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[Russia-Ukraine war](#) [Art market](#) [Museums & heritage](#) [Exhibitions](#) [Books](#) [Podcasts](#) [Columns](#) [Adve](#)

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**Collectors**  
[Archive](#)

## Raymond Nasher, the world's biggest private collector of modern sculpture

The shopping-mall millionaire has been wooed by museums all over the world, but Dallas looks set to benefit from generosity in the great American tradition

**Jason Edward Kaufman**

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### Dallas

They say everything's big in Texas and that surely holds true for the Nasher Collection, the single largest and most important private collection of modern sculpture in the world. Several hundred text book examples trace the history of the medium from Rodin to Abakanowicz, maintaining a level of quality that rivals even the best museums. More than 100 pieces are now in the Guggenheim in New York until 1 June, following their West Coast showing at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

The man behind this remarkable collection is Dallas real estate developer Raymond Nasher, a civic leader and patron who has held presidential appointments under fellow Texans Lyndon

Johnson and George Bush, including a stint as US delegate to the UN in the late sixties.

Born in Boston in 1921, he came to Texas in 1950. His star rose in 1965 with the opening of NorthPark Mall, still the most popular retail centre in the city. The bank he founded at the mall later merged with Comerica Bank of Texas, of which he is currently chairman. As Nasher began integrating world-class sculptures into his buildings (there are several dozen at NorthPark), he and his late wife Patsy gravitated towards modern sculpture in their private collecting as well.

“It’s a personal collection”, claims Mr Nasher, started “to educate our three daughters and give us a great deal of pleasure. Yet, somehow it has become a relatively historical collection with most of the pieces turning out to be important works of art”.

Indeed, they have. He has unique plastercasts of works such as Rodin’s 1875 “Age of bronze” (acquired from the family of Rodin’s founders), Picasso’s 1909 “Head of Fernande” (acquired through Jan Krugier from the Picasso estate), and Brancusi’s 1907-1908 “The kiss” (acquired through Daniel Elkon). There is Gauguin’s large wooden carving depicting his pregnant Tahitian mistress, or Gaudier-Brzeska’s unique marble “Hieratic portrait of Ezra Pound” (formerly on deposit at the Tate from Pound’s daughter). And few experts would dispute the importance of three bronze busts of Diego that are the only sculptures Giacometti ever painted.

Mr Nasher intends to keep the collection together as the core of a proposed Nasher Institute for Modern Sculpture that would organise travelling exhibitions, sponsor research on the artists and the period, deal with matters of conservation and generally become a place for discussion.

Museums around the globe have lusted after the collection at least since 1987-89, when a selection of works visited the Dallas Museum, the National Gallery in Washington, the Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Forte di Belvedere in Florence, and the Tel Aviv Museum. But the collector has ruled out an overseas institution. Among his wooers have been the National Gallery in Washington, which intends to construct a National Sculpture Garden next to the museum. “I hope that in some way we could contribute to that garden by lending pieces”, says Mr Nasher.

The Guggenheim, host of the current exhibition, has also been in pursuit. Mr Nasher joined their board not long ago, and in 1995 he designed and underwrote expansion of the garden at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, loaning thirty works for display, a gesture he plans to repeat in this and future Biennale summers.

Though he is affiliated with other museums as well, discussions are furthest advanced with the

Dallas Museum of Art, with which Mr Nasher has been closely involved for many years as a trustee, lender, and donor. “Dallas would be first choice because it is our home and our children’s home, and it is where we started the collection”, he says. Mayor Ron Kirk is anxious to land the prize, calling the Nasher Collection a “top priority”, along with the new downtown arena for the city’s two sports teams. According to a spokesperson, “It will help to put Dallas on the map culturally, and serve as a mechanism to bring people to town”.

The \$15 million proposal by Dallas Museum and the city calls for creation of the Patsy and Raymond Nasher Sculpture Garden across the street east of the Dallas Museum, and conversion of a large barrel-vaulted sculpture hall and four adjacent rooms into a suite of galleries for small-scale sculptures and paintings from the Nasher collection.

“Space is not a problem”, says Director Jay Gates, whose museum, which operates in a city-owned building, has added 360,000 square feet since the early 1980s.

The city would float a bond to cover its portion of the cost, the one stipulation being that the art be donated either to the city, to the museum, or to a foundation that would guarantee the permanence of its installation.

An answer is expected from Mr Nasher’s foundation within a matter of weeks. “If he decides quickly, we can do it in three years”, says Assistant City Manager Mary Suhm.

### Mr Nasher’s wish list

Mr Nasher told The Art Newspaper he is constantly looking for works by Medardo Rosso, Boccioni (he once acquired a bronze of “Unique forms of continuity in space” which proved to be a Brazilian-made replica), Modigliani, Duchamp-Villon, Gauguin, Matisse, Brancusi, Picasso, Giacometti, Dubuffet, David Smith (particularly the “Voltri” or “Cubi” series), Calder, Mirò, De Kooning, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, and Lichtenstein. He says he is not especially drawn to Minimalism, which he calls “interesting”, but lacking “that sense of excitement I get from a Brancusi or a Picasso”

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[Collectors](#)

[Sculpture](#)

[20th Century](#)

[Modernism](#)

[Private collections](#)

[Dallas, Texas](#)

[Nasher Collection](#)

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