

SPECIAL REPORT: THE ART OF COLLECTING

Paris Exhibition Presents the Art, Not the Artist



Matthew Newton

David Walsh, owner of the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, with a work by Michel Blazy.

By DAVID BELCHER
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PARIS — In an age where names like Monet, van Gogh or Hopper guarantee long lines at exhibitions akin to those at rock concerts, the Australian collector David Walsh dares to show art without identifying the artist or capitalizing on a celebrity name. It's about the art, not the artist, he says.

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While critics have derided Mr. Walsh's decision not to label artworks, or even to group them by period or theme, others have hailed him as a visionary. Tourists from around the world have flocked to his sprawling, \$100 million Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, stimulating the island's economy the same way the Guggenheim Museum put Bilbao, Spain, on the cultural tourism map a decade ago.

Beginning Saturday, the curious can experience Mr. Walsh's unorthodox take on presenting art at [La Maison Rouge](#), a private museum in Paris. The exhibition, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and titled "[Theater of the World](#)" (through Jan. 12) is a sampling of about 150 MONA pieces and some 300 works from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Mr. Walsh's curating style — a seemingly random presentation of art from all over the world, from ancient to

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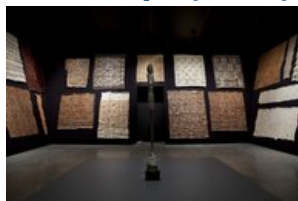
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Remi Chauvin/Museum of Old and New Art
Part of the exhibition "Theater of the World" at the Maison Rouge in Paris.

modern, in the same room — is just another example of how art and its presentation are constantly evolving, he insists.

“Categories are the first problem with museums,” Mr. Walsh said recently by telephone from his home in Tasmania. “What they are in fact doing is showing what’s similar and asking you to see what is different. We’re asking you the opposite. We are seeing things that are different and asking you what is similar.”

For Mr. Martin, “Theater of the World” was a continuation of his own curating style, which he said is quite similar to Mr. Walsh’s.

“We came up with similar ideas differently,” Mr. Martin said. “He started to collect works of art from different periods. The name of his museum says it all. He wanted to break the linear approach and make it more anthropological.

“I had similar ideas. I started to put them in shape and form in the [Museum Kunstpalast](#) in Düsseldorf with two artists there. I reorganized the permanent collection in a nonlinear way, not chronological or by technique.”

Mr. Walsh, who rose from poverty to build a gambling empire in Australia and become a millionaire, has been drawn to art since his childhood, when he spent hours on Sundays at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, “instead of going to Mass,” as he put it. He soaked up the history of his native land and became obsessed with great works from ancient Egypt through to Modern Art. His fortune has allowed him to amass hundreds of artworks, and his desire to share them with the public led to the opening of MONA in 2011.

Wedged into a cliffside on a peninsula on the Tasmanian coastline and sprawling across 9,000 square meters, or 97,000 square feet, much of it underground, MONA is far from the celebrity architect design of many new museums. Described by Mr. Walsh as a “subversive adult Disneyland,” MONA is best known for its often outrageous collection, which largely focuses on sex and death. But perhaps its most distinguishing feature is that it does not have wall panels identifying each piece of artwork, or an obvious way in which pieces are grouped.

“Museums want to show off their trophies,” he said. “When you enter most museums, you feel small in the greatness of the hall. What we are doing is bottom up, not top down. I don’t give you visual cues at MONA that most museums give you.”

If they prefer, visitors can carry an electronic device, created by a technology company that Mr. Walsh founded, which identifies each artwork. The seemingly random presentation is, in fact, Mr. Walsh’s method. He sees art as being linked by association, not by category or chronology.

“The world sees art as a straight line from ancient Greece to Egypt to Rome to Abstractionism,” Mr. Walsh said. “We think of this Victorian notion of the West creating the world. I love this idea that from antiquity to Giacometti, plenty of cultures were making beautiful things.”

One example of how that is celebrated in “Theater of the World” is a room full of tapa cloths from native South Pacific islanders surrounding an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus that stands upright. At the other end of the room is a pencil-thin Giacometti bronze sculpture, “Femme Leoni” (1947). Mr. Walsh, in the audio guide, describes how human forms have been depicted over thousands of years.

Another room is devoted to the eye; yet another to the relationship between human and beast. A Picasso painting and a tribal shield share a space, and a Max Ernst sculpture sits

atop an antique Peruvian mortar.

The 18 rooms are mostly being recreated for the show at La Maison Rouge, whose owner, Antoine de Galbert, a private art collector, set up the gallery in 2005. The show will omit a few items because the space is smaller, and a booklet, rather than the electronic device used at MONA, identifying each work of art will be distributed to visitors.

“When Mr. Galbert decided to open this space almost 10 years ago, he decided to show his own collection and other collections,” said Paula Aisemberg, La Maison Rouge’s director. “We don’t show collections made by companies and advisers, but collections by one person who has, say, a vision.”

For Mr. Martin, the chance to work with Mr. Walsh — they met when Mr. Walsh admired how Mr. Martin curated Artempo in Venice in 2007 — is a chance to merge their visions while challenging themselves, museumgoers and perhaps the way art is displayed.

“Museum curators have long thought that the public couldn’t appreciate works of art if they didn’t learn art history,” Mr. Martin said. “My point of view is completely different. There is something very central in art that everyone can experience.”

“You don’t go to a concert just to learn about the history of music,” he continued. “This is what I want to convey to people with exhibitions. There is much to learn just from seeing things. Knowledge is not something you absolutely need to appreciate a work of art.”

A version of this special report appears in print on October 17, 2013, in The International New York Times.

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