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Houston's Museum of Fine Arts bucks the recession in Texas

The museum's endowment has grown to \$157 million and a \$50 million building by Raphael Moneo comes next

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The 1982 oil crisis that crippled the Texas economy, and the State's subsequent groping to regain its fiscal feet, should have made life miserable for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. But during this period, the MFA managed instead to accelerate its growth.

Director Peter Marzio told The Art Newspaper that less than one per cent of the budget comes from the public sector, making government cutbacks less devastating than for most museums.

Peter Marzio also says that support never flagged from his Texas-sized member board, nor from private sources and corporations, particularly oil companies such as Shell, Conoco and Exxon. Astonishingly, he reports that the total endowment grew from \$21 million in 1982 to \$157 million today.

With its loosened purse strings, a few years ago the museum bought adjacent land and hired Robert Venturi's firm to draw up a master plan. The expansion calls for several structures to go up over the next decade, including a \$50 million building designed by Spanish architect Raphael Moneo. According to Mr Marzio, added galleries will transform the MFA from a "regional" into a "major" museum.

A lead gift from chairman Alfred C. Glassell Jr has allowed the MFA to begin a \$7.5 million enlargement of the affiliated Glassell School of Art, across the plaza to the north. The permanent collection will grow through a happy agreement with the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation that will place on long-term deposit several hundred Old Master and Modern paintings by major artists.

The foundation was established by the late wife of Humble Oil (Exxon) founder Robert E. Lee Blaffer, and dedicated to "bringing great works of art to the people of Texas". Executors recognised the mission would be best served with the works in a flagship such as the MFA. The full magnitude of the windfall will not be felt until the collection can be installed in the new building, but until then rotating selections will be interwoven with the permanent collection.

The MFA also has a roster of exhibitions. "Degas landscapes" (until 3 July, see The Art Newspaper No. 37, April 1994, p.12), is a collaboration with the Metropolitan that assembles seventy paintings, monotypes, pastels and drawings, accompanied by exhibition curator Richard Kendall's monograph published with Yale University Press. Starting this month, the MFA is joining the Seattle Art Museum, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the North Carolina Museum of Art to present "A gift to America" (until 2 August), a paintings exhibition that pays tribute to dime-store magnate Samuel H. Kress (1863-1955), who distributed about 3,000 objects (1,400 Old Master paintings, 1,300 bronzes, 150 sculptures and assorted decorative arts) to American museums, most notably the National Gallery of Art.

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