

'Money talks' Museums Journal, May '06

In the rush to secure lucrative sponsorship deals, are museums ignoring the ethical and moral dimension of taking corporate cash?

Patrick Steel investigates

LAST MONTH MODERNISM: DESIGNING A NEW WORLD opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). Exploring how modernist ideas have influenced contemporary living, the exhibition includes furniture, painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic design and fashion. It is sponsored by the furniture retailer Habitat to coincide with the launch of its new store on London's Regent Street.

As part of the deal, the V&A is hoping to attract new audiences through a series of events run by Habitat, featuring the museum's curatorial staff at the Regent Street shop. Neither organisation is willing to reveal how much the deal is worth, but by way of comparison, the price of sponsoring the museum's Surreal Things:

Surrealism and Design exhibition, which will open in March 2007, is £400,000. Sponsorship has become an increasingly important part of museums' revenues. The Tate's corporate fundraising department was established in 1991 with a team of five and is now a development department staffed by 35 people, raising about 50 per cent of the museum's operating costs.

And while the Tate is an extreme example, a report published in December last year by Arts & Business (A&B), which promotes partnerships between arts organisations and the business community, found that private sector investment in museums, the visual arts and galleries has increased from £85.1m in 2000/01 to over £97m in 2004/05. Museums received £42m in private money last year, a significant part of which was corporate sponsorship.

Colin Tweedy, the chief executive of A&B, attributes this growth to changing attitudes that date back to the Thatcher years and also to more recent political pressures: 'This government is pushing more and more arts institutions to behave like businesses and generate their own income. Inevitably, I think, we are moving to a greater commercialism. I do not think we will ever go back to the age where government grants will be just steadily increasing.'

This greater commercialism carries with it a set of ethical conundrums. If an exhibition sponsored by a private company reflects that company's commercial interest, where should museums draw the line on their involvement? And are there companies that museums should imply not have dealings with?

In the December 1989 edition of Museums Journal, Maurice Davies, now the deputy director of the Museums Association (MA), picked out exhibitions such as the Science Museum's Food For Thought, sponsored by Sainsbury's, and the Natural History Museum's BP-sponsored Global Ecology display as examples of what he dubbed 'Herod syndrome': the equivalent of creche facilities being made available by King Herod Enterprises Ltd.

He could have also added the MA itself, which was criticised for choosing Shell UK as a sponsor for the Times Shell Museum of the Year Award in 1989, when the company was the target of anti-apartheid protesters for its involvement with the South African regime.

The Diamonds exhibition at the Natural History Museum (NHM) last year was sponsored by two companies involved in the diamond trade: Steinmetz and the Diamond Trading Company, an offshoot of De Beers. The exhibition's opening prompted protests from campaigners who alleged that it ignored some of the issues surrounding diamond mining for fear of annoying its sponsors. Michael Dixon, the director of the NHM, refuted the accusations at the time, saying the museum was not a political organisation.

Earlier this year the museum announced that it would be rebranding its annual photography competition the Shell Wildlife Photographer of the Year, provoking anger from environmentalists.

Friends of the Earth said: 'Shell's sponsorship is an act of blatant hypocrisy and undermines everything the competition stands for.'

Sharon Ament, the director of public engagement at the NHM, reiterates that the museum is not a campaigning organisation:

'What we have to do in the museum is decide whether the partnerships we are entering into would bring benefit to what we are doing and how we are operating and, clearly, this partnership with Shell will bring a great benefit, enabling us to bring this exhibition to hundreds of thousands of people.'

London's Science Museum secured a £1m deal with the computer gaming company Nintendo earlier this year and the money will go towards a number of developments including Game On, an exhibition on the history of video games, which is to open in late 2006. But even though the exhibition will contain a range of products, including consoles by Sony and Xbox, the choice of subject matter might lead some to conclude that the museum is too close to the sponsor.

'That is always a danger,' says Michelle Bryant, the senior development manager at the Science Museum. 'But companies understand the need for us to retain control because if we lose it, it devalues their sponsorship.' Nonetheless, says Bryant, the reality is that if the museum has to choose between two 'like-for-like' products, 'we would take the sponsor's'.

According to BP's website the company's expert views 'helped to shape the exhibition content' of the Science Museum's BP Energy Gallery. Bryant says that BP had no editorial control over the content of the exhibition, and she remains philosophical about the criticisms from environmentalists:

'I think it's a concern and we should be aware of people's feelings on it, but any institution that takes money from a company stands to be scrutinised, and you have to manage that accordingly.'

The National Portrait Gallery had to manage more than just scrutiny last year at the presentation ceremony of the BP Portrait Award, when an environmental campaign group calling itself London Rising Tide blockaded the gallery's front entrance and held an alternative portrait exhibition outside to protest at BP's involvement with the competition.

A spokesman for London Rising Tide says the organisation is planning to protest outside the awards again this year. Two of the group's websites (www.nationalpetroleumgallery.org.uk and www.artnoil.org.uk) carry a warning about the dangers of climate change with a series of allegations against BP.

Below this is the email address for the portrait gallery's director, Sandy Nairne, with an exhortation: 'Tell Sandy Nairne how you feel about BP sponsorship.'

Nairne is unperturbed by the protests, confirming that he has received a number of 'generally very polite emails that I reply to as a publicly accountable figure'. He says it didn't surprise him that BP's association with the award — which was previously sponsored by John Player and Imperial Tobacco — has led to protests, because

'fuel, energy, and the environment are incredibly complex and difficult issues'.

He says that he was aware of the website, but that the gallery had not looked

into any of the allegations against BP. 'We are not set up to do detailed investigations into companies,' he says. 'We know enough about the positive record of BP, including its campaigns on the environment. We do talk with them, but their overall promotion is their business.'

Claire Fauset of Corporate Watch, a group that researches the social and environmental impact of large corporations, disagrees:

'Museums are in a very difficult position regarding funding, but they should take a political stand and not take money from destructive companies, which includes the oil industry.'

But apart from some basic guidelines from the MA and the International Council of Museums, there are very few rules governing sponsorship. Tobacco advertising is illegal, and many museums have a policy on the promotion of alcohol at exhibitions that are likely to attract under-18s. Some museums will do a financial search on the company or look at press clippings to see the sort of issues that they might be involved in, but beyond that, there is only the discretion of the director or the trustees.

Most museums consider sponsors on a case-by-case basis, although the Tate has a policy against arms manufacturers after a deal with United Technologies in 1986 prompted concern from a number of artists and led to protests.

As Andrea Nixon, the Tate's director of development, points out, this policy is as much for pragmatic as ethical reasons: 'It is very important that we work closely with the artistic community because without artists we would be stuffed. But many American museums think we are insane not to [take money from arms manufacturers].'

The difficulties of such a policy are highlighted by the Tate's definition of arms companies, ruling out United Technologies, which makes weapons, but not Rolls Royce, one of the museum's current sponsors, because 'as far as we're concerned they don't make arms, they make aeroplane engines'.

The Tate can afford to be choosier than most, though. With two of its galleries being in the capital, it is undoubtedly easier for it to attract sponsors than its regional counterparts. 'There is more money in London,' says Nixon.

'But there is just as big a need for sponsorship throughout the country.' Bill Ferris, the chairman of the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) and the chief executive of the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust, would agree: 'Most AIM members would look to sponsorship in one form or another, but they are often likely to be unsuccessful.'

Small independent museums just don't have the infrastructure to put the case to sponsors in the way that the nationals do and for us, being in Chatham rather than London is not helpful to major corporate sponsors.' But he adds: 'Although survival is an issue, you have to remain true to the values of the museum.'

But with government subsidy cut to the bone, most museums are grateful for whatever sponsorship they can garner. In an increasingly commercial climate, can museums really afford to take an ethical stance on sponsorship?

Or is perhaps Colin Tweedy right when he says: 'Most arts organisations take the same view as our founding chairman, Lord Goodman, did. He said: "I don't care where the money comes from. It could be rolled by the mafia. If it goes to the arts it becomes good money"'.

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