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By Abby Schultz

Advisor Leslie Ramos Makes a Case for Giving to Arts and Culture

Guests attend the YoungArts New York Spring Gala 2024 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art earlier this month in New York. YoungArts: The National Foundation for the Advancement of Artists was started by Sarah Arison to create understanding of the value of artists in society. Arison is featured in Leslie Ramos's "Philanthropy in the Arts: A Game of Give and Take."

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Leslie Ramos is not your average arts and culture advisor. Yes, Ramos will assist in building and managing collections, but her focus isn't on acquiring a painting by the latest sensation. It's on philanthropy.

"We work with clients whose primary goal is to be philanthropic—they might be thinking of donating a collection to an institution in the future, they might be thinking about legacy planning," Ramos says. "Our work in the more traditional advisory sense is geared toward that."

Ramos is co-founder, with Aurelie Cauchy, of the Twentieth, an art advisory based in London. Earlier this year Ramos's book, *Philanthropy in the Arts: A Game of Give and Take*, was published by Lund Humphries in association with the Sotheby's Institute of Art.

The book details the challenging financial environment most arts and culture institutions are dealing with from a combination of falling levels of public funding and the after-effects of the Covid-19 crisis, including declining numbers of visitors to museums, the theater, ballet, and other arts groups.

Then there's the fact that giving to the arts has never been robust. Among those who give monthly in the U.K., only 2% to 3% donate to the arts compared with 26% who donate to animal welfare, Ramos writes, citing data from a 2022 Charities Aid Foundation Report in the U.K. In the U.S., the Giving USA 2023 report found 5% of philanthropic dollars went to "arts, culture, and humanities" in 2022, compared with 27% of dollars that funded religious organizations.

“The arts are constantly facing a battle for relevance and have consistently been one of the least supported charitable causes,” she writes.

One reason is that supporting the arts through philanthropy isn’t quite as straightforward as other areas of giving, she says in an interview.

Consider museums. Although many of these institutions are the most established types of arts organizations—often ensconced in impressive structures and filled with priceless objects—they have faced increasing challenges.

“Museums are institutions that are respected and that many of us turn to looking for answers, looking for solace, looking for something that either uplifts or gives an explanation or helps you understand the world that we live in,” Ramos says.

As the world has become seemingly more complex, “not necessarily being able to have straightforward answers to many of the issues that we’ve been facing, including the pandemic, has affected how museums interact with their audiences and their communities, and shifted the levels of trust in the institutions themselves.”

Throughout the book, Ramos details why and how people give to the arts, the financing needs of these organizations, and the barriers arts philanthropy faces today and in the future. For the arts ultimately to be sustained, philanthropists and arts groups need to strengthen what Ramos describes as “good giving” and “good taking.” That is, donors should trust the institutions they support to do their jobs, and institutions should treat donors with respect.

“It’s a relationship that needs to work,” she says.

The ‘Impact’ Problem

Ramos believes a big reason arts and culture suffers from a lack of philanthropic funding is that it’s not viewed as important as other charitable causes, such as curing cancer, or tackling poverty and hunger, particularly at a time when many donors are tracking the effectiveness of their gifts.

“The arts are having a hard time trying to demonstrate the impact that they have on society,” she says. “If you’re donating to build a school, you can say [for example] 150 children will benefit from the building of the school,” she says. But how can the impact of an art exhibition be measured?

“You can say visitor numbers are important, but sometimes you have exhibitions of very obscure art movements or very obscure artists, or an opera from a historical composer that nobody has heard of,” Ramos says. “It’s advancing academia, it’s advancing research, cultural knowledge—that’s hard to quantify on an Excel spreadsheet.”

But as she argues in the book, “the arts can act as a powerful conduit to address society’s most pressing concerns, from the environment to biodiversity, to social justice and mental health.”

It also doesn’t take much to make a difference. Multi-million-dollar donations such as Seattle-based developer Richard Hedreen’s recent gift of his estimated US$300 million art collection to Seattle University—plus US$25 million to create a museum on campus—can be life-changing to an institution. But small dollar donations can go a long way to support the purchase of materials for a children’s art workshop or to pay for a lecture for art students, for example, Ramos says.

“There are ways to support the arts to an extent and also still be charitable to other causes because they are all extremely important,” she says.

Why Give?

The reasons donors choose to give to the arts usually comes out of passion, whether that's for painting or theater or dance, or being moved by a particular experience. There's also the social experience it can provide. "Being part of a community, that's a very important driver," Ramos says.

Some U.S. donors give to the arts purely for tax benefits, but Ramos finds that donors who actively get involved in the institutions they support are more likely to be philanthropic. Generally, taxes "are not necessarily the primary driver," she says.

In the visual arts, supporting individual artists and artist commissions is less straightforward than supporting an institution, such as a museum. "They don't come looking for you," Ramos says. For collectors and aspiring collectors, and others interested in becoming more involved in the art world, "the initial entry point is commercial galleries and auction houses," she says.

The problem with being introduced to the arts through galleries and auction houses is that commercial enterprises tend to be more interested in selling objects to a potential collector than having that individual support an artist residency, for example.

Though "a healthy and thriving art market does ensure that artists make a living," Ramos writes, it may mean collectors are less aware, or have less money to spend, on nonprofit concerns. As she explains, half of the art world exists in the commercial space, but the other half is "made up of museums, small artist-run spaces, nonprofits and art schools, and [is] filled with curators, art historians, writers, educators and museologists," who don't have the same resources and get far less attention.

This can be countered for some collectors once they realize that supporting certain institutions could provide them with access to "better works of art and to better galleries," she says, although she notes that it's always best to give simply because it's important. In the book, she often emphasizes that donors should give to small organizations that are "deeply connected to artists at critical points in their careers."

The fact younger generations appear to be less interested in the arts and as connected to specific institutions as their parents or grandparents is a looming concern, particularly as significant wealth is passed on.

What's encouraging is that arts philanthropy is being pushed in "exciting new directions" in Asia and Africa, outside the dominant centers of the U.S. and Europe, "making it more digitally native, more community-oriented and more accountable," Ramos writes. Also, "arts organizations are learning that the strategies used to engage with the Rockefellers and Gettys of old might not be enough for a younger and more diverse crowd who want mission-driven organizations that they respect."

Ultimately, though, the arts need to show that they matter. As Ramos writes, "It is necessary for the survival of the arts to show that they can be a conduit for so much more than the art itself and can help build social cohesion, bring awareness to other causes and improve mental health."