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The Art's Here. Where's the Crowd?

By [EDWARD WYATT](#)

LOS ANGELES

JOHN BALDESSARI, the conceptual artist who has long made his home here, for years gave his college art students one piece of advice when they graduated: Go to New York, the capital of the art world.

Now, however, Mr. Baldessari has a different view. "I don't think it matters," he said recently. "More and more young artists leave school and stay here. The opportunities are better, and the cost of living is cheaper. People involved in art regularly come to L.A. It really doesn't matter if they live in New York or L.A."

Two decades after Los Angeles emerged as the nation's second art capital, the city is reaping the benefits of a migration of artists, galleries, dealers and curators. In recent years more than two artists have moved to this city for every one that moved away, a net rate of gain that is higher than in any metropolitan area in the country, according to an analysis of [Census Bureau](#) statistics by Ann Markusen, a professor at the [University of Minnesota](#).

In the process new centers of gravity have emerged for contemporary art and artists in a city that has suffered for years because of its lack of a central arts district. Now there is not one such geographic center but several: downtown, where a thriving gallery district operates in what used to be a nighttime ghost town, as well as in former industrial areas in Culver City and Santa Monica. And a new generation of curators have been lured to the major museums here. The [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), the [J. Paul Getty Museum](#) and the Hammer Museum have each attracted energizing new talent in recent years.

Of course the city has long since emerged as an important center for the performing arts as well. The [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#), regarded as one of the country's most dynamic orchestras, gained added allure with its move to [Frank Gehry](#)'s 2003 Disney Hall on Grand Avenue, and the Los Angeles Opera is preparing for its first-ever "Ring" cycle next door at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

In architecture Los Angeles has been an incubator not just for Mr. Gehry but for the rising star Thom Mayne, and high-profile commissions by [Renzo Piano](#) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Steven Holl at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County are proceeding apace. And the boom in television and film production in Hollywood has created new opportunities for visual artists and dancers, many of whom also work for companies that perform in or have close ties to Pacific Rim countries.

Yet the city is still struggling to attract cultural tourists. While New York, London and Paris each attract 10

million to 15 million such visitors per year, Los Angeles draws only about 2.5 million, according to a 2004 study by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation.

“Why is that?” asked the philanthropist Eli Broad, the city’s most visible and generous champion of the arts. “Perception. We have not promoted cultural travel. That’s going to start happening, and that’s going to get the city more and more attention.”

Whereas 40 percent of visitors to New York and London take part in some sort of cultural activity — a museum visit, a theatrical performance or the like — and 85 percent of visitors to Paris do so, only about 1 in 10 tourists to Los Angeles visit a cultural site.

To remedy that Mr. Broad and other civic leaders are bargaining on their investment in the commercial and cultural districts that are taking shape downtown, like the Grand Avenue Project and L.A. Live, efforts that include hotels, restaurants, shops and entertainment centers.

“It will mean a big boost to the economy, and a big boost to how our city is viewed internationally,” Mr. Broad said. “It’s not simply sunshine, beaches and Hollywood here.”

But that effort hasn’t been easy. Two years ago Mr. Broad tried to raise \$10 million in public financing to promote the arts here. While the city promised \$2 million, officials at the county, state and federal levels balked, arguing in part that more private money should be raised for that purpose. For now the effort has stalled, although Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa said in an interview that he would like to create a public-private partnership to accomplish what Mr. Broad proposed.

The mayor’s initiative, however, awaits his appointment of a new general manager for the city’s cultural affairs department, a job that has gone unfilled since the previous department manager resigned nine months ago.

The department manager will be charged with fashioning a new cultural master plan for the city, a blueprint for encouraging both local investment in the arts and reaching out to areas of the city that are underserved by museums, theaters and the like. The master plan was last revised in 1991.

“I think there are a lot of people who want to get involved in the arts, and would if there was a conduit for it,” Mr. Villaraigosa said in an interview.

But that financial conduit is conspicuously absent, especially at a time when corporations are cutting their arts budgets or using them more for marketing than for philanthropy. That problem is aggravated by the relative shortage of major corporations here: Los Angeles has fewer Fortune 500 companies than Richmond, Va., or Charlotte, N.C.

Historically, said Kevin F. McCarthy, a senior social scientist at the Rand Corporation who is working on a study of support systems for the arts in cities around the country, Los Angeles has had three sets of business leaders: the first drawn from the downtown corporations, the second from the high-technology

and aerospace industries on the west side, and the third from Hollywood.

“You could never get the entertainment industry to work with the other two guys, even though there were some people who had connections in both communities,” Mr. McCarthy said. The problem with Hollywood leaders, he said, is that “they’re so used to publicity and understanding the importance of marketing that they want to be the center of attention on all of this stuff.”

“I think they also have a very short-sighted focus, like much of the corporate sector, on profits,” he added. “And they tend to see this as a zero- sum game.”

Some Hollywood moguls are already big donors of course. [David Geffen](#) gave \$5 million in 1996 to the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#); it now maintains the Geffen Contemporary galleries as a separate part of its three-campus institution. Mr. Geffen also gave money for the renovation of a theater near the [University of California](#) at Los Angeles campus in Westwood that is now called the Geffen Playhouse. And Disney Hall was built with \$120 million from corporations and private donors, along with an initial \$50 million from Walt Disney’s widow, Lillian, and more than \$100 million from Los Angeles County.

Mr. Broad says he is confident that Hollywood’s commitment will increase, in part through the goading of newly arrived museum directors, including Michael Govan. Mr. Govan arrived one year ago from the [Dia Art Foundation](#) in New York to take over as director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and has forged new connections with Hollywood. Among his additions to the museum’s board are [Barbra Streisand](#); [Michael Crichton](#); Terry Semel, the chief executive of Yahoo and former co-chief executive of Warner Brothers; and Willow Bay, the television reporter who is married to Robert Iger, chief executive of Disney.

Now, however, Mayor Villaraigosa may be in the best position to mobilize money into the arts, galvanize business leaders in Hollywood and beyond, and raise the visibility of the city’s cultural scene. “He’s got the kind of sex appeal that Hollywood wants,” Mr. McCarthy said. “He could bring these guys together,” in a way that the previous mayor, [James K. Hahn](#), could not.

In 2004 Mr. Hahn floated the idea of doing away with the city’s cultural affairs department altogether. That effort was fought by Mr. Villaraigosa, then a councilman, earning him the support of many grass-roots arts organizations, which helped his 2005 election campaign.

“I think we can get Hollywood to be more active in the arts,” Mr. Villaraigosa said. “One of the reasons why we’re focused on finding a visionary leader in the area of the arts is because it’s going to take someone who’s got the wherewithal, the respect, the ethos if you will, in the arts community and can rally that community in support of new initiatives,” like cultural programs in the schools and greater citywide spending on the arts.

If anyone knows how hard it can be to attract that support, it is Mr. Broad, who seems to have a hand in almost everything that goes on in the arts.

He was the founding chairman of the Museum of Contemporary Art, and its present location on Grand Avenue downtown, near Disney Hall, is a direct result of his efforts. Mr. Broad is also a trustee of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which is currently building the Broad Contemporary Art Museum on its campus on Wilshire Boulevard, thanks to a \$60 million gift from Mr. Broad and his wife, Edythe.

The Broads have also made a big impact on the art schools in the Los Angeles area. Last fall U.C.L.A. opened the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Center, a collection of studios, classrooms, offices and gallery space designed by the architects [Richard Meier](#) and Michael Palladino. Outside sits a Richard Serra sculpture commissioned by Mr. Broad for that purpose. And the Broads have donated money for buildings at the two other major art schools in the region, the California Institute of the Arts, known as CalArts, in Valencia, and Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif.

His efforts extend beyond the visual arts. He recently provided a gift to pay for the Los Angeles Opera's staging of Wagner's "Ring," the first time the complete cycle will be produced here.

"Eli Broad really does seem to be the most strategic thinker right now about L.A. and the arts," said Elizabeth Ondaatje, a Rand Corporation researcher who is directing the institution's studies of the arts with Mr. McCarthy. "Every other month you read another investment they've decided to make."

Mr. Broad (whose name rhymes with road) has generated a fair amount of resentment in some corners here for his outsized presence on the art scene. His devotion to the downtown projects have been criticized as ignoring pockets of the city that have less access to the arts, like the largely Hispanic sections of East Los Angeles and the areas south of downtown that have large African-American populations. And some of the resistance he faced in his most recent fund-raising effort came from people who wondered why a billionaire was asking for money from taxpayers to promote museums on whose boards he sits.

Ever an optimist, Mr. Broad dismisses those criticisms, saying he prefers to discuss why, despite the relative lack of major corporations here, he still believes that new money can flow to the art world. As evidence, he cited a \$25 million donation announced this month by BP, the energy company, to the Los Angeles County Museum to finance a new entrance pavilion.

If it has been hard to attract investment and government support for cultural activities, the city's vibrant visual arts scene might be seen as its own best advertisement.

"The rest of the world is promoting the city as well or better than L.A. does," said Gary Garrels, the chief curator at the Hammer Museum, who moved here two years ago from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "All of the curators and galleries that are dynamic are coming to Los Angeles and looking at what's going on here."

Downtown, which not too long ago was little more than a ghost town after 5 p.m. on weekdays, now bustles with activity around Fifth and Spring streets on Friday and Saturday nights, when art galleries typically schedule their openings of new shows. Similar scenes unfold around more established galleries on Wilshire Boulevard and among emerging contemporary galleries in Santa Monica and Culver City, the

incorporated area south of Interstate 10.

Last year Los Angeles and its artists were the focus of a major show at the Pompidou Center in Paris, “Los Angeles 1955-1985: The Birth of an Art Capital.” This month the Hammer Museum here will feature 15 contemporary Los Angeles artists in a show exploring what it means to create here, playfully titled “Eden’s Edge.”

As a career art seems more realistic to graduate art students than ever before, said Patrick Painter, who owns a gallery in Santa Monica. “Students graduate here with a feeling they can live in L.A. and make a living in LA,” he said. “L.A. will never be more important than New York, but it will be equal.”

And naturally some artists adopt Los Angeles precisely because it is not New York. Max Jansons, a Los Angeles painter who is a New York native, graduated from U.C.L.A., then returned to [Columbia University](#) for a master’s degree. He now lives in Santa Monica.

“I like having time to be in my studio without being surrounded by tons of different voices and seeing all these different shows and being part of that activity,” Mr. Jansons said. “There’s something very focused about your time here in the studio that I never really had in New York when I was there.”

Whereas New York presents more opportunities for the chance meetings with other artists that stimulate discussion, he added, it is easier to isolate oneself and get work done in Los Angeles. “Here you really have to make an effort to be part of something,” he said.

In large part that is because of the sprawl that so defines Los Angeles, said Michael Brand, who came here in 2005 as director of the Getty Museum. “The thing the city lacks is public transport and ease of access,” he said. “That, I think, is a major problem, unlike London, unlike New York, where you can just quickly go to other sorts of cultural organizations. It means people like myself and my colleagues in the end find it harder to maintain a face-to-face dialogue. You’ve got to plan ahead, and at a minimum it’s an afternoon.”

What Angelenos get in the trade of course is physical space. Sherin Guirguis, an artist who was born in Egypt and received her master’s degree from the [University of Nevada](#) at Las Vegas, said she chose Los Angeles by necessity.

“I couldn’t afford to live in New York no matter what, not even in Brooklyn,” she said. “I’m able to have space here. I make very large work, and it’s very expensive to make.”

Meanwhile the path forged by Mr. Baldessari and others has brought a legitimacy to artists here, one that many people believe will be followed by increasing levels of financial aid.

“L.A. has been the model for another American city having a spot in the art world,” said Fredric Snitzer, the owner of a gallery in Miami who brought works by several of his artists to the “Art LA” show here in late January.

“In the old days California artists were like they were on another planet,” he said. “In the last 20 years

that has changed. There are fabulous artists here who have to be reckoned with.”

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