

Corporate sponsorship: a sea change for French museums

Georgina Oliver

Long known for its unstinting government support to cultural life and institutions, France has now embarked on a vigorous and dynamic approach to private-sector partnerships, a new direction that spells major changes in the way museums see their role and functions. A member of the committee of the Anglo-American Press Association of Paris, Georgina Oliver is a prominent arts and style columnist. Over the years, her signature has appeared in major international magazines such as Time and American Vogue as well as in specialist art publications. In London, during the early 1970s, she was already actively involved in building bridges between the visual arts and the private sector, on the board of 'Industrial Sponsors', an independent association that organized exhibitions in corporate venues.

Back in the 1950s, French railway carriages were notoriously uncomfortable. Now, the high-speed TGV (*train à grande vitesse*) is the envy of the world. Such seems to be *la méthode française* in many fields: start off at a snail's pace, watch other countries innovate and make mistakes, then catch up *à très grande vitesse*.

A curatorial domain in which France appeared slow before unexpectedly aiming for the top of the class is the ability to set up partnerships with private enterprise. On the one hand, France's prestigious state-run and -financed museums used to be loath to accept outside resources. On the other hand, corporate bodies willing to engage in cultural patronage have so far been offered little or no fiscal incentives to do so.

Yet, by all accounts, a sea change is in the air. One of several recent French museum coups, the opening of the Sackler Wing of Oriental Antiquities at the Louvre is a striking illustration of the sponsorship drive considered to be part-and-parcel of cultural management at the approach of the third millennium.

Typical of France's present go-getting generation of museum administrators and curators, Daniel Marchesseau seeks partnership solutions for all the major exhibitions he organizes. Chief curator of heritage at the Paris Museum of Modern Art, he explains that his country's largely government-subsidized arts institutions can no longer give modern museum-goers 'the kind of comforts they have come to expect' without extra funding from the private sector. Improved museographic standards have created a thirst for properly put-across information, which means that financial backing and contributions in kind, such as transport and

insurance, are required at once on the heritage front and for temporary projects.

Marchesseau confirms that there is an upswing in museum partnerships, but also stresses that the 'roaring eighties' are over. At first a handful of potential sponsors were on hand for a handful of blockbuster events. Now, the competition is stiffer: justifiably, some companies prefer to support humanitarian causes as well as cultural events and while the number of sponsors has increased, so has the proportion of museums applying to them for funding.

The partenariat generation

In France, 'Mr Corporate Sponsorship' is Jacques Rigaud, President of ADMICAL (the Association for the Development of Industrial and Commercial Sponsorship), a highly motivated arts-into-industry association started in 1979, which publishes an invaluable directory listing its sponsor members and specifying the different categories of cultural projects that they are committed to. The author of a number of seminal publications focusing on the 'exceptional' rapport of French culture with state institutions and resources, this former UNESCO official is now President of the leading independent radio station RTL. He recalls an era when the French arts establishment was wary, not to say indifferent to big business. In those days, only certain American companies implanted in France had a 'contract' to sponsor culture.

Initially encouraged by a younger generation of arts buffs keen to implement the philosophy he first expressed in a book entitled *La Culture pour vivre, Libre culture* (Gallimard), Rigaud continues to emphasize that private sponsorship is by no means intended to be a form of charity;

'everybody has to gain from it' is his motto. ADMICAL's objective is to give French museums an extra zest of curatorial flexibility, while providing companies with an efficient if indirect communication tool.

Jacques Rigaud points out that the personnel of a company that sponsors the arts ends up identifying with its management's cultural options and that the artists whose projects are privately financed develop a stronger bond with the civic world around them. Aware of mutual misconceptions, he agrees that industrial sponsorship was in danger of becoming a fad during the 1980s. As he sees it, some curators assumed the sky was the limit. In contrast to the complexities of institutional decision-making, corporate bodies appeared to be empowered to write cheques that made everything possible.

Across the Atlantic as well as in other European countries, French culture is generally perceived as an affair of state. However, a convergence of ideas has gained ground. While the French museum élite has become more open to the cross-fertilization between the visual arts and corporate identity extolled by American publicists, other governments have started to envisage the utility of having a fully fledged Ministry of Culture *à la française*, turning to local authorities and the private sector where appropriate.

'I owe Jacques Rigaud everything,' says Christophe Monin, a business-school graduate who was ADMICAL's delegate general before taking charge of the 'light but driven' communication and fundraising structure set up ten years ago to centralize partnership negotiations at the Louvre. Without a doubt, we are talking about privileged working conditions. The

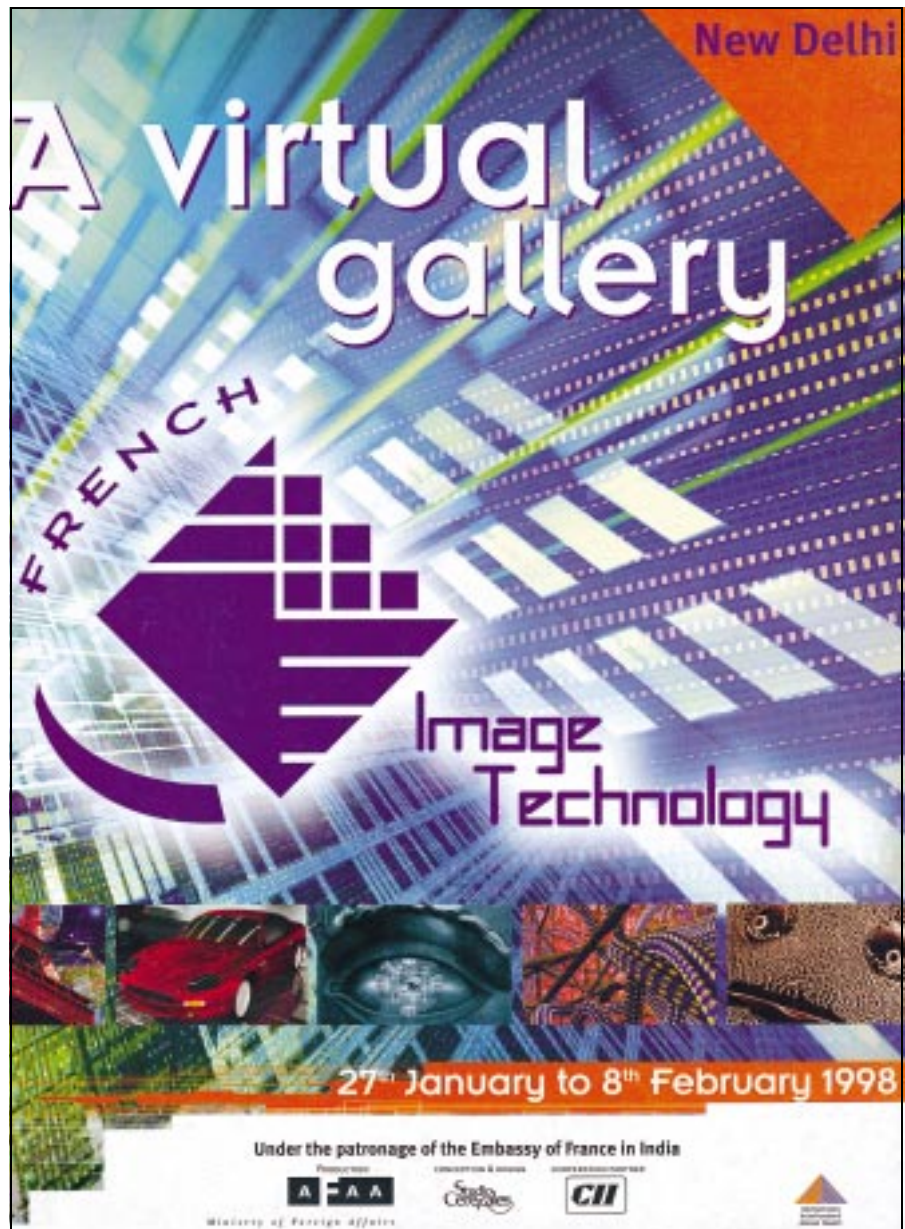


Photo by courtesy of the author

Grand Louvre's flamboyant, red-scarfed president-director Pierre Rosenberg is personally implicated in his museum's quest for patrons and the Louvre is in itself a venerable visiting card, yet Monin's strategy is refreshingly empirical.

State-of-the-art museum databases soon to be installed with the help of outside funding and know-how rank high on his agenda and he is clearly keen to mention the signature of a 25-million-franc contract with the Japanese television network Nippon Television (NTV), which will allow the Louvre to inaugurate a specially redesigned two-room *Mona Lisa* space by the year 2000 or 2001. None the less, Christophe Monin also finds it rewarding to secure relatively small sums for the acquisition of vital items for which curators hesitate to request public money.

Catalogue of the exhibition 'French Image Technology: A Virtual Gallery' held in New Delhi in 1998.



An LVMH-backed educational project at the Georges de la Tour exhibition at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais.

A prospective perspective

Both the Direction des Musées de France and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (RMN) have become more prospective in their approach to corporate sponsorship as well as in their contacts with local authorities. Sybille Heftrler's floor in the RMN offices, on the Rue Etienne-Marcel at the heart of Paris's rag trade and fashion quarter, is a hive of activity 'with meetings all the time'. In many ways, Heftrler operates like a meteorologist, gauging the temperature of the market to see which companies are likely to be interested in such and such exhibition or restoration project. Herself an ex-journalist with *Le Point*, she combs financial periodicals such as *Les Echos* and *La Tribune* to check out potential sponsors' marketing needs.

In practice, some boards of directors are easier to convince than others; the image of certain major enterprises on ADMICAL's list of benefactors has become indissociable from their contribution to the arts. Among these, LVMH (Moët Hennessy – Louis

Vuitton), the luxury-goods empire headed by Bernard Arnault, has been promoting cultural projects for about seven years. One of Arnault's closest advisers, Jean-Paul Claverie wants LVMH's communication and sponsorship operation to 'match the excellence' of the products manufactured by the companies belonging to the group, 'some of which have been in existence for more than 250 years'.

Promoting the arts is a pursuit regarding which LVMH does not communicate figures, but Claverie indicates that it is one of France's most regular sponsors of cultural projects and humanitarian causes. Concerned with the transmission of enduring values, such as *art de vivre* and craftsmanship, to a rising generation of future customers, the group's education-oriented patronage strategy targets schools as well as young artists who have shown particular promise in a given discipline.

LVMH backed the Nicolas Poussin and Paul Cézanne retrospectives at the Grand Palais, before enabling the RMN to mount the *Picasso et le Portrait* tribute previously seen in New York. However, Jean-Paul Claverie is anxious to underline the all-or-nothing quality of his arts-sponsorship strategy. Also presented at the Grand Palais, the Georges de La Tour exhibition did not 'just get a cheque'. As always, theme competitions were launched for schoolchildren and travelling scholarships were awarded to art students.

While companies like LVMH prefer to keep their permanent *partenariat* staff streamlined, calling upon expert advice from the best specialists for individual cultural or humanitarian projects, other organizations establish their own museum-like foundations. EDF, France's electricity board, has created the

Fondation Electricité de France, which operates in three main directions: heritage, contemporary art and nature. In the spotlight, partly thanks to its Espace Electra exhibition space in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, this forward-looking foundation supports mainstream artists, museums and educational schemes in France and abroad, also providing cultural events with electricity-linked services.

Some sponsors start off with discreet subscriptions covering the costs of specific restoration needs or acquisitions, then decide to make a bigger splash with contributions that obtain huge media coverage. Although Yves Saint Laurent Couture continues to finance arts projects as well as humanitarian, scientific and social proposals, which are not obvious immediate-return investments, of late, the company has lent its stamp to a multiplicity of highly visible events, including the World Cup's 300 fashion-model closure ceremony and the installation of a gold and silver-alloy 'Pyramidion' on top of the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde.

Thinking international

In complete contradiction with France's reputation for reticence towards corporate sponsorship of the arts, the AFAA (Association Française d'Action Artistique) relies on a dynamic outgoing partnership policy to achieve its principal goals: the promotion of French culture abroad and the elaboration of international exchanges in this context. Linked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government bodies, this pioneering association celebrated its seventieth anniversary in 1992, but is no dinosaur when it comes to exploiting experienced diplomatic networks and on-the-spot business contacts

to promote French artists in a global economy.

The AFAA's statutes have always given it complete latitude to solicit private funding, and now it uses that know-how to develop a constantly renewed fundraising strategy. Today, some thirty top-flight French and European companies belong to the AFAA's Club Entreprises, a sponsorship-spurred committee whose accomplishments are impressively diverse.

During a seminar entitled 'Quelles Stratégies pour Conquérir les Nouveaux Marchés Artistiques Internationaux?' (What Strategies to Conquer New International Artistic Markets?) the association's visual-arts adviser Marie-Paule Serre observed that many contemporary French artists such as Christian Boltanski have made their mark overseas through AFAA-initiated exhibitions, before achieving recognition in their own country. In 1986, the AFAA was proud to announce that Daniel Buren's display at the Venice Biennale (curated by the Paris Museum of Modern Art Director Suzanne Pagé) had won the 'International Golden Lion for the Best Pavilion'. Likewise, several galleries with stands at the 1998 Basle and Chicago art fairs benefited from AFAA backing.

However, the AFAA's beat is neither restricted to avant-garde concepts nor limited to heavy-duty historical overviews. Several projects highlight its capacity to adapt to diametrically opposite yet by no means incompatible *fin de siècle* consumer requirements: a yearning to touch base with ancient civilizations combined with an equally strong interest in advanced image technology.

Zoë Logak, a new-generation sponsorship executive at the helm of the Club Entreprises, refers to *La gloire d'Alexandrie*, an



ultra-ambitious AFAA/Paris Musées co-production mounted at the Petit Palais, whose sponsors included Elf Aquitaine, the Electricité de France foundation, GAM (Global Asset Management), CEBTP (Centre Expérimental de Recherches et d'Etudes du Bâtiment et des Travaux Publics) and the BNP (Banque Nationale de Paris), then draws attention to a multi-sponsored multimedia exhibition held in New Delhi in January/February 1998 entitled *French Image Technology: A Virtual Gallery*.

Faced with the challenge of continuing to make an impact on the international museum scene during its temporary closure for repairs till the year 2000, the Georges Pompidou Centre has at once boosted its fund-raising policy and organized a whole series of multicultural, multidisciplinary, extra-mural events in Paris, in the regions and abroad.

One of the most talked-about recent arts sponsorship success stories, the Man Ray show held at the Grand Palais with the

backing of the Calvin Klein fashion house, bore the Pompidou Centre signature outside the museum.

Presided over by Jean-Pierre Marcie-Rivière, a former jet-setting banker who is as *au fait* with contemporary art as he is at ease with high-powered business contacts, the Association des Amis du Centre Georges Pompidou has created an International Club which invites art-lovers, private collectors and corporate executives, as well as Friends' associations representing museums from other countries, to join its ranks.

It is not just an impression. Such gestures are symptomatic of France's increasingly unambiguous attitude to sponsorship. In all kinds of ways, in a multiplicity of territories, be it via decentralized arts and government institutions or through its determination to export *la culture française*, a new wave of complex-free museum decision-makers is all set to manage change, with the help of private enterprise. ■

The Iranian Gallery in the Sackler Wing of Oriental Antiquities at the Louvre.