

# ARTS INNOVATION FUND

California arts organizations conducted 28 experiments to achieve new relevance for audiences, communities and professional artists with support from The James Irvine Foundation. Here's an overview of what they did and what they learned.



About the Arts Innovation Fund  
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*Irvine Arts Program Director*

## DECLINING AUDIENCE FOR TRADITIONAL ARTS

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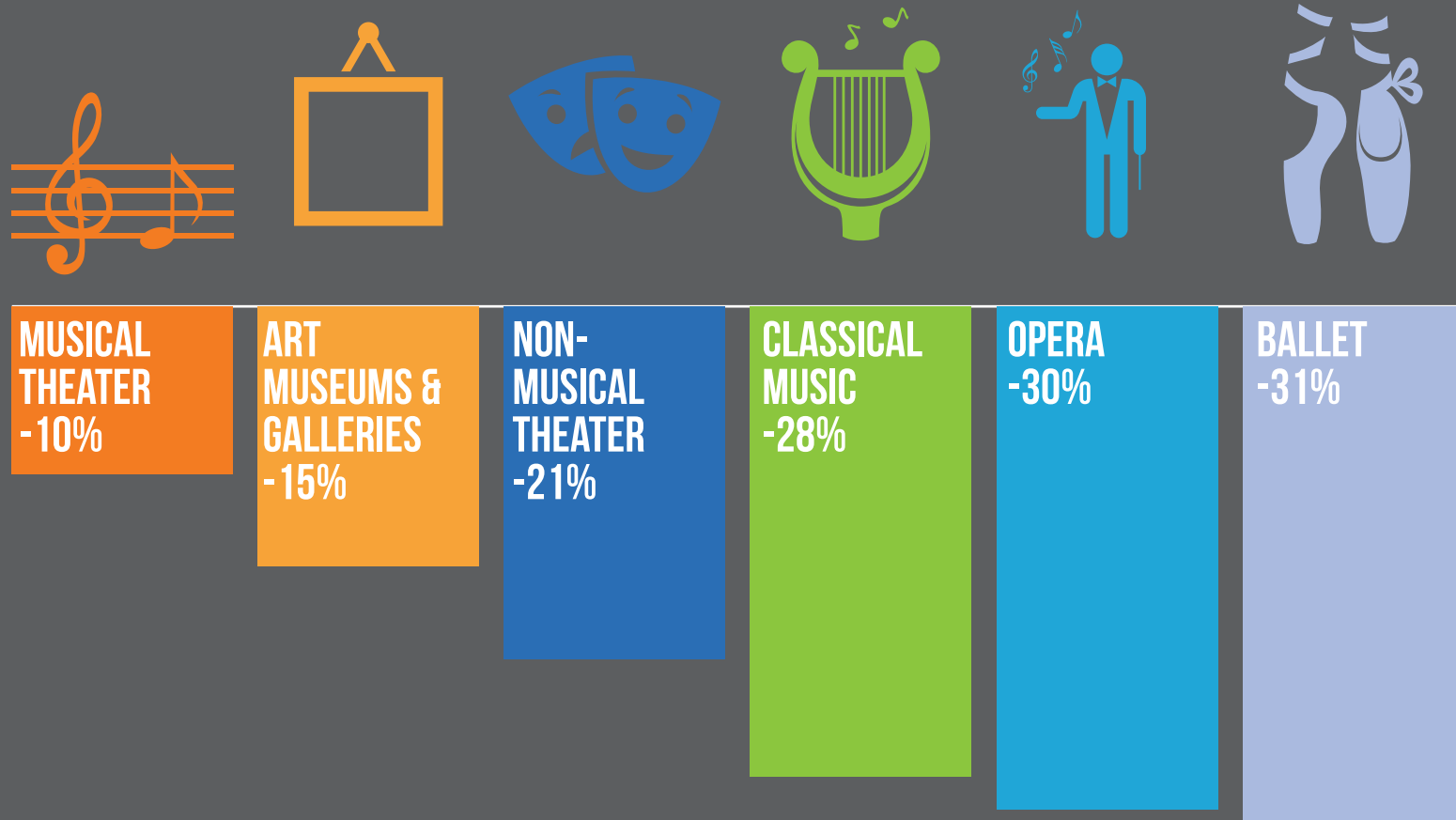


An Overview of A Laboratory for Relevance: Findings and Recommendations from the Arts Innovation Fund by The James Irvine Foundation is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

# DECLINING AUDIENCE FOR TRADITIONAL ARTS

Arts organizations have been losing audiences. Participation in arts and culture events among American adults has reached its lowest point since the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) began polling in 1982. Attendance has declined for all the performing art forms from 1982 to 2008, and has fallen for art museums and galleries since 1992.

## CHANGE IN PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES



Between 2002 and 2008, arts participation in California fell by 6 percent. See [Arts, Culture and Californians](#) for state-specific details on participation trends.

“People consume media in an entirely different way today than they did 20 years ago... As an arts organization we’d better come into line with that or **risk irrelevance.**”



The following conventional responses to boost attendance are useful, but are not enough to reverse the decline:



More marketing to promote and introduce programs



More private fundraising to make up for lost earned and contributed income



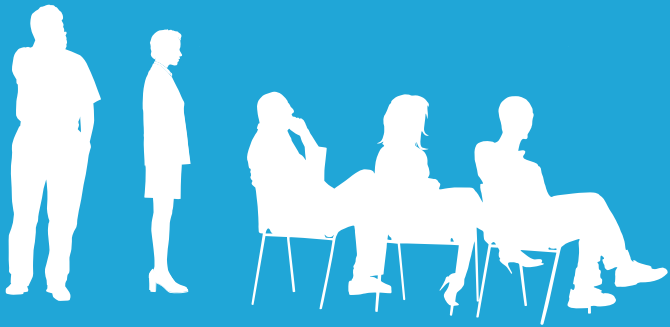
Advocacy for greater public support

With falling participation, arts organizations, thought leaders and funders are compelled to ask why — and to explore the evolving role of the arts in our lives.

# BRIDGING A RELEVANCE GAP

There is a growing divide between traditional program offerings and the interests of audiences, communities and artists. Many feel the arts must change or risk irrelevance.

## BY TRADITION...



Audiences find meaning in art primarily through observation and reflection.



Communities find identity in their major arts organizations, and those institutions play important civic roles.



Artists look to institutions as guardians of professional, high-caliber art.

## YET TODAY...



Audiences seek arts experiences that are active, immersive and even social.



Communities with changing demographics and new realities identify with, and support, major arts institutions less.



Artists feel institutions are losing touch; they crave opportunities for more diverse, challenging work.

## A GROWING DIVIDE

Mindful of this gap, Arts Innovation Fund grantees set out to reach people in new ways.

# EXPERIMENTS IN ARTS INNOVATION

Nineteen California arts institutions used funds from the initiative to carry out 28 innovation projects. Each was an experiment designed to achieve new relevance for one or more groups.

## INCREASING RELEVANCE IN THREE IMPORTANT WAYS

**Audience engagement** projects aimed to make arts experiences more participatory, personally meaningful and social.



**Community engagement** projects attempted to strengthen the connection between institutions and communities.



**Artist engagement** projects sought to increase artists' influence on institutions and their offerings.



## PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS



### ARTISTIC RESOURCE

The Old Globe  
[www.oldglobe.org](http://www.oldglobe.org)



When The Old Globe moved its technical center to southeast San Diego, the theater sought ways to become an artistic resource for students and residents of this low-income community.

The company distributed free tickets, initiated an education program in a local high school and offered paid internships in the scene shop. The centerpiece of its Arts Innovation Fund project was its effort to collaborate with residents on community productions, including *Emancipated*, which is based on stories of foster children who have aged out of foster care and face life on their own at age 18. The play was created with four “emancipated” foster youth and had public readings at The Old Globe and the local high school.

The theater marked its 75th anniversary with the development and production of *Odyssey*, a music theater event. This community collaboration featured a cast of 200, only three of whom were professional actors. Other performers included a gospel choir from a local church, a high school drum line, a local hip-hop dance group, young performers from theater training programs and schools, several Old Globe volunteers and 50 more individuals recruited through casting calls hosted by a local YMCA and a church. *Odyssey* sold out three performances at the company’s large outdoor theater in Balboa Park, and it was received with enthusiasm by the San Diego community.  
(continued)

American Conservatory Theater  
Berkeley Repertory Theatre  
Center Theatre Group  
de Young Museum  
Hammer Museum  
Japanese American National Museum  
La Jolla Playhouse  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Los Angeles Philharmonic  
Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego  
Oakland Museum of California  
Pacific Symphony  
San Diego Opera  
San Francisco Ballet  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
San Francisco Symphony  
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles  
The Music Center  
The Old Globe

 [View PDF of all projects](#)

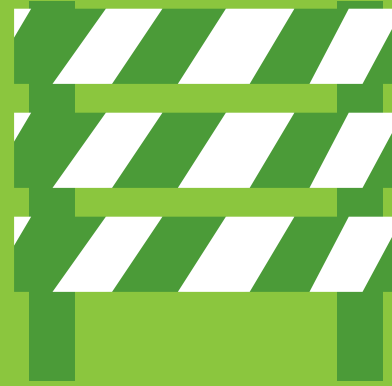
Arts Innovation Fund grantees approached the innovation challenge by extending their work and their reach in a variety of ways. Results were just as varied — and provide a rich context for future arts innovators.

# OBSTACLES THAT LIMIT CHANGE

For many arts institutions, innovation isn't easy. In fact, the process is fraught with built-in obstacles.

## RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Not everyone's interested in new kinds of engagement with the arts. Core constituents may like things as they are.



## TENSIONS RELATED TO ROLES AND OWNERSHIP

Innovation calls for organization staff to act and collaborate in new ways, creating tensions over departmental ownership and resources.



## TIME AND MONEY LIMITATIONS

Innovations require funding and people power beyond that required for existing organizational commitments; new funding streams and business models must be established to sustain and spread success beyond the experimental phase.



*“I thought this would be challenging for the first year or so and then everyone would get it. Boy, **was I wrong!**”*

- California arts innovation project director

An appreciation of these obstacles to change can help set expectations for organizations pursuing innovation and growth.



# LASTING BENEFITS AND LESSONS LEARNED

As a group, Arts Innovation Fund participants took focused, incremental steps toward bridging relevance gaps through new approaches. Although many projects were not sustained, many grantees achieved long-term organizational gains and attained valuable insights on how to increase relevance.

## ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTATION

Most Arts Innovation Fund organizations reported that the experimentation process changed them in important, lasting ways.



Formed enduring relationships with artists, community and audiences



Increased communication and collaboration across departments

Developed new capacity for learning, adapting and seizing opportunities



Reduced organizational hierarchy and involved more decision makers



Improved digital capabilities and social media presence



Grew more confident to experiment in the future

## LESSONS LEARNED

While organizations themselves experienced change, the progress of some innovation projects was limited.



### CONTAINED

Innovation projects were contained within clear boundaries, which controlled risk but also limited project outcomes and sustainability.

### INCREMENTAL

Experiments achieved incremental progress — leaders found that broad, organization-wide change would require more time and resources.

There is an open question about how to support experimental, participatory projects like those in the Arts Innovation Fund. The James Irvine Foundation's new [Arts strategy](#) aims to support arts organizations in adapting to a changing environment by helping build their capacity for change. This includes support that enables them to take risks to re-envision themselves and their work.

# WAYS TO SUPPORT INNOVATION

The right strategies can contribute to project success and lead to lasting organizational change.

## LEADERS WHO CHAMPION THE CAUSE

Successful experiments had leaders who were highly supportive of the innovation process and project. These leaders inspired and empowered staff and artists, and they protected the project and project team from resistance.

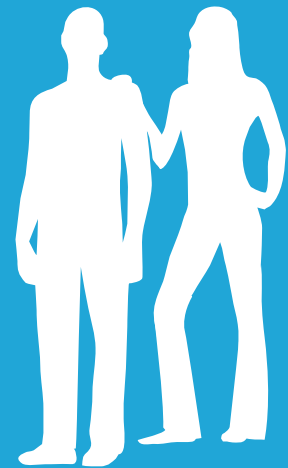


## FUNDING THAT IS DEDICATED AND PATIENT

New ventures require new funding. Because most of the resources of established, successful organizations are tied to existing programming expected by constituencies, additional funding is required to translate a successful innovation into sustainability. New revenue streams and business models are key.

## COACHES WHO OFFER FIRM SUPPORT, FLEXIBLE STRUCTURE

Strong coaching that included outside perspective from consultants and input from each organization led to positive changes in culture and skill during the innovation period. Consultants supported accountability, goal setting and measurement. They also encouraged reflection, collaboration and, when warranted, revision of approach.



## MORE ABOUT THE INITIATIVE AND ITS OUTCOMES



Josephine Ramirez, Arts Program Director,  
The James Irvine Foundation

*“We’re moving away from this question about audience engagement to this larger question: How do we as a field make and produce art that is more meaningful to more people, and more kinds of people?”*

Download the [full report](#) for an in-depth look at major findings, observations and recommendations or [join the conversation](#) on our blog.

