

Why the Arts Matter

A Research Brief on the Creative Economy, Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration, and the Mental Health of Artists in Community

This brief gathers evidence from peer-reviewed research, UN reports, federal data, and national arts organizations to make the case for community-rooted arts investment — and to articulate the vision behind A Thousand Wordz. All data comes from primary or peer-reviewed sources including the National Endowment for the Arts, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, UNCTAD, the World Health Organization, NIH/NCBI, and Nature Reviews Psychology.

\$2.5B	18,749	42%	\$1.4T
Maine arts & cultural production added to state economy annually	Mainers employed in arts & cultural industries	of Maine adults attend live music, theater, or dance annually	Global creative services exports in 2022 — up 29% since 2017

Sources: [NEA / U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2023\)](#) · [UNCTAD Creative Economy Outlook 2024](#) · [NEA Survey of Public Participation in the Arts \(2022\)](#)

01 — The Creative Economy: Why It Matters

The National Picture

The arts and culture sector is one of America's most powerful economic engines. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, arts and cultural production represents a \$730 billion industry — larger than transportation, tourism, agriculture, and construction combined — accounting for 4.2% of national GDP. The sector employs 5.3 million Americans and generates \$1.169 trillion in total economic activity annually.

Source: [Americans for the Arts / U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account](#)

Maine's Creative Economy

Maine's creative sector is a significant economic driver. Arts and cultural production adds \$2.5 billion to Maine's economy annually — 2.7% of the state's GDP. The sector supports 18,749 jobs with total wages and benefits of \$1.23 billion. More than 42% of Maine adults attend live music, theater, or dance performances, and more than 15% attend art exhibits each year. In the past five years, the National Endowment for the Arts distributed over \$12.4 million in federal funding to Maine directly or through state and regional partners.

Source: [National Endowment for the Arts State Profile — Maine \(2023\)](#) · [National Assembly of State Arts Agencies \(NASAA\)](#)

The Global Picture

Globally, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reports that creative services exports reached a record \$1.4 trillion in 2022 — a 29% increase since 2017. Creative industries contribute between 0.5% and 7.3% of GDP and employ between 0.5% and 12.5% of the workforce in countries where data is available. UNESCO estimates that cultural and creative industries account for 6.2% of global employment.

Source: [UNCTAD Creative Economy Outlook 2024](#) · UNESCO

"This is not just art. It is an economic powerhouse that we must harness together, leaving no one behind."

— UNCTAD Creative Economy Outlook 2024

02 — The Power of Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration

What Cross-Pollination Does

When artists from different disciplines share their techniques, thought processes, and underlying philosophies, they are exposed to novel ideas that spark creativity and innovation. Cross-pollination between art forms cultivates new creative forms and encourages artists to venture beyond their comfort zones. Visual artists gain insights from dancers; writers learn visual storytelling from filmmakers; musicians discover new rhythmic structures through visual art.

Source: [The Hollows Online — Exploring the Benefits of an Interdisciplinary Art Community \(2025\)](#)

Interdisciplinary Collaboration as Innovation Engine

At the core of cross-pollination is interdisciplinary collaboration — enabling artists to create works that defy classification. Through networking, collaborative projects, residencies, and open studios, artists build environments that foster cross-disciplinary dialogue and spark collaborations that create entirely new possibilities. Research from the University of Georgia's Arts Collaborative demonstrates that interdisciplinary work builds deeper community understanding, increases openness to new approaches, and builds resiliency — framing feedback as discovery rather than judgment.

Source: [Global Leaders Institute — Cultivating Innovation in the Arts Through Cross-Pollination](#) · [UGA Research News, Arts Collaborative \(2025\)](#)

Community Arts as Cross-Disciplinary Practice

Community-based arts commissions that intentionally mix disciplines — sculpture, writing, visual media, sound recording, data visualization, performance — provide cost-effective ways of reaching diverse communities and creating opportunity for cross-pollination between arts and sciences, and between community and academia. Artists involved in such projects report significant professional and personal growth, while their communities benefit from new perspectives and tools.

Source: [Frontiers in Sustainability — Commissioning Community-Based Art Projects \(2025\)](#)

03 — The Arts and Mental Health: The Evidence

Arts Participation and Mental Wellbeing

After controlling for all time-constant variables and identified confounders, frequent arts participation and cultural attendance are associated with lower levels of mental distress and higher levels of life satisfaction, with arts participation additionally associated with better mental health functioning. Arts engagement among the general population helps enhance positive mental health and protect against mental distress — independent of a wide range of confounding factors.

Source: [Arts, Mental Distress, Mental Health Functioning and Life Satisfaction — Fixed-Effects Analysis of a Nationally-Representative Panel Study, NCBI/NIH](#)

50 Mechanisms of Impact

A landmark 2026 review published in Nature Reviews Psychology identified 50 distinct causal processes by which arts engagement influences mental health outcomes — organized into a theoretical model called the 'arts exposome.' The review concludes that participation in creative arts therapies, community arts programmes, and arts activities undertaken for leisure can reduce psychiatric symptomatology in people with mental health conditions.

Source: [Mechanisms Underpinning the Mental Health Impact of Arts Engagement — Nature Reviews Psychology \(March 2026\)](#)

Community Art Projects and Recovery

A 2025 peer-reviewed multi-center study published in Healthcare found that participatory community art projects enhance social connections and self-expression — key elements of mental health recovery. The findings demonstrate that creative collaborations facilitate emotional processing and challenge stigma associated with mental health conditions. Improvement in social belonging through arts participation supports integrating arts-based interventions into recovery-oriented care.

Source: [Mental Health Recovery Process Through Art — Healthcare Journal, May 2025 \(Cases-Cunillera et al.\)](#)

Prevention and Protection

Activities such as making and listening to music, dancing, visual art, and visiting cultural sites are all associated with stress management and prevention — including lower levels of biological stress in daily life and lower daily anxiety. Arts engagement can help reduce the risk of developing mental illness such as depression in adolescence and in older age. The National Endowment for the Arts, NIH, and the Kennedy Center published joint research in The Lancet (March 2024) calling for more transdisciplinary partnerships between scientists, musicians, music therapists, technologists, and healthcare providers.

Source: [WHO Evidence Review on Arts and Health — NCBI/NIH · NEA — Arts and Mental Health \(2024\)](#)

"Arts engagement amongst the population as a whole may help enhance positive mental health and life satisfaction, and protect against mental distress."

— NCBI/NIH Fixed-Effects Panel Study

04 — The ATW Vision: Why Community Matters

Art Builds Community

The cultural landscape of Maine is as rich and diverse as its natural landscape. Maine arts organizations share common goals — how to build community support, expand collaborative programs, build on rich cultural heritage while engaging people in new creative forms of expression, and celebrate the diversity of communities. These questions are at the heart of building community through the arts in Maine.

Source: [*Grantmakers in the Arts — Arts and Community Building in Maine*](#)

The Federal Moment — Why Now

Maine's creative sector faces a critical moment. Several Maine-based NEA grantees have already received termination notices in 2025, and proposed eliminations of the NEA, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services represent a severe threat — particularly to rural, aging, and economically vulnerable communities. Community-based organizations like A Thousand Wordz are essential to filling that gap.

Source: [*Cultural Alliance of Maine / Maine Arts Commission — Federal Arts Funding Update \(May 2025\)*](#)

"Creativity builds connection — and connection is the foundation of a strong, healthy, and resilient society."

Source: [*Cultural Alliance of Maine, May 2025*](#)

What A Thousand Wordz Does

A Thousand Wordz is a Greater Portland, Maine organization dedicated to connecting mixed genre artists who share their works in community — to build community. Through open calls, themed cross-disciplinary collaborations, an artist directory, and partnerships with organizations like the Cultural Alliance of Maine, ATW addresses every pillar of this research: economic participation, cross-genre innovation, artist mental health, and community resilience.

When artists connect across disciplines, when communities gather around creative work, when barriers to participation are removed — the research is unambiguous. Lives improve. Economies strengthen. Communities heal.

Key Sources & Further Reading

[UNCTAD Creative Economy Outlook 2024](https://unctad.org/publication/creative-economy-outlook-2024) — <https://unctad.org/publication/creative-economy-outlook-2024>

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[Healthcare Journal — Mental Health Recovery Through Art \(2025\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC12110931/) — <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC12110931/>

[WHO Evidence Review — Arts and Health](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK553778/) — <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK553778/>

[Frontiers in Sustainability — Community-Based Art Projects \(2025\)](https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sustainability/articles/10.3389/frsus.2025.1592706/full) —

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[Grantmakers in the Arts — Arts and Community Building in Maine](https://www.giarts.org/article/arts-and-community-building-maine) —

<https://www.giarts.org/article/arts-and-community-building-maine>

[Global Leaders Institute — Cross-Pollination in the Arts](https://www.globalleadersinstitute.org/blog-post/cultivating-innovation-in-the-arts-through-cross-pollination/) —

<https://www.globalleadersinstitute.org/blog-post/cultivating-innovation-in-the-arts-through-cross-pollination/>

[UGA Arts Collaborative — Interdisciplinary Insights \(2025\)](https://research.uga.edu/news/interdisciplinary-insights-from-the-arts-collaborative/) —

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