

Inside Philanthropy

“We Saw an Opportunity.” A Unique Initiative Helps Museums Tackle Climate Change

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Climate change has emerged as one of philanthropy’s hottest funding areas, a trend we acknowledged in Inside Philanthropy’s 2020 [Philanthropy Awards](#). In fields as diverse as [higher ed](#) and [local journalism](#), we’re seeing more grantmakers integrate climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Now comes word that New York City’s Helen Frankenthaler Foundation has established the [Frankenthaler Climate Initiative](#), “the first nation-wide program of its kind for the visual arts and the largest private national grant-making program to address climate change through cultural institutions.”

The \$5 million initiative’s first round of grants will support visual art museums seeking to “assess their impact on the environment and to lower ongoing energy costs.” The foundation, which

developed the initiative with the climate research organization Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) and Sustainable Museums, is accepting [letters of interest](#) until March 15, 2021. The foundation will announce awards this fall.

“We at the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation are excited about the prospect of assisting museums and arts institutions to address their climate impacts by supporting clean energy projects through this new grants program,” Executive Director Elizabeth Smith told me. “These projects not only have the potential to reduce emissions for the planet, but also benefit individual institutions.”

The initiative speaks to the expanding reach of [artist-endowed foundations](#) (AEFs) over the past five years and suggests that climate change may be an area of opportunity for more arts funders in the future. “We saw that we could take a leading role in addressing this unmet need, and hopefully inspire others to join us,” Smith said.

An artist’s foundation

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) was an American abstract painter whose career spanned over six decades. Established and endowed by the artist during her lifetime, the foundation [became active in 2013](#) on the closing of Frankenthaler’s estate.

The foundation maintains an extensive collection of Frankenthaler’s work and materials. It is also an active grantmaker. In 2019, [it awarded grants](#) to the Foundation of Contemporary Arts to establish the Helen Frankenthaler Award for Painting, the Studio Museum in Harlem to endow the Helen Frankenthaler Research Library, and Madison Square Park Conservancy to support artist Martin Puryear’s presentation for the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The foundation also awarded Frankenthaler Scholarships in painting and art history for graduate students at six universities.

The Frankenthaler Climate Initiative expands on the foundation’s commitment to social impact philanthropy, which includes a multi-year COVID-19 relief effort [launched last April](#), October’s \$1.5 million grant cycle supporting projects promoting equity and access, and grants for digital initiatives and professional advancement opportunities for students and recent graduates.

Opportunity for impact

Back in 2018, I spoke with Christine J. Vincent, project director of the Aspen Institute’s Artist-Endowed Foundation Initiative (AEFI) about [the growing footprint of AEFs](#) across the visual arts grantmaking space.

Vincent pointed to a confluence of drivers fueling the field’s expansion, including a red-hot global art market, an AEF-friendly federal tax code and a growing recognition across the artist community about the importance of “legacy stewardship.”

Vincent also explained how AEFs were expanding beyond legacy preservation to provide critical support for [historically underfunded artists](#). “You’ll find AEFs involved in emergency grant initiatives responding to natural disasters—Joan Mitchell, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, etc.,” she said. “You’ll also find AEFs willing to place financial need and emergency assistance as criteria for support to individual artists—Pollock-Krasner, Adolph Gottlieb, etc., whereas few institutional funders committed to strategic approaches to issues deploy ‘charity.’”

The Helen Frankenthaler Foundation’s pre-2021 grantmaking fits this paradigm. But a \$5 million

initiative to help museums reduce greenhouse emissions using cutting-edge clean technology? Not so much.

I asked Smith why the foundation took a closer look at the issue. While researching ways the foundation could address climate change, she said, “we learned that energy consumption is one of the highest fixed costs for museums’ operating budgets. Reducing these costs therefore frees up funds for museums to more actively pursue their missions.”

Foundation leadership also found that few private foundations supported climate-related programming in the cultural sector. “The only cultural grantmaking program of which we are aware is the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections,” Smith said. “We saw an opportunity to do something new that could make a difference.”

“Tangible and necessary”

The Frankenthaler Climate Initiative itself came together from a series of conversations between Smith and her board over the past year about expanding the scope of the foundation’s social impact philanthropy.

“We began to move in this direction shortly after the start of the pandemic shutdowns in March 2020,” Smith said. First, the foundation launched its COVID-19 relief effort. Its [equity and inclusion](#) grantmaking cycle followed seven months later. In late 2020, leadership discussed what should come next. “Climate change and the need for clean energy initiatives seemed to be tangible and necessary,” Smith said.

The Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) is the initiative’s primary advisor and leverages its “pragmatic knowledge of the technical requirements of how energy consumption in buildings can be reduced,” Smith said. Along with RMI’s carbon-free buildings division, the consultancy [Sustainable Museums](#)—which will administer the project—helped the foundation refine the scope and criteria for this first year of the initiative.

The initiative will fund projects in three categories: scoping grants to help museums understand climate and energy mitigation opportunities, technical assistance grants to support identified efficiency projects on the path toward procurement and financing, and implementation grants to provide partial seed funding for established projects.

A joint team will review letters of interest submitted in phase one of the application process and recommend museums to be invited to submit proposals for phase two. The team will also help organizations develop applications, identify applicants that should receive funding and connect grantees with technical experts to achieve their goals.

What’s next

Smith told me the foundation has not yet determined if the multi-year initiative will roll out over two or three years, or more. “We are approaching this first year as a pilot during which the extent of need and interest from the museum and arts community can be assessed,” she said. The inaugural round will also give RMI and Sustainable Museums “valuable data which may generate further thinking about approaches to climate change action in the arts.”

She and her team have begun moving forward with a second year of COVID-19 relief giving, part of a three-year commitment the foundation made last spring. “We plan to direct a large part of

our 2021 support to many of the organizations we've previously funded and with which we have existing relationships, to help strengthen and sustain them with unrestricted grants," she said.

The foundation will continue its support of projects and organizations aligned with its mission to extend the legacy of Helen Frankenthaler. "We plan to support the next generation of artists and art historians through our Frankenthaler Scholarships program, and will continue to support projects that resonate with Frankenthaler's artistic legacy, including relevant exhibitions and publications, as we have done since the foundation became active in 2013," Smith said. "We see our social impact philanthropy and our continued arts philanthropy not as an either-or situation, but as a both-and."