

A brief history of the Friends of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

www.fbmt.org.uk

Ninety-one years ago the then Keeper of the Gallery, SC Kaines-Smith, wrote to the Treasurer of Birmingham City Council, Mr JR Johnson: 'I am hoping that we may get together ... a very large number of small subscriptions, and I am proposing that these subscriptions should be made payable to you for the Friends of the Gallery Fund Account.' An alliance of subscribers who wanted to make their own independent contribution to the City Council-owned museum formed the Friends. And this is still our vision today.



'Portrait of Mumtaz Mahal', 1840-1890, Artist unknown; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1932, 1932P240

The Friends of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery ('the Friends') is a registered Charity. Since its foundation in 1931, the key charitable objective of the Friends has been to support Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery (which became Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) in 2012). The Friends offers financial support - including financing acquisitions, capital projects and curatorial posts; donates time - providing support to BMT through volunteering, which has included frontline working behind the Friends' Desk in the gallery; and works behind the scenes on specific projects in conservation, cataloguing and researching.

BMT was founded in April 2012 and is responsible for governing and managing the museum sites and collections owned by Birmingham City Council. It runs nine museum sites across the city: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG), Thinktank, Sarehole Mill, Aston Hall, Soho House, Museum of the Jewellery Quarter, Blakesley Hall, Museum Collections Centre and Weoley Castle.

On Wednesday 1st July 1931, at the first General Meeting of the subscribers to the Association of the Friends of the Gallery, the association was named 'The Friends of the Gallery'. There were 124 members and £150 to spend. John Humphreys - the Chair; Alderman W. A Cadbury - Chair of the Art Gallery Committee; and S.C. Kaines-Smith - the Secretary were present at the meeting.

They voted to purchase the following items:

- a portrait miniature of Mumtaz Mahal, the favourite Queen of Shah Jahan (Members will know this image as it was used on our Membership cards for our 80th anniversary year);
- a Sardonyx Cameo by Schmidt from the middle of the 19th century; and
- 'Cyclamen', a painting by Florence Engelbach.

The cost of these three acquisitions came to a total of £61 - 15s - 0d. By the end of the financial year a further fourteen items had been purchased for the sum of £210 - 18s - 0d. 90 years later, the Friends are proud to have purchased over 2,700 items for Birmingham's collections.



'Cyclamen' by Florence Engelbach, 1931, Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1932, 1932P238; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

The Friends currently contribute approximately £15,000 each year to BMT and this money is used for a variety of purposes including purchasing acquisitions, supporting conservation work and contributing to capital projects. This money comes from an investment portfolio which the Friends has built up over the years, membership fees, surplus from events and fundraising. Over the years, the Friends' relatively modest contributions have been instrumental in leveraging external funding from grant-giving bodies such as the V&A Purchase Fund, the Art Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council England and local charities. In approaching external funders, declaring a contribution from their dedicated and committed group of Friends enables BMT to demonstrate strong and positive local support. In addition, the Friends continues to receive bequests and legacies, and uses these generous contributions to make purchases in memory of the benefactor.



Above and below: 'Transporter' by Keiko Mukaide and Ronnie Watt, 2012; Commissioned for the Friends' 80th Birthday; Photo by Melissa Hughes

Over the years the Friends have commissioned works by both established and young artists and craftspeople, helping BMT to develop its collection of Contemporary Art. In 2014 the Friends purchased 'An Ode to Christian Joy', a self-portrait by up-and-coming artist Emily Sparkes which was exhibited at the 'New Art West Midlands' exhibition. To celebrate the Friends' 80th birthday, the Committee commissioned a major new art work - 'Transporter' by Keiko Mukaide and Ronnie Watt - which was installed for the opening of the Birmingham History Galleries on 12 October 2012. Considerable financial support has also been given to various capital projects including BMAG's Birmingham History Galleries, a Friends' border in the garden at Blakesley Hall, and the refurbishment of the Orange Room as part of the Development Programme for Aston Hall. Our fundraising appeal raised £26,000 for the Staffordshire Hoard Appeal for on-going research and conservation.



Friends Evening Opening at BMAG in July 2013 - with some Friends and the Anglo-Saxon soldier!

The social side of the Friends really took off in the late fifties. Then, the highlight of the year was the Friends' Ball. This was a grand white tie event with dancing in the banqueting suite of the Council House, entertainment in the Round Room and dinner was spread out within the galleries themselves. Nowadays, the conservators might have something to say about that! Peter Miles, the Friends' Chair, recalls that as the Friends' Membership grew, Members provided 'cordon bleu' catering for the gallery's private views. His first experience of getting involved with the Friends, over 50 years ago, was helping with 'Bellini Parties'. These were organised by Glennys Wild, the then Keeper, and Madeline Aston, the Friends' Social Secretary, to raise funds towards the purchase of 'Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Donor' by Giovanni Bellini.

Friends' events have continued over the years. Before the pandemic, the Friends organised an extensive range of educational and social activities for Members. These included events at BMT's nine sites, evening talks, visits and day trips to galleries, exhibitions and places of interest throughout the country, weekends away and trips abroad. A number of sold out events had to be cancelled at the start of the pandemic, but we are now looking to the future and we have a full events diary again!

The Friends publish a quarterly magazine, 'Artefacts', which includes feature articles, information about Friends' events, contributions from BMT and a quiz. The magazine keeps our Members informed about our current work and future plans. 'Artefacts' also features articles about other cultural organisations and lists events across the West Midlands. The Friends' website - www.fbmt.org.uk - promotes our work and activities.



Derek Street, a Friends' Volunteer, greeting visitors to BMAG at the Friends' Desk



Ann Crump, a Friends' Volunteer, at the Friends' Desk in 2016

Until 2020 a Friends' Desk in the Industrial Gallery in BMAG, staffed by volunteers, acted as a general information point for the public, as well as providing an opportunity to recruit new Members. During special exhibitions we also had a Friends' Desk in the Gas Hall.

Until recently we have had an office in BMAG, which has been provided by BMT. Due to the closure of BMAG for major work, in May 2022 we were delighted to move to a new office at Soho House, one of BMT's Historic Properties. Since 1991, the Friends has employed

part-time paid administration staff to run the office, together with our core team of volunteers, including our dedicated Trustees. The Friends could not run without this essential volunteer support.

Over the last ninety-one years we have been proud of our successes: the contributions which we have made to BMT, both financial and otherwise; our loyal Members; the wide range of events and activities which we have been able to provide for our Members; 'Artefacts', our professionally published magazine; and the strength of our relationship with the Museums we were formed to support. We have been incredibly fortunate to have a dedicated, energetic and committed team of volunteers - from our Chairs and our Trustees, our office team and our events organisers to the contributors to 'Artefacts' and those who have manned the Friends' Gallery Desk. None of this would have been possible without them.



The Friends' Committee at Blakesley Hall, July 2022

If you would like to know more about the Friends, if you are interested in becoming a Member, supporting our work or if you would like to get involved, then please do get in touch by emailing melissa.page.fbmag@gmail.com or writing to us at The Friends of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Soho House Museum, Soho Avenue, Birmingham, B18 5LB.

By Melissa Hughes, Friends' Administrator and Editor of Artefacts