

INTERVIEW

Interview with Antonio Escámez Torres*
President of the Santander Bank Foundation

The Santander Bank Foundation – 25 Years of Cultural Patronage

Santander Art and Culture Law Review¹: The Santander Group is known for its involvement in activities connected with corporate social responsibility. One of its notable entities working in this area is the Foundation that carries the name of the consortium. When establishing this organisation, did you follow the example of any already existing models, or did you opt for an innovative solution?

Antonio Escámez Torres: The Santander Bank Foundation was established 25 years ago. At that time there were not many foundations in Spain. Since its origins until today the Foundation has been faithful to its statutory objectives. However, in order to adapt to the needs of changing society, innovation has always been at the heart of its functioning. By acting in this way, and being always committed to make a contribution to the social and cultural improvement of the communities where the Santander Bank operates, we have been diversifying our strategic plan with a view to embracing a wide range of action areas that include art, music, literature, sustainable development, social aid, and the promotion of young talent.

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¹ On behalf of the SAACLR Editorial Board Alicja Jagielska-Burduk, Wojciech Szafrąński.

INTERVIEW

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The Santander Bank Foundation has been operating for over 20 years. Not only has it conferred international visibility on the Santander Group, but it has also become, based on its own merits and accomplishments, an internationally renowned brand. What patronage plans for the near future have been adopted by the Foundation in order to continue this excellent trajectory?

The Foundation is going to keep developing its intense activity focused on promoting culture by means of our own exhibitions of modern art, as well by our arts-sponsorship work. Moreover, we are going to develop programmes aimed at environmental protection, restoration of natural spaces, as well as programmes designed to promote education, which we consider to be a driving factor of progress.

What do you think is the key to success of entities like the Santander Bank Foundation? Is it the financial factor, i.e. its specific monetary donations? Or is it rather the human factor, which manifests itself in the passion and commitment of the people who work for the Foundation? I am asking this question because in Poland a lot of foundations are created that are provided by their founders with only minimum capital. Such foundations have to operate with a view to gaining the necessary financial means to enable them to implement projects designed to achieve their statutory objectives.

Both factors are of paramount significance. On one hand, it is important that the major part of the Foundation's revenue comes from its own property invested in shares of the Santander Bank. On the other hand, the human factor is no less important. The Foundation has a team of committed professionals who get involved in each project to make sure that it is carried out successfully. Indeed, we would not be able to reach excellence in the projects we develop if the people who work for the Foundation did not act with enthusiasm and commitment.

In your opinion, how could entities that comprise the so called "third sector of NGOs" support the development of culture at the national and international levels? Nowadays we can observe that art has become a marketing object and, unfortunately, there are many instances of plunder and destruction of archaeological heritage, such as the case of the tombs in Timbuktu or the case of Buddha statues in Afghanistan. In these circumstances, non-governmental organisations whose activities are developed in the field of culture are faced with new challenges, including the constant need for education and raising the awareness of society to the value of cultural heritage.

Education is a key to appreciating the value of cultural heritage, since you do not love what you do not know. The Foundation's commitment to education has ma-

terialised in the form of the diverse programmes we have in place, which we feel proud of. Not only do we get involved in the sensitisation of young people by means of their artistic, musical and literary formation, but we also act from the ecological perspective, which we consider to be vital for the future of society.

In 2014 the exhibition of Grażyna Kulczyk’s collection “Everybody is Nobody for Somebody” was held at the Santander Art Gallery (Boadilla del Monte). I am mentioning this exhibition because in an interview published in “Santander Art and Culture Law Review” Grażyna Kulczyk stated that the opportunity to exhibit her collection at that gallery had been a prestigious event in her artistic life. At the same time, she emphasised that her cooperation with the Foundation was excellent. It was the first time that a private collection from Poland was displayed at the Santander Art Gallery. Will it be possible to see some more examples of art works from Central and Eastern Europe there in the near future?

Each year the Santander Bank Foundation organises a major exhibition of important international collections of modern art in Ciudad Financiera. Apart from the exhibition of Grażyna Kulczyk’s Collection, in 2015 the Goetz Collection from Munich was shown at our gallery. We do not exclude that a collection from Central Europe will be exhibited there in the future.

The Santander Group possesses its own art collection, which has been growing over the years. Could you describe the mechanism by means of which works of art are acquired for this collection? Has the same mechanism been employed since the creation of the collection, or has it been modified? Who has the last say when deciding about purchasing a work of art for the collection?

The Santander Bank Collection has grown by uniting the collections of banks that were acquired by the Santander Bank or that merged with it. Pieces of art have been purchased for our collection only sporadically. Moreover, on the occasion of the construction of Ciudad Financiera (Boadilla del Monte), María Corral was entrusted with a curatorial project concerning sculptures situated outside of this complex. The final say on purchases is given by a commission of experts that advises us in this field.

Art does not know frontiers. For this reason the question arises whether there are prospects that the Santander Collection will purchase works of Polish artists, such as Andrzej Wróblewski or Roman Opałka.

Although we admire the pieces of art of these and other Polish artists that we have shown at the Santander Art Gallery, our collection is focused on Spanish art.

INTERVIEW

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The Santander Collection is undoubtedly a large one, as it includes more than a thousand objects. Therefore I would like to ask whether you are going to take, or perhaps have already taken, any measures aimed at its “purification” in the sense of giving it a specific profile. Have you considered a strategy in this regard?

As I have already mentioned, the Santander Bank Collection is formed on the basis of various collections. In the course of these fusions some refinement of our collection has been carried out. Its current configuration makes it possible to engage in a very interesting tour through the history of art from the sixteenth century to the present.

What part of your collection is the property of financial entities acquired by the Santander Bank? Is it a considerable part, or rather a marginal number of works of art?

The most important part of the collection comes from banks that at different stages have become part of the Santander Bank.

How would you characterise the degree of complexity with respect to the legal protection of operations involved in the transfer and exhibition of art works comprising your collection in other places? I have in mind the example of the successful exhibition “From Cranach to Picasso”, which was held in 2013 in the National Museum in Wrocław.

At present there are standard procedures that apply to temporary exhibitions and movements of art works, both at the national and international levels. The works of art are insured and private security firms are contracted to escort them during their trips.

The Foundation carries out other projects in the artistic field, such as the support project for collectors, or the project “Open Workshop” which is aimed at artists. By the way, the official website of the latter project contains a photograph of Polish artist Stanisław Dróżdź. The Foundation also carries out educational projects and activities whose objective is to combat the marginalization of people that suffer from some kind of disability. Can these initiatives be perceived as a form of realisation of the principle of sustainable development promoted by the Foundation?

Yes, we try to develop all the activities of the Foundation in such a way that they are in line with the values promoted by the Bank, in particular with its mission to make a contribution to the development of society. Apart from projects with-

in the ambit of art and education, the Foundation supports initiatives designed to improve the environment. Moreover, last year we launched the programme Santander Ayuda (Santander Aid), whose objective is to support social projects in favour of the neediest.

One of the characteristic features of projects supported by the Foundation is their multidisciplinary. In this respect it is worth mentioning the combination of the protection of cultural heritage with the prize awarded for the best practices adopted in this area. Do you think it would be possible to launch a project in the field of the protection of natural heritage under the auspices of the Foundation in Central Europe?

This is an excellent idea. For the time being, the activities of the Santander Bank Foundation in this regard are carried out mainly at the national level through our programme of restoration of the natural heritage. Nevertheless, a project aimed at supporting initiatives of this kind in other European countries would be very interesting.

To what extent do you think the activities of the Foundation foster the public mission of promotion and support of culture and of the protection of cultural heritage? Do you think that your work replaces state actions? Have you ever experienced any competence conflict between the private and public sector in this regard?

Never. Quite the contrary. The crisis we have been going through since 2008 has made the cooperation between public and private sectors essential. Within this cooperation we are able to carry out common projects. For instance, the Foundation is carrying out excellent educational programmes, implemented jointly with the Reina Sofia Museum, which is a state-run institution. We are also developing projects such as the urban camp Ciudad Diwo or the program of artistic creation called Levadura (i.e. leaven). Both of them are being carried out in cooperation with the municipality of Madrid. As far as the protection of heritage is concerned, we are always attentive to the needs of our society and we are aware of the fact that institutions such as ours can carry out significant support work in areas where the state does not reach. When it comes to heritage of all, no help is too small.

To conclude this interview, I would like to ask you a question concerning the role of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme. As a lawyer with long management experience, what do you think is the role of entities like UNESCO Chairs in creating

INTERVIEW

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hard and soft law pertaining to culture? In your opinion, what are the possibilities for exerting an effective influence on the conduct of purchasers and art dealers by academic institutions of this kind?

There is no doubt that academic institutions are agents of fundamental importance in the process of professionalisation of the profiles of artist, art collector, or gallery owner. People working in these areas have gradually ceased to be amateurs and started acquiring the knowledge they need to develop their activities effectively. The professionals educated in such institutions as you mention will have the necessary instruments to meet the challenges that emerge in this sector. In this context, the UNESCO Chairs are of fundamental importance in the development of university networks and creating a solid global cultural fabric.