

New museum initiative designed to advance US foreign policy is looking for applicants

Can US museums help win the war on terror?

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1st July 2007 00:00 BST

The US State Department is funding a new museum initiative designed to advance US foreign policy. The department's cultural-diplomacy arm, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, has established a programme in conjunction with the American Association of Museums (AAM), that will see US museums collaborating with foreign institutions in "community-focused" partnerships.

Grants of \$50,000 to \$100,000 will be offered to US institutions chosen to take part in Museums & Community Collaborations Abroad (MCCA). The inaugural cycle—for which applications are due on 1 August—will award up to five grants.

Proposals that include foreign museums pre-selected by US Embassies and Consulates "may receive additional consideration by the MCCA Selection Committee", the application guidelines state. The State Department website presents model projects which have been proposed by US diplomats abroad. The State Department requires that these proposals include a statement explaining: "How this project promotes US foreign policy."

For example, the US Consulate in Peshawar has proposed that US museums partner with Pakistani institutions on a programme designed to increase understanding of pre-Islamic history in the Islamic fundamentalist Northwest Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan. "A tangible dynamic

exists which downplays or denies the region's pre-Islamic roots, most prevalently in...tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan," explains the consulate. US officials in Nepal, Bolivia and Peru are seeking partnerships that "spread tolerance and respect for diversity".

Since 1980 the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and AAM have collaborated on a staff exchange programme for US and foreign museums. That is being phased out and replaced by the policy-oriented MCCA.

The overall budget for the inaugural round of grants is \$690,000 of which the State Department contributes \$350,000 and AAM and participating museums provide the balance. An AAM spokeswoman says the State Department is considering investing an additional \$100,000 in the programme. The first grants will be announced in September.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as '*Can US museums help win the war on terror?*'

 *Appeared in The Art Newspaper Archive, 182 July 2007*

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