



What People Talk About When They Talk About the Arts

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Los Angeles
County
**Arts &
Culture**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why do people participate in the arts? To fully address diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to increase access to the arts for everyone, it is not enough to know the demographic makeup of arts participants. We also need to understand what they gain from the experience, and how they integrate the arts into their lives.

To explore these questions, a team of researchers from the LA County Department of Art and Culture interviewed 28 people from different communities across the county who have one fundamental thing in common: all of them are avid participants in and supporters of the arts. Using a broad definition of both “arts” and “participation,” we looked for common threads across their varied experiences that enable us to think more deeply about diversity, equity, and inclusion: Why are they so committed to the arts? What do they love about arts and culture, and what could make arts and culture better for them? What other kinds of creative activities do they participate in? How did they first get involved? How do arts and culture fit into the rest of their lives?

In recent years, efforts to understand the diversity of arts participants have focused on quantitative data, primarily demographics like race and ethnicity, age, gender, LGBTQ status, and disability. Larger arts organizations with bigger budgets may use psychographic data as well. While these data help artists and organizations gain a better understanding of the people they serve, what can be learned is limited by the categories offered in closed-ended questions and the level of detail that can reasonably be asked on a brief questionnaire. Surveys and administrative data tell us a little about a lot of people, going wide rather than deep. The limitation to this kind of quantitative analysis is that the measures like average, median, and majority privilege the center at the expense of statistical outliers and minorities. This is important information, but it does not tell us everything we need to know in order to serve all communities effectively or equitably.

We sought to complement what has been learned from quantitative studies by using qualitative methods that treat majorities and minorities, the statistical center and periphery as equal, in order to more fully understand both. This approach helps to better understand both audiences and organizations that appear in smaller numbers in quantitative studies. By using research methods where we engaged with people as whole, complex human beings, we discovered how their lives and values intersect with the arts

and culture. The findings from this study offer actors in all parts of the arts ecosystem – funders, nonprofits, government agencies, and artists – another way to understand the audiences they serve.

For this study we interviewed 28 people ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s. Nearly two-thirds of them were people of color. Fifteen percent of them had household earnings lower than the countywide median. They lived in 21 different zip codes in 19 neighborhoods in LA County. What they had in common was that all are highly active in arts and culture, spending hours each month at museums, theaters, concert halls, parks, community centers, churches, neighborhood venues, school multipurpose rooms, small galleries, stadiums, and other places. Some of the people we interviewed fit stereotypes of people who are “into the arts,” but many contradicted common labels.

Some of what we learned reinforced what we already know, at times helping us to see existing knowledge in a new light. Some of what we learned surprised us. In its entirety, this study shows how arts and culture play a critical role in our communities with benefits that reverberate far beyond the moment of the experience.

THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Across all these differences, we identified twelve themes that tell us much about who loves the arts and why they do.

1. People who are highly engaged with “the arts” don’t always call those experiences or even think about them as “arts”
2. To talk about the arts is to talk about relationships with family and friends
3. Arts education is essential for everyone
4. People want art that teaches and even challenges them
5. Art is a means to express your own culture and experience someone else’s
6. Culturally-rooted arts experiences are often about identity, place, and belonging

7. Benefits of the arts are material and tangible, as well as emotional and spiritual
8. People value art they can experience together in shared public spaces
9. Hollywood is often discussed as a foil to highlight the benefits of the arts
10. Arts, culture, and faith can be deeply intertwined
11. Interest in sports and arts are not mutually exclusive
12. Barriers to participation in the arts are not only logistical and financial, but also experiential and emotional

What we learned through these interviews makes a powerful case for increased investment in the arts, especially as a tool to achieve cultural equity and social inclusion. Those investments create significant benefits for the people of LA County, not only those who call themselves “arts people” but also those who do not claim the term.

From these findings, several recommendations emerged that can help arts organizations, artists, public arts agencies, and others improve their work:

- ▶ Make more art more widely available in shared public spaces to create opportunities for people to express their own cultures while also experiencing someone else’s, and to help overcome the geographies and demographics that separate our communities from each other.
- ▶ Find a new language to talk about arts and culture in our daily lives, the way people talk about food and sports.
- ▶ When providing arts and culture services in a community your organization has never served before, do not assume you know what that community needs. Instead, create opportunities for community members to participate in deciding in what arts you present and how.
- ▶ Think about the barriers that prevent people from participating in your arts not only as financial and logistical but also experiential and emotional, then find ways to address them.

- ▶ Collect and use data strategically and wisely, with respect for humanity and community. Engage with the people whose data you want to collect at every step in the process.
- ▶ Investigate how your use of social media and other online advertising tools may be excluding some groups of people.
- ▶ Talk to people in the communities you serve who do not love the arts to find out what they think about your work.

Through this study we learned that arts are where people can explore their personal individuality, express their culture, and experience something completely new, all at the same time. These interviews showed how the arts can be used to bring people together across many forces that can otherwise divide us. They remind us that as we strive to ensure that everyone has access to the many benefits of the arts – material, tangible, emotional, and spiritual – we must ensure our efforts to understand our differences are balanced with efforts to understand what brings us together.

INTRODUCTION

One of the great paradoxes of working to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion is that understanding people by their demographic characteristics can lead us to divide people even as we seek to bring them together. It can cause us to misunderstand individuals, even as we gain a greater understanding of specific groups or communities. Those of us who make or support arts and culture¹ must know the demographic makeup of who benefits from our work, whether as an audience member or participant, artist, staff person, volunteer, or board member. It is critical that we understand the demographics of who does not experience those benefits so that we can remove the barriers that exclude them. If not used carefully, though, demographic data can lead us – however inadvertently – to stereotype both individuals and communities.

Each person who enters a museum, theater, bookstore, concert hall, or tiny storefront venue is a complex human being who is far greater than the sum of his or her component parts. An individual arrives as part of a community and a culture – perhaps multiple communities, cultures, and identities – and as a singular person too.



A person brings with them their family and friends, both figuratively and literally. One person may talk in fluent arts jargon, while another uses everyday language to describe an arts experience. Some fluidly code switch² as they enter and exit arts venues, while others choose not to, and still others do not have to. Those who enter arts venues as people who love the arts may know themselves that way, may categorize arts as “high” or “low” and have a preference. They may arrive at a theater to see a play with the same level of joy and anticipation they have when they arrive at a stadium to see a game or a church for a service. For some people, the arts are so integrated into their lives that they do not see them as activities or events but as part of their identity.

This research project began with the goal of using qualitative methods to understand arts audiences in a way that complements and overcomes the limitations of quantitative data. Our findings build knowledge that can help us and other public arts agencies better serve our constituents. By treating each individual as a whole human while also seeking to understand their identity from demographic and other perspectives, we gained new insights into how they experience the arts and make meaning of those experiences.

The people we interviewed for this study are highly active in the arts, spending hours each month at museums, theaters, concert halls, parks, community centers, churches, neighborhood venues, school multipurpose rooms, small galleries, stadiums, and other places. In their free time they sing, draw, write, act, edit, carve, read, design, paint, cook, sew, direct, and dance for fun. Some of them spend countless unpaid hours each month rehearsing with the choir, making costumes for their children’s performances,

editing publications, or leading workshops where they teach others how to do something they love. Some buy season tickets, donate cash, and help publicize the performances, exhibits, books, and organizations they love. A few make a living doing creative work. We wanted to know who they are and why they spend so much of their time, energy, and money on arts and culture.

The 28 people we met come from many walks of life in LA County. We talked to a man who, when he retired after a long career as a public school teacher, took a playwrighting class at a community-based theater. He is now acting in their productions and well on his way to directing his own play. We talked to a mother about the sacrifices she has made to ensure her daughters can enjoy the kinds of dance and music classes her family couldn't afford when she was a child. We talked to a man who has used his family wealth to invest in music programs and scholarships to create opportunities for young people from historically underserved communities. We talked to a professor who has traveled across the US singing in her church choir. We met a young actor who takes acting classes and ushers at a local theater, simultaneously seeking to break into the entertainment industry while also building a community of friends.

What we learned from talking with this diverse group of people is that the arts are a place where people can express who they are as individuals, experience their culture as part of a community, and at the same time find common ground across what makes us different. It is where a group of people can come together to have a shared experience that is at the same time unique to each of them. In a time when political and economic forces seem to be driving us apart, when so many powerful actors seek to separate communities by race, gender, class, and language, we found these interviews to be robust reminders of what we have in common. As we conducted the interviews, each member of the research team would return

to the office and tell each other stories about the fascinating person we'd just spent an hour or more getting to know.

This study has taken place at a particular time in the history of LA County. Since 2016 County government has established new offices focused on serving immigrants, women and girls, and the homeless. Emerging County initiatives are seeking to find innovative, new solutions to problems of violence and trauma. The Department of Arts and Culture (Arts and Culture) has been deepening our cross-sector work, as have public arts agencies across the US and in other countries. Even as federal budget cuts threatened the National Endowment for the Arts, the LA County Board of Supervisors passed a motion to transition what was the Arts Commission to become a full-fledged department of County government. More than this, what began for Arts and Culture in 2015 as a standalone initiative to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the arts, has come to infuse all of our work. It is this work in particular that inspired this study of arts audiences and participants.

The ultimate goal of this research project was to provide information that can help arts organizations serve their communities more effectively and equitably. To that end, the findings are organized into twelve themes that can help us better understand why and how people participate in arts and culture. While they only apply to the group of people we interviewed, they nonetheless offer important perspectives and suggest actions arts organizations can take to achieve those goals. The concluding set of recommendations primarily target providers and funders of arts and culture programming including those in both the public and private sectors but can be useful for others in the field.

Beyond this, we hope this report offers broader insights into how we can use arts and culture to help our communities share, heal, build, and find common ground.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: CULTURAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION

This study of arts audiences in LA County began as an outgrowth of LA County's **Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative** (CEII).³ This initiative was launched in November 2015 when the LA County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution directing Arts and Culture (then the Arts Commission) to conduct "a constructive County-wide conversation about ways to improve diversity in cultural organizations" for all County residents. A series of town hall meetings were held to gather ideas and perspectives from people across the County. From this, the CEII Advisory Committee recommended a series of 13 actions the Board of Supervisors could take to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and access to the arts. Six of these recommendations were unanimously approved and are being implemented.⁴

Research and evaluation methods have played a critical role at all phases of CEII from the very beginning. This began with a literature review⁵ that was published in March 2016, providing background information on how organizations, individuals, and governments have worked to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the arts and culture sector. Arts and Culture hired SMU DataArts to conduct a study measuring the demographic makeup of the nonprofit arts and culture workforce in LA County. The baseline report⁶ published in April 2017 found that the arts workforce is more White, more female, and more homogenous than the county population. This study has been carried out in 2017 and again in 2019 to track change over time.

Even as CEII was being launched, Arts and Culture had been working with the Ford Theatres to standardize the way we ask audiences and participants about their race and ethnicity, gender, class, and other demographic

characteristics. In doing this we sought to balance the need to allow individuals to express themselves in their complexity, while also allowing us to compare our data to countywide statistics available from the US Census Bureau. While these data have helped us gain a better understanding of the people who attend our workshops and programming, we are still limited by the categories offered and the level of detail we can reasonably ask about on a brief questionnaire. Survey methods allow us to know a little about a lot of people, going wide rather than deep. As will be discussed further in the Methods section, quantitative surveys privilege the center, the people who make up majorities and averages, at the expense of what are called "outliers" by statisticians.

The era of big data has influenced the field of arts and culture as much as any other. Big budget arts institutions pay for services that append data from credit card companies to that of their ticket buyers, telling them for example, what kind of car most opera goers in LA County drive, or what percent of a major theater's season ticket holders also purchase audio books. Psychographic data⁷ like these are combined with demographic and geographic data to divide potential



audiences into market segments, then customize advertising initiatives to those subgroups. Smaller arts nonprofits collect data on a much smaller scale, gathering basic information about their participants and audiences when they can. Grantmakers, including Arts and Culture, add data collection and reporting requirements that are intended to help grantees gain greater knowledge about who they are serving and help their funders understand which communities are served with their funds.

While these data can tell us much about what communities we do and do not serve – by their demographics, psychographics, and geographies – they do not tell us everything we need to know in order to serve them effectively. This was the point of departure for this study. What could we learn if we sat down and talked with people from many walks of life and different communities across LA County who have one fundamental thing in common: they are avid participants in and supporters of arts and culture? By going deep with this specific group, using a broad definition of both “arts” and “participation,” we could look for common threads across their varied experiences in areas that can help us think not only about diversity but also equity and inclusion: Why are they so committed to the arts? What do they love about arts and culture, and what could make arts and culture better for them? What kinds of creative activities do they participate in? How did they get involved? How do arts and culture fit into the rest of their lives?

By using qualitative methods and engaging with people as whole, complex human beings, we learned a great deal about how their lives and values intersect with the arts and culture. Some of what we learned reinforced what we already know, at times helping us to see that knowledge in a new light. Some of what we learned surprised us. All of it deepened our belief that arts and culture play a critical role in our communities with benefits that reverberate far beyond the moment of the experience.

PARTICIPATION AND BENEFITS OF THE ARTS: LITERATURE REVIEW

PARTICIPATION

Methods used to measure who participates in the arts have changed as practices in the field have evolved. For example, the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) longitudinal Survey for Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) has gathered data about who participates in what kinds of arts since 1982. Items on the SPPA questionnaire have been revised over time to reflect new ways of participating in the arts as they have emerged and to reflect new definitions of "art." In their most recent administration of the survey they found the share of Americans who had attended an arts performance or visited a museum or gallery – a long-standing measure of arts participation – declined from 39 percent in 1982 to 33 percent in 2012.⁸ At the same time, however, they found that in 2012, 71 percent of Americans consumed art through some kind of electronic media, including television, radio, or the internet. They also found 59 percent of Americans went to the movies that year. This suggests that arts participation is not declining so much as it is changing. What we learn about the arts also changes when we change the definitions.

As it does for the nation as a whole, the SPPA shows a decline in traditional measures of participation in the arts in California, a state known for its creativity and innovation. Fully 790,000 people made their living in the creative industries in California in 2017, an increase of 38 percent over 2011.⁹ Surprised by this apparent contradiction, the James Irvine Foundation commissioned two studies to explore arts participation by Californians in much greater



detail. The first analyzed SPPA data, finding that while national declines in traditional measures of arts participation are also true here, Californians participate in the arts at a higher rate than the national average, and that arts participation is even greater in urban areas within the state.¹⁰

Their second study created a new survey that asked Californians about their arts participation in a completely different way.¹¹ This survey found many more Californians going to concerts, arts fairs, and the movies than were found by the SPPA. Perhaps more important, this survey asked many more questions about making art or actively participating in arts events, finding that nearly all Californians read for pleasure, and more than half create DIY projects, make visual art, dance, and do crafts. They found that large shares of Californians write creatively at least once a week and sing or make music nearly every day. This study also discovered differences in how and where different groups engage in the arts, with African American and Latinx Californians more likely to attend fairs and festivals than Whites, and Asians more likely to use social media to learn

about art, artists, and arts events than other groups. The study found community venues to be particularly important places for immigrants to engage in arts and culture. In other words, this study found that participation in the arts is not declining in California but is robust and on the rise. Similarly, in the national 2017 CultureTrack study, respondents defined more activities as “culture” than ever before, and reported that they participate in them for a wider variety of reasons.¹² How arts and culture are defined and measured makes all the difference.

The evolution of participation and how it is measured has been driven in part by new technologies that have dramatically altered the ways we engage with creativity and the arts. It has also been driven by innovations in how artists and arts organizations invite people to engage hands-on in arts and culture, with a particular focus on reaching communities they have not historically served. These include a large number of in-person events that invite members of the public to dance, drum, sing, or play along. They include taking live and virtual performances on the road, away from large institutional venues and into parks and community centers. A 2016 literature review on public engagement in the arts published by Arts and Culture explored how the purpose of these engagement activities have varied and changed over time.¹³ While some arts organizations see engagement as a way to discover new audiences who can make up for declining ticket sales among their traditional audiences, others see reaching new communities as a question of social responsibility or social justice.

What studies like the NEA’s national SPPA and Irvine’s research in California show is that for most arts disciplines and genres from the European canon, participation by Whites tends to be higher than other racial or ethnic groups. As art forms such as salsa and hip-hop are added to what is measured, and as definitions of participation have been expanded to include the way arts activities are embedded in people’s daily lives, the apparent disparity declines. When questions are asked offering open-ended response options, nuances in how different communities of color engage in arts and culture emerge, providing a more complex picture that shows high levels of participation across all groups.

Nonetheless, concerns remain that the benefits of the arts including arts education and access to employment in the entire creative sector, leadership opportunities on arts nonprofit boards of directors, and the opportunity to see oneself and the concerns of one’s community portrayed in artworks, are not equitable for all. This is particularly true for experiences provided by more formal arts institutions. For example, a demographic study in 2015 found that 72 percent of staff at US museums were non-Hispanic White, compared to 62 percent of the population as a whole.¹⁴ The arts and culture workforce in LA County made up of arts nonprofits and government arts agencies has been found to be 60 percent non-Hispanic White, compared to 27 percent of the county population as a whole.¹⁵ This is not a uniquely American phenomenon. A 2016 study found people of color and people from working class backgrounds to be underrepresented in the UK culture and creative industries workforce.¹⁶ For example, the UK museums, galleries, and libraries workforce is nearly 98 percent White, while the total population is 86 percent White.¹⁷

BARRIERS

To understand why different groups of people do and do not participate in the arts, the NEA commissioned a study that used more traditional definitions of arts participation such as attending performances or exhibits.¹⁸ When asked why they attended arts performances, the primary motivation was to socialize with family or friends, but when asked why they attended an art exhibit, the primary motivation was to learn new things. Motivations differed somewhat by race and ethnicity. African Americans and Asian Americans tended to attend performances to support community events and organizations, while first-generation Latinx immigrants often attended arts events to celebrate their cultural heritage.

This study also found that self-identified class was a more important factor than actual earnings. Among people who earned about the same amount and had the same level of education, those who self-identified as middle class were more likely to attend arts events than those who identified as working class. When they asked if there had been an

arts event in the previous year the respondent had wanted to attend but had not, lack of time was the reason most commonly reported. This was particularly common among parents with young children. Cost was often a barrier, as was a location that was too difficult to get to. One in five respondents overall said they did not attend because they did not have anyone to go with them. People who identified as Mexican American and as African American were much more likely to say this than other demographic groups.

Another study by the National Center for Arts Research (NCAR) used patron data to dig deeper into the question of distance.¹⁹ They found that among people who attend arts events, if the event is more than one mile away from their home, they are 80 percent less likely to attend. The NCAR study further found distance to be a greater barrier for people living in communities with lower socioeconomic status than those from wealthier communities. These findings suggest a need to provide more arts and culture programs and facilities in those communities. However, those same programs and facilities have, in some cases, been associated with gentrification and displacement of the very communities they were meant to serve, though recent research suggests this relationship is more complicated than commonly believed.²⁰

BENEFITS

Another rich body of empirical research seeks to understand the “impact” of the arts, primarily driven by the need to justify public investment in the arts. This work, too, has evolved, largely in step with changes in political and social climate. Founding legislation for the NEA passed in 1965 presented the value of the arts as given, stating that access to the arts is critical to a functioning democracy and an important complement to science and technology.²¹ The law further stated that “It is vital to democracy to honor and preserve [America’s] multicultural artistic heritage as well as support new ideas, and therefore it is essential to provide financial

assistance to its artists and the organizations that support their work.” Controversies in the 1980s and 90s over artists who received NEA funding led to research designed to quantify the instrumental impact of the arts in both terms both monetary (employment, tax revenues) and social (civic participation, neighborhood revitalization).²²

While this research expanded knowledge among arts administrators and broadened perspectives on the potential benefits for people working outside the arts, by the early 2000s the limitations of this approach had become evident. Measurement of extrinsic value leaves out some of the greatest benefits of arts and culture to human life, as a source of pleasure, identity, and aspiration.²³ New research methods were developed to measure the intrinsic impact of the arts from audience and participant experiential perspectives.²⁴ Questions of whether intrinsic experience and value can truly be measured remain. More recently, some researchers have begun to move away from questions of what is quantifiable and generalizable to using anthropological methods to gain a deeper understanding of how and why people engage with the arts.²⁵

Combined, the literature tells us a great deal about who attends what kinds of arts and culture events and the types of barriers they experience. It offers insights into both extrinsic and intrinsic benefits of participation. This study explores how and why people participate. Our work complements the strong body of research on who participates in the arts, as well as evolving research on the value of the arts. Our intent was to gain understanding that can help people and organizations who make and support the arts to move from a diversity perspective to one of equity and inclusion. We did this by finding people who are actively engaged in many different ways and from many different communities, then listening deeply as they told us about what they love about the arts.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to learn about who participates in the arts in LA County and why. “Participation” was defined as audience activities that include both attendance as an audience member and active engagement in hands-on activities. This study was designed to complement quantitative studies both we and other arts organizations conduct that count audience members and collect data in such categories as race and ethnicity, age, income, education level, LGBTQ status, and disability status using closed-ended questions. While those studies can count the numbers of people who participate and categorize them by a predetermined set of limited categories, they cannot tell us why they participate and how.

One particular benefit of this qualitative approach is that it can help us better understand both audiences and organizations that appear in smaller numbers in statistical studies. Quantitative studies generally focus on measures of centrality such as *averages*, *medians*, and *majorities* at the expense of outliers and statistical minorities. This study treated majorities and minorities, averages and so-called “outliers,” as equal, in order to more fully understand both. On its own, this study provides a valuable lens for looking at arts participation, it can be combined with other studies that collect quantitative data about staff, boards, audiences, and programming for a fuller picture of the arts and its beneficiaries in LA County. We hope this study offers actors in all parts of the arts ecosystem – funders, nonprofits, government agencies, and artists – another way to understand the audiences they serve, both in the methods and findings.

We utilized a maximum variation sampling approach where we identified individual audience members through arts

organizations across LA County. Maximum variation sampling is a purposive sampling technique used to capture a wide range of perspectives. To select those organizations, we coded recent grantees of Arts and Culture’s Organizational Grant Program (OGP)²⁶ and partners in the Ford Theatres Artists Partnership Program (FPP)²⁷ according to a series of categories (e.g., budget size, discipline, type of programming, audience size, target audience, institution type, and geographic location) using data they have submitted to DataArts. Some FPP partners were not nonprofits, so comparable information about those organizations was collected from Ford Theatres staff. Three additional organizations were identified to represent communities that were not well represented from these two pools. From this set of organizations we selected thirty organizations that represent wide variation across all of these categories. By reaching maximum variation in organizations, we sought to achieve maximum variation in individuals interviewed. As discussed later in the section *The People We Interviewed*, this approach proved to be successful.

At least seven of the organizations we contacted are culturally-rooted, meaning their work is grounded in one or more specific aspects of human diversity, including but not limited to race.²⁸ Intentionally including culturally-rooted organizations in our sampling methodology helped us reach people who are often underrepresented among arts audiences, in terms of demographics, artistic disciplines, and perspectives on the arts.

Once the organizations were selected we contacted each institution and requested that they identify and put us in touch with one of their most active audience members or participants, people who have demonstrated consistent and



intensive engagement in the organization over time. In cases where the organization selected did not wish to participate, we identified a second organization with similar characteristics. In cases where the audience member or participant identified by that organization did not wish to participate, we asked the organization to select another person. In two cases the initial person we contacted for an interview responded much later, after the second person had agreed to an interview. In these cases we interviewed both individuals. In three cases the highly engaged audience member or participant identified was a couple, and we interviewed those couples together. In total, we held 25 interviews with 28 individuals.

Semi-structured interviews with the selected individuals (and couples) were conducted by staff of Arts and Culture's Research and Evaluation (R&E) team.²⁹ The interview protocol can be found in the appendix. Each interview was approximately one hour long and was conducted in English. The interviews were conducted at locations selected by the interviewees: at Arts and Culture's offices, in coffee shops and restaurants, at arts nonprofit venues, and in people's homes. Permission was requested and all interviews were recorded, then were transcribed for analysis. Throughout the research process we promised complete anonymity. This applies not only to the individuals we interviewed, but also the organizations that helped us find interviewees. This was

intended to give interviewees confidence and encourage them to speak freely. It was also intended to make very clear to the organizations who are also grantees of ours that there was no relationship between their participation in this study and any future grants.

This study took advantage of the positive bias that has been identified as problematic in studies that seek to evaluate the impact of arts experiences on audiences.³⁰ This study selected interviewees who were assumed to have had significant positive arts experiences. Rather than try to measure the impact of those arts experiences, this study asked interviewees to think about and explain how they participate and why.

When time came to code the interviews we drew on the knowledge and wisdom of our colleagues at Arts and Culture to develop *in vivo* codes. A total of ten staff people working at different levels in all divisions of Arts and Culture (arts education, civic art, grants, and communications) and at the Ford Theatres did this review.³¹ Each was given a unique set of three interview transcripts to read, and they were asked to tell us what themes they observed across those transcripts, what unique items or statements stood out, and to point out anything strange, unusual, or unexpected in what interviewees said. Their responses were compiled into a set of what now served as *a priori* codes. These codes were then further analyzed and we identified twelve major themes. We used Nvivo software to mark and track our coding.

Knowing that consistency in coding across four researchers would be a challenge, we allocated the work by code. Each team member was given a subset of the codes for analysis, then they wrote memos to summarize their findings. These memos were given to the Director of Research and Evaluation who wrote the final report, which was reviewed and edited by all four members of the original research team.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

THE PEOPLE WE INTERVIEWED

WHO THEY ARE

To describe the people we interviewed, we begin with some familiar demographic boxes. As the interview questions show, our questions about gender and race or ethnicity were open-ended. Responses to the race or ethnicity question were re-coded into Census categories in order to create these charts.³² We asked people to identify their age by decade of life. For

household income we asked if they had earned more or less than median household income for the County (approximately \$55,000 per year at the time³³) in the prior year. For those who responded yes, we asked if they had earned more than \$100,000 per year. Figures 1 through 4 show the makeup of our interviewees.

FIGURE 1 Gender

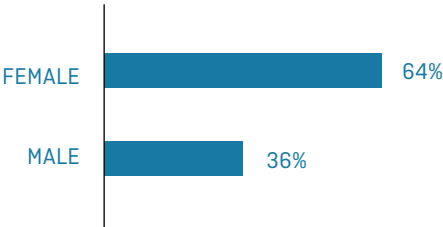


FIGURE 2 Age

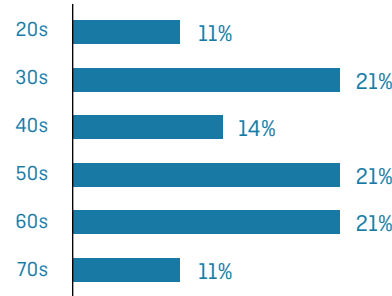


FIGURE 3 Household Income

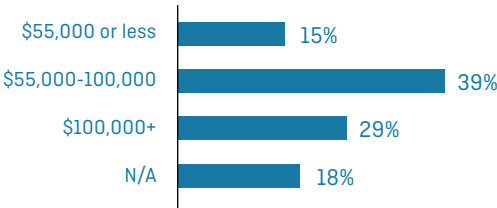
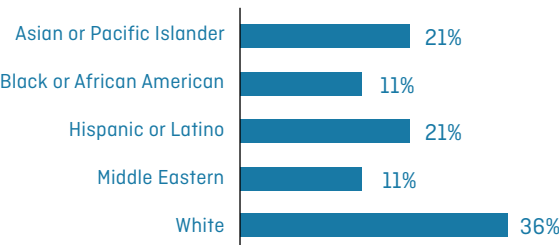


FIGURE 4 Race or Ethnicity



Of course identity goes far beyond the demographic basics. Our interviewees used a variety of words and phrases to describe themselves. Some were about their ethnic background or other markers of identity, while some were about what they enjoyed doing. Those terms include (in alphabetical order)

- ▶ Academic
- ▶ Activist
- ▶ African American
- ▶ Armenian
- ▶ Artist
- ▶ Asian American
- ▶ Athlete
- ▶ Black
- ▶ Bland
- ▶ Brazilian
- ▶ Caucasian
- ▶ Canadian
- ▶ Christian
- ▶ Filipino/a
- ▶ French
- ▶ German
- ▶ Iranian
- ▶ Italian
- ▶ Jewish
- ▶ Latino
- ▶ Mexican
- ▶ Middle class
- ▶ Muslim
- ▶ Northern European
- ▶ Of African descent
- ▶ Parent
- ▶ Person of color
- ▶ Portuguese
- ▶ Social secretary
- ▶ Social justice
- ▶ South Asian
- ▶ Visayan speaker
- ▶ Westside PTA
- ▶ soccer mom
- ▶ White person
- ▶ Writer

LA County is a place where identity is often closely aligned with geography. Our 28 interviewees lived in 21 different zip codes.³⁴ Using those zip codes and the LA Times' *Mapping LA* project,³⁵ we found that our interviewees lived in the 19 neighborhoods shown in Figure 5.

The LA Times aggregates those neighborhoods into regions that are also meaningful for residents. As Figure 6 shows, our interviewees lived in ten of *Mapping LA*'s 16 regions.

FIGURE 5 *Neighborhood of residence*

NEIGHBORHOOD	N INTERVIEWEES
Angeles Crest	1
Atwater Village	2
Claremont	1
Culver City	4
Eagle Rock	1
East Hollywood	1
East Los Angeles	1
El Segundo	2
Griffith Park	1
Hollywood Hills West	1
Koreatown	1
Mar Vista	1
Mid-Wilshire	1
Montebello	2
Pasadena	4
San Fernando	1
Tujunga Canyons	1
Westchester	1
Westlake	1

FIGURE 6 *Region of residence*

REGION	N INTERVIEWEES
Angeles Forest	2
Central L.A.	8
Eastside	1
Northeast L.A.	1
Pomona Valley	1
San Fernando Valley	1
South Bay	3
Southeast	2
Verdugos	4
Westside	5

As useful and meaningful as geography is, it has limits. Within any single neighborhood or community there can be pockets of great wealth and opportunity, as well as great poverty and disadvantage. The Social Science Research Council's *A Portrait of LA County*, divides the county into five regions based on a human development index (HDI), mixing geography with demographic data.³⁶ Their HDI is a composite of scores for health, education, and earnings. Since these are not commonly known measures, details about each of the Five LA Counties is provided in Figure 7, as well as the number and percent of interviewees who live in each. As the table shows, our interviewees were evenly distributed across the three middle regions. It is a limitation of this study that we did not interview anyone at either the very highest or lowest HDI regions.

This is not a representative sample of all people in LA County, nor all people in the County who participate in the arts. The communities they come from, whether defined by demographics or geography, are not any more or less likely to participate in the arts than any other communities. But what these data tell us very clearly is that we were successful in our effort to reach beyond the predominantly White, older, affluent people that prior research has found make up the majority of “high art” audiences. Therefore, the themes we discovered are not limited to the voice of the majorities and the averages, but from a wide range of people from many different communities who are active, engaged participants in the arts.

FIGURE 7 Portrait of LA County *region*

5 LA COUNTIES	HDI	LIFE EXPECTANCY	% WITH BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR MORE	MEDIAN INDIVIDUAL EARNINGS (2015)	N (%) INTERVIEWEES
Glittering LA	9+	86.4 years	69.9%	\$52,687	0
Elite Enclave LA	7 to 8.99	83.9 years	58.3%	\$48,347	10 (35.7%)
Main Street LA	5 to 6.99	82.9 years	35.5%	\$35,773	10 (35.7%)
Struggling LA	3 to 4.99	81.5 years	19.6%	\$25,469	8 (28.6%)
Precarious LA	below 3	78.7 years	4.7%	\$19,060	0

WHAT THEY DO

We asked our interviewees about the kinds of activities they engage in both in the arts and outside of the arts. Nearly two-thirds of them reported that they attend some kind of live theater or music performances and nearly half go to museums or galleries. More than half have taken arts

classes at some time in their life. More than half commit volunteer time to an arts nonprofit, and half of them also donate money. A little more than a third of them draw, sketch, paint, or otherwise engage in some kind of visual art-making activities. Their other arts activities include (from most common to least)

- ▶ Perform music
- ▶ Dance
- ▶ Write
- ▶ Attend literary events
- ▶ Watch movies or television
- ▶ Create videos, film or podcasts
- ▶ Go out to art walks or to see public art
- ▶ Listen to music
- ▶ Act

A little more than a third of our interviewees have earned money in the arts at some time, often as a teacher or staff member of an arts organization.

Our interviewees reported on activities they have engaged in at some point in their life that are creative but that historically may not have been included in definitions of “art” on national surveys such as the SPPA. These include (in alphabetical order)

- ▶ Calligraphy
- ▶ Cheerleading
- ▶ Coloring
- ▶ Cooking
- ▶ Costume making
- ▶ Crocheting
- ▶ Gardening
- ▶ Origami
- ▶ Reading
- ▶ Refinishing furniture
- ▶ Sewing

When asked how they incorporate arts activities into their everyday life, some people responded with numbers, and the range was wide: monthly, two to three times a month, six times a year, a dozen performances in the past seven months, two afternoons a week. Others told us about how the arts are inextricably woven into their lives and part of their identities:

“I can’t imagine separating them from the rest of my life.”

“Outside of my work I think it provides a major framework for my life. It’s something that I’m really passionate about and something that I think provides a lot of balance.”

“I went every day for every workshop they had to offer.”

“The arts are just a major part of what we do. I love being creative. I love the arts world.”

The people we interviewed are not only actively engaged in the arts, but they also actively engage in many other activities that generally are not considered to be artistic or creative. Nearly half of our interviewees play some kind of sports, while nearly a third watch sports. A quarter of them engage in some kind of outdoors activity like hiking or camping. A quarter of them volunteer for either a nonprofit, school, or government agency. More than a third talked about spending time with family or friends. Other interests include faith activities and following politics.

Nearly a third of interviewees enjoy travel, and some of them talked about how, in LA County, they are able to explore the arts and cultures of the countries they’ve visited or want to visit. A few interviewees connected how they like to explore culture through both food and arts events.

What’s more, we discovered the frequency with which people engage in the arts varies. A number of people told us they listen to music all day long every day. Some go to classes that meet in the evenings weekly or even more often. Some try to make it out to arts events once a month or once a week. Others go out a few times a year. Some maintain a regular arts practice at home (or at least try to).

When asked what kinds of arts and cultural activities they participate in, a number of interviewees answered with

references to particular places in their city, neighborhood, or community. Some talked about exposure to the arts in terms of geography. Interviewees named the neighborhoods where they engage in the arts either on purpose or accidentally, as when stumbling upon public art or a free live performance: from South LA to Encino to Culver City to Burbank to Downtown to Long Beach to the San Gabriel Valley to Pico Union to Malibu to Glendale to Pacoima. Others told us types of venues where they've experienced art in LA, including (in alphabetical order)

- ▶ Beaches
- ▶ Churches and temples
- ▶ College campuses
- ▶ Health clinics
- ▶ Home
- ▶ Metro stations
- ▶ Museums
- ▶ Online and on social media
- ▶ Parks
- ▶ Public schools
- ▶ Public theaters

Because we offered anonymity to our interviewees, the details and specifics we can provide as we report what we learned is limited. If we can't tell you the particulars of the individuals, however, we can give you guidance for reading. Some of the people we met fit stereotypes of people who are "into the arts," but many contradicted common labels. Take a moment to acknowledge the images that come to mind when you think about who is a ballet dancer or listens to cumbia (or both), who enjoys tea ceremonies or Cambodian hip hop. Then set aside those images.

In other words, as you read through the twelve themes that emerged, set aside your assumptions about who loves the arts and why.

TWELVE MAJOR THEMES

Art is a place you take your children, hang out with friends, and meet new people, perhaps even find a life partner. Art is what you do when you need to raise your spirits, find solace, or center yourself during troubled times. Art is beauty, challenge, communication, history lesson, and activism. Art is a way to express your unique self, celebrate your culture with others, and learn about communities and traditions other than your own. Art is a vehicle for understanding critical social issues. Art is a community and it is a way to be in community. Art can be something you do with family, and it can become family.

Twelve major themes emerged from our interviews. Some reflect the benefits of the arts while others highlight barriers to participation. Some reinforce what many artists, arts administrators, and arts educators already know, while others may be surprising. Some reflect prior research while others suggest new areas for research. For the most part, the themes are presented in order from those that were most visible and evident in the data. The one exception is the twelfth theme, presented last because it offers a way to re-think barriers to the arts, a critical stepping stone in our goal of moving from research to action.

THEME 1: PEOPLE WHO ENGAGE WITH THE ARTS DON'T ALWAYS CALL IT "ARTS"

While everyone we talked with had been identified by a professional arts administrator³⁷ as a person who is highly engaged in the arts, not everyone we interviewed thought of themselves as "arts people" or even as "creative." The people we interviewed described a wide variety of arts and culture activities that they participate in. We quickly discovered that even people who do not think of themselves as "arts people" love the arts.

Prior research has shown that many people think their personal behaviors and values are not part of what they consider the arts, and that terms like "arts" and "culture" do

not apply to their own creative activities.³⁸ What we found here supports that. When asked what kinds of arts activities they engage in, some answered readily, naming disciplines or genres, using technical arts terms, telling about the venues where they experience art or the people with whom they make art. Others, however, were not able to answer the question immediately, saying they do not participate in a lot of artistic activities. Over the course of the interviews, each person – including those who did not see themselves as being highly engaged in the arts – told about many different arts and creative activities they enjoyed as either audience or participant.

“There’s so many ways to engage with arts in the city that you don’t need to be like somebody who has an MA in art history to find a place in the arts scene in this city.”

For example, in an interview with a couple who have been season ticket holders for years to a local theater, when we asked, “What other creative cultural activities, artistic activities do you do?” each of them said flatly, “We don’t.”

Well, other than hula. The wife has taken hula lessons for years. Also, they travel to Vegas to see theater and musical shows. “But as far as other cultural things, we’re not really that involved.”

Other than drawing, as it turns out. The husband sketches, does metalworking, and took drawing and calligraphy courses in college. Then they told us that when two-for-one deals are available, they invite family and friends to go with them to the theater. The longer we talked with this couple, the more arts and culture activities emerged. They’ve been members of different museums around LA County over the years. Finally, toward the end of the interview, they told the story of how they met: they were in a drum and bugle corps in their community. He played the bugle, while she carried a flag.

As another interviewee told us, it is not necessary to be an expert or even know how to do an art form to enjoy it:

“Maybe I don’t know how to do the dance but I’m doing it, I’m dancing. I’m having fun and I’m enjoying myself.”

Even people who don’t use the word “arts” or “creative” to describe themselves or the things they enjoy doing, we learned, may still be highly engaged in the arts. People who love the arts may never tell you that they do, at least not in those words.

THEME 2: TO TALK ABOUT THE ARTS IS TO TALK ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

We did not ask a single question about family or friends in our interviews, yet every person we interviewed talked about them, sometimes at length. These are the people who introduced them to the arts and the people they attend arts and culture events with. What we learned is that to talk about the arts is to talk about family and friends.

Family

Every person we interviewed except one spoke about a family connection to the arts. For nearly everyone, a family member was their starting point into the arts, the person who first exposed them to it. Most often it was a parent, but grandparents and older siblings also played a role. For many, they are playing that same role for their children and grandchildren, their nieces and nephews, taking them out to arts events, driving them to arts classes, and making art with them at home.

One man grew up watching his grandfather perform in the philharmonic orchestra in Mexico City. One calls herself a “dance mom,” taking her children to rehearsals and performances, learning new skills in order to help make their costumes. One is the son of an arts teacher who has convinced his parents to donate regularly to a literary nonprofit where he volunteers. Another goes salsa dancing regularly with his brother and wife. Another is the child of a “huge jazz fan” who grew up to marry a jazz fan. Another is studying son jarocho music with her mother. More than one parent talked about “dragging” their kids to museums, concerts, and plays. Some couples do all their arts events together.

"My mom had me in every school dance that you could think of, especially when it came to Latin Heritage month. I did anything from La Bamba to I don't know what the hell I was dancing. That's the one thing that I remember from my mom that I always was involved in dancing."

"Weekends or whenever we get together with family, [my daughters] get groups together and now they're singing together. They get their cousins and they make music videos or movies and stuff like that."

Our respondents connected the arts to major family milestones in life. There is the couple described above who met in the drum and bugle corps. Two men we spoke with each told about taking arts classes in school because a girlfriend was taking the class. One man told how he turned to writing:

"When I realized that my marriage had failed, I needed an outlet.... I need this to survive, because a psychologist won't do it for me. [Writing] became an avenue for me to cope."

One mother told us,

"My mom, she's going to celebrate her 50th wedding anniversary, and she wants my girls to sing, and she wants them to play the piano at church for them, so everyone's really happy and proud of them."

Two people we talked to told stories of turning to deeper engagement with the arts to help them through the loss of a parent. One of them established a regular poetry practice during Ramadan after her mother passed away. Friends heard about it and created an online community where they could write with her and share their work with each other. The other met the head of a small local museum shortly after losing her father. The museum director's description of working at his institution sounded like family to her, so she volunteered to help out with a project. Since then she's become an ongoing, regular volunteer at the museum.

Another interviewee described a childhood summer community festival her family attended each year in her neighborhood this way:

"There was always folklórico, there was always mariachi, there was always that music, that entertainment, that vibe and it was just a sense of bringing family together. I always associated music and dance with bringing families together through different events."

Friends

When our respondents talked about the arts, they also talked about their friends. They go out to the arts with friends and they make art with friends. They learn about arts events from friends. We heard stories about lifelong friendships made through the arts.

"I love the fact that when I introduce my friends to it, they just feel that it enhances the friendship and it introduces them to another art form."

Several people told us about long-standing groups of friends who regularly go to arts events together, some to the theater, some to museums, some to festivals and art walks. Others told us about the "social secretary" role they play among their circle of friends, inviting them to arts and other events.

"We send out invites. Sometimes a whole group will go. We will always go regardless of who else is going, but we invite everybody to join us if at all possible. We have been told we're exhausting."

More than one person told us about the critical role the arts played in finding a community of like-minded people, especially when moving to a new city. One person who moved to LA to pursue a career as an actor has found lasting friendships through acting classes and ushering jobs at a local theater.

Another told us about the community of friends she's developed as they support each other in their writing practice,

going on writing dates together and supporting each other to keep up with their submissions. She also told us a half-joking story about losing friends to the arts. When she introduced some of her friends to each other they formed a band, and now they hang out together without her.

The role of the arts in a friendship can be more about the human connection than the art itself, as one person explained:

"Even though the art is the activity, the impetus may not have been the art itself as much as it was the social interaction. I have four kids, grandkids, and lots of friends, so we're always looking for something to do. That's why I say 'art and something.'"

The connection between family, culture, and art can continue across generations and continents. One woman told us how she "grew up with music in her ears." Her mother studied under a composer back in their home country in the Middle East. This composer was known for transcribing traditional music of rural villagers onto paper and for liturgical compositions. When her mother migrated to Europe she visited the aging composer in the hospital every week for two years. Her brother-in-law grew up to be a musicologist who has written books on the composer. Today, now older than her mother was when she visited the composer in the hospital, she performs the work of this same composer as part of a local choir in LA.

In some cases, the arts events that people attend are those where a friend or family member is performing, or where their work is on display. This includes everything from going to see a child in a play at school to a friend's concert or reading.

A few of the people we spoke to are part of artist communities. However, the handful who make a living in the arts did not talk about the people they work with in this way. One specifically contrasted the kinds of people he works with in the entertainment industry with those he does volunteer work with. Another stated that she did not want to make a living from her art because it frees her to be an artist activist.

The communities of artists our interviewees described were groups of people brought together around shared values and friendship:

"I was very deliberate to build a community of people around me that I could hang out with but also we could make art together."

"When you find a place where there's passionate artists, all of a sudden it's like wow, this is different from any other place. I no longer feel like an outsider. I feel like I'm in a community of like-minded outsiders. We all have a place."

THEME 3: ARTS EDUCATION IS ESSENTIAL

Nearly all of our interviewees had some kind of arts instruction during their lifetime, either in school, from parents, in private lessons, or through community centers. Many of the people we talked with described the benefits of arts education for themselves or their children. No matter what kind of arts instruction they may have received or where, nearly everyone agreed that arts education is essential.

"I don't think it's a luxury, I think it's a right. Kids should have the right to an arts education."

Almost everyone we spoke with had formal arts training in school, including arts classes in elementary, middle, or high schools, in college, or graduate school, in community college or in extension programs. As children, some had years of private lessons in, for example, dance or piano. One interviewee described how classroom art classes became a through-line in his life:

"I think it was third grade when I won a month's worth of classes. It was painting classes on canvas. I fell in love with it so even till now I have little canvases that I try to put together. I still have the one which was my first time picking up a brush."

In addition, the majority of our interviewees experienced formal arts education in non-academic settings, in nonprofit organizations, or arts programming through parks and recreation departments or public libraries. A few people spoke about informal arts education experiences. Outside of school, many learned the arts from family members. Others have learned how to do crafts on their own by watching online videos. A few learned painting by going to paint night events. One person told the story of how she went to a popular open mic night month after month to watch the performers and learn how they did spoken word. By the end of summer she achieved her goal of stepping up to the mic to perform her own work.

People whose children are now grown adults were as adamant about the need for arts education as those whose children are still in school.

"I just knew [my children] needed to have music in their lives. It was for me just as important as a math class, literature English class. Music is just as important and that's what I told them."

"Years ago if you had asked me about the arts in public education, I would've said it's a waste of money. Now I would say absolutely. It's vitally important because it gives kids who may not have academic abilities that are great, other avenues of expression."

This last perspective stands out, a person who is deeply engaged in the arts but only later came to believe in the value of arts education. It suggests this finding on arts education is not as tautological to this group of interviewees as it might at first seem. Formal arts education in school was not the starting point to lifelong engagement with the arts for all of them.

Nonetheless, the benefits of arts education and training for children are clear to the people we talked with. It teaches

patience and personal discipline, they told us. It helps young brains develop differently. It gives students an avenue for self-expression. It's a place where children make lifelong friends. Parents described seeing their children becoming more confident in speaking up in class as they become more comfortable performing in front of an audience. One interviewee told about how a literature teacher and his love for books kept her in school at a difficult time in her life when she was at risk of dropping out.

Another interviewee told us about how her childhood arts classes made her who she is today:

"I am in a family of four and I'm the only one that danced and took dance classes as a little girl and I'm the only one now with a profession versus a lot of my brothers.... It's sad because if there were an art program like hip-hop back in those days when I was growing up, those boys would probably never end up in jail."

"It's something that needs to not just be ancillary part of education. It's got to be an essential, vital part of curriculum. I sincerely believe that."

THEME 4: PEOPLE WANT ART THAT TEACHES AND EVEN CHALLENGES THEM

Many of the people we interviewed are not looking only for pleasant, passive experiences but are hungry for art that engages them more fully. While our interviewees talked about the sensory pleasures of, for example, seeing an exquisite painting or a hearing a beautiful song, many also talked about wanting more from their arts experiences. They want to learn about the artist, to place the artwork in its historical and social context. Some want art that challenges, addressing social issues head-on. Together, we found a desire for art that engages people beyond the immediate experience of it.

Several people told us how much they enjoy learning about who made the artwork they are experiencing and why they did. They want to understand the historical context within which an artwork was made. One person told us that she had been drawn to the arts from a young age, but it was not until a college art history class where she learned the story of a woman painter from the baroque period who defied the gender expectations of her era that she felt confident in her own commitment to the arts. Another told us she prefers history exhibited through artifacts and relics over abstract visual art.

Another spoke at length about how taking drumming classes sparked his curiosity so he began doing research about the history and culture of Africans in his home country in Latin America. He searches the internet to learn more about how beats from one region of the world have found their way to other regions, how they mixed with local traditions to create whole new musical styles.

Others want arts that engage in issues of social justice. They talked about wanting art that challenged them to see the world or their local communities in a new way. They want thought-provoking experiences. A few described specific performances they had attended or books they had read that addressed issues like Islamophobia or homophobia. Others talk about how they make art to engage with social issues:

"Art for me ends up being kind of a pursuit of my feelings about injustice in the world, and just trying to make sense of the world."

THEME 5: ART IS A MEANS TO EXPRESS YOUR OWN CULTURE AND EXPERIENCE SOMEONE ELSE'S

Our interviewees talked about LA County as a place where a person can explore their own individuality, a community can express its culture, and where people can experience something new and unfamiliar – all through the arts. It may be part of a community celebration where everyone who attends is familiar with the traditions and practices embodied in the

art form. It may also be the act of sharing something you love with people who know little or nothing about it, or the act of going to an unfamiliar part of town to see or hear something you've never seen or heard before. In other words, the arts is a means to express your own culture and to experience someone else's.

For some of our respondents, art is a gateway to learn about other cultures. Seeing a performance from a particular region of the world, one couple told us, makes them curious to eat the food from that region, and to hear the music and learn dances from that region.

"It's nice to see a variety of folks interact and each community has their own set of artists, values, and expressions. It's nice when we bring them together, and share them, and learn from each other."

People told us about performances they'd attended that shattered myths about Asians, challenged stereotypes of Muslims, or brought culturally-rooted art forms to a wider audience. We heard about books in translation and blogs that situate activism and art within a particular culture. We learned the differences in how salsa is danced in Mexico, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and Nicaragua. We were told about the importance of seeing films that are not *about* other countries but are *from* those countries, *by* their own filmmakers.

Many of the people we spoke with talked about the cosmopolitan nature of their experience of the arts in LA County, crossing ethnic, geographic, and religious boundaries. Connecting one's culture to others allows artists and organizations to stretch the limits of their own art form, reinterpreting tradition and imagining new forms of cultural expression and cultural belonging. For example, people of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian faiths each told us about nontraditional ways they engaged in religious practices through the arts. We also heard stories about how art can break down the barriers between people, bringing us together to understand each other better. It can overcome

misinformation and distortions about other cultures that are common in American media.

One interviewee described how the arts were influential when he was growing up in teaching him to explore other cultures:

"I'm a military brat, and something that's a standard in every city you move to. You can learn about the city by going to the library and going to the museum. So if you're new in town, and you don't know anybody... you hang out in the library and you go to the museum. I've been to the library and the museum in many cities across the country, and that just developed this love and passion for learning more and more about different cultures."

Many of the people we interviewed characterized arts and culture in LA County as a place where diversity is valued, encouraged, and welcomed. Some spoke of this as a current reality:

"I'm from southern California so it was only when I left I realized how amazing the welcomeness to diversity within performance is."

Others, however, characterized diversity and inclusion in arts and culture as something more aspirational than actual in LA County, depending on where you go:

"With artistic practice, what I'm learning is that you can have a view of it that's more exclusive or more inclusive. Some galleries might purposefully install themselves with snobby people to protect this exclusive space while others work hard to make the people off the street feel comfortable, that they have a vested interest in the practices going on in the community and come and be a part of it."

THEME 6: CULTURALLY-ROOTED ARTS EXPERIENCES ARE ABOUT IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Some of the people we interviewed talked about their experience of art forms, performances, and organizations as being rooted in their own culture. While some of what they talked about overlaps with our themes related to *family* and with *expressing* and *experiencing culture*, they specifically talked about these arts experiences as being steeped in a sense of identity and belonging.

They talked about culturally-rooted arts organizations not just as spaces of community by birth or heritage, but also community by love (chosen family), friendship, affinity, and faith. These organizations provide the structure for deeply personal arts experiences that may be individual or communal, that give enduring shape to their understanding of what art is, what it does for people, and how art relates to other aspects of their lives and identities.

One couple we talked to has bought season tickets year after year to a local theater in part because they can see people from their ethnic community on stage in leading roles, performing work created by people from that same group. Another supports a different community theater because it is working to foster and grow talent from his local neighborhood. Yet another talked about how some of the old timers in her ethnic community grumble when their arts programming is in English, but that it is important to her organization to be inclusive in order to share their culture with everyone.

One person who has performed for years with a culturally-rooted group talked about how the art form is, for her, inextricably linked to her cultural, personal, and community identity. It has deepened her relationship to children and elders in her family. For her, art is both a form of creative expression and the primary lens through which she relates to other people, both personally and professionally.

Interviewees from two different LA County ethnic communities each described their culturally-rooted arts experiences this way:

"When they brought the [folklórico] outfits out I was in love, being up on stage wearing a beautiful outfit, and then dancing and being able to move the skirts back and forth."

"That was first time on the mic and that was the discovery of my poetic voice. I don't think I would have jumped on the mic if it wasn't for an Asian American mic spot that made me feel like I could talk about my issues without having to explain it."

One of our interviewees described the joy she experiences sharing culturally-rooted performance on stage this way:

"I like the fact that when you looked at the audience, it was multi-ethnic, it was multi-generational. Everybody was having a great time."

Interviewees that we met through culturally-rooted arts organizations talked about how important their culturally specific experiences were for them personally. For example, they told us about how much they valued seeing people like themselves on stage and directing the symphony. At the same time they do not limit their arts engagement to their own cultural traditions. Nearly all of them also expressed interest in experiencing a wide range of arts, both within and beyond the culturally-rooted organizations they support:

"I am interested in the inclusion of Latino-Chicano artists and I'm so thankful that we have, in Los Angeles, figures like Dudamel. I love opera as much as I love classical music, as much as I love jazz."

THEME 7: BENEFITS OF THE ARTS ARE MATERIAL AND TANGIBLE, AS WELL AS EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL

Our interviewees talked about how they have benefitted from their arts and culture experiences, and how the arts can benefit others. The benefits of the arts can be material and tangible, as well as emotional and spiritual.

"I think anybody who gets into the arts will have some kind of emotional benefit as well, a physical benefit as a whole. I think it makes the mind a lot more creative. They do better at school. I mean it just stimulates them in a very different way."

Through their participation in the arts the people we interviewed have

- ▶ Created lifelong friendships
- ▶ Uncovered hidden talents
- ▶ Told their personal story
- ▶ Connected with or built a community
- ▶ Exercised their mind
- ▶ Coped with loss
- ▶ Become more disciplined and productive
- ▶ Gained personal confidence
- ▶ Learned about other cultures
- ▶ Adjusted to moving to a new city
- ▶ Seen the world through other people's eyes
- ▶ Experimented and taken risks
- ▶ Explored faith and spirituality
- ▶ Learned about life
- ▶ Been empowered
- ▶ Collaborated with others
- ▶ Traveled to places they never imagined possible
- ▶ Learned about history
- ▶ Found work
- ▶ Created a business
- ▶ Bonded with family

- ▶ Found like-minded people who accept them as they are
- ▶ Created something tangible in the real world
- ▶ Found an audience for their work
- ▶ Improved their physical and emotional health
- ▶ Experienced an opportunity to shine
- ▶ Made sense of the world

Feelings that our respondents associated with their experiences in the arts were expressed with a wide range of words: joy, calm, transcendence, flow, alive, happy, thought-provoking, challenging, frustrating, mind-blowing, and energizing. Several people talked about the way in which art has been a refuge and a home, something that raises their spirits and takes them away from the mundane, while also being a way to express themselves. The arts, several of them told us, can be a place or a practice where they find solace in difficult times.

"There's something about working with your hands and the materiality of things. That's a physical connection that your body has to the world. It's physical between the senses in your skin and the materials of the world. Somehow that was more satisfying in a deeper level than just sitting in a chair typing computer keys."

As discussed earlier, many people talked about the benefit of arts education for children, their own and others'. More than one person told us that in communities with limited economic opportunities, art can offer positive alternatives but only if it is available, accessible, and relevant.

THEME 8: PEOPLE VALUE ART IN SHARED PUBLIC SPACES

The importance and value of art in shared public spaces emerged as another theme in our interviews. People talked about murals, drum circles, festivals, and films. They named specific artworks, describing both the works and the locations

where they had seen them, drawing a connection between art and public places. Public spaces, they told us, need more art:

"Art in public spaces is really important to me. I would love to see more."

They also highlighted the shared, communal nature of arts experiences in public spaces. It was not simply the experience of the art, but the fact that they experienced it with other people that mattered to them. One interviewee talked about art in shared public spaces as a better way to reach people:

"Music outside of a classroom for me is also very important because music out in the streets and music in direct contact with people makes a lot of sense."

Another articulated the benefit of public arts experiences that people can chance upon in their daily lives:

"I would love to see art woven into people's lives more, like their day to day, that it's not necessarily an event."

Southern California's long summer outdoor art season creates opportunities for art in public places, as another person told us:

"The summer is pretty much my favorite part when it comes to the arts. Outdoor concerts and art shows and things like that, you get to go and gain that sense of community, that sense of family it's associated with."

Part of the value of public art, our interviewees told us, is in its accessibility to people who do not live near museums, galleries, or performance venues, or for those who feel uncomfortable in those spaces. Many spoke about how they value performances and festivals that bring communities together, building connections between people who may think of themselves as different from each other. Public art is also affordable art, and it is art that is less constrained

by traditional “high art” norms. Some interviewees said that younger people may be more drawn to public art:

“I feel like sometimes the higher-up people who get to make these decisions or are advocating for maybe these funds don’t realize how much young people appreciate things like public art.”

At the same time, some older people we spoke with were equally vocal about how much they value free art in public places.

One interviewee told us his experience is that LA County is not proud of its public art the way other regions like Chicago and New York are. He thinks we should be.

In perhaps one of the most compelling stories we heard, public art can help a community see itself in a new light. One person living in the San Fernando Valley described the impact of a large number of new murals on both the physical environment and self-perception of the people who live there:

“It was just another mural after another mural and our community had never had that. A lot of people just driving by seeing that, it just really surprised them. I don’t think anybody in our community ever thought we would have so many beautiful murals.”

THEME 9: HOLLYWOOD IS A FOIL THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE BENEFITS OF THE ARTS

Hollywood looms large in LA County’s creative economy,³⁹ so it is perhaps no surprise that even though we did not ask about the entertainment industry, it came up in many of our conversations. Most often, those who talked about Hollywood used it as a negative foil to highlight the benefits of the arts.

The people we talked to include actors, animators, directors, screenwriters, and voice actors. Several of them moved to LA with dreams of working in film or television. Our

interviewees included people who’ve worked in video stores, organized with an entertainment industry union, worked for a nonprofit helping disadvantaged communities access film and television jobs, and worked as an unpaid Hollywood reporter. More than one sings in a choir or acts in theaters that include performers who make their living elsewhere in the entertainment industry:

“There’s a number of community theaters that work with non-Hollywood types. Even here there are people who are working in the industry, but they come here, because this is their love, theater. It’s not for money.”

Only a few of them now make a living in or adjacent to the entertainment industry. Respondents with experience in the industry – both those who have been successful and those who have not – generally characterized it as alienating:

“I was very involved with my actors union, organizing artists into having a functional union. Demanding what is rightfully ours. I’m talking about when I performed with my voice and getting a good paycheck and residuals. Being recognized as a professional, important citizen.”

“Nobody in that business gives anybody anything, no matter who you are.”

Where the entertainment industry has a reputation for using shortcuts and references that stereotype people by race, gender, religion, or other demographic characteristics,⁴⁰ our interviewees saw nonprofit arts and culture specifically as a tool for overcoming media-driven labels. The people who work in the nonprofit arts sector are seen as very different from those who work in the entertainment industry. This may reflect a difference between people who see their creative work product as a public service versus those whose goal is to make money from it. One interviewee who makes his living in the entertainment industry and volunteers with a local arts nonprofit described it this way:

"People I meet who have chosen to work in arts [nonprofits]... it's almost a guarantee that there's some likemindedness and world view that I'm going to agree with. Very rarely does a person do that because they're really hoping to get rich and they're very self-involved. It tends to be, the people who work in arts want to make the world a better place and a prettier place."

THEME 10: ARTS, CULTURE, AND FAITH ARE OFTEN INTERTWINED

For many people, early childhood introductions to the arts happened in places of worship. For some, the interconnection between faith and the arts is part of their adult identity.

For one person we interviewed, art is part of her ministry and a personal mission. The child of parents who were both musicians and actors, one of which was a minister, she sang in the choir from childhood. Choir rehearsals now include both singing and prayer. She has sung with her choir at venues throughout LA County, including the Skirball and Disney Hall. Of her fellow choir members, she said,

"Some folks are musicians, some people are semi-professional singers, but we've grown in terms of the ministry piece of it. You're learning artistry and musicianship, but it is so interwoven with our walk in life and God."

We heard about childhood arts experiences or training that were part of religious practices, such as singing in the choir, performing the Christian nativity story, or bar mitzvah music and dance. More than one person told us about learning folklórico or Aztec dance in Catholic church or school as a child.

A few used metaphors that connect faith and spirituality with arts experiences. One described the connections he has made with fellow volunteers at an arts nonprofit as a "churchlike experience." One person described church as a theatrical

experience. Another described music as cleansing, feeding, and healing his soul. Another described her arts participation as always having a social justice aspect to it because she grew up in a very strict religious household.

Our respondents also told us about how as adults they have connected religious and cultural traditions with the arts. One person described how the nonprofit where she volunteers incorporates arts practices like spoken word into their practice of Jewish rituals. A few still sing in faith-based choirs as adults. As described earlier, one interviewee told us about creating a practice of writing a poem a day for the month of Ramadan. Another interviewee described how both art and faith are intertwined in her day.

"From literally the moment I woke up to the moment I went to sleep there was music in our house, and so now it's just embedded in me now that I wake up in the morning, I say a little prayer like thank you God for letting me wake up today, and then I turn on the radio. That gets me going, gets me ready, on my way to work."

THEME 11: SPORTS AND ARTS ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

Conventional wisdom would have it that people who love arts and culture are not the same people who love sports, and vice versa. When it comes to public investment in major facilities, sports and arts are sometimes presented as competing with each other. What we learned from our interviews is that while conventional wisdom may be largely correct, sports and arts are not mutually exclusive.

Nearly half the people we interviewed told us they also enjoy participating in sports, from beach volleyball to hiking to cycling. A quarter of them described themselves as fans of a particular sport or team, ranging from the LA Dodgers to FC Barcelona.

Two interviewees in particular had extensive experience with sports and offered interesting perspectives on the relationship

between athletics and the arts. One had played baseball for years as a child and may have had a chance to continue in college but was sidelined by an injury. After that he took a theater class almost by accident and discovered that much of what he loved in sports could also be found in theater, including recognition and applause for a job well done.

"A lot of things in life, you work at and you practice at it but you never know where it's going to be applied. The arts and sports are definitely things where, 'This is the day where the game is or the show is.' It will be applied at this moment, this is what you're working towards. For me that's very appealing."

The other person was married to a professional athlete for many years. She saw many of the benefits of the arts also available in sports.

"I think art in some way pleases people and gives them a courage and a drive. Athletics does that as well. I see them as really being partners in that sense. The idea that you can stick to something. You don't have to be the best but you can work at it, work at it, work at it, and get better."

THEME 12: BARRIERS TO THE ARTS ARE NOT JUST LOGISTICAL, BUT ALSO EXPERIENTIAL

The barriers to participating in the arts that we learned about through our interviews are, for the most part, familiar to both artists and arts administrators. They include lack of time, especially for parents, the cost of tickets, or the discomfort and fear associated with going to unfamiliar venues or neighborhoods. Our respondents also talked about how difficult it is to learn about arts events. From all this, the theme that emerged most powerfully for us that while arts administrators may see barriers to the arts as logistical, people experience them emotionally.

Young women participating in the arts

Art can be something you do despite barriers that get in

the way. Women of different ages and from different ethnic groups told us about how, when they were younger, they found ways around family or community rules preventing girls from participating in the arts. This was somewhat surprising, considering the fact that in the US, women tend to attend or participate in arts events at a higher rate than men.⁴¹ Nonetheless, these were the stories we heard. For example, one told us about how her mother kept her at home to try to keep her safe, but she wanted to learn how to paint. When she was 14 years old she discovered a community arts center in a strip mall across from where her mother worked that was close enough for her mother's comfort to let her go.

Another woman who is several decades older than her told us about wanting to learn to tap dance as a child:

"I wanted to tap dance but nice girls [in my community] don't do that. I would go to my cousins' tap dancing lessons. I would watch them dance and learn the steps and then hide and practice tap dance, what I had seen. It was a self-taught kind of an experience."

For another woman, her teenage experiences of overcoming barriers make for stories she is proud to tell:

"[Dance] battling was not the biggest thing to do for girls back in my day. It was guys battling. My girlfriend and I, we teamed up and we had no fear. We battled with guys because we knew how to dance, we knew the latest moves and we knew how to create those moves and make it our own and be so unique that nobody could follow us."

Lack of time

Many people simply lack the time to attend as many arts events as they would like. One person told us, for example, that she would like to take arts therapy classes to improve her skills, but cannot find the time.

The demands of parenting take up time. Some parents told us they simply don't go out as much as they did before

having children. In other cases the kinds of events they attend is limited by what their children are interested in seeing. One father explained how a lack of time to attend the arts affects the kinds of shows he and his wife attend, with or without their children:

"We tend towards easier to find productions, so we tend towards larger venues.... I worked a lot in independent theater when I was younger and embraced a little more risk. When you're only seeing one show a month, your risk tolerance goes down a little bit."

Economic and class barriers

Cost is a familiar barrier to participating in the arts, and it came through clearly in our interviews. The price of tickets to blockbuster shows at big venues can be prohibitive. Even for moderately priced events the expense of taking the whole family can be out of reach. Some of our respondents understood the challenge arts organizations face trying to make their work accessible while still making a living. As one person told us:

"The organization needs to get paid for its work, but if you're an average person, it's kind of hard to afford everything. I think that's kind of a hard balance."

Several people told us about how their own parents had not been able to afford arts classes when they were children. For each, this spurred them to make sure their own children had the kinds of opportunities they didn't. As one mother told us,

"When I was a kid, I wanted to be in ballet folklórico. I wanted to play piano. Unfortunately my parents couldn't afford it... because you had to pay for the dresses, and you had to pay for everything so that got expensive. That's why I tell [my] girls, I want you to do what you want, I want to provide as much as we can."

One of our interviewees who works in arts education sees the problem of financial inequity from a different angle:

"Kids on the West Side are taking flying trapeze lessons [while] kids in South LA don't even know how to rip paper, glue, or paint. I know one school has a \$75,000 atelier, where at another school, you're hard-pressed to find watercolors."

Several of our respondents talked in general about the cost of attending arts events as a barrier that discriminates. Some expressed an awareness of the privileges of being from the middle or upper classes that gives them access to go to shows or museums that others cannot afford. We talked to one man whose family has donated significant sums of money to arts nonprofits for programming and scholarships to support young people in low-income communities who likely would not have opportunities to study the arts. He himself has also volunteered as a teaching artist in his free time.

For others, though, money is a consistent barrier:

"I wish programs would be cheaper, more accessible. There's a lot of stuff I wish I could take my girls or I could go to."

Lack of information

Another barrier is how difficult it is to learn about arts events to attend or arts programs to participate in. Several people mentioned the *LA Weekly* specifically, saying it used to be their go-to source for arts events but is no longer. People across the age spectrum told us about the limits of social media, saying that it's "so segmented" they often miss events they would have been interested in because they do not have a personal connection to the artist, the institution, or even a single person who could have told them about the event. They want more promotion, more advertising, more marketing of the arts. More than one interviewee proposed creating some kind of all-inclusive list of everything going on in the region. They want to learn about events that are new and different from what they have attended in the past.

Belonging and discomfort

As one person put it when talking about a major downtown LA arts facility, people will categorize a place as feeling like “my space” or “not my space” and this will determine whether or not they attend. This might be centered on age, class, race or geography.

“Some older people might be reluctant to go to a bar that they don’t know to hear young people.”

“There’s something about a museum that I actually don’t like. I don’t like the feel of it, the stuffiness of it, the snobbishness.”

“To be blunt, White folks are afraid to come down to [this] festival because it’s in the ‘Shaw,’ what’s called the Crenshaw area.”

Another interviewee talked about a sense of belonging as it relates to the people he sees on stage:

“Art has to talk to you, art has to say something. [Sometimes] I even find myself, when I buy a subscription, and they sell me on some play, they don’t say anything to me. I look at the cast and it’s all White. I read who the artistic team is, and I don’t see a Latino name on there.”

Entry points to the arts aren’t always clear, especially for people whose families didn’t introduce them to the arts at a young age. Arts education in school was named as one tool to overcome this, as was arts programming through nonprofits in community spaces like parks and libraries. Not only can programs like this teach a child how to dance, paint, or sing, they can take them to venues where art is performed and exhibited, giving them a chance to claim a wider range of places as “my space.”

Going alone

Most of the people we interviewed participate in the arts with family or friends. A few stated they were “willing” or “not afraid” to attend an arts event alone, which serves to emphasize how not having someone to go with to the show can be a barrier.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We found that people from many different walks of life who are avid participants in the arts can easily and clearly articulate the benefits of the arts in terms that are material and tangible, but also emotional and spiritual. They deeply value arts education for children, their own and others'. Family experiences during childhood were a powerful driver of their later engagement in the arts. Some have overcome tremendous barriers to access the arts, if not for themselves then for their children. People are actively looking for arts experiences that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also engage them beyond the moment of experience. For most, the values of the entertainment industry are very different from those they find in the arts, though this does not prevent them from enjoying films and television. Many of them enjoy sports experiences as much as they enjoy arts and culture. They want more communal arts experiences in shared public spaces.

For the people we interviewed, the arts keep them grounded and keep them in touch with their humanity. It is a connection to culture, heritage, identity, family, and friends. One person we interviewed captured the essence of this when he explained why, as an adult with grown children, he continues



to take music classes through a local culturally-rooted nonprofit. He described a work life that is likely familiar to many in LA County. He loves his job and his colleagues, but his work is stressful and tense. It requires him to drive through LA traffic, often multiple times in a single day. "I need to feed my soul," he told us. "I look forward to my evening classes twice a week or on the weekend. When I go to my music class, it's a healing that I really seek. There are so many things to be sad about, but with music you cleanse that out and you become a happy person."

What barriers prevent people from gaining access to these benefits? Much of what we learned reinforces what arts administrators already know. When people are not familiar with a particular venue, neighborhood, or art form they may be reticent to try it. When they do not feel comfortable in a place, do not see themselves reflected in the art or in the audience, they feel disconnected or alienated. Sometimes family or community values create barriers to arts participation, especially for young girls. In a time of media disruption, they feel they are missing out on arts events and do not know how to find out about them.



Among our most notable findings is that cost as a barrier to the arts is more complicated than it may appear. Even people who appear on paper to be doing well may find participation in the arts unaffordable. Median household income in LA County at the time of the interviews was about \$55,000,⁴² and only four of the people we interviewed earned about the median or less, which means this group was underrepresented in our sample. However, several people we interviewed who earn more than the median – sometimes significantly more – talked about cost of the arts as a barrier. For example, we spoke with one person who lives with a spouse and has household income nearly double the median, who yet struggles to afford arts classes for their three children. The United Ways of California’s *Real Cost Measure*⁴³ reports that a family like theirs in LA County must earn more than \$95,000 per year simply to meet basic needs. One or even two parents earning \$15 per hour will not earn enough in a year to cover basic needs. Artists and institutions that seek to increase access to the arts for everyone who lives in LA County should keep in mind that poverty benchmarks and minimum wages are not good measures of whether or not a person, family, or community can afford the arts. If families earning middle class incomes struggle to afford the arts, what does this mean for providing arts to working class people and those living below the poverty line?

FROM FINDINGS TO ACTION

What we learned through these interviews makes a powerful case for public investment in the arts, especially as a tool to achieve cultural equity and social inclusion. Those investments create significant benefits for the people of LA County, not only those who call themselves “arts people” but also those who do not claim the term. They may enjoy sports and Hollywood entertainment as well, but they deeply appreciate the value and benefits of arts experiences that are noncommercial, community-based, and culturally-rooted. Investments that make arts experiences more affordable benefit people across a wide range of income levels.

Arts experiences that take place in communal public spaces create opportunities for people to experience serendipitous, unexpected moments of joy, supporting the case for more free art in public places. It is a common denominator that makes sense in a region that gets nearly 300 days of sunshine a year. Our region is also one where racial and ethnic communities are largely separated by geography. Making more art more widely available in shared public spaces can create opportunities for people to express their own cultures while also experiencing someone else’s, which can help us overcome some of the factors that separate us.

These findings support prior research that has recommended replacing the abstract and possibly elitist concept of “arts appreciation” with more direct and practical “arts talk”⁴⁴ in daily life. Talking about arts and culture in everyday language can create opportunities for people from different communities to talk to each other about their experiences, the way “sports talk” brings people together around their favorite teams. This can be part of the historical and social context of art that so many people told us they wanted. It can be a type of engagement that goes beyond the immediate experience of the art. Arts talk could also be a bridge between those who are sharing their culture and those who want to learn more about it.

Our findings also suggest an opportunity for arts providers and public arts agencies to rethink how they could bring audiences, participants, and constituents into a more active role in deciding how resources are invested in a community. Demographic data can help an organization or agency identify communities that have limited arts facilities and programs, but those data cannot explain the history, needs, or aspirations of the community itself. As this study has shown, communities are made up of complex individuals who cannot be reduced to their component parts. Arts administrators should consider using mechanisms that give members of a community they seek to serve for the first time an opportunity to discuss and negotiate priorities among

themselves in a meaningful way. For example, an art gallery could set aside part of the year to exhibit work juried by a committee made up of community members, or a public arts agency could allocate a portion of its funds to be spent according to a participatory budgeting process.

When an arts and culture organization brings new programming, resources, or facilities into a community that is different in some way from their historical audiences or participants, they should find ways for the local community to engage in their planning process, especially if their investments presage new demand for housing that can drive up prices and displace long-time residents. Findings presented here tell us that arts administrators should not make assumptions about a community's needs and interests based on its demographic makeup. They further tell us that holding public meetings to gather input is not always adequate. Within our team of four researchers, all of whom are professional arts administrators, there were moments when we disagreed about whether an interviewee had an attitude that was generous or paternalistic, and whether a particular comment showed appreciation for other cultures or was treating them as "the other." Giving the people who live in a community a meaningful voice in local decisions rather than leaving interpretation to outsiders can help to ensure new arts and culture investments serve the community that already lives there.

Prior studies of barriers to the arts have long focused on logistics such as cost, travel distance, and time. More recent attention has been paid to communities defined by demographics or geographies, and whether certain groups defined by race or class are unwelcomed or even alienated by certain arts events or venues. For the most part the focus is on the barriers, not the people who experience them. Though the people interviewed for this study were all avid participants in the arts, many had experienced barriers to the arts, and often talked about experience in emotional terms. This suggests an area for both researchers and arts administrators to explore: gaining better understanding of how people experience barriers to the arts and how they

have overcome them. Their stories could help us identify new pathways beyond diversity to build true equity and inclusion in the arts.

Collecting demographic data has benefits, but also potential costs and hazards. We need to know who is being served and who is not, but demographics – especially race and ethnicity – continue to be troubling points of division in LA County and the US as a whole. It is therefore critical to use data thoughtfully and wisely. Collect only what is needed without putting undue burden on organizations, audiences, and participants. Analyze the data with respect for humanity and community. Protect and respect human subjects at every stage of the research, from writing research questions to designing collection methods and protocols to analyzing the data to sharing findings. Use both numbers (quantitative data) and stories (qualitative data) to understand who we serve and how they benefit, because together they tell us more than either can individually. Use what we learn from the data to meet our communities where they are. After all, art is about beauty and joy, about social justice and quality of life, about asking the hard questions and refusing to accept simplistic answers. Research about art and culture should be just as ambitious.

This study is also a call to rethink how we use data for advertising and promotion. The people we interviewed do not fall into neat market segments. Focusing on marketing to people who are demographically or psychographically most likely to come to an event can have the effect of excluding people who also might have come. Social media, while it may help reach some new participants, may actually be exacerbating the problem of filtering out potential audiences by race, gender, or social class. How do you reach people who do not click on arts blogs and stories but who nonetheless want to go to the theater, take a dance class, or stop by a cool new temporary art installation on their way home after the kids' soccer match? Even people who are likely and regular arts audiences are having trouble finding out about new and unfamiliar shows and events they would have been interested in.

One major limitation of this study is that in its intentional focus on people with strong positive arts experiences, the voices of people with negative or very limited formal arts experiences were excluded. How would those individuals characterize the value of arts and culture in their lives? How are they similar to and different from the people interviewed here? What barriers to participation in the arts would they identify? The findings presented here suggest that much could be learned from a studies that go into detail with people who live in LA County and do not love the arts.

Any single person staring up at a mural, listening to a poet read, or taking a guitar class may be there in search of beauty, solace, happiness, or a challenge. Some are there to experience something familiar while others want to experience something completely new. A person's family and community may have exposed them to a wide range of arts experiences, or may have been a source of barriers to participation in the arts. Nothing about their demographic characteristics can tell us why they are there or what they will take home with them.



We learned through this study that arts are where people can explore their personal individuality, express their culture, and experience something completely new, all at the same time. These interviews helped show us how the arts can be used to bring people together across many forces that can otherwise divide us. As we strive to ensure that everyone has access to the many benefits of the arts – material, tangible, emotional, and spiritual – we must also ensure that our efforts to understand our differences are balanced with our efforts to understand what brings us together.

APPENDIX

Interview protocol used to guide all interviews.

I'm *[first and last name]* and I work for the LA County Arts Commission. As you know, we're conducting a study of arts audiences and participants. The purpose of this study is to understand who participates in the arts in LA County and why. While we got your contact information from *[organization name]*, this survey is not about them. We want to learn about your arts experiences more broadly. Your participation in this interview and your answers to my questions will not affect their organization in any way.

The way this works is that I have a series of questions I'll ask you. We are interviewing about thirty different people for this study, and we are asking you all the same questions. I'll take notes, but in order to make sure I get everything right I'd like to audio record our interview. Would that be okay?

[If yes, turn on recorder and place it somewhere discrete but near you. If not, then don't.]

If I ask a question that you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer it. If you need to stop the interview early before we're done, just let me know and we'll stop.

When we write our report we will analyze the data from everyone we interview anonymously, and will report on it in the aggregate without naming names. While we may use quotes from your interview, we won't identify who said what. Does that make sense?

Do you have any questions for me before we get started? Is there anything I need to clarify?

Let me confirm I have your name spelled correctly.

[Say the person's name aloud and show them a piece of paper with their name printed on it. Make any needed changes on the paper in writing.]

1. You've been identified by *[organization name]* as being a fan of theirs, someone who comes to many of their *[shows or events]* and is strongly engaged in the arts, culture, and creativity. What is it about their work that engages you so much?
 - ▶ For you, is it mostly about this particular organization, the art that they do, their broader mission, or the arts in general that matters most?
2. What other creative, cultural, or artistic activities do you do?
 - ▶ Do you make art, attend arts events, or both?
3. How do these activities fit into the rest of your life?
 - ▶ Are they something you do every day or something you try to keep up with every so often?
4. Where do you do those kinds of creative, cultural, or artistic activities and who do you do them with?
5. What kinds of things do you do in your free time other than the arts?
 - ▶ For example, do you do sports, gardening, politics, spend time with family, volunteering somewhere, crafts, travel, etc.
6. Have you ever taken any kinds of arts classes or had art training, either as a child or as an adult?
 - ▶ Tell me about them.
7. Can you remember, is there a particular experience or moment in your life when you realized the arts would be important to you?
 - ▶ Tell me about that experience and how it changed you.
8. What do you like and what do you wish were different about the arts in LA County?
9. I'd like to finish with a few demographic questions.
 - ▶ Can you please tell me your age – just the decade, so are you in your 20s, 30s, 40s, etc.?
 - ▶ What is your gender?
 - ▶ How do you define your race or ethnicity?
 - ▶ What zip code do you live in?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add about your involvement with the arts?

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The word “culture” has multiple definitions that overlap somewhat, and its usage has evolved over time. In the Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative managed by the LA County Department of Arts and Culture, as well as in this paper, the word is most often used to refer practices associated with Merriam-Webster’s first definition: “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” This report does not use the term to refer to another definition of “culture” that is often associated with the arts: “enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training.” See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>.
2. The term “code switching” originated in linguistics, referring to the way people mix languages and speech patterns in everyday conversation. It is now used more broadly to explore the ways people express themselves as they move between different types of situations and contexts.
3. “The Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative,” Los Angeles County Arts Commission, <https://www.lacountyarts.org/about/cultural-equity-inclusion-initiative/cultural-equity-inclusion-initiative>.
4. The six recommendations are (for more details see <https://www.lacountyarts.org/about/cultural-equity-inclusion-initiative/ceii-implementation>):
 - development of a cultural policy for the County,
 - a requirement that all cultural organizations receiving LA County funds have a board-adopted statement, policy, or plan for diversity, equity, and inclusion,
 - expansion of college arts pathways through paid arts internships for community college students,
 - development of teen arts pathways to create access to work-based learning opportunities in the arts,
 - creation of a program to place artists as creative strategists in County departments to address social problems, and
 - extend LA County’s civic art requirement to private developers.
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26. OGP makes two-year grants to LA County nonprofit arts organizations to address priority needs and ensure cultural services for the diverse communities that comprise LA County. See <https://www.lacountyarts.org/funding/organizational-grant-program>.
27. The Ford Theatres Artists Partnership Program is a competitive application process that provides independent artists, nonprofit organizations, presenters, producers or producing collectives the opportunity to co-present at the Ford's historic 1,180-seat performing arts facility, using a shared risk/revenue model. See <https://www.fordtheatres.org/artist-portal/artists-partnership-program>.
28. The LA County Department of Arts and Culture defines a culturally-rooted arts organization as one that was founded and continues to be grounded in work around one or more specific aspects of human diversity, including but not limited to race. We say "at least seven" because this term is somewhat fluid, and it is possible that other organizations on our list also consider themselves to be culturally-rooted. For more information see <https://www.lacountyarts.org/calendar/aligning-your-organizations-mission-vision-and-core-values-cultural-equity-and-inclusion>.
29. When this project was designed and during the interview phase the Ford Theatres were under the direction of the LA County Arts Commission. Dr. Jesse Ruskin, Evaluation Associate for the Ford, was part of the Research and Evaluation team at the Arts Commission.
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31. Among the ten reviewers, three were Latinx, one was African American, one was Asian American, and five were White. One was

- born outside the United States. The youngest was in their 20s and the oldest was in their 50s. While some were people with limited supervisory responsibilities, none held “director” titles.
32. The US Census has tested a “Middle Eastern” category in its Race and Ethnicity questions but has not added it. For more information see <https://www.census.gov/about/our-research/race-ethnicity.html>.
 33. US Census Bureau. “Selected Economic Characteristics: 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.” https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_5YR_DP03&src=pt.
 34. LA County is home to more than 10 million people living in 1,775 zip codes, spread across 4,751 square miles.
 35. The LA Times’ *Mapping LA* site provides maps and information about demographics, crime, and schools in 272 neighborhoods across the county. See <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods>
 36. *A Portrait of Los Angeles County* from the Social Science Research Council explores how LA County residents are faring in terms of well-being and equity, examining well-being and access to opportunity using a human development framework and American Human Development (HD) Index scores. See <http://www.measureofamerica.org/los-angeles-county>.
 37. Arts administrators are the management professional who run day-to-day business operations of organizations that provide arts and culture services, working in nonprofits, government, or business enterprises. They undertake tasks including management and operations, marketing and advertising, education, fundraising, research and evaluation, advocacy, and much more.
 38. Kevin Kirkpatrick and Anne Romens. “Creating Connection: Research findings and proposed message framework to build public will for arts and culture.” Arts Midwest and Metropolitan Group. April 2015. https://www.artsmidwest.org/sites/default/files/ArtsMidwest_BPWReport.pdf.
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