



The Central Appalachian Folk and Traditional Arts Survey and Planning Project

Executive Summary

MID ATLANTIC ARTS



Covers: Mingo County West Virginia. Credit: Roger May.
This page: Animal print molds for children to create a keepsake
at the Norton Friends & Farmers Market High Knob Outdoor Fest
in Wise, VA. Credit: Nicole Musgrave.

Mid Atlantic Arts is one of six regional arts organizations in the United States, and is distinguished for its work in international cultural exchange, model programs in performing arts touring, its knowledge and presence in the jazz field, and its support of folk and traditional arts. Mid Atlantic Arts nurtures and funds the creation and presentation of diverse artistic expression and connects people to meaningful arts experiences within our region and beyond.

As part of its commitment to folk and traditional arts, Mid Atlantic Arts recently pursued an opportunity to initiate a research initiative to explore the transmission, understanding, and appreciation of folk and traditional arts currently practiced in Central Appalachia. Aware of the complicated history of funding initiatives in the region, significant resource disparities, and the presence of dynamic local folk and traditional arts ecosystems across the region, Mid Atlantic Arts launched a research project to learn more about the work currently underway in the defined region. With the support of a private funder, Mid Atlantic Arts initiated [The Central Appalachian Folk and Traditional Arts \(CAFTA\) Survey and Planning Project](#) in 2019 with the intention of building a new program mindful of community sensibilities and responsive to the needs of practicing folk and traditional artists.

The CAFTA Project was conducted in cooperation with the [Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network \(LiKEN\)](#) under the direction of folklorist, Mary Hufford. The project included a 15-month study of folk and traditional arts in the [central Appalachian regions of Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia](#), as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission.



Visitor with hand carved and painted walking stick at the annual Y-Bridge Arts Festival in downtown Zanesville, Muskingum County, OH.
Credit: Jess Lamar Reece Holler.



Annual Warren Greek Festival at the St. Demetrios Orthodox Church near downtown Warren, Trumbull County, OH.
Credit: Jess Lamar Reece Holler.

Project Objectives

Lady D performs at the
Freefolk Brewery in Fayetteville, WV.
Credit: Jordan Lovejoy and Michael Gallimore.

- **To survey** established and emerging arts and culture programs, festivals, archives, and initiatives in order to assess their constituencies, goals, and outcomes, and to understand the barriers and opportunities they face within the context of economic and demographic trends;
- **To identify** folk and traditional artists in the region and listen deeply to their experiences with community and public programming, their current methods for intergenerational transfer of traditional practices, and the forms of recognition they value;
- **To undertake** a systematic assessment of stakeholders, identifying potential partners and resources for the proposed program;
- **To build** rapport, trust, and credibility in the region.



Research Phase

Field Team and Advisors planning during the first CAFTA Summit held in Bland, VA. Credit: Betsy Taylor, LiKEN.

The **Research Phase of the CAFTA Project** occurred from February 2019 through February 2020. To achieve project objectives, LiKEN assembled a team of 10 Field Team members to cover the 112 counties included in the project. Field Team county assignments were determined based on each individual's area of interest, depth of experience in specific counties, and available time commitment. Field Team members conducted ethnographic field work through participant observations, interviews, and documentation and submitted raw data and individual County Reports summarizing findings by county. Throughout the project, Mid Atlantic Arts, LiKEN, and the Field Team received feedback and guidance from a 14-member Advisory Group comprised of folk and traditional arts professionals. A list of Field Team and Advisory Group members is available on Mid Atlantic Arts' [website](#).

Upon research completion, LiKEN analyzed Field Team submissions and drafted project findings. Drafts were reviewed by the Advisory Group and other stakeholders before being presented as the [CAFTA Final Report](#). In addition to the Report, data about individual artists and practitioners, programs, and events were aggregated into [CAFTA Inventories](#).



Project Findings

Jamit! Baskets woven by Mike and Judy McDade in Pickaway, WV.
Credit: Jordan Lovejoy and Michael Gallimore.

Capturing the vibrancy and diversity of folk and traditional arts currently practiced in the region as well as mounting concerns about resource scarcity and cultural sustainability, this project highlights the current findings along with the potential impact of new funding programs and partnerships. Across the counties, fieldworkers found remarkable, resilient, and variegated evidence of “vital and constantly reinigorated artistic traditions.” The findings have been distilled into six categories:

- **The Interplay of Community Life and Folk and Traditional Arts**

Across the entire survey region, there was a profound awareness of the need to promote community by creating shared experiences through the arts and other cultural activities. This might include those more “traditional” arts of basket or quilt making to foodways or environmental arts and emergent practices like table-top gaming and stand-up comedy.

- **Economic Context and Folk and Traditional Arts**

The survey found that in the wake of deindustrialization, many communities have turned to the folk and traditional arts as a means to promote economic revitalization. Artists and community leaders across the region are using historic sites, public art, and remnants of industrialization combined with grassroots activism to spur tourism and revitalization.

- **Folk and Traditional Artists, Practitioners, and Tradition Bearers**

While there are many folk and traditional artists, practitioners, and tradition bearers in the area of study, only a small percentage are earning their living from their practice. On the other hand, individuals laid off from industrial jobs have repurposed their technical skills for artistic practices and much needed supplementary income. The presence of folk and traditional artists shows up across a community, either through selling in local gift shops, participating in gatherings such as music nights, or arts education programs in public schools.

- **Spaces and Methods of Transmission**

A complex and variable mechanism for transmission of traditional practice and cultural knowledge existed across the region. Many practitioners referenced learning from

familial or community mentors while some identified as self-taught having studied online and refined their skills through personal practice. Across the region practitioners credited elementary school, field trips, and participation in programs like 4-H for initially exposing them to folk and traditional arts. Other common methods for sharing and transmitted traditions included folk classes and schools, apprenticeships, travelling exhibits, and community spaces and peer learning.

- **Folk and Traditional Arts and Under or Misrepresented Communities**

African American, Latinx/Hispanic, Native American, LGBTQA+, and recently arrived immigrants, as well as geographically marginalized communities were identified as groups underrepresented in arts and culture funding histories. Significant additional research is recommended in these communities. Observations include that despite the deep roots of African Americans in the region, cultural organizations that serve them are not formally networked; many of these populations have historical sites of significance in the

region that are being used for public education and tourist sites; LatinX and Hispanic communities tend to center cultural activities in family and religious gatherings and are largely under the radar of traditional infrastructure; the LGBTQA+ community has become more visible over the last decade and is heavily invested in their Appalachian identity; and that social tension strains collaborative relationships between geographically isolated and more urbanized communities.

- **Support Systems and Programs**

While certainly not an exhaustive list, the survey found that the support for folk and traditional arts comes from a variety of sources and included funding at the national, state, and local level. Support for practitioners is available through fellowships, a variety of guilds and associations, along with other interest groups. University systems provide support for formal archives, collections, and museums. Corporate sponsorships are a common source of support for local events and festivals that feature folk and traditional arts.

A more detailed overview of the findings, along with a deeper look at subregional characteristics and opportunities identified at this stage, can be found in the full [CAFTA Final Report](#).

Program Recommendations

In response to the project's findings, LiKEN crafted the [CAFTA Program Proposal](#) which includes an expansive and aspirational list of potential program and funding activities for both Mid Atlantic Arts and other potential funders. LiKEN recommended five complementary funding initiatives specifically for Mid Atlantic Arts, believing these programs would have the greatest potential impact on the region given Mid Atlantic Art's mission, strengths, existing partners, and current strategic plan. These program recommendations are:

- **Listening to Underrepresented Communities**

This work includes building responsive folk and traditional arts resources for communities underrepresented in existing arts and culture programs, including but not limited to African American, LGBTQA+, Native American, Latinx, and geographically marginalized rural communities. Unique programming and grant opportunities would be developed for focus communities based on specific and immediate needs identified by on-going field work. This initiative suggests that Mid Atlantic Arts should consider partnering with universities and community scholars to develop field school programs to sustain the long-term field work essential to this concept.

- **Strengthening Regional Support Systems for Local Folk and Traditional Arts**

This initiative leverages the programs ability to have a regional reach to bring local initiatives together through new resources and launch new regional projects ripe for support. Recommended activities include a regional grant program supporting multi-state apprenticeships; community projects; a regional peer arts learning network; and a regional award program awarding fellowships to practitioners, community scholars, and archivists and recognizing them in meaningful ways.

- **Arts and Community Space**

This program area nurtures collaboration among multiple sectors to overcome socio-economic barriers that hamper community wellness and folk and traditional arts practice

to position communities in robust and healthy futures. This initiative is designed to strategically direct resources to the most vulnerable, addressing wealth and funding disparities and suggests a variety of grant support programs, including: Creative Placemaking; Support for For-Profit Organizations and Businesses Supporting/Partnering with the Arts; Public Arts Direct Grants; and Grants to Projects Supporting Folk and Traditional Arts and Healthy Communities..

- **Increase Opportunities for Folk and Traditional Artists in Existing Programs and Events**

This initiative addresses common resource gaps that prevent folk and traditional artists from participating in existing public programs and other opportunities. Recommendations include offering travel and participation stipends for practitioners to attend festivals, conferences, and other trainings as well as creating unique creation stipends for folk and traditional artists through existing artists-in-residency programs operating in the region.

- **Professional Development for Folk and Traditional Artists**

Includes developing and delivering accessible and relevant technical assistance and training to practitioners in the region. This initiative targets practicing folk and traditional artists interested in increasing the profitability of their practice by further developing their entrepreneurial skills and public presentation skills. Selected participants would be provided with a stipend to cover the cost of materials, travel, and per diem.

Outcomes for Mid Atlantic Arts

In October 2020, Mid Atlantic Arts publicly announced the CAFTA Final Report and CAFTA Program Proposal. Following the public release, Mid Atlantic Arts conducted a series of Public Feedback Sessions. Mid Atlantic Arts has identified several program recommendations from LiKEN's proposal for further development. Program priorities have been informed by public response to the CAFTA Project, as well as Mid Atlantic Arts' strategic plan. Mid Atlantic Arts' goal is to launch a multi-year, multi-state program to support the understanding, recognition, and practice of folk and traditional arts in the Appalachian regions of Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia by the end of 2021. Mid Atlantic Arts will launch the program in phases while sustaining efforts to secure additional funding to extend and expand the program over time.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to express our sincere gratitude to the hundreds of individuals who contributed to this report by providing valuable information to the Field Team. We deeply appreciate the traditional artists, culture bearers, community leaders and members, organizers, business owners, and arts advocates that generously offered CAFTA Field Team members local context and provided personal insights and experiences.

The CAFTA Field Team, who diligently surveyed a wide geographic area of 112 counties with great integrity and sensitivity, produced comprehensive county reports and a rich collection of photographs and recordings that serve as the foundation for the CAFTA Final Report. The CAFTA Field Team brought significant experience and expertise to this project with a commitment to challenging histories of field work in the region, and to approaching the conceptual and technical obstacles that come with new collaborative projects with creative resolution. The CAFTA Advisory Group offered guidance and many suggestions to CAFTA Field Team Members throughout this project. The Advisory Group provided consistent guidance to Mid Atlantic Arts, including reviewing and responding to early drafts of the CAFTA Final Report and Comprehensive Program Proposal.

This project was funded by Mid Atlantic Arts.