

With \$440 Million, a New Arts Foundation Spreads the Wealth

Based in Milwaukee, the Ruth Foundation for the Arts starts in the top echelon of arts philanthropy. But the money came as a surprise to many grantees.



By Ted Loos

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New foundations spring up all the time, but rarely on the scale of the Ruth Foundation for the Arts, which was established this year and announces its first grants this week.

Funded by a \$440 million bequest from Ruth DeYoung Kohler II, the foundation immediately enters the highest echelons of arts philanthropy. Kohler, who died in 2020 after a career of nurturing self-taught artists, was a scion of the Wisconsin bathroom-fixture fortune, as a member of the eponymous founding family of the Kohler company.

The foundation, based in Milwaukee, is planning to give away between \$17 to \$20 million a year. “They will be right up there at the top,” said Joel Wachs, the president of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. His foundation gives away around \$17 million a year, he said.

The Ruth Foundation’s initial round of giving spreads \$1.25 million among 78 different nonprofit organizations in the visual and performing arts. It plans to make another round of donations this fall and in spring 2023.

The grantees range from well known to less so, including Maine’s celebrated Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture; the alternative art space White Columns in New York; the arts center Appalshop of Whitesburg, Ky.; and the Griot Museum of Black History in St. Louis.

Two groups from Milwaukee are receiving grants, Milwaukee Film and Arts at Large, which supports equitable access to arts education.

Karen Patterson, the executive director of the Ruth Foundation, said that the scope of philanthropy may evolve.

“I’m not too quick to define it yet,” said Patterson, who is one of only two full-time employees. “We’re building as we go.”

Fueled by nearly half a billion dollars, it has the potential to provide a safety net for many smaller arts organizations.

“I’m bowled over by the impact we can have,” said Patterson, who formerly worked as a curator at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wis.

That is where Patterson got to know Ruth Kohler, who ran the center from 1972 to 2016. It was established in 1967 and was named for her grandfather, the founder of the Kohler Company.

The center gained a reputation for its focus on folk art and work by self-taught artists, a particular interest of Ruth Kohler’s. In 2021 the center opened the Art Preserve, an experimental space for artist-built environments, which was one of her passion projects.



Ruth DeYoung Kohler II, who died in 2020 and whose \$440 million bequest funded The Ruth Foundation for the Arts. “She used to say, ‘All the art for all the people,’” Patterson said. Robert Phillips, via John Michael Kohler Arts Center

“Ruth Kohler was early to self-taught, vernacular art,” said Margaret Andera, a contemporary art curator at the Milwaukee Art Museum. “We’re used to that now, but many institutions were late to that game. She was an innovator.”

About half of the foundation's grantees are ones to which Kohler gave quietly during her lifetime, through the R.D.K. Foundation, a predecessor to the Ruth Foundation; and the other half were nominated by a group of nearly 50 artists.

Her giving was low-key, as were many things about Kohler. For one, she didn't like to be photographed, said Patterson, who worked closely with Kohler for seven years.

"I didn't know about it, honestly," Patterson said of Kohler's previous giving. "It was under the radar."

Beyond the parameters of visual art, performing arts and arts education, Kohler's vision for the Ruth Foundation was not specific about where its money should go, giving Patterson and the three-person board of trustees a lot of leeway.

"Ruth was never prescriptive," Patterson said. "She used to say, 'All the art for all the people.'"

Patterson added that Kohler had her own way of working: "She was always idea-focused and always there to make things happen. Ruth followed the lead of artists." She always wanted to make sure that staff members were pushing themselves creatively.

Michelle Grabner, who, in addition to making her own art, teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has helped the foundation by nominating grantees, knew Kohler for decades.

"She was a formidable woman," Grabner said, adding, "She had opinions, she was strong. The Midwestern nice thing, she didn't have time for that."



From left, Veronica Jackson, Aurora Brush and Judith Tong of the Women's Studio Workshop, which will receive \$10,000 in the first round of grants. via Women's Studio Workshop

Since none of the organizations receiving money applied for grants, the money came as a surprise to many of them.

The Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, N.Y., will receive \$10,000 in the first round of grants.

"I thought it wasn't real at first," said Lauren Walling, the workshop's executive director. "I was thinking, 'Are they trying to get bank info from me? Is this a scam?'"

Founded in 1974 as a residency program for women artists, the workshop specializes in prints, works on paper and handmade artist books. It has evolved to include queer, transgender and nonbinary artists.

"As a person who is constantly raising money, you're always pushing a rock up a hill," Walling said. "When someone says, 'Here's some money,' you want to fall over."

Walling added that the workshop was recommended for the grant by the artist Andrea Chung, which made it even more meaningful.

"What's special is that this foundation is going to artists first," she said. "They're asking, 'Who has moved you, who has changed your life?'"

The First Peoples Fund, headquartered in Rapid City, S.D., will receive \$20,000. The fund's president, Lori Pourier, described the organization as devoted to supporting "Native artists and culture bearers and traditional keepers of tribal communities."



The filmmaker Razelle Benally, center, of the First Peoples Fund, an organization dedicated to supporting Native artists. via First Peoples Fund

Pourier had never heard of Kohler before she was contacted by the Ruth Foundation.

"That's what was so exciting about it," she said. "It means more support for rural, isolated tribal communities, where most of our work takes place."

The grants also "help us get recognized by the larger philanthropy community," Pourier added. Before this grant, it had also received support from the Ford Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In 2021 the fund unexpectedly received \$6 million from MacKenzie Scott, the billionaire philanthropist who has been aggressively donating the fortune gained from her stake in Amazon.

Armed with not quite the fame and philanthropic resources of Scott, Patterson is preparing to be deluged with requests. But she did not seem to have trepidation about it.

"I think about that all the time," Patterson said of the likely influx. "I hope people look at our grantee list. We're artist-centric and community forward. If you see yourself in that list, by all means, let's talk."

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