Murray Region
Arts & Culture Snapshot | 2013

Introduction

This report was prepared by the General Manager and Regional Arts Development Officer, Murray Arts, and provides an overview of the arts and cultural sector in the Murray region. It outlines some of the key issues and trends impacting the region and provides a summary of the structure and business models it operates within. It has been developed to provide Arts NSW Arts Funding Program (AFP) assessment panels with an up to date overview of the region.

Overview – Murray Region in NSW

The Murray region covers an area of 17,755 square kilometres and sits on the state border between NSW and Victoria located on a major highway between Sydney and Melbourne. It has a population of approximately 130,020.

This region is divided by the Murray River and has a strong history of Aboriginal ownership and European settlement centred on trade (wool, wine, and wheat), industry, migration (Bonegilla Migrant Centre received and resettled over 300,000 migrants from 1947–1971), farming and gold.

The main employers in the area are healthcare and social assistance, manufacturing, construction, retail trade, accommodation and food services, public administration, education and training.

Murray Arts services three NSW Local Government Areas (LGAs) and three Victorian LGAs:

NSW
- Albury City – 49,467 pop. (major centre)
- Corowa Shire – 11,000 pop.
- Greater Hume Shire – 10,423 pop.

VIC
- City of Wodonga – 37,000 pop. (major centre)
- Indigo Shire – 16,111 pop.
- Towong Shire – 6,019 pop.

Significant industry and/or service providers include:

- Hospitals (private and public)
- Disability and Aged Care industries
- Government agencies including Defence Force / Bandiana Army Barracks
- Education Institutions including Charles Sturt University and LaTrobe University
- Tourism / historical significance (Ned Kelly, gold rush, high country, food and wine)
- Local industries and trade including VISY, Mars Petcare.
The index of relative socio economic disadvantage (SEIFA Index) indicates a high level of disadvantage in this region at 991.3 (compared to the national average of 1005.2). Culturally and linguistically diverse people make up approximately 4.2% of the population. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 2.3% of the population.

**Arts and Cultural Overview**

The Murray region boasts strong professional arts and cultural practice and a high proportion of resident artists. There is a strong performance culture due to national arts organisations (the Flying Fruit Fly Circus and HotHouse Theatre) operating from this region. There are a multitude of festivals and opportunities for community engagement in the arts, as well as a very large number of museums due to the high historical significance of the region.

**Local Government**

All councils have a commitment to the arts, with the appointment of dedicated arts workers in three of the six council’s (some departments larger than others) and four of the six councils have adopted Arts and Culture Strategies. The two larger Councils of Albury and Wodonga support strong modern arts infrastructure with two major performing arts venues (Albury Entertainment Centre and The Cube) and regionally significant art galleries and collections (Albury Art Gallery, Wodonga Art Space, Corowa ArtSpace). The Albury Library Museum is also of significance and a major community engagement space and attraction of the region.

Tight fiscal conditions have seen strain placed on arts and culture budgets across the region. All but one of the cultural workers or community workers who are responsible for cultural activity work part time.

**Performing Arts**

The region’s most significant cultural activity is in the performing arts. With institutions such as HotHouse Theatre and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus (which is also an educational institution), PROJECTion Dance and the Regional Academy of Performing Arts and Somebody’s Daughter Theatre Company setting the standards for ongoing engagement in theatre and performance.

There are also a number of local theatre companies such as Albury Wodonga Theatre Company, Livid Productions and Highwater Theatre.

**Visual Arts**

The geography of this region attracts a high number of professional practising visual artists. There are twelve private and public art galleries and a number of private studios open to the public. Gateway Island arts precinct is supported by City of Wodonga through heavily subsidized rent and is a hub of activity for artists. Specific studio space is available for rent, and two commercial gallery outlets are located onsite. Creative enterprise and specific symposiums such as Murray Arts’ annual ‘Bright Sparks – Creative Industries Symposium’ is well attended by graphic designers and visual artists seeking to build a sustainable career in the arts.

Access to further education and courses in visual arts have seen a decline due to cuts in TAFE funding.

**Literature**

There is a high number of practicing writers and general community interested in the creation of varying styles of literature. Albury City hosts an annual ‘Write Around the Murray’ writers’ festival which is always well attended, of a high standard and attracts interest from a number of other arts bodies.
Music

There are a number of professional and grass roots musicians in the region, engaged in a number of music styles. Music in the region is supported by the Murray Conservatorium, Jazz Basement, Community Music Victoria, local venues, local government, and the presence of groups such as brass bands, community bands, choirs and programs such as MusicAbility (a music program for people with a disability) and Music Kids (an early childhood program). Local music events tailored for youth include: Freeza, Redfest, Cafe Culture series and Dreamfields.

Festivals

There are a number of large and small cultural festivals in the region, notably:

- Bundji ‘Come Share with Us’ Festival (an Aboriginal Festival), Albury City
- Carnivale (a multicultural celebration), Wodonga
- Planes, Trains and Submarines, Holbrook
- Kids Festival, Corowa
- various festivals/celebrations in Indigo
- Man from Snowy River Festival, Corryong
- Write Around the Murray Festival, Albury
- Yackandandah Folk Festival.

Largely volunteer run and resource short, the ongoing sustainability of local cultural festivals is always being discussed.

Museums

There are 19 Museums (public and private) operating across the region. Albury City hosts an Annual Museums Conference. As many museums are largely volunteer run by an ageing demographic, succession planning and future viability are central problems which need to be addressed.

Aboriginal Arts & Culture

There is strong representation of Aboriginal people in this region with 2.3% of the population identifying as Aboriginal (2006 census data).

There are many agencies both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal within this region supporting Aboriginal culture that utilise the arts as an engagement tool for increasing community health and wellbeing. Murray Arts facilitates a strong Aboriginal Artists Network, and ongoing engagement by local councils with Aboriginal artists on various initiatives.

Major Developments

The major upcoming development in the Murray Arts region is the redevelopment of Albury Art Gallery (work to begin in July 2013), Wagirra Trail (project has commenced), Lavington Library (to be opened in July 2013) and the redevelopment of Junction Place (project has commenced), a place-based urban renewal of the old Railway Junction in Wodonga incorporating public art.

Key Issues and Trends

- National and international arts companies located in the region.
- Two major Councils boast strong arts and culture departments.
- Smaller outlying councils with limited financial support for arts and culture programs and projects.
Aboriginal arts and culture is strong, but requires ongoing time and resource commitment and is centred on strong relationships.

- Resourcing of quality arts programs to regional/remote communities.
- Maintaining high level programming funding for arts organisations.
- Securing infrastructure funding for new developments has been difficult.
- Large number of public and private museums in the region.

**SWOT Analysis**

**Strengths**

- NSW Regional Art Board structure.
- Six shire partnership.
- Existing creative and cultural community in Murray Arts region.
- Willingness of current community to engage in the arts.
- Cultural Tourism Network to promote the region.
- Aboriginal engagement.
- Strong theatre/performance culture.
- Four tertiary institutions (two universities and TAFEs).
- Large population and audience for the arts.
- Accessibility to arts programs and venues.

**Weaknesses**

- Infrastructure funding.
- Sustainability of regional grass roots festivals.
- Cuts to TAFE funding impacting training and career pathways.

**Opportunities**

- Cultural tourism sector growth.
- Creative enterprise development.
- Utilisation of the arts as a tool for community recovery in the wake of natural disasters.
- Professional development opportunities for artists, particularly Aboriginal artists.
- Music industry development.
- Increasing public profile of community arts and un-missable arts opportunities.
- Partnership development with environmental, science, health organizations.

**Threats**

- Loss of funding.
- Withdrawal of local government partnerships.
- Impact of possible council amalgamations.
- Low socio-economic profile.
- Ageing demographic.
- Retaining young families.