

Protea – Our International Curatorial Exchange One Year

On

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This article is about our ‘one year on’ report on Protea – our international curatorial exchange between eight curators based in the UK and South Africa, which can be accessed in full [by clicking here](#).

Protea was an international curatorial exchange programme conceived and run by John Ellerman Foundation that involved eight curators working in the UK and South Africa undertaking field research in the form of 10-day bilateral visits taking place between April and August 2022. *Protea* had two points of origin:

1. A focus on curatorial development, which underscores our existing commitment to supporting curatorial skills through our [Museums and Galleries Fund \(MGF\)](#).
2. The longstanding connections between our founder, John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Baronet, and the two countries in which he spent most of his life – the UK and South Africa.

What emerged from these points of origin was not necessarily foreseen but we found that *Protea* ignited a spark which has the potential to illuminate the path for a more collaborative, participatory and inclusive future in museum practice.

I had the opportunity to interview the curators who took part, a year after the project’s close. We were interested to find out whether the enthusiasm which had been bubbling through the projects remained, whether curators were still in touch with their counterparts and new connections, and whether they were optimistic for the future of their work and wider curatorial practice. What we heard was that even a modest injection of flexible funding can have catalytic impacts. In the evolving landscape of museum curation, the project and funding have been transformative for a small group of people, fostering and solidifying international links between curators based in the United Kingdom and South Africa.

Unlocking Creativity and Building Alliances

Protea was envisioned as a project which would showcase the potential of curating as a driver of change. The financial flexibility afforded by the project empowered curators to deepen their knowledge, venture into unexplored territories, and forge stronger connections with peers in the international curatorial community. *Protea* succeeded in bringing together energetic curatorial minds, sparking not only exchanges of ideas but also fostering stronger networks between institutions. The programme catalysed further academic research, knowledge-sharing within global peer networks, and progressed crucial conversations (felt more deeply by being in person) around uncomfortable yet vitally significant topics such as colonialism. These have resulted in exhibition proposals, guest lectures, and strengthened community bonds.

Colonial Legacies and the Path to Decolonisation

An important theme which came from *Protea* was the profound and lasting impact of colonialism on museum practices in both the UK and South Africa. Through our discussions, participants shed

light on the complex challenges posed by colonial legacies, from forgotten objects of great spiritual and cultural significance waiting in limbo in European museums, to colonial artefacts in South African museums, neglected due to their association and complicity in South Africa's violent apartheid past. Decolonisation, colonial restitution, and the importance of community involvement emerged as common and timely themes across continents.

Pioneers and Educators

The *Protea* curators emerged as quiet pioneers and educators, internally and in some cases externally advocating for better decolonial museum practices and sharing their learning with generations of students unafraid to probe and navigate these same discussions. They conveyed that museums are repositories of stories, and without the people they represent or share these stories with, their purpose is diminished. The curators' commitment to community engagement was not just a professional duty but a moral responsibility.

A Template for Future Endeavours

Originally conceived as a one-off celebratory initiative, *Protea's* impact has surpassed its initial intentions. The 'one year on' review not only highlights the benefits for individuals and institutions but could also serve as a blueprint for future endeavours. Its success was no doubt facilitated by a few key factors: flexible funding; trust and respect for participants' expertise; and comprehensive support structures.

But there was also risk involved. It was an untried and untested project, with a guiding framework but no need or desire for specific outcomes other than trusting that this funding would support the advancement of curators' practice and learning.

Providing parameters but a high level of trust is something of a sweet spot in philanthropic funding and can produce the most magical results as it allows creativity to flourish. Fortunately, as evidenced through this report and the dialogue with curators, *Protea* funding was in safe hands with the selected curators possessing not only a deep passion for and understanding of their fields of research but a heightened awareness of self and a huge amount of humility. Even through our short conversations, as a lay person with no deep experience of curation, their thirst for learning and for communicating and educating others was infectious. Replication of *Protea* could yield profound results in advancing the field of curatorial practice and particularly of leaders who have community and justice at their core.

The luxury of time

Another of the noteworthy aspects of *Protea* was its fortuitous timing, expressed by several of the participants as being the right opportunity at the right time – and by one curator as 'miraculously serendipitous'. Participating in the project gave space to the curators to step away from their daily routines. This opportunity for reflection and experimentation proved to be invaluable, allowing curators to contemplate their work, share experiences, and envision new possibilities within their field.

The notion of 'time as money' is arguably a product of capitalism and colonialism and has become a commodity which can be bestowed and conversely snatched away. For an enlightening conversation on this, see the Diaspora Futures Collective's ['Saving Time'](#) write up. As I move on from John Ellerman Foundation and embark on a period of travel and rest, I have been reflecting on the notion of time and what a privilege it has become to put things on hold and take time out for reflection. We often canter through life and wonder where the years disappeared to, but we would do well to consciously steady our pace, notice our surroundings and give ourselves the grace of

time. We endlessly seek to 'save time', don't want to waste other people's time or our own because it is so precious. A relatively small amount of funding to eight people provided them with some time and space to step back from the day to day – should we seek to embed and make more commonplace moments like these? Time is a privilege, but shouldn't it be a right?

Conclusion

As we express gratitude to the curators whose generosity and insights made *Protea* possible, we also extend an invitation to others to replicate and build upon the *Protea* experience. In a world where the 'how' of curatorial practice is becoming increasingly important, *Protea* stands as a testament to the transformative potential of trust-based funding for collaborative, flexible, and community-oriented initiatives. We hope the echoes of *Protea* continue to reverberate, inspiring future generations of curators to reshape the narrative of museum practice and foster a more inclusive, enlightened cultural landscape.

Read the full *Protea* – one year on report, [by clicking here](#). If you would like to speak to us about carrying out a similar international exchange programme like *Protea*, we would be very happy to talk to you. Please contact Sufina Ahmad, Director of John Ellerman Foundation on sufina@ellerman.org.uk.