WHITE PAPER — 2026

The Museum of the 21st Century

Scale, Coherence, and the Architecture of Transmission

Sylvain Lévy

Co-founder, DSLcollection

Culture survives through transmission.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Museum models worldwide face a decisive moment. Traditional museums — from regional art centers to grand national institutions — confront mounting pressures: financial survival, evolving audience expectations, and rapid technological change. Meanwhile, digital-native collections propose leaner, more decentralized approaches to curation and public engagement. This white paper examines both models not as competitors but as complementary laboratories, each testing different answers to the same question: what makes a cultural institution viable over decades, not just visible for a season?

Drawing on nearly two decades of experimentation with DSLCollection as a private, digital-first collection of contemporary Chinese art, and informed by recent crises at institutions as varied as Saks Fifth Avenue and the Louvre, this document argues that the central challenge is not technological adoption or audience growth, but coherence at scale. When institutions expand beyond the point where mission, labor, and accountability can still align, visibility becomes a liability rather than protection.

The white paper proposes **polyphonic architecture** — a governance framework that allows multiple voices, formats, and publics to coexist within a single institutional mission — as a practical response to fragmentation, and examines how 21st-century collections must shift from accumulation to transmission: building temporal bridges that renew meaning rather than merely preserve objects.

SEVEN SECTIONS

I. Institutional crisis and the limits of scale

II. Financial and governance models

III. Audience fragmentation and the challenge of pluralism

IV. Digital infrastructure as cultural responsibility

V. The collector's evolving role

VI. Polyphonic architecture as operational framework

VII. Practical implications for museum leadership

I.

Introduction: When Scale Stops Protecting Institutions

Saks Fifth Avenue and the Louvre seem to inhabit different worlds. One sells luxury; the other safeguards culture. One is a private enterprise; the other a public monument. Yet both are facing the same test — not of relevance, but of coherence. Their problem is not that no one comes, but that the forms of attention they attract no longer translate automatically into institutional health.

Both remain powerful symbols. Saks still carries the aura of retail authority; the Louvre still embodies cultural centrality. Foot traffic flows, headlines accumulate, partnerships multiply. But inside, the mechanisms that once translated visibility into institutional health have begun to break down. At Saks, store closures, layoffs, and the abrupt termination of longtime employees reveal that brand recognition no longer guarantees operational stability. At the Louvre, wildcat strikes by attendants and security staff in 2025 exposed a fault line: the institution had scaled to nearly ten million visitors annually, yet the people responsible for making those visits possible — ticket agents, guards, educators — could no longer recognise their own labor in the museum's public image.

> *Scale, past a certain threshold, stops being a form of protection and becomes a source of incoherence. When institutions expand faster than governance, mission, and accountability can follow, they lose the ability to integrate feedback, make decisions, or sustain the conditions of care that made them valuable in the first place.*

For museum directors, this presents an urgent question. The standard responses to financial pressure — diversify revenue, expand digital reach, grow the audience, multiply partnerships — assume that more is better. But what if the problem is not insufficient scale, but *unmanageable* scale? What if the path forward requires not growing larger, but choosing more carefully what to do, for whom, and at what pace?

This white paper examines that question through two contrasting models: traditional museums with physical buildings, large staffs, and decades of institutional memory; and DSLCollection, a private, digital-first collection of contemporary Chinese art operating since 2005 with no permanent building, no ticketed visitors, and a governance structure designed for maximum flexibility. The goal is not to prescribe one model over the other, but to clarify the trade-offs each makes, the pressures each faces, and the conditions under which hybrid forms — combining the best of both — might emerge.

II.

Financial Viability and the Problem of Dependence

Museum finance is a map of vulnerability. Every revenue stream carries a dependency; every dependency narrows the margin for autonomous decision-making. Traditional museums, especially in North America and Europe, rely on a complex and fragile mix: public subsidies, private donations, corporate sponsorships, membership fees, ticketing, retail, and — increasingly — hospitality ventures such as cafés, event rentals, and branded merchandise.

Public funding, where it exists, provides baseline stability but exposes institutions to political cycles, budget cuts, and shifting priorities. Private philanthropy offers flexibility but ties programming to donor preferences, board composition, and the reputational calculus of wealthy individuals. Corporate sponsorships bring capital but risk instrumentalising exhibitions as brand experiences. Ticketing generates predictable income but locks museums into tourism economies, making them vulnerable to external shocks and pressuring them to prioritise blockbuster exhibitions over curatorial risk or research depth.

The cumulative effect is mission drift. Museums built to serve local communities find themselves designing for international tourists. Institutions founded to take curatorial risks adopt risk-averse programming to protect revenue. Directors spend more time managing donor relations, corporate partnerships, and board expectations than shaping intellectual direction. The building — once the institution's greatest asset — becomes its greatest liability: high fixed costs for maintenance, security, climate control, and insurance mean that revenue shortfalls cannot be absorbed by temporary adjustments. The museum must keep the doors open, the lights on, the guards paid, regardless of whether programming aligns with mission.

By contrast, DSLCollection operates on a single-patron funding model: the collection is privately funded by its founders, with no ticketing, no membership fees, no sponsorships, and no public subsidies. This eliminates revenue diversification but also eliminates the governance fragmentation that comes with it. Decisions can be made quickly, without board approval, donor consultation, or public justification. Programming is not constrained by audience size, ticket sales, or sponsor expectations. Curatorial experiments — such as launching a virtual museum in Second Life in 2007, commissioning a VR experience in 2016, or building *The Forgetter*, an AI-driven erasure platform for digital collections in 2021 — can be undertaken without needing to demonstrate immediate return on investment or broad public appeal.

> *Financial simplicity enables intellectual complexity. When an institution does not need to justify every decision to multiple stakeholders, it can afford to take longer views, pursue more speculative projects, and hold positions that are temporarily unpopular.*

The trade-off is scalability. A single-patron model cannot support the staffing, infrastructure, or public programming of a major museum. It cannot serve mass audiences, cannot build permanent collections in the traditional sense, and cannot provide the employment stability or professional pathways that large institutions offer. It is, by design, a laboratory rather than a monument — a space for testing ideas that traditional museums may lack the structural flexibility to attempt.

For traditional museums, the question is not whether to abandon diversified funding — that is neither possible nor desirable — but whether financial complexity can be managed without surrendering institutional coherence. This requires governance structures capable of mediating between competing demands; boards that understand the difference between fiscal oversight and curatorial direction; development teams that can say no to partnerships that undermine mission; and leadership willing to accept smaller budgets, slower growth, or reduced visibility in exchange for greater alignment between what the institution says it does and what it actually does.

The alternative is not collapse, but hollowing out: institutions that remain visibly operational but whose internal capacity for critical thought, long-term planning, and cultural risk has been systematically eroded by the need to satisfy too many masters at once.

III.

Governance, Accountability, and the Speed of Decision-Making

Governance is where mission either survives or dies. A museum can have the most sophisticated curatorial vision, the most innovative programming, and the most engaged audience, but if its governance structure cannot translate vision into decision, sustain decisions over time, or integrate feedback without paralysis, the institution will drift — slowly at first, then irreversibly.

Traditional museum governance is designed for stability and legitimacy, not speed. Boards of trustees, often composed of donors, civic leaders, and prominent collectors, provide financial oversight, legal accountability, and public credibility. Decisions on major acquisitions, capital projects, senior hires, and strategic direction are deliberated collectively, reviewed by committees, and subject to fiduciary and reputational scrutiny. This structure protects institutions from arbitrary or self-interested leadership, ensures community representation, and builds confidence among funders, regulators, and the public.

But it also introduces structural lag. By the time a proposal has moved through curatorial staff, executive leadership, board committees, legal review, and donor consultation, the conditions that made the proposal urgent or relevant may have shifted. Emerging artists become established; pressing social issues lose media attention; technological platforms evolve or disappear. Museums built for deliberation struggle to respond to moments that require decisiveness.

> *The structural contrast clarifies the trade-off: legitimacy vs. agility. Traditional museums gain legitimacy through collective governance but lose agility. Digital-native collections gain agility through simplified governance but must constantly earn legitimacy through demonstrated expertise, curatorial rigour, and community trust.*

For museum directors navigating this tension, the question is not whether to eliminate boards — boards are essential for fiduciary oversight, community accountability, and long-term stability — but whether governance structures can be redesigned to allow selective agility within a framework of broad accountability. This might mean creating small, empowered decision-making units for digital experiments, temporary exhibitions, or artist collaborations, while reserving board-level deliberation for acquisitions, capital projects, and strategic direction. It might mean establishing innovation budgets that directors can deploy without full board approval, provided they report outcomes transparently.

The goal is not to weaken accountability, but to match governance speed to decision type. Some decisions benefit from deliberation; others are killed by it. Institutions that cannot tell the difference will find themselves perpetually reactive, responding to changes only after they are no longer relevant.

IV.

Audience Fragmentation and the Challenge of Pluralism

Museums have never served a single public, but the fiction of "the general public" once allowed institutions to design programming, interpretive materials, and spatial experiences as if audiences were relatively homogeneous. That fiction is no longer sustainable.

Today's museum audiences are not just diverse — they are incompatible. Scholars expect deep archival access, rigorous interpretation, and opportunities for research collaboration. Casual visitors expect accessibility, visual engagement, and emotional resonance. Families with children expect interactivity, safety, and educational clarity. International tourists expect iconic objects, multilingual labels, and efficient navigation. Local communities expect representation, programming relevance, and participatory decision-making. Digital audiences expect high-resolution images, open access, and shareable content. Donors and sponsors expect visibility, alignment with brand values, and measurable impact.

Each of these audiences has legitimate expectations, but satisfying all of them simultaneously is impossible. A gallery optimised for contemplative viewing frustrates families seeking interactive engagement. An exhibition designed for scholarly depth alienates casual visitors. A blockbuster exhibition that drives tourism revenue disappoints local audiences seeking programming that reflects their own communities. A social media strategy that prioritises viral reach undermines the institution's credibility with scholars and serious collectors.

> *True inclusivity does not mean designing every experience for every audience. It means ensuring that every audience has access to experiences designed specifically for them — even if those experiences are different, happen at different times, or take different formats.*

DSLCollection approaches audience fragmentation differently: by accepting that not every project serves every audience. Some initiatives — such as publishing collection data online — serve researchers and curators. Others — such as commissioning VR experiences — serve digitally native audiences interested in experimental formats. Still others — such as loaning works to major exhibitions — serve museum-going publics who expect physical encounters with art. The collection does not attempt to serve all these audiences at once, in the same space, with the same experience.

This is where polyphonic architecture becomes essential. Rather than seeking a single institutional voice that speaks to all audiences, museums must develop the capacity to sustain multiple voices, each addressing different publics, within a coherent institutional mission. The mission remains singular — to collect, preserve, interpret, and transmit cultural knowledge — but the voices, formats, and temporalities through which that mission is enacted are plural.

Polyphonic architecture is not relativism. It does not mean abandoning curatorial authority or institutional expertise. It means recognising that authority and expertise take different forms when addressing different publics, and that an institution capable of modulating voice, depth, and format without losing coherence is stronger, not weaker, than one that insists on uniformity.

V.

Digital Infrastructure as Cultural Responsibility

In the ecosystem of generative AI, LinkedIn has quietly become one of the most-cited sources — just behind Reddit, ahead of Wikipedia, media outlets, and institutional archives. For those who still imagine LinkedIn as a recruiting platform or a space for professional networking, this is disorienting, but for anyone watching how knowledge is being reorganised in real time, it is entirely predictable.

AI systems do not retrieve facts; they retrieve patterns of language. When a model is asked a question, it generates an answer by synthesising fragments from the corpus it was trained on — not by looking up authoritative sources, but by identifying which words, phrases, and structures most frequently appear together in similar contexts. Platforms like LinkedIn, with hundreds of millions of users producing vast volumes of accessible and algorithmically optimised text, become a reference layer not because they are more accurate than museums, but because they are more voluminous, more current, and structurally easier for AI to parse.

> *Museums that publish collection data, curatorial essays, and research findings online make their knowledge more accessible and citable — but they also cede control over how that knowledge is used, quoted, or recontextualised. The alternative is to risk becoming invisible in the new reference layer, arriving in the conversation only after AI has already supplied an answer from more accessible sources.*

DSLCollection has approached this as a curatorial decision, not a technical one. Publishing collection data openly, making curatorial writing available online, and contributing

interpretive context to widely indexed platforms is understood as part of the work of transmission, not a supplement to it. A collection that cannot be cited, referenced, or discovered by the systems that shape how knowledge circulates risks becoming culturally inert — preserved, perhaps, but not active.

The response cannot be to retreat into proprietary control — that simply guarantees irrelevance. Nor can it be to optimise blindly for algorithmic visibility at the expense of intellectual rigour — that guarantees citability but sacrifices credibility. The alternative is to recognise that digital infrastructure is not marketing; it is a form of cultural responsibility. Museums must publish not to be popular, but to ensure that when their knowledge is cited, it is cited accurately, contextually, and with proper attribution. This requires thinking of digital infrastructure as a parallel form of stewardship: maintaining open collection databases, contributing to linked open data initiatives, publishing research in accessible formats, and designing metadata and contextual writing so that when machines parse institutional knowledge, they do so in ways that remain faithful to curatorial intent.

VI.

From Accumulation to Transmission

For most of modern history, collecting has been understood as a form of accumulation: acquiring objects, preserving them, and building inventories that grow steadily over time. The great collections — whether institutional or private — have been measured by their scale, rarity, and comprehensiveness; a major museum is one with hundreds of thousands of objects, a serious collector one with depth across categories and periods.

But accumulation is no longer a viable model — financially, spatially, or conceptually. Museums cannot afford to acquire, store, and care for everything; storage, conservation, and insurance costs grow faster than endowments. Private collectors cannot build monuments to their own taste without confronting questions of succession and public access; audiences faced with vast collections and infinite online archives experience not abundance but paralysis — too many objects, too little meaning, no clear path through the archive.

> *The analogy with couture is instructive: Valentino Garavani's legacy does not rest on the number of dresses produced, but on the standard he set — a line so correct it became a reference for everything that followed. Standards do not compete for attention; they organise it.*

The necessary shift is from possession to stewardship, and from accumulation to transmission. A collection becomes meaningful not when it is largest, but when it is legible as an argument — a perspective, a set of relationships between works, ideas, and contexts that clarify something about the world.

DSLCollection has operated under this logic since its founding. The collection is not comprehensive; it focuses on contemporary Chinese art, with particular attention to works exploring identity, diaspora, memory, and the relationship between tradition and modernity. It does not seek to own everything of importance, but to build a constellation of works whose relationships illuminate something that cannot be said through any single object. It does not preserve for the sake of permanence, but for the sake of transmission: ensuring that future audiences — scholars, curators, artists, publics — can encounter these works, understand their contexts, and use them to build new meanings.

Such an approach requires curatorial discipline. Every acquisition must be justified not only by the quality of the work, but by its relationship to the existing constellation and to the argument the collection makes. Every deaccession must be understood not as failure but as refinement, clarifying the collection's identity by removing what no longer serves its mission. Every loan, publication, or digital release is part of the collection's public life — its ongoing work of transmission beyond any single institution.

For traditional museums, the shift from accumulation to transmission is harder: legal restrictions on deaccessioning, donor expectations, and institutional habit all favour growth over clarity. Yet the alternative — continued expansion without refinement — leads to unmanageable collections, unsustainable costs, and a loss of curatorial coherence.

VII.

Polyphonic Architecture: A Governance Framework

Polyphonic architecture is not a metaphor; it is an operational framework. It addresses the central governance challenge of the 21st century: how to sustain multiple voices, temporalities, and publics within a single institutional mission without either fragmenting into incoherence or collapsing into uniformity. The term comes from music, where polyphony describes compositions in which distinct melodic lines sound simultaneously, each with its own rhythm and logic, yet together forming a coherent whole.

Applied to institutions, polyphonic architecture begins by recognising that a museum already speaks with many voices — curatorial, educational, digital, conservation, community-based, financial — and that these voices do not automatically agree. A curator may prioritise art-historical rigour; an educator, accessibility; a digital strategist, reach; a community liaison, representation. Rather than suppressing these tensions or resolving them by fiat, polyphonic architecture treats them as productive information: evidence that different values, publics, and time horizons are in play and must be explicitly calibrated.

THREE COMPONENTS OF POLYPHONIC ARCHITECTURE

The central compass. A concise document specifying what the institution will not compromise, even under financial or political pressure — curatorial independence, ethical acquisition, public access, intellectual rigour.

A set of voices. Defined not as departments but as perspectives: Curator, Educator, Community Liaison, Archivist, Experimentalist, Steward, Public Advocate, and others as the institution requires.

A calibration protocol. For each decision: which voices are primary, which are consultative, and which can remain silent without undermining legitimacy.

An acquisition decision, for example, might foreground the Curator and the Steward (art-historical depth and long-term sustainability), consult the Educator and Community Liaison (future programming and representation), and keep the Experimentalist secondary. A decision to launch a new social media platform would foreground the Digital Strategist and Public Advocate, with the Educator and Curator in consultation and the Archivist and Steward weighing in only on resource implications. This is not consensus-building; it is voice-mapping.

> *Polyphonic architecture does not eliminate conflict; it makes conflict legible and accountable. If a decision fails, the institution can ask whether the right voices were engaged, whether secondary perspectives should have been elevated, or whether the central compass was ignored.*

For conservative museum directors, this framework offers a way to honour institutional complexity without surrendering coherence: boards remain accountable without micromanaging; curators retain intellectual authority without sidelining community input; digital teams can experiment without undermining credibility. Institutions that continue to act as if they have a single voice and serve a single public will keep lurching between incompatible demands, losing the capacity to do anything distinctively well.

VIII.

Practical Implications for Museum Leadership

The synthesis of traditional and digital-native models does not point toward a single ideal museum of the future. It points toward a pluralism of institutional forms, each optimised for different missions, publics, and resources, but each capable of learning from the others' experiments. For traditional museums, several implications follow.

First, financial complexity requires governance discipline. Diversified revenue is necessary, but it must be managed so that funding sources do not dictate programming: clear firewalls between development and curatorial decision-making, directors empowered to refuse partnerships that undermine mission, reserves strong enough to absorb short-term losses without sacrificing long-term direction.

Second, leadership must distinguish between decisions that require consensus and decisions that require speed. Acquisitions, capital projects, and senior appointments benefit from board deliberation, while digital experiments, temporary exhibitions, and artist collaborations often do not.

Third, museums must accept that not every project serves every audience, moving from the fiction of the general public to the design of discrete projects for discrete publics — serving scholars deeply, families meaningfully, and international visitors powerfully, but not all in the same format at once.

Fourth, institutions should treat digital infrastructure as cultural responsibility, not marketing: publishing collection data, curatorial research, and interpretive writing openly so that institutional knowledge remains citable, accessible, and accurate as it circulates through

AI systems, social media, and aggregators.

Fifth, they must shift from accumulation to transmission, understanding collections as arguments rather than inventories and aligning acquisition, deaccession, loans, and digital releases with that argumentative clarity.

Finally, they can adopt polyphonic architecture as a governance framework, mapping the voices and publics their institution serves, clarifying which voices are primary for which decisions, and treating disagreement as information rather than dysfunction.

For digital-native collections, the demands are different but no less stringent. Agility without accountability is unsustainable: single-patron funding enables rapid experimentation but requires constant legitimation through curatorial rigour, scholarly engagement, and transparency about scope and limitations. Digital infrastructure is powerful but not a substitute for institutional depth; online projects gain value when they connect to robust archival, research, and educational ecosystems, often through partnership with traditional institutions. Above all, digital-native actors must resist the temptation to equate reach with success: scale is not the goal; coherent resonance is.

The most promising institutional forms are likely to be hybrids: museums that maintain buildings and permanent collections while operating agile digital laboratories; private collections that publish openly and collaborate with public institutions; regional museums that share digitised collections and expertise rather than duplicating every capacity in-house. All of these forms demand leadership willing to ask a difficult question: if the mission remained constant but tools, formats, and alliances could change, what would you preserve, what would you let go, and what new architectures of transmission would you dare to invent?

IX.

Conclusion: Fidelity in Times of Acceleration

The crisis facing museums is not simply technological, financial, or demographic — though it manifests in all three. It is a crisis of coherence: the growing inability of institutions to align mission, governance, and public action at the speed and scale at which they now operate. Visibility, in this context, is ambiguous: it can signal relevance, but it can also mask exhaustion, mission drift, and internal disconnection.

The examples discussed — from Saks and the Louvre to digital-native collections and platform dynamics — suggest that survival will not be secured by more scale, more visibility, or more data alone. What is required is fidelity to purpose under conditions of acceleration: the capacity to say no to forms of growth that undermine mission, to design infrastructures that turn impressions into resonance, and to build governance architectures capable of holding many voices without losing the thread.

> *In this sense, the challenge for museum leadership today resembles the challenge facing any long-running cultural project in an age of constant novelty: to treat each new format, partnership, or "era" not as a break with the past, but as another variation on a score that remains, beneath all the noise, recognisably and responsibly their own.*

Sylvain Lévy

Co-founder, DSLcollection & Aika — 2026