

[close window](#) | [print](#)**Money And Art: A Love Affair That Transcends Time****An Interview with David Gordon as told to Julia Ann Charpentier.**

David Gordon  
(Photo by: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

In academia, the separation of the humanities from business has been a long-established tradition. Yet the love affair between money and art transcends time. Like Romeo and Juliet, one without the other means suicide. From the beginning of his career, **David Gordon** recognized the volatile nature of this relationship. Today, he is renowned worldwide as an outspoken corporate executive who has taken two incompatible domains and made the people in each realm work together for their own good.

**Gordon** may be known as a controversial, unconventional personality, but this man's success as director of the **Milwaukee Art Museum** for the past five years can be attributed to his confident, direct approach. He brought the museum out of \$30 million in debt, increased attendance, and made the Santiago Calatrava Quadracci Pavilion a winged icon. No longer is Milwaukee known as a blue-collar beer capital. Thanks to his contribution to the arts, the city has a revitalized image that attracts international tourists.

Before moving to Milwaukee in 2002, this Oxford-educated native of London had a thriving career as CEO at The Economist for twelve years and served as director of the Royal Academy of Arts for six. When offered his position in Milwaukee, he proclaimed it was "love at first sight." The French Ambassador recently named him Knight in the Order of Arts and Letters for establishing a relationship with the Louvre Museum in Paris. In March 2008, **Gordon** stepped down and embarked on yet another career as a museum management consultant.



Milwaukee Art Museum  
(Photo by: Milwaukee Art Museum)

**JC:** Art and money aren't necessarily related. How has your knowledge as a businessman influenced your career in the arts?

**DG:** They're very much related if you're running a museum. You're having a constant balancing act between your artistic ambitions and your resources. So having had something of a business background has been of enormous value to me. And because of my love of art, I think I can bring something to the artistic side as well, even though I'm not an art history major or haven't been a curator.

**JC:** What is unique about the creation and the appreciation of the arts in England? In what ways do Americans stereotypically differ?

**DG:** The Royal Academy is much more like an American institution than other British ones in that it did not receive any funding from the state. Rather like an American museum, it has had to charge admission and raise money from donors and sponsorship, and so running the Royal Academy was very much like running the Milwaukee Art Museum. I was well prepared for Milwaukee by the Royal Academy. Had I been working in a state run institution, which did not have to go out and beg, borrow and steal money, I would have found it rather more difficult.

**JC:** What did you learn at the Royal Academy of Arts that you could not have learned from any other art institution?

**DG:** It has a reputation for putting on outstanding international exhibitions, and working with their really brilliant chief curator Norman Rosenthal, I learned that there's no point in doing anything unless it's the best, unless it's excellent, unless it's outstanding.

**JC:** How does your experience in Milwaukee compare to your time at the Royal Academy?

**DG:** In a way, the politics of the Royal Academy were complicated by the fact that it is actually an academy. There are academicians, and so the council of the Royal Academy was composed of academicians, of artists and architects. And in Milwaukee the board of trustees is a wide range of people with a variety of backgrounds, who I think have greater understanding of the needs of running an organization of this scale than I found among the academicians at the Royal Academy.

**JC:** I understand that the Milwaukee Museum was \$30 million in debt when you took over. How did you erase this debt?

**DG:** The first thing was to make it clear that our artistic policy had to be full of vitality and of interest and of very high standard because people don't give money to an institution

(Images provided by Julia Ann Charpentier)



because they need it. They give money because they want to... because they're excited... because they're impressed.

**JC:** How do you go about making the arts accessible and appealing to ordinary middle and working class people?

**DG:** It's a most difficult thing to do. All museums struggle with it. I was lucky enough to be brought up in a home where art was a part of life. Going to exhibitions was something one did, and if one is brought up in a home without those advantages, then it's much more difficult. We have an intense educational program, and we bring in something like sixty thousand school age children a year to visit the museum in the hope that some will be entranced and exhilarated. With adults who are not in the habit of coming, it's a problem. We market quite intensively, but I do feel that that's our big challenge.

**JC:** You've stressed the importance of the globalization of art.

**DG:** The idea of international traveling exhibitions has been around for some time. That's not new. That's been going on for two or three decades. What's clear is that the international art market has become even more international. At the recent auctions in New York, bidders were coming in from Russia and from India and from China and from the Arab countries in a way that was never the case before. So one is seeing a huge international interest in art, and quite unusually, what's changed is that instead of being interested just in impressionists, which was the case until about seven or eight years ago, they're buying artists who are still alive, who are producing quite difficult works. So there are two changes. One is that the emphasis has shifted from impressionist works to contemporary works or modern works, and secondly, many more countries are producing very rich people who are interested in spending huge sums of money buying art. One's seeing things going at auction for thirty... forty... fifty million dollars.

**JC:** What is your definition of art?

**DG:** It's a unique product of somebody's imagination that has originality and skill and has the capacity of either making you feel that it's beautiful or challenging.

**JC:** How do you distinguish between commercial and artistic aspects of a work?

**DG:** The same way that you do with many other things in life. You go to the theater. You have to pay a sum of money, but you're not conscious of that while you're sitting in the theater watching the play.

**JC:** In the twenty-first century the moneymaking element involved in creating a work may outweigh artistic merit. Do you think this diminishes quality?

**DG:** I think a bit, but I'm not a purist about it. I'm rather glad that people are spending sums of money in art. Some of it trickles down to young artists so that instead of having to starve in a garret until they are discovered, they can begin to make a living earlier on. I don't think it's having a corrupting influence.

**JC:** When you look at the twentieth century, what decade stands out as the most enlightening?

**DG:** The first two decades of the twentieth century... the period up to the First World War was when art recognizably became completely different from anything that had gone before.

**JC:** Do you think that the twenty-first century will do everything to break established norms?

**DG:** The problem that artists have nowadays is that in a way everything's been done. Nobody is any longer shocked by anything. And the times when people were deeply shocked by a piece of contemporary art are long since gone. Therefore, if young artists want to make a splash, it's actually more difficult to do so. It's more difficult to shock people and outrage them than it was in the past. So they have to succeed by the strength of their ideas in a very, very competitive marketplace. There are more artists, probably more artists alive and practicing today, than have there been in the total of humanity. China has forty art schools turning out thousands of graduates a year. Art schools around the world are booming, as people want to do something creative. So there are thousands, tens of thousands of artists, being turned out who have to compete and get attention.

**JC:** Do you think art should always challenge the status quo?

**DG:** No. I don't think art should always challenge. I think art should always do anything. I think artists should do what they want to do to express themselves. Art that looks like art that's been done before, but is done with technical skill, I suppose has a place. But artists are always striving for originality. The degree to which they're challenging the status quo differs from one to the other. There are always some who are good at doing something beautiful that is recognizably from a long tradition of portrait. An artist who is really good at his skill may not necessarily be breaking new ground.

**Julia Ann Charpentier is a freelance writer and editor. You can contact the author at: [juliacharpentier@aol.com](mailto:juliacharpentier@aol.com)**