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Arts Galas Show That Extravagance Never Goes Out of Style

They are costly, labor-intensive and seemingly dated, but cultural organizations say black-tie dinners remain essential to pleasing donors and paying the bills.



Cultural galas, like one hosted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, can seem anachronistic at times, but they remain a mainstay of fund-raising for arts organizations. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times



By **Robin Pogrebin**

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They drank salted maple espresso martinis and ate snow crab, Wagyu short rib and passion fruit bonbons.

They watched Kim Kardashian pose on the red carpet in a plunging white neckline. Leonardo DiCaprio charmed them as their host, and [Charli XCX](#) pumped them up with her hit song “360.”

But these were not attendees at some glamorous awards show. They were at a benefit for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

For its own annual fund-raising event, the New York Philharmonic served Skuna Bay salmon and beef tenderloin. The tables were set with Wedgewood blue linens and tall arrangements of hydrangeas and orchids, surrounded by silver votive candles with sprigs of blue delphiniums.



Kim Kardashian at the LACMA gala in November. Monica Schipper/Getty Images



The LACMA dinner featured a performance by Charli XCX. Matt Winkelmeyer/Getty Images for Lacma

At a time when cultural institutions are still recovering financially from the pandemic shutdown and face rising costs, one might expect their expensive annual fund-raisers, first born as 19th century soirees, to have gone the way of top hats and opera glasses.

But even as some administrators question whether galas are worth all the money and effort, most continue to feature them as a mainstay of fund-raising, and in some cases have doubled down on extravagance, entertainment and glitz to attract wealthy donors.

As enamored as Philharmonic fans are of classical music, for example, the New York orchestra made sure their benefit crowd heard Josh Groban singing show tunes along with Puccini.

A Lavish Host:
Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)



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**A Smaller Affair:
Katonah Museum of Art**



The Katonah Museum of Art's last gala dinner drew 172 guests to Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Pocantico Hills, N.Y. Gabe Palacio

TOP-PRICED TABLE: \$50,000.

HONOREES: The artist Bisa Butler; Jenny Indig, a local philanthropist; and Peter Kunhardt, Jr., executive director of the Gordon Parks Foundation in nearby Pleasantville.

HIGHLIGHTS: Dinner at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, co-owned by chef Dan Barber, including grass-Fed beef, Maine halibut, and hazelnut dessert.

COST OF THROWING IT: **\$162,000**

NET GAIN: **\$180,909**

Where an open bar and piped music used to suffice, galas now often feature specialty cocktails, live performers and elaborate décor by event designers.

As a matter of mathematics, the gala's durability is based on the sizable takes, which for many remain substantial even if organizations are spending more to haul it in. The Philharmonic's gala cost about \$600,000 and grossed more than \$4 million.

The Detroit Institute of Arts netted close to \$1 million at its gala, which cost about \$700,000; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston — which has netted about \$3.2 million at its gala, having spent \$400,000; and El Museo del Barrio expects to net at least \$972,000 at its gala next spring, and to spend about \$378,000.



Some experts said it helps to stage galas in the spaces being underwritten by the event so that donors feel a more immediate connection to the art. Brandon Patoc

Even when the margins are slim, experts say the events have value as crucial perks for donors and trustees whose giving, year-round, is often some multiple of what they might spend for a table at a gala. It is typically a night where their time and money is celebrated and their stature within the organization is rewarded by providing them with an opportunity to rub elbows with prominent honorees, featured artists and fellow philanthropists.

“It pulls your support group together for a moment of celebration and recommitment to an organization when everyone sees each other — it builds an esprit du corps,” said Michael M. Kaiser, chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland, who used to head the Kennedy Center in Washington. “Many donors are not comfortable fund-raising, but inviting someone to a gala is so easy. It’s a very simple quid pro quo and it’s a way for board members to introduce their circle to an organization without a lot of effort.”

The [Academy Museum Gala](#) this year — which honored the director Quentin Tarantino as well as the actors Rita Moreno and Paul Mescal — drew the likes of Nicole Kidman, Kerry Washington and Tom Hanks. It brought in \$11 million after spending about \$3 million.

And many an institution envies the Met Ball, an international fashion event at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that last spring grossed about \$26 million. The co-chairs included stars like Jennifer Lopez and Zendaya, and the money raised went toward underwriting exhibition and conservation efforts by the museum's Costume Institute.

But to make an impact on donors, it helps to have the “wow” factor.

LACMA, for example, has brazenly — and shrewdly — exploited its adjacency to Hollywood with an annual “Art and Film Gala,” which in [this year's 13th iteration](#) honored the filmmaker Baz Luhrmann and the artist Simone Leigh. Chock-full of celebrities, it grossed more than \$6 million, having cost about \$3 million.



Scenes from the LACMA gala. Michelle Grosskopf for The New York Times



The sense of getting VIP access to artists and performances also has an impact, especially for guests less familiar with a given cultural organization.

“You need to see the work. You need to be in the Koch Theater and see a performance,” said Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, who served on the board of City Ballet. “It is harder to experience the mission of the organization remotely. ”

Reynold Levy, the former president of Lincoln Center and a philanthropy expert, described the gala as an opportunity “to reach beyond the existing fund-raising base of an organization and to increase the giving of existing donors who have the opportunity to show off a little.”

And if you want to attract broader financial support for some of the most cultivated of American arts, it doesn't hurt to have a few boldfaced names walking the red carpet. Both recent Los Angeles galas received flashy photo spreads in Vogue, People, W and WWD, as did the New York City Ballet's [Fall Fashion gala](#), hosted by Sarah Jessica Parker, which this year attracted stars like Brooke Shields, Laverne Cox and Justin Theroux. Tables ranged from \$30,000 to \$200,000 and individual tickets were \$3,000 to \$15,000.

At the New York Philharmonic gala, Alec Baldwin — one of the evening's co-chairman — and his wife Hilaria were seated with two members of the orchestra, Mindy Kaufman (piccolo) and Tabitha Rhee (viola). The night's honorees were the World Trade Center site developer Larry A. Silverstein and his wife Klara, whose profile might be lower than Baldwin's but whose drawing power among other well-heeled donors remains considerable.

Silverstein, 93, who has been honored at many galas, said in an interview that he tried to beg off the Philharmonic's invitation, but one of the orchestra's co-chairmen told him "we need you to do this, because you can help us raise a ton of money."

So the developer agreed to discuss it with his wife Klara. "She said OK," Silverstein recalled. "But let this be the last one."



Though the extra care that goes into a lavish gala is expensive, many larger institutions have found that they still profit at the end, both in money and good will. Brandon Patoc

Upping the ante on lavishness is often not a practical strategy for regional museums with smaller budgets that can produce tasteful, warm and well-attended dinners that draw a devoted and sophisticated crowd, but not a lot of celebrities.

The Katonah Museum of Art, for example, held its last gala at Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Westchester, which has a capacity of 250. Last year's honorees were the artist Bisa Butler, to whom the museum [gave](#) a solo exhibition in 2020; Jennifer Indig, the founder of the Fern Hill Project, a nonprofit for female entrepreneurs; and Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., the executive director of the Gordon Parks Foundation. Perhaps the best-known celebrity there was [Michael Kelly](#), the actor from "House of Cards."

For its upcoming gala in March, the museum has landed the iconic musician Patti Smith. Nevertheless, given the economics — a cost of \$190,000 and expected net of \$241,000 — as well as the strain on its small staff, the Katonah Museum is considering long-term alternative approaches, such as a series of smaller events with a programmatic element or one elevated cocktail party.

"People want more experiences, want to be able to mingle, and want it to be more fun," said Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe, the museum's executive director. "The question is how do you do that and be able to justify such a high ticket to command the revenue you need the event to make for you?"

"For a small museum like ours — with limited staff and limited resources," she added, "you can exhaust the staff if you're doing these kinds of things."



The actor Michael Kelly at the Katonah Museum of Art gala. Gabe Palacio

Competition for donors can also come into play. The Katonah museum is in a region that is home to many wealthy patrons of the arts and is not far from other relatively small cultural gems like the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, the Bedford Playhouse and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Getting some of these patrons to the party can be a challenge as they are often city dwellers who view their local residences as getaways where they consider themselves off-duty.

And unlike larger institutions, regional cultural organizations often do not have space on-site to house the affair.

“If you are a big institution like the Met, they can have a dinner in the Temple of Dendur,” Mapplethorpe said. “We don’t have that capability.”

Other organizations are also re-evaluating. The Portland Museum of Art in Maine, for example, is focusing on its broader fund-raising efforts, having moved away from an annual dinner about a decade ago. “A gala does not make economic sense for us,” said Elizabeth Jones, the deputy director. “We may revisit that choice down the road.”

The Charlotte Symphony is repositioning galas as the way it starts each season and “to make some kind of statement of intent about where the orchestra is heading,” said David Fisk, the president and chief executive.

“There are people who enjoy dressing up and going out for a special night,” Fisk added. “There is still a role for fund-raising and for doing good all in one evening.”



Troye Sivan, the singer/songwriter, was among those who attended the LACMA gala in November. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times

To be sure, there are some donors for whom the prospect of another gala can be tiring, and they might feel tempted to just write the check rather than dress up for another evening making small talk over poached salmon.

“I’m sure that all of us at 5 o’clock on the evening of a gala at least once have said, ‘Do I really have to go?’” the philanthropist Adrienne Arsht said. “But then we go and have a glorious time.”

Some patrons were quite happy during the Covid-19 pandemic when the galas became virtual affairs.

But arts organizations have realized that many donors want, and deserve, a more public acknowledgment, not only of their gifts but of their commitments to the institutions to which they have dedicated years, sometimes decades, of their lives.

“It’s a way to thank your donors, a way to acknowledge your donors,” said Levy, who came under some criticism for having too many galas at Lincoln Center. “I know some people say you can overdo it,” he said. “I personally don’t think so.”

Robin Pogrebin, who has been a reporter for The Times for nearly 30 years, covers arts and culture. [More about Robin Pogrebin](#)