Bridging the Private and Public: A Journey of Patronage and Purpose

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In many cultures, private patronage is essential in enabling the production of art. Unconstrained by institutional regulations and responsibilities, private art patrons and collectors can pursue a range of considerations in their curatorial decisions and their support of artists—resulting in a plethora of diverse artistic expressions and under-represented voices residing within private collections that can often remain hidden from public view. Rachel Teo, co-founder of The Private Museum Singapore, explains how an arts space like hers makes previously inaccessible works available to the public and adds diversity, breadth and depth to a nation's cultural capital.

The Beginnings of The Private Museum (2010)

In 2010, The Private Museum (TPM) was founded by my father, Daniel Teo, and me with a mission: to encourage private art collectors to share their collections with the public. We wanted to create a space that fostered an art ecology grounded in patronage and which promoted art appreciation across wider communities. This foundation would allow us to be connected with our own history, culture, and heritage while encouraging others to engage in the experience. With this understanding, we set about planting the seeds for an institution that would contribute to Singapore's arts ecosystem.

The opportunity arose with a government tender for the use of 51 Waterloo Street—a compact, 1,400-square-foot space offered by the National Heritage Board (NHB) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) to encourage private arts initiatives. For collectors, this space would foster a deeper appreciation of how art spaces can connect people, ideas, and communities by offering exposure through exhibition-making. The space would also allow us to provide internships and job opportunities for the next generation of artists and art professionals who were being nurtured at institutions such as LASALLE College of the Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), and School of the Arts Singapore (SOTA).

Building Foundations: Structure, Practice, and the Waterloo Years (2010–2021)

The establishment of TPM as a charity required structure, governance and the generosity of directors who were willing to give their time and advice pro-bono. As part of our governance, we ensured that over 50% of our board comprised non-family members to align with charity regulations and to embrace accountability. In 2015, we were accorded Institution of a Public Character (IPC) status, and, in 2020, we were invited by the National Heritage Board to be part of The Museum Roundtable. The latter was a pivotal milestone for TPM as it formalised our inclusion in a network of more than 50 museums and heritage galleries in Singapore.

"Private collectors can unlock hidden artistic voices, enriching a nation's cultural capital through diversity and access."

Over 50 exhibitions were presented at our Waterloo Street home from 2010 to 2021. This period was marked by experimentation, learning, and resilience. In the beginning, we were often misunderstood. Were we a gallery or a private collection on view? But we remained focused on our vision: to become a leading independent private museum.

We were fortunate to have had the guidance of Tan Hwee Koon, a seasoned curator formerly from the Singapore Art Museum. Her knowledge in museum practice was instrumental to our museum's foundation. We worked with professional art installers, conservators, and writers, treating every exhibition with the same rigour as a public museum would—through condition reports, art handling protocols, and catalogue publications.

I recall our very first collector exhibition with Alan Hodges in 2011, *To Add a Meter to an Unknown Mountain: An Iconic Collection of Contemporary Chinese Photography.* When I asked him why he collected art, he replied, "Art moves my soul." My response to him was simple: "Please help me move more souls." This remains at the heart of what we do at TPM. My father has always said that "art is medicine for the soul", and we hoped to create a space that offered just that—a quiet sanctuary where people could take a moment away from their busy lives to reflect and connect with art.

Another highlight during this period was our exhibition of works by Khoo Sui Hoe from the collection of Datuk Lim Chong Keat from Penang. One of the works, *Children of the Sun,* was eventually acquired by the National Gallery Singapore—an outcome that illustrates how private collections can meaningfully contribute to our shared heritage in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

We also marked significant milestones, such as an inaugural fundraising gala in 2018 to commemorate our 8th anniversary. What began as a celebration quickly evolved into a cornerstone of our sustainability strategy. Since then, we have had numerous fundraising campaigns, all going well beyond raising funds. They affirm our commitment to long-term partnerships, deepen our network of patrons and supporters, and reinforce our belief in the enduring value of TPM.

A New Chapter: Osborne House and Expanding Horizons (2023–2025)

In 2021, we closed the chapter at Waterloo Street and began preparing for something bigger. The road to this next phase was not without challenges, but was made possible by the tenacity and direction of our Associate Museum Director, Aaron Teo. He was instrumental in our expansion and move to Osborne House, a colonial-era building at 11 Upper Wilkie Road. Aaron helped to envision its potential as TPM's new home, together with my father and me. His efforts in working with stakeholders and key partners including Richard Hassel from WOHA were key to bringing our vision to life.

In 2023, TPM reopened in Osborne House, renewing its commitment to heritage, accessibility, and evolving the role of the museum in contemporary society. The move marked an expansion in vision, scale, and ambition. Our new space gave us the opportunity to dream larger and organise bigger exhibitions.

The first exhibition we presented was a large-scale survey exhibition of Kumari Nahappan, charting over 30 years of her interdisciplinary artistic practice. Since then, we have presented eight monumental exhibitions at our new home, engaging over 20,000 visitors. Among these was one of our most ambitious undertakings to date—*Chronic Compulsions*, a landmark group exhibition developed in collaboration with the collecting community, Art Addicts Anonymous. This exhibition brought together 15 private collectors in Singapore, each sharing deeply personal selections from their collections. It was a powerful reflection of our founding mission—to spotlight the role of collectors as cultural custodians and to build on a culture of patronage through public access and dialogue.

Private Sector Partnerships: A Catalyst for the Arts

TPM's work is underpinned by the belief that the private sector plays an essential role in shaping the future of the arts. From the beginning, we invited and collaborated with artists, collectors, architects, philanthropists, corporate sponsors, and members of the public to be meaningful partners in this journey.

Outside of exhibitions, TPM has also built a strong culture of patronage through sustained fundraising efforts. We have organised over 10 large-scale fundraising initiatives—from art gala dinners to charity golf tournaments—each designed not only to raise funds but also to cultivate a broader community of supporters. These events serve as critical platforms for engagement, allowing us to encourage communities to become active patrons.

Longstanding collaborations with design studios and logistics providers, as well as our cultural partners across Southeast Asia, have allowed us to deliver professional, thought-provoking experiences. Serendipitous opportunities and creative risks have afforded us the chance to grow TPM into an example of how the private sector can contribute meaningfully to cultural development.

Internationalisation and Public Engagement: The Role of the Independent Museum

Meaningful internationalisation goes beyond simply showcasing art; it is also about fostering relationships and positioning Singapore in a broader international conversation with artists, collectors and institutions. We have been fortunate in our internationalisation efforts, with the support of various grants and art agency partnerships. Future development will depend on continued support and commitments from both existing and new partners.

In 2015, we partnered with visual artist, Takuji Kogo, director for Kitakyushu Biennale in Japan, in presenting our first digital art exhibition. Through our second collaboration "Candy Factory Projects" in 2017, we brought in artists from beyond Singapore to engage with local audiences. With support from the Government of Western Australia, we hosted a collaboration between Australian artist Ian de Souza and Singaporean Andy Yang to present an exhibition exploring the fluid exchange between the cultural landscapes of Singapore and Australia. Another example of our internationalisation efforts was our presentation of Natee Utarit, a renowned contemporary Thai artist, whose exhibitions at TPM were supported by international collectors. These exhibitions were not only artistic showcases, but also opportunities to engage and educate local audiences through featured artist talks, docent-led tours (in collaboration with Friends of the Museum), fireside conversations, and workshops designed to foster community engagement.

Organising international art residency programmes with partners like Bali Purnati and Cemeti Art Space in Indonesia, for Singaporean artists like Han Sai Por, Hong Zhu An and Lim Tiong Gee, provided new experiences in immersive overseas environments. These artist-in-residence programmes resulted in new works which were exhibited at TPM, created important networks, and opened up fresh artistic dialogues across geographies.

One of our most memorable public initiatives involved specially curated bus tours that took audiences across the city to visit public sculptures by acclaimed Singaporean artist, the late Anthony Poon (1945–2006). Programmes like these take art beyond the walls of the museum and into the arenas of daily life, offering new ways to connect with Singapore's cultural landscape and encouraging audiences to engage with art in everyday spaces.

Our continued involvement with international art fairs such as ART SG and S.E.A. Focus remains an important element of TPM's internationalisation and public engagement efforts. Through their VIP programmes, we have raised our interaction with global patrons and art professionals, and increased awareness of our exhibitions. Such encounters with the international art community play an important role in cultivating long-term relationships and cross-border patronage.

Looking Ahead: Building for the Future

Patronage has always been integral to art history. For example, the masterpieces of the Renaissance

would not exist today without the church and wealthy supporters. Particularly with TPM, a charity-based organisation, patronage is an indispensable part of our future. But we aim to foster a broad-based rather than narrow patronage. We consider every visitor who walks through our doors a patron—everyone who lends their eyes, heart, and mind to engage with art, everyone who could potentially become a collector or a donor.

Government support has played, and will continue to play, an important role in sustaining our mission. The Cultural Matching Fund (CMF) and endorsements from the National Arts Council (NAC), in particular, have been instrumental in doubling the impact of private giving—reinforcing the importance of a shared responsibility between public and private sectors in nurturing the arts. Grants, both private and institutional, have enabled us to scale our programmes, deepen our research, and build long-term cultural value that benefits the wider community.

A perspective by Eric Crosby, an American museum director, is worth sharing: "To open our perspective, museums need to start acting less like local institutions with global aspirations and more like global institutions with local aspirations". For TPM, our global relevance—already evident in our showcasing of international art—will continue to be reflected in tandem with the growing collector base in Singapore. As this base grows, many will collect art pieces from both local and international artists. As a Singapore-based institution, remaining connected to our local audiences and our artists is vital for TPM as our job of curating collector shows in Singapore is central to our core programming.

A key challenge of having a museum in Singapore is the cost of real estate. This challenge is compounded by the short leases given by the Singapore Land Authority (SLA). Nevertheless, we remain focused on our vision for TPM to become a museum for all Singaporeans—one that reflects the richness of our local narratives, fosters a sense of belonging within the community, and invites all to share in the ownership of our cultural heritage as joint custodians for Singapore's growing legacy of arts and culture. □

About the Author



Rachel Teo is the co-founder of The Private Museum (TPM), which she established together with her father, Daniel Teo, in 2010. Envisioned to support art appreciation and patronage, TPM is a non-profit, private museum that aims to be an alternative platform bridging the gap between the private and the public, by connecting communities through art, culture, and heritage, actively engaging local, regional, and international audiences from all walks of life.

Deeply committed to supporting, advancing, and developing the arts, culture, and heritage ecosystems in Singapore, Rachel serves on the Board of leading Singaporean music charity The TENG Company, and was on the executive committee of the Art Galleries Association of Singapore from 2019 to 2022.

For her contributions, Rachel was recently awarded the Patron of the Arts award at Robb Report Singapore's Gala 2024, and the Friend of the Arts award at the National Art Council's Patron of the Arts Awards in 2023.