

# The art *of* partnering

**Case study:  
V&A  
Photography  
Curators**

## What

The response to our questionnaire about this partnership tells us that it is:

‘A two-year pilot programme to help support the development of curatorial expertise in art photography, working with regional museum partners. Supported by the Art Fund.’

### Questionnaire Response

The partnership is led by the V&A and the other organisations involved are Nottingham City Museums and Museums Sheffield.

According to our questionnaire response, the partnership did agree joint objectives and there is a formal written agreement between the partners in the form of a contract. The partners do have plans to work together again. As the partnership has not yet completed it has not yet been evaluated.

‘It’s co-funded by the V&A and Art Fund and they offered two regional institutions the opportunity to host a curatorial trainee. Basically they’re year-long placements, half the year at the V&A and half the year in the host regional institution.’

Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums

‘It is a partnership funded by the Art Fund. We discussed how we might use our expertise in photography curation and their knowledge of the sector and gaps [in knowledge in the sector] to help improve curatorial expertise and skills in this very particular area. Nottingham Castle Museum and Sheffield Museum were chosen from the museums who replied [to an open call] and then the first trainee was appointed, again through open competition. They applied for an annual contract on the understanding that they’ll work here for six months and at Nottingham – because Nottingham will be the first partner – for six months.’

Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A

## Why

Our questionnaire response tells us that the motivation for initiating the partnership was as follows:

‘Peer support and access to specialist skills for curators working with art photography collections in regional museums is limited. As a result, many photography collections tend to be “dormant” and inaccessible to experts and audiences and the active development of these collections is perforce limited.’

### Questionnaire Response

Interviewees from the V&A and Nottingham Museums went into further detail concerning the motivations for initiating this partnership. The V&A developed the idea for and initiated the partnership and explained that the main reason they did so was to develop art photography curating skills in regional museums:

‘The particular skills that you might need to be a photography curator aren’t there in the regions [...] And the Art Fund particularly, and we agreed, felt that we could do something to help boost skills [...] so it will improve overall the skills for this particular area [...which] was definitely seen as a gap.’

**Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A**

After skill development, the V&A also explained that they had another motivation, which is connected to their status as a national museum:

‘As a national museum, we have a remit to work nationally, to work throughout the UK, and we do it in lots of different ways. This is another way that we could share our expertise, share our knowledge, share our collections and each of the regional museums came up with an idea that would have an outcome at the end of the twelve months.’

**Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A**

Yet another motivation for the V&A was engaging broader audiences and reaching audiences in regions of the country that they might not otherwise have been able to.

‘The programme aims were to provide this practical training opportunity, to enable UK organisations, us and the regional partner, [and] to raise the public profile and improve the public access [to the photography collections], which will have a legacy after the trainees have finished that partnership, the other ways that we can work together in the future. That’s what we want.’

**Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A**

We also spoke to Nottingham City Museums and their motivations for becoming involved were complementary but slightly different. They had a significant collection of contemporary art photography that they were keen to do more with and the possibility of doing so was the main motivation for becoming involved in the partnership.

‘I’m speaking in my role at Nottingham City Museums and Galleries, based at Nottingham Castle and the museum service has a collection of fine art but within that is a discrete collection of art photography, contemporary art photography, which was formed a couple of years ago with support from the Contemporary Arts Society as a special area of collecting for us [...] we’ve shown some of the collection in recent years but we were aware that we would like to do more with it because it is an important collection. There’s some really key national and international artists represented in it. We also have a small number of historical art photographs, which have rarely been seen to date.’

**Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums**

Due to the quality of their photography collection they arranged for an external review to be carried out by Martin Barnes, senior curator at the V&A in the word and image department with a specialism in photography, who noted that it includes some important work. Following on from this, the V&A invited Deborah Dean from Nottingham Museums to speak at a roundtable discussion that brought national and regional museums together to talk about how they could begin to develop expertise in curatorial skills in art photography across the country. There was also a representative from the Art Fund at the roundtable. Considering the challenges in this context laid out the factors that necessitated a partnership such as this one. At the roundtable they discussed ways to increase access, increase profile and increase the expertise around these photography collections.

‘After the roundtable, the V&A and Art Fund went away and formulated this scheme which was a curatorial partnership.’

**Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums**

So, when the advertisement came out asking for regional museums to join the partnership, it addressed issues that Nottingham Museums had already been thinking about.

When the V&A were developing the ideas for the partnership, value for money was not a key motivating factor.

‘Value for money wasn’t a major driver. Obviously we needed the funding to do it [...but] I don’t think partnerships are a way of saving money particularly. I just think it will enable us to work better for our audiences and for our collections, more effectively, more efficiently. It reaches a wider audience. I just think it will make us do a better job.’

**Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A**

## How

Setting up the partnership required gaining funding and then recruiting the regional partners:

‘We applied for a grant [from the Art Fund] and it enabled us to employ two trainees, one in each of two years who will work with us for six months and then with the regional partner for six months. The regional partners were chosen through open competition. We advertised on our website, in the museum’s journal, and the sectoral press for partners.’

**Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A**

Once the partners were recruited, each trainee was recruited and then began work:

‘The trainee will spend six months in each of the V&A and the regional partner; firstly embedded in the V&A Photographs section, learning photography curatorial skills and working on an agreed project at the regional partner to raise the profile of the photographs collection within each museum.’

**Questionnaire Response**

**Case study: V&A Photography Curators Programme**

Each trainee will spend the first part of his or her traineeship at the V&A. A key part of the time spent there will be dedicated to learning skills and knowledge from the V&A's expert staff, which they will then take to the regional museum they are placed in.

'We are the National Museum of Art Photography so our collections are unparalleled and we have a team of staff working with our photograph collection who are all very highly trained in the work that they do. They are sharing their skills with the trainee in the first six months, teaching them how to look after photographs, how to identify them, how to catalogue and research them. And then the trainee will go and share that [knowledge] with regional colleagues for the second six months.'

**Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A**

After this, an exhibition project will be developed for the partnership with both of the regional museums. For Nottingham this will be an exhibition on Emerson, an eminent nineteenth-century photographer. Nottingham have a collection of his work and the V&A also own some, which the exhibition will enable them to show to a Nottingham audience.

The V&A were clear that they were looking for a museum that not only had a collection of art photography, but also had an existing plan regarding what they wanted to do with this collection as well as the resources to support the plan and the trainee.

'The regional museum also has to put some resource into the partnership in terms of sharing general expertise with the trainee, supporting them in delivering the outcomes which in Nottingham's case is an exhibition. So we were looking for a museum that has an art photography collection that was under-used and the museum didn't have the skills or the staff in post to do the necessary work, but the museum had a good clear idea of what outcomes it wanted and it had some resources to help support those outcomes.'

**Julia Brettell, National Programmes Manager, V&A**

## What worked

Interviewees reported that they particularly valued a number of aspects of the partnership. These include engaging broader audiences, sharing skills and knowledge, the collaborative nature of the process and raising their profile.

### Engaging broader audiences

The partnership has helped both the national and the regional museums to reach broader audiences.

'It will raise the profile of the regional photographs collection and broaden the reach of the V&A's collections and expertise.'

#### Questionnaire Response

'I hope what it will do is let the wider national photography sector – if you like, people who are interested in photography and visit exhibitions and read books – know about the collection: the photography specialist audience but also the maybe not-quite-so-specialist but actively interested audience, that might not be aware of our collection at the moment, might not have even considered that the Castle might have this on offer.'

**Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums**

Nottingham Museums explained that having the V&A's name attached to the exhibition as well as advertising the show through the V&A's channels would help to bring it to a wider audience. As far as the V&A is concerned, partnering in this way helps them to bring their collection to new parts of the country.

'I think any partnership is about doing something that's greater than the sum of the parts and has more impact than either partner working on their own.'

**Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums**

**Sharing skills and knowledge**

For the regional museums in particular, this partnership is particularly valuable as it enables them to develop new specialist skills and knowledge. The V&A has much more resource available to devote to developing specialist knowledge and also to conducting further research and attending photography fairs nationally and internationally than a regional museum does. Nottingham Museums explained how valuable it was to be able to tap into this research and expert knowledge:

'The V&A is a large national institution with specialist teams in a wide range of subject areas and they have that long history and breadth of knowledge – and also depth of knowledge – so to be able to work with them as a regional partner where we have a much smaller team covering a much wider range of things is really valuable because it means that we can tap into that expertise [...] and bring a fresh perspective on an area of our collection [...] it's good for us as well to have a window into how the V&A approach an exhibition. And I think we'll learn from that.'

**Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums**

Nottingham Museums have also benefitted from the connections of the candidate appointed to the traineeship post. The partnership provided the museum with access to a quality employee that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to work with:

'I think we're very lucky in this as there was a very strong field of candidates for the traineeship, so we have someone that's already fairly established – it was the aim that it wouldn't necessarily be a very early career curator [...] but somebody who already had a bit of experience. Nevertheless we're really benefiting from the knowledge of our trainee already and the connections that she can make for us [...] for example, she has worked on the Format Photography Festival in Derby with which, although a near neighbour to us, we haven't yet had a strong connection.'

**Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums**

**The process was collaborative**

Although the V&A are officially the project lead and are providing the funding (along with the Art Fund), Nottingham Museums felt that they had been involved in all aspects of the process and were equal partners:

‘It’s been a very collaborative process right from the beginning so we were involved in drafting job descriptions for the trainee and in the recruitment process (we were on the interview panel). It was a very equal process and it’s been very, there’s been a very open dialogue between us and them and it’s been quite consultative all the way along. So although the V&A are leading and funding [with the Art Fund], [...] they’ve [...] made sure that we’re part of that discussion and part of the project.’

Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums

### Raising profile

The partnership will raise the profile of the V&A’s photography collection in Nottingham and Sheffield. It will also help the regional museums to raise the profile of some of their other projects due to the association with a national museum such as the V&A.

‘We’re just about to become a Major Partner Museum with Derby Museums so we’re having Arts Council funding for the next three years to work on a variety of projects but I was able to plug this project into that structure so it’s about the value for money thing, which I think comes from working with a prestigious national institution and being able to maximise the potential of that and plug the project into other things that are going on regionally.’

Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums

## Challenges

Interviewees reported very few challenges associated with this partnership, although as it is still at an early stage and the first trainee is yet to make the transition from the V&A to Nottingham Museum it is possible that further challenges will arise as the partnership develops. The only potential challenge identified is that as the trainee will be based at the V&A first, she will start developing the exhibition (which will take place in the regional museum) during this time. This could mean that the exhibition gets planned in a way that is different from the usual process undertaken for exhibitions in the regional museums. Although undoubtedly there will be benefits and learnings associated with this method, it could also lead to challenges in terms of delivery of the exhibition within the timescales and resources available.

‘So already she’s begun to think about the exhibition that she’ll be doing while she’s with us at the Castle, which she’s researching during her placement at the V&A with their support. So already small things have cropped up like the way they plan exhibitions is slightly different from us. They probably have a slightly longer lead-in time, they tend to work with exhibition designers for a lot of their shows whereas for us, it tends to be much more in-house.’

Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, Nottingham City Museums

## Evaluation

As the project is still ongoing it has not yet been evaluated although there are plans to do so.