

## WHY PHILANTHROPISTS SHOULD NOT SUPPORT THE ARTS

A response to Timothy Ogden in Alliance magazine, @timothyogden

John Nickson

At last, we have an argument against philanthropy for the arts, see Timothy Ogden's posting in Alliance magazine.

Ogden makes some powerful points and one of them resonates with me in particular. I hope that I may persuade him to amend his views, at least in part.

Ogden's main point is that a great deal of philanthropic funding is little more than tax-subsidised privilege in support of organisations such as museums that cater mainly for the rich. Arts philanthropy is merely a sophisticated form of marketing and advertising. He cites "the grotesque situation at the Lincoln Centre" where the institution is paying a former donor's family to take their name off a concert hall so that it can receive an even larger donation from a new donor.

He asks what would happen to artists, such as Van Gogh, if there were no philanthropic funding. He points out that art flourishes despite poverty. He is not against funding of the arts but he is against diverting philanthropic funds from more important concerns such as the relief of poverty and disease.

He asks how much philanthropy of the arts is "instrumental" in pursuit of specific objectives or "art for arts sake" and if anyone knows.

Ogden makes powerful points. His views are shared by some philanthropists. All philanthropists have to make a choice about what matters most. Should they support culture or cancer research? My response is based on twenty five years as a Director of Development for three national arts organisations, as a trustee of education charities and as a donor who supports the arts, education, medical research, charities for the homeless and human rights.

We know that art and artists cannot survive without patronage of some sort. That was partly Van Gogh's problem. He did not have patronage. Neither public not private funding creates art but there is a symbiotic relationship between artists and those who sometimes literally feed their talent and bring their work to a wider public. For most of history and before the Arts Council was established after the Second World War, most well known artists have depended upon philanthropy which attracted no tax relief and little public acknowledgment.

The arts appeal to a mass audience. To enable the public to have access is expensive. Public funding for many institutions in the UK has declined from 80% plus to less than 25% of the annual budget since 1980. Who should pay for public access? The private sector has picked up much of the bill.

I do not believe that museums cater primarily for the wealthy. Tate Modern is the most popular museum of modern and contemporary art in the world with around five million visitors a year and an online following of twenty million. The majority of visitors are under forty. Anyone visiting Tate Modern can see that most of the visitors are young and not remotely prosperous, no doubt partly attracted by free access. There would be no Tate Modern without philanthropy

I do not believe that most arts philanthropy is instrumental and merely a form of marketing. Corporate sponsorship clearly IS advertising. The overwhelming majority of the philanthropists and donors I dealt with over 25 years were giving to support art for arts sake because they believe that art is vital part of what it means to be a human being. People may be surprised that most philanthropists shy away from acknowledgment and have to be persuaded by people like me to have their names on a list or on a wall to encourage others. The largest donation I was involved with was absolutely huge (multiples of millions), the project could not have been delivered without it and the donor has insisted on remaining anonymous, for no other reason than to protect the privacy of his family.

The example of The Lincoln Center quoted by Ogden is truly grotesque and a betrayal of all the principles of good philanthropy. We should not allow it to taint philanthropy of the arts. Moreover, I believe the US version of arts philanthropy is not appropriate for the UK. Arts boards are dominated by the rich and powerful, as you would expect in a plutocracy, and this compromises artistic policy and the independence of artists. We have a mixed economy in the UK that is the best possible guarantee for both artistic independence and cultural vitality.

I do agree with Ogden that tax relief is a thorny problem. My position is that tax relief must be directly related to what is in the public interest and what delivers public benefit. We are entering a minefield and my views are not popular with many charities. One way out of the minefield would be to redefine public benefit and restrict entitlement to tax relief for charities receiving public funding or operating in an environment that enjoys the support of either central or local government. That might exclude the donkey sanctuary but include the opera house. The issues are complex.

Philanthropy has always and will always be about choice regarding priorities. Donors and trustees must decide what is important and what matters. I prefer to talk about the personal rather than the abstract so please allow me to mention my own philanthropy.

As a governor of an international college I decided to support a refugee from the Rwandan genocide through college in the UK and graduate and postgraduate studies in the US over a period of nine years. I decided to invest in the future of one person rather than to give the money to a variety of causes. There are arguments for and against that approach but that was my choice. I believe that the young man I support will make a positive contribution to humanity.

I have also chosen to support charitable organisations where the distinction between art and education barely exists. In addition to London Music Masters, which uses classical music tuition to transform the lives of inner London primary school children, I am a trustee of the Royal College of Music. We train the musicians of the future. Music matters to most people and if they thought about it, they could not imagine life without music. Music is important and so I have chosen to support an outstandingly gifted young clarinetist who could not possibly afford to study without philanthropic support. The College has to charge fees because government funding is no longer sufficient.

Is Ogden saying that philanthropists should not support the arts until everyone is fed, watered and housed and disease is conquered? That appears to be his view but my question is this: as the state retreats, if philanthropists are not to fund the arts, who will?

I believe my question goes to the heart of the matter. The case for and against philanthropic funding of the arts depends upon whether you believe that culture matters and is integral to quality of life.

Culture defines humanity and civilisations. A few politicians recognise this. Hitler used culture as a powerful weapon to forge social and political change. He banned what he called degenerative art and used film and music to serve Nazi ideology. Hitler's war destroyed Germany's cities but not the belief of the German people in the power of culture to express what mattered to them. They chose to decide that their opera houses should be amongst the first buildings to arise out of the ruins, emblems of creativity, culture and spiritual renewal.

In those days, public funding paid the bill. Now, we need philanthropists to help fulfill aspiration for a better life.

More recently, beleaguered Palestinians chose to give priority to restoring the only grand piano in Gaza because they want some joy in their lives. They know that mankind cannot live by bread alone and that without culture, life is not worth living.

John Nickson. 17 April 2015  
@johndnickson.  
[www.johndnickson.com](http://www.johndnickson.com)