

EDITORIAL

Birmingham Museums Trust

An appeal for financial support and the trouble with Arts Council England

On page 16 readers will see a magnificent reproduction of an out-of-copyright work of art, *Morgan-le-Fay* by Frederick Sandys (1829–1904). It is provided by Birmingham Museums Trust in hi-resolution free of charge, because, like all other images of out-of-copyright works of art, it is in the public domain. This excellent trust has made all such images freely available for download from its website, without registration, and that is how it should be. Its initiative ought to shame the National Gallery, the Tate, the National Portrait Gallery, the British Museum and the Royal Collections Trust into doing likewise. Those institutions, however, are still peppering their online collections with assertions of copyright, and plastering their reproductions and credit lines with copyright symbols. By what right?

Birmingham Museums Trust now needs our financial help and we hope that it will be freely given, just as they freely support us devotees of British art who read this journal. The Trust has suffered badly from the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Some 60% of its income is generated by visitors and its application for money from the Arts Council England Emergency Response Fund was turned down.

The chair of Arts Council England is Sir Nicholas Serota, who has probably done more to distort the understanding of art in this country than anyone else. His career has been characterised by a doctrinaire insistence on the primacy of contemporary art, the problem being that, under his directorship, the Tate publicly defined contemporary art as art that is ‘of an innovative or avant-garde nature’ (*Tate Guide to Modern Art Terms*). Birmingham’s museums and galleries are, of course, very largely filled with the art of the past, and are especially rich in British pictures, with perhaps the finest group of Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces in one place.

And so, while ignoring the obvious importance of Birmingham’s collections, what has Serota spent all that emergency money on instead? Here is just a selection, and remember that the word ‘contemporary’ in this context means what Serota intends it to mean.

Art Monthly, a journal devoted exclusively to contemporary art, **£42, 270**

Auto Italia commissions exclusively contemporary art from ‘emerging artists’ – **£35,159**

Institute of Contemporary Arts. The name says it all, although it no longer has much time for any kind of art, but plenty for political activism. It received **£289,368**. That would have helped in Birmingham, but of course the ICA is in London, which was handed a third of all the money available, 38.7%, while the whole of the Midlands got just 17.1%.

South London Gallery. This was once a gallery with an interesting collection of old pictures donated by artists such as Lord Leighton in the 1890s. That was all dispersed when, in effect, the gallery was hi-jacked, and now it offers only contemporary art. **£150,000**

Studio Voltaire says it ‘focuses on contemporary art’ and so that triggered a dole of no less than **£240,867**.

Naturally, the *Whitechapel Gallery*, where Serota first learned to manipulate everything in the direction of his kind of contemporary art, landed **£150,000**.

An: Artists Information Company sounds a good thing at first, since it claims to represent some 25,000 artists, until you read on and find that ‘its mission is to stimulate and support contemporary visual arts practice’. **£90,178**.

Project Space Leeds. By now it will come as no surprise that this beneficiary of **£212,241** is ‘an independent, artist-led contemporary art space’.

All these beneficiaries are part of what the Arts Council calls its National Portfolio: a host of organisations selected to be funded by the Arts Council and devoted, in large part, to everything contemporary, although there are some anomalies in there in the form of such distinguished institutions as the Wigmore Hall.

The list of grants to those individuals and organisations that are *not* part of the National Portfolio makes, if anything, even more depressing reading, as the activities of the lucky winners in so many cases are misguided, trivial and foolish.

It is most unfortunate, then, to put it no more strongly, that a lot of the finance offered by the government on 6 July, some £1.57bn, to mitigate the crisis of funding in the arts caused by Covid-19, will be handed to such a blinkered organisation as Arts Council England to administer. The government announcement contains these ominous words:

Decisions on awards will be made working alongside expert independent figures from the sector including the Arts Council England and other specialist bodies such as Historic England, National Lottery Heritage Fund and the British Film Institute.

It is ‘Arts Council England’ that is the worrying bit, since that has evidently been identified by the government as the body to advise on the visual arts. The terms under which the government has made this offer are vague, but Arts Council England will be only too happy to define them on its behalf, and we know what that means.

It is clear that the government intends some £100m of the money to go to ‘national cultural institutions and English Heritage’. It is also clear, if Arts Council England has anything to do with it, that the Birmingham Museums Trust, along with other institutions that share its enlightened mission to engage today’s visitors with the art of the past, will be lucky to see any of it.

Here is where you can find details to donate:

<https://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/support-us>

To inspire you, on the following page we offer a selection of some of Birmingham’s pictures, a number of which have been discussed in *The British Art Journal* in the past.