

Charles Saumarez Smith on the Louis Vuitton Young Arts Project

Louis Vuitton's project to support young artists is an exciting sign of our socially responsible times, says Charles Saumarez Smith

One of Louis Vuitton's first arts projects in London was a dinner at the National Gallery which started with a discussion about the current state of contemporary art practice and was followed by a spectacular meal for which the tables were designed and dressed (or undressed) by the contemporary American performance artist, Vanessa Beecroft. It was an event which may have done no good to my reputation as the National Gallery's director, particularly when it appeared in Tatler, but it certainly succeeded in bringing a new audience of the über-arts elite to the gallery and it inaugurated the idea, which animates much of Louis Vuitton's arts programme, that there is an interesting cross-over between art, fashion and education.

More recently, Louis Vuitton was one of the supporters of the Royal Academy's Anish Kapoor exhibition, making possible one of the more adventurous displays of contemporary art in London. During the exhibition they held another of their art talks, in which Anish Kapoor was lightly quizzed by the Serpentine Gallery's Hans Ulrich Obrist and, among friends, was able to give an insight into the sources of his art.

Louis Vuitton's latest artistic venture is a much more ambitious, impressive and in many ways rather surprising act of grand largesse for a label which is so associated with haute luxe. Supported by Yves Carcelle, chairman and CEO, the company is putting a very substantial sum of money (they will only say that it is 'northwards of £1 million') into making it possible for five major arts institutions in London — the Royal Academy, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Tate Britain, the Hayward Gallery and the South London Gallery — to work together to enable young, mostly underprivileged teenagers to have access to a range of artistic opportunities, including visits to exhibitions, behind-the-scenes tours, and lessons in drawing. The idea is to open up London's arts institutions to fresh eyes and the project is led by Margot Heller, director of the South London Gallery.

The Royal Academy is one of the institutions involved, and we recently hosted an event in which a group of students from a range of London boroughs came to eat cupcakes in the Royal Academy's John Madejski Fine Rooms. They were then split into two groups and members of the group I attended were able to develop their drawing skills in the old mid-19th-century drawing studio downstairs in the Royal Academy Schools.

As well as doing 30-second sketches from a model, they were encouraged to doodle, developing the relationship between hand and eye in an intuitive way. I found it rather moving, as I always do when I watch people concentrate on the practice of drawing, developing a skill which is nowadays so undervalued, particularly because the teaching was done not by a tutor from the Royal Academy Schools, as one might have expected, but by one of the children involved in the project.

So what, one may ask, is in it for Louis Vuitton? They are patently sincere in their desire to be involved with the art world and now have a good track record of supporting and promoting contemporary art, which will no doubt be on display in their new Bond Street store. It is obviously good for brand identity to be associated with creativity amongst young people and there is presumably, also, a strong element of corporate social responsibility. But there seems to be more to it than simple generosity.

At the opening, which happened by pure chance to be held on the cold, sunny morning of a new government, Boris Johnson, as Mayor of London, spoke with characteristic and slightly hectic verve of a new era of liberal conservatism whereby the pursuit of wealth could, and should, be combined with a social conscience.

He was funny, but also deadly serious in comparing the era of Margaret Thatcher, which was solely about the pursuit of self-interest, with that of David Cameron, which is widely expected to be about broader issues of social responsibility. It seems that the Louis Vuitton Young Arts Project is an interesting sign of the new times, whereby big international corporations recognise that there are great benefits in being involved with the development of new artistic skills in the next generation.

For more information on the project visit www.louisvuittonyoungartsproject.com

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