. 5: Trends in IMMA's acquisition methods, 1989–2020. Data source: IMMA online collection.

Not only have donations generally been the primary source of acquisitions, but a handful of donors are responsible for the bulk of works gifted to the collection throughout IMMA's history. Of the 1,501 works classified as donations in IMMA's online collections, the top three donors by volume—Gordon Lambert, George and Maura McClelland, and the Smurfit Kappa Group (an Irish-founded global paper and packaging manufacturer)—have given 43% of all donated works. The top five donors—which then includes Barbara Novak, Brian O'Doherty, and Maire and Maurice Foley—have given 55% of all donated works (Figure 6).

It seems evident that in lieu of a regular, robust acquisitions budget from 2008 to 2019, IMMA's executive and curatorial staff turned to strategic donations, which



Fig. 6: Bubble plot comparing number of works donated by IMMA's collection by benefactors versus acquired through other methods (1990–2019). Data source: IMMA online collection.

former Head of Collections Catherine Marshall described as an “acquisition-led, purchase-led” donation.⁵⁰ In these cases, the museum approaches private philanthropists with requests for them to purchase specific works, which are then donated to the museum. Assisted purchases follow a similar logic in which private funds are donated to be used for the acquisition of specified works. Initiatives such as IMMA 1000, a private acquisitions fundraising initiative founded by businessman John Cunningham, and the Hennessy Art Fund, a corporate sponsorship program

⁵⁰ Catherine Marshall, quoted in Herrero, *Irish Intellectuals and Aesthetics*, 138.

supporting the acquisition of contemporary Irish art, both fall into this category.⁵¹ These programs were launched in 2016 and 2017 respectively, but did not appear to fully make up for the loss of IMMA's purchasing power in real terms of the number of works added to its collection since 2008.

Communicating Philanthropy Online

It is clear that private philanthropy has had a significant effect in shaping IMMA's collections. However, this outsized impact is not strongly communicated through-out IMMA's online collections. Beyond standard metadata, the online records provide information related to a work's institutional identity, including a credit line detailing how and when the work was acquired, and tags used to categorize and group artwork in the collection based on shared characteristics. Tagging, which links works together, is said to "increase access to online collections," providing opportunities for audiences to draw connections between works.⁵² In the metadata model used by IMMA, tags are only created for three categories: medium, year produced, and artist name. There are no tags for acquisition year, acquisition method, or donor provided in the credit line, which disconnects pieces donated through the same trust or benefactor.

Museum websites can provide possible "entrance points to public collection databases," and play a key role in determining how audiences can interact with collections.⁵³ For cultural institutions, the creation of an online catalogue "carries with it many decisions that affect how data [is] input and retrieved," and importantly the chosen method for organizing metadata can affect "what types of

51 "IMMA Launches Major New Private Fundraising Initiative to Support Contemporary Art in Ireland After Years of Devastating Cuts," IMMA, May 5, 2016, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/about/press-centre/imma-1000-fund-raises-e120000-in-year-one/>; Madeleine Lyons, "The Man Committed to Saving Irish Art," *The Irish Times*, June 11, 2016, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/homes-and-property/interiors/the-man-committed-to-saving-irish-art-1.2679777>; Barry, "Weddings, Festivals and Hennessy are Helping Irish Art."

52 Susan Cairns, "Mutualizing Museum Knowledge: Folksonomies and the Changing Shape of Expertise," *Curator* 56, no. 1 (January 2013): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12011>.

53 Bodil Axelsson, "Online Collections, Curatorial Agency and Machine-assisted Curating," in *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Media and Communication*, ed. Kirsten Drotner et al. (London: Routledge, 2018), 67, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781315560168-6/online-collections-curatorial-agency-machine-assisted-curating-bodil-axelsson>.

searches may be performed” by audiences engaging with a museum’s website.⁵⁴ At a time of expanding access to online museum collections “digitization projects have tended to prioritise descriptive information about the physical appearance of [objects]” over “institutionally-gathered archival information.”⁵⁵ The acquisition and donor information that is presented in sparse, non-linked, decontextualized formats “might technically be available in an online catalogue [but] can remain ‘invisible’ if it is not clear how to search for it effectively,” such that museums cannot fully communicate the impact of philanthropy on their collections, as is reflected in IMMA’s online holdings.⁵⁶

Further afield, it is not only in the Republic of Ireland that museum collections are highly indebted to philanthropic donations. The exhibition *True Luxury... Art Acquisitions 2012–2018* shown at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam—a museum of modern and contemporary art—openly acknowledges this fact. On view from September 2018 to February 2019, *True Luxury* was a survey exhibition drawn from recent acquisitions to the museum’s collection. While it contained works acquired through a range of methods, the press release and associated text for the exhibition specifically focused on donations, stating that “the museum underlines the increasing importance of private donations to the collection.”⁵⁷ The exhibition title also alluded to this: taken from Erik van Lieshout’s installation *Echte luxe is niets kopen/ True Luxury is Not to Shop*, it was billed by the museum as an “ironic reference to the reality that, in a time of shrinking museum budgets and skyrocketing prices on the international art market, collections rely on magnanimous donors to expand their holdings.”⁵⁸

For the period 2012–2017 covered by *True Luxury*, donations to the Stedelijk Museum’s collection outpaced purchases more than 2 to 1.⁵⁹ It is therefore not sur-

54 John S. Hansen, “Cutting Edge and Cutting Corners: Evolving Technology, Expanding Usership, and Responsive Solutions in a Museum Database,” *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 7, no. 3 (2019): 234, doi:10.1017/aap.2019.20.

55 Elizabeth Haines and Anna Woodham, “Mobilising the *Energy in Store*: Stored Collections, Enthusiast Experts and the Ecology of Heritage,” *Science Museum Group Journal* 12 (Autumn 2019): unpaginated, Science Museum Group Journal E-Library, <http://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/browse/issue-12/mobilising-the-energy-in-store/>.

56 Haines and Woodham, “Mobilising the *Energy in Store*.”

57 “True Luxury... Art Acquisitions 2012–2018, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam,” Press Release, *Artforum* (2018), accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.artforum.com/artguide/stedelijk-museum-amsterdam-351/true-luxury-art-acquisitions-2012-2018-165622>.

58 “True Luxury... Art Acquisitions 2012–2018,” Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/true-luxury>.

59 “Annual Report,” Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/museum/organisation/annual-report>.

prising that the museum’s curatorial team developed an acquisitions show that explicitly acknowledged the role of private donors in determining what is hung on the walls of the Stedelijk. In this way, *True Luxury* went a step further than simple acknowledgement. Yet, while the Stedelijk has more confidently addressed this in its physical gallery space, the online collection site follows the pattern of IMMA in minimizing information about philanthropy. A more relational structure is employed, with artwork and object records connected to material held in the Stedelijk Museum Library, however, as with IMMA, this does not include acquisition notes or donor records.

Linked Data for Museum Collections

Collections, whether physical or online, are the means through which museums build meaning for their visitors, and as such become “sites of political, social and cultural power.”⁶⁰ The decisions museums make in the process of digitizing their collections determines what information is made available to online visitors, and sets the lens through which audiences interpret collections. In the IMMA and Stedelijk Museum collection sites discussed, audiences had limited options to draw connections between artworks. Future prototypes for online collections might link collection records with material on the archival context related to an artwork’s custodial history and provenance through applying more extensive tagging, adding tags to fields such as donor name, acquisition method, and acquisition year. Making this information searchable and linked through tagging would be a viable way to offer access to the networked web of philanthropic connections that exists within a collection through relatively simplified data structures.

For everyday users the benefits may be limited to seeing the volume of work gifted by a particular donor. However, for museum professionals or researchers, tagging provides a simplified model for applying machine-readable metadata to digital collections records. Museum staff can thus “increase the use of their materials, and allow for more efficient user searches.”⁶¹ Linked Data also provides “op-

⁶⁰ Rebecca Kahn, “Smudges on the Glass. Tracing and Locating the Museum in the British Museum’s Digitised Collections” (PhD diss., King’s College London, 2016), 36, [https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/smudges-on-the-glass\(3f46b74b-1fad-44de-b484-ffc7f43318cf\).html](https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/smudges-on-the-glass(3f46b74b-1fad-44de-b484-ffc7f43318cf).html).

⁶¹ Lucy McKenna, Christophe Debruyne, and Declan O’Sullivan, “Understanding the Position of Information Professionals with regards to Linked Data: A Survey of Libraries, Archives and Museums,” *Proceedings of The 18th ACM/IEEE Joint Conference on Digital Libraries, Fort Worth, Texas, June 2018*, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1145/317026.3197041>.

portunities to create meaningful links between objects across collections.”⁶² Assigning tags to acquisition or donor credit lines makes it possible to visualize how certain artists have entered IMMA’s collection through philanthropic gifts, and to ask multi-dimensional questions around how philanthropic gifts can shape the character of a collection, for example via increasing representation of certain artists, styles, or time periods.

If Irish cultural institutions applied linked data structures to their online collection databases “it could be possible to collaborate with other repositories to create a more rounded digital resource containing a more diverse range of surviving archives.”⁶³ Institutional buy-in is one of multiple challenges inherent to pursuing such projects. These range from logistical (lack of staff expertise or financial resourcing), to technical (incompatibilities between museum cataloguing software and metadata needs for linked data projects), to conceptual (limited museum-based linked data projects from which to draw inspiration).⁶⁴

This prototype was based on the belief that “the future of museum documentation is in relational, interconnected information structures.”⁶⁵ Fundamentally, these structures require a reconsideration of the relationship between museum collections and archives, a model which IMMA itself appears to be embracing with its ongoing Collection and Archive Digitisation Project.⁶⁶ Not a passive witness, the organizational memory stored in the archive is a record of decisions made by museum staff, private donors, and government agencies in determining the institutional character of the museum itself.⁶⁷ Furthermore, both museums and private philanthropists benefit from a view of collecting that pinpoints “the

⁶² McKenna, Debruyne, and O’Sullivan, “Linked Data: A Survey of Libraries, Archives and Museums,” 8.

⁶³ Nicholas J. Wyatt, “Digitising Charles Babbage at the Science Museum, London: Managing Expectations, Enabling Access,” *Circumscribe* 21 (2018): 62, <https://doi.org/10.23925/1980-7651.2018v21;p56-62>.

⁶⁴ Maija Ekosaari and Samuli Pekkola, “Pushing the Limits beyond Catalogue Raisonné: Step 1. Identifying the Digitization Challenges in Museums,” *Proceedings of 52nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences at the University of Manoa, January 2019*, 3172, <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/59753>; McKenna, Debruyne, and O’Sullivan, “Linked Data: A Survey of Libraries, Archives and Museums,” 7.

⁶⁵ Michael Jones, “From Catalogues to Contextual Networks: Reconfiguring Collection Documentation in Museums,” *Archives and Records* 39, no. 1 (2018): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2017.1407750>.

⁶⁶ “IMMA Archive in the Project Spaces,” IMMA, 2019, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://imma.ie/whats-on/imma-archive-in-the-project-spaces/>.

⁶⁷ Michael Jones, “From Personal to Public: Field Books, Museums, and the Opening of the Archives,” *Journal of the Archives and Records Association* 38, no. 2 (2017): 216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1269645>.

moment of an object's accession into a public collection as the natural point at which donor impact on collection shape and trajectory comes to an end."⁶⁸ When curators display recently acquired collection gifts and focus solely on art historical or aesthetic themes, they adopt the donation into broader institutional narratives while participating in the minimization of the donor's relationship to the works. The donor is simultaneously cleansed and canonized, going through the "dynamic procedure of valuation" and benefitting from the "hegemonic logic of inclusion" on which canonization is based.⁶⁹

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this chapter, digital platforms may create opportunities to develop a richer, deeper contextual environment for audiences, who can make their own decisions about how to engage with collections. Yet, "opening" the archive in this way may also cause museums to face increased scrutiny over their donors, both contemporary and historical. Maxwell L. Anderson, former Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Dallas Museum of Art, has asked "Are we meant to rename the Frick [The Frick Collection in New York] because Henry Clay Frick was a union-buster? What are the limits of retrospective institutional cleansing?"⁷⁰ I would argue that "institutional cleansing" occurs not through the removal of donor names from gallery walls but from a prevailing attitude that the contextual biographies of private donors have no place in the museum. Whether intentional or otherwise, what many museum leaders have defined as a stance that is "above the fray of the political" arguably cedes an element of their authority – to construct, interpret, and communicate art history – to align with the concerns of private philanthropists.⁷¹ In turn, museums, though seen as "institutions that hold works in public trust" and whose "collections have a fundamentally educational role," receive little support to devote time and resources to investigating

68 Claire Wintle, "Consultancy, Networking and Brokerage: The Legacy of the Donor in Museum Practice," *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 23 (2010): 72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41416856>.

69 Saloni Mathur, 'Why Exhibition Histories?,' *British Art Studies* 13, unpaginated, <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-13/why-exhibition-histories>.

70 Maxwell L. Anderson quoted in Morris, 'The Louvre Took Down the Sackler Name.'

71 Olga Viso, 'Decolonizing the Art Museum: The Next Wave,' *The New York Times*, 1 May 2018, accessed 29 August 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/opinion/decolonizing-art-museums.html>.

their own institutional ethics.⁷² Indeed, such critique may also risk the loss of support from contemporary benefactors. Yet, as activists and audiences increasingly demand that museums have “a voice and a sense of accountability,” there may be an increasing public relations benefit to self-driven institutional critique.⁷³

Increasing online access to archives and more openly engaging with acquisition records will move museums towards a public recognition of the place of private philanthropy within their walls. It may also serve to dispel widespread beliefs that museums are comfortably, if not entirely, funded by government agencies.⁷⁴ IMMA certainly addressed the interrelated nature of decreased public funding, philanthropy, and museum programming in their series of media conversations and press releases announcing private sponsorship. However, they failed to carry these conversations into the museum in a critical capacity, never moving beyond effusive praise for their private backers. Communicating about philanthropy in the museum might be more impactful if it was intended not just to deliver public relations benefits to sponsors but to vocalize the museum’s ongoing financial needs and their effect on decision-making, and the influence this has on what audiences eventually see in the museum.

Philanthropy has never been on the periphery of museum operations. Rather it has always sat close to the core of how museums develop their collections, their institutional identity, and the art historical canon derived from it. As museums increasingly embrace the public history turn they have adopted curatorial and educational approaches to reinterpret their collections, working towards audience-driven goals such as decolonizing gallery spaces or displaying queer histories. In this vein, institutions would be remiss not to engage with and spark richer conversations with their audiences about the role that private philanthropists have played in influencing the stories that have been, and can be, told in their museums.

72 Luigi Di Gaetano and Isidoro Mazza, ‘Better an Egg Today than a Hen Tomorrow’ On the Implications of Deaccess Policies for Donations to Museums,’ *Journal of Cultural Economics* 41 (2017): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-015-9262-5>; Erich Hatala Matthes, ‘Why Museums Need Their Own Ethics Departments,’ *Apollo Magazine*, 4 September 2017, accessed 29 August 2022, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/why-museums-need-their-own-ethics-departments/>.

73 Viso, “Decolonizing the Art Museum.”

74 Elizabeth Rudrud, “Does Money Matter? Visitor Awareness and Perception of Museum Funding Models” (MA thesis, University of Washington, 2015), unpaginated e-thesis, https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/33431/Rudrud_washington_02500_14784.pdf?sequence=1.