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# Public art and private wealth: the controversial collaboration between the national museum in Norway and Fredriksen Family Art Company Ltd

Ida Uppstrøm Berg  and Håkon Larsen 

Department of Archivistis, Library and Information Science, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT

There has been much discussion in the US and European media about the evolving relationship between wealthy private art collectors and underfunded public art museums. This paper examines the public debate regarding the ten-year loan agreement between the National Museum in Norway and the Fredriksen Family Art Company Limited. The agreement was exposed to harsh criticism from actors within the art world when it became known to the public in June 2019. Based on an analysis of newspaper articles from when this was a hot topic in the public debate, we investigate the dynamics of the debate and seek to understand why it became such a contested issue. This study shows that the Norwegian culture based on egalitarian values and high tax moral, and a long history for the state to subsidize the arts and culture, are important reasons why the collaboration became as controversial as it did.

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a boom in the contemporary art world, and the number of private art collectors has increased dramatically (Gnyp 2020; Quemin 2020). By donating significant collections to public museums or constructing their own museums, private collectors exert a growing influence over what is displayed to the public (Walker 2019). Private influence on public museums can take many forms, such as through donations, sponsorships, partnerships, or loans of artworks. Consequently, an enduring scholarly debate has arisen, emphasizing the distinct interests of the parties involved. One facet of this discussion concerns the growing involvement of private actors in the arts sector, contributing to a larger dialogue on the privatization of culture (Wu, 2002). This has led to increasing concerns among critics that private collectors will determine tomorrow's canon of great artists and artworks based on their personal taste and vanity rather than art historical scholarship (Fasche 2013). Critics argue that private art collecting

**CONTACT** Ida Uppstrøm Berg  [Idauppst@oslomet.no](mailto:Idauppst@oslomet.no)  Department of Archivistis, Library and Information Science, Oslo Metropolitan University, Pilestredet 48, 0167 Oslo, Norway

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impacts the mission of public institutions by shifting public heritage into private hands and that the trend of increased influence of private collectors in public museums runs the risk of creating an 'art history from above' that caters to the financial power of a selected group, promoting specific intellectual, social, and aesthetic values for an indeterminate period (Brown 2019, 1).

With France as an example, Alain Quemin (2020) notes that Centre Pompidou has received significant financial support from François Pinault, a wealthy collector and patron of the arts, which has substantially impacted the museum's programming. Similarly, concerns about the growing private influence in the art world have been raised in Norway due to private collectors' increased influence on public museums through donations and long-term loans during the 2000s (Veiteberg 2019). Several factors contributed to this influence, including the rise in wealth prompting more corporations and individuals to establish their private art collections, a purchasing crisis within public museums, and a gradual shift from state to private financing of art museums (Veiteberg 2019). Veiteberg (2019, 141) argues that if public support for museums in Norway does not increase, they will rely more on private donations and long-term loans in the future.

Camarero, Garrido, and Vicente (2011, 251) indicate that the trend of shifting from state to private financing is evident not only in museums following a more business-oriented Anglo-American model but also in those with a traditionally public-oriented European model. In the United States, the 2008 recession intensified budgetary reductions, leading to a decline in corporate and state funding, placing museums under heightened financial restrictions and resource scarcity (McDonnell and Tepper 2014). Similarly, in Europe, cultural institutions are urged to embrace entrepreneurship and foster collaborations with the private sector, be less dependent on public support, and diversify their revenue sources (Alexander 2018; Lindqvist 2012; Prokúpek and Divišková 2022; Proteau 2018; Rubio-Arostegui and Villarroyc 2022). In contrast to other European countries, the Nordic countries (Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland) have maintained significant state subsidies to art museums. These countries share a socially integrative welfare model, The Nordic model, that combines a market economy with an active state (Häyrynen 2018). In Norway, state subsidies remain high, but increased political pressure has urged museums to engage in more public-private collaborations (Prop nr. 1 S 2016-17), and as documented by Veiteberg (2019), the increasing purchasing prices on contemporary artworks has pushed art museums to engage in collaborations with private collectors. Historically, the generous level of public funding for cultural institutions in Norway has resulted in public support being widely regarded as a symbol of autonomy and freedom; cultural sponsorship remains a relatively small part of the overall cultural economy; and there is no system of tax incentives to stimulate indirect public support (Mangset and Hylland 2017, 373). Consequently, donations, deposits, sponsorships, and similar means are still primarily regarded as supplementary financing options for cultural institutions.

Agreements between wealthy individuals, families, or companies and underfunded public museums have been the subject of intense discussion in the UK and US media in recent years (Chow 2022; Leah 2019; Pogrebin and Harris 2019; Swaine, Kirchgassner, and Greenfield 2019). Scholars have, among others, looked at the collaboration between Tate and BP (Chong 2013) and SFMOMA and the Fisher Foundation (Shaked 2022). In Norway, such a debate occurred in 2019, when the National Museum entered into a

ten-year loan agreement with the Fredriksen Family Art Company Limited (FFAC), headed by Kathrine and Cecilie Fredriksen, daughters of shipping billionaire John Fredriksen, the world's wealthiest Norwegian with a net worth of 205 billion NOK (Kapital 2023). This article examines the heated media debate that followed the public disclosure of the collaboration and delves into the criticisms leveled at this collaboration and the justifications offered in its favor. Even though there have been several controversies over privately funded art in public spaces in Norway over the last decade (Larsen 2023; Paulsen 2019; Thakre 2019), this type of loan agreement is brand new in a Norwegian context. We will analyze the reception of the Fredriksen/National Museum agreement, unravel the dynamics of the debate, and seek to understand why the loan agreement became such a contested issue.

### Gift economy and art world logics

According to Marcel Mauss' influential theory of the gift, gift-giving is not a one-sided act but a social practice that creates a reciprocal relationship between the giver and the receiver. Reciprocity is the essence of gift economy, Mauss argues, and can come in the form of gratitude and honor (Mauss 2011). Inspired by this theory, anthropologist Ane Moe (2016) took a closer look at how curatorial freedom is challenged by the requirements that follow the gift and how this can threaten the museum's autonomy. Through interviews with employees at the National Museum in Norway and art collectors who donated or deposited art, she found that the two forms of gift economy, donation and deposits, influenced the collection's value in different ways: donation is a predictable gift that adds value to the National Museum's collection, as the artwork does not leave the collection, and a deposit is a temporary gift that adds symbolic value to the collection. In the interviews, the museum employees problematize that, in the end, the museum loses out on receiving a deposit, as a loan agreement that ends with the owner selling the artwork with a possible profit contradicts the National Museum's wishes for and with the art (Moe 2016).

To understand the ongoing public debate regarding the collaboration, the perspectives offered by Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Abbing have been valuable. Bourdieu described the transformation of the gift into other values, such as prestige or social advancement (Bourdieu 1992). In *Free Exchange* (1995), Bourdieu and artist Hans Haacke argued that 'The museum term sponsorship more accurately reflects that what we have here is an exchange of capital: finance capital on the part of the sponsors and symbolic capital on the part of the sponsored' (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995, 17). According to Abbing (2019, 192), art companies inevitably have sponsors, donors, and subsidizing governments in mind while making judgments about the core product, management, and curation. He argued that individual donors and corporations may buy attention, a better image, a clear conscience, and influence in the art company through financial support, and that large donations can result in private collectors' names being attached to rooms or buildings, which is significant and lasting. Abbing (2019, 193) stated that many rooms in art buildings have been named after donors over the past decades, and the 'sale' of room names has brought in substantial additional income. Abbing – like Bourdieu (1996) before him – emphasized the incompatibility of art and money, as the shared ethos in the art world is anti-commercial (Abbing 2019, 161–162).

Private capital in art funding runs the risk of being perceived as out of place (Douglas 1966) by art world actors, something that has been addressed by Victoria Alexander (2014, 376), who pointed out that 'some people in the art world feel that their organizations are polluted by money coming from corporations whom they may see as deserving of the dirtied reputations they seek to cleanse through arts sponsorship.'

These perspectives will be fruitful in understanding some of the criticism directed toward the collaboration based on the Fredriksen family history. Before turning to the case at hand, we will provide a brief history of art patronage in Norway to display the local context for this kind of agreement between private collectors and public museums.

## History of patronage in Norway

Historian Bodil Stenseth provides an overview of the most prominent art collectors and patrons who donated or attempted to become donors to public institutions in Norway between 1770 and 1970, concluding that the tradition of donating to the public sector was underdeveloped among wealthy Norwegians (Stenseth 2005, 36). As Norway was a part of Denmark-Norway between 1537 and 1814, followed by a union with Sweden until 1905, Norway did not create the basis for a significant and powerful institutionalized culture in the nation's capital (Stenseth 2005, 36). Unlike Denmark and Sweden, Norway lacked a powerful aristocracy and did not have a royal or princely art collection that could form the core of a national gallery (Stenseth 2005, 57). The collection of the National Gallery of Denmark, for example, originally belonged to the Danish Royalty, but with the introduction of democracy, the art collection was given to the people (DR TV 2021). However, private collectors, such as Olav Schou, Christian Langaard, and Rasmus Meyer, among others, each contributed in their own way to public museums with generous donations between 1890 and 1915. Schou and Langaard donated their art collections to the National Gallery, but their donations were one-time occurrences and did not establish a Norwegian tradition (Stenseth 2005).

While government funding was mainly allocated to procure artworks by Norwegian artists, the National Gallery had to rely on private funds to acquire foreign artworks. During WWI, wealthy Norwegians, notably merchant fleet beneficiaries, formed Friends of the National Gallery, led by Christian Landgaard. The association played a significant role in securing around 140 works for the museum, which included prominent artists such as Picasso and Manet (Haugstad 2015).

Subsequently, there have been significant donations, such as Rolf Stenersen's donation of his collection of more than 800 artworks to the municipality of Oslo in 1936, including 370 works from Munch (Stenseth 2005, 44), and Sonja Hennie's and Niels Onstad's donations of 110 works of contemporary art to Bærum municipality in 1961. Both contributions came with the condition that the municipalities construct and run art museums dedicated to the collections. Stenersen, Hennie, and Onstad represented a new type of collector. In contrast to Schou and Meyer, they were self-made. Like most *nouveau riche*, they were proud of their success and liked to bask in the attention generated by their wealth (Stenseth 2005, 52). In a report on behalf of the Arts Council Norway, Jorunn Veiteberg asserted that except for Hennie-Onstad, Norwegian private collectors had little visibility in the post-war era, but this changed in the 1990s and 2000s (Veiteberg 2019, 140). Private collectors have assembled extensive collections and established their

own museums. Alternatively, they have donated or loaned their art to public museums. Consequently, private collectors wield significant influence in the Norwegian art market, and publicly funded museums are not the sole arbiters of defining who and what is of value within the Norwegian art scene (Veiteberg 2019, 26).

## Case description and data

The National Museum, with a societal mission to ‘hold, conserve, exhibit and promote public knowledge about Norway’s largest collections of art, architecture and design’ (Nasjonalmuseet 2023a), was formed in 2003 after a merger of the National Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, and the Museum of Architecture. The government finances approximately 93 percent of the museum’s operating budget of NOK 863 million for 2023 (Prop nr. 1 S 2022-23). The museum’s collection comprises 400,000 items, among which roughly 5,000 constitute contemporary artworks created by national and international artists post-1945 (Nasjonalmuseet 2023b). Since 2004, the museum’s annual reports show a purchasing budget that has remained consistently below NOK 10 million, failing to keep up with inflation.<sup>1</sup> The new museum building opened to the public on 11 June 2022. As the largest art museum in the Nordic region, there is an ambition to use the building to put Norway on the world map as an art nation.

The Fredriksen Family Art Company Limited was registered in Cyprus on 14 December 2016 (Cyprus Registry 2023). The lending agreement between the National Museum and the FFAC consists of three parts. Firstly, it encompasses a collection of contemporary and post-war artworks from international artists worldwide, which will be exhibited in the museum’s second largest hall, ‘Søylerommet’ (the Pillars), which spans an area of 727 square meters. The room is dedicated to and named after the Fredriksen sisters’ deceased mother, with a small plaque saying: ‘Kindly provided to the new National Museum in memory of Inger Katharina Astrup Fredriksen.’ The museum is responsible for the import, customs clearance, documentation, storage, supervision, and maintenance of loaned works. According to the loan agreement, the museum shall contribute artistic advice and use its expertise in the art market to ensure the best possible terms. The second part of the collaboration, ‘the Fredriksen Commissions,’ is a series of biannual exhibitions with international artists in ‘Lyshallen’ (the Light Hall), a hall of 2400 square meters on the top floor of the museum. Finally, the collaboration comprises a research program called Fredriksen Research with four PhD positions.

A working committee with members from the National Museum and the FFAC has been established to determine which items from the Fredriksen collection will be exhibited in the museum. The sisters themselves will occupy two of the seats. The National Museum and FFAC will work together to organize and develop the collection, but the FFAC will ultimately decide whether to acquire the artwork. The ten-year loan agreement has the option to be extended. The agreement was entered into during Prime Minister Erna Solberg’s (2013–2021) conservative coalition government, which emphasized the need for cultural institutions to seek additional funding sources beyond public money and encouraged increased public-private collaboration in the cultural sector.

Our data consists of media articles gathered through systematic searches in Retriever, a full-text database for Norwegian newspapers. We conducted a database-wide search on 1 April 2020 with the search string Nasjonalmusee\* AND Fredriksen\*. This search led to hits in

27 of the archived media sources. We limited the search period to 19 June to 31 December 2019 to capture articles related to the time when this story was high on the agenda in the Norwegian press. This resulted in 181 hits, mostly from national newspapers but also from several regional papers, the webpages of the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK, and the art world website *Kunstkritikk.no*.<sup>2</sup> After filtering out articles of less significance, we were left with 125 articles.<sup>3</sup> The most intense period of the debate took place during the first three months after the collaboration was announced, with 115 of the 125 selected articles being published between 19 June and 27 September 2019. These 115 articles constitute the basis of our analysis.<sup>4</sup> The debate is presented chronologically, but where different actors discuss with each other over time, the discussions are put together.

## Results

### *Launch of the collaboration*

The debate occurred over a short but intensive period after the collaboration was announced on the front page of Norway's second largest daily with a sizeable headline that read: 'Fredriksen twins and the National Museum enter into a giant agreement. Art collection gets its own room' (Borud 2019).<sup>5</sup> To the journalist writing the article, the museum director, Karin Hindsbo, emphasized that this is more than a pure 'sponsorship agreement' (Borud 2019). She said they would build a long-term collaboration that allows the museum to showcase artists it otherwise could not afford to have in its collection, thus enriching the audience and giving the National Museum international recognition (Borud 2019). In response to whether it is acceptable for a sponsor to 'purchase' a separate space in the museum, Hindsbo said that she believed this was a friendly and natural way to acknowledge the collaboration and that this is common practice abroad (Borud 2019). Cecilie Fredriksen stated: 'Our ambition is that we together build up a collection of international art that will put the museum on the international art map' (Borud 2019). In the days and months that followed, the collaboration became the subject of a contentious debate in Norwegian newspapers, and the agreement was both praised and criticized.

Artist Marianne Heske quickly criticized the collaboration, claiming that we are now experiencing American conditions in Norway. She argued that the agreement demonstrates that money dominates the art world and that the National Museum is for sale: 'If you have enough money, you can buy a room and a place in art history' (Hagen 2019). Ruben Steinum, artist and chairman of the Association of Norwegian Visual Artists stated that 'by leaving the responsibility [of building up a collection] to private actors, they give away definition power' (Brønmo and Breian 2019). Artist Jonas Ekeberg, like many others in the debate, emphasized that he is not opposed to private actors in public museums but claimed that Hindsbo is endangering the National Museum's professional integrity through this collaboration (Ekeberg 2019). He and others with him stated that the Fredriksen sisters' professional expertise is insufficient to shape the National Museum's program and profile.<sup>6</sup> Hindsbo and the Director of collections, Stina Högvist, replied that this collection is developed by the National Museum, instead of a collection that is already complete when it enters the museum (Hindsbo and Högvist 2019). Hindsbo also referred to cultural policy goals and argued that '[t]here are unambiguous guidelines for the cultural institutions to have more legs to

stand on financially, not just the state' (Hagen 2019). *Aftenposten's* cultural editor, Cecilie Asker, proclaimed that '[m]ore wealthy people should open their wallets' (Asker 2019). In contrast to countries with a long tradition of private contribution, such as the US, UK, and Denmark, the public in Norway has become accustomed to the state paying (Asker 2019).

### ***'Building a greenhouse for the Fredriksen Family'***

The fact that the loan agreement would help increase the value of the private collection was a point raised by many of the critics. Erling Høyesteren, director at Aros art museum in Denmark and former director at the Norwegian public art museum KODE, said that it is rather un-European that a national art museum develops a program with a private sponsor and that 'it is not the National Museum's task to build up a private art collection' (Larsen and Nilsen 2019). On 28 June, artists Ina Hagen and Ida Madsen Følling wrote that the National Museum should care for our cultural heritage, not function as a consulting firm for wealthy heirs. 'This gift is not a donation; it is a Trojan horse wrapped in glossy gift paper', they wrote, adding that the Fredriksen sisters have now gained access to the most qualified art consultants, the most attractive exhibition venue, and the best resources for handling, storage, and conservation in Norway, for at least the next ten years (Hagen and Følling 2019a). In response to criticism from Hagen, Følling, and others, Hindsbo emphasized that the National Museum would not act as an art advisor to the Fredriksen sisters. Instead, the museum would provide input and seek to acquire necessary works to contextualize and complement the museum's existing collection. She also emphasized that the collaboration would enable the museum to create more exhibitions than it would have been able to within its own budget (Hindsbo 2019a). The next day, Hindsbo told NRK that '[t]hese are works that we would otherwise not have come close to. And then it is a question of whether they should hang at MOMA in New York or at the National Museum in Oslo' (Lie Jor et al. 2019). Hagen and Følling responded by claiming that Hindsbo failed to address the crux of their critique, which was that she had entered into an agreement that would enhance the value of a private collection (Hagen and Følling 2019b).

Similarly, attorney Hans M. Graasvold stated that '[t]he National Museum is building a large greenhouse for the Fredriksen family, where they can increase the value without the National Museum benefiting from it' (Ismail, Martincic, and Nilsen 2019a). He argued that the loan agreement differed significantly from other agreements in the museum sector and pointed toward more private interference in Norwegian museums. Director of the Renaissance Society in Chicago, Solveig Øvstebø,<sup>7</sup> remarked that it was notable that the National Museum will use its own resources to build up a collection that it eventually does not own, pointing out that '[i]t is strange that right now, it is actually in Norway that we see one of the most extreme examples of private influence on professional choices in a public museum' (Tunheim and Hagen 2019).

Several critics also referred to the Fredriksen family and their history as tax avoiders, as Fredriksen reported moving to Cyprus in 2006 and no longer pays taxes to Norway. On 5 July, artist Marianne Heier criticized that John Fredriksen is not to be found in any lists of Norwegian taxpayers. She claimed that '[t]he agreement between the National Museum and this family allows the taxpayers' money to promote an already enormous private fortune owned by someone who does not pay taxes' (Heier 2019). Furthermore, as



implied by several, Heier argues that the sisters get to 'bask in the glory as sophisticated cultural sponsors' (Heier 2019).

### ***Motives and suspicion***

The director and the head of arts and culture at Sparebankstiftelsen DNB<sup>8</sup> believed the criticism was often based on a naïve belief that culture can be financed mainly by the public sector. Furthermore, they wrote that the Norwegian cultural debate usually tends to suspect and mock private individuals who contribute to the art world and referred, among other things, to the debate that arose when Christian Ringnes presented his plans for a sculpture park in Oslo (Støylen and Bjørnsen 2019).<sup>9</sup>

Several politicians from the opposition engaged in the debate. The deputy leader of the Red Party believed the museum was naïve and claimed that the museum underplayed Frederiksen's financial motives. She argued that this is not only a matter of art: it is essential to remember that art is a lucrative way to invest money (Ismail, Martincic, and Nilsen 2019b). Trine Skei Grande, Minister of Culture (the Liberal Party), rejected the criticism and argued that the agreement would give 'more art to the people' (Ismail, Martincic, and Nilsen 2019b). In an interview the following day, Skei Grande stated that there is too much mistrust for wealthy people to contribute to art museums in Norway (Ismail 2019). A politician from the Socialist Left Party stated that 'even if the museum curators choose what will hang on the wall, the Fredriksen sisters will undoubtedly have power over the museum's resources and priorities. That is why we want to debate the agreement, not because we mistrust the rich' (Klassekampen 2019). The Minister of Culture also feared that the rich would be intimidated from sponsoring the arts due to all the public criticism and that there is a culture in Norway of attacking and distrusting anyone who wants to give a gift (Heiervang 2019). She believed that the Norwegian art world is quite conservative and that a culture has developed that says that public money is good and private money is evil (Heiervang 2019).

In a joint statement, the Fredriksen sisters claimed that in the debate, critics had attributed motivations to them they did not have. They wrote: 'Our interest in art is our mother's heritage, and having the opportunity to build a collection that will be displayed in Norway in memory of her is what motivates us' (Fredriksen and Fredriksen 2019). Additionally, the sisters stated that the National Museum would not use its resources to advise them and that the museum has complete control over which works will be exhibited and how the collection will be curated (Fredriksen and Fredriksen 2019).

### ***Cultural policies and museum funding***

In defending the loan agreement, the director of the National Museum mentioned other countries, like the Netherlands, England, and Denmark, where significant cuts have forced arts and culture organizations to make rapid, substantial changes. Hindsbo referred to the National Museum of Denmark, which must collect 50 percent of its funds through external financing and private actors (Hindsbo 2019b). Furthermore, she reminded critics that the government has long made it clear that cultural organizations cannot rely too heavily on state funding and that the collaboration provides opportunities for the museum: 'Our

purchasing budget is less than ten million NOKs. One of the works we can borrow from Fredriksen alone can be worth tens of millions' (Hindsbo 2019b).

Historian Børre Haugstad (2019a) called the Minister of Culture, Skei Grande, the big villain, as she is the one who 'owns' the museum but does not want to allocate money so that the museum can do its job: 'Therefore, the museum is forced to go to the ship-owner's daughters,' he stated. In response to this criticism, Skei Grande asserted that this is an outmoded viewpoint held by individuals who consider complete state sponsorship of cultural activity to be the only acceptable circumstance: 'With that worldview, there is a risk [...] that funding for the cultural sector collapses like a house of cards the day the economy turns' (Skei Grande 2019a). 'Whether the money has become 'clean' by visiting the state budget, or whether it comes 'dirty' directly from private donors, is ultimately only of academic interest when we stand in the National Museum and experience world-class art,' Skei Grande (2019a) stated. Haugstad responded to Grande's criticism and argued that he does not mind that they honor their dead mother or get a room named after her but that he would have preferred it to be a gift to the museum rather than a loan so that the museum's collection would be permanently improved (Haugstad 2019b).

Many critics of the agreement shared this viewpoint. Artist Lotte Konow Lund believed that Skei Grande dismissed the criticism. She thought the minister should welcome the fact that the art world wants to debate anything that challenges the autonomy of the National Museum. Konow Lund argued that '[w]e are not talking about private gifts. We are talking about ten-year privatization of the National Museum's procurement policy' (Ismail and Nilsen 2019).

According to artist Maya Økland (2019), politicians should ensure that the National Museum can support its collection, program, and research rather than placing demands on self-funding. She claimed that the government's cultural policy is to blame for the unethical nature of the agreement (Økland 2019). Art collector Arne Austrheim believed the museum management was only doing what the ministry expected and that one must see the agreement in light of the larger political picture (Austrheim 2019).

### ***Integrity at stake?***

On 24 July, Kathrin Pabst, board member at the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and Liv Ramskjær, Secretary-General of the Norwegian Museum Association, criticized the agreement and asserted that the museum's integrity was at stake. They demanded a concretization of the ethical guidelines with reference to ICOM. The loan arrangement, in their opinion, did not specify who had the final say: 'From our perspective, it seems like a private actor has bought access to a public museum to the degree that is unique in Norwegian art history' (Pabst and Ramskjær 2019a). Hindsbo, on the other hand, emphasized that 'Fredriksen has no control or influence over who will work with the collection, what is being researched, or who will be employed at the museum' (Hindsbo 2019a). Furthermore, Hindsbo added that while evaluating these documents, it is essential to focus on the parties' intentions (Hindsbo 2019a). Pabst and Ramskjær claimed that despite assurances from the museum administration, the written loan agreement did not sufficiently specify that the museum has the last say in professional disputes (Pabst and Ramskjær

2019b). Director General of ICOM, Peter Keller, supported Pabst and Ramskjær in an internal e-mail correspondence which the newspaper got hold of (Brække and Hammer 2019). Keller argued that Kathrine and Cecilie Fredriksen could find reasons to withdraw their loans and that this has the potential to influence decisions, which is unfortunate. Keller also pointed out that ‘it should be questioned whether, and in what way, museums should cooperate with individuals and companies who avoid paying taxes in their home countries’ (Brække and Hammer 2019).

Like several before him, politician John Ivar Liverød from the Labor Party claimed that the Fredriksen family are free riders and asked why Norway should offer a rostrum to those who do not want to participate in our community (Liverød 2019). He referred to Grande’s statement on 26 July, which proclaimed that it is ‘better that they spend money on art than stupid jets’ (Skei Grande 2019b) and claimed that ‘[f]or Fredriksen, this is a much better showcase than buying private jets or grandiose yachts’ (Liverød 2019). Liverød was later criticized by Trygve Hegnar, investor and chief editor of the financial publications *Finansavisen* and *Kapital*, who denied that Fredriksen had withdrawn from society. He pointed out that Fredriksen is still among the largest shareholders in major Norwegian companies (Hegnar 2019).

We will now delve deeper into the presented findings, beginning with an exploration of the key points of criticism, followed by an examination of the arguments in favor of the collaboration.

## Discussion

### *Excessive returns*

Through this debate, the critics ascribed intentions and ambitions to the Fredriksen sisters that went beyond mere contributions to the public sector. Critics contended that the FFAC gets excessive returns, raising questions among opponents about the economic and social motives of the sisters. Exhibiting art at the National Museum offers the FFAC the potential to acquire artworks at reduced costs, given the association with a national museum. Simultaneously, the prestige of being showcased in a national museum could enhance the value of artworks if they were to be later sold, which has the potential to increase the collectors’ economic capital. Public institutions like the National Museum play a crucial role in validating private collectors by providing them with a ‘quality stamp,’ indicating that their collection is museum worthy. This validation is not just about what the FFAC could get back financially but also the social and cultural capital and symbolic power they can get from showcasing their collection with the public at the museum (Bourdieu 1984; Moustaira 2015, 52). By insinuating that FFAC only enters into the agreement for financial motives and to ‘bask in the glory as sophisticated cultural sponsors’ (Heier 2019), the collaboration is by some criticized for being a mere conversion of capital (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995).

Critics also voiced concerns that the museum could compromise its curatorial authority. In the arts, autonomy is held as the *nomos*, and opponents argued that the loan agreement itself crosses a line of interference. They contend that it grants the sisters excessive influence over the museum’s artistic decision-making, raising concerns about heightened private interference. This concern is shared by several academics, including

Brown (2019, 8), who indicates a trend within art collection and museum culture, namely '[a] shifting of public heritage into private hands.' Collaborating with private actors poses a potential challenge for museums to maintain autonomy. However, research by Victoria Alexander on American museums suggests that private sponsors generally do not exert pressure on museum programming. Instead, they are primarily interested in reaching audiences and generating positive publicity (Alexander 1996). The National Museum representatives reject the notion that the FFAC has the authority to determine the museums artistic content and assert that this collaboration leaves open the possibility of actively contributing to shaping the collection, which would not be the case if receiving a donation.

### ***The Fredriksen family***

As stated in the introduction, controversies have also arisen surrounding art museums accepting funding from private actors with 'dirty' or 'polluted' (Douglas 1966) money, exemplified by protests against partnerships with families such as the Sackler family (Walters 2019) and corporations like British Petroleum (Muñoz-Alonso 2015). The controversy examined in this article can be viewed along the same lines. Even though it is the Fredriksen sisters who are accountable for the agreement, they function as representatives of the Fredriksen family business under the leadership of their father, John Fredriksen. Critics point to their father's questionable business history and tax avoidance, in that John Fredriksen amassed his fortune by transporting oil during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and currently holds citizenship in Cyprus for tax purposes. Several critics contend that endorsing loans from private collectors potentially involved in tax avoidance and other questionable practices raises ethical issues for public institutions. This criticism is a continuation of the broader global discourse on wealthy corporations attempting to reconcile their image by financially supporting public museums. While this collaboration may not be as contentious as the British Petroleum and Tate partnership (Chong 2013), critics of the agreement extensively scrutinize the FFACs intentions and motives. In the aftermath of the debate, 505 Norwegian artists (and some art galleries) signed a petition opposing the agreement, labeling it as 'art washing.'<sup>10</sup>

Opposition to the agreement may also stem from the Fredriksen family's embodiment of values that diverge from both the traditional Norwegian norms of equality and the established norms within the art world. Lien, Lidén, and Viken (2001) argue that Norway has a norm of equality that makes it difficult for elites to establish superior status in a social context. This norm of equality can be expressed in cultural value, political ideology, and national identity (Lien, Lidén, and Viken 2001, 11). In this case, it becomes apparent in several ways. First, Norwegian culture is characterized by a skepticism towards private actors. The left-wing parties in Norwegian politics are particularly critical of private actors taking over the public sector, calling them 'welfare profiteers' (velferd-sprofitører) (Hagen 2021). Second, the history of the family company challenges the tax-paying moral in Norway. Third, as egalitarianism is a core value in Norwegian culture (Henningsen and Vike 1999; Sakslind and Skarpenes 2014; Skarpenes 2007), critics react negatively to the very rich seeking to make a name for themselves in a public space. Similar controversies have been stirred by the establishment of a privately initiated sculpture park in Oslo (Larsen 2023; Larsen et al. 2021), and a donation of a

private art collection to Sørlandets Kunstmuseum in Kristiansand (Thakre 2019). Also, in these cases, the collectors are among the wealthiest in the country (Kapital 2023), and the collaborations have provoked adverse reactions among opponents. The Fredriksen sisters belong to the economic upper class (Bourdieu 1984; Hansen et al. 2014), and their jet set lifestyle, with expensive clothes, shoes, and bags, challenges the Norwegian egalitarian culture and its code of modesty (Daloz 2007).

### ***Art, money, and politics***

In the media debate, critics employed various terms to characterize the loan agreement. Expressions such as ‘consulting firm,’ ‘American conditions,’ and ‘privatization,’ among others, were used to illustrate how private money infiltrated the National Museum. These terms, associated with commercialism, are used in a negative context by the critics. Their criticism is rooted in the dichotomy between art and money, reflecting what Bourdieu (1993) referred to as disavowal of the economy. Moreover, the critics draw on the widely shared narrative that the world of art and the world of commerce are inherently hostile spheres (Abbing 2022, 189). Abbing has also pointed out that individuals within the art world, particularly those on the left side of the political spectrum, tend to attribute many issues in the arts to commerce, the market, neo-liberalism, and capitalism (Abbing 2019, 161).

Conservatives from politics, the media, and the art world, on the other hand, have problematized the ridicule directed at art collectors such as the Fredriksen Family and Christian Ringnes (Larsen 2023) when entering public-private collaborations, fearing that the wealthy might refrain from future donorship. In an interview with us, this perspective was further highlighted by the Minister of Culture, who stated that ‘it is remarkable that when Christen Sveaas donates three paintings to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, even I, as the Minister of Culture, am given a grand tour of the museum. However, if you donate paintings to the National Museum here [in Norway], the media often scrutinize you for being self-centered.’<sup>11</sup>

By focusing on all the advantages this collaboration brings the museum and more or less writing off any advantages for the FFAC, the advocates for the agreement use a strategy that entails ‘presenting normal commercial transactions and sponsorships as some kind of philanthropy’ (Abbing 2022, 203). They cover up the commercial aspect by not talking about it, for ‘[a]s Bourdieu (1993, 74) has pointedly observed, the business of art rests on practices that ‘can only work by [actors] pretending not to be doing what they are doing’ (Alexander and Bowler 2014, 5).

### ***International recognition***

As previously stated, the historical lack of emphasis by the Norwegian state on acquiring art from international artists has led to a reliance on private entities to augment the National Museum’s international art collection. Moreover, many international works of art bought by Norwegian collectors have ended up in museums abroad (Haugstad 2015). Furthermore, it is argued that the support extended by the FFAC has empowered the museum to showcase artworks that would have been impossible otherwise. Therefore, the museum’s decision to enter into the loan agreement should be seen as a

broader effort to improve its international collection and enhance the museum's international recognition. This aligns with one of the goals set by the Norwegian government in constructing a new National Museum, namely for it to become a museum of international importance (Meld. st. nr. 23 (2011-2012), p. 13). Similar initiatives, such as constructing new buildings for the Norwegian Opera & Ballet and MUNCH, reflect this trend of raising the global profile of Norway's cultural institutions in the capital, which can be seen as an element of state patronage in cultural policies (Abbing 2019, 240–247; Larsen, Kann-Rasmussen, and Rivano Eckerdal 2022, 182). According to Elstad and De Paoli (2014), the Norwegian government's previous motives for supporting culture were centered on making Norway an independent cultural nation and contributing to public education, while nowadays, the motives are more focused on generating a dividend, such as strengthening Norway as a brand both culturally and business-wise (Elstad and De Paoli 2014, 217). These efforts again reflect a broader tendency toward utilizing culture to bolster national and international images and engender economic benefits (Plaza 2007). By exhibiting international art at the level of the Fredriksen collection, the National Museum endeavors to augment its global standing as a cultural tourism destination, thus building on the social value of art (Frey 2019).

## Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the public debate related to the loan agreement between the National Museum in Norway and the FFAC. Even though there are traditions for private support of art in Norway, art world actors were provoked when the most important art museum collaborated with the country's most affluent family with questionable ethics related to tax issues.

The criticism was centered on concerns regarding the FFAC getting excessive returns. According to the critics, the collaboration will contribute to increasing the value of the Fredriksen collection, bolster their reputation, and grant them excessive influence over the artistic content of the museum. Furthermore, our analysis shows that the Norwegian egalitarian culture makes it difficult for the Fredriksen sisters, with their debauched lifestyle and infinite wealth, to gain legitimacy as art collectors as the art world is also a world where commerce is often perceived as a hostile force. In the case at hand, the critics perceived the money of the Fredriksen family to be polluting the sacred space of the National Museum.

The commercial aspect, on the other hand, was denied by the defenders of the agreement. Moreover, they worried that the unwarranted suspicion directed at the sisters might dissuade wealthy individuals from supporting public museums in the future. For the defenders of the agreement, particular emphasis was placed on how the collaboration could enhance the museum's international recognition by providing access to world-class art and benefit the Norwegian public by displaying art they would otherwise have to travel abroad to behold. Supporters of the agreement also argued that the museum had limited acquisition funds and emphasized that such collaborations were common practice abroad. Throughout the months of the heated debate, none of the debaters showed any sign of changing their opinion.

While focused on a single case, this study carries broader implications with significant relevance for museum management and curatorship. The case serves as a noteworthy

illustration of the potential conflicts and pitfalls that can arise when museums engage in public-private collaborations. This paper delineates the implications of what a mishandling of such collaborations could have on the legitimacy of public museums. The current case highlights the importance of clear communication and precise agreements, ensuring that there is no room for interpretation within the contractual framework. This approach is crucial for avoiding misinterpretations and conflicts. With public museums facing financial constraints and private collectors accumulating more wealth, collaborations of this kind are likely to become increasingly prevalent, even in Norway.

## Notes

1. <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/om-nasjonalmuseet/styret-organisasjon-og-ansatte/armsmeldinger/> (30 January 2024).
2. We also included *Dagens Næringsliv* (DN), Norway's largest financial daily, in the search, even though the publication is not part of Retriever. DN had several articles on the subject.
3. The articles filtered out were duplicates, notices, fact boxes, or articles that had nothing to do with the topic.
4. We have also conducted 15 interviews with art world actors who participated in the debate, which have been helpful in providing context for this analysis. The interviews will serve as data for upcoming articles.
5. All quotes translated by the authors.
6. The critiques refer mainly to clause 7.2 (a) in the loan agreement when criticizing the influence of the FFAC: 'NM shall provide the curatorial services referred to below utilizing its own qualified personnel for those purposes, but after discussing and agreeing the identity of the personnel and scope of those curatorial services with FF: (A) to develop the Collection, including selected artworks, to be lent to the New National Museum ...' (Agreement 2017, 15). The agreement is not publicly available, but access can be requested at [elnnsyn.no](mailto:elnnsyn.no).
7. Former Director of Bergen Kunsthall and current Director of Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo.
8. Sparebankstiftelsen DNB is among the largest Norwegian foundations and makes financial contributions to a wide range of charitable causes (Store Norske Leksikon 2019).
9. See Larsen (2023) for an analysis of the debate.
10. <https://www.agiftwecanaffordtorefuse.com/> (16 November 2023).
11. Interview with Trine Skei Grande, 30 May 2020.

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## Notes on contributors

**Ida Uppstrøm Berg** is a PhD Research Fellow at Faculty of Social Sciences – Department of Archivistics, Library and Information Science, Oslo Metropolitan University. The overall aim of her doctoral thesis is to examine public-private collaboration at Norwegian art museums. Bergs research interest is the sociology of art, cultural sociology, cultural policy, and LAM-issues. In her doctoral work, Berg is associated with the research project Political Dynamics of the Cultural Sector (POLYCUL).

**Håkon Larsen** is a Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences – Department of Archivistics, Library and Information Science, Oslo Metropolitan University. Larsen's main areas of interest are cultural sociology, cultural policy, public libraries, and the sociology of art. He is WP-leader of the WP on private donations to the cultural sector in the POLYCUL project. He is also leader of the INKULSAM research group at OsloMet.

## ORCID

Ida Uppstrøm Berg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9767-1956>

Håkon Larsen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7406-7991>

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