

Royal Academy chief warns of hard times for regional museums

Piccadilly institution receives no state funding but is 'gigantically' reliant on blockbuster shows

Britain's regional museums and galleries are facing "incredibly tough" conditions as spending pressures tell on local authorities, the chief executive of the Royal Academy has warned.

Charles Saumarez Smith, former director of the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery, said directly funded national museums felt they had been left with "a good result" from George Osborne's Autumn Statement last month, which ordered only modest reductions in spending compared with the brutal cuts many had feared.

Yet hundreds of other institutions part-funded by councils, including long-established museums serving large conurbations, are still facing staff cuts and potential closures as local authorities struggle to pay for their statutory obligations in elderly care and other services.

"The vitality of the system outside London is hugely important," Mr Saumarez Smith told the FT in an interview. "But it's completely obvious that, with the exception of the small number of what I regard as 'beacon institutions' such as Turner Contemporary or the Baltic, it's incredibly tough for the big city museums."

Speaking from the Palladian splendour of Burlington House on London's Piccadilly, Mr Saumarez Smith is in the privileged position of heading an organisation that takes none of its funding from the state.

The RA's finances, comprising exhibition income, donations, sponsorship and annual subscriptions from its 91,000 Friends, are in good health after a hugely popular Ai Weiwei retrospective and a Summer Exhibition that drew more visitors than any since 1955.

The RA's self-confidence was underlined earlier this year when it unveiled plans for a £50m project to create new teaching and exhibition spaces, as well as a lecture theatre, on Burlington Gardens — for which more than £46m has already been raised. Mr Saumarez Smith, 61, says: "I've found it a pleasure to be in an institution that hasn't had to be managing staff reductions."

Founded in 1768 by the painter Joshua Reynolds and numbering JMW Turner, John Constable and William Blake among past academicians, the RA claims a unique status among Britain's cultural institutions in combining the functions of an artists' club, a programme of public exhibitions and postgraduate training school.

It is the antithesis of the corporate hierarchy, with a council of academicians and a series of committees on which they sit. These artists and architects — up to a maximum of 80 at any time — run everything from exhibitions and education to finance and audit, and are not afraid to voice disagreements over policy.

These can occasionally break out in public, as they did in the run-up to Mr Saumarez Smith's appointment in 2007, prompting some observers to condemn the RA as intrinsically dysfunctional. Yet since his arrival, conflicts have broadly remained behind closed doors. When the FT notes the relative tranquillity of his tenure, his hand shoots out to touch the wooden mantelpiece beside him.

"When I was appointed, my predecessor but one wrote an opinion piece saying I was completely off my head. His view was the composition of the RA made it impossible to do my job. But I don't feel that . . . so far."

Having been a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, Mr Saumarez Smith likens the RA's governance to the more representative model at UK universities, in contrast to a top-down corporation. But he is also keen to dispel a common misapprehension of artists as intractable anarchists. "People forget artists are often pretty businesslike, particularly nowadays. They're running big operations."

The academy is nonetheless looking at its governance arrangements, complicated by the relationship between three separate charities: the RA, the RA Trust and the RA Friends. "In theory they are completely aligned but in practice it's not always straightforward," he says.

Lady Suzanne Heywood, an RA trustee and director at consultancy McKinsey, has been enlisted to look at the structure but Mr Saumarez Smith's expectations remain modest. "I personally don't think the environment is one which will support anything very radical but it's good to talk about it. These issues float around but are not properly analysed."

The RA's lack of state funding is not an unalloyed blessing: without a predictable annual grant, income remains "gigantically" dependent on the volatile appeal of exhibitions, he says.

With crowd-pleasers such as Ai Weiwei, "everything swings", he says: greater footfall brings higher takings at the shop and restaurant and a boost to Friends' recruitment. But future shows on Abstract Expressionism and the Russian Revolution may not produce the same results, regardless of the critical reaction, Mr Saumarez Smith warns.

The need for greater financial stability has sparked efforts to boost income from the flagship Summer Exhibition. This year showed the first fruits of this drive, with the galleries transformed by vibrant backdrops of pop art-ish colour and the show given a more contemporary appeal in the hands of academician Michael Craig-Martin. The high visitor numbers translated into purchases of work at higher prices, boosting sales 60 per cent.

It is a far cry from the early 2000s, when the RA regarded contemporary art exhibitions as financially unviable. That view has shifted as the market — and public interest — mushroomed.

Mr Saumarez Smith singles out the Anish Kapoor exhibition of 2009 as a milestone: "It changed the perception of what an art exhibition could be in the main galleries. It was very adventurous."

There has also been a broader relaxation of boundaries at the RA, which acquired a reputation after the second world war as a place of hidebound conservatism. "Henry Moore [the modernist sculptor] would always walk on the other side of the street so as not to suffer contamination," he said. "The membership now is a much broader church." Tracey Emin, maker of the unmade bed, was appointed professor of drawing in 2011.

For the next two years, as Mr Saumarez Smith devotes more of his time to the Burlington Gardens project ahead of its opening for the RA's 250th anniversary, he will be hoping for continued peace among the institution's creative types.

Having overseen building works at the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery, he believes that architecture has the power to trigger a broader transformation in culture. "You look at how [an organisation] operates, what it is, how it relates to its audience and almost

inevitably you change it . . . I find that deeply rewarding.”

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