

# Shiny museums are not enough

There's no point building beautiful new art galleries if they can't buy the works they need, says Charles Saumarez Smith

Ten years ago, I used to find visiting regional museums and galleries frequently depressing. Too often, they would occupy big Edwardian buildings and show all the signs of long-standing institutional and municipal neglect - ancient showcases and old-fashioned labels; a half-hearted, under-funded attempt to upgrade the natural history displays; peeling walls and disillusioned staff.

There was a sad contrast between the experience of visiting museums and galleries in this country, particularly in the big cities after rate-capping, and seeing new and beautifully presented museums and galleries in small cities - for example, in Holland, where there has been a long-standing programme of national and regional investment.

At last, this is beginning to change. Over the past decade, as a result of a government initiative called Renaissance in the Regions and through the huge amount of investment made by the Heritage Lottery Fund, there has been the beginning of a transformation in museums and galleries throughout Britain. Throughout the country, there are new museums and galleries, such as the wonderful new Walsall Art Gallery, as well as smaller spaces, such as ArtSway in the New Forest. Nor is this programme anywhere near at an end.

All of this is good news. But it has become increasingly clear that museums and galleries cannot live on capital projects alone. There is no point having beautiful, gleaming new museums and galleries with the most up-to-date facilities and cafés if they don't have the money to buy works of art.

It is absurd to have spent £135 million of largely public funds on building Tate Modern if the Tate doesn't have the funds from government to buy the best contemporary art. It is an idiotic misuse of Arts Council resources to build a beautiful new art gallery in the centre of Walsall if the local authority then doesn't have the funds to run it to its full potential. And it will be a waste of the investment in the planned art gallery at Middlesbrough if it cannot show great exhibitions of historic as well as contemporary art.

This is why the Museums Association is today publishing a report on Collections for the Future: to try to concentrate everyone's mind not on the buildings that house our collections, but on the collections - what we collect, how we display what we collect, how we study it, and how on earth we pay for it.

At the heart of the report is an issue that must be faced. There is no point whatsoever in having museums and galleries unless they have the funds to add to their collections. The National Gallery needs to be able to acquire not only an occasional Raphael, but also lesser works to supplement less fashionable areas of the collection. But, equally, local museums and galleries need to be able to add to their collections.

During the 1950s, nearly every city in Britain had an adventurous programme of collecting contemporary art, which has yielded a rich and often unseen legacy. Nowadays, there are only a few art galleries that are collecting actively and few are able to afford, or have the expertise, to buy international contemporary art. We need to find ways to make this possible.

My own view as to what needs to be done is threefold. First, I think it was extremely sensible of the Conservatives to suggest in their election manifesto that there should be a central acquisitions fund, perhaps constituted from the lottery, to make acquisitions possible. This should not be a party political matter, because it was first proposed by a coalition government in 1922.

Second, if there is not going to be a separate acquisitions fund, the government needs to recognise that it has a responsibility to support acquisitions by properly grant-aiding the National Heritage Memorial Fund, which has relatively meagre funds at its disposal.

Third, there need to be tax breaks to encourage people to give works of art to museums during their lifetime, as happens in France, Spain, Canada and the United States.

If these things were to happen, we might not only have great new museums and galleries, but also great new collections inside them.

The Telegraph 14 Jun 2005