



A New Agora for New York: Museums as Spaces for Democracy

Nature of the Request

The Museum Association of New York (MANY) requests consideration for an Implementation Grant in the amount of \$499,988 to produce a Humanities Discussion series “A New Agora for New York: Museums as Spaces for Democracy.” In ancient Greek cities an Agora was both an assembly of people and the physical setting in which they gathered. It was an open space in which intellectual and thought-provoking discussions formed the foundation of a civil society. As we approach an essential act of our nation’s founding, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, this project will create spaces in museums through exhibitions and programs in which communities can learn together and participate in humanities discussions grounded in texts and objects of material culture.

New Yorkers and their histories are deeply connected to the founding of our nation and the continuing evolution of our democracy. The roots of the abolition, women’s suffrage, and civil rights movements are in New York soil. Five US Presidents were born and raised in New York. New York ranks third in our nation in welcoming New Americans. The stories inherent in the collections of our museums and these interwoven historical and political factors come together to make twelve New York museums ideal locations for an exemplary Humanities Discussion Series connected to the NEH’s A More Perfect Union initiative.

“A New Agora for New York: Museums as Spaces for Democracy” Humanities Discussion programs will explore the context and main controversies behind our democratic system including the principles and events that inspired the writers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the struggle for civil rights, voting rights, and equal participation in our democracy; the freedoms and responsibilities of citizens; and the formal and informal processes of our political systems.

The project will support the work of twelve museums and their communities as they explore, reflect on, and tell the story of their role in the evolution of American democracy. Museums will be supported through the creation of a public humanities Project Fellow position and will have access to Consulting Scholars, New York State Museum (NYSM) education and curatorial staff, and American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) Vital Resources program. MANY will partner with Humanities New York (HNY) to use the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum on Main Street (MoMS) Exhibition *Voices and Votes: Democracy in America* as a launching point for “A New Agora for New York” series of humanities programs. The exhibition includes historical and contemporary photos; educational and archival video; engaging multimedia interactives; and historical objects like campaign souvenirs, voter memorabilia, and protest material. The rotating exhibition will be installed for six weeks at twelve museums from March of 2024 through January of 2026.

The NEH funded programs will include two planning symposia for scholars and museum staff, the development and installation of twelve exhibitions based on project themes drawn from the museums’ collections, a lecture by a project scholar, a Community Conversation discussion program and trainings led by HNY staff, and a workshop for local teachers to help build their knowledge and leadership skills. The museums will gather and share oral history projects using *OurStoryBridge* virtual platform. We estimate that more than 50,000 people will participate in the programs and visit the exhibitions.

Through conversations with museum leaders across the state, we know that planning for commemorative activities is taking place, but for museums with smaller budgets and fewer resources, opportunities for participation may be limited. With funding from the NEH, this project will address the gap between interest and funding and make an impact in twelve communities in our state by supporting the work of their museums as new Agoras - spaces for discussions and programs about American democracy.