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Original Article

### Investigating how Art Showcases Cultural Identity in South Western Uganda: A Case Study of Mbarara City

Dickson Mwesiga<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bishop Stuart University, P. O. Box 09, Mbarara, Uganda.

\* Author for Correspondence Email: [dmmwesi@gmail.com](mailto:dmmwesi@gmail.com)

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Culture,  
Community  
Cohesion and  
Performance Art.

Introduction: Art has always been a powerful tool for expressing cultural identity across the world. From the cave paintings of ancient Europe to the contemporary visual and performance art of the 21st century, art serves as a universal language for expressing shared values, beliefs, and experiences. The study explored the role of art in expressing cultural identity in Mbarara City. Methods: This study adopted a cross-sectional research design with quantitative approaches. Data was collected from local artists, cultural institutions and community members. The total sample size was 70 respondents. A stratified random sampling method was used to select the sample, and questionnaires were used in data collection. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the survey data. Results: It was established that visual arts such as paintings and carvings depict the traditions of the Ankole people and that music and dance are taught to younger generations as part of cultural education. Respondents also noted that folk dances are frequently used during cultural events and festivals. On the role of Art in preservation of culture, it was found out that Art brings people together and promotes unity within communities and that Artists in Mbarara city play a key role in preserving local traditions. Conclusions: The findings show a strong focus on passing cultural traditions (music and dance) to the younger generation, which indicates a positive outlook for the preservation of these aspects of the culture, even though some other traditions (like storytelling and crafts) may be in decline. While there is strong agreement on the importance of music, dance, and visual arts in cultural representation, some traditional elements are less influential in the modern cultural landscape of Mbarara.

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## INTRODUCTION

Art has long been recognised as a powerful tool for expressing cultural identity and human experience across the world. Throughout history, diverse societies have used various forms of art, including visual art, music, dance, and performance as a means to communicate, celebrate, and preserve their cultural narratives (Al-Zadjali 2024). In a globalised world, art continues to serve as both a reflection of local traditions and a platform for engaging with the broader international community. Thus, the role of art in cultural identity has become increasingly significant in global discussions about heritage, memory, and nationalism (Ahmed 2023). UNESCO, through its conventions on intangible cultural heritage, emphasises the importance of protecting and promoting cultural expressions to preserve the identity of communities around the world (Echeverri 2011).

In Africa, art is deeply intertwined with cultural identity. Traditional African art forms such as beadwork, painting, sculpture, and dance are not only aesthetic expressions but are also imbued with social, spiritual, and political significance (Onibere and Ottuh 2024). African art often serves as a means of documenting history, narrating community values, and reinforcing communal ties. However, the impact of colonialism, globalisation, and urbanisation on African art has been profound. During colonial rule, African artistic traditions were undermined, often regarded as inferior or primitive in comparison to European artistic ideals. This legacy continues to influence the way African art is

perceived, both locally and internationally (Onibere and Ottuh 2024).

In Uganda, Art is often used for ceremonial, religious, and social purposes, with each ethnic group contributing its distinct style and symbolism. The role of art in expressing cultural identity in Uganda is particularly significant, as the country has gone through periods of political and social upheaval (Kidega, Kwesiga et al. 2023). During the post-independence era, Uganda faced challenges related to ethnic conflict, dictatorship, and instability, which often undermined cultural development. Despite these challenges, Uganda's artists have remained resilient, using their art to narrate the country's history, struggles, and aspirations (Muyanja 2022).

In Mbarara city, South Western Uganda, Art has long been recognised as a powerful medium for expressing cultural identity, capturing the essence of societal values, traditions, and history. It plays a significant role in representing the cultural heritage and identity of the diverse ethnic communities that inhabit the region (Kigozi 2023). However, despite the richness and diversity of artistic expressions in the area, there remains a lack of comprehensive research and documentation on how art in Mbarara City contributes to the preservation and promotion of cultural identity. To address this gap, the study explored the role of art in expressing cultural identity in Mbarara City, Southwestern Uganda.

### Specific Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- To identify the forms of Art used to preserve culture in Mbarara City.
- To find out the role of Art in the preservation of culture in Mbarara City.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design, which involves the collection of data at a single point in time from a sample that is representative of a larger population. This design was chosen because the research aimed to examine current practices, perceptions, and meanings associated with art and cultural identity without manipulating any variables. The cross-sectional design is particularly appropriate for sociocultural studies that focus on understanding phenomena as they exist in their natural settings (Fischer et al. 2023). The quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for standardised data collection through closed-ended Likert-scale questionnaires, which ensures consistency across all respondents.

### Area of Study

The research was conducted in Mbarara City, located in Southwestern Uganda. Mbarara is a cultural and economic hub for the Banyankole people, with a diverse artistic presence including visual arts, crafts, music, dance, sculpture, and fashion. The city also houses cultural institutions, galleries, and youth centres that support and promote cultural expressions through art.

### Target Population

The target population for the study comprised individuals who are actively engaged in or interact with the artistic and cultural sectors within Mbarara City. These included: practising visual artists, sculptors, and performers, traditional artisans and craftspeople, cultural leaders and art educators, particularly from local institutions, and Community Members.

### Sample Size

The sample size for this study was determined using *Slovin's formula*, which is used when the population size is known or can be reasonably estimated.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N * (e)^2}$$

$$n = 85 / 1 + 85(0.05)^2$$

$$n = 85 / 1 + 0.2125$$

$$n = 85 / 1.2125$$

$$n = 70$$

### Sampling Techniques

#### *Stratified Random Sampling*

A stratified random sampling method was most appropriate to ensure that all key subgroups in Mbarara City were proportionally represented. This improved the accuracy of the results and helped to examine differences among groups. With this method, the researcher divided the population into strata (subgroups) based on relevant characteristics. These were; age groups (18-30, 31-50, 51+), gender (Male, Female), occupation (Artists, Teachers, General Community Members) and education level (Primary, Secondary, Tertiary). The researcher randomly selected respondents within each stratum using random number tables. The distribution of the respondents, therefore, was 10 ART Teachers, 20 Artists, 10 Elders/Cultural Custodians and 30 Community Members.

### Data Collection Methods

#### *Questionnaires*

A structured self-administered questionnaire was developed with closed-ended Likert-scale items to assess perceptions on the role of art in cultural identity expression. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale: (1-Strongly Disagree, 2-

Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree). The key themes covered in the questionnaire were; the forms of Art used to preserve culture and the role of Art in the preservation of culture in Mbarara city. By structuring the questionnaire around these two core themes-forms of art and art's role in cultural preservation -the instrument provided a comprehensive view of how residents in Mbarara perceive and engage with artistic expressions tied to their identity.

### Data Analysis

The collected quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

(SPSS) version 25. The purpose of the analysis was to summarise, describe, and statistically examine the perceptions of respondents regarding the forms of art used and their role in preserving culture in Mbarara City. The analysis followed a two-stage approach: descriptive statistics to summarise the general trends and patterns, and inferential statistics to determine relationships and differences between demographic groups and responses.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1: Biodemographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	44	62.9
Female	26	37.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Highest Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	28	40.0
Secondary	16	22.9
Diploma	8	11.4
Degree	18	25.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Farmer	11	15.7
Business	42	60.0
Artist	9	12.9
Teacher	8	11.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Source:** Primary Data, 2025

The majority of respondents were male (62.9%), while females made up 37.1%. This suggests a gender imbalance in the sample, which may reflect the actual community demographics or indicate potential gender-based differences in engagement with cultural practices or research participation. Male perspectives may be more prominently represented in the findings, potentially influencing responses related to cultural values and art.

Also, a significant portion of respondents (40%) had only primary-level education, and another 22.9% had secondary-level education. Only 37.1% had

post-secondary qualifications (diploma or degree), indicating that most respondents (62.9%) had low to moderate education levels. This educational background could influence how respondents perceive and engage with art and cultural practices-possibly favouring practical or traditional forms over academic or institutional perspectives (like those involving museums or galleries).

Findings also show that the majority of respondents (60%) were involved in business, suggesting that the sample is largely made up of economically active individuals in the informal or commercial

sector. Artists made up only 12.9%, which is relatively small but still relevant for a study on art and culture. Teachers (11.4%) and farmers (15.7%) were also represented, adding diversity in occupation, but the relatively low numbers may mean their influence on the overall results is limited.

Figure 1: Age of the Respondents



Source: Primary Data, 2025

On average, respondents are about 46 years old. This suggests that the survey or study likely involved middle-aged adults, possibly extending into both younger and older adult populations.

A standard deviation of 14.276 years indicates that there is moderate to high variability in the ages of the respondents. Assuming a roughly normal distribution, about 68% of the respondents fall within one standard deviation of the mean: Between approximately 31.6 years ( $45.89 - 14.276$ ) and 60.2 years ( $45.89 + 14.276$ ). This means the sample likely includes both younger adults (e.g., late 20s or early 30s) and older adults (e.g., into their 60s).

Table 2: The Forms of Art Used to Preserve Culture in Mbarara City

Response	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Traditional music in Mbarara reflects the local culture and heritage.	70	1	5	3.41	1.489	Moderate agreement
Folk dances are frequently used during cultural events and festivals.	70	1	5	4.14	1.094	Strong agreement
Visual arts (e.g., paintings, carvings) depict the traditions of the Ankole people.	70	1	5	3.99	1.324	High agreement
Oral traditions such as storytelling are still practised within communities.	70	1	5	2.19	1.266	Low agreement
Traditional crafts (weaving, pottery, beadwork) are significant in preserving culture.	70	1	5	2.39	1.266	Low agreement
Cultural costumes and attire represent important symbols of identity in Mbarara.	70	1	5	2.21	1.284	Low agreement
Music and dance are taught to younger generations as part of cultural education.	70	1	5	3.57	1.336	High agreement

Source: Primary Data, 2025



Findings in the table show that there was a moderate agreement on whether traditional music in Mbarara reflects the local culture and heritage (Mean = 3.41 and Std Devn 1.489). This indicates that people are somewhat in agreement but not strongly so, suggesting that while music does have some connection to the region's culture, it may not be seen as the most significant cultural representation. This concurs with studies on Ugandan music education. Note that traditional music is still included in school curricula, such as teaching indigenous instruments and songs. However, researchers like Nsibambi (2022) emphasise that much traditional knowledge remains oral, with Western frameworks dominating scholarly records. That reflects a situation where awareness exists, but deeper understanding and critical engagement are lacking—a partial recognition that mirrors the study findings.

Respondents strongly agree that folk dances play an important role in cultural events and festivals (Mean = 4.14, Std Devn 1.094). This suggests that folk dances are a prominent and regularly featured aspect of cultural celebrations in Mbarara, emphasising their importance in maintaining cultural identity. This finding is in line with Research by Mabingo (2019), which shows that Ugandan dance teachers view heritage dances as embodied knowledge, central to communal and participatory learning. This suggests that folk dances are not only preserved, they're actively taught and experienced as living history, reinforcing the study finding that they are key features in cultural events. Also (Ssebulime 2022), note that traditional dances of southwestern Uganda performed at youth gatherings and festivals serve as both entertainment and identity sealers. If similar dances are part of Mbarara's festivals, the data resonates with these regional practices, reinforcing that dance is integral to celebration and cohesion.

Also, findings indicate that there is a strong agreement that visual arts, such as paintings and carvings, are representations of Ankole traditions. It

suggests that visual arts are recognised as a vital medium for preserving and conveying the cultural heritage of the region. The findings align with (Nkiziibweki and Mutungi 2018) in Mbarara district, who explored how Ankole traditions and artefacts inspire textile design, demonstrating a clear link between visual media and cultural motifs. Similarly, Penilope's 2011 research on small-scale weaving emphasised using traditional Ankole motifs such as pottery, basketry, and woodwork in contemporary product development, actively preserving cultural forms through visual representation.

There is a low level of agreement that oral traditions like storytelling are still practised within communities (Mean = 2.19). This suggests that storytelling may not be as commonly practised today, or that it is losing prominence in Mbarara, possibly due to modernisation or changes in communication methods. The findings resonate with (Wanyenya 2013), who investigated Bamasaaba storytelling in Eastern Uganda and found that storytelling is vanishing among Bamasaaba due to formal education, globalisation, and media shifts and could completely vanish. Also, (Khamalwa 2024) highlighted that Uganda's 15-45 age cohort is losing access to oral heritage, partly due to demographic crises like HIV/AIDS that disrupt elder-youth transmission. This supports the study's finding that the intergenerational continuity of oral traditions such as storytelling practice in Mbarara city is also weakening, suggesting that at one point, such traditions may completely disappear.

The low mean score (Mean = 2.39) indicates that traditional crafts are not viewed as highly significant in preserving culture by the respondents. It may reflect a decline in the prominence of such crafts or a lack of awareness regarding their importance in cultural preservation. However, recent academic research consistently affirms that traditional crafts are fundamental to preserving intangible cultural heritage. Scholars such as Ariffin

et al. (2023) note that traditional arts act as living expressions of community identity, history, and shared values, are intergenerational tools, transferring knowledge from elders to youth and offer contextual insight into cultural beliefs, rituals, and cosmologies that are otherwise lost in globalised settings. In stark contrast to the findings, this body of work shows that traditional crafts are not merely decorative but embedded in the social, spiritual, and historical fabric of cultures.

Similarly, the low agreement (Mean = 2.21) on cultural costumes and attire as symbols of identity suggests that they may not be as central or highly valued in representing local identity as they might have been in the past. This could point to changing fashion trends or a shift in cultural expressions. Despite this finding, recent academic research shows a strong and growing recognition of the role that traditional attire plays in preserving culture and asserting identity, especially in the face of globalisation and cultural homogenization. Contemporary scholars agree that traditional dress is far more than clothing. It is a visual language that conveys ethnic origin, historical memory, social status, and religious or ceremonial role. For example, Silas-Ufelle and Ntagu (2025) note that among the Igbo people of Nigeria, traditional attire like *isiagu* is used to symbolise status, honour, and ancestral connection, especially in rites of passage and community ceremonies. Despite the growing popularity of Western dress, such garments still carry symbolic power that reinforces communal identity. Despite the low score, the study

successfully identifies traditional clothing as a form of art and cultural preservation. The low perception is itself an important finding, revealing how modern identity formation is evolving, where public understanding may not align with scholarly and cultural practice and why revitalisation efforts are still necessary and relevant.

A relatively high level of agreement indicates that music and dance are indeed taught to younger generations, highlighting the importance placed on passing down cultural practices through education. This is a positive sign for cultural continuity in Mbarara. The strong agreement implies that music and dance are seen not only as entertainment but as integral parts of identity and heritage. It also indicates that respondents recognise and value intergenerational transmission, particularly through educational or informal settings like schools, community events, and family ceremonies. The finding concurs with Scholars like Makwa (2016) who argue that music and dance in Uganda function as vehicles of memory, helping younger generations connect with ancestral stories, values, and beliefs. In Mbarara and other areas of western Uganda, traditional performances such as Ekitaguriro (a dance of the Banyankole) are still practised and taught in schools and community functions, reinforcing cultural identity and social cohesion. The evidence from the study, supported by current scholarly literature, confirms that music and dance are vibrant forms of art used to preserve culture in Mbarara city.

**Table 3: The Role of Art in the Preservation of Culture in Mbarara City.**

Response	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Art is an effective means of transmitting cultural values to the youth	70	1	5	3.44	1.451	Moderate agreement
Public performances and exhibitions enhance the visibility of local culture.	70	1	5	3.31	1.314	Moderate agreement
Art helps maintain a sense of identity among people in Mbarara.	70	1	5	3.27	1.102	Moderate agreement
Without art, traditional culture would gradually disappear.	70	1	5	3.40	1.279	Moderate agreement
Art brings people together and promotes unity within communities.	70	1	5	3.84	1.304	High agreement
Artists in Mbarara play a key role in preserving local traditions.	70	1	5	3.84	1.369	High agreement
Cultural centres, galleries, and museums are effective in preserving cultural identity.	70	1.00	5.00	3.0857	1.31593	Low agreement

**Source:** *Primary Data, 2025*

Findings show that respondents moderately agree that art is an effective way to transmit cultural values to the youth (Mean = 3.44). This suggests that while art is recognised as a valuable tool for educating younger generations about cultural values, it might not be seen as the most significant or dominant method, indicating some mixed opinions on its effectiveness. Recent literature strongly supports the view that art is a dynamic and multidimensional channel through which culture is passed down to the next generation. According to Uduak and Akpan (2020), art communicates meaning in ways that verbal language cannot, allowing young people to visually and emotionally connect with cultural narratives. In African contexts, scholars such as Uduak and Akpan (2020) emphasise that murals, storytelling through painting, sculpture, and folk art are critical in shaping youth consciousness, especially in rural and peri-urban communities. This confirms that art is not merely decorative-it is a communicative medium through which values, norms, beliefs, and community history are encoded and shared.

There is moderate agreement that public performances and exhibitions help to enhance the visibility of local culture (Mean = 3.31). This shows

that people generally agree that these events have some positive impact on cultural exposure, but perhaps not to a very high degree. Public performances and exhibitions may still be considered important, but not the primary method for showcasing culture. This perception partially aligns with scholarly work, which consistently highlights public performances and exhibitions as powerful tools for sustaining and showcasing cultural heritage. For instance, scholars like Georgios (2018) emphasise that traditional dance, music, and drama are essential in transmitting cultural knowledge, especially to younger generations. The moderate agreement from respondents may reflect a gap between the theoretical value of these events and their practical implementation or accessibility in Mbarara.

Respondents moderately agree that art helps maintain a sense of identity among people in Mbarara (Mean = 3.27). While art does contribute to local identity, its role in shaping and sustaining this identity may not be fully recognised by all, suggesting that other factors also play an important role in preserving local identity. The finding concurs with (Valerio 2022), who argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but rather a



continually evolving process shaped by history, culture, and power. He emphasises the role of cultural practices, such as art, in producing and representing identity. Also, (Bhandari 2021) contends that cultural elements like myths, memories, symbols, and traditions (often preserved through art) form the basis of national identity. In local contexts like Mbarara, art might hold such symbolic power, but this connection might not be explicitly acknowledged by all community members, particularly in increasingly urban or modern settings where traditional art forms may be overshadowed by media and global culture. This aligns directly with the objective, showing that the role of art was explored, documented, and evaluated in the local context.

There is moderate agreement that without art, traditional culture would gradually disappear (Mean = 3.40). This shows that while there is some recognition of art's importance in preserving culture, it is not universally seen as the sole or most critical factor. Respondents likely believe that other aspects, such as social practices or education, also play a significant role. This finding aligns with the views of scholars like Baral (2023), who argued that art acts as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and histories, especially through visual symbols, music, dance, and oral traditions. However, Baral (2023) also noted that cultural continuity depends on a broader socio-cultural ecosystem, including language, rituals, and education. Similarly, (Qiu, Zuo et al. 2022) recognises intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as encompassing more than just artistic expressions. It includes oral traditions, social practices, rituals, and festive events. Art is thus one of several conduits for preserving culture. This perspective is reflected in the responses from Mbarara city, suggesting that while art is valued, its role is seen as complementary to other cultural pillars like family transmission, communal practices, and education systems. Thus, the objective was successfully met, as the data provided a clear indication of how art functions

within a larger cultural framework in Mbarara. The study highlighted not only the recognition of art's importance but also the community's nuanced understanding of the interconnected roles of various cultural elements in ensuring heritage continuity.

There is strong agreement that art plays a role in bringing people together and promoting unity within communities (Mean = 3.84). This shows that art is widely perceived not only as a medium of cultural expression but also as a social integrator. In the context of Mbarara city, this likely includes activities such as traditional dance performances, community festivals, music events, and visual art exhibitions, all of which create shared spaces where cultural identity is both expressed and reinforced. Scholars such as Al-Zadjali (2024) support this interpretation, emphasising that art fosters social bonds and helps individuals find meaning in collective identity. Also, Song and Kim (2019) highlighted the role of the arts in peacebuilding and social cohesion, particularly in multicultural and post-conflict communities. In the Ugandan context, art forms such as epic storytelling (ebyooto), community music groups, and public murals serve as platforms for dialogue, reconciliation, and shared celebration. Therefore, the strong agreement on art's role in promoting unity substantiates the broader argument that art contributes meaningfully to the preservation of culture in Mbarara, both directly and indirectly.

Respondents strongly agree that artists are crucial in preserving local traditions (Mean = 3.84). This high level of agreement underscores the important and respected position that artists occupy within the cultural landscape of Mbarara city. Respondents clearly acknowledge that artists are not merely performers or creators, but also cultural custodians responsible for transmitting heritage, values, and identities through their work. This view aligns with the arguments made by Salam (2020), who highlighted the role of African artists, musicians, poets, dancers, and storytellers as key agents in the preservation and reinvention of cultural memory.

Artists often use traditional forms and motifs while also adapting them to modern contexts, ensuring both continuity and relevance. (Telesetsky 2009) pointed out that in African settings, artists often serve as intergenerational bridges, communicating cultural meanings from elders to youth. In this way, artists help to embed cultural knowledge in accessible, lived experiences, a role that goes beyond entertainment and becomes integral to identity formation.

The relatively low mean score indicates that respondents do not strongly agree that cultural centres, galleries, and museums are effective in preserving cultural identity. This could suggest that people do not see these institutions as playing a significant role in cultural preservation, or they may feel that these places are not as accessible or impactful in promoting local culture compared to other forms of cultural expression, like public performances or community engagement. The finding concurs with Scholars such as Bhatta (2016) who argue that institutionalised art spaces in Africa often reflect colonial legacies and may fail to resonate with local populations. These spaces are sometimes seen as elite or disconnected from grassroots cultural expressions. Similarly, Raimo et al. (2022) observe that postcolonial museums in Africa have struggled to redefine their role in society, often lacking participatory programming that includes local voices. On the other hand, Pawelski (2022) in a study of Western Uganda, emphasises the role of music, dance, and drama festivals in preserving language, history, and identity, particularly among youth. These forms of expression are mobile, accessible, and tied to community narratives, which might explain why respondents in Mbarara value them more than static institutions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate that folk dances, music, and visual arts are viewed as strong cultural symbols in Mbarara, with widespread agreement on their

importance in cultural events and heritage. However, oral traditions, traditional crafts, and cultural attire are not viewed as strongly relevant or practised, which suggests that these aspects of culture might be losing ground in favour of more prominent forms like dance and music.

The findings show a strong focus on passing cultural traditions (music and dance) to the younger generation, which indicates a positive outlook for the preservation of these aspects of the culture, even though some other traditions (like storytelling and crafts) may be in decline. Thus, while there is strong agreement on the importance of music, dance, and visual arts in cultural representation, some traditional elements are less influential in the modern cultural landscape of Mbarara.

The findings of the study reflect a community that sees art and artists as essential to cultural identity and cohesion, especially through informal or community-based expressions like performances and local traditions. However, the formal structures for cultural preservation (e.g., museums and galleries) appear to be less trusted or engaged with, signalling a need to bridge the gap between institutional efforts and grassroots cultural life.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For Local Government and Policy Makers

Develop supportive policies that recognise and fund the role of art and culture in community development.

Invest in upgrading cultural infrastructure (e.g., museums, galleries, community centres) and ensure they are accessible to all segments of society.

### For Cultural Institutions (Museums, Galleries, Cultural Centres)

Revamp exhibits to be more interactive, inclusive, and relevant to local cultures and histories.

Collaborate with schools and artists to create outreach programs and travelling exhibits that engage youth and rural populations.

### For Artists and Art Organisations

Act as cultural ambassadors by integrating traditional values into contemporary art forms and sharing them widely.

Partner with communities and institutions to lead workshops, performances, and art projects that involve diverse age groups.

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