

South Arts and the Ford Foundation launch \$6m programme supporting Southern arts organisations

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The Collage Dance Collective, based in Memphis, Tennessee, is one of the initial organisations selected to receive grants from the Southern Cultural Treasures initiative, a grant-making scheme set up by the Ford Foundation and South Arts. Photo: Raphael Baker.

The Ford Foundation has partnered with South Arts, a non-profit organisation working to support the cultural scene in the Southern US, to launch the Southern Cultural Treasures initiative, a \$6m four-year grant-making scheme that aims to benefit underserved cultural organisations and art projects in the region.

The initial cohort of grantees includes 17 museums, orchestras, theatre and dance companies, and one tribal nation that were selected from a pool of around 240 applicants. More than 800 Southern cultural organisations were approached to submit proposals for the grant, based on the criteria that the institutions serve BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of colour) communities.

According to Susie Surkamer, the president and chief executive of South Arts, only around 50% of arts funding nationally is allocated to Southern cultural institutions, and 25% the funding received by the Northeast.

“It’s not surprising information that the South has been underfunded in various areas, and the arts is one of those areas,” says Susie Surkamer, the president and chief executive of South Arts. “The South doesn’t have a lot of urban areas. There’s Miami, Atlanta, Charlotte and New Orleans, for example, but besides these major urban areas there are also little hamlets and suburbs and towns, and figuring out who to fund is challenging.”

South Arts, which was founded in 1975, is headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, and represents an additional eight states, including Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Its role is to be a “connector and help assist those who want to work with artists and organisations in the South, and educate other organisations outside of the South that can be involved with benefitting these projects”, Surkamer says.

Some of the grantees include the Otis Redding Foundation in Macon, Georgia, a music and visual arts centre that is currently working on a capital campaign that will allow the institution to move to a new space, and Efforts of Grace in New Orleans, Louisiana, which supports creative works that emphasise the contributions of Black Americans.

The tribal nation selected as one of the grantees, the Catawba Indian Nation of Rock Hill, South Carolina, has a “separate organisation within the Nation that focuses on culture but, because of how their funding operates, the federal funding awarded to the tribe is not allowed to be used on cultural programmes”, Surkamer says. “There is one funding source that has been there for years but it is nowhere near enough. The grant will help them to create new funding streams and support their long-term sustainability.”

The programme is part of the Ford Foundation’s America’s Cultural Treasures initiative, a \$156m programme to benefit underfunded or marginalised cultural organisations nationwide. Southern Cultural Treasures is expected to run through March 2025 and provide each organisation with up to \$300,000 of general operating grants and an additional project grant of up to \$7,500.