

Modern day patrons who set artists free

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When tenants complained about her unfinished installation in their luxury condominium, Helen Brough needed help. Fortunately she already had the backing of David Walentas, the property magnate who had commissioned her 30ft by 40ft sculpture for the lobby of 70 Washington Street, one of the many buildings he owns in the Dumbo section of Brooklyn, New York City.

"Helen's piece was not well-received at first," says Jane Walentas, David's wife, who is also an artist. "This was risky – it's playful, contemporary and a little wild. We thought it was fabulous."

The Walentases were disturbed by the resulting controversy. "David never backed down," says Jane Walentas. "He believed it was our mission to educate people, to help them understand her work."

For Brough, a British abstract artist, the Walentases' emotional support was as valuable as their financial assistance. "Working publicly is really exhausting and having someone solidly behind you provides a great platform," she says. "Your patrons become like your family. They support you and do more than just write cheques."

In recent years, wealthy individuals have engaged increasingly in old-fashioned patronage, or the sponsorship of chosen artists. Yet today's patrons hardly model themselves on the Medicis, and their role is rarely limited to commissioning work for private collections. Like the Walentases, they often become intimately involved in their artists' lives, socialising and visiting studios, and providing not only funding but also space and materials.

"These people exist everywhere but they are usually very quiet about it," says Wayne Lawson, who is director emeritus of the Ohio Arts Council, a board member of the National Alliance of Artists' Communities in Providence, Rhode Island, a board member of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and a professor of arts administration and public policy at Ohio State University. "They are knowledgeable. They come to really love the art, and they want to be part of its creation."

Lawson believes that in their own quiet way, contemporary benefactors are galvanising a profound change in the art world. By giving artists freedom from quotidian concerns, they are helping to shape a generation of creators who are more original and willing to take risks unseen in nearly 30 years.

Brough, 40, met the Walentases in 2004 while working at the Triangle Arts Association, to which the Walentases' company, Two Trees Management, donates studio space for its artist-in-residence programme. The couple gave Brough total autonomy on her subsequent commission and later offered her a free studio for seven months. "They understand the importance of space, which means so much," Brough says.

Similarly, Elizabeth Turk, 45, says the marble sculptures she produces would be impossible to make without the help of the Chiarini family, who run a stone fabrication business in southern California. For the past six years the Chiarinis have given Turk their rejected marble and allowed her to use their stone-cutting machines, equipment to which she could never otherwise have access.

Now Turk can work on large-scale installations that before were prohibitively expensive, and she has greater liberty to experiment.

"I have an incredible infrastructure. I can take risks and not always be thinking about how to pay the rent," she says, praising the Chiarinis' "grass-roots" patronage. "This is true support from underneath. They don't even get a tax write-off."

To be sure, artists still seek grants and fellowships from organisations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the American Academy in Rome for the experience and prestige they offer. Selection by a board of experts provides a stamp of legitimacy one patron alone cannot give.

Likewise, wealthy individuals are more likely to give to established artistic institutions, such as museums, theatres and symphonies, which place donors within an exclusive coterie and give them confidence that their money will be funnelled towards “deserving” artists who are presumably unlikely to shock.

As opposed to this more common, conservative approach to arts funding, Lawson says modern patrons “don’t play it safe. They trust the artist’s creativity and want to let us see the world through the artist’s eyes. And that’s how they’re going to turn round the art world.”

Those willing to gamble by backing specific artists may secure a place in art history, but they seldom impose themselves in a heavy-handed way. For instance, Ron Pizzuti, chairman and chief executive of Pizzuti, the property development company based in Columbus, Ohio, holds one of the nation’s premier collections of post-second world war art and has served as a trustee for the Columbus Museum of Art. He is a trustee of the Wexner Center for the Arts and chairman of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra Board.

Pizzuti is currently working to open a gallery with studio space for young artists, whom he will help financially.

Yet one of the most memorable ways Pizzuti raises visibility for emerging artists is through his firm’s holiday mugs. For the past 15 years he has hand-picked an artist to design an original piece that he then purchases and photographs for a mug. Other than stipulating that the work must be “in good taste”, Pizzuti gives no direction and the art is never commercial. He fills the mug with sweets, includes a short biography of the artist and sends the package to 1,600 friends and associates in lieu of holiday cards.

“It’s an expensive proposition for us, but it spreads the word about a young artist. And it’s been really successful,” Pizzuti says.

Patrons of the performing arts are particularly concerned with increasing their artists’ profiles and often help produce shows, as they feel symphonies and plays are meant to be shared with a wider audience. After directing Eduardo Machado’s first full-length play, *James Hammerstein*, the son of the musical theatre legend Oscar Hammerstein, offered to pay the young playwright a salary in exchange for the right to direct all plays Machado produced during that period. “I was young, but Jamie never interfered. He said he believed in my talent. I felt complete freedom to be creative,” says Machado, 54, who is now the artistic director of Intar, a theatre company that promotes Hispanic artists. From this autumn he will be teaching playwrighting at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.

Machado says the arrangement ended because he “had to grow up”, but he credits Hammerstein’s resources and guidance, as well as the grants he received from the National Endowment for the Arts, with jump-starting his career. “I don’t know if I would have been a writer otherwise.”

Charles Mee, 69, also says he owes to his patrons his ability to write plays full-time. For years he struggled to support his family as a magazine editor and political journalist, writing plays on the side. But in 1998 he approached his friend of 30 years, Dick Fisher, who by then had become chairman of Morgan Stanley, the investment bank. “I told him I couldn’t succeed because every play I wrote put me farther behind in trying to feed my children,” Mee recalls.

Fisher began sending Mee a stipend that pays for all his living expenses, including his children’s education and family trips to Europe. Since Fisher’s death last year, his widow has continued to support Mee, who has received a lifetime achievement award in drama from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, two OBIE Awards and a Laura Pels Foundation Award for Drama.

“Writing plays was my great love, and they set me free to do it. It’s much easier to donate to the New York Philharmonic. If you give money to an individual, you can look foolish if he does something embarrassing,” Mee says. “It takes terrific bravery and a sense of adventure to be a patron.”

Modern patrons may be motivated by genuine devotion to the arts, but encouraging creativity occasionally proves good for business. “I’m not selfless,” David Walentas says. “Because I had 3m sq ft we bought for nothing, it wasn’t costing me a lot to give it away. And it brought activity and safety to the neighbourhood just to have the space occupied.” For a long time, corporate America was wary and only artists were willing to inhabit Dumbo. But furnishing an artsy enclave from dilapidated warehouses has since enabled him to sell the luxury condos that he develops for millions of dollars.

While art and finance enjoy a fine romance, the connection can pose problems.

“It’s a very passionate, intense relationship. Whenever money is involved, the situation gets complicated,” Machado says, explaining why, even before Hammerstein’s death in 1999, the two grew apart.

And Jane Walentas recounts her disappointment on learning that a woman to whom she had granted space to develop a ballet company was in fact running for-profit children's dance classes. "She really took advantage. She was hosting birthday parties there, leaving cake all over the floor, and I was mopping up."

In spite of such potential snags, Lawson still sees patronage as a boon for the art world. "At artist colonies such as MacDowell or Anderson Ranch, the art is getting better and more bold, and I think patrons are a big part. There are a lot more people helping artists than we're even aware."

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