

ART & DESIGN

Van Gogh Museum Wants to Share Its Expertise, for a Price

By NINA SIEGAL MAY 4, 2016

AMSTERDAM — The Van Gogh Museum here has started a program to offer its professional services to private collectors, corporations and other institutions. It says the move could create a new revenue stream as a hedge against declining government financing and global events like terror attacks that could have an effect on visitor numbers.

Museums around the world have long sought creative ways to bring in money outside of ticket sales, but the Van Gogh’s program, announced last month, is unusual in that its target group includes private clients, experts in museum finance and administration said.

Under the program, museum employees will provide advice and support in areas such as collection conservation and preservation, installation of climate control systems, museum management, and the development of educational programs.

“Museums are used to a different type of outreach that is more about sharing their knowledge and collection, but not in the commercial, contractual manner,” said France Desmarais, the director of programs and partnerships for the International Council of Museums in Paris. “What’s unique is that they are using their expertise to

commercialize, in a sense, but museums have been doing revenue-generating activities for a long time.”

A museum with a public mission that is working on behalf of private clients could raise questions about curatorial independence, some experts said. Ms. Desmarais said that ethical concerns might arise if, for example, the Van Gogh Museum was offering collectors advice about acquiring artworks from the auction market, because the perception could arise that the museum might eventually want to acquire the work for itself or receive it as a donation.

The Van Gogh Museum said that so far it had no plans to do so.

Adriaan Dönszelmann, the managing director of the Van Gogh Museum, who initiated the program, said he did not think ethical issues would be a problem, but he did acknowledge that there could be time-management issues for staff members.

“We’ve made sure that it’s O.K. for our current staff to spend 5 to 10 percent of their time on professional services, for people who want to be part of this adventure,” Mr. Dönszelmann said. If the program is successful, he added, the museum might hire additional specialists to serve clients.

Mr. Dönszelmann said he expected the venture, which was announced on April 7, to generate up to 5 percent of the museum’s annual operating budget, currently €45 million. He said there were no contracted clients as of Monday, but that the museum was in negotiations with several interested parties.

Compared with other Dutch museums, the Van Gogh receives a relatively small proportion of its income in the form of subsidies, slightly less than 20 percent, or €7 million a year. Though the museum has lost a small amount of state funding, a 2012 tax on profits from commercial enterprises like gift shops has cost the museum €500,000 annually, officials said.

“We are quite dependent upon people visiting the museum, and 85 percent of those visitors come from other countries,” Mr. Dönszelmann said. “In this time of potential terrorism and natural disasters, this flow of tourism to Amsterdam is vulnerable.”

He declined to discuss fees except to say that they would be arranged on a sliding scale, with museums or other public institutions paying lower rates than corporate clients. He also said that services could be provided in exchange for museum sponsorship.

Robert J. Stein, the executive vice president and chief program officer of the American Alliance of Museums in Washington, called the program “a great idea.”

In a telephone interview, Mr. Stein said the Van Gogh Museum was known for its expertise in business development, among other areas.

“The hesitancy or concern is that those kinds of efforts could detract from the overall mission of the organization,” he cautioned. But he added that a program like the one the Van Gogh has started could expand networks of donors and sponsors aside from any immediate financial benefits.

The Van Gogh Museum started a pilot project two years ago to test the viability of the program, Mr. Dönszelmann said. It found a number of clients through a partnership with Deloitte Luxembourg, the financial management consultancy, which remains involved in the new program.

For example, Van Gogh Museum managers offered professional advice to Arcis, a fine art storage and collection care company in Manhattan that is planning to open in 2017, on security, climate control and operational systems.

Dos Elshout, a doctoral student in cultural studies at the University of Amsterdam who recently completed a thesis on new business-minded approaches at Dutch museums, said this was part of a trend in European museums to look at new sources of revenue as government subsidies for arts institutions have been reduced or have become less predictable.

“Museums exchange services, knowledge, tips and so on all the time, and of course it was always in a collegial way,” he said. “Now, because of the financial cuts of a few years ago, they have to ask money for services.”

Ms. Desmarais of the International Council of Museums noted that some European museums, such as the Louvre and the British Museum, have provided

advice and professional services to governments and other institutions. In 2007, for example, the United Arab Emirates and France signed an agreement to create the Louvre Abu Dhabi, drawing on the expertise of the Paris museum and offering space to exhibit items from its collections.

Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, paid \$525 million for the privilege of using the Louvre name, plus an additional \$747 million for anticipated art loans, special exhibitions and management advice.

In the United States, the Guggenheim Museum has long been a pioneer in revenue-generating activities, using income from satellite museums in Bilbao, Spain, and Abu Dhabi to supplement traditional fund-raising.

Mr. Stein of the American Alliance of Museums said many institutions were engaged in what he called “entrepreneurial revenue diversification,” including staging traveling exhibitions, developing software and opening satellite stores.

“This is a little bit of where cultural organizations are going,” he said. “Most museums had been in the philanthropy-and-ticket business for a long time and are recognizing that some balance of that with earned revenue sources is a healthy position to be in.”