

Arts of the Bering Strait Region

THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ROLE
OF TRADITIONAL ARTS AND CRAFTS





SALMON LAKE



“May I just say, keep an open mind about art.
Whatever it feeds you, let it feed you.
Whatever it gives you, let it happen...

Because whatever comes out from up here, it comes out beautiful...

What you are, your art is...
Give beauty to beauty, pass it on.”



MaryJane
Litchard (Inupiaq)

INTRODUCTION

Art is Interconnected

THE BERING STRAIT REGION is located in one of the most remote parts of the world. The area includes the Seward Peninsula, Norton Sound, St. Lawrence Island, and Little Diomedede Island.

With this rich diversity in culture and language comes artwork that shares intimate aspects of each culture's history, skills, traditions which have been passed down for thousands of years. Indigenous Art not only plays a critical role in preserving cultural ways of doing and speaking but perhaps now, more than ever, plays an important role in the local communities' economic landscape.

Today, hunters and gatherers combine subsistence harvesting with the cash economy to offset the high cost of living in rural Alaska. Families must navigate this new landscape, and the sale of art plays a critical role in the balance. Today, artists are economic drivers within their communities.

Tribal leaders at Kawerak, Inc., the regional non-profit tribal consortium serving the twenty federally recognized tribes in the region, see the local arts as an economic and cultural keystone. Kawerak's mission is to advance the capacity of our people and tribes for the benefit of the region. As such, Kawerak has prioritized Regional Capacity Building as a strategic focus, one that includes small business development and tourism expansion. Additionally, Kawerak recognizes culture and language priorities, including the need to support cultural traditions, harvest of subsistence materials, passing down of ancestral skills, and speaking Native languages, all of which provide meaning and social context that exists outside of the English language and Western practices.

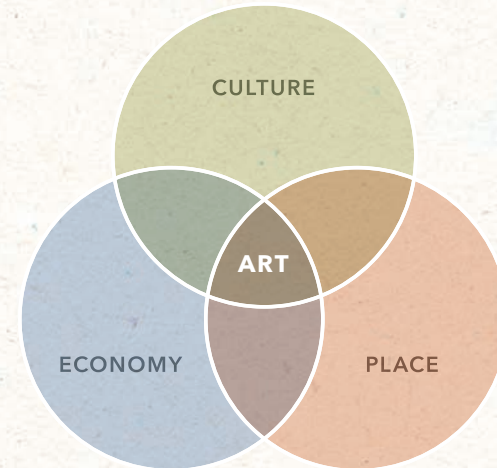
In a region with a diverse cultural presence and growing reliance on the cash economy, mindfulness of interconnectedness—between thriving Indigenous

culture, continued dependence on natural resources, and the ever-changing economic landscape within each community—is critical.

The artist community is a perfect example of this interconnectedness between culture, natural resources, and economy. The Bering Strait region is home to a diverse group of artists, from beaders and skin sewers to world-renowned ivory carvers. Kawerak is committed to learning the role that art plays in passing on traditional knowledge and understanding the relationship between subsistence activities and materials to create art, and ensuring access to the business tools and resources needed to support our region's artists.

To navigate the existing artist landscape, Kawerak, with financial assistance from First Peoples Fund, distributed a region-wide survey and coordinated artist interviews and focus group meetings. Over the course of two years, 172 surveys were collected region-wide. Kawerak social science consultant Sandhill.Culture.Craft facilitated five in-depth one-on-one artist interviews and three focus group meetings in three communities. This report, developed by McDowell Group, summarizes feedback from the artists and provides a snapshot of the artist landscape within the Bering Strait region. We hope this document offers you a glimpse of the richness of the region through the arts and how it is imperative to support the Indigenous arts through advocacy, funding, and program development.

— Kawerak, Inc.
Community Planning and Development



CONTENTS

- 4 **INTRODUCTION**
Art is Interconnected
- 5 Suggestions: Supporting
Bering Strait Artists
- 6 The Bering Strait Region
- 8 Background on Study:
Survey and Interviews
- 9 **ART CREATION**
- 10 Learning and Skill
Materials
- 11 Space
Ivory Ban
- 12 **FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE
OF ART**
- 13 Selling Art
Pricing Art
- 14 Marketing Art
Arts Economy
- 15 **CONNECTIONS TO PEOPLE,
PLACE AND TIME**
- 16 Wellness and Purpose
- 17 Place
- 18 Sustaining Culture
- 19 Thank You

On the cover:

*Ivory beluga, Edwin Noongwook,
(St. Lawrence Island Yupik)*

*MaryJane
Litchard (Inupiaq)*

*Benjamin Pungowiyi
(St. Lawrence Island Yupik)*

*Denny (Yaava) Akeya
(St. Lawrence Island Yupik)*



Artists who responded to the survey and who participated in focus groups provided suggestions to strengthen the practice of traditional arts and crafts forms in the region. Access to materials, space to create work, support for selling art, and educational opportunities to pass on traditional methods were the most frequently mentioned areas of need. Specific suggestions are listed here; please see data on page 18.



David Miller, traditional dancer (Inupiaq)

SUGGESTIONS

Supporting Bering Strait Artists

Establish dedicated **arts-and-crafts workplaces** in communities.

Increase education and awareness about **ivory ban issues**, their potential implications, and action-steps.

Promote education about and development of opportunities for advertising and **selling works online**.

Build a network of art dealers who pay **equitable prices** for work.

Encourage youth interest in art.

Provide educational opportunities to **learn traditional arts**, including ways to learn skills requiring use of legally protected materials (e.g. walrus ivory, baleen).

Explore ways to support insurance and **shipping costs** associated with sending artwork to purchasers.

Encourage **grassroots organization** around arts sales, such as supporting small group of people transporting the work of multiple artists to conferences.

Promote **inter-generational teaching** and interactions about art and crafts (particularly within families).

The Bering Strait Region

COMMUNITIES

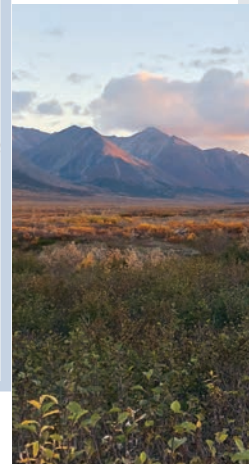
Twenty communities are located in the Kawerak service region, primarily on the coast or river systems. Sixteen of the communities are currently permanently inhabited:

Map #	Community	Survey Participants*
1	Brevig Mission	4%
2	Diomedes	4%
3	Elim	1%
4	Gambell	19%
5	Golovin	-
6	Koyuk	2%
7	Nome	13%
8	Savoonga	27%
9	Shaktoolik	-
10	Shishmaref	8%
11	St. Michael	-
12	Stebbins	1%
13	Teller	2%
14	Unalakleet	9%
15	Wales	1%
16	White Mountain	1%

Four more communities are now used primarily for fish camps or other subsistence uses:

17	Council
18	King Island
19	Mary's Igloo
20	Solomon

* In addition to artists living in the above communities, Anchorage (2%) and Other (6%) were also recorded.

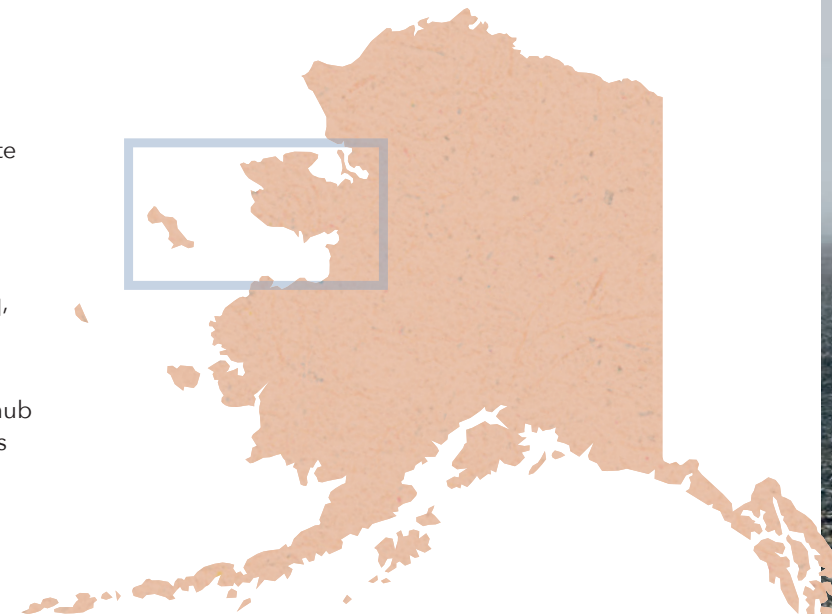


FACTS

- 230 miles from north to south
- 570 miles of coastline
- 23,000 square miles, the equivalent of the size of the state of West Virginia
- 9,300 residents, of which approximately...
- 7,000 are Alaska Native Inupiaq, St. Lawrence (Island) Yupik, and Central Yup'ik people
- In villages outside of the main hub of Nome, Alaska Native peoples comprise 90 percent of the population

MORE INFO

"Kawerak. Our Region."
Available at:
kawerak.org/our-region



PRISTINE LANDSCAPES AND DEEPLY-ROOTED SUBSISTENCE LIFESTYLES



GRAND CENTRAL

THE BERING STRAIT REGION in northwestern Alaska covers about 23,000 square miles on the Seward Peninsula and includes St. Lawrence Island, King Island, Little Diomedede Island, and the communities along the eastern and southeastern shores of Norton Sound. Three culturally distinct groups of Indigenous people—Inupiaq, Central Yup'ik, and St. Lawrence Island Yupik—have lived in the region for thousands of years.

The region contains 570 miles of coastline, approximately 2.3 million acres, and a varied landscape of open ocean, seasonal sea ice, coastal waters, river deltas, tundra, hilly regions, and mountain ranges. Subsistence has been a part of the region since time immemorial. Subsistence means more than hunting; it incorporates caring for the land and animals,

and depends on an understanding of respect, reliance and interconnectedness between us all. Practices supplied families and entire communities with nourishment, tools, clothing and material for art. No part of the animal was wasted, as using all parts of the animal was a way to honor life and demonstrate gratitude for the gift the animal had given to the people. Subsistence practices within the region are heavily focused on hunting for marine mammals (seals, walrus, whale and polar bear), fishing for a variety of salmon and non-salmon species, moose and caribou hunting, reindeer herding, and gathering a variety of plants, berries, and eggs.



GAMBELL

Background on Study

A RECENT community needs assessment conducted within the Bering Strait region found high unemployment rates, 11.6 percent within the area compared to 6.6 percent statewide, as well as prevalent poverty with 30 percent of children below the poverty level compared to 14 percent in Alaska as a whole. Kawerak, Inc. made small business development a strategic priority to address the chronic unemployment and high poverty levels found in the Bering Strait.

Artists are vital contributors to their communities' existing economic landscapes. When artists have access to additional resources, new markets, and places to make art, there are opportunities for positive community economic development outcomes.

Utilizing grant funding from First Peoples Fund, Kawerak distributed a region-wide survey to ask artists directly about how to best support their creation of art and the extent to which arts contribute to their household income. The personal insights shared by the artists provided valuable information on how Kawerak and resource partners can build a well-planned, sustainable, and innovative program to support the individual artists in the Bering Strait region.

SURVEY

Based on a survey designed by the First Peoples Fund, Kawerak developed a 39-item survey tailored to the Bering Strait region. The survey examined:

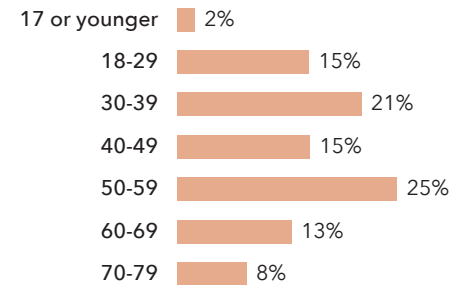
- types of art created by Bering Strait artists
- how and where artists create their work
- contexts in which artists sell their art
- economic role of art in households
- infrastructure and training needs of artists in the region.

A total of 172 individuals completed the survey online or in-person. The average age of respondents was 46. Respondents were most likely to live in Savoonga, Gambell or Nome at the time of survey completion, and 95 percent of respondents identified as Alaska Native. More than a third of respondents described themselves as Mentor/Master/Mature artists with approximately 10-15 years or more of experience. Kawerak administered the survey, and McDowell Group compiled the results.

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

In 2019, five interviews (averaging one hour in length) and three focus groups (averaging two hours in length) were held with a total of 14 artists in Nome, Brevig Mission, and Savoonga to further explore the importance of the arts to the artists and their communities. Artists who participated in the interviews and focus groups described their primary art forms as beading, carving, basketry, sewing, writing, painting, and dancing. Participants included Yup'ik, Inupiaq, and St. Lawrence Island Yupik people and ranged in age from teen-aged to elderhood. Their artistry skill levels spanned from newly-starting artist to master artist. Topics explored included artist skill levels, disciplines, and the experience of art creation; economic considerations related to the arts; connections among art, community, culture

AGE OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



and subsistence; among other areas of discussion. Sandhill.Culture.Craft conducted and analyzed the ethnographic, semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

McDowell Group interpreted the results and developed this report.



Art Creation



Beach grass basket, Pauline Klementson (Yupik)



Beaded fox tail earrings, Teresa Trigg (Inupiaq)

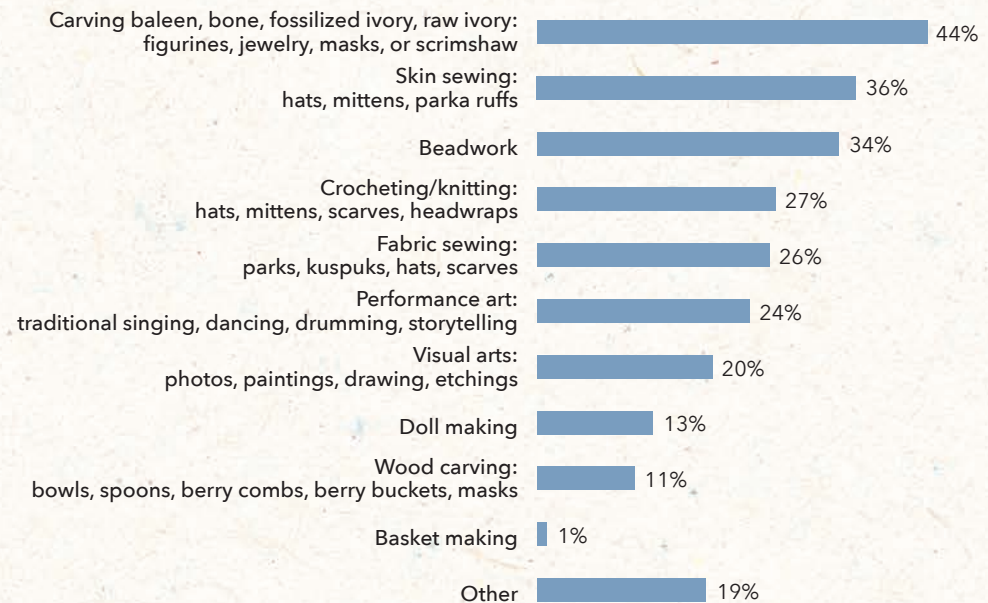
BERING STRAIT ARTISTS create a wide range of artwork from carving of baleen, bone and ivory to beading, skin sewing, and performance art. Many artists practice several art forms. The most common form of artwork practiced in the region is carving, including baleen, bone, fossilized ivory or raw ivory. Approximately one-third of artists create skin sewing art and/or beadwork. About a quarter of artists who responded to the survey create crocheted/knitted art, fabric sewing, and/or performance art such as traditional dance, singing and storytelling (27, 26, and 24 percent).

More than half of survey respondents work on their art several times a week (29 percent almost every day, 23 percent a few times a week).

Calfskin kammaks (boots), Wilfred Topkok



WHAT TYPE(S) OF ARTS AND CRAFTS DO YOU CREATE?





ART CREATION LEARNING AND SKILL

Artists of all skill levels—emerging, practicing, professional, and master—live and create work in the Bering Strait region.

The journey from emerging to master artist takes time and relies on connections to place, people and traditional knowledge. Opportunities to learn emerge from artists’ connections to the land through subsistence, their social networks of various types (such as family members and mentors), and cultural memory. As artists develop their skills, they often strengthen those very connections through their work. Many participants described learning their craft at a young age, emphasized the importance of young people learning about art, and spoke of their commitment to mentoring younger artists.

Of artists who responded to the survey, the majority described themselves as master artists with approximately 10-15 years or more of experience (39 percent). About a quarter of respondents described themselves as either practicing/establishing artists with approximately 3-5 years of experience (24 percent) or professional artists with between 5-10 years of experience (26 percent). Twelve percent of artists are emerging artists, new learners with less than three years of experience.

“[TEACHING and learning art] is the same process as when you have young kids go hunting... They don’t know what to do, but they’ll watch, and next time they’ll help out, and if you ask them to hold this and that they’ll start taking part in it, they’ll learn.”

“I HELPED my grandfather make some of those pieces [carvings]... I studied his techniques...that was a fairly exciting time of my life.”

ART CREATION MATERIALS

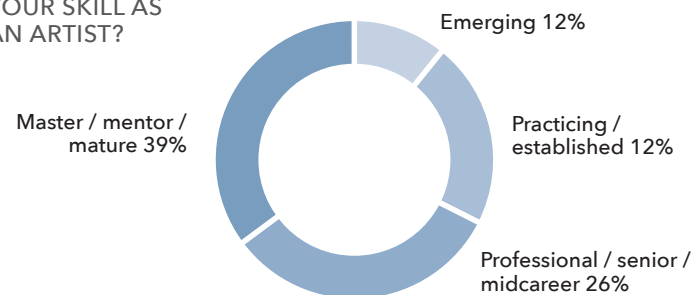
Bering Strait artists use a variety of natural and synthetic materials to create their work.

Materials are often shared, gifted, or purchased among artists. Participants described donating ivory to carvers in need of material and receiving beads from friends passing through.

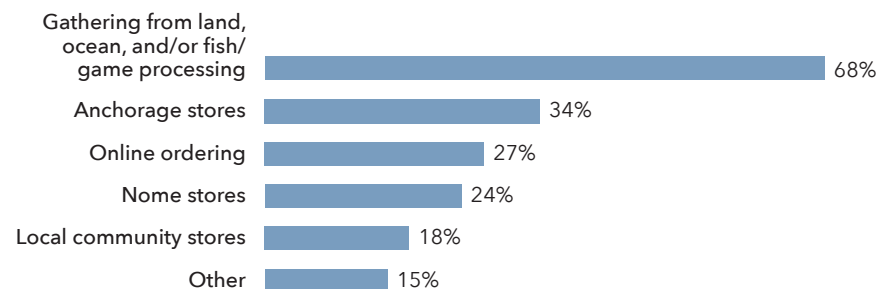
Artistic material is often closely connected with subsistence activities or the broader environment. For example, some artists described how the changing climate affects art by limiting the availability of subsistence-based resources for creating art and by putting pressure on artists to earn more from their work to offset a more limited food supply.

Many gather local materials from the land, ocean, and/or fish/game processing (68 percent). Artists also reported purchasing materials from stores in Anchorage (34 percent), stores in Nome (24 percent), and their community store (18 percent). Over a quarter of responding artists purchase materials online from various retailers (27 percent).

HOW DO YOU CLASSIFY YOUR SKILL AS AN ARTIST?



WHERE DO YOU NORMALLY ACCESS MATERIALS?





Ivory walrus, Benjamin Pungowiyi (St. Lawrence Island Yupik)

IVORY BAN

Knowledge and concern about ivory bans varied. Well over half of artists who completed the survey are aware that some states in the Lower 48 are banning the sale of ivory (63 percent). Forty-five percent of responding artists have noticed a decrease in the sale of items made of raw or fossilized ivory during the last year; 37 percent had not. Focus group and interview participants generally opposed bans that would affect Alaska Native artist use of mammoth or walrus ivory.

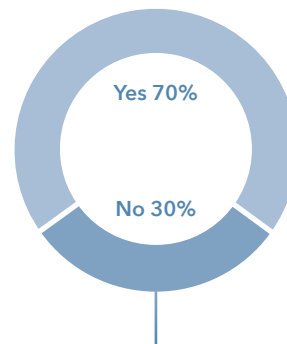
“OUT ON MY FIRST HUNT, when I was like 12 years old, I got into a walrus hunting party... those were my first sightings of animals which I carved... I got the techniques of butchering the animals, and as I did, I closely examined the animals for their details.”

ART CREATION SPACE

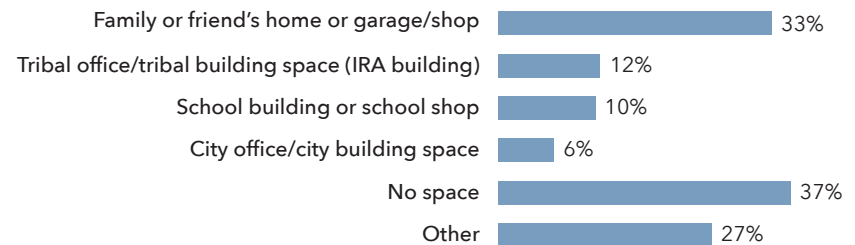
During focus groups and interviews, artists suggested that establishing dedicated arts-and-crafts workplaces in communities would not only solve logistical issues (such as ventilating carving dust) but also provide opportunities for interaction among artists.

Most artists who responded to the survey have a dedicated space at home to work on art (70 percent). Of the remaining 30 percent who do not have a space at home, a third work in a family or friend’s home or garage/shop (33 percent) or some other space (27 percent). Thirty-seven percent of artists who said they did not have a space at home, do not have a workspace in the community either.

DO YOU HAVE SPACE AT HOME SPECIFICALLY TO WORK ON YOUR ART/CRAFT?



IF “NO,” DO YOU HAVE A WORKSPACE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



Financial Importance of Art

Artwork matters financially to artists, whether as a primary source of income or, more commonly, as supplemental income. Art can provide money throughout the year, including when jobs are limited or subsistence resources are not as plentiful due to the season and the changing climate. For many artists, selling artwork provides supplemental income that helps pay bills, fund subsistence activities, provide cash in an emergency, and support other family needs such as sports-related travel or college tuition. Artists also barter their work for other goods or donate their art to those in need. Many artists would create art even if their work did not generate income, largely because of the well-being and purpose experienced through their work.

INCOME

Artists who responded to the survey reported an **average household income of \$28,000** in 2017, before taxes. A third of artists reported earning less than \$5,000 in 2017 (33 percent); 79 percent of surveyed artists report household incomes under \$50,000.

DO YOU SELL ANY OF YOUR ART/
CRAFTS AS A WAY TO SUPPLEMENT
YOUR MONTHLY INCOME?



Baleen basket, MaryJane Litchard (Inupiaq)



Caroline Brown (Inupiaq)

"[WHEN SELLING in the village] I usually sell my stuff to the teachers or some local people that like them too, but I always have to give a low price for the local people because they don't have as much money as others; some people like them, and I don't mind, and it will help me too, but it also will kind of hurt me because it's kind of like half-price. I usually send my stuff out to Nome ... it's kind of hard to sell here in the village."



FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE SELLING ART

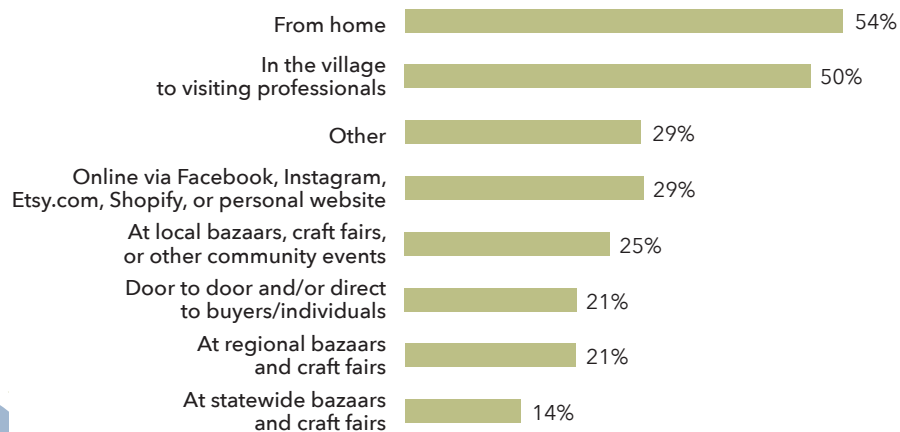
Over two thirds of artists who responded to the survey sell their art or craft to supplement monthly income (68 percent). Of these, half sell art/crafts from their homes (54 percent) and to visiting professionals in the village (50 percent). Nearly a third of artists who sell their work, sell art/crafts online via Facebook, Instagram, Etsy, Shopify, or a personal website (29 percent).

Just over one third of artists report traveling outside of their home community to sell work (34 percent) spending an average of \$829 on travel expenses. Most artists, however, do not report traveling to sell their art/crafts (66 percent). Of artists who travel, half go out of the region (52 percent); 41 percent remain in the region, traveling to Nome and surrounding villages; and over a third travel both in and out of the region (34 percent). Very few artists have ever applied for loans or grants to supplement their artistic work (only 4 percent).

HOW OFTEN DO YOU BARTER AND/OR TRADE YOUR ART/CRAFTS?

Never	32%
Rarely	29%
Sometimes	29%
Often	7%
All of the time	2%

WHERE DO YOU SELL MOST OF YOUR ART/CRAFTS?

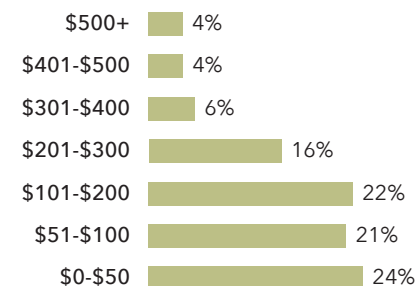


FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE PRICING ART

Pricing artwork is not clear-cut. When selling art locally, artists often sell at reduced prices. During focus groups and interviews, artists noted what is often a large and frustrating gap between what they receive for their work and what art resellers earn. The cost of shipping work to sellers can further limit earnings. One artist described learning to balance the creation of large, more expensive pieces with smaller, less expensive works which sell more quickly, as well as learning which pieces sell best in different locations.

Of artists who report selling their work, the price of individual pieces ranged from \$144 to \$463, on average. About one quarter of artists report their average price per piece is between \$0 and \$50 (24 percent). Twenty-five percent of artists reported that their most expensive piece sold in the last 12 months was over \$500. Artists desire training on pricing art, working with galleries, and marketing, among other topics. Training, coupled with access to online markets, can ensure competitive and accurate value for Indigenous art.

WHAT IS THE AVERAGE PRICE OF EACH ITEM THAT YOU SELL?



WHICH TYPES OF BUSINESS TRAINING WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN?

Pricing your artwork	41%
How to work with galleries/art shows to display your work	31%
How to teach your art/craft to other people	31%
Social media marketing	22%
Incorporating Native values into your business practices	22%
Methods of tracking and communicating with buyers/clients	21%
How to set up Paypal or use Square, for instant electronic payments	20%
Preparing for and displaying at art shows	20%
Advertising (postcards, brochures, business cards, etc.)	18%
How to become certified through the Silver Hand Program	18%
How to develop a business plan	18%
How to develop a digital portfolio of your work	18%
How to do your taxes for your art sales	14%
Basic computer and social media skills	14%
Logo/brand development	13%
How to acquire a business license	13%
Other	3%

FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE MARKETING ART

While most artists who responded to the survey feel satisfied with available opportunities to distribute or sell arts/crafts (69 percent), just under a third do not (31 percent). Thirty-eight percent of responding artists have not had formal or informal business training. Those who have primarily learned from friends or family (38 percent), other artists (30), or Elders (26 percent). Survey results showed that Bering Strait artists would be interested in a variety of training types, the most popular being ‘pricing your artwork’ (41 percent), ‘how to work with galleries/art shows to display your work’ (31 percent), and ‘how to teach your art/craft to other people’ (31 percent).



Frank Miller artwork. PHOTO BY KATIE MILLER

FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE ALASKA ARTS ECONOMY

The arts play a broad and significant role in Alaska’s economy—benefiting not only the artists who create and sell their work, but also Alaskans who purchase, retail, promote, teach and volunteer for the arts—locally in the Bering Strait region and throughout the state. Half of Alaska households consider the arts important to the economy, and 60 percent of Alaska households consider art important for quality of life.

Nationally, the non-profit arts sector generated \$166.3 billion in economic activity and supported 4.6 million jobs in 2015. In 2001, the most recent statewide analysis completed, an estimated 4,500 Alaskans, approximately 2 percent of the workforce, earned income from arts-related activity. In terms of people directly employed, the arts sector was larger than Alaska’s mining, residential construction, and banking sectors. In 2001, Alaska artists earned an estimated \$20 million. Total employment in the arts sector, including arts organizations and sellers, accounted for approximately \$40 million in annual income to Alaskans in 2001. Indirect economic impact from the arts industry supported an additional 600 jobs and \$16 million in earnings in 2001.





Connections to People, Place and Time

Creation of art/crafts matters to artists financially, culturally, physically, psychologically, and in terms of artists' connections to the cosmos and environment. It is a whole body, whole spirit, and whole person endeavor.



Benjamin Pungowiyi (St. Lawrence Island Yupik)

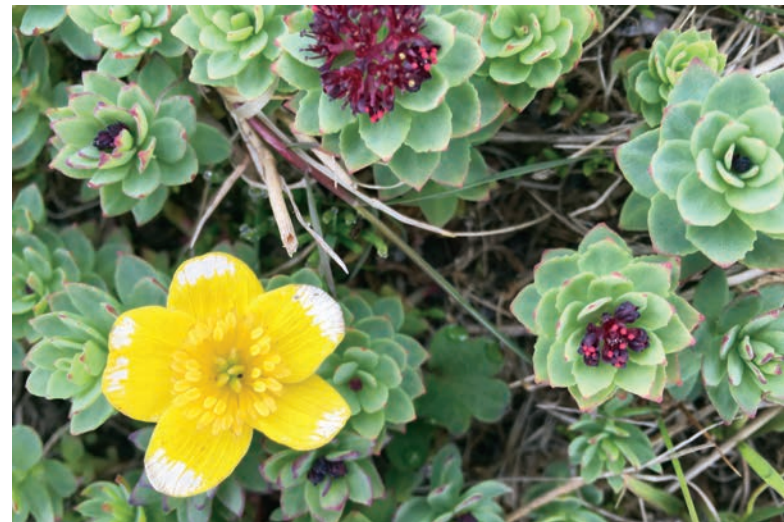
CONNECTIONS WELLNESS AND PURPOSE

Art supports the physical, mental and spiritual wellness of artists. Craft work is time-intensive and, often, physically demanding. The practice of creating art teaches patience and resilience, for example, when an artist must fix a piece that breaks or learns a new skill. Art creation can reduce stress, clear the mind and promote a sense of peace. Many artists derive a deep sense of satisfaction from their pieces. Artwork is an avenue of spiritual connection for many artists, an opening to receive from and connect with the spiritual realm.

"[MAKING ARTWORK] eases my mind because I cancel all my stress, [...] it just cleans your mind."

"AFTER I DANCE, my heart, my spirit is really uplifted, like all my worries and fears and whatever go away. It's a really good healing thing."

"I HAD TO LEARN the hard way how to pick grasses. My mom made me stay out the whole day, I remember, until I got it right. I had to look at - all the grasses, they look the same, when they die they all look the same. I had to sit there and figure out which was from last year, the day before, the year after, and this year's grass. That's how she taught me how to learn grass. And it was hard. And she knew the difference; I didn't. It was the feeling of each grass, from hard to soft. That's how I learned, to touch the grass."

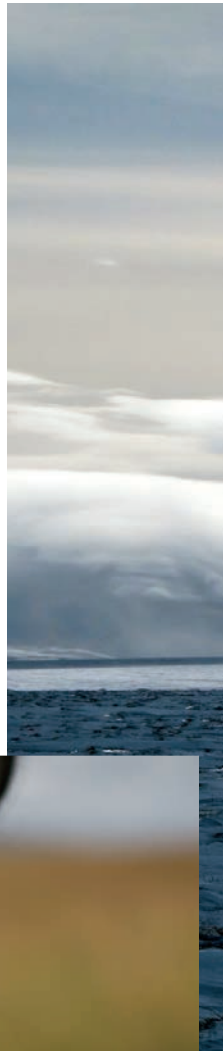


"I'M GETTING INTO more of an ancient style [...] my thought was to represent our ancestors to keep that art visible to the world before it disappears [...] so the next generation could pick up on it."

"WHEN I STARTED, I used to be kind of tense, but as time went by, I learned to control my mind and my body, to take my time, rather than try to rush."



Silver fox tail earrings, Teresa Trigg (Inupiaq)





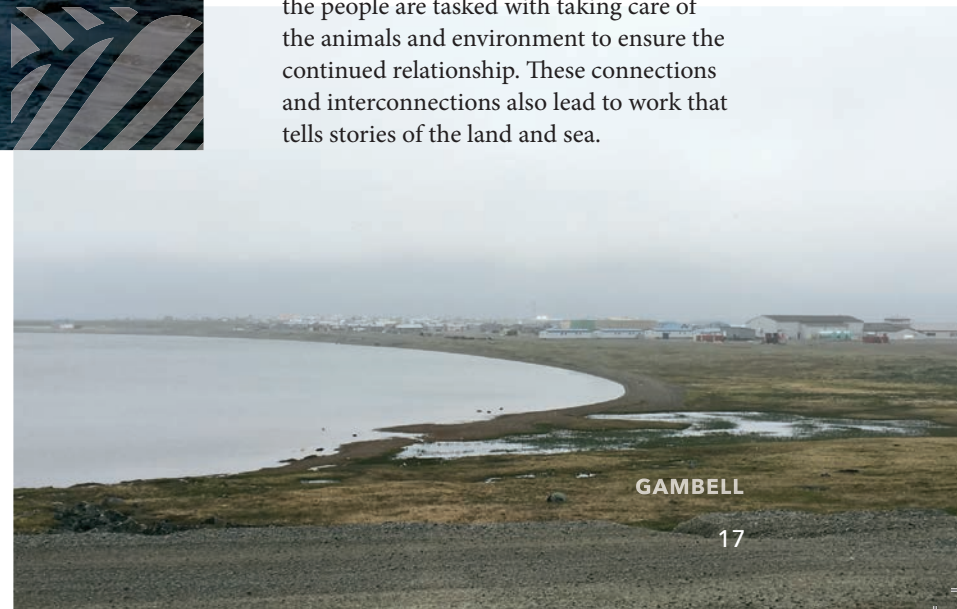
TRAIL TO SERPENTINE HOT SPRINGS

“[W]HEN YOU REPRESENT what came from this region, and it's showing the rest of the world what it's like up here, it kind of gives me a [...] push to do more artwork.”



CONNECTIONS PLACE

In the Bering Strait Region, creation of art is intimately connected to the place. The ancestral lands and waters provide connection, inspiration, and materials for work. Artists connect to place through traditional knowledge and practices that provide the framework in which artist can deepen their art experience. In the case of a grass basket maker, through knowledge passed down, the artist knows the types of grasses and reads their age through touch. While picking, the colors of the tundra, animals in the sky and sound of the ocean can come into the art-making experience. Those experiences then weave into her work, or are shared with others to be incorporated into song and other works of art. Art also provides practical items for survival in the extreme weather in the Bering Strait, such as beaded seal skin mittens and fur lined atigis (parkas) crafted and utilized for warmth. These gifts of the animals of the land are essential for the survival of the people, and the people are tasked with taking care of the animals and environment to ensure the continued relationship. These connections and interconnections also lead to work that tells stories of the land and sea.



GAMBELL

CONNECTIONS
SUSTAINING CULTURE

Art creation preserves and sustains the living body of traditional knowledge. Art is one of the most important avenues to express culture; its various forms—carving, beading, sewing, dancing—must be lived and practiced to be sustained. Many artists create their work, in part, to pass on their crafts to others and ensure traditions are remembered, by creating art that carries memory and teaching younger generations of artists. Creation of art, for many artists, is closely connected with subsistence practices, whether directly through materials or inspiration from the land.



Ivory figurines, Edwin Noongwook (St. Lawrence Island Yupik)

“TO ME, IT’S ALMOST like a real spiritual thing. Like when I want to carve, when I get a piece of material, and I hold it in my hand, I am just silent with it, and it will speak to me and tell me what it wants to become, and then I’ll carve it into that.”

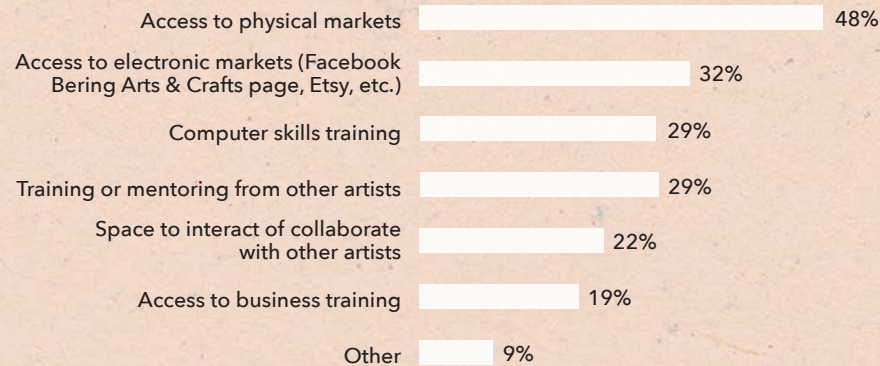
SUPPORTING BERING STRAIT ARTISTS

Artists who responded to the survey and who participated in interviews and focus groups provided suggestions to strengthen the practice of traditional arts and crafts forms in the region. Access to materials, space to create work, support for selling art, and educational opportunities to pass on traditional methods were the most frequently mentioned areas of need. Please also see page 5.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD PROVIDE THE MOST HELP TO YOU IN THE CREATION OF YOUR ART/CRAFTS?

Access to materials and resources for creating art	64%
Space to create art	48%
Training or mentoring from other artists	33%
Space to interact or collaborate with other artists	31%
Access to credit and financial assistance	21%
Access to business training	21%
Other	7%

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD BE MOST HELPFUL IN SUPPORTING DISTRIBUTION OR SALE OF YOUR ART/CRAFTS?



THANK YOU

Kawerak, Inc. thanks the following organizations and individuals for their contributions to this document.

All artists and crafters who participated in the survey, focus groups and interviews.

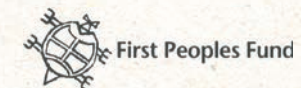
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*Beaded seal
skin earrings,
Teresa Trigg
(Inupiaq)*