

Indigenous Artist Cooperative

Feasibility Study

Prepared for

Montana Cooperative Development Center

By

Native Ways Today LLC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of a 6-month-long study to determine the feasibility of a cooperative of Indigenous artists who reside in the Billings area and on the four eastern Montana reservations – Fort Belknap, Fort Peck, Crow, and Northern Cheyenne. The Montana Cooperative Development Center (MCDC) hired Native Ways Today LLC to provide an assessment of artists in the given geographical area regarding their artistic endeavors and interest in a cooperative.

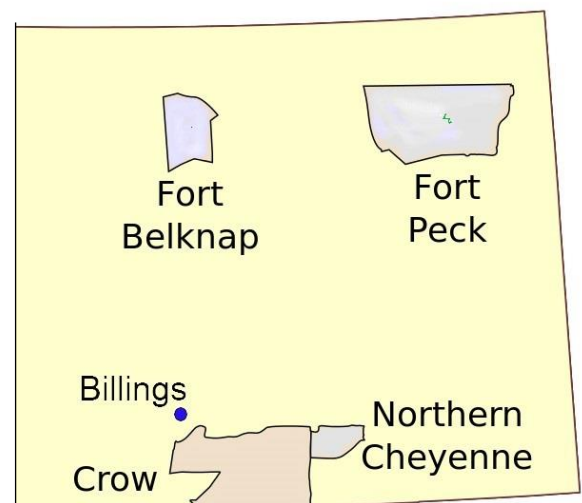
A survey of artists, along with interviews of retail establishments, art educators, and other stakeholders determined a strong interest in a potential cooperative. Among the 154 artists surveyed, all of them responded with a positive or neutral answer to the question, “Would a local (your community only) Indigenous artist co-op be of interest to you?” The majority (67%) said “yes,” with 25% saying “maybe,” and 5% answering “don’t know.” Responses were similar when asked about interest in a regional (more than one tribal community) cooperative.

While interest in a new co-op was positive, there was a general lack of familiarity among the artists with how cooperatives operate. Half of respondents acknowledged they had no familiarity, along with 30% who had heard of them, but were unsure how they operate. Only 19% were very familiar with cooperatives and how they operate, and 1% were currently members of some type of cooperative. Forming and building membership in a cooperative would require introductory and ongoing education to the artist community.

Survey respondents also described their greatest challenges to earning a good living as an artist. While varied, the feedback generally fell into four categories: lack of time, access to art materials, financial planning/cash flow, and reaching new markets. These issues will be addressed in a separate business plan for a proposed artist cooperative.

Given the results gathered during this study, it was determined to develop a business plan for a potential artist cooperative and continue to pursue the idea with Indigenous artists throughout Montana.

This summary report provides an overview of the study process and presents conclusions and recommendations. The appendix contains the survey questions.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

Artisan cooperatives have been used throughout the world to collectively bolster the growth of individual and community livelihoods. Internationally, Peace Corps volunteers have long collaborated with local artisans to develop regional economies. For example, [silk weaving cooperatives in Madagascar](#) are generating income growth throughout the region. With their success, members of the cooperatives – all of which are female -- have been able to pay their children's school fees, address their family's health needs, build or repair their homes, and reinvest in their silk production. In the U.S., artist cooperatives have been thriving from coast to coast for decades. Examples of long running cooperatives are the [Carmel Art Association](#) in Carmel, California (1927), [Studio Gallery](#) in Washington, DC (1956), and [Gallery 4](#) in Fargo, North Dakota (1975).

Past studies have shown how the sales of artwork can boost the income of Native Americans and their communities. Based on research conducted in Washington, Oregon, Montana and South Dakota, the [2013 study](#) by Colorado State University and the First Peoples Fund makes the case of Native arts as a strong and available economic force in Indian Country. The creative production of art and artistic expression are among the most promising ways to expand the market economy in both rural and urban Native communities. The research also found that, in many cases, opportunities to improve monetization of art are being missed.

The major findings of the study included:

- A third of Native people are practicing or potential artists, but most live below the federal poverty line.
- Half of Native households on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation depend on home-based businesses, including art, for income.

- Eight in 10 of the home-based businesses on the Pine Ridge Reservation consisted of selling traditional arts.
- More than 60% of emerging Native artists earn less than \$10,000 a year, while workshops and training can lead to a significant rise in incomes.

It is difficult to know how many artists are creating and selling their work on Montana's reservations. Artists often work from their kitchen tables or small spaces tucked inside their homes. Some sell their art only to people with whom they are already familiar, or their art may not be identified by name in retail outlets.

The Montana Arts Council and Montana Office of Indian Country Economic Development could not offer an estimate on numbers of Indigenous artists in the state, but agreed the number was very high. If the findings from the 2013 First Peoples Fund study can be extrapolated to Montana tribal communities, to any degree, it is easy to see the potential for economic growth in these rural communities by boosting the sales of local artwork.

For this reason, the Montana Cooperative Development Center sought to explore the possibility of an artist cooperative and how it could benefit the art sector. Funds were obtained from the USDA's Socially Disadvantaged Group Grant (SDGG) to conduct this study.





DISCOVERY PROCESS

Throughout the study, the research team identified key questions relevant to the feasibility of a new Indigenous artists cooperative in central and eastern Montana. The team developed a questionnaire, then traveled throughout central and eastern Montana to conduct the survey.

Primarily, the team sought to answer the following questions.

- How are Native artists earning a living?
- What are the biggest challenges they face when trying to run and grow their business?
- What is their familiarity with cooperatives?
- Based on their understanding of cooperatives, is there an interest in a cooperative within their own community or a larger area such as other tribal communities?

Prior to beginning the survey, artists were identified through a variety of means. This included researching directories such as the Made in Montana listings, contacting retailers who carry Native art, and connecting with artists to find out what other artists are in their network.

The research team visited Crow Agency twice during the study period, as well as one visit each to Billings, Lame Deer, Wolf Point/Poplar, and Fort Belknap.

This study only targeted visual artists, such as fashion designers, beaders, quill workers, painters, illustrators, textile artists, potters, weavers, leatherworkers. It did not include literary artists, such as authors and poets, or performing artists – speakers, singers, drummers, flute players, and storytellers.

Contacts were made at the Beyond Indigenous event in Billings, Crow Fair annual pow wow and gathering, retail shops, tribal cultural offices, tribal colleges, an outreach session at Crow Agency, Zoom meetings, and other locations.

The majority (82%) of the surveys were completed in person with the remainder completed online as a result of email communications sent from Triia, a subsidiary of the Native American Development Corporation, and MCDC to their respective contacts.

In addition to artist responses, owners and managers of art galleries, trading posts, and gift shops were queried about their experience procuring art from Native artists and the challenges they faced when working with artists as vendors.

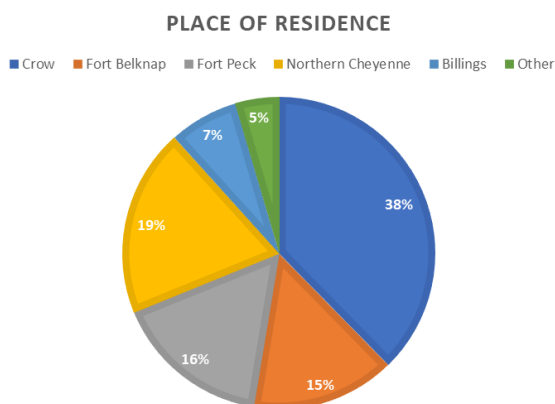
The team also visited several artist cooperatives to learn about different operational practices which could potentially be implemented in Montana.

KEY FINDINGS

The survey conducted by the research team revealed the demographics, art practices, and opinions of 154 Native Artists throughout Montana.

Place of Residence

As a result of the discovery process, the majority of survey respondents lived on the four eastern Montana reservations and in the Billings area. Those who lived elsewhere reported being from Hardin (on the border of the Crow Reservation), Livingston, Montana (from Fort Peck), Reno, Nevada (from Crow), Rapid City, South Dakota, and Wind River Reservation, Wyoming.

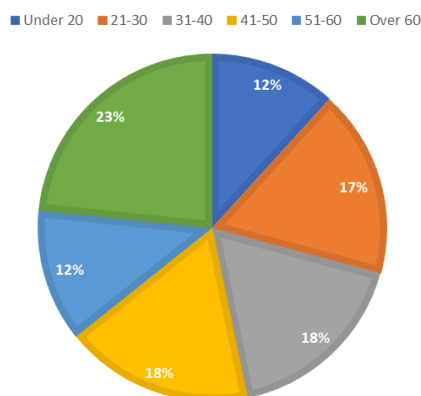


Age and Gender

The survey outreach yielded a variety of artists evenly distributed through all age groups. The largest group represented was over 60, while the smallest group was under 20.

Female respondents (80%) outnumbered males (20%) four to one.

AGE OF RESPONDENTS



Type of Artwork

It was impossible to include the total spectrum of artforms being done throughout Indian Country. Therefore, the survey included nine choices as well as a category labeled “other” with an area for text. The nine categories included:

- Painting/Illustration
- Textiles/Sewing/Weaving/Needlework/Quilting/Knitting
- Pottery/Ceramics
- Beadwork
- Quillwork
- Woodworking/Carving
- Leatherworking/Rawhide/Hide Tanning
- Drums/Rattles
- Silversmithing/Jewelry Making
- Other: _____

Every category was selected by at least one respondent, with beadwork, textiles, leatherwork, and painting leading the way. Nearly all respondents (85%) identified with doing more than one form of artwork, with some selecting as many as five categories.

Artists selecting only one type of artwork were those doing beadwork (10%) and painting (5%). Other forms of art included sketching/abstract art, digital art, medicinal plants, soaps/candles, doll making, photography, metal work/sculpting, and ready to wear clothing.

Career Status

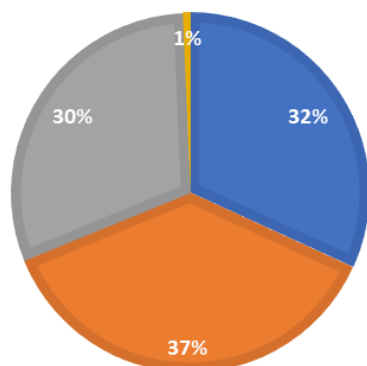
Respondents had a wide range of experience practicing their art and how they are earning a living from their work. The survey asked the question, “What do you consider your standing in the art world and offered these four options:

- Side Hustle (do not earn a living from art)
- Emerging Artist (distribute to all customers directly)
- Established Artist (distribution other than myself)
- Other: _____

Survey respondents represented a balance of different career stages with approximately one-third in each of the defined categories.

CAREER STATUS

■ Side Hustle ■ Emerging ■ Established ■ Other



Years of Practicing Art

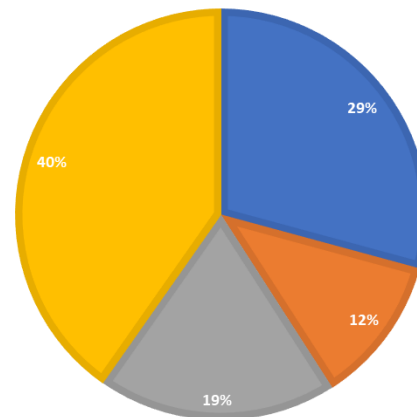
The survey asked the question, “How long have you been practicing your art?”

Because the majority of artists stated they were doing more than one artform, we can assume they meant how long they had been practicing art in general, rather than one specific artform. As can be seen in the chart below, respondents

were evenly divided into the four categories, with the largest group (40%) being those with over twenty years of experience.

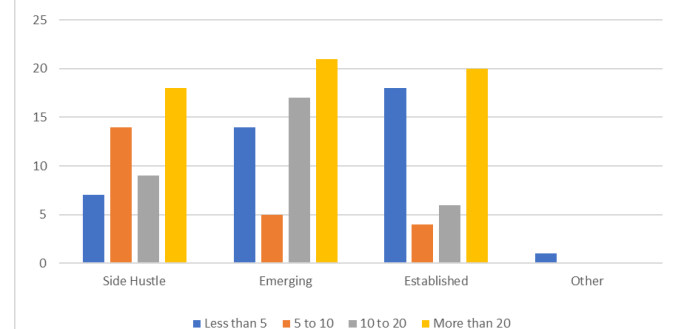
YEARS OF PRACTICING ART

■ Less than 5 ■ 5 to 10 ■ 10 to 20 ■ More than 20

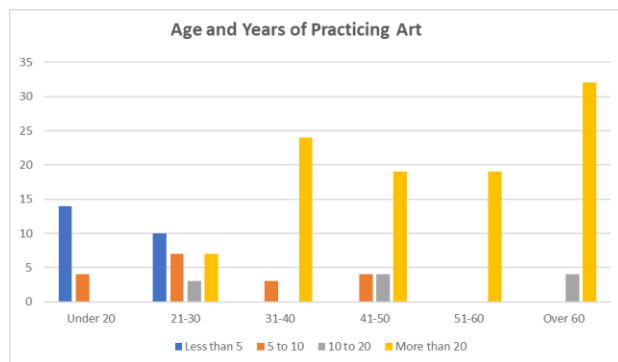


There was no direct correlation between years of practicing an art and the stage of their career – full time or part time, emerging or established. There were many established artists with less than five years of experience, as well as many part-time artists with more than twenty years of experience. As can be seen from the chart below, there are about an equal number of long-time artists in each of the categories, while the largest number of those practicing less than five years are established artists.

Career Status and Years of Practicing Art

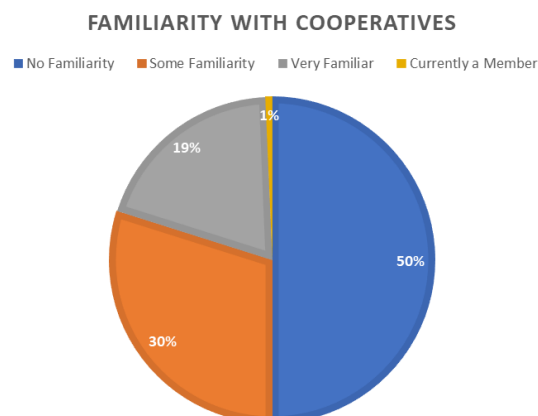


A comparison of age and years of practicing art showed no surprises. The majority of artists over the age of 31 have been doing artwork for more than 20 years, while those under 30 had mainly been practicing their craft for less than 5 years.



Familiarity with Cooperatives

When asked about their familiarity with artist cooperatives, half of respondents said they were “not at all familiar.” Another 30% had heard of them but didn’t know exactly how they operated. It is unclear whether it is the term “cooperative” with which they are unfamiliar, or the concept of a cooperative. Three other terms – collective, collaborative, and guild – are often used for groups of artists working together for a common goal. In artists’ minds, these may mean the same thing, or something entirely different.



Interest in Cooperative Services

To gauge interest in specific services, the survey offered a brief definition of cooperatives and listed a range of services that could potentially be provided by a cooperative for its members. The question was phrased in the following manner.

“A cooperative is a member-owned organization that pools member resources (time, money, etc.) to benefit the entire group. Below are some benefits an artist cooperative might provide its members. Check all the items that would interest you if you were a member of a cooperative.

- **Marketing** (reaching new customers in a brick-and-mortar space, art shows, and/or online)
- **Studio Space** (a common space used by members to create their art)
- **Business Education** (bookkeeping, financing, etc.)
- **Art Education**
- **Supplies** (using the buying power of members to get a discounted rate on art supplies)
- **Networking** (with artists and others in the art business)”

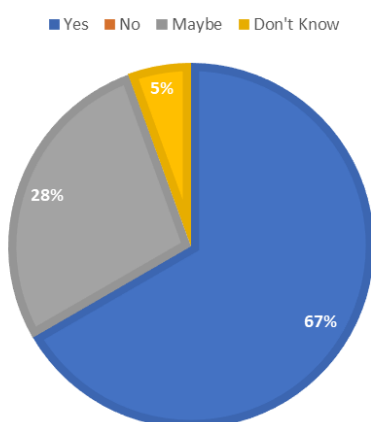
Since multiple choices were permitted, most respondents selected more than one service. Those with two selections made up 30%, as did those with five choices. These were followed by three selections (18%), one selection (14%), six selections (4%), and four and zero selections, each with 2%.

Marketing ranked highest among the services mentioned with 27% of responses. This was followed by Networking (20%), and Business Education (14%), while Supplies, Arts Education and Studio Space each accounted for 13% of responses.

Interest in a Local Cooperative

With their current level of understanding of cooperatives, artists were asked if a local cooperative – one that was made of members solely in their own community – would be of interest to them. Two-thirds of respondents answered in the affirmative, with the remaining one-third saying “maybe” (28%) or “don’t know” (5%).

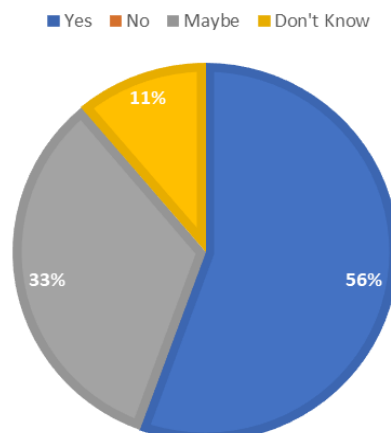
INTEREST IN A LOCAL CO-OP



Interest in a Regional Cooperative

When artists were asked about interest in a regional cooperative – one that was made up of members from their own community as well as other tribal communities – the response was still positive, but slightly less so. While 56% answered in the affirmative, the remaining 44% responded with a “maybe” (33%) or “don’t know” (11%).

INTEREST IN A REGIONAL CO-OP



Time and Financial Investment

When contemplating a possible cooperative, it was important to understand if artists would be able to contribute time to the operational aspects and how much they would be willing to pay for membership fees. The questions were worded as, “How much time would you be willing to dedicate to an artists cooperative?” and “How much would you be willing to pay to belong to an Indigenous artists co-op?”

Artists in every category – ages 20-60, side hustle to established – answered overwhelmingly that they could contribute less than 5 hours per week.

The answers were more varied when it came to the membership fee. While two-thirds selected “Less than \$20 per month,” many artists were willing to pay more. Those that said a one-time fee would work best suggested that fee should be in the range of \$50 to \$150.

Where Supplies are Purchased

Other than the creative genius, two other components go into a piece of visual art: labor and art materials. Any savings on supplies would affect the profit margin for Indigenous artists. That is why the survey included the question, “Where do you primarily buy your art supplies?”

While there were a variety of sources mentioned, most were online or brick-and-mortar retailers. Several were large chain stores in Billings such as Hobby Lobby, Tandy Leather, Walmart, and JoAnn Fabrics. Others were independent retailers like Buffalo Chips and Montana Leather Company, and local trading posts. Online retailers included Amazon and Crow Creek Trading. Several artists use recycled objects they find at pawn shops and thrift stores.

Packaging and shipping supplies are bought almost exclusively online.

Challenges Facing Artists

To determine what services might be prioritized by a potential artist cooperative, the research team sought to find out what artists felt their greatest challenge was. Hence, the survey included the open-ended question, “What is your greatest challenge to earning a good living as an artist?”

While “a good living” can look different for each individual, the answers provided helped articulate challenges and obstacles which Montana’s Indigenous artists encounter in their effort to run a profitable business. The answers generally fell into four categories: lack of time/balancing time between work and family, access to affordable art materials, financial planning/cash flow, and reaching new markets.

Other challenges mentioned were lack of adequate workspace, lack of business knowledge, purchasers not paying for

commissioned works (“buyers backing out”), and the reality of everyday life.

The topic of cash flow was mentioned in many ways, but mainly worded as “not having the money to get supplies for the next project.”

Teachers, Mentors & Role Models

With an eye toward growing the arts economy in tribal communities, we wanted to know who had influenced, inspired and mentored current artists. Not surprisingly, there were many individuals who served in these roles.

Respondents selected an average of three answers to the question below, providing a total of 496 responses.

“Who are/were your most important teachers, mentors and role models in the art world?”

- An elementary school teacher
- A high school teacher
- A college art instructor
- A parent or other relative
- A tribal elder
- Another Native artist
- A non-Native artist
- A gallery owner
- An art show organizer
- Other: _____

Those individuals selected most frequently were a parent or other relative (20%), another Native artist (18%), a high school art teacher (15%), and a tribal elder (14%). This was followed by gallery owner (9%), art show organizer (7%), elementary school teacher (7%), other (5%), non-Native artist (3%), and college art instructor (2%). Mentioned in the “other” category were myself, friends, and historical artwork.

Feedback from Retailers

As reflected in the previous subject, gallery owners and other retailers are much more than mere purchasers of artwork. They are often trusted advisors and mentors. They know what their customers want and how much they are willing to spend. They also have a vested interest in seeing artists succeed.

While meeting with the research team, retailers voiced their concerns in working with Native artists. Chief among those concerns is ensuring that artists get a fair price for their art. Often, retailers find that artists are underpricing their work. Consequently, the retailer spends time advising them on what those prices should be.

Through discussions with both artists and retailers, the research team found that most artists have different tiers of pricing for their work. This is typically based on where, and with whom, they are doing business. A Native artist might have three prices: one for family and friends, another for selling to customers on the reservation, and, lastly, what was referred to as the “true” price or “real” price – what it might sell for in larger markets off the reservation. With so many factors to consider, advice received from retailers becomes very important.

Another concern mentioned by retailers is their inability to get a consistent supply of artwork from their vendors. This ties into the time constraints and cash flow challenges mentioned by the artists.



Cooperative Models

During this project, the research team researched various forms of existing artists cooperatives. They fell into four general categories: worker co-ops, studio co-ops, gallery co-ops, and multi-functional co-ops.

Worker Co-ops

A worker cooperative is a for-profit enterprise that is owned and controlled by its workers, who constitute the members of the cooperative. Workers own the business, and they participate in its financial success based on their labor contribution to the cooperative.

Worker-owned co-ops for creative professionals include [Stocksy](#), [Meerkat Media Collective](#), and the [Sound Co-op](#).

Studio Co-ops

Studio co-ops purchase or rent physical space, share financial investment, responsibilities, and governance over how the space functions – such as who can use it, when, and for what. An artist receives the benefits of ownership, but less of the risk, because it's distributed evenly across all owners.

The [Oglala Lakota Artspace](#) (OLA) is an arts center on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in Kyle, South Dakota. Completed in 2021, this Native-led space is a partnership of First Peoples Fund, Lakota Funds and Artspace. The 8,500-square-foot arts center includes artist studios, a recording studio, classrooms, exhibit area, outdoor market space, community gathering space, and a performance area. While not operating as a true cooperative, it is an example of how a facility can be utilized by many artists.

[Western Montana Musicians Cooperative](#) in Arlee is an example of a studio co-op in which musicians share practice and performance space.

Gallery Co-ops

Artists can decide to show their work together as a gallery co-op. This might mean buying a gallery space to show their work or renting space collectively for a group show. A gallery co-op could be an ongoing commitment or one that exists only for a brief time. By showing their work together and sharing a percentage of the profits, each individual artist can potentially expand their audience of buyers and curators.

Gallery co-ops can be held in physical spaces like the [Artists' Collaborative Gallery](#) in Sacramento, the [Backstreet Gallery Cooperative](#) in Florence, Oregon, the [Colorado Creative Co-op](#) in historic Old Colorado City in Colorado Springs, or in digital spaces like [Artisans Cooperative](#).

Multi-Functional Co-ops

The [Ancestral Rich Treasures of Zuni Cooperative](#) (ARTZ), a tribally-owned co-op in Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico incorporates many of the elements of the gallery (physical and digital) and studio cooperatives, along with mentorship for their youth.

The [Zuni Youth Enrichment Program](#) (ZYEP) partners with ARTZ to offer year-round apprenticeships where an art mentor leads a cohort of young artists. During the apprenticeship, students develop their art skills, learn entrepreneurial skills, and engage in their culture. The apprentices get a membership in the co-op and sell their art in the gallery.

Conclusion

Given the findings of this study, an Indigenous artists cooperative could be feasible in Montana if it is structured properly. To make the cooperative financially stable and sustainable, the cooperative should include artists from at least the four eastern reservations.

More research should be conducted, as well as more outreach and education to the artist community.

Once the business plan has been reviewed and more details determined for a proposed cooperative, it would be wise to conduct a series of workshops on the tribal reservations in the coming year.

To make the sessions more accessible, they should be held midday at tribal colleges with a lunch provided. To draw artists, an important business education topic – such as how to price one's art – should be highlighted. There should also be a brief course about the cooperative model and how it operates.

Including a couple of Native artists with success stories and real-life tips on running their own businesses would also be helpful and motivational.

A survey should be conducted at these meetings that delves deeper into the likelihood of the artist becoming a member of a cooperative, perhaps with questions such as:

On a scale of 1-5, what is your interest in a multi-community co-op with a fee structure like this?

With this information in hand, subsequent steps can be determined.

Key Takeaways

- Indigenous artists are facing challenges which are stifling their personal, as well as their community's, economic growth.
- A cooperative could provide services to assist artists in overcoming some of those challenges.
- There is strong interest in a new cooperative among artists living on Montana's four eastern reservations.

References

First Peoples Fund, et al; Establishing a Creative Economy: Art as an Economic Engine in Native Communities. July 2013. <https://www.firstpeoplesfund.org/market-study>

Special Thanks to:

Bambi Allen, Southern Plains Indian Museum
Renee Bear Medicine, Museum of the Plains Indian
Rachelle Brown, Montana Tribal Tourism Office
Monica Smith Grable, Montana Arts Council
Rayme Growing Thunder, Fort Peck Language and Culture Department
Jael Kampfe, Indigenous Impact Co.
Carrie Moran McCleary, Plains Soul
Tally Monteau, Triia
Lili Munn, Triia
Luke Robinson, Office of Indian Country Economic Development
The many artists and retailers who offered their time and expertise.

Art Credits:

Page 1:

Rawhide parfleche earrings, John Isaiah Pepion
“*His Dream Shirt*” by Lauren Monroe Jr.
Angel Ornament, Unknown Crow artist

Page 3:

Sunrise Camp, Jeremy Johnson

Page 4:

Necklace and earrings, Neta Old Elk

Page 5:

Beadwork, Carrie Moran McCleary

Page 11:

Beaded purses, Ramey Growing Thunder

Appendix

Indigenous Artist Survey

This survey is being conducted by the Montana Cooperative Development Center (MCDC) to determine if one or more Native artist cooperatives would be practical, useful, and beneficial in one or more tribal communities. No personal identifying information is being requested. All responses will be kept confidential. Average time to complete the survey is less than 5 minutes. Funding for the study is being provided by USDA's Socially Disadvantaged Groups Grant (SDGG). Thank you for your input!

1. What is your artform? *Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Painting/Illustration
- ☐ Textiles/Sewing/Weaving/Needlework/Quilting/Knitting
- ☐ Pottery/Ceramics
- ☐ Beadwork
- ☐ Quillwork
- ☐ Woodworking/Carving
- ☐ Leatherworking/Rawhide/Hide
- ☐ Tanning Drums/Rattles
- ☐ Silversmithing/Jewelry Making
- ☐ Other: _____

2. How long have you been practicing your art. *Check one.*

- ☐ Less than 5 years
- ☐ 5-10 years
- ☐ 10-20 years
- ☐ More than 20 years

3. What do you consider your standing in the art world. *Check one.*

- ☐ Side Hustle (Do not earn a living from art)
- ☐ Emerging Artist (distribute to all customers directly)
- ☐ Established Artist (distribution other than myself)
- ☐ Other: _____

4. What is your greatest challenge to earning a good living as an artist?

5. Where do you primarily buy your art supplies?

6. Are you familiar with artist cooperatives. *Check one.*

- ☐ Not at all familiar
- ☐ I have heard of them, but don't know exactly how they operate.
- ☐ I am very familiar with them and how they operate.
- ☐ I am currently a member of an artist cooperative or have been a member in the past.

7. A cooperative is a member-owned organization that pools member resources (time, money, etc.) to benefit the entire group. Below are some benefits an artist cooperative might provide its members. *Check all the items that would interest you if you were a member of a cooperative.*

- ☐ Marketing (Reaching new customers in a brick-and-mortar space, art shows, and/or online)
- ☐ Studio Space (a common space used by members to create their art)
- ☐ Business Education (bookkeeping, financing, etc.)
- ☐ Art Education
- ☐ Supplies (Using the buying power of members to get a discounted rate for art supplies)
- ☐ Networking (with artists and others in the art business)

8. Would a local (your community only) Indigenous artists co-op be of interest to you?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe ☐ Don't know

9. Would a regional (more than one tribal community) Indigenous artists co-op be of interest to you?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe ☐ Don't know

10. How much would you be willing to pay to belong to an Indigenous artists co-op?

- ☐ Less than \$20 per month
- ☐ \$20-\$50 per month
- ☐ \$50-\$100 per month
- ☐ More than \$100 per month
- ☐ One-time fee would work best for me. It should be no more than \$_____.

11. Because co-ops are owned by members, they sometimes rely on the labor of members to accomplish their mission. How much time would you be willing to dedicate to an artists cooperative? *Check one.*

- ☐ Less than 5 hours per week
- ☐ 6-10 hours per week
- ☐ 11-20 hours per week
- ☐ More than 20 hours per week

12. How important would it be all member of an Indigenous artist co-op be enrolled tribal citizens? *Check one.*

- ☐ Not important. Anyone can belong.
- ☐ Important, but descendants could also belong.
- ☐ Very important that all members be enrolled.
- ☐ Don't know or prefer not to answer.

13. What is your place of residence?

- ☐ Crow
- ☐ Fort Belknap
- ☐ Fort Peck
- ☐ Northern Cheyenne
- ☐ Billings
- ☐ Other: _____

14. Have you ever changed your place of residence to earn a better living in art?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Have moved more than once.
- ☐ Have not moved, but have considered it for this reason.

15. What is your gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer not to say

16. Who are/were our most important teachers, mentors, and role models in the art world?
Check all that apply.

- ☐ An elementary school teacher
- ☐ A high school art teacher
- ☐ A college art instructor
- ☐ A parent or other relative
- ☐ A tribal elder
- ☐ Another Native artist
- ☐ A non-Native artist
- ☐ A gallery owner
- ☐ An art show organizer
- ☐ Other: _____

17. What is your age?

- ☐ Under 20
- ☐ 21-30
- ☐ 31-40
- ☐ 41-50
- ☐ 51-60
- ☐ Over 60
- ☐ Prefer not to say