

Photo by WeSparq



What is the issue?

The San Francisco Bay Area is one of the most diverse regions in the United States, where people of color comprise over 50 percent of the population. Despite this diversity, the region is highly segregated by cultural community. This study explores how artistic practices can serve as a powerful bridge, and finds that these practices are often deeply embedded in community formation, identification, expression, and empowerment led by artists and culture bearers.

What is the research context?

Mosaic America is a nonprofit organization based in Santa Clara County that is committed to fostering belonging within and between cultural groups in highly diverse communities. The organization operates in a region shaped by extensive migration, multiple cultures, and extreme economic disparities. In culturally distinct communities of the region, artists and artistic communities foster and maintain a range of cultural practices, neighborhoods, networks, events, gatherings, and programs as tools for strengthening community. This brief and the research it's based on seek to illuminate how these cultural artists and advocates create, mobilize, and live out a sense of belonging and intergroup community coherence.

Research Approach

The team of researchers from Mosaic America and San José State University engaged artists, advocates, and culture bearers from culturally distinct communities of color in urban areas of Santa Clara and San Francisco Counties and rural parts of coastal San Mateo County. Using online research and existing databases to generate maps, they gathered oral histories, organized diverse convenings of artists, and rooted their analysis in literature reviews to inform their findings. The research expanded the scope of Mosaic Atlas—a publicly accessible digital tool, designed to map and visualize cultural assets located across the Bay Area, as defined by culturally distinct communities.

What are the research findings?

Researchers found that in addition to the performing arts, artist communities across the Bay Area engage in a wide range of practices that may not meet traditional definitions. They embrace a broad definition of art that includes, for example, culinary arts, textile arts, digital art, ancestral traditions, political advocacy, and everyday ways of tasting, moving, adorning, appreciating, relating, respecting, and telling in cultural communities (“life art”).

Research brief based on *Mapping and Mobilizing Cultural Arts in the Bay Area* by Jan English-Lueck, Usha Srinivasan, Milina Jovanović and Sukanya Chakrabarti.

The findings show how artists and advocates—through their art—fulfill community needs, engage with heritage and ancestral traditions, cultivate respect, educate outsiders, communicate identity, express purpose, embrace responsibility, and challenge dominant cultural narratives. Their art is also a way of healing from trauma, storytelling, innovating, and building community resilience.

Researchers gleaned insights from how culturally distinct artistic practices were embedded in the communities within the three counties they studied, which are not always readily apparent. In Santa Clara, many artists engaged in community organizing as an art form, emphasizing the creative aspects of community engagement and storytelling for empowerment and social change. In San Mateo County, artists who were part of the inquiry emphasized the interconnectedness of art and daily life. Rejecting the notion of art as a separate, commodified entity, they engaged with nature and the land as an integral part of their artistic practice and cultural identity. Immigrant and Indigenous artists from San Francisco, a hub of global migration, were skilled at connecting across cultural and transnational borders. They honored ancestral traditions while embracing hybridity and innovation. Ultimately, they refused to see art as separate

from community, defining it as the very act of people making art together to strengthen identity and connections. Belonging and *communitas*—or “we-feeling”—are what people feel when they are making art together. The research illuminates how cultural artists’ and advocates’ work—deeply rooted in culture—is central to community. It also expands our understanding of how artists’ work serves a range of social objectives that go far beyond artistic expression.

Suggested Brief Citation

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Read More

[Mosaic Atlas](https://mosaicatlas.org/research/), an interactive portal presenting the results of the study on which this brief is based. <https://mosaicatlas.org/research/>

Implications for Stakeholders

Funders and allies should identify cultural artists and view them as strategists, bridge-builders, and agents of transformation, rather than just as recipients of support for their artistic projects. Recognizing and respecting the holistic, community-oriented worldview of artists—who see their creative work as deeply intertwined with life, nature, and social justice—can begin to shift current funding paradigms.

Arts service organizations (ASOs) can broaden and reframe their work with cultural artists whose untapped expertise in community needs can help improve community well-being and tackle wider civic issues. ASOs can also evolve into bridging institutions, linking cultural vitality with community belonging and civic life.

Practitioners can build resilient cultural communities and funding streams through reciprocal, intercultural collaboration between artists, staff capacity development, innovative funding models and alliances, multicultural engagement, audience development, and inclusive programming that honors both tradition and innovation.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The views summarized in this brief are those of the research team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.