# **AHRC/CHASE Collaborative Doctoral Award PhD studentship in collaboration with Birkbeck, University of London and the Foundling Museum, London**

## **Narratives of Fall: The Archive and Art Collection of the Nineteenth-Century Foundling Hospital**

**The studentship**

The Foundling Hospital was the UK’s first children’s charity and first public art gallery, founded in 1739 to care for babies at risk of abandonment. The chronological focus of this research project will be on the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when the criteria for an infant’s admission to the Hospital changed in very significant ways; to be eligible the mother had to be unmarried, it had to be her first child and she had to prove that prior to her pregnancy she was of previously good moral character.

This funded PhD works across social history and art history, with a dual interest in the lives of women and Foundling Hospital officers, as revealed in the archive, and the visual representation of those women and the institution through the Museum’s nineteenth-century art collection. **The specific focus of the project will be devised by the student in consultation with supervisors**.

The archive of the Foundling Hospital is truly extraordinary, containing a wide range of material from the nineteenth century, including: the names of applicants; the completed application forms (known as ‘petitions’); notes of interviews with women; references from employers; and records of checks on women carried out by the ‘Hospital Enquirer.’ It is thus an invaluable source of social historical knowledge regarding sexuality, class and women’s work.

As well as detailed work on the archive, the second strand of the CDA thesis will be on the Museum’s collection of nineteenth-century painting and sculpture. The Hospital was the UK’s first public art gallery and in the nineteenth century collectors and benefactors continued to donate works that resonated with themes of motherhood and childhood, abandonment and philanthropy. The nineteenth-century collection is extremely under-researched and the project will be a significant and original contribution to knowledge of the art of this period.

By studying the nineteenth-century archive and art collection in tandem, the student will be able to consider the relationships between the images and narratives represented in the mothers’ application forms and related documents and those depicted in the art and sculpture of the Hospital in the same period.

The **objective** is to use the archive and art collection of the nineteenth-century Foundling Hospital to engage with a set of issues relating to sexuality and its representation, challenging and reworking some of the over-familiar narratives of Victorian sexuality and Victorian art.

Accordingly, the **aims** of the project are:

* To create a better understanding of the nineteenth-century Foundling Hospital art collection, including its provenance and its social and cultural contexts.
* To examine the relationships between the archival materials and the paintings and sculpture that were being donated to and commissioned by the Hospital at the same time.
* To consider the agency of the women/mothers and to consider the relationships between their narration and the narratives of the Hospital officers and in paintings and sculpture.

As well as a completed PhD thesis, the student will also assist with the cataloguing of the nineteenth-century art collection and its preparation for and presentation on the Museum website. The project will give the student close and sustained access to the Foundling Hospital archive, while at the same time providing them with curating and archiving skills to contribute towards an exhibition of the mid-nineteenth century archive material and art collection, to be held at the Foundling Museum at the end of the CDA.

Based in Birkbeck’s Departments of History of Art and History, the PhD will be supervised by an interdisciplinary team Professor Lynda Nead (History of Art) and Professor Matt Cook (History). Kathleen Palmer (Curator: Exhibitions and Displays) will offer supervision at the Foundling Museum, particularly in matters regarding the collection, archive and exhibition curation.

The student will engage with and be trained in several aspects of museum curatorship and exhibition creation, planning and delivery. In particular, we expect the student to acquire knowledge and expertise on artefact conservation and care of the collection; cataloguing and enhancement of databases; and integration of document sources and artefacts.

At Birkbeck, the student will have access to a wide range of expertise in nineteenth-century studies, and the history of sexuality and gender, as well as research centres such as the Centre for Museum Studies and the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies. Birkbeck Graduate School offers a wide range of research skills and related training and there are seminars, reading groups and work-in-progress meetings where the student will be able to participate in the vibrant research culture at Birkbeck.