

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Introduction

This project's purpose is to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of John Ellerman Foundation in 1971.

This anniversary presents a special opportunity to build on the Foundation's existing work in supporting curatorial development, and to do so in a way that extends its understanding of what curating is, the forms it can take and where and how it can have impact. The project name *Protea* references the national flower of South Africa and, in its allusion to the legend of Proteus, acknowledges the transformative outcomes that can be activated through imaginative and resourceful curatorship. It heralds a new international curatorial exchange programme, in which selected curators from the UK and South Africa are invited to undertake field research in the form of 10-day bilateral visits taking place between April and early June 2022.

The project has two points of origin: a focus on curatorial development, which underscores the Foundation's existing commitment to supporting curatorial excellence through its Museums and Galleries Fund; and the longstanding connections between the Foundation's founder, Sir John Ellerman II, and the two countries in which he spent most of his life – the UK and South Africa.

The overarching strategic aim of the project – one that informs all the Foundation's activities – is to advance wellbeing for people, society and the natural world – delivered primarily through the Foundations' grant-making in the **Arts, Social Action** and the **Environment**.

The project's bilateral canvas reflects the wider emphasis placed by the UK Government on 'Global Britain', characterised by an accelerated interest in optimising existing ties between the UK and the rest of the world, including nations within the Commonwealth.

## **The Opportunity**

The programme centres on six funded residential Curatorial Exchanges. These will consist of paired curatorial exchanges involving selected institutions in the UK and South Africa or paired freelance curators originating in each country, or a mix of these. The programme is aimed at curators who can demonstrate at least five years of professional curatorial experience. We are looking for significant evidence of an existing commitment to curatorial practice, as well as an ability to self-manage the Exchange's preparatory research and in-the-field residency phases.

Selected candidates are expected to work within the Curatorial Framework (see below) managed by Executive Curator Mark Irving.

## **The Curatorial Framework**

The Framework strikes a balance between being directional and flexible in guiding and supporting selected curators on their chosen research area for the Exchange. It seeks to be inclusive and equitable in recognising that there are many forms of curatorship and approaches to curating – be these researching and interpreting collections and/or assets, preserving and deepening knowledge, forming connections between artefacts, places and identities, convening makers and audiences, interrogating the power relations between people and institutions, creating space for change.

This Framework injects curating with a thread of creative practice so that the situational context of the exchange becomes a medium through which curatorship is enacted, developed, and adapted through an active learning process that is inherently dynamic.

The importance of situational context and its reciprocal relationship with the curatorial 'agent' underscores the auto-ethnographic principle at the heart of this project's approach. Auto-ethnography is a form of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork and writing and has an extensive background literature. It combines situational analysis with subjective experiential record. The professional self is acknowledged in the research.

The Framework is shaped around three Thematic Areas – **Arts, Social Action, Environment** – relevant to the wider work of John Ellerman Foundation.

Curators are asked to respond to one of these Thematic Areas. It is recognised that there may be some overlap between these – e.g., a curator may investigate how cultural artefacts or cultural production can explore environmental issues – but the research question driving their Exchange should be clearly centred within one Area.

Curators will be invited to frame their research enquiry either as a relatively ‘deep dive’ in one phase of the Framework– Inform, Interpret, or Implement – or as a linear route through the three phases. The Executive Curator will work with the curators to establish the best approach that suits them, the context and research area.

Phase	Environment	Social Action	Visual Arts
<b>Inform</b>	Caring for and securing knowledge about collections (e.g., natural history)	Researching a cause, measure, or objective to influence policy	Caring for and securing knowledge about collections (e.g., art & culture)
<b>Interpret</b>	Representing collections, stories, people that speak of the state of the land and its biodiversity and our place in it	Identifying/selecting specific contextual opportunities for scope and agency via social change events/processes	Representing collections, stories, people, and their connection to society, culture, and the natural world
<b>Implement</b>	Devise and activate a strategic plan to enhance, correct, or contest existing knowledge or models of behaviour	Devise and activate social change events or processes through consensual or contest-based approach	Devise and activate a strategic plan to enhance, correct, or contest existing knowledge or models of behaviour

## The Exchange

This consists of 3 parts: i) preparatory research, ii) the residential exchange\*, iii) documentation.

Preparatory research: this should take place in the weeks/months leading up to the Exchange. This allows curators whose applications are successful to develop the research question set out in their proposal, locate where it sits within the Curatorial Framework, and define the tools they will use to manage their fieldwork. It is also a vital opportunity to establish and extend contact with the partner institution in the other country so that their experience on the Exchange is as optimal as possible.

To support this, each curator is provided with a sum equivalent to a maximum of £2500 to cover their time and expenses incurred at this stage.

Residential Exchange: We will pay for outward and return flights, visas, and provide a fixed budget for 10 nights hotel or equivalent accommodation in or near the site of research. We also provide a subsistence allowance for this period. Reasonable travel expenses within the host country are also covered, although it is expected that the fieldwork site is located close to the accommodation to minimise such expenditure.

There will be opportunity to get together with the other Exchange curators in-country as we hope the cohort will want to share their experiences and insights within the group both in person and/or through a relevant online forum. A Project Manager will be assigned to each group in each country to manage logistical issues and facilitate the Exchange experience.

\*If COVID-19 restrictions prevent in-country residency, we have contingency plans to convert some or all of the residency into an online exchange, with re-allocation of the foreign travel budget to support in-country travel and support in terms of videography/documentation.

Documentation: We are not prescriptive about the nature of the outputs generated from the Exchange. These may take one or more formats, including essay, blog, video, report, lecture. These outputs should reflect the curator's experience on the Exchange, describing their research question and findings, bearing in mind the project's underlying auto-ethnographic approach.

These outputs will be made available for *Protea* and John Ellerman Foundation to disseminate through its platforms for an unlimited period as appropriate, although copyright of course remains with the curator. Any costs incurred by documentation are to be covered by the curator, although we are also seeking additional support towards these in the form of partner sponsorship.

## **The Benefits of the Exchange**

This Exchange provides a valuable opportunity for individual curators to undertake field research that supports their personal and professional development. This could be through exploring new areas within their existing practice, thus deepening their expertise. Or it could be a planned encounter with contexts, questions, and subjects

outside their existing practice. It enables them to test their resilience and the applicability of their skills as well as giving them the opportunity to acquire new knowledge, international contacts and wider networks that will be of value to them and their institutions.

By connecting curators in the UK and South Africa, the project seeks to demonstrate what curators have in common but also to reveal what they have to offer each other and the contexts in which their fieldwork takes place. By participating in *Protea*, the successful candidates will be both ambassadors for their practice and their institutions as well as part of a new international enterprise that may serve as a model for others.

For the institutional partners involved – be these national or regional museums, archives, research centres, heritage asset owners, universities, local authorities – the Exchange provides, we hope, a valuable opportunity to build new contacts, to import and share expertise, to identify strategic openings, and to plan and advocate for action/change.

For curating as a practice and discourse, we hope this Exchange brings insights that illuminate the value of curating as a means for unlocking creativity, building alliances, fuelling support, influencing power, and driving change.

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