

The Cranach syndrome. Calls for private donations for museums' art acquisitions: new perspectives for the French Public Cultural Institutions funding?

On the eve of Christmas day 2012, Sylvie Ramond (head of the Lyons Museum of Fine Arts) announced the achievement of a large funding campaign launched in September that same year. Dedicated to the purchase of a mid 19th century painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, that successful project is an event of great importance not only because of the number of people that donated on that occasion (ca 920) or the amount of money gathered (ca € 80.000), but also because of the mere nature of the campaign, its target and its both economic and symbolic implications regarding the national traditions of art acquisition and cultural sponsorship(1).

It was indeed one of the first time in France that a public museum (here municipal) targeted private micro-sponsorship to get the funds required to enrich its permanent collections. Of course, not all the money needed to get that particular piece has been raised via that strategy. As a matter of fact, about 90% of the € 750.000 of its cost had already been collected through public funds (coming both from state and regional institutions) or more traditional sponsorship (from firms, foundations etc.). Though, the episode remains not only nearly unprecedented but quite revolutionary regarding the national practices of collaboration between public and private actors. In this article, I intend to investigate the many aspects of that event and the new trend it embodies in the French cultural (and more specifically museum and art) public governance, coming from its context of origin (in both economic, political, social and institutional terms), to its development and implementation to end with the futures strategies and challenges it raises for the future.

To better understand the strategy implemented by the Museum of Fine Arts of Lyons, it is necessary to get back to the very first French initiative of the kind. Quite famous, because of its originality at the time and its impressive success (and media support), that project was launched by the Louvre Museum in November 2010 and regarded the acquisition of a 1531 painting by Lucas Cranach from a private collector(2). Just like in the case of the Lyons Museum, for that piece, the Louvre had already used its traditional processes of financing, coming to a call for funds to the French State to a massive sponsorship campaign targeting firms and private foundations.

In fact, it was not only three months before the deadline scheduled for the sale of the painting that the directors of the famous Parisian institution, not having been able to collect the money required, finally decided to wider their vision of sponsorship and asked individuals to provide micro-donations. Three parameters must be stressed in that particular framework. The first is the context of "*emergency*" that implied to search for innovative and very efficient strategies in a very short term. The second is the progressive decrease of the State's financial involvement in Culture that made it necessary. The third is the massive stepping down of the firms' traditional sponsorship since 2009 in France. These last two should be considered in detail.

In an essay, published in early 2012, Yves Marek and Claude Mollard underlined how the situation of the general economy since the beginning of the 2000's affected the public funding of Culture in France, in particular in the museum governance field. In fact, quoting these authors, it is generally considered that between 2000 and 2010, the financial resources provided by the French State to the museums decreased

from 32 to 16 million euro(3).

The numbers regarding the acquisitions of art pieces are even more impressive: coming from 20 million euro in 2009 the budget cuts took them down to 8.5 million euro in 2012(4). The situation is worse if we consider the regional authorities (regions, departments, cities) that usually finance culture for the highest part(5). In that context, as we may conclude, the State has proved rather powerless in several cases and had to use other ways to provide support. One of the more interesting is a shift from financial to legal support through the development of administrative formulas that eased (but not solved) the issues faced by museums. The “Cranach case” is an example of that scenario in the specific context of the public acquisitions of art pieces. Demonstrating its mere incapability to get the money to the Louvre, the French government chose to attribute to the painting a special status of “*Trésor national*” that enlisted the museum to get a 30 month priority for the purchase, limited the possibility to export the painting for the same time and made the sponsorship opportunities more attractive to firms(6).

As such, indeed, the financial and tax advantages regarding the sponsorship specifically targeting the purchase of a “*Trésor national*” gets to 90% of the amount of money offered to be free of any public taxation(7). Yet, if the numbers regarding the firms’ sponsorship in France given by the “*Association pour le développement du mécénat industriel et commercial*” (ADMICAL) in 2011 prove to be rather encouraging (as far as 494 million euro were given to cultural institutions that year), it is generally assumed that the prudence –caused by the pressure of the economy might imply a massive decrease that leads to innovative projects(8). And it was the case for the Cranach and even more for the Ingres of Lyons, because of the less important network of sponsors that this regional museum has been able to develop through the years and its smaller exposure to public fame.

In that particular context, two key elements have been considered for the launch of campaigns targeting the sponsorship of private individuals. The first is a close look to foreign traditions, in particular British and North American ones, where 90% of the funding of museums linked to acquisitions come from that particular source(9). The second is a new and wider understanding of a 2003 French law (also known as the “*Law Aillagon*”) regarding the financial and taxation advantages linked to private and sponsorship(10).

But what’s even more interesting is the rhetoric developed by museums to promote their projects and convince their costumers to help. Here, the documentation created by the Museum of Fine Arts of Lyons proves to be very exemplary. Giving up on a French tradition of Public governance on the mode of “*Etat Providence*” in Culture, the Museum highlighted the simplicity of any donation, their legitimacy no matter how important or low it was, and mostly the “citizen” identity of that gesture that creates a particular and supposedly unbreakable bond that it creates between a territory, a community, an institution, an art piece and its audience. As such, the range of donations that could actually be done for the Ingres acquisition campaign was very wide, coming from 1 euro to 1000, but all the donors were to be officially thanked through the inscription of their names inside the museum’s hall. As Sylvie Ramond has declared in a recent interview, the donation by a private individual to a public institution replaces the notion of common cultural heritage at the heart of the museums’ life and therefore enacts a new way of living a citizenship through culture(11).

If a further survey of that new trend remains to be done, an early evaluation may raise several positive points, regarding the enrichment of national collections, innovative solutions regarding the issues of public finances in culture and even, if we go deeper, new ways to involve private audiences to museums (already high in France). As Olivier Poivre d’Arvor has stressed in a seminal but quite controversial essay published in 2011, one of the challenges faced by Culture in France – and on a wider scale – in Europe, is the

necessity to make room for a deeper involvement, a stronger range of choices and a larger possibility to empower not only public authorities but also audiences, that is private actors that might create together a “*cultural new deal*” that could be more collaborative, dynamic and efficient(12).

As such, micro-sponsorship might become a way to develop seminal actions of culture and in particular require people to define through their financial support what makes their culture today, in other words, what should become a clear statement of their own heritage. The development of actions of the kind in many fields (not only museums but cinema or theatre) proves the relevant nature of such strategies that go way beyond financial issues(13). Yet, several questions must be raised that may regard in particular their chance to become efficient on a larger scale for institutions that don't have the prestige or the strong implementation in the audiences' minds. Here, the documentation regarding the acquisition of the painting by Cranach by the Louvre, is very illustrative. Among the many micro-sponsors that were questioned, several explain their implication by their emotional or imaginary link with the Louvre which is, to them, not only a great French institution but the “*Musée de la France*” in itself(14). What could be their desire to get involved in the campaign launched by a museum that is not as successful, not as rich, not as symbolically-strong in their minds? Or for art pieces (or projects) that are not as easy to get in touch with (extra-occidental art, contemporary art...)?

Endnotes

(1) The painting (an oil on canvas, 41,5 x 32,5 cm, dated ca 1848) shows the famous meeting between Charles Vth's ambassador and Italian poet Pietro Aretino. It was bought to a Parisian gallerist and will be shown in the Lyons Museum in early 2013.

(2) The Louvre attracted more than 7000 private sponsors and gathered donations between 1 and 40.000 euro. For a report of the campaign, see the documentation gathered by the Louvre, online:

<http://www.louvre.fr/acquisition-des-trois-graces-de-lucas-cranach>.

(3) For these numbers and their analysis, refer to Yves MAREK & Claude MOLLARD, Malraux, Lang... et après ? Débat sur la culture, Paris, Area – Descartes et Cie, 2012, p. 25.

(4) For these numbers, refer to Elisabeth PHILIPPE, “Précarisation, budgets en baisse... : l'angoisse du monde de la culture”, Les Inrockuptibles, 887, December 2012, online:

<http://www.lesinrocks.com/2012/12/02/actualite/culture-en-crise-11327592/>.

(5) The funds attributed to the regions by the State, departments and cities by the State decreased from 16% to 45% in 2012. The general revenues of each of these “collectivités territoriales” (as these authorities are called in France) have decreased in a comparable way.

(6) The status of “Trésor national” has been defined by the law of July, 10th 2000. For more details, see:

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/actualites/politique/protection-patrimoine/protection.htm>.

(7) Yves MAREK & Claude MOLLARD, op. cit., 35.

(8) For these numbers, see the 2011 report of the ADMICAL, online:

<http://www.admical.org/default.asp?contentid=62>.

(9) One of the most famous examples of this tradition in the British system is the campaign organized for the purchase of a drawing by Pierre-Paul Rubens by the Tate Gallery in 2008.

(10) For more details, see the Law of August, 3rd 2003 (aka “Loi Aillagon”) on the French government's law website :

<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000791289&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

(11) For that comment, see: <http://rhone-alpes.france3.fr/2012/11/16/mba-ingres-144708.html>. The concept of “mécénat citoyen” has been used in several publications since 2010. The French Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art has organized a first symposium about that topic in May 2011 in partnership with the Fondation du Patrimoine. That foundation organized 32000 campaigns of private individual

sponsorship campaigns. For more information, see: <http://www.fondation-patrimoine.org/fr/national-0>.

(12) Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, Culture, Etat d'urgence, Paris, Tchou, 2011.

(13) For examples in the theatre field, refer to:

<http://blog.athenee-theatre.com/index.cfm/2010/2/11/Que-pensezvous-du-mcnat-citoyen-pour-soutenir-la-culture>.

(14) For testimonies of the donators, refer to the documentation online provided by the Louvre:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdYWke1a-70>.



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