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In Europe, the Arts Ask for Alms

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BERLIN — Last week the shadow culture secretary for Britain’s Conservative Party, Jeremy Hunt, promised to introduce “a U.S.-style culture of philanthropy” if the Tories come to power in the coming election. Speaking before the State of the Arts conference in London, Mr. Hunt foresaw a “golden age” of tax breaks to encourage private donations and help cut back on government spending.

“I do believe in state funding,” he reassured his no doubt partly skeptical audience, “but we are committed to a mixed-economy funding model for the arts.” He added that the party’s shadow chancellor, George Osborne, agreed with him.

And in Paris last month the Pompidou museum was shut down by a strike for more than two weeks, and other museums for several days, because France’s president, Nicolas Sarkozy, also wants to reduce arts support. He has proposed making cuts in the whole state workforce, with its jobs for life and generous pensions, including at cultural institutions like the Louvre, the palace of Versailles and the National Library. The plan is for only one worker to replace every two who retire. The Pompidou Center’s labor union estimates that the museum would lose some 200 jobs in the next decade as a result.

French museums are supposed to raise money if they want more workers. In short, to Americanize the system, as Mr. Hunt is proposing in Britain.

Didier Alaime, who represents the Confédération Générale du Travail, the country’s biggest union, in its dealings with the Culture Ministry, said the other day that “the more public policies are dependent on private financing, the more they risk feeling the ups and downs of the market.” He added, “The more we’re dependent on outside financing, the less we” — he was speaking about the people of France — “control the policies that are financed.”

Mr. Alaime recalled how a few years ago the Louvre relied not on public money but on a gift from Total, the oil company, to pay for the restoration of its Apollo Gallery, where now “the name of the sponsor is more visible than the name of the

gallery itself.”

“It gives the impression that culture is merchandise,” he said.

Franck Guillaumet, secretary of the union for Pompidou employees, echoed that thought. He lamented how “we have to struggle against this unfortunate trend in order to preserve the French cultural exception,” as many in France proudly call the country’s brand of cultural protectionism. Increasingly, he added, “we live under a Thatcherian system in which public service and civil servants are demonized.”

The only thing worse for the French than becoming more like America, apparently, is becoming more like Britain.

But Britain and France may not be so far apart when it comes to public versus private financing. For years Americanization has been creeping in in both countries and in others in Europe, like Italy and Germany. American culturati tend to idolize the Old World approach whereby governments pick up the tab for culture. (In the Pompidou’s case more than 70 percent of the cost of running the museum is paid by the French government.) But a consequence is that European cultural institutions have, compared with those in the United States, next to no tradition of private giving. There are few, if any, tax incentives to entice private donations in many countries. Even volunteer work tends to be frowned upon: paid employees seem to consider it a threat, not a boon to public service.

Here in Berlin I often escape for an hour or two to the Gemäldegalerie, this city’s museum of old master paintings, one of the best in the world. But because it’s off the beaten tourist path, and because this is Germany and not France, it is nearly always empty. In room after room of Giotto and Raphael, Titian and Rembrandt, Dürer and Holbein I find myself alone, save for the sandal-clad guards spending quiet days of monkish solitude, sharing what I have come over the years to think of as my private Filippo Lippi, my personal Vermeer, my own Chardins and Watteaus.

It is a glorious gift, and I am grateful to a public financing system that in this particular case is not yet in thrall to, or is proudly resisting, the marketing strategies that have turned the Musée d’Orsay in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London into the equivalents of Wal-Marts on Black Friday. Bureaucratic benign neglect likewise sustains dozens of German opera companies, whose proliferation is a point of national pride. At the same time, by freeing these companies from market forces, it allows them to answer to pretty much no one except themselves. The abundance of mediocre opera productions in Germany is a consequence.

Even when government-sponsored culture begins with grand ambitions, the machinery of state can grind it down. Just as Georges Pompidou, France’s president, devised the Pompidou museum, his successor François Mitterrand opened the Orsay as part of an attempt to guarantee his own cultural legacy, and then Jacques Chirac did the same with the Branly museum for non-Western cultures. (In France presidents are aspiring Medicis, with public money.) In those cases — politics twisted how objects are displayed, as artifacts of a dubious

revisionist history at Orsay and, even if unwittingly, as exhibits in a colonialist zoo at Branly — they also produced shopping-mall-style museums.

The point? Government patronage is no panacea in Europe, admirable and beautiful though it may be in principle and sometimes in reality. Private patronage, meanwhile, can have its distinct advantages. True, strings are usually attached. But a variety of donors tend to allow an institution more independence and flexibility, more lightness on its feet.

In Italy, where government-run museums struggle under sclerotic bureaucracies, private collectors and companies have set up foundations and exhibition spaces like the Fondazione Prada in Milan and the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin that set a standard for contemporary art there. In Germany the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, an opera house and concert hall criticized by many here for eschewing government money and relying on private patronage, though it has a mixed record, has given the Bayreuth and Salzburg festivals runs for their money.

American museum directors these days must spend their careers passing the tin cup, but by now government grants in the United States, which were always small, are beholden to special interests and awarded to recipients who will offend neither left nor right — so they offer no real alternative.

In an ideal world America would be more like Europe, and vice versa. In America's case it's probably too late. For the moment European museums are stuck between privatization and the lack of private donors.

You don't have to be a Tory to believe that sweetening the pot, tax-wise, would help spur charitable giving. Despite what the French unionist Mr. Alaime said, public support doesn't spare cultural institutions from cutbacks when the global economy tanks. And rich donors might even help compensate in bad times. In any case they're necessary. Like it or not, Europe is, in this respect anyway, lurching toward America.

Maia de la Baume contributed reporting from Paris.