Collecting

Francisco Goya's 'Witches' Sabbath' (1798) — Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid

The Spanish proposition

Private museums | Attracted by economic stability and a dynamic cultural scene, collectors are looking to Spain to establish permanent premises. *Paul Richardson* reports

The new museum stands on a side street within a few minutes' taxi ride of one of the planet's greatest concentrations of top-flight, world-class art: the Paseo del Prado in Madrid. A neoclassical townhouse on the calle Alcalá Galiano, the Fundación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson is poised to open its doors this autumn as the first permanent, visitable home of an art collection whose quality and depth would not be out of place in Madrid's great public museums.

Its proprietors, the Masaveu family of Asturias, began buying art during the 19th century. With a business portfolio ranging from cement works to banking and wineries, and a net worth of some €2.1bn, the family has spent its cash wisely: the Colección Masaveu is like a Premier League team in which the biggest players are *galácticos* such as El Greco, Zurbarán, Murillo, Raphael, Tintoretto, Rembrandt and Goya — though the new "cultural centre" is intended primarily to house the modern masters of the Colección Fundación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson, a subset of the family's fine art possessions, and act as a venue for temporary shows that will be held in the building's four exhibition halls.

If opening a private museum in the shadow of the Prado and Thyssen-Bornemisza feels audacious, it's worth remembering that both of these great institutions are based on collections acquired over generations by single families (one of them royal, the other aristocratic), and that many if not most

of the world's important art establishments originated in the private collections of industrial and banking magnates: the Tate, Frick, Guggenheim and Getty, to name but a few.

A spate of recently opened museums around the world, often in attention-grabbing architect-designed buildings, includes Walmart heiress Alice Walton's Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas, Dasha Zhukova's "Garage" in Moscow, and François Pinault's own-brand gallery in a repurposed 18th-century mansion in the Paris district of Les Halles. According to the art-collecting website Larry's List, 72 per cent of the world's 317 private art museums have opened since 2000.

Though the phenomenon is not confined to any one country, Spain is certainly experiencing a notable uptick in private museum openings. Historically this has been fertile terrain for collectors looking to give their collections a publicly accessible home. The Lázaro Galdiano Museum, in its pseudo-Tuscan palace in the Salamanca neighbourhood of Madrid, is perhaps the most illustrious precedent for a new generation of 21st-century museums showing off the collections of Francisco Duarella (Madrid and Barcelona), Antoni Vila Casas (Barcelona), Carmen Thyssen (Málaga) and Helga de Alvear (Cáceres).

The Masaveu building in Madrid comes hard on the heels of another high-profile vessel for the art collection of a wealthy Spanish family: the Centro Botín, associated with the Botín banking dynasty, whose sleek Renzo Piano building on the harbour-side in Santander opened to huge acclaim in 2017.

A further strand to the story are the foreign collectors, largely from Latin America, seeking to deposit their treasures in discrete sections of existing Spanish museums. A prime example is the Cuban-born, Miami-based Ella Fontanals-Cisneros, who last year signed a deal with the Spanish government to create a permanent museum for her superb contemporary Latin American collection in a 5,000 sq metre wing of the former tobacco factory, now avant-garde Madrid art space, Tabacalera.

Meanwhile a major tranche of the 7,000-strong haul of international modern art — Kandinsky, Ernst, Schlemmer, et al — belonging to Roberto Polo (also of Cuban origin, but with family roots in Spain) now rests in dedicated sections of two provincial Spanish museums, the Museo de Santa Fe in Toledo and Casa Zavala in Cuenca.

Clockwise from main: gallery view of Colección Roberto Polo in Toledo, with works by Pierre-Louis Flouquet and Oskar Schlemmer; Italian collector Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo; Jaume Plensa's 'Julia' (2018) in Madrid, commissioned by the Fundación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson; Madrid's Lázaro Galdiano Museum Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores, Jaime Tan

Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, the Italian collector based in Turin, had long been on the lookout for a Spanish HQ for her Fondazione when she discovered the perfect site: a cavernous post-industrial warehouse belonging to the Matadero cultural complex in Madrid. (Banners fly from the building's exterior, but no opening date has been announced.)

The motives driving a private collection to "go public" are various. Sometimes the primary reason is simple: after a lifetime of buying, the collector has simply run out of space — or, as one Spanish art-world commentator tactfully puts it: "The collection has outgrown the personal and intimate sphere."

Having decided to open up to the public gaze, some collectors would rather invest in their own premises — or at least guarantee the independence of their own collection within a public institution, for donating to a big museum can often result in your precious pieces being dispersed within the building or (worse) consigned to a basement storeroom. According to Alvaro Sánchez of the Fun-

Seventy-two per cent of the world's 317 private art museums have opened since 2000

dación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson, the opening of the Masaveu premises in Madrid springs from a desire to "give a greater visibility to our projects, which until now had happened in spaces unconnected with the foundation".

But not everyone wants their own place. Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, who has spent 50 years collecting one of the world's most important collections of 20th-century Latin American art, believes the world has enough art museums to be getting on with. "My husband and I prefer to lend or deposit, and instead of building a museum, we believe it's better to spend the money on grants, publications and research."

In any case the incentive would not seem to be financial. Spain's tax law offers deductions on up to 50 per cent of the value of the bequest, but with a limit of just 10 per cent of taxable income. Any benefit to the would-be donor is therefore negligible, and the Latin Americans wouldn't qualify for it anyway.

For them, Spain appeals for much more powerful reasons. Linguistic and cultural ties are obviously a major draw. The economic stability of Spain, its position as a bridge into Europe and the dynamism of its culture industry may also be part of the attraction. "I feel very happy because I've spent time thinking that the collection would need a home where the public could have access to all of this Latin American art that I've spent a long time collecting," says Ella Fontanals-Cisneros, adding significantly: "For me, Spain is a second home."

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Medieval warrior in auction battle

Lewis chessmen
Almost two centuries after the discovery of a buried hoard of ancient chess pieces on the Isle of Lewis, another has emerged on the market. By *Susan Moore*

Of all the "lost" objects to rediscover, few could rival a Lewis chessman. These diminutive carvings of kings, queens, bishops, knights and rooks in the guise of armed "warders" are no mere gaming pieces — they lay claim to being the most resonant, and beloved, survivors of the secular medieval world.

And now, almost two centuries after the buried hoard was first discovered on the Outer Hebridean Isle of Lewis, another of these 12th-century morse (walrus ivory) figures, a solitary warder, has resurfaced on to the market. Its debut at Sotheby's on July 2 is sensational, but perhaps not unexpected.

The reason is that the details of the discovery of this extraordinary hoard — the exact location and size of the find and its initial dispersal — remain shrouded in mystery, and very possibly deliberately obfuscated. (Professor Neil Stratford's engaging *The Lewis Chessmen and the Enigma of the Hoard* recounts all the tall tales.)

What is known for sure is that 92 morse carvings, 59 of them chessmen, were shown to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in Edinburgh in April 1831. At some point they were sold for £300 to an Edinburgh art dealer who discreetly sold 10 of them on before suggesting that the British Museum maintain the integrity of the hoard by acquiring the rest of the group, which it did.

The antiquary who acquired the 10 pieces was able to source another chessman on Lewis (these 11 now belong to the National Museum of Scotland). It is unclear how many pieces, if any, remained on the island or were sold in Edinburgh. When these chessmen were carved — and they are likely to have been produced in great numbers — the Western Isles belonged to the kingdom of Norway, and the consensus of scholarly opinion now suggests that Lewis chessmen were made in Trondheim.

The details of the discovery of this hoard are shrouded in mystery

Given their general lack of wear, it also seems likely that they were part of the stock of a merchant.

If we are to presume that the medieval game was played with the same number of pieces as modern chess, the hoard as recorded had enough figure pieces for four complete chess sets, save for five missing pieces, one knight and four warders.

This warder was bought in Edinburgh in 1964 for £5, sold by one local antiques dealer to another, and his ledger reveals that it was never recognised as anything other than an antique chess piece. It has passed down through his family.

A 13th-century walrus-ivory 'warder' that has resurfaced on to the market two centuries after the Lewis chessmen were discovered