



Voices & Vision – Art Thought Leadership Symposium

Voices and Vision is a 2-day art thought leadership programme, on the occasion of **Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60**, that creates a space for meaningful exchange and deeper engagement with real-world issues. Join us in shaping the dialogue on our shared past, present, and future.

Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60 and Voices and Vision are presented by The Culture Story, produced by Family Office For Art.

The Power of Patronage: Shaping Art, Culture and Lasting Legacies

26 July 2025

Moderator:

- Usha Chandradas | Consultant, Withers KhattarWong, Co-founder of Plural Art Mag and former Arts NMP

Speakers:

- Mae Anderson | Chairman, ArtOutreach
- T. Sasitharan (Sasi) | Co-founder and Director of Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI)
- Prof. Ho Puay Peng | Project Lead, Shaw Heritage research and interpretation project

STYLE 1 — Reader-Friendly Voice

Introduction

Opening the session, moderator Usha Chandradas invited the panel to unpack the complex and sometimes fraught concept of patronage and legacy. Who sustains the arts, and what kinds of legacies do they leave behind? In a landscape where arts organisations often face structural precarity, these questions are critical. The conversation drew together three perspectives: heritage and architecture, private wealth and philanthropy, and the ephemeral world of theatre.



Built Heritage and Long Legacies

Prof. Ho Puay Peng highlighted two projects illustrating how patronage shapes cultural memory. His research on the Shaw Brothers follows their arrival in Singapore in the 1920s; they built cinemas, amusement parks, and television networks that defined popular entertainment for decades. Beyond commerce, their philanthropy through foundations, film production, and public events helped shape Singapore's cultural life during a formative era. For Ho, telling these stories is less about nostalgia than connecting younger generations to histories of entertainment, philanthropy, and nation-building that risk fading from view.

“Patronage is not just about monuments. It is about ensuring that stories endure and remain meaningful to future generations.” — Prof. Ho Puay Peng

He also discussed a decade-long collaboration with the Li Ka-shing Foundation in Hong Kong to design a Buddhist monastery. Here, architecture became a vessel for a donor's values, envisioned to last “a thousand years.” For Ho, buildings endure, but it is storytelling—communicating the meanings behind them—that ensures cultural legacies remain alive.

Philanthropy Today: Ego, Strategy, and Survival

Mae Anderson, chair of Art Outreach and a senior philanthropy advisor, spoke candidly about the realities of arts fundraising. Straddling the roles of running a small independent charity and advising Asia's wealthiest clients, she sees both sides of the giving equation.

Philanthropy, she noted, is “more popular than ever,” but also more complex. Asia's ultra-wealthy face pressures from regulators, consumers, and ESG metrics; giving can become a way to offset business risks. Yet arts and culture face a structural disadvantage: the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which guide much corporate philanthropy, barely mention culture. As a result, arts charities struggle to compete with causes like hunger or health when companies seek to justify donations.

In response, Art Outreach has shifted away from gala dinners toward a service-based model, acting as advisor and project manager. By brokering commissions for museums, universities, and collectors, they generate fees while directly supporting artists and curators. The approach is pragmatic, if less glamorous, requiring sustained labour and humility.

Anderson also noted a generational shift: where past donors might give for naming rights, today's donors often demand strategy, impact metrics, and exit plans. Charities must now demonstrate governance, sustainability, and accountability with professional rigour equal to for-profit corporations.



Theatre's Ephemeral Legacy

If built heritage and financial philanthropy leave tangible legacies, theatre operates at the other extreme. T. Sasitharan, known as Sasi, described theatre as fundamentally ephemeral: “The moment you walk out of the theatre, the show is over.” Unlike architecture or paintings, theatre leaves no lasting object—only memories, feelings, and shared human experience.

“Patronage is not just transactional but relational—it is about walking the journey with artists.”
— T. Sasitharan

This makes patronage in theatre uniquely challenging. Donors are not buying buildings or collections; they are investing in belief, trust, and the conviction that art matters. For the Intercultural Theatre Institute, which he co-founded, survival has depended on finding the rare patrons who are willing to not only give financially, but to “walk the journey” with artists and students. Patronage here is relational rather than transactional.

Sasi stressed that the impact of theatre cannot be measured in R.O.I. or KPIs: its true legacy is the transformation of people. Students trained at ITI return to their communities across Asia, carrying new skills and ideas that ripple outward. For him, theatre cannot change the world directly—but it can change people, and people can change the world. This belief, he argued, is what patrons must be persuaded to support.

Changing Forms of Patronage

The panelists reflected on how patronage has evolved. Ho described it as being often serendipitous: individuals with passion for heritage or conservation stepping forward at the right moment, sometimes unexpectedly donating buildings or funding projects. Anderson noted a shift from cheque-writing to rigorous, impact-driven philanthropy, with funders often being “more sophisticated than the charities” they support. Sasi lamented that Singapore’s ecology sometimes pits small independent groups against large state institutions, creating competition when collaboration would better serve the arts community.

All three acknowledged that the arts require different kinds of patronage than sectors like health or education. Strategic philanthropy often seeks to make itself redundant—solving a problem until no more intervention is needed. But the arts cannot and should not become redundant. They must be sustained as ongoing practices that feed the human spirit.



Ethics, Risk, and Turning Away Donations

An important strand of discussion was the ethics of arts patronage. Usha asked whether the panelists had ever turned away donations—they all gave a knowing laugh. Ho emphasised that a donor's heart and motivation matter: philanthropy tied purely to vanity, with no alignment to vision, is problematic. Anderson admitted to rejecting opportunities where donor conditions were too narrow or self-serving, such as projects that excluded whole categories of artists. Sasi recalled debates in the 1980s over whether arts groups should accept funding from tobacco companies, highlighting the ethical dimensions of arts patronage.

“Not all money is good money. Legacy means more than monuments; it is built through values carried forward.” — Mae Anderson

Ultimately, the speakers agreed that not all money is good money. Patronage carries responsibilities on both sides, and arts organisations must sometimes resist compromising their values for financial survival.

Engaging Younger Donors

The panel also explored strategies for engaging younger donors and audiences. Ho suggested that philanthropy can be a way of forging identity, helping younger people connect with heritage and culture as part of defining themselves. Anderson emphasised that younger donors respond to philosophy and activism, seeing artists as powerful messengers capable of driving social conversations. She described collaborations where artists raised funds themselves through sales and exhibitions, showing that grassroots creativity can build sustainability and attract donor interest.

Sasi added that smaller contributions from younger donors—though modest compared to large corporate gifts—are still significant. Building a culture of giving, he argued, requires reaching beyond “the converted” to persuade new audiences that art is essential.

Family Offices and Future Wealth

Audience questions turned to Singapore's 2,000 family offices, a vast yet untapped resource for the arts. Many clients are already collectors, Anderson noted, but arts groups must prove readiness with strong programmes, governance, and narratives—or risk seeing funds diverted to state institutions or international museums.

She also noted the impending generational wealth transfer in Asia. Trillions of dollars will shift to younger inheritors in the next decade. If cultivated carefully, this could reshape the arts philanthropy landscape, provided charities are prepared to meet the expectations of these new donors.



Conclusion: Legacies Beyond the Self

“How do patrons and institutions shape cultural futures, and what legacies do they leave behind?” — Usha Chandradas

Closing the session, Usha asked each speaker to reflect on their personal legacies. Sasi demurred: he saw himself not as leaving a personal legacy but as a custodian of theatre’s larger legacy, which long predates and will outlast him. Anderson spoke with candour about her worries for succession at Art Outreach, describing her greatest challenge as finding the right future leadership. Ho, for his part, emphasised living authentically in the present, impacting people moment by moment rather than obsessing over monuments.

Together, their reflections underscored a central theme: legacies in the arts are not static monuments but ongoing relationships. They are built through stories, beliefs, and values carried forward by artists, patrons, and communities. Whether through enduring buildings, ephemeral performances, or strategic philanthropy, patronage shapes not only what is remembered, but also how societies imagine their futures.

Alternative Recap

This panel examined the shifting dynamics of patronage, philanthropy, and legacy in Singapore’s arts ecosystem, drawing perspectives from heritage, finance, and theatre. Moderator Usha Chandradas framed the discussion around how legacies are built and sustained, and how patrons, donors, and institutions shape cultural futures.

Prof. Ho Puay Peng reflected on the Shaw Brothers’ century-long legacy, situating their cinemas and philanthropy within nation-building and community life. He also drew on work with Hong Kong philanthropist Li Ka-shing, noting how built heritage projects express a donor’s vision and values. For him, patronage is less about monuments than ensuring cultural stories endure for younger generations.

Mae Anderson, speaking as both arts patron and philanthropy advisor, stressed the complexity of motivations behind giving. She distinguished between “ego-driven” and “impact-driven” philanthropy, observing that projects must align with frameworks such as ESG and the UN Sustainable Development Goals—though culture is conspicuously absent. She highlighted Art Outreach’s pivot from fundraising galas to an advisory model, commissioning artists while candidly noting the arts’ fundraising challenges relative to hunger or health. Younger donors, she said, often demand strategy, accountability, and exit plans, mirroring business practices.



From theatre, T. Sasitharan argued that patronage is relational, about “walking the journey” with artists and believing in theatre’s power to transform people. He recalled foundational support that sustained the Intercultural Theatre Institute and stressed the need to look beyond material R.O.I. to value emotions, memories, and identities forged in performance.

The panel traced the evolution of patronage from naming-rights philanthropy to today’s strategic, impact-measured giving, and cautioned against funding ecologies skewed toward large state institutions. Audience questions raised issues of ethics, family offices, and rejecting misaligned donations. Concluding, speakers agreed that legacies are not static monuments but living relationships—between past and future, artists and patrons, values and visions—that continue to shape Singapore’s cultural life.

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