



# The Role of Folk Art in Community Health Practices

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the often overlooked intersection between folk art and community health practices, emphasizing the transformative potential of folk art in fostering psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. By examining the historical and contemporary relevance of folk art as a medium for community healing, the paper discusses how cultural expressions of identity, resistance, and reintegration serve as natural therapeutic outlets. Case studies from arts-based health initiatives demonstrate the role of folk art in addressing social determinants of health, enhancing community resilience, and promoting holistic health. The review further proposes practical applications for integrating folk art into community health programs, emphasizing the need for culturally grounded, participatory, and sustainable approaches to health promotion.

**Keywords:** Folk Art, Community Health, Cultural Healing, Emotional Resilience, Art Therapy, Social Determinants of Health.

## INTRODUCTION

Mainstream healthcare in the US focuses improbably on the individual body, steering attention away from the roles of social and psychological forces in health and healing. By incorporating the cultural sources of distress, trauma reintegration from these same sources can heal, build resilient communities, and effect social change. The role of communities in healing has been widely touted. This review will examine a field of research that has received little attention: the ways that folk art contributes to health and well-being, either in psychological terms as an aspect of community practice—a means of resistance, healing, or reintegration—or in traditional medical terms—as a magical or shamanic element of treatment. Early psychological frameworks guiding some of this research will be introduced, and frameworks used in research considering folk art as a means of psychological healing will be detailed as well. This line of research uncovers the potential for large-scale health improvement achieved through the integration of cultural heritage preservation into health promotion and practice [1, 2, 3]. Reinterpreting Latin definitions of heal correlated with making whole and health emphasizes the cultural underpinnings and social determinants of health practices that aim to rebuild a sense of wholeness, “to return to conditions that are, and that are experienced as, normal or natural, whole or integral.” Bringing this background to a contemporary focus on local or traditional medical practices and, more broadly, public health and health promotion, researchers and health development workers understand and leverage the naturally healing properties of cultural and artistic expressions of community identity and values. Programs seeking the preservation of historic resources, in the process, can—even when they are not convened for the specific purpose—concretely contribute to physical health by relieving the aggregate stress that social support networks are unable to ease [4, 2, 5].

### Historical Perspectives on Folk Art and Health Practices

The last three decades have seen a growing interest in ethnographic work exploring the interplay of artistic production and healing, and much of this work consists of historical analyses of the intersections of "art," "health," and "society." These works frequently trace artistic practices such as music, literature, and visual art "capable of healing" to Western art therapy foundations, such as the widow ten Berge who provided 10th-century healings for rheumatism with needlework. These works often have non-Western precedents that place art in the service of broader social healing processes, some of which provide local contexts for meaning, others a carrier of a healing essence. Art's importance for healing goes back a long time. **This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.**

way [6, 7, 8]. The ancient Greeks had a term for it, kallos-ethos, which connoted the norms of inner and outer beauty, and the process of cultivating them, which was how the Platonic philosopher and physician Alcmaeon first defined the possibility of initiating wellness through the arts. The Hellenic world had ancient healing traditions associated with the goddess Muse, and many museums were built in her honor to house healing art and instruct healers on its use. The poetic traditions of other cultures have similar roots, especially Sumerian and Egyptian, and here also the performer of the singing or recitation that could heal had to in turn for the performance receive material, social, or spiritual help. Ancient Greek medical tradition and specifically the writings of Hippocrates include art as a component of cultivation of character that helped maintain health. The practice of training as a healer through singing, painting, and writing long continued, and Catherine the Great of Russia passed a law in 1796 mandating the instruction of children in art to stem a plague. Early connections between art and "positive health" are evident in the Renaissance writings of Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, and Agrippa on the arts of healing body and spirit.

### **The Psychological and Emotional Benefits of Folk Art in Community Health**

Engagement with folk art has been empirically linked to a number of psychiatric and psychological benefits. Folk or indigenous art can assist in the process of emotional resilience and in building adaptive strategies in communities. It has been used as a method of emotional expression that enhances people's abilities to cope with stress, grief, or trauma, and to reconnect with others in their community. Although folk art has not been formally therapeutic in nature, a number of folk and outsider artists made art to process their innermost thoughts and feelings. In doing so, they are purported to have used a creative, or right, thinking style which is adaptive and connects with healing [9, 10, 11]. This mode of creation, an essential component of folk art and outsider art processes, is not primarily aesthetic, but serves as a form of communication and emotional expression. This integration of ideas begins to approach folk art for its direct correlation to both the creative processes of cognition as well as to psychological reactions of sublimation (altered negative turns into positive), therapeutic processes of creativity, and aesthetic resonance. The possibility of healing through creativity is also addressed directly in experiences using First Nations art. Powwows provide space in which contemporary individuals may enter an ancient liminal field, creating spaces of remembrance for healing as part of a global tribal imagination. Art displays the capacity to uniquely affect people as a group, perhaps more significantly than other media. Folk art represents the full texture of community life, acting as a guardian of cultural identity and continuity. It can reconnect people with their community, providing a common history and allowing individuals to emerge from the background to share their artistic achievements with others. In revisiting stages of psychological development, the act of establishing generativity is identified as the primary task of the middle-aged person: folk artists create to reinvent the self or to process pain. This offers credence to the idea that people who are exhibiting folk art, and indeed consuming it, are party to a sharing of meaning that restimulates their capacity for empathy, indigenous and global. Consequently, it seems plausible that this sharing can evoke in an audience, either individual or community, movement to personal or communal reconnection with the transcendent. These notions offer up a healing or counseling intervention by way of folk-art understanding and application [12, 13, 14].

### **Case Studies: Folk Art Initiatives in Community Health Programs**

Here are four different case study examples to demonstrate the integration of folk art into community health programs.

Painted Stories initiated a number of successful aspirations and outcomes: individuals connected through Painted Stories and co-devised an arts-based community health program, Humer-Grape! Dessert the Musical. For Wet Productions and associates, coaching 'safe sharing' participants became a way to test whether any of our arts-based community health practices and principles were effective. One of the experiences from the development process and presentations of Humer-Grape! was a lecture and component of a conference paper which featured the findings of our research project and interviews. As part of the research phase of Painted Stories, we heard some amazing stories from doctors and cemented our philosophy surrounding arts and health. Having now experienced the potential that music, dance, and song can offer health consumers, we interviewed over fifty inpatients in the AIDS quarantine unit of a major Melbourne hospital and asked them 'What has frightened you the most?' and 'What has heartened or inspired you?' The responses were amazing: 'It healed me to be a part of this process,' reflects an individual. 'Working on this project has reduced my built-up anxieties,' adds another in an unpredictable approach, and it is the consumption of the project (in a craftivist action) rather than the product that results from this process that is crucial [15, 16, 17]. Seed intuited that the permanence of art might redress some of the barriers often presented by community art that can often assume that the focus of attention is the process of making art and the creation of a 'community' artist or ethic, rather than

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contextualizing the making of art and art's meaning in individual lives. Finally, and especially in this case, the permanence and public nature of the artwork has another significance. An individual stresses that while access to an authentic 'real' Aboriginal experience is cherished, there is an irony at play. It is disconcerting that healing indigenous soldiers become tourist-oriented community installations. This is one stress point in the deployment of folk-art strategies: what effect does folk art have in terms of revealing community and creating a cohesive community where participation is reliant on idealizing such difference? Reuniting the fractured narrative of monkey and the egg is the first signature of such power. The simple ambition was to be a prosthesis between isolated carers and the vast world of carers, and for such a large cohort, they felt ignored and belittled by a national strategy [18, 19, 20].

### **Practical Applications and Recommendations for Integrating Folk Art in Community Health Programs**

Because folk art is valued as a community practice and is community-generated, integrated efforts to promote community health via popular folk-art activities must also reflect and respect the values and practices of each specific community. Therefore, we are not recommending expansive, prescriptive programs that could be delivered in some standard way by virtually anyone, everywhere, to anyone wishing to work at the intersection of folk art and health. Nonetheless, there are some elements common to most or all programs or services that would utilize folk art to promote individual and community health. Below we present a series of recommendations and strategies that could act as a foundation or guide for the development of programs or services incorporating folk art. These are based upon what we have learned from our work and the models we have seen and are attempting to reflect fundamental principles, values, and goals that make the art health approach valuable [21, 22, 23].

- The process of program or service development should meaningfully engage the community in a dialogue about what they want and need from programs of this kind.
- The art generated should be owned, controlled, and enjoyed by the participants. Art is just one of many mediums. Our focus and service benefit from, and frame it within, the context of our organization's holistic approach to health and wellness.
- Local artists should perform shows locally and possibly around the state.
- Participants should be connected with others in the community who share their goals, experiences, and interests, and given the opportunity and support to access that resource.
- Programs and their availability should be well-publicized to allow any interested individuals and organizations access to the service.
- Individuals wishing to facilitate an art and health project should seek training and should have access to education and resources, as well as connections within the creative community to share the art generated.
- Finally, meta-analyses that facilitate the establishment of standards for assessing programs' effectiveness and outcomes, and guidelines for creating and implementing programs should be reviewed. For instance, it is likely folk artists need training about the fundamentals of the health topic or topics of interest, as well as facilitation techniques designed to promote genuine dialogue within groups [24, 25, 26].

### **CONCLUSION**

Folk art, as a form of cultural and artistic expression, plays a significant role in enhancing community health by fostering emotional resilience, promoting cultural identity, and addressing psychological well-being. The historical roots of folk art in healing traditions demonstrate its enduring relevance in community health practices, offering pathways to reconnect individuals with their heritage and communities. Through case studies, this paper highlights how integrating folk art into health initiatives creates spaces for collective healing and empowerment. By incorporating folk art into community health programs, we can promote a more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and holistic approach to health care that addresses not just the physical, but also the social and emotional dimensions of well-being.

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