

A MUSEUM OF  
ONE'S OWN

Indonesian  
tobacco magnate  
Oei Hong Djien  
founded the  
OHD Museum to  
house his  
collection of  
more than 2,000  
works of art






# *Powering Asia's* **ART ATTACK**

FORGET YACHTS, PRIVATE JETS AND SUPERCARS, SMART COLLECTORS ARE INVESTING IN ART – AND CHANGING ASIA'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN THE PROCESS, WRITES HELEN RUSSELL





hink “iconic gallery” and names like the Guggenheim, MoMA, Saatchi and the Tate probably spring to mind. The culture of the collectors’ museum established by wealthy European or American patrons goes back more than a century. But fast-forward a few years and it’s likely to be a different picture, with Asian collectors and philanthropists setting the benchmark for first-class galleries on an international canvas.



The last decade has seen a surge in collectors setting up shop and now there are about 200 private museums in China alone. Investing in art has long been a favoured hobby of those who can afford it, and with the population of the super-wealthy in Asia growing at twice the rate of the rest of the world, the region’s richest have never had it so good. As Philip Dodd, former director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and co-founder of Made in China put it at last year’s Art HK fair, “There’s a lot of money sloshing about.”

In 2010, Indonesian-Chinese collector and agribusiness tycoon Budi Tek dropped a cool US\$6.7 million for a painting by Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang, while Chinese entrepreneur Liu Yiqian and his wife Wang Wei claim to have spent more than US\$317 million on their hobby. But there’s more to the boom than big bank balances.

“Rich people have always liked to leave memorials behind,” says Dodd, “and there is an element of ego involved. Although some collectors are interested in investment pieces or whatever’s hot right now, it’s largely Asian art they’re buying. It’s an opportunity to show private works and educate the public, so there’s a degree of cultural patriotism.”

This is something to which Wang can testify. She established the 10,000sqm Long Museum in Shanghai to show her collection of Chinese revolutionary and contemporary art, telling delegates at Art HK12, “because art education is quite poor and there are so few public museums, it’s up to private collectors to fill this gap.” Other collectors such as Li Bing, founder of the Beijing He Jing Yuan Art Museum, were spurred on by the impact of the revolution in China’s art scene and the desire to protect and promote what remained.

A lack of government-funded galleries in Indonesia inspired 73-year-old tobacco magnate Oei Hong Djien to set up the OHD museum in Magelang for his collection of more than 2,000 works of art. “Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world and we have a lot of great artists, but we don’t have a national museum so private collectors have to take over,” says Djien. “Most of the top works of Indonesian art are in the hands of private collectors and it’s a shame if the public does not have access to these.”

In China, independent galleries are categorised as “private non-enterprises” and are entitled to tax breaks and subsidies. Meanwhile, in Indonesia and other parts of Asia, there is hardly any regulation

#### A CULTURAL EVOLUTION

clockwise from top: The vast Himalayas Art Museum in Shanghai; entrepreneur Liu Yiqian and his wife Wang Wei, both art collectors



“There are no rules about how to run galleries in Asia, because it’s all so new”



or government interference. This means that with a decent bank balance and a will to display your wares, setting up a gallery in the region is relatively straightforward. It’s making the museum sustainable that’s the problem.

The Chinese state news agency, Xinhua, recently reported that most of Shanghai’s private museums had faltered at one stage or another. Zhao Yueting, a collector of antique ceramic teapots, was forced to close his Shihua Art Museum last year after a developer pushed up his rent.

Djien readily admits that opening your own art facility is a big responsibility. “It’s a commitment to providing for art education, to conserving and promoting artwork and supporting living artists,” he agrees. A rock-solid infrastructure to keep all those plates spinning is essential, but managing a private museum doesn’t come with a manual.

“There are no rules about how to run galleries in Asia, because









#### ART SMART

opposite, clockwise from top left  
Part of the installation *Share, But it's Not Fair*, by Paola Pivi at the Rockbund Art Museum; Indonesian-Chinese collector Budi Tek; *Landscape of Rocks and Mountains* by Zhang Daqian at Shanghai's Long Museum; Indonesia's OHD Museum; *Sentinel of Our Great Motherland* by Shen Jiawei at the Long Museum  
this page  
The eye-catching entrance to the OHD Museum



## “In 50 years Asia’s private collections will be the world’s great museums”

it’s all so new,” says Dodd. “Everyone is learning as they go along.” This can also be liberating as Asian collectors find new and innovative ways to secure the future of their galleries. “One thing that the Chinese have been doing is using commercial projects to fund private collections, and this makes them more sustainable for the future,” he adds.

Entrepreneur Dai Zhikang founded what’s now known as the Himalayas Art Museum in Pudong, Shanghai, as part of a development that includes a hotel and theatre, as well as residential and commercial property. The busy location helps to make the gallery financially viable and the idea is quick to catch on. The Rockbund Art Museum, set up by Thomas Ou, is the only contemporary art gallery along The Bund and must be entered through a shopping centre, ensuring a steady footfall of potential clients.

Smart strategies like these are now being shared by gallery owners via the Collectors’ Club, founded by Bing to allow private collectors to meet regularly and exchange ideas about contemporary art. Hong Kong’s International Art Fair (now HK

Art Basel) also supports an annual private museum forum and, in March this year, new London-based show Art13 launched a summit for gallery owners. Zhikang, Wang and Bing flew in to take part in the discussion, hosted by Dodd. The forum, titled The China Moment, underlined the fact that we are living in a “museum era” with Asia at the forefront.

“There’s still a lot to learn for collectors in Asia but there’s also an opportunity to do things differently,” says Dodd. “Private museums can take risks, be flexible and make things happen more quickly. An exhibition that might take four years to come to fruition in a publicly funded space may take only a few weeks at a private museum.”

It may not be easy and learning on the job can be tough at times. But the future is bright. Asia’s collectors are agile in their pursuit of great works, swift to create public access and keen to collaborate and educate themselves to make sure their galleries are sustainable. As Dodd says, “The great American museums are built on private collections – and in 50 years Asia’s private collections will be the world’s great museums.” ■

### HOW TO START YOUR OWN MUSEUM

Philip Dodd offers his advice to would-be private museum founders.

1. think about the content and collections rather than just the building. Galleries need a strong, distinctive identity – not an architect.
2. have an eye to the future. It’s not just about financing something now, it’s about sustaining it in five, 10, or 15 years.
3. find friends and other gallery owners you can work with. It’s very costly to put on an exhibition by yourself, but if you share a show or a collection it’s much more affordable.
4. bring in experts – engage professional teams who know what they’re doing to manage the museum.
5. work out what strategies you’ll use to market your gallery to Asia. It’s no use replicating the marketing models used in the West, so you need experts that understand the Asian market. It’s likely that Weibo will be more important than, say, magazine advertising.