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The Nature and Sources of American Art Museum Funding

Jeffrey Abt

Barabási and Shekhtman introduce their study by pointing to the role of donors/trustees in museums, especially over "which works are displayed, institutional priorities, and myriad other issues," including "ethical questions" associated with those responsibilities. The topic has been addressed many times over the years, as, for example, in Karl Meyer's 1979 study *The Art Museum: Power, Money, Ethics*.¹ Nonetheless, Barabási and Shekhtman believe there is insufficient information on the subject—a problem their big-data project is designed to solve. While it is possible that type of methodology might contribute fresh insights, the material they have compiled fails to do so. There are two reasons: first, the dataset design for their study is flawed, reflecting an inadequate understanding of museums per se; second, it overlooks more than a century of historical research indispensable for understanding the matters they are pursuing. Together they reveal the value of a more interdisciplinary approach to these questions, one in which quantitative data collection and analysis is complemented with qualitative historical information and interpretation.

Regarding the authors' dataset, to confine their study to the "funding of 'American art,'" the authors sampled only those museums articulating "support of American art in their mission statements." But mission statements rarely define the nature of museums' collections, and thus the authors bypassed several institutions possessing some of the nation's largest collections of American art, such as the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Another problem arises from the authors' reliance on data from "institutions . . . certified by" the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD). The AAMD does not certify museums or director-applicants for membership.² If Barabási and Shekhtman were looking for a meaningful standard, they could have considered museum accreditation as peer evaluation–based confirmation of an institution's adherence to rigorous professional standards. To employ it, the authors would have had to pull their data from membership rolls of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), which accredits museums. Barabási and Shekhtman could have readily filtered the AAM's institutional membership rolls by museum type, size (by staff), as well as accreditation status to create a more relevant basis for the type of comparative study they propose. This points to another omission in the authors' study: museum expenditures. After all, accreditation incurs a higher level of expenses commensurate with professional standards for facilities, staffing levels and qualifications, procedures, programs, etc., which—when compared with income—would reveal far more about institutions' funding needs and therefore their reliance on certain types of sources. Related to this information is an institution's per capita costs; that is, how do a museum's overall expenses play out on a per-visitor basis?³

When Barabási and Shekhtman comment that foundation giving “gravitates toward large, already comparatively well-resourced institutions with national profiles,” I assume the authors are referring to large museums in major metropolitan areas. If so, might that funding trend be in response to the much larger numbers of people those museums serve?⁴

As for historical context, Barabási and Shekhtman correctly observe that “private donors, in particular, play a significant role not only as sources of financial support but also in taking on major governance roles as trustees of institutions.” It is extremely important, however, to add that private individuals serve in those capacities by design, and their close involvement is unavoidable due to the laws by which nearly all Americans nonprofit institutions, including museums, are created and self-governed. They must be established in accordance with the state laws governing their jurisdictions, a legacy of the country’s origins in a group of former colonies that became the first thirteen states.⁵ Most important of all, virtually every one of this nation’s museums is a voluntary association. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his nineteenth-century tour of a young United States:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. . . . If it be proposed to advance some truth, or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.⁶

Because of these fundamental factors, among the world’s major art museums, those of the United States are—as the study’s authors note—an unusual breed. Unlike their peers abroad, which are typically funded by their national governments, most American museums rely on an array of funding sources. That backing comes from a host of individuals, private foundations, revenue-producing enterprises, and admission fees, but only a small portion from government agencies, and even then with some difficulty. These are not newly understood facts. Laurence Vail Coleman succinctly explained them in the chapter on “Money” in his sweeping 1939 study *The Museum in America*, and over a decade prior (about a century ago!) he mapped the various contractual and statutory issues surrounding government funding in his *Manual for Small Museums* (fig. 1).⁷

A related matter surveyed by Barabási and Shekhtman is the philanthropic web of individuals and foundations on which museums depend for their fiscal well-being. Here, too, historical context is useful. Already in the 1960s Neil Harris modeled future studies of the networks and values of philanthropists, opinion leaders, and their allies in the formation and sustenance of American museums. About the same time, Daniel

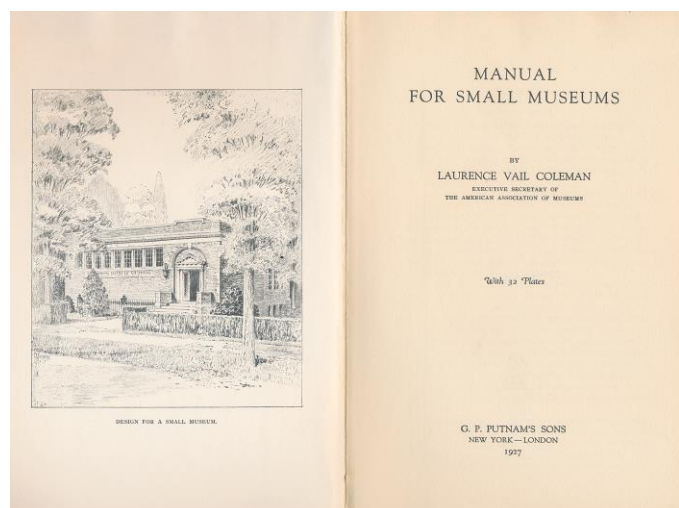


Fig. 1. Frontispiece and title page of Laurence Vail Coleman, *Manual for Small Museums* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1927).

M. Fox contributed an insightful examination of philanthropy and museums. In the 1970s Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz added greater detail and depth by showing how a relatively small number of individuals, through their trustee service at multiple institutions, nurtured a city's sprawling cultural infrastructure. By the 1990s that work was widening into new directions with, for example, investigations of underrecognized participants, such as Kathleen D. McCarthy's exploration of women's philanthropic leadership.⁸ Just as Barabási and Shekhtman would have benefited from a fuller understanding of museum professional associations in selecting their data sources, so too, with some historical background, they could have saved themselves a fair amount of trouble compiling facts we have known for a long time.

To the extent that there are ethical concerns embedded in our cultural infrastructure, the authors' study does not show how having more data on this phenomenon will help us better understand, much less improve, how museums might manage the problem. There are already a host of standards on ethical conduct.⁹ Ethics has long been a research topic among museum studies scholars, and there are entire curricula and programs devoted to it.¹⁰ Over the years, museum trustees formed their own association to help guide the training and responsible performance of future trustees.¹¹ Perhaps this is the best museum professionals and trustees can do. In the final analysis, if museum professionals believe more data are needed to understand and critically assess the myriad sources of museum funding and the ethical challenges they entail, Barabási and Shekhtman's study shows that a big-data social-science method by itself is insufficient. A more interdisciplinary approach incorporating the knowledge published by historians and museum professional associations is also necessary.

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Notes

¹ Karl E. Meyer, *The Art Museum: Power, Money, Ethics* (New York: William Morrow, 1979).

² Perhaps the authors were thinking of the AAMD's minimum standard for membership: director-applicants must be heading a museum with "an annual operating budget of \$2 million or higher." "Membership: How to Apply," Association of Art Museum Directors, accessed October 12, 2023, <https://aamd.org/about/membership/how-to-apply>.

³ For some examples of how that information might be compiled and presented, see Jeffrey Abt, *A Museum on the Verge: A Socioeconomic History of the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1882–2000* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), "B.5: Attendance Compared to Operating Expenses," "B.6: Operating Expenses per Visitor," 284–85 (and related tables).

⁴ Major institutionalized foundations typically calibrate the sizes of their grants—especially those related to exhibitions, educational outreach programs, and even capital improvements—based on various performance metrics, not least among which is the number of visitors served.

⁵ For historical background, see Jeffrey Abt, "Personifying the Museum: Incorporation and Biography in American Museum History," in *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities*, ed. Kate Hill (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2012), 133–44.

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1840), 2:114–15.

⁷ Laurence Vail Coleman, *The Museum in America: A Critical Study* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1939), 1:177–96; Laurence Vail Coleman, *Manual for Small Museums* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), appendix C, "Contract with Local Government," and appendix D, "Laws of the Various States Relating to the Support of Museums, Art Galleries and Historical Societies by County or Municipal Authorities."

⁸ Neil Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement," *American Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1962): 545–66; Daniel M. Fox, *Engines of Culture: Philanthropy and Art Museums* (1963; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions, 1995); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture and the City: Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago from the 1880s to 1917* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), esp. appendix A, "Participation of the Cultural Philanthropists." Also relevant are Paul J. DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," *Media, Culture and Society* 4 (January 1982): 33–50; and Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁹ See "Ethics," American Alliance of Museums, accessed October 12, 2023, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/ethics>, as well as the ethics and conflicts-of-interest statements in "Professional Practices in Art Museums" (whitepaper), Association of Art Museum Directors, 2011, <https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/Professional%20Practices%202011%20rev%202.2.23.pdf> or "Managing the Relationship between Art Museums and Corporate Sponsors" (policy statement), Association of Art Museum Directors, May 2007, https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/Corporate%20Sponsors_clean%2006-2007.pdf.

¹⁰ See, for example, the Institute of Museum Ethics, Seton Hall University, especially its resources page (accessed October 12, 2023): <https://www.museumethics.org/links-to-resources-2>.

¹¹ Museum Trustee Association (MTA), <https://www.museumtrustee.org>. The Association began in 1971 as a committee of the American Association of Museums (now the AAM) and split off as the MTA in 1986.