

BRISTOL MUSEUM SHORT-LISTED FOR THE ART FUND PRIZE FOR MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol has been short-listed for the UK's largest arts prize for its exhibition 'Breaking the Chains', which commemorates the impact of slavery. The museum will now compete with three others for the £100,000 Art Fund Prize, which is awarded for originality, imagination and excellence. The winner will be announced on 22 May at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. This achievement comes two years after Brunel's SS Great Britain won the same £100,000 award.

The exhibition highlights the city's pivotal role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and marked the bicentenary of the Act which abolished it. It also demonstrates the fruits of an extraordinary collaboration between staff, academics, numerous community groups and light and sound specialists who invested 150 years of personal accounts, records and memorabilia with a priceless immediacy through interactive technology.

Director Gareth Griffiths is delighted: "This is a wonderful tribute to the work of the Museum team and all those from the community who supported the exhibition. Talking to them afterwards, I felt the judges had appreciated the challenges not only of the subject-matter but also of the incredible efforts made to create the exhibition in a remarkably short time. As an independent museum, our ability to deliver an imaginative response to challenging histories over the last five years has been fully appreciated – not least by the Art Fund Prize judges."

The short list, which spans the length and breadth of the country, is:

The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol, for 'Breaking the Chains'

From the enslavement and resistance of African peoples in the Transatlantic trade to the 2004 tragedy of Morecambe Bay, this landmark exhibition presents the 500-year history and legacy of slavery. Launched to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1807, the challenging and emotive displays in this exhibition also show why campaigns against slavery need to continue to this day.

The Lightbox gallery and museum, Woking

In 1993, a group of local people got together to create a museum and gallery for Woking's town centre. Fifteen years on, their dream has been realised in a contemporary arts centre that is a beacon for the local community and that presents a unique collaboration between local history, the visual arts and architecture. Housed in a striking new building, The Lightbox has been critically acclaimed as an 'ingenious jewel'.

Shetland Museum and Archives, Lerwick, Shetland

This vibrant new museum and archive is set within a restored 19th Century dock and provides a new 'Heritage Hub for Shetland'. Shetland Museum and Archive tells the fascinating story of Britain's most northerly group of islands - from its geological beginnings to the present day. The project has preserved the rich culture and heritage of these most northerly of British islands, encouraging visitors to discover more through a network of local heritage and cultural sites.

Wellcome Collection, London

American-born philanthropist and entrepreneur Sir Henry Wellcome dreamed of a 'Museum of Man' to house his collection of artefacts and objects; 70 years later, the Wellcome Collection opened its doors on London's Euston Road. This hybrid space - which is somewhere between a gallery, museum and live event space – approaches science in a fresh and engaging way. Over 1,500 exhibits are used to explore the new connections between medicine, life and art.

Sue MacGregor, Chair of the Judges, comments: "We've been greatly impressed by each of the museums we've looked at over the past few weeks, and I'm delighted that the short list of four continues our theme of diversity, distinctiveness and real excellence. Any one of them could be a worthy winner: which makes our next task - finding that winner - very challenging indeed!"

David Barrie, Director of The Art Fund comments: "These four astonishingly diverse projects not only span the country, but also a dizzying range of topics, from slavery and medical science to contemporary art and seafaring. In their very different ways they prove just how exciting our museums and galleries can be. Now it's for the judges to pick the final winner - they'll have a hard job!"

The short list for The Art Fund Prize (formerly The Gulbenkian Prize) was selected from a long list of ten UK museums and galleries. The other six in the running were: the British Library, London, for 'Sacred – Discover what we share'; International Slavery Museum, Liverpool; London Transport Museum; National Army Museum, London, for 'Helmand: The Soldiers' Story'; The Pier Arts Centre, Orkney.

The Prize is judged by an independent panel, which this year comprises:

- Sue MacGregor CBE (Chair), broadcaster
- Keith Khan, Head of Culture for the London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games
- Diane Lees, Director of the V&A Museum of Childhood and Director Designate of the Imperial War Museum
- Christopher Lloyd CVO, former Surveyor of The Queen's Pictures
- Dr Mark Miodownik, Head of Materials Research Group, King's College London
- Maggie Semple OBE, Chief Executive of The Experience Corps Ltd
- Emma Soames, Editorial Director of SAGA Publishing

The Art Fund Prize is open to all accredited museums and galleries in the UK. As well as celebrating excellence, it is also intended to increase public appreciation and enjoyment of all these museums and galleries have to offer.

Last year's winner was Pallant House Gallery in Chichester. Previous winners include Brunel's SS Great Britain in Bristol (2006), Big Pit: National Mining Museum of Wales, Blaenafon (2005), The Scottish Gallery of Modern Art for Landform - part sculpture, part garden, part land-art - by Charles Jencks (2004), and the National Centre for Citizenship and the Law at the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham (2003).

For more information please visit: www.artfundprize.org.uk

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Notes to editors

- Due to his involvement with the Wellcome Collection's events programme, judge Mark Miodownik was not involved in any of the discussions relating to the Wellcome Collection.
- The Art Fund Prize for museums and galleries is administered by the Museum Prize, a charitable company created in 2002 by The Art Fund, the Campaign for Museums, the Museums Association and National Heritage. Its trustees are Penelope, Viscountess Cobham (Chair), James Bishop (National Heritage), Ylva French (Campaign for Museums), Mark Taylor (Museums Association), Sandy Nairne (Director of the National Portrait Gallery), James Naughtie and Eleanor Updale.
- The Museum Prize is registered as a company in England and Wales No. 421870 and a charity No. 1093174. Registered Office: 24 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW.
- The Art Fund is the UK's leading independent art charity. It offers grants to help UK museums and galleries enrich their collections; campaigns on behalf of museums and their visitors; and promotes the enjoyment of art. It is entirely funded from public donations and has 80,000 members. Since 1903 the charity has helped museums and galleries all over the UK secure 860,000 works of art for their collections. Recent achievements include: helping secure Anthony d'Offay's collection, ARTIST ROOMS, for Tate and National Galleries of Scotland in February 2008 with a grant of £1million; putting together a unique funding package to ensure Dumfries House in Ayrshire and its contents were secured intact for the nation in July 2007; and running the 'Buy a Brushstroke' public appeal which raised over £550,000 to keep Turner's *Blue Rigi* watercolour in the UK. For more information contact the Press Office on 020 7225 4888 or visit www.artfund.org