



THE ART NEWSPAPER

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

Museums & Heritage
Archive

Miami Beach, the Wolfsonian, “Sometimes it moves sideways and sometimes it moves backwards but generally speaking it will move forward”

Financial problems for decorative arts museum launched last November

Jason Edward Kaufman

31 August 1996

Miami Beach

Since opening last November (The Art Newspaper, November 1995, p.18), the Wolfsonian Foundation’s museum of modern applied arts has been experiencing a severe “cash flow problem”, according to director Peggy Loar.

The museum has laid off more than half of its thirty-five employees, closed for the month of July and slashed expenditure from \$3.2 million in 1995 to under \$2 million for the current fiscal year.

A \$500,000 loan from the City helped them reopen to the public in August, but with chief curator Wendy Kaplan one of the casualties, plans for a major autumn exhibition remain uncertain.

“We tried being self-sufficient; unfortunately, in this day and age that’s not possible”, laments Mitchell Wolfson, Jr, the institution’s founder and chairman, whose 70,000-piece collection of American, British, Italian, Dutch and German design, 1885-1945, is on extended loan to the museum.

Since 1993, his annual infusions have dropped from more than \$3 million to less than \$1 million per year, yet, according to Ms Loar, “Everybody seems to think that Mr Wolfson is carrying the whole ball, and he hasn’t been for some time”. Programming grants have come from the NEA, Knight Foundation, Chase Manhattan Bank and the State of Florida has committed \$510,000 over three years for operations.

However, there is no endowment, which means that unless the board digs deep into their collective pockets, money will remain a constant concern for the museum.

A significant obstacle to both private and public giving may be the fact that the Wolfsonian’s “permanent” collection actually belongs to Mr Wolfson. The collector has donated only the building and 250 objects that comprised the inaugural exhibition, although he has vowed to convey the contents of every exhibition prepared by the museum. “I have no heirs and I can’t take it with me” states the 58 year-old bachelor, “but I am just going to make sure that whatever institute [the collection] goes to will be the best”.

He mentions the possibility of a partnership. perhaps with a university, which could satisfy his ambition to create “an academy of the decorative and applied arts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century”. and he has similar collaborative aspirations for the Wolfsonian Foundation’s Castello Mackenzie-Wolfson in Genoa, where he would like the Italian government to establish a centre for conservation of novecento design materials, of which the 1913 castle is itself a veritable catalogue.

Meanwhile rumours are rife that Mr Wolfson’s inherited millions are waning.

The Miami Herald reports his having placed on the market his parents’ Miami Beach estate for \$3.9 million and the downtown Sterling Building for \$4.5 million. Mr Wolfson merely points out that “All museums have difficulties in their initial stages”, and of his fledgling Wolfsonian he

says, “Sometimes it moves sideways and sometimes it moves backwards, but generally speaking, it will move forward”.

The inaugural show, “the Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885-1945”, whose catalogue won the Wittenborn Prize, is now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (until 22 September). The next stop in its international tour which continues until 1999, is the Seattle Art Museum 24 October-12 January 1997.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as *“Sometimes it moves sideways and sometimes it moves backwards but generally speaking it will move forward”*

[Museums & Heritage](#)

[Funding](#)

[Decorative arts](#)

[Miami](#)

[Finance](#)

[Wolfsonian](#)

[Mitchell Wolfson Jr](#)

COOKIE SETTINGS