

CODART + CNA Survey Analysis

Respondents: 107

Sent to members of the following organizations: CODART, Historians of Netherlandish Art (HNA), Renaissance Society of America (RSA)

General Questions

Q.1-2: Fellowship prevalence and funding sources

Out of the respondents who work in a museum, roughly half reported that their institution currently offers fellowships. The majority are funded by external partners (50%) as opposed to solely by the museum itself (24%). In the comments, respondents noted that external funding came primarily from sources such as the Mellon Foundation or Getty Paper Project, in some cases requiring a contribution from the museum as well. Another source of co-funding is universities.

Q. 2-7: Goals of a new fellowship program

Respondents emphasized object-based training, practical curatorial (including exhibition) experience, and professional development as being essential to a fellowship program geared towards aspiring and emerging curators. Talent development and preparation for a curatorial career was identified as the primary goal of such a program.

Several respondents also expressed a desire for more fellowship opportunities for mid-career and senior curators, who could benefit from designated time and resources to work on long-term research and exhibition projects, exchange knowledge with curators at other institutions, and gain new perspectives on their own collections.

When asked what was most needed from a new fellowship program, respondents emphasized providing career development opportunities for emerging museum professionals (and keeping this broad to account for the scarcity of curatorial positions and the likelihood that fellows will pursue other paths) and promoting diversity within the field. One-on-one mentoring, such as that offered by the new HNA program, is also essential. Several respondents also mentioned the importance of ensuring that early-career fellows become adept at collaboration and team work.

The following were identified as crucial skills and competencies that could be integrated in a new program: writing for a broad and diverse audience (public, donors, grant applications, etc.); languages; conservation and material-technical knowledge; connoisseurship; fundraising, grant-writing, donor engagement.

Q. 8: Fellowship duration

Most respondents felt that a full-time fellowship term of 1-2 years was ideal. This allows fellows enough time to acclimate to a collection and institution and work on a project in an in-depth way. Shorter fellowships of 3-6 months could be offered for specific projects, such as a publication, digital project, or exhibition.

Q. 9: How can a fellowship contribute to career development?

Respondents emphasized the importance of integrating the fellow fully into the host institution and department and giving them a high degree of responsibility. A balance should be struck between structured daily work and flexibility to work on an independent project. Producing a concrete deliverable, such an exhibition or publication for which they are credited, at the conclusion of the fellowship should also be a key component of the position. Contact, visibility, and networking were also mentioned as crucial to ensuring the longer-term career prospects of the fellow.

Q. 10: Ideal career stage for fellows

This response had a wide range of opinions, which may have to do with the different academic training and requirements for curators in various regions. Many respondents felt that the pre-doctoral or early post-doctoral stages were ideal: at this stage, fellows would have a solid academic background and possibly already a few years of museum (internship) experience. Additionally, they have demonstrated the ability to develop a research project independently. By contrast, a significant number of respondents felt that it was essential to begin practical training at an earlier stage, such as during or after the MA or even as early as the BA or secondary (high) school. Since candidates at the BA/MA stages are less specialized than PhDs or post-docs, one could argue that they are more flexible and can be trained within the museum. More advanced fellows tend to focus on their own projects and are frequently already identified as a specialist in a particular area.

This distinction is reflected in the difference between the North American curatorial career trajectory, in which a PhD (of 5+ years) is typically required for a permanent position, and the Dutch trajectory, in which internships start at the BA level and traineeships are emphasized over academic degrees. MA programs also typically have a curatorial track with a traineeship component and it is less common for aspiring curators to pursue a PhD. Ultimately, these distinctions will probably impact how a fellowship program is structured in a North American museum vs. one in The Netherlands.

Q. 11: How can a fellowship program promote diversity and inclusivity?

This question yielded several thoughtful and fruitful suggestions, reflecting its high importance to many respondents. Most agreed that diversifying the field needs to start much earlier, at the secondary (high) school level. Museums could cultivate strong connections with local high schools and universities to encourage a more diverse body of younger students to pursue museum work. Reaching out to minorities via high schools and HBCU's (Historically Black Colleges or Universities in the U.S.) was suggested by several respondents. The Getty Foundation Multicultural undergraduate internship program and the new Mellon Undergraduate Fellowship program are two examples to look to for guidance and inspiration.

In terms of selection criteria, it is important to cast a wider net and to look beyond conventional profiles. For example, not only Ivy League institutions, but also state universities in the U.S. Eliminating age limits is also important in this regard, as candidates from non-traditional backgrounds may be older in age but still junior in terms of their academic record and years of experience. In short, life circumstances should not be overlooked when assessing a candidate's potential. Respondents also suggested opening up fellowships to students from disciplines other than art history.

On a practical note, respondents underscored the importance of offering fellows a liveable stipend, ideally assisting with housing, relocation, and immigration, and providing flexibility for those with young children or other care responsibilities. Pairing fellows with BIPOC mentors during and after the fellowship term was also suggested.

Q. 12-13: Challenges of early-career curators

The majority of early-career respondents identified the lack of knowledge of either an area of their collection or a particular skillset as their greatest challenge. Lack of funding for travel and networking is also a significant issue. Other challenges mentioned in the comments section include: being overwhelmed by too many responsibilities; sexism and classism; and a lack of transparency regarding advancement and promotion trajectories.

Q. 14-15: Mentoring by mid-career and senior curators

An overwhelming majority of respondents (85%) indicated that they would be interested in participating in a formal mentoring program for aspiring or early-career curators. When asked what they hoped to gain from this experience, they mentioned building a personal connection with and getting a new perspective on the field from younger colleagues; contributing to the career development of others and guiding them through the professional landscape; sharing their personal experience and in return being inspired by fresh ideas; and giving something back and helping the next generation. The main concern mentioned was the time commitment.

Q. 16-17: Museum exchange program

A majority of respondents (84%) expressed an interest in participating in an exchange program that would allow them to work for period of time in another museum. When asked what they hoped to gain, respondents emphasized the following: broadening their institutional perspective and experience; gaining a new perspective on their home institution and collection; expanding their network and discovering new possibilities for collaboration; gaining inspiration from new colleagues and institutions; learning how museums in other cultural contexts operate. Concerns about the feasibility of such a program were raised, however, namely who would replace them in their home institution during their sabbatical?

Q. 18-29: Feedback from current and former fellows

Roughly 1/2 of the total number of respondents identified themselves as current or former museum fellows, indicating the importance of such a function to one's career trajectory. Their experience rating was mostly positive. Just under 1/2 of the respondents reported that their fellowship focused on an individual project, such as a PhD dissertation or publication, as opposed to the remaining group, who focused on general curatorial training or a museum-initiated exhibition or project.

Most fellows received some form of mentoring, either on a regular basis or sporadically during their fellowship term. For most respondents, professional development was the most important element of the fellowship experience. Career development, mentoring, and producing a deliverable (exhibition, publication, etc.) were prioritized in the survey results. Integration into the daily life of the museum was lacking for over half of the respondents, with some noting that they had little interaction with museum staff and focused mostly on an individual project. Those fellows who were treated more like museum staff, with departmental responsibilities and an integrated workspace, had a significantly different experience than fellows who had no departmental or administrative duties and focused entirely on their own external project. The distinction between a research fellowship and a curatorial fellowship, in which fellows receive hands-on, practical training and exposure to the daily life a curator, is made clear in the comments.

On a positive note, an overwhelming majority of respondents reported maintaining good connections with their host institutions and fellows cohort even after their fellowship was

completed. According to the comments, while some museums encourage this through newsletters and alumni gatherings, it is more typically the fellows themselves who initiate these relationships and make the effort to stay connected.