

# John Ellerman Foundation

## MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES FUND

**Key points from the seminar held on 26 March 2019 at 2 Temple Place,  
London CW2R 3BD**

### BACKGROUND AND AIMS OF THE SEMINAR

The Foundation launched its Museum and Galleries Fund in 2013. As the programme developed, a number of ideas and suggestions came up which it was thought would add value to the grants awarded:

- Several grantees were keen to connect with others involved in the programme
- Some asked the Foundation to raise the profile of the work funded, and in doing so also highlight the importance of curatorial skills
- The Foundation itself wished to share the experiences and learning from the programme and develop networking opportunities for those in receipt of grants with one another and with other potential funders

Alongside this, the evaluation identified some significant benefits, not just for curators and the collections but also for the institutions themselves; these included increased organisational resilience and enhancements to their wider reputation. This demonstrated the wide range of impacts arising from this investment in curatorial skills and the importance of this work to the sector.

The resulting half-day seminar held on 26 March 2019, which followed the launch of the report on the first five years of the Museums and Galleries programme, had four aims:

1. Championing the value of curatorial skills
2. Bringing together a range of funders and policy makers with current and former grantees to network and share experiences
3. Sharing and discussing the outcomes of the first five years of the Museums and Galleries Fund
4. Informing John Ellerman Foundation's approach to future funding.

### KEY THEMES AND PRESENTATIONS

#### **Session 1: The importance of the "Under the bonnet" work of curatorship**

The first session was chaired by Virginia Tandy, independent evaluator and adviser to the Fund. The choice of speakers amplified two key outcomes that emerged from the research: exploring the value of supporting the core curatorial work on collections, and examining how developing curatorial skills and knowledge could strengthen organisations as a whole.

The presenters, who were drawn from museums and galleries supported through the Fund, were asked to comment on the following question:

*'How has the Foundation's funding enabled the development of curatorial skills in your organisation and what have been the long term benefits for you, your collections and your partners'*

The work presented covered: the development of a local curatorial network of museums in Cumbria; the building of confidence in the knowledge and understanding of Islamic collections in Manchester through making international and local connections; the provision of specialist natural history expertise to a network of partners brought together by National Museums Wales ; and the construction of a collections management system from scratch, in the case of Blackpool Council. The types of institution represented the full range supported through the programme - independent trusts, university museums, local authority museums and national museums.

The benefits generated by these projects included:

- The creation of new posts to develop curators or build the confidence of existing curators in working with objects which may be outside of their own specialist field, and improving working relationships between regional and national institutions or across geographical areas; as was the case in Manchester and National Museums Wales
- The development of volunteering opportunities to support the management of the collections, such as in Blackpool
- Improved engagement with local communities, leading to increased collections knowledge and expertise in Manchester
- Speedier responses to enquiries from the public relating to mollusca specimens across the network of museums participating in the National Museums Wales programme and beyond, due to the new web-based resources
- On the financial side, work across Cumbria had attracted small capital grants for four participating museums and led to a new online database of collections from eight local museums. In Manchester and Blackpool the work supported was integral to major capital projects.

### **Session 2: New approaches to curation**

Chaired by Caroline Collier, adviser to the Fund, these three presentations each had a strong visual arts focus, from three independent museums and galleries based in England and Northern Ireland. All had received grants from the Fund. They examined the question:

*'How has the Foundation's funding enabled you to work differently with collections, audiences and partners and how has this changed the ways that your organisation works?'*

All three presenters highlighted the relationship of their particular institution to its location:

- For Sheffield Museums Trust this was about recognising the significance of philanthropy in the history of the development of the Graves Gallery's collections,

and exploring how that model could be developed in the 21st century to assist with the loan and exhibition of works of art through relationships with collectors today

- In Belfast the curatorial training created by the MAC sought to meet a need for the training of curators in contemporary art, to develop the presentation of work in Northern Ireland and beyond
- Gainsborough's House in Suffolk had established a Keeper of Art and Place to highlight the museum's broader connections with the town, the County and London. This also informed the thinking behind a major capital investment.

All three projects used new and different approaches to re-assert the relevance and identity of their organisations, and in two cases their collections, by building new relationships. These links were made through potential lenders and donors and guided by local history and professional contexts, offering new experiences for both aspiring curators and visitors.

### **Session 3: The Future**

The focus of the third session on future directions and challenges was chaired by Laura Pye, Director of National Museums Liverpool. It was timely as the Museums Association was nearing completion of its Collections 2030 research report (launched in April 2019) and was about to enter a new phase of its own grants programme for collections in partnership with Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Arts Council England (ACE) and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) were embarking on a new collaborative relationship regarding the support of museums, informed by the Mendoza Review and the new strategic framework for the NLHF.

Contributors were asked to address the question of:

*“Future directions and challenges for collections and curatorial skills.”*

The Foundation's research into its portfolio of grants under the Museums and Galleries Fund is relevant to this discussion, as it offers examples of curator-led models of skills development. Many of these have a strong collections focus, and the evaluation drew out the learning arising from the experiences of the wide range of organisations involved.

The speakers in the third session, two of whom were the leads for museums in ACE and NLHF and two of whom received grants from the Fund (National Museums Scotland and Turner Contemporary) all looked to the future. Respondents from Beamish Museum and the Museums Association also commented. The key issues that emerged from the presentations and the subsequent discussions, were:

#### **1. Ensuring access to specialist expertise at a time when curatorial numbers are shrinking**

Sharing knowledge and resources through place-based projects such as the Cumbria Museums Consortium and building on the work Subject Specialist Networks are both important opportunities. The role of the specialist staff in national museums (as seen in the partnership between National Museums Wales and the Natural History Museum and a new project that is about to begin with National Museums Scotland) offer opportunities for collections review and documentation, which is particularly important where there are no local specialists.

Models using peripatetic curators and freelancers are also increasingly being proposed as ways of addressing this issue. This represents a culture change for museums that have traditionally held expertise in-house. One of the early projects run by Leeds Museums demonstrated the value of external expert review to support the management of geological collections. Led by a

regional museum, the project worked with a range of partner museums across the country which did not have their own specialist curators, to help them understand the scientific and educational importance of their holdings.

## **2. Supporting curatorial confidence to link collections with others beyond the institution**

This means making better use of collections to make connections with both local communities and specialists from further afield, and to benefit from their knowledge and experience. This enables museums to demonstrate their local relevance and discover the regional and national significance of their holdings. The grants portfolio includes many examples of such work, including Manchester Museum, Blackpool Council, Royal Pavilion and Museums Brighton and Bristol Museums; these show the value of a deeper understanding of collections of all kinds and the development of skills to care for them appropriately.

## **3. Enabling genuine co-production**

The experiences of Turner Contemporary in working effectively with audiences to produce high quality exhibitions pioneered new ways of working. This not only engaged volunteers, but developed audiences and local support leading to new forms of curatorial practice. It engendered a sense of community ownership that could be extended to collections displays. Funded by the Foundation, this new and challenging approach has a legacy in influencing the whole organisation's approach to its role and relevance in Margate.

## **4. Making best use of digital opportunities**

This strand ran through several of the funded projects. It includes funding the creation of websites to assist in the identification of specimens, bringing together a dispersed collection led by RAMM in Exeter and extending the National Inventory of Regional Paintings to cover the north. The discussions in this session demonstrated that more could be done in this field in understanding the potential of digital working, by digitising collections and building online audiences.

## **5. Enabling disposal**

Giving curators the confidence to ethically dispose of items was thought important, given the challenges of collections storage that face every museum. Collections knowledge and expertise must be at the heart of all decisions relating to de-accessioning material. To date this has not been a focus of any applications to the Fund; however, it is increasingly recognised as a major issue for many museums and shared storage and collections rationalisation are seen as solutions. As one contributor put it, museums need to be able to stop doing things as well as continuing to collect.

## **6. Diversifying the workforce to reflect local and national demographics**

ACE, the development agency for museums in England, sees this as a major priority. As a responsive funder, the Foundation reflects rather than shapes the sector, and needs to consider its response to this challenge. The work described above, which engages audiences with curatorial practice, goes some way to involving a wider range of people in the local museum or gallery.

## **7. Engaging with the debates about decolonising collections**

How do the UK's museums confront the colonial past and how that is reflected in their collections? This issue has some relationship with the previous point, and requires specialist expertise to both identify and understand previous practice and determine the future of contested objects. This is a field of work with which the Foundation could engage if museums come forward with developed proposals which match our criteria.

## **NEXT STEPS FOR THE FOUNDATION**

The issues discussed above, along with the findings of the report on the evaluation of the Fund, have enhanced the Foundation's understanding of the results of the grants in the context of future directions and challenges for collections and curatorial skills. This will feed into the Foundation's consideration of the future of the Museums and Galleries Fund.

The evaluation has shone a light on the positive impact of the first five years of investment in curatorship and collections, and the value of support for an underinvested area of museum work. Grantees have commented on the significance of such funding in meeting a genuine and urgent need that serves the core purpose of museums.

However this trend of underinvestment is unlikely to be reversed. Museums and galleries will have to be increasingly creative in their approach to keeping their collections in good shape and accessible. As other funders review their strategies and priorities for the support of museums and galleries, the Foundation will keep the learning from the evaluation and seminar in mind and aim to ensure its future support continues to fill an important niche in the funding ecology for the sector, as it plans the next iteration of the Fund.