

Critic's Notebook: A new life for the Broad Collection

Now that the collection is going public, Eli Broad should seize the opportunity to create a truly welcoming artistic environment in downtown L.A.

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Huntington, Getty, Simon, Hammer, Crocker, Menil, Wadsworth, Phillips, Frick, Morgan, Whitney, Guggenheim, etc. — the list of super-rich Americans who, since the mid-19th century, have established museums or galleries to house their personal art collections is as familiar as the institutions that still carry their names. Their motives have been wide-ranging: altruism, self-aggrandizement, fun, social engineering, commitment, reputation laundering and more, including various combinations thereof.

Which is to say, the news is unsurprising that Eli and Edythe Broad will indeed erect a self-funded building with endowment (price tag: upward of \$300 million), featuring 50,000-square-feet of exhibition galleries to display rotating installations selected from their 2,000-piece contemporary art collection. But the plan is not the portent of major shifts in American cultural history that some seem determined to make it.

A recent Forbes magazine article breathlessly burred about "the rise of the billionaire ego-seum." But the Broad museum is more accurately described with the modest adjective, "next." It's next in a long line of such U.S. institutions.

The first was an undertaking by Daniel Wadsworth — son of one of the richest men in Connecticut, a seaman who made his first fortune in the West India trade and his second from supplying goods (socks, pork, tin kettles) to the Continental Army. In Hartford in 1842, the Wadsworth heir opened America's first art museum to show his collection.

Wadsworth's huge wealth was partly accumulated by the toil of tiny fingers. The same year his art museum opened, child labor laws went radical: Kids younger than 12 were limited to 10-hour workdays. As with most single-collector museums ever since, virtually every American "billionaire ego-seum" cited by Forbes — Broad, Alice Walton's Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art now being built in Arkansas, the Fisher Collection soon to be attached to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art — follows in the wake of a ravenous period in which a larger social philosophy of "greed is good" takes hold.

Hollywood culturally framed that sentiment in the 1987 movie "Wall Street." The 1981 Reagan tax cuts launched today's private museum developments, expanded by the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts. ("Wall Street" gets its Bush-era sequel, "Money Never Sleeps," in September.) The fuel for private museums is almost always skyrocketing wealth mixed with favorable tax policy.