

John Ellerman Foundation

Museums and Galleries Fund: Executive summary

A report by Virginia Tandy and Dan Watson
January 2019



Executive Summary

Origins of the Fund

“Good curating is based on the knowledge and passionate curiosity that sparks the flame of interest in others when communicated.”

Caroline Collier

Museums and galleries are a local and accessible means for people to engage with arts and heritage. Many hold important collections which have the power to inspire creativity, motivate artistic expression and stimulate local regeneration. Over the years, however, they have faced increasing challenges from public funding cuts and underinvestment. While this has had an impact on all aspects of their work, there seems to have been a particular loss of curatorial skills, with a consequent hollowing out of the professional capacity and knowledge that are key to unlocking the value of these collections.

These concerns emerged as part of the John Ellerman Foundation’s research and consultation which informed its grantmaking strategy. The findings prompted the creation of a new Museums and Galleries fund. Set up in 2014, it aims to strengthen museums and galleries outside London, with a focus on enhancing and sustaining curatorship to improve collections management and find new ways to attract and engage the public.

Museums and galleries come in many forms and sizes. They may be independent charities, run by local authorities, in a process of transition from local authorities to independence, part of universities or large national institutions. Altogether they are home to a rich variety of collections – from molluscs and archaeology to social history and fine art.

The Fund responds to the complexity of the sector by supporting both those institutions that are embarking on new projects and those struggling with the difficult public funding environment. Some applications have been prompted by new developments, such as the need for intensive collections work as part of a major capital project, while others have focused on significant collections that, due to restructures, retirements or redundancies, no longer have any dedicated specialist curatorial staff.

In the five years of the Fund, the Foundation has made five or six grants annually for periods of up to three years. It has provided £2.7m to 31 organisations, with the average grant around £86,000. The six grants announced in June 2018 are included in the numbers but are not described in this report, as work has yet to begin.

Method

As a new approach, evaluation by an independent consultant was built in from the start. The experience and analysis of the first 25 recipients where work is underway forms the basis of evidence in this report, with the evaluator charting trends and developments from an annual assessment of the projects against objectives. It also draws on a workshop convened by the Foundation of a group of four grantees and their partners who were all using training and networks to improve curatorial skills, and includes reflections from additional interviews with individuals from 13 of the funded organisations, selected to represent the variety of work supported.

Six themes emerge from the work, and provide the structure for this report. The Foundation hopes it will serve as a reference point for other organisations with an interest in supporting curatorial work, by presenting different models of developing curatorship.

Even five years in, it is still early days, with only some of the grants complete and many with some way to go. There are already, however, some strong and consistent experiences and messages, albeit with much still to come.

The funding ecology

As a public good, museums and galleries rely on significant public funding from central and local government. Both sources have been under pressure during the years of austerity, and these cuts follow a longer-term trend of those funds which were available being directed to education, outreach and new business models. While all these elements are vital to a thriving and successful museum or gallery, the latter emphases have distracted attention and investment from the heart of an institution – that is, the collections it looks after, both now and for the future, and the knowledge, experience and skills to understand and open them up to the wider public.

Local authorities are essential to a thriving museums and galleries sector outside London, either running their own institutions or acting as a key source of funding for others. However many are under increasing financial pressure. Arts Council England (ACE) took over responsibility for supporting museums in 2012, first funding 16 Major Partner Museums and in 2018 adding 66 to its National Portfolio funding. Funding for Subject Specialist Networks is ACE's only dedicated investment in curatorial skills.

The Heritage Lottery Fund may support curatorial posts as part of a capital project or a time-limited heritage grant, but since the last round of its Collecting Cultures scheme there is no funding programme dedicated to developing collections work.

Among independent funders, only a few provide revenue funding, often for short-term projects with specified aims – such as the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, administered by the Museums Association, for work which uses collections for a social purpose, and the Pilgrim Trust’s partnership with the Association of Independent Museums which makes small grants for object and preventative conservation. The Art Fund initially provided bursaries for curatorial travel and research and two traineeships. In recent years its New Collecting Awards support acquisitions and associated professional development, and the Weston Loan Programme provides grants of £5,000-£25,000 for local museums to borrow from national collections.

The John Ellerman Foundation’s Fund

This Fund is unusual in focusing specifically on multi-year support for core curatorial work in museums and galleries outside London. It also allows organisations to apply for a grant to support their own curatorial priorities in the context of their own circumstances, rather than construct projects in response to a specific approach identified by the funder.

The Fund has two other special features. First, applicants do not have to be accredited museums; some successful applications have been for collections with no previous professional stewardship. In these cases grants were used to work towards or achieve accreditation or similar recognition of the collection. Second, they are not required to have their own collection; the focus is on developing and strengthening curatorial skills with a benefit for the public, however that is to be achieved.

With new territory comes uncertainty. It was unclear at the start whether there would be sufficient demand. There was also a concern that the Fund might be perceived as pursuing an academic or elitist seam at a time when people were struggling with what could be seen as the more pressing problems of austerity. This was mitigated by a strong emphasis on the work funded having both a public benefit and a legacy within and beyond the organisation. The detailed criteria can be found on the Foundation’s website.

The grants: themes and impact

The funding criteria give wide scope and flexibility as to eligibility and purpose of any funding. For some, the main focus was their own institution, while other initiatives involved highly structured networks. Grants were made to a wide range of types and sizes of organisation, and for a rich variety of collections. A full list is published as an appendix to this report and on the Foundation’s website.

From within this variety, the report identifies six themes. The groupings are not mutually exclusive, as several grants could be placed within more than one category, but they capture the primary drivers for the work and how funding has supported curatorial skills in different contexts:

- **Organisational development.** The largest group, with seven grants. Work included supporting local authority and other museums through change or a redevelopment, ensuring knowledge retention through succession planning, achieving recognition of the importance of an individual collection, strengthening management and building long-term relationships with private collectors.
- **Leadership in geographic areas or fields of specialist expertise.** Of the five grants in this category, three had a geographical focus (Cumbria, the South West and Northern Ireland), with two seeking to share their specialist experience (in one case molluscs, in the other military history).
- **Links with capital projects.** Three grants were made in the context of imminent or hoped-for investments, all of which have proceeded. The curatorial dimension also brought considerable associated benefits, through partnerships with other institutions, volunteer engagement and wider networks.
- **Digital initiatives.** Two grants were for specific initiatives which aimed to unite dispersed collections through a single website, both highly successfully. Two other grants included significant digital outputs in the form of dedicated websites, providing a single access point for collections – one across a region, and the other opening up specialist collections in six cities in the UK.
- **New models of curating.** Many of the grantees are experimenting with new approaches to curation with four grants focusing specifically on this. Two involved interesting new opportunities for the curators themselves, with the two others using innovative ways of involving local people in commissioning work, curating and interpreting collections.
- **A deeper understanding of collections.** Four grants enabled the exploration and fuller understanding of the significance of four highly individual collections, including filmmaking, geology, Islamic art and the legacy of the 'Basic Design' teaching method in art schools.

Outcomes from the grants

The grants led to a spectrum of outcomes, with three main types being most significant across the six themes: those for curatorial skills themselves; a multiplier effect within the museum or gallery as a whole; and impact beyond the institution. These show how investing in curatorial skills can be transformative in other areas.

- **The core curatorial benefits mainly relate to individual skills and knowledge.** They include early career or trainee staff developing their own skills, opportunities for existing staff to flourish and develop through new responsibilities for management and collections, and deeper knowledge and understanding of collections. There was also noticeable, greater capacity to disseminate and share this knowledge.

- **Increased curatorial activity helps build organisational resilience.**
This came from leveraging further funding for capital developments and programmes, increasing loans and acquisitions and generating innovative ways of engaging volunteers and local communities.
- **The benefits of curatorship extend beyond the museum.** Sharing knowledge and skills across geographic and thematic networks gave the core institutions greater status and reach, which was enhanced by the development of new academic partnerships and other expert relationships. These activities also served to reinforce the wider reputations of the funded organisations.

Conclusions and next steps

The focus on core costs relating to curatorial skills for up to three years drew an enthusiastic response, demonstrating that the Fund is filling a gap in the types of funding available to the sector. Demand has varied year on year, but has considerably exceeded the budget available, with 277 applications translating into just 31 grants, a success rate of 11% (1:9). For our regular grantmaking the success rate is much higher, hovering around 30%, a further illustration of the tough competition for the Fund.

As ever, the unforeseen is as interesting as the anticipated direction of travel. Perhaps the most significant finding is the case for the importance of that “under the bonnet” work of curatorship – often quiet, unfashionable and eschewed as academic or arcane – which both keeps collections alive and makes them accessible and engaging to the wider public. A determined focus on valuing the collections at the heart of museums and galleries and the staff that care for them and open them out to the rest of us brought considerable wider benefits. Interestingly, those institutions which placed the greatest value on curatorial skills were also stronger on involving volunteers and the wider community.

“John Ellerman Foundation is flying the flag for curation in a way that no other funder is.”

Beamish Museum

This report shines a light on the value of curatorship in museums and galleries. The results from the work funded illustrate that the impact can be transformational – showing benefits to individual curators, the collections and the institutions themselves. Taken together, these findings present a powerful case for further investment in curatorial skills and knowledge.