

Update on the Museums and Galleries Fund 2020-21

(3 minute read)

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After a restorative (albeit disrupted by another lockdown) Christmas break, the Grants Team at the John Ellerman Foundation returned to their home offices and launched into reviewing and sifting the 61 high-quality applications that had been submitted to be considered for the annual Museums and Galleries Fund.

The programme of funding is entering its eighth year and to date has awarded 46 multi-year grants, mostly core funding, worth a total of £3,962,641. Ellerman aims to help strengthen museums and galleries in the UK by helping organisations enhance and sustain curatorial development in order to attract a broader and more diverse public. With most, if not all, museums and galleries forced to close during the numerous lockdowns of 2020-21, the Foundation recognises the need to support such important institutions more than ever.

I began working at the Foundation as Grants Manager in March 2020, which means that when we ran the previous round of our Museums and Galleries Fund, I was able to support from the second stage of our application process onwards. This year is the first time I have been involved with the entire application process, from the pre-application chats right through to the awarding and administration of the grants that will take place in the next couple of months. This is particularly exciting for me as I have a long-term interest in the museum and gallery world, having completed an MA in Art History on the west coast of Canada and previously worked in a commercial gallery based in the heart of London.

As the deadline for submission of applications neared at the end of 2020, the Grants Team began to speculate about the number of proposals that would be received and the kind of areas they may focus on. We wondered if the pandemic would impact the capacity of fundraising teams to submit applications, or if diversity, equity, and inclusion would feature heavily in the proposals, with organisations wishing to reinterpret collections and “decolonise” their institutions.

The number of applications received was in line with previous years, which was encouraging and indicated the commitment, and perhaps more importantly, the significant need for institutions to fundraise, regardless of the disruption of the pandemic. Indeed, many of the applications spoke about the importance of trying to ensure financial stability through securing multi-year grants during these very uncertain times.

The focus on curatorial development and the funding of existing and new curatorial posts was, as expected, a key element to many of the applications received. The Grants Team had also anticipated receiving applications that focussed on the digital hosting of collections or the development of the digital presence of the institutions themselves. Conversations with existing grantees had indicated that the digital reach of their organisations, which can be hard to prioritise or fundraise for, had become increasingly important when physical visits to the locations became impossible due to the pandemic. However, we were surprised to find that overall, the digital component of the applications was not as prominent as the curatorial development of staff members.

As mentioned, I completed an MA in Art History a number of years ago and love to visit well-curated museums and galleries, be they regional, national, big or small. My own area of study enabled me to work closely with Canadian First Nations communities on Vancouver Island, British

Columbia. I learned a huge amount from the conversations I had with key community members and gained first-hand experience of a diverse and resilient culture.

I believe, and I know the rest of the team share this view, that when museums and galleries are at their best, they also enable people to encounter and engage with new and sometimes challenging spheres of knowledge and perspectives. The best examples of these spaces give people the opportunity to have their own voices amplified, especially for those who might have faced barriers to accessing museum and gallery spaces in the past.

Regardless of what the future holds and how soon we might be able to return to face-to-face meetings, it is clear that these spaces will always be needed as places to reflect, to socialise and to encounter culture and society. Alongside this, and in light of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, museums and galleries, some of which have deep ties to colonialism and British imperialism, are clearly looking to reconcile themselves to their complex and sometimes uncomfortable histories. Through strategic and curatorial planning, they are seeking to become more inclusive – all of which will only enhance the role they play within our lives.

It is exciting to be involved in a grantmaking programme like Ellerman's. It recognises these complex circumstances and seeks to enable institutions to look outside of their usual working practices, while remaining committed to excellence and innovation.