

THE EXPORTABLE MUSEUM

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*How cultural institutions became geopolitical instruments
and what cities risk when prestige replaces purpose*

Culture survives through transmission.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have spent four decades building a collection and, in parallel, watching the institutions meant to contextualise it transform into something their founders would not entirely recognise.

DSLcollection was conceived as a deliberate act — bounded in time, disciplined in scope, rooted in a specific belief about a specific moment in Chinese contemporary art. That deliberateness was not a limitation. It was a method. It taught me that cultural meaning requires constraint, not just ambition; commitment, not just circulation.

The question this paper addresses emerged from a different observation: that the most visible cultural institutions of our era are no longer primarily defined by what they hold, but by where they appear. The museum has become a signal before it becomes an experience. Its name travels further than its scholarship. Its brand precedes its curators.

This is not a polemic against institutional expansion. Some of the most important cultural encounters of the last two decades have taken place in cities that did not inherit prestige but chose to build it. The issue is more precise: what are cities actually acquiring when they import a museum name? And what does an institution actually export when it extends beyond its founding walls?

These are not rhetorical questions. They have governance consequences, financial implications, and — most importantly — consequences for whether art continues to function as a site of meaning or is gradually reassigned as a luxury of urban positioning. The paper that follows moves between diagnosis and condition: it maps what is happening, why, and under what terms it might produce genuine cultural density rather than borrowed prestige.

I write as a collector, not as a policy analyst. But collecting is, among other things, an education in the difference between value and price, between presence and reputation, between what endures and what merely circulates. That distinction is precisely what is now at stake in the global museum economy.

S.L.

The Museum Unmoored

The name opens the door. What is built afterward is the only thing that matters.

A museum used to belong somewhere. That belonging was not incidental. It was constitutive. The institution drew authority from rootedness — from the specific city that built it, the national narrative that legitimised it, the community of scholars and publics that inhabited it over time. Its permanence was the point. Its location was its argument. To visit a great museum was to travel toward something irreplaceable, precisely because it could not be reproduced elsewhere.

That logic has not collapsed. But it has been profoundly complicated. Across the world, leading cultural institutions now operate in registers that have nothing to do with fixed geography. Their names circulate as signals of distinction in cities that did not form them. Their exhibitions are modular, designed for travel. Their expertise is licensed, franchised, or embedded in strategic partnerships with governments, sovereign wealth funds, and real estate developers. Their identities function not only as institutional legacies but as concentrated forms of cultural capital — portable, deployable, and increasingly valued precisely because they can be moved.

What this means, concretely, is that the museum has become an exportable brand. Not in a metaphorical sense, and not as a symptom of cultural decline. But structurally: as an organised system of trust, recognition, and symbolic authority that can be attached to new urban contexts in order to transfer legitimacy from the established to the aspiring. When Abu Dhabi opened a Louvre branch on an artificial island, or when Bilbao transformed itself through a single building bearing a single name, they were not simply hosting art. They were acquiring affiliation. They were purchasing position within a global hierarchy of cultural seriousness that now operates, like finance, through nodes and networks rather than through stable centres.

This paper argues that the exportable museum is neither inherently progressive nor inherently destructive. It is structurally ambiguous. It can generate genuine cultural density in places that were previously peripheral to international discourse. But it can also function as an elegant instrument of symbolic dependency — a borrowed vocabulary spoken fluently but not yet inhabited. A city can appear on the global cultural map without becoming culturally generative. An institution can multiply its presence without deepening its thought.

The decisive distinction — the one this paper attempts to articulate — is between prestige and ecosystem. Prestige is transferable by definition. Ecosystem is not. A museum branch transfers

prestige. It does not automatically transfer the density of relationships, the accumulated critical culture, the professional networks, or the civic habits of trust that make an institution genuinely alive in the life of a city. The name opens the door. What is built afterward is the only thing that matters.

The sections that follow trace the transformation from rooted institution to mobile brand, examine the motivations of importing cities and exporting institutions, analyse the museum-as-platform logic, weigh evidence of genuine benefit against documented risks, map the emerging cultural geography, identify governance conditions for success, and look beyond the prestige economy toward alternative models.

From Rooted Institution to Mobile Cultural Brand

A museum's name carries transferable market value. That distinction, seemingly abstract, has proved worth billions of euros at negotiating tables across three continents.

The transformation of museums from fixed civic institutions into mobile cultural brands is not metaphorical — it is contractual. The most precise case is the Louvre Abu Dhabi, whose intergovernmental agreement, signed on 6 March 2007, stipulated €400 million for the license to use the word 'Louvre' for thirty years. Extended in 2021 to 2047 for an additional €165 million, the deal literalised what had previously been implicit: a museum's name carries transferable market value. The total agreement — encompassing loans from twelve French institutions, curatorial advice, and management services — reached €1.165 billion.

The Guggenheim's franchise model preceded the Louvre's by a decade. Thomas Krens, who became director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in 1988 with an MBA from Yale, was explicit about the corporate analogy: 'A good brand becomes an article of faith among a consumer audience. If you buy a BMW or a Mercedes, you can be pretty much guaranteed a quality experience.' Under Krens, the Foundation expanded to Bilbao (1997), Berlin (1997–2013), Las Vegas (2001–2008), and Abu Dhabi (announced 2006). The model was structurally extractive: host governments bore all construction and operating costs; the Foundation provided its name, collection access, and curatorial framework.

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, announced in 2006 and still incomplete as of 2026 after two decades of construction delays, has come to function less as a future data point than as present evidence: that the franchise model, however generously funded, does not automatically produce institutions. It produces announcements. What converts an announcement into an institution is not capital but commitment — and commitment of a kind that neither sovereign wealth nor licensing agreements can purchase.

Tate offers the contrasting domestic-network model. The 2000 rebrand unified four galleries — Tate Britain, Tate Modern (opened 12 May 2000 in the former Bankside Power Station), Tate Liverpool, and Tate St Ives — under a single identity, distributing one national collection across the UK rather than licensing a name internationally. Its Artist Rooms initiative tours single-artist presentations to over 200 UK partner venues, activating the collection without commodifying the brand.

The Hermitage's Amsterdam outpost demonstrated the existential fragility of single-source dependency. Operating from 2009, it paid approximately €1 per visitor to the State Hermitage Museum in exchange for priority access to St Petersburg's collections. On 3 March 2022 — eight days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine — the museum severed all ties overnight, closing an exhibition of 500 Russian avant-garde works at an estimated cost of \$2 million in lost revenue. By September 2023, the institution had rebranded as H'ART Museum. The case clarified something important: a museum branch that depends on a single foreign collection for its entire identity is not an institution — it is a display case.

What unites these divergent models is a shared structural shift: the museum's institutional identity now behaves more like a brand than before. A brand, in this context, is not merely a logo or a marketing device. It is a condensed form of trust — a name that carries expectations of quality, seriousness, cultural status, and symbolic value. When a city seeks to host a branch of a major museum, what it acquires is not just access to a collection. It acquires affiliation with an already established narrative of excellence and relevance. What the city cedes in exchange — curatorial autonomy, programming control, the right to define its own cultural identity — is rarely made explicit in the press release.

Why Cities Want Museum Brands

What cities acquire when they import a museum name is not simply art. It is narrative elevation.

The motivations are simultaneously economic, symbolic, and geopolitical, and the evidence is most concentrated in the Gulf states. Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island represents the largest cultural-district investment in history: a \$27 billion development encompassing the Louvre Abu Dhabi (Jean Nouvel, opened 2017), the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (Frank Gehry, expected 2026), the Zayed National Museum (Foster + Partners, opening late 2025), and further institutions by Mecanoo, Zaha Hadid Architects, and Tadao Ando. The strategy is explicit: a hydrocarbon state diversifying not just its economy but its identity.

Bilbao remains the canonical case, its returns extraordinary enough to have generated an entire academic subfield. The Basque government committed approximately \$100 million for construction, \$50 million for acquisitions, a \$20 million one-time fee to the Guggenheim Foundation, and approximately \$12 million annually in operating subsidies. By 2024, the museum attracted 1,301,343 visitors — its highest figure — generating €777.6 million in total economic demand, contributing €672.7 million to GDP, producing €105.5 million in tax revenue, and sustaining 14,236 jobs. Cumulative visitors have exceeded 25 million. The initial public investment was reportedly recovered within six years.

Yet the academic critique of the 'Bilbao Effect' is now substantial. Beatriz Plaza's research has repeatedly cautioned that Bilbao's success resulted from 'a happy coincidence of many supportive economic and social factors' — including broader infrastructure investments, transportation improvements, and political stability — rather than from the Guggenheim alone. J. Pedro Lorente observed that measuring the museum's effect by economic returns was 'as perverse as evaluating a hospital by the restaurants nearby.' The Wall Street Journal, surveying the failures that followed Bilbao, suggested renaming the phenomenon the 'Bilbao Anomaly.'

Qatar has pursued a parallel but distinct strategy. Qatar Museums, led by Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani — reported by Bloomberg to operate an annual acquisition budget of approximately \$1 billion — has built an indigenous institutional ecosystem rather than importing franchise brands. The Museum of Islamic Art (I.M. Pei, 2008), National Museum of Qatar (Jean Nouvel, 2019), and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art anchor the strategy. Art Basel Qatar launched in February 2026, positioning Doha as a new art market node.

Shanghai's West Bund corridor — a 940-hectare former industrial zone with \$3 billion in state investment — offers the Chinese model. The Centre Pompidou × West Bund Museum Project operates on renewable five-year contracts, with West Bund Group paying approximately €4.15 million annually covering all construction and operating costs. The arrangement carries a documented compromise: all art requires pre-approval by Chinese authorities. Pompidou president Serge Lasvignes acknowledged that 'Chinese rules are obviously different to those in Europe.' The candour was unusual; the arrangement is not.

The Centre Pompidou's Shanghai arrangement introduces a dimension of cost that the financial terms do not capture. The Pompidou was conceived as an act of deliberate institutional provocation: a publicly funded institution explicitly designed to democratise access to modern and contemporary art, to refuse the museum's traditional role as guardian of cultural hierarchy. Its founding logic was anti-authoritarian. Its West Bund arrangement — in which all exhibited works require pre-approval by Chinese authorities — inverts that logic structurally. An institution founded to resist state control has become, in this configuration, structurally complicit in it. Lasvignes's candour does not resolve the contradiction. It merely makes it legible.

China's 1.49 billion museum visits in 2024 deserve more than a data point. They represent a reorganisation of cultural gravity that the franchise model is not designed to accommodate. The Western exportable museum is premised on the assumption that cultural prestige flows from established centres toward aspiring peripheries. China's figures — and the broader proliferation of institutional capacity across Asia, the Gulf, and sub-Saharan Africa — suggest that the directional premise is increasingly incorrect. The question for institutions expanding into these regions is no longer whether they can bring culture to an underserved public. It is whether they can remain intellectually credible to publics whose cultural traditions are not deficits to be addressed but inheritances to be negotiated with.

What cities are acquiring when they import a museum name is not simply art. It is narrative elevation: the signal to investors, tourists, curators, students, and elites that a city is not peripheral — that it belongs to the conversation, that it has become visible on the cultural map through someone else's long-accumulated credibility. What that transaction costs in terms of cultural self-determination is rarely enumerated in the feasibility study.

Why Museums Themselves Expand

International partnerships are not an ambition — they are a survival mechanism.

The financial pressures are structural and differ sharply by national funding model. Tate received a government grant-in-aid of just £50.8 million in 2023–24 — down from £54.2 million the prior year — raising 70% of its income from non-government sources, yet posted an £8.7 million deficit with reserves dropping to £10.9 million. UK core government funding for arts organisations fell 18% between 2010 and 2023; DCMS spending per person fell by nearly one-third in real terms over the same period. Against this backdrop, international partnerships are not an ambition — they are a survival mechanism.

COVID-19 intensified these pressures catastrophically. Across the US museum sector, operating income fell by an average of 40%, more than half of institutions furloughed or laid off staff, and the Metropolitan Museum forecast a \$100 million shortfall. Director Glenn Lowry was unusually candid: 'We're going to survive because we have a \$1.2 billion endowment. Smaller institutions may not.' One-third of US museums feared permanent closure. The lesson was not subtle: scale and international revenue diversification had become existential buffers, not strategic luxuries.

The Guggenheim Foundation under Krens was candid about the commercial rationale. Foundation endowment grew from \$20 million to \$118 million and New York attendance doubled to 900,000 — but the international franchise remained the primary revenue strategy. Yet the model's fragility was equally demonstrated: the Guggenheim Las Vegas averaged only 666 daily visitors against a break-even threshold of 3,000–4,000, closing after fifteen months. The organisation's operating budget collapsed from approximately \$48 million to \$24 million between 2001 and 2003.

Curatorial ambition can also be sincere. Some institutions genuinely understand expansion as mission extension. Centre Pompidou-Metz (Shigeru Ban, opened May 2010) drew 800,000 visitors in its first year and has since exceeded five million cumulative. V&A; Dundee (Kengo Kuma,

opened September 2018) reached 500,000 visitors in its first six months, generating £304 million for the Scottish economy and increasing tourism to Dundee by over 50%. These are genuine cultural outcomes, not mere brand amplification.

It would be a mistake to read institutional expansion primarily as cynicism. Many of the curators and directors who lead international partnerships are genuinely committed to mission extension — to bringing works to publics that would otherwise never encounter them, to building local professional capacity, to demonstrating that cultural seriousness is not the exclusive property of a handful of Western capitals. The director who believes she is democratising access is not wrong about her intention. She is often wrong, or at least incomplete, about the structural conditions in which that intention operates.

The divergence between stated values and operational logic rarely announces itself. It accumulates. The institution that commits, in its founding partnership documents, to building local curatorial capacity may find, a decade later, that the urgency of funding has consistently prioritised short-term revenue over long-term capability transfer. The institution that claims to be introducing international standards may find that 'standards' has functioned as a synonym for its own aesthetic preferences. The gap between mission and mechanism is not the result of bad faith. It is the result of structural incentives that no amount of good faith can overcome without governance architecture specifically designed to counteract them.

The problem begins when mobility is confused with universality, or when brand expansion outruns institutional reflection. As Philippe de Montebello, Met director for thirty-one years, said of the Guggenheim franchise: 'Please! They are after the money.' The critique is too blunt to be entirely fair, but it identifies something real: that the pressure to remain relevant in a globalised environment pushes institutions toward forms of mobility that resemble platform behaviour — distributed presence, repeated visibility, network effects — without the institutional depth those ambitions require.

The Museum as Platform

A platform museum must be judged by the architecture of its relationships, not only by the quality of its collection.

One of the clearest ways to understand the current transformation is to say that the museum is becoming a platform. A platform is not simply a site or a service. It is an organised system that connects multiple actors, enables repeated interactions, and gains value through networked participation. Applied to museums, this means institutions increasingly function as hubs through which objects, narratives, expertise, audiences, partners, and cities are linked — and through which institutional authority is as much exercised remotely as it is concentrated in a single building.

The Metropolitan Museum's Open Access initiative (launched 7 February 2017) released 375,000 CC0 images, producing a 385% increase in Met collection visibility on Wikipedia within its first year. The Met acknowledged what this implied: 'In an age of Open Access, The Met's website is one platform among many for mission fulfilment.' More people now encounter the Met collection through Wikipedia than through metmuseum.org. The museum's authority is distributed, not diminished.

Bloomberg Connects, launched in November 2019 and now providing free digital guides for 1,250 cultural spaces across twenty-four countries in forty languages, demonstrates how platform logic reshapes the museum ecosystem. A single philanthropic platform now mediates the visitor experience of more than a thousand institutions simultaneously. TeamLab Borderless, drawing 2.3 million visitors to its Tokyo incarnation in its inaugural year — a Guinness World Record — has since expanded to Osaka, Macau, Beijing, Singapore, Jeddah, and forthcoming sites in Abu Dhabi, Hamburg, and Utrecht: an immersive-art institution that is effectively pure platform from inception.

Artificial intelligence introduces a further complication that the platform museum has not yet adequately addressed. When a visitor's encounter with a work is mediated by an algorithmic recommendation engine — curating the path through the gallery, surfacing related works, personalising the interpretive layer — the question of whether the museum is organising an encounter or managing attention becomes urgent. A genuinely transformative museum experience

has always involved a degree of productive disorientation: the work that stops you, that does not fit your existing framework, that you did not know you needed to see. Algorithmic mediation is optimised for engagement, not for disorientation. The platform museum that deploys AI to maximise visitor satisfaction may be systematically eliminating the conditions that make art meaningful.

When the museum becomes a platform, its value lies not only in what it contains but in what it connects. Is it creating reciprocal exchanges or one-way transfers of prestige? Is it strengthening local ecosystems or subordinating them? Is it producing durable knowledge or merely repeated visibility? These questions do not have simple answers, but the fact that they are now the right questions marks how far the institution has travelled from its founding logic.

The Promise: What Exportable Museums Can Achieve

At their best, such museums demonstrate that imported prestige can be transformed into locally rooted meaning.

Despite the risks, the internationalisation of museums can produce real and lasting benefits when carefully designed. The strongest evidence comes from Bilbao, where average expenditure per visitor reached €243, cumulative visitors have exceeded 25 million, and the city won the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize in 2010. A Harvard Business School case study concluded that the museum was 'the tip of a much deeper iceberg' of simultaneous investments in infrastructure, transportation, and urban planning. Bilbao Ria 2000 — the urban development agency that coordinated the broader transformation — was as important as the Gehry building.

Louvre Abu Dhabi has demonstrated genuine educational outcomes. In 2024, a record 64,223 student and teacher visits (a 41% increase from 2023) were recorded alongside 357,117 young visitors to the Children's Museum. The institution runs 'Schools Take Over the Museum' and 'University Take Over the Museum' programmes, launched a grants and fellowships programme in 2024, and maintains a research partnership with the J. Paul Getty Museum and 47 other institutions. Emirati curatorial staff have been integrated into exhibition teams with international mentorship. By 2024, the museum attracted 1.4 million visitors annually (84% international), making it the most visited museum in the Arab world.

The museum's permanent collection is organised chronologically across civilisations, deliberately juxtaposing Eastern, Western, African, and Asian works to show civilisational connections rather than segregating by national school. Director Manuel Rabaté has described the museum as 'a crossroads of civilisations, a majlis of the mind: a place of assembly for ideas as well as people.' This is a genuinely different curatorial proposition — one that could not have been conceived

within any single European national museum tradition.

V&A; Dundee illustrates what happens when an institution is conceived from the outset as an ecosystem catalyst rather than a prestige import. Through its 'Living Room for the City' project, communities were engaged before the museum opened. Its learning programme has since reached 270,000 people. Its economic impact of £304 million for Scotland was achieved on a fraction of the Saadiyat budget. The museum must become a catalyst, not a monument to borrowed reputation. The distinction is not architectural. It is conceptual, and it must be settled before the first stone is laid.

The Risks: Homogenisation, Fragility, Displacement

A museum built on an island called 'happiness' while tolerating forced labour among its construction workers has resolved nothing about the meaning of culture.

The strongest critique of exportable museum brands is not that they exist, but that they may flatten cultural life under the sign of prestige. The term 'McGuggenheim' emerged in the 1990s to describe what Michael Sorkin called 'the cultural equivalent of Starbucks.' The Guggenheim Helsinki rejection is the most documented case of democratic resistance. The financial terms proved unacceptable: Helsinki would pay up to €80 million for construction, €15 million to a supporting foundation, and underwrite a €35 million construction loan, with annual running costs of €14.4 million far exceeding projected admissions revenue of €4.5 million. On 30 November 2016, the Helsinki City Council voted 53 to 32 against. Surveys showed 75% of Helsinki citizens opposed the project.

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi labour controversy represents the deepest ethical challenge to the exportable-museum model. The Gulf Labor Coalition gathered over 2,400 signatories to an initial petition. Human Rights Watch documented in its 2009 report 'The Island of Happiness' that all 94 workers interviewed had paid \$1,800–\$4,100 in recruitment fees, worked twelve-hour days in 100°F heat, and faced passport confiscation and deportation threats. A 2015 follow-up found government-paid monitors documenting that 86% of workers still carried recruitment debts. On 13 April 2016, the Guggenheim Board unilaterally severed negotiations with the Coalition.

That severance clarifies something the prestige economy ordinarily keeps implicit: when brand equity and ethical accountability conflict, the franchise model structurally prioritises the former. The Guggenheim Board's decision was not an aberration. It was the franchise mechanism operating as designed. The host city bears the legal exposure; the institution retains the brand equity; the workers bear the physical cost. That distribution of risk is not incidental to the model. It is the model.

Cultural homogenisation is the subject of a robust critical literature. Alain Quemin's empirical research has demonstrated persistent structural inequalities: despite globalisation discourse, the art world retains 'a clearly defined centre comprising a small number of Western countries, among which the US and Germany are pre-eminent, and a vast periphery.' The Bilbao deal itself specified that 'all responsibility for aesthetic decisions, including the architecture, collection and programming' lay with New York.

Cultural homogenisation operates at a level deeper than programming or aesthetics. What the imported institution exports, alongside its name and collection, is a set of epistemological conventions that it rarely identifies as conventions: the white cube as neutral display environment; the autonomous artwork as the primary unit of cultural meaning; the individual artist as the figure through which creativity is understood and attributed; the chronological Western-canon narrative as the default framework for organising cultural time. These are not universal principles. They are historically specific conventions that emerged in particular European and North American contexts and were generalised through institutional power. The exported museum does not merely bring art. It brings a theory of what art is, how it is to be encountered, and whose creativity counts as art-making.

What the imported institution structurally cannot accommodate — without fundamental reorganisation — are the traditions that operate through different epistemological conventions: the South Asian *rasa* tradition, in which aesthetic experience is understood as a collective emotional resonance rather than an individual encounter with an autonomous object; the African communal heritage model, in which cultural objects derive meaning from their relational position within living communities rather than their isolation in display environments; the East Asian *literati* tradition, in which cultural production is inseparable from social practice, scholarly formation, and the non-market transmission of sensibility. These traditions are not exotic alternatives to be represented within the white cube. They are epistemological systems that the white cube cannot, by design, adequately host.

The gravitational distortion produced by imported prestige is perhaps most visible in the local artist market. When a major international institution arrives in a city, it reorganises the local attention economy: curators, collectors, and critics reorient toward the institution's programming logic and away from the ecosystem that preceded it. The Guggenheim Bilbao's founding deal — which specified that all aesthetic decisions including programming lay with New York — created precisely this distortion. The Basque Artists Program, introduced subsequently to ensure some proportion of local artistic representation, was not an expression of the model's values. It was a correction of its structural bias, introduced under civic pressure. The correction should have been the inception.

Financial fragility ultimately confirmed what the critics had argued conceptually. Guggenheim SoHo closed in 2002, Las Vegas in 2003, Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin in 2013, Hermitage Amsterdam in 2022. Each closure demonstrated a different version of the same structural flaw: the franchise model concentrates risk in the host and concentrates reward in the franchisor. The host city bears construction costs, operating deficits, and reputational exposure; the institution retains its brand equity regardless of outcome.

A New Cultural Geography

The question is no longer who has the greatest collection. It is who belongs to which network, under what terms, and at what cost to the ecosystems they enter.

Cultural authority has shifted from a historically Western-centric, centre-periphery model to an increasingly distributed network. The older model is not dead — Alain Quemin's empirical research continues to document a 'clearly defined centre comprising a small number of Western countries' and a 'vast periphery' — but the mechanisms through which that authority is exercised have changed fundamentally. What matters now is not only intrinsic quality, but who is connected to whom, through what structures, and under what terms.

Biennials have proliferated from approximately 30 in 1990 to over 300 officially registered today. The Venice Biennale attracted 700,000 visitors at its 2024 edition curated by Adriano Pedrosa — the first Latin American curator in the event's history. The Sharjah Biennial, rebooted in 2003 under Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi — ranked first on ArtReview's Power 100 in 2024 — has become a model for non-Western institutional investment. Art Basel & UBS estimates global art market sales at \$57.5 billion in 2024 (down 12% from 2023), with art fair sales accounting for 31% of dealer revenue.

Museum attendance rankings for 2024 show the Louvre at 8.7 million, Vatican Museums at 6.8 million, British Museum at 6.4 million, the Met at 5.7 million, and Tate Modern at 4.6 million. Behind those figures lies a more radical data point: China recorded 1.49 billion museum visits in 2024. That number does not merely dwarf the Western museum economy — it suggests that the centre of gravity of global cultural participation has already moved, irrespective of where institutional prestige is still officially conferred.

The ArtReview Power 100 — compiled since 2002 — reveals the shifting geography of influence. The 2025 first position went to Ibrahim Mahama (Ghana) — the first African artist to top the list, known for community-focused art institutions in Tamale, influence earned through institution-building rather than market performance. Cultural capital is now measured through circulation, association, and network position.

Conditions for Success

No exported museum appears to be fully financially self-sustaining without either government subsidy or sovereign wealth.

Comparative governance analysis reveals four distinct models. The Louvre Abu Dhabi intergovernmental agreement is the most comprehensive and costly (€1.165 billion over 40+ years), involving a national museum owned by the UAE and managed through a bi-national agency. The Guggenheim Bilbao created a private foundation governed jointly by the Basque Government, the Provincial Council of Biscay, and the Guggenheim Foundation, with the board chaired by the President of the Basque Country. The Centre Pompidou's 'pop-up' model is lighter and more flexible. V&A; Dundee operates as an independent charitable company, separate from the broader V&A; family, with Scottish Government core funding and community co-design processes from inception.

AEA Consulting's analysis of the Guggenheim Bilbao identifies five key success factors: integration into a wider investment strategy beyond culture; ongoing government revenue support with no 'break-even' fantasy; critical mass of museum-goers within the catchment area; first-mover advantage; and strong, unified political culture. The assessment concludes that these conditions 'are not easily met' and are 'unmet in most, if not all, of the Guggenheim's subsequent candidate sites.' No exported museum appears to be fully financially self-sustaining without either government subsidy or sovereign wealth.

The institutions that have refused to export are as analytically significant as those that have. The Frick Collection, the Rijksmuseum, and — most instructively — the Barnes Foundation represent institutions whose founding mandates explicitly constrained or prohibited branch expansion. The Barnes case is the sharpest. Albert C. Barnes's indenture of trust, drafted to prevent exactly the kind of institutional mobility that would divorce the collection from its pedagogical context, was nonetheless overridden through a decade of legal, financial, and political pressure, culminating in the 2012 move of the collection from Merion to Philadelphia's Museum District. The case demonstrates that even legally fortified anti-expansion mandates are not immune to the financial

gravity of the prestige economy. The question is not only whether institutions choose to expand, but whether the structural conditions of the cultural economy leave genuine non-expansion as a viable choice.

A more analytically precise concept than 'investment' for the host city's position is cultural debt. The importing city does not merely spend on a museum. It incurs obligations — financial, reputational, and curatorial — that extend beyond the initial agreement and compound over time. The governance benchmark that follows from this concept is direct: at what point does the imported institution begin generating cultural outputs that would have been impossible without it, and that could not have been generated by an equivalent investment in indigenous institutional capacity? If that question cannot be answered affirmatively within a defined period — say, fifteen years — the arrangement has produced dependency, not development.

Comparative analysis of failed or underperforming exported museum projects reveals five recurring structural patterns. The first is the prestige announcement without ecosystem preparation: an institution that opens with a superstar architect and a global press conference but without a professional development programme, a community co-design process, or a realistic operating model. The second is single-source dependency, in which the branch's entire programme is contingent on one external collection or one external institution, producing the fragility demonstrated by Hermitage Amsterdam. The third is the phantom audience: the assumption of visitor numbers that do not materialise because the cultural infrastructure needed to support them does not exist. The fourth is governance asymmetry, in which all risk is borne by the host and all brand equity retained by the exporter, producing the incentive misalignment that characterised the Guggenheim franchise model. The fifth, and perhaps most insidious, is local ecosystem displacement, in which the imported institution attracts the resources — funding, curatorial talent, media attention, collector interest — that had previously sustained indigenous institutions, producing a net negative for the cultural ecology it claimed to enrich.

Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* (2010) defines four models of community integration: contributory, collaborative, co-creative, and hosted. Simon's implementation at the Museum of Art & History in Santa Cruz produced a 100% increase in attendance and a 30% increase in membership. V&A; Dundee's 'Living Room for the City' project, engaging communities pre-opening, exemplifies the co-creative model. Its learning programme has since reached 270,000 people — evidence that participatory design is not merely good governance but good economics.

What the governance literature consistently shows is that the projects most likely to fail are those designed to announce ambition rather than build capacity. The museum that opens with a press conference and a superstar architect but without a professional development programme, a community co-design process, a realistic operating model, or a clear understanding of whose cultural ecosystem it serves will not endure. Prestige initiates the conversation. Only ecosystem

sustains it.

Beyond Prestige

The score is written not to be preserved but to be played — by those who understand why the constraints exist.

The distinction between 'ecosystem' and 'trophy' approaches can be operationalised through concrete cases. Trophy projects prioritise prestige over integration: the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (two decades of delays, documented labour exploitation, no organic local art ecosystem preceding the project).

The Ordos Art Museum in Inner Mongolia warrants clarification. The building — completed in Kangbashi in 2011 — was not a franchise import but an indigenous commission, conceived by Ai Weiwei and Herzog & de Meuron. Its failure was not the failure of the exportable museum model but of speculative urbanism: a cultural institution commissioned as infrastructure for a city that was itself speculative, built for a population that never arrived. The distinction matters. It demonstrates that the risks of misaligning cultural institutions with urban development are not limited to imported prestige but extend to any institution conceived as an instrument of urban aspiration rather than as a response to existing cultural life.

Ecosystem institutions include Te Papa Tongarewa (New Zealand, 1998), where Māori communities participate in governance and curation; and the District Six Museum in Cape Town (opened 1994), conceived by former residents documenting the forced removal of 60,000 people during apartheid.

DSLcollection offers a deliberately contrary model — not as a template but as a demonstration of what deliberate constraint can achieve. A collection bounded in time (1997–2012), disciplined in scope (Chinese contemporary art at a specific moment of cultural opening), and resistant to the growth logic that governs both the market and the institution. Its value lies not in its scale but in its specificity: the thesis embedded in its choices, the period it documents, the judgment it exercises through exclusion as much as through acquisition. This is not anti-institutional; it is a different theory of what an institution is for. The museum need not be exportable to be significant. The collection need not circulate to be alive.

The critical-theory tradition offers an essential diagnostic vocabulary for these dynamics, most useful when deployed as analysis rather than inventory. Tony Bennett's theorisation of the 'exhibitionary complex' explains why the museum form was always already political. Hans Haacke's declaration that museums belong to 'the consciousness industry' and Sharon Zukin's tracing of 'a relentless drive for expansion by art museums' through urban space extend that critique into the financialised present. James Clifford's concept of the museum as 'contact zone' reframes what is at stake: not a neutral display of cultural heritage, but an ongoing, power-charged exchange that must be actively shaped toward reciprocity or it will default to dependency.

Emerging models suggest alternatives to both the trophy and the traditional form. Eco-museums replace the equation 'Museum = building + collections + visitors' with 'Ecomuseum = territory + heritage + community,' making rootedness the institutional method rather than the institutional constraint. M+ Hong Kong (opened November 2021), Asia's first global museum of contemporary visual culture, positions itself as actively decentring Western narratives. Zeitz MOCAA (Cape Town, 2017), the largest museum of contemporary African art globally, operated with programmes that did not merely represent African art within a Western institutional frame but challenged the frame itself.

The Sarr-Savoy Report documented over 90,000 sub-Saharan African objects in French public collections and called for permanent restitution. Its most significant methodological contribution was not the inventory — though the inventory was essential — but the bilateral methodology it proposed: not restitution as a one-way return, but as a basis for ongoing relationship. Objects would return; relationships of scholarly exchange, exhibition partnership, and institutional accompaniment would follow. The model implies that the exportable museum's most durable contribution is not the branch it opens but the relationship it cultivates — and that relationship must be genuinely bilateral, shaped by the receiving institution with the same authority as the exporting one.

Climate urgency, decolonisation, and artificial intelligence converge in a single question that the exportable museum has not yet adequately answered: whose authority legitimises our presence? The Gallery Climate Coalition's commitment to 50% CO₂ reduction by 2030 implies that the carbon cost of transporting collections and staff across continents is no longer ethically neutral. The decolonisation movement implies that the epistemological conventions the institution exports are not universal and must be negotiated rather than assumed. Artificial intelligence implies that the data extracted from visitor behaviour — the most intimate record of how people encounter art — is a resource whose governance requires consent, not merely privacy compliance. Together, these forces are restructuring the cost of institutional mobility in ways that make the prestige economy's calculus — arrive, announce, expand — increasingly untenable.

Prestige and Its Discontents

Franchises degrade without reinvestment. Ecosystems compound.

Museums are now exportable brands. That is no longer a prediction or a provocation. It is a structural condition of the cultural economy we inhabit. Institutions that once derived their authority entirely from place now derive it also — and increasingly — from network position: from the frequency and quality of their connections, the breadth of their circulation, and the cumulative weight of their name in global systems of prestige. Cities, in turn, have learned to read cultural affiliation as a form of urban capital, as legible to investors and political elites as infrastructure or credit ratings.

The exportable museum concentrates opportunity in the hands of institutions already dominant. It creates escalation dynamics in which cities compete through borrowed prestige rather than indigenous confidence. It risks turning cultural development into a form of luxury signalling — visible, photogenic, strategically narrated, and ultimately shallow if institutional mobility is not matched by the slower, harder work of ecosystem building.

A museum that expands internationally without expanding intellectually — that multiplies presence without multiplying thought — eventually discovers that its brand has travelled further than its authority. The name remains. The trust hollows. What was projected as vitality reveals itself as scale without substance.

The antidote is not contraction. It is discipline. The exchange must be genuinely bilateral: the institution shapes the place; the place shapes the institution. Without that dynamic, what is called partnership is, in practice, franchise. And franchise, however elegantly structured, is not culture. It is the management of cultural association. Franchises degrade without reinvestment. Ecosystems compound. Cities that acquire cultural affiliation without building cultural infrastructure will find, a decade later, that the prestige has not accumulated — it has merely circulated.

Ultimately, what is at stake is the difference between being valuable and being visible. Visibility is comparative and external. Value is cumulative and internal. Visibility can be acquired through affiliation. Value can only be built through time, care, and the willingness to be transformed by the publics one genuinely serves.

*Are we deepening the cultural life of this place,
or are we decorating its ambition?*

That question is not the end of strategy. It is the beginning of the only strategy that endures.

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Chinese Contemporary Art 1997–2012

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