

Connection through curation: what museums mean to me now

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The 2022-23 round of the Museums and Galleries Fund (MGF) had been open for a month when I joined John Ellerman Foundation in November 2022. Though I brought nearly five years of grantmaking experience from my previous role, I anticipated there might be a learning curve with my approach to museums and galleries. I never considered myself much of a museumgoer. Sure, I'd been to museums before, but I always felt like I was doing museums "wrong". When I walked around looking at all the objects on display, I waited with little success for some deeper meaning to be revealed. Most of the time, I just wanted to skip straight to the gift shop.

During our assessment of the 2022 batch of MGF applications in early 2023, I observed my colleagues, Trustees and our external advisor for the MGF, Dr. Virginia Tandy, reflecting on the applications we received in a way that was different to how I thought about museums and galleries. There were lengthy conversations around curatorial skill, the quality and value of collections, and new or fresh approaches—all considerations that didn't occur much to me when I stomped angrily around museums, thinking, "What does it all mean?"

After experiencing my first round of the MGF, I set an intention to be more thoughtful in the way I personally experience museums and galleries. (The gift shops can wait!)

While I was on holiday this summer, I wandered around the fifth floor of the Asian Gallery at Tokyo National Museum. The collection included artefacts of gold, silver, bronze, and jade, many of which were crafted into beautiful ornaments fit for royalty. Yet the piece that resonated most strongly with me was an unassuming stoneware turtle about the size of a 50p coin. The caption next to the turtle was sparse. All I could glean about the turtle was its origins in the Three Kingdoms period of Korea, sometime in the 5th or 6th century. There was nothing to explain who moulded this turtle out of clay or why. I wondered who made it and what had been on their mind. What were their hopes and dreams for the future? Could they imagine as far ahead as the 21st century? For me, the 37th century seems so distant and impossible. I cannot fathom the possibility that there would be any trace of my own existence that far into the future, yet centuries from the time of this turtle's creator, my present timeline briefly touched the history of someone who has not been alive on this earth in quite a long time. I thought about the people we love, the finite time we share together, and how we can't live forever but there are markers of our lives that might speak to our legacies even when we're long gone.

During the same trip, I also visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Most of us are familiar with Hiroshima's place in history; in 1954, the United States of America dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, one in Hiroshima and one in Nagasaki. At the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, many of the items on display once belonged to those who died in the bombing. Amongst other things, there were school uniforms, never to be worn again; a lunchbox packed with a meal that would not be eaten; and a rusty tricycle and metal helmet. I learned that the tricycle and helmet belonged to three-year-old Shinichi Tetsutani, who died from injuries he sustained after the A-bomb exploded over Hiroshima. His father Nobuo buried Shinichi with his tricycle and his helmet so that he might still ride his favourite toy after his death. I was moved by this last act of love in the face of impossible tragedy.

I also struggled with the stark reminder of the lasting harm that our choices can cause to others. I thought about how this, too, is a type of legacy, and how there are some things we don't want to remember but they are too important to forget.

In Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, Odell writes, "It is with acts of attention that we decide who to hear, who to see, and who in our world has agency. In this way, attention forms the ground not just for love, but for ethics."

In the times when I was breezing impatiently through museums and galleries, I was looking but I wasn't paying enough attention. I hadn't thought too deeply about how collections find themselves in museums and galleries. They don't appear spontaneously out of the ether. Having spent the last year learning more about curating in museums and galleries, I see more clearly that the act of choosing what the public sees in a museum or gallery can determine what receives our attention and what stories we bear witness to.

To curate and to conserve is to determine what objects and what stories are told and held onto. Curatorial development and the funding of existing or new curatorial roles are central to many of the MGF applications we receive. We are especially interested in proposals that: enable new ways of working through innovation, new thinking and fresh approaches for both established curators and those just starting out; ensure organisations are able to safeguard and advance curatorial skills and conservation skills; and make the most of opportunities at a time of development or change. As we embark on the tenth year of this Fund, I am excited to learn more about the different approaches that various institutions use to share the stories that their collections hold.

I also look forward to seeing the sheer breadth and depth of collections that will be featured in the applications to us. The MGF is open to a wide variety of collection types. We have supported visual and decorative arts, archaeology, and social and natural history collections. Accreditation is not required, but applicants should demonstrate high quality delivery in their field at a national level; national significance, likely through a unique or high-quality collection; commitment to collaborative approaches, either as a focus of the request, or at a minimum, with a strong track record of partnership working.

This year, the MGF is open for first-stage applications from 16th October 2023 until 9th January 2024. To find out more about the MGF, we recommend that applicants attend our weekly question and answer (Q&A) sessions. Details of these sessions are published here on our website: <https://ellerman.org.uk/apply-for-funding/museums-and-galleries-fund>.