

Education Amplifies Arts & Crafts Value Chain



► The catalysts

Capitalizing on assets: In the early 2000s, Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission, Ala-Tom Resource Conservation & Development Council (RC&D), and the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development worked together to inventory assets for a tourism initiative. These partners identified individuals with a wealth of artistic talent throughout the 19-county Black Belt region and working in a variety of heritage crafts and fine arts.

Opportunity for new perspectives: Some counties in the Black Belt region have poverty rates over 30 or even 40 percent. Unemployment is higher than the state and national averages, and underemployment is over 20 percent for many of the counties, according to the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Council Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS, an economic development plan for part of the Black Belt region).

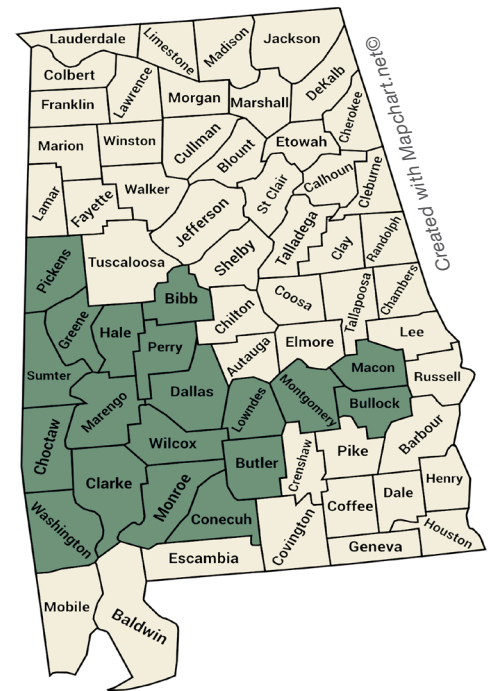
Strengthening the economy: Artists from households that are struggling financially, as well as those whose finances are more stable, are becoming more economically resilient with new markets opened up through the Black Belt Treasures

Cultural Arts Center (BBTCAC), a nonprofit that began operation in 2005. By tapping into the expertise of regional institutions and artists and connecting with tourism and education stakeholders and community leaders, BBTCAC now coordinates an arts and culture-based network of partners, with impactful roles in education and tourism.

► The value opportunities

Creative individuals throughout the region create artistic products by quilting, basket making, pottery, sculpting, and woodworking. Some complete projects simply as a hobby, while others rely on much-needed earned income. Either way, their ability to market their products was often limited before BBTCAC opened, and they often settled for the prices that they felt they could get for their work, rather than asking for a price that fully valued their time and artistic talent.

BBTCAC opened its main gallery in Camden, Alabama in a vacant car dealership in 2005, and later opened a satellite gallery in the Greenville Chamber of Commerce in Butler County, Alabama. BBTCAC also hosts a website with an online sales platform,



■ Alabama counties served by BBTCAC

along with information about the region and the artists. Initially serving 75 artists, BBTCAC's roster has grown to over 450 artists in 2018, representing a variety of artistic traditions, and with artists from across the whole income spectrum, as well as artists of all ages and races.

BBTCAC plays an important role in helping artists establish fair market prices and increase their household financial security. BBTCAC uses a juried process to accept artists' work in the gallery. This process is an important one to establish measures of quality and justify pricing. It has been important that the juried process be inclusive of diverse media and artistic styles, especially including local heritage crafts such as quilting, pottery, and basket-making.



Courtesy BBTCAC



BBTCAC Executive Director Sulynn Creswell says of the gallery: “We really want the diversity to show, because that represents the diversity of the people of the region. We have those who have been formally trained through college, and those who are folk learners and have taught themselves.”

BBTCAC staff and artists work to meet the region’s value opportunities together with other partners, including education providers such as schools and community centers; tourism businesses such as tour operators, hotels, food service businesses, and heritage tourism sites including the Camden Shoe Shop Museum, Gee’s Bend Ferry Terminal, Gee’s Bend Quilt Collective, and regional special events organizers; and regional and statewide arts organizations. Together they form a value chain, a network of businesses, organizations, and individuals who work in their own ways toward a common vision for community and economic development. The value chain receives key support from funders and financing partners and from institutions such as the Alabama State Department of Education, Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority, Black Belt Incubator Network, and numerous centers and programs at the University of Alabama, Auburn University, and University of West Alabama.

► The demand

BBTCAC and its artist partners have found that a significant amount of demand exists for the center’s work. The value chain has focused on experiential tourists, who are interested in learning about the people, history, culture, and traditions of a place. Connections to tour operators, community-based tourism groups, and marketing and promotion networks keep value chain partners in contact with demand. This approach has led to success: “We have welcomed visitors here from all 50 states and 31 foreign countries,” says Creswell, as well as visitors from within Alabama.

Artists are frequently in the shop and willing to talk with customers about their art and their own background, so that individuals who buy pieces of art often feel a connection to the artists and the place. BBTCAC Art Programs & Marketing Director Kristin Law says, “You can buy a piece of art in a store anywhere. But when you come here, you get the story, you learn about the artist, you find out about the maker, and it’s just so much more meaningful.”

Artists receive 70 percent of revenue of the products sold in the gallery, while the remaining 30 percent goes toward the gallery’s overhead costs. By 2018, over \$1 million had been earned by the artists whose work is sold in the gallery. “Some artists



might only be earning an extra \$25 per month, but that might make the difference in being able to pay a bill or having enough to eat,” Creswell says.

Demand for arts and crafts products is only part of the picture for BBTCAC. The organization focuses on education as its core mission, so demand partners also include artist entrepreneurs accessing training and business skills and lifelong learners—members of the public of all ages who seek arts education in traditional and non-traditional settings.

► Putting it together: Education increases community capitals

“We consider education starting the moment that someone walks through the door. At that point, we’re able to educate them about various art forms, the regions’ artists and craftspeople, and the history and culture of this region,” says Creswell.

A focus on education underscores much of BBTCAC’s activities in three main areas: entrepreneurship, arts, and regional cultural heritage. BBTCAC has worked with the University of West Alabama, the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, and the University of Alabama Small Business Development Center to develop a curriculum called ArtsCultivate. This series of classes and workshops are designed for artists



who currently or could in the future sell their art through BBTCAC. With a mix of business skills training and artistic development, the curriculum is intended to grow the marketability of artists' work by investing in their knowledge base, and thereby providing opportunities to increase their income. This directly impacts the financial capital of participating artists. BBTCAC staff also offer one-on-one consultations on pricing, displaying works in the gallery, and other marketing tips. These efforts increase the artists' individual capital by building their business skillsets, as well as their financial capital when the business skills translate into increased earnings.

BBTCAC holds a variety of classes for youth and adults in a variety of media, including painting, ceramics, basket weaving, chair caning, storytelling, and more. Beginners and more experienced artists develop interest in the arts through such classes, ensuring a steady stream of individuals in the region who might

produce art and fine craft products for sale in the future. Creswell says of the classes, "As a result, lives have been enriched, talents have been discovered, skills have been enhanced, and businesses have been created."

BBTCAC has workshop space where classes and summer camps are held on-site, part of its built capital. It also works with education partners to integrate arts programming into schools. With grant funding, BBTCAC launched the Teaching Artists Program, which placed teaching artists in schools in nine Alabama counties during the 2016 – 2017 and 2017 – 2018 school years. The participating teaching artists receive training on quality arts education programming. Each teaching site includes regional heritage arts and crafts and storytelling as an emphasis area, which reinforces the stock of cultural capital, as well as teaching art skills and critical thinking skills.

In summer 2018, BBTCAC held a Black Belt Area Arts Enrichment Summer Gathering for School Administrators, which was attended by 29 regional school administrators. The daylong program focused on arts integration, with presentations from state agencies and organizations, regional artists who have served in the Teaching Artists Program, a school administrator, and BBTCAC staff. This opportunity to build social capital with education stakeholders will likely lead to chances to develop and deliver new arts programming and continue to invest in the stock of community capitals across the region.

► The bottom line: Scaling up successes

The former auto dealership that houses BBTCAC includes space that has been underused in the back of the facility, where the auto repair shop had been. Once used primarily as warehouse space, the auto shop is being transformed into an Art House with support from grant funds, and the initial phase will be complete by mid-2019. The renovation will provide business incubator space for artists in the form of a studio/office, where workshop space and equipment will allow entrepreneurs to start or expand their arts business with low overhead. The renovation will also provide a new, larger general-purpose art classroom and a pottery-specific classroom with a kiln room. These improvements will help BBTCAC to better utilize the space it has available and capitalize on energy within the community for arts education, pottery in particular, and art as a business.

The initial renovation will only use 1/3 of the remaining unfinished auto shop space. Future phases of construction will likely include additional studio space, borrowing ideas about flexible studio space from site visits at other facilities. BBTCAC also hopes to construct a new meeting room that is large enough to hold gatherings of up to 75 or 80 people. Currently, the gallery's large community events are held at a nearby church or the health department, and attendees are then invited to visit the



gallery afterward. This is an important enhancement of built capital in the community, hopefully inspiring others to invest in underutilized buildings in the community.

“We are always trying to find ways to bring artists together, so they can learn from each other and build community among creative professionals. How often do they get to meet with someone doing similar work from two counties over?” says Kristin Law, BBTCAC Art Programs and Marketing Director. These additional investments in the built infrastructure, as well as future programming, that are ongoing and planned for the future will provide those kinds of networking and market opportunities. This builds vital social capital among artists, leading to the sharing of best business practices. This will continue to add further value to the economic and educational impact that BBTCAC has on the region.

► Funding the value chain

Grant support and donations from individuals and businesses have provided necessary funding for arts infrastructure and developing new programming. For example, start-up funding to set up the gallery came in the form of grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development, the Delta Regional Authority, Alabama Power Foundation, as well as a loan through the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission’s Revolving Loan Fund program. Federal support and other matching funds have continued to provide the dollars that enable capital projects. The Art House renovation occurring in 2018 – 2019 has been supported with funding from USDA Rural Development, with match from foundation grants and donations. Significant support for staffing has also been provided through the DeltaCorps program, a partnership between the Delta Regional Authority and AmeriCorps. During a one-year program, DeltaCorps members served

as significant additions to BBTCAC’s small staff, providing the staff time needed to develop relationships with teaching artists and schools and expand the Black Belt Quilt Trail tourism initiative.

State support has come in the form of grants from the Alabama Department of Tourism, as well as an annual appropriation from the state education trust fund through the Alabama Commission on Higher Education to support BBTCAC’s arts education work. Grants and appropriated state funds such as these support much of the programming that is developed and delivered.

Foundations have been critical partners, with grants that have supported both capital and programming. For example, the Art House Renovation match has included a large commitment from the Daniel Foundation of Alabama, while the Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation provided grant support for expanding the gallery space. On the programming side, the Teaching Artists Program was developed with grant funds from the Black Belt Community Foundation, Community Foundation of South Alabama, and Ala-Tom RC&D. Black Belt Teaching Artists were afforded the opportunity to provide in-school programs in nine regional counties through grants made directly to participating schools through the Alabama State Department of Education’s (ALSDE) Alabama Arts Education Initiative. BBTCAC received a grant from the nonprofit regional arts organization South Arts to expand the Black Belt Quilt Trail to showcase the region’s artistic quilting tradition, which has become well known outside



Courtesy BBTCAC

the region as well. Alabama Humanities Foundation has supported programming in many locations across the 19-county area.

The earliest partners have continued to be engaged, providing back office support and an annual monetary commitment from the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission, as well

as periodic funding through Ala-Tom RC&D, and professional resource support from the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development and the University of West Alabama Division of Economic and Workforce Development.

Donations have been an important ongoing funding source. The Guild Membership program and corporate sponsorship program invite donations to support BBTCAC’s mission. Guild Memberships can range from \$25 to over \$10,000 and help provide match for some federal grants, as well as support for educational programming. Contributions to the Guild Membership program come from individuals, businesses, and organizations whose missions are aligned with that of BBTCAC. In 2014, BBTCAC held a crowdfunding campaign on the platform Indiegogo and collected donations in the gallery to raise funds for the pottery station being developed through the Art House renovation. A successful experiment, the campaign received over \$10,000 in contributions.

Some of BBTCAC’s activities also generate revenue that help to cover certain costs. For example, BBTCAC offers youth and adult arts classes and camps with a registration fee, and the gallery earns a commission of 30 percent of art sales to cover some of their overhead expenses.

The Community Capital assessment demonstrates the assets on which BBTCAC is built and how it is growing those capitals through its concerted effort.

- **Individual capital:** The value chain is built on individual capital in the form of artists' technical skills in the medium with which they work. BBTCAC's educational activities expands on individual capital for artists and creative entrepreneurs through the ArtsCultivate program and other ongoing programs and to develop art and business skills, and for other makers and individuals through networking, programs and educational events.
- **Intellectual capital:** Regional artists hold significant creative intellectual capital and drive innovation culture through the pieces they produce. BBTCAC has partnered with intellectual capital assets such as museums, regional arts organizations, and colleges and universities to access analysis and build opportunities.
- **Social capital:** Groups that have a focus such as textiles, book discussion, and more bring together residents to celebrate the region's heritage and connect over shared interests. The annual festival Hog Wild for Arts gathers residents to celebrate arts and food. BBTCAC builds social capital by bringing artists together and helping them learn from each other.
- **Natural capital:** BBTCAC's gallery space represents infill development in an established community. Several artists use reclaimed wood and other natural materials in their art, and natural capital represents a major source of inspiration for both longtime regional artists and new residents.
- **Built capital:** Gallery and office space enable the value chain to exist, along with other built assets that facilitate tourism activity. Ongoing renovations will serve as an arts business incubator with shared studio space and equipment for creative entrepreneurs, classroom space for the adult and youth student, and community gathering/meeting space.
- **Political capital:** A BBTCAC staff member was appointed to the Alabama Course of Study Committee for Visual Arts,

providing a role in the state's approach to primary education. State-level associations and connections may lead to opportunities. Presentations at local, regional, and state meetings such as ATRC events and the Alabama Association of Regional Councils annual conference ensure local government officials are aware of the breadth of BBTCAC's work and impact.

- **Financial capital:** BBTCAC has accessed funding for capital expenses and to develop and deliver programming from a variety of public and private funders. Guild memberships indicate that local individuals and businesses are willing to invest their own resources in the work of BBTCAC.
- **Cultural capital:** The region is home to a rich cultural heritage related to the arts including literature, music, visual arts, fine crafts, and culinary arts. Arts festivals, workshops, and experiences visiting the gallery and speaking with artists celebrates and grows this cultural capital. BBTCAC refers visitors to other cultural assets in the region, such as the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective, Gee's Bend Ferry Terminal, and Camden Shoe Shop Museum. Through collaboration with the University of Alabama Press, Black Belt Treasures celebrated the region's cultural capital by publishing *Visions of the Black Belt: A Cultural Survey of the Heart of Alabama* in 2015. With more than 4,000 copies sold, the story of the valuable cultural heritage of Alabama's Black Belt is being told.
- **Local ownership and control:** BBTCAC staff and board members making decisions about the gallery and operations are all residents of the region. Artists selling products at the gallery must live within the 19-county Black Belt region of Alabama, so profits from the sale of art products can return to local entrepreneurs and drive local economies.
- **Better livelihoods:** Juried artists whose work is sold through BBTCAC include low- to moderate-income artists generating earnings through improved market access. These artists also experience an increase in pride of place, quality of life, self-worth, and interaction with like-minded peers.

Information sources:

www.blackbelttreasures.com

Black Belt Treasures: 10th Anniversary Video (2015), <https://vimeo.com/217451855#t=10s>

Black Belt Treasures Annual Report (2014). <https://blackbelttreasures.amercommerce.com/images/Publications/BBTCAC-Guild-Annual-Report-2014-FINAL.pdf>

Simply Southern TV: Show 423 featuring BBTCAC, <https://youtu.be/9OYdu66bWTY>

Black Belt Art House Pottery Station Indiegogo Campaign, www.indiegogo.com/projects/black-belt-art-house-pottery-station#/

Personal communication with Sulynn Creswell and Kristin Law.

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