

HOFFMAN NEWSLETTER

Philanthropy in the arts & business leadership: A Conversation with Melanie Coisne from the King Baudouin Foundation

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I recently had the pleasure of sitting down with Melanie Coisne, Head of Heritage & Culture at the King Baudouin Foundation (1). We spoke about philanthropy in the arts in the context of personal drivers, business leadership and strategy. In a context marked by rapid societal changes and public funding restrictions, philanthropy intersects increasingly with ESG considerations. The role and influence of philanthropy will undoubtedly continue to grow, and has the potential to have a significant effect on society.

Melanie, do you have an example of successful philanthropy in the arts to share with us?

A recent example of a successful philanthropic initiative hosted by the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) is the Isabelle and Philippe Dewez Fund, established by the Dewez couple with the aim of enriching the collections of Brussels' museums. In recent months, significant works by Oscar Jespers, Valerius de Saedeleer, and Evelyne Axell have been acquired through the fund and are now part of the collections at the Musée d'Ixelles and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. A completely different form of support is exemplified by the Youth, Research and Music Fund. Currently, the fund supports a project in a university hospital's neonatal unit, where musicians bring comfort to suffering infants and their parents.

What motivates individuals—especially business leaders—to become philanthropists? Can you share insights from your experience?

People become philanthropists because they care about the world and the people living in it. Often, we hear business leaders speak about their wish to "give back to society"—a core philanthropic value. These leaders, already at the helm of successful operations, are seeking meaningful ways to contribute to a better world. The increasing interest in philanthropy among leaders is evident in the numbers: in 1999, the KBF hosted just four corporate funds. Today, we collaborate with over 80 enterprises. It is meaningful to distinguish between the engagement of the business leader and that of the company itself. The former is primarily driven by personal motivation, as is the case with many of our philanthropists. The latter, however, tends to be more deeply embedded and often reflects the very DNA of the organisation. Furthermore, it may be said that it is these corporates who are driving the sector to explore new forms of philanthropy, such as employee engagement, impact investing, and the active involvement of clients—both B2B and B2C.

What benefits do you see in integrating philanthropy into a business model? Is it purely altruistic, or are there strategic advantages as well?

While altruism is often a key driver, a leader's personal conviction can spark a wider philanthropic culture within their organisation. In some cases, this pursuit of greater impact becomes embedded in the company's DNA. Philanthropy also offers valuable lessons for businesses. The shared objective is no longer solely 'making profit', but increasingly aims at 'making profit through meaningful impact. Unlike the competitive nature of business, philanthropy is rooted in collaboration. Engaging in philanthropic work often challenges and broadens traditional business practices.

Focusing specifically on arts philanthropy, how does it influence personal fulfillment and leadership in business, from your perspective?

The Private Art Support Foundation (PASF) created a fund several years ago to support living Belgian artists and promote their work outside of traditional museum settings. Businesses can participate by displaying selected artworks in their offices, making the collection accessible to a wider audience. The selection process may reflect the personal taste of the business leader or involve broader participation across the organisation. These artworks foster conversation among colleagues, enhance workspaces, and even serve as conversation starters with clients. The echoes we get from participating companies are extremely positive.

How can arts philanthropy benefit businesses in terms of brand image and employee engagement?

An excellent example of the latter is the Sofina Boël Fund for Education and Talent, created in 2011. It supports students, youth, and traditional craftsmanship with an annual budget of several €MM. To promote heritage crafts, the fund helps train talented young artisans in traditional trades. At Sofina Investment, employees are moreover encouraged to assess potential beneficiaries through working groups using due diligence. This involvement strengthens team dynamics and fosters deeper engagement. It's more than CSR or HR—it's about meaningful involvement for societal impact.

The company's association with a respected philanthropic facilitator like KBF also enhances brand image. The specific collaboration adds credibility and expertise, serving as a powerful tool for building corporate identity among peers, investors, stakeholders, and clients.

What are the challenges of measuring the impact of arts philanthropy, and how do leaders approach this?

Measuring impact in the arts is particularly challenging due to the lack of clear, quantitative metrics. While the number of grantees or the value of grants can provide some indication of success, they don't fully reflect long-term societal impact. Nevertheless, it's essential for companies and their leaders to gather insights and ensure their philanthropic investments are responsibly managed. Rather than seeing impact measurement as an end in itself, it should be used to refine and strengthen the initiative over time. The arts sector for their part is

increasingly exploring systemic approaches to assess cultural engagement. These methods help organisations evaluate effectiveness and promote evidence-based practices—an area where the cultural sector can also learn from corporate methodologies.

How can arts philanthropy become more strategic and sustainable in the long term?

Philanthropic enablers can play a crucial role in this regard. At KBF, we facilitate philanthropy for both individuals and businesses looking to deepen their societal engagement. As an independent, pluralistic foundation, we have the freedom and duty to take risks, innovate, and explore new paths. Our mission is indeed to enable meaningful philanthropy, including support for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. We are the ideal partner for organisations seeking to go beyond traditional strategies and create lasting, transformational impact. The philanthropic sector therefore needs to understand the wishes and needs of all parties involved, and match both in a meaningful way. It goes without saying that this takes time and creativity. For example, arts philanthropy is not only about restoring paintings or supporting young, talented artists. It can also take place at the intersection between heritage and climate change, or music and mental health, to name but some.

Looking ahead, how do you envision the future of philanthropy in business, and what are your long-term goals?

The future of corporate philanthropy in the arts and heritage sector lies in adopting a cause-driven approach rather than addressing broad, generic needs. Our goal is to raise awareness for long-term initiatives and inspire leaders to see their support as transformative rather than transactional. We aim to help them understand that their contribution can be a gamechanger. More importantly, we encourage them and their teams to remain engaged throughout the process—however long it takes—to realize lasting, positive change.

Is philanthropy for me? How and where to start?

Contrary to conventional belief, philanthropy is not solely the domain of the wealthy or defined by large-scale (corporate) financial contributions. At KBF, we are firmly convinced that every individual and every organisation has the potential to be philanthropic - whether through donations, volunteer work, or the sharing of professional expertise. Our experience demonstrates that philanthropy often begins modestly - with an idea, a desire to make a positive impact, or a simple gesture of goodwill. For example, a philanthropic initiative may involve partners in a law firm providing pro bono legal advice to refugees. When financial support is involved, some companies choose to structure their giving more formally. One such approach is the creation of a corporate fund, allowing for a more strategic and sustainable engagement.

At KBF, we accompany individuals and businesses who seek to contribute to the common good. Together, we invest opportunities, exchange expertise, and help transform aspirations into tangible impact. It would be our pleasure to support you in shaping your philanthropic vision and remain at your disposal for an explorative discussion.

Melanie Coisne, Head of Heritage & Culture, KBF

coisne.m@kbs-frb.be

Centre for Philanthropy & Corporate Advice, KBF

philanthropy@kbs-frb.be

Michel Grisay, Partner, Hoffman

mg@hoffman-associates.be

- (1) The King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) is an independent and pluralist public utility foundation, which has been working to improve society for almost 50 years. Its mission is to contribute to building a better society in Belgium, Europe and elsewhere in the world. The KBF is an actor for change and innovation, serving the public interest and increasing social cohesion. It endeavours to maximise its impact through capacity building among organisations and people who contribute to building a better society. The KBF accompanies philanthropists and donors (individuals, companies, or organisations) wishing to take action for the common good on any continent and in any area of the general interest.