

Why Art?

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This week Sen. Vinehout writes about the importance of art and art tourism to the state's economy. Wisconsin's investment in the arts has dropped significantly in recent years, while Minnesota ranks #1 in state spending for the arts. This impacts not only the artists but businesses that benefit from tourism dollars.

MADISON - "Art has the power to fill spaces in our souls that nothing else can," said Alan Nugent, owner of Abode Art Gallery in Stockholm. I recently had an opportunity to learn about art and its impact on Wisconsin.

"Art has the power to transport, transform, to call and excite. I see this every day when people come in my gallery. People talk about being revived and rejuvenated. They feel things they haven't felt in a while," Alan said. "The other day an 80-year-old farm woman came in and viewed a painting of the countryside. The painting took her back to memories decades old."

Alan loves art. His passion is palpable. His drive is the matching of art created by someone he knows with a new owner moved by the creation.

"Artists put into their work their passion for the natural world," he explained. "How often do we get to do something that creates an emotional response?"

Stockholm, a small community along the Mississippi River, is one of many communities that

experienced an art renaissance in recent years. New businesses and tourists flock to the picturesque community nestled below the bluffs. The center of Stockholm is the Wide Spot Performing Arts Theater, named for the wide spot in the Big River. Alan and his partner renovated this historic opera hall.

“We have a visual art gallery,” he said. “But writing is the most powerful form of art and the hardest to understand. At Wide Spot the most interesting performances have been spoken words; poetry and readings.”

Through the Arts Board, Wisconsin supported the work of Wide Spot with a small grant to assist in the first season of “Going Coastal” a podcast radio show. “A tiny bit of seed money creates a community,” Alan noted. The seed blossomed into many profitable tourist businesses.

“Arts and tourism are utterly intertwined. They cannot exist without each other,” Alan stated.

Across the nation, states are vying with each other to snag more of the tourists’ dollars. *Arts tourism*

has become the new buzz word. Communities are looking to attract those who spend money as tourists; they are more likely to be over 50 and looking for good food and culture.

Fortunately, western Wisconsin has become a destination for many tourists. They are drawn to its natural beauty like the Great River Road which was voted the “Prettiest Drive: Ultimate Summer Road Trip in the United States”. Tourists are also drawn to communities all around western Wisconsin for the emerging cultural scene.

Wisconsin makes small investments in developing art and tourism through the work of the Wisconsin Arts Board and the Department of Tourism. Alan is a member of the Board of Directors of Arts Wisconsin, a nonprofit organization promoting state funding for the arts.

“We advocate for the arts as a way to build communities and economies,” Alan explained. “This funding allows people to create, to think outside the box; to build something they would never be able to do otherwise. The funding tends to show exceptional return on the state’s

investment.”

Wisconsin historically ranked in the middle of the pack in state spending for the arts. But this commitment has waned, especially in recent years. A study just released by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies ranks Wisconsin arts funding 48th in the U.S. with only fourteen cents per person spent on the arts.

Minnesota ranked #1 with \$6.31 per person invested in the arts.

This huge disparity is a drag on Wisconsin’s economy as hundreds of thousands of dollars go from Wisconsin to Minnesota. “They have it and we don’t,” Alan said. “We are trying to reverse it by people coming here [to Stockholm] but we are a grain of sand.” The lack of funding means many projects never get off the drawing board.

“This shows how important it is for each individual to step forward and support the arts. Otherwise we won’t survive,” Alan emphasized.

What can you do to support the arts? Come to the Stockholm Art Fair [Saturday, July 19th from 10am to 5pm](#)

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Find other art fairs at www.travelwisconsin.com . You can also learn about the work of the Wisconsin Arts Board at www.artsboard.wisconsin.gov and Arts Wisconsin at www.artswisconsin.org

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