



What Elite Museums Can Teach Us About Running a Creative Business

Balancing between the creative imperative and the bottom line is an art perfected by top museums like MoMA.

Picture yourself in a museum of modern art. On the walls of the gallery are two Picasso paintings, *Dish of Pears* and *Seated Nude*, alongside other paintings by European artists active in the early 20th century. Step into a room nearby and there is another Picasso, *The Three Dancers*, among a selection of masterpieces by international Surrealists. Elsewhere in the museum, in another curated show, you find again the unmistakable hand of Picasso in *Weeping Woman*.

You could, in fact, be at the Tate Modern in London where several of the Spanish master's works are currently seen in ongoing exhibitions **as described above**. Why does the elite museum juxtapose works of one of the most famous artists ever with lesser-known works when it could plausibly draw more visitors with a permanent solo exhibition of its 54 Picasso paintings, sketches and sculptures?

Arcane though the question may sound, the answers contain not just insights to the underlying logic and driving forces of top museums, but also the key to reconciling the creativity or innovation and profit imperatives of a business.

In "**Networks on the walls: Analysing 'traces' of institutional logics in museums' permanent exhibitions**", **Anna Zamora-Kapoor** of Washington State University, **Yue Zhao** of Paris School of

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Business and I unravel the question by analysing artist selection and the underlying networks among artworks in the permanent collections of three top museums of modern and contemporary art: Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. We show that elite museums' selection of artists and the way in which they display the latter's works are subject to forces of state, market and aesthetics as well as to the compromises these often conflicting forces engender – dynamics similar to what businesses in the creative and innovative industries face.

Networks on the walls

We built a dataset comprising 514 artists whose works were displayed in the permanent exhibitions of MoMA, Centre Pompidou and Tate Modern. To determine the factors driving the selection of artworks by a specific museum, we collated data on the exhibited artists' year of birth, gender and nationality as well as reputation (based on their ranking on **artfacts.net**, number of solo and group shows, art movement affiliation). We also constructed networks among the artists depending on where their works were displayed in each of the three museums, i.e. artists were connected to other artists if their artworks were shown in the same room.

Our findings, now published in *Poetics*, showed state, market and aesthetic imperatives were at play in what the museums put in their permanent collections and how they showed it.

State: We found that all three museums over-represent artists from their countries despite claiming a global remit. For example, an artist who was born in the United States had a greater likelihood of being selected by the MoMA, while a British artist was more likely to be picked by Tate Modern compared to a non-British one. The observed organisational bias for home-grown artists reflects public museums' obligation to **promote national heritage and, by extension, soft power**. This mission is especially true of elite art museums, which occupy a central place in their national cultural space and represent an entry point to their nation's culture for domestic and international audiences.

Another factor that might have contributed to the museums' curatorial "nationalism" is the importance of public funding. In 2017, Centre Pompidou received €71 million in state funding. Tate Modern received less subsidy: the Tate Gallery that comprises Tate Modern and Tate Britain received £35.6 million. MoMA, in contrast, relied on paying visitors and private donors.

Market: Our analysis sorted the 514 artists represented in the permanent collections into three tiers by reputation scores. MoMA, which a trustee once described as being "run like a business", mostly exhibited those in the top tier and avoided those in the bottom tier. Heavily-subsidised Pompidou, meanwhile, favoured the bottom-tier artists and eschewed the top tier.

Aesthetic: The aesthetic logic holds that museums' first and foremost responsibility is towards the collection, preservation and valuation of works of art. We theorised that, under the aesthetic imperative, curators would tend to categorise works of artists from the same country or same movement like Surrealism in the same room, controlling for other factors including age and prestige. Our findings showed that all three museums were indeed driven by the aesthetic logic.

The networks we created by analysing "room sharing" arrangements among artists further illuminated the curatorial approach of each museum. Some 80 percent of the 514 artists were exhibited in just one room; Picasso stood out for having works in 14 rooms. Unsurprisingly, he loomed large in the networks of Tate Modern and MoMA. Tate's network was held together in the centre by Picasso, Henri Matisse and Henri Laurens; MoMA's network converged on Picasso. Pompidou had the most structurally different network of all. It comprised

more nodes, more components and a higher degree of connectedness than its peers.

These findings suggest that the French institution showcased a more diverse line-up of artists and an unusual pattern of exhibition arrangement. As the director of Centre Pompidou, Bernard Blistène, said: "Each museum consists of the singularity of its own history; its collections are the incontrovertible proof."

When it comes to specific artistic movements, it was the Tate that played to its own beat. Shows on video installations, Cubism, **Arte povera** and Minimalism were especially likely to be staged at the London museum, known to be partial to theme-based clusters and artists belonging to specific movements, than at MoMA or Pompidou.

Know-what and know-how: drawing the boundaries of a boundless creativity

Our study is based on the idea that objects and their arrangements hold cues to social and institutional dynamics among organisational stakeholders. This applies particularly to museums. Directors, curators, conservationists, marketing staff and other professionals working for museums often have to tread a fine balance between state, market and aesthetic imperatives to address diverse demands. They compromise on some decisions while defending their prerogative in others.

For example, curators may defer to directors over selection of artists and artworks to conform to state and market logics (the know-what of selection). But they often maintain curatorial autonomy over how the works are displayed (the know-how of using the selected resources). As we have shown, this two-step approach is evident in how artworks are displayed in museums' permanent collections.

Creative businesses including those in fashion, film, music and high-tech innovation can take a leaf out of elite museums' playbook. Put simply, museums offer a lesson on how to balance between two often opposing imperatives: creativity or innovation versus profit; art versus commerce. The business side spells out the know-what and draws the boundaries. Designers and other creatives should then be given free rein to exercise their know-how within those boundaries.

For now, in business, one of the companies that perhaps best exemplifies this two-step modus operandi is **Gucci**. As soon as he became CEO in 2015, Marco Bizzarri decided he wanted a more contemporary look for the century-old fashion house that would appeal to millennials. He hired a creative director, Alessandro Michele, known for his eccentric style and fondness for streetwear. Michele

lost no time in overhauling Gucci's staid image, right down to updating the brand's "GG" logo with lots of bling and embroidering Mickey Mouse on leather bags. Sales have been on a meteoric rise since, from €4.4 billion in 2016 to about €9 billion last year. Know-what and know-how came together in spectacular fashion in this case.

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