

# Midwest Culture Bearers Award 2025

## About Midwest Culture Bearers Award

The Midwest Culture Bearers Award will honor and amplify the work of nine Midwestern folk arts and culture practitioners each year. This award seeks to financially support folk arts and culture practitioners, as well as create opportunities for further recognition and relationship-building across the region.

Selected individuals will each receive a \$5,000 unrestricted, non-matching award. Additionally, we will offer professional development and networking opportunities, and stories featuring awardees and their work.

## What is a Culture Bearer?

Culture bearers and folk arts practitioners are deeply rooted in the practice and preservation of cultural traditions through craft, storytelling, dance, performance, visual arts, language preservation, foodways, and more. Cultural identities may include geographic communities, occupational groups, or family traditions.

Folk arts and culture bearer practices are often connected to cultural communities and prioritize sharing knowledge with the next generation. Some of the titles they may use are culture bearer, folk artist, taproot artist, traditional artist, elder artist, and ancestral knowledge bearer.

## Applications for the 2025 award are now open.

- **Review the Guidelines:** Learn more about the culture bearers and folk arts practitioners we support and review our grant deadlines in the sections below.
- **Submit your application by Monday, July 21, 2025 at 11:59pm Central Time:** You may enlist assistance from another person to complete the application. We also allow nominations with consent from the individual being nominated.

## Eligibility Requirements

This award recognizes the work of Midwestern culture bearers and folk arts practitioners. We invite these individuals to apply.

This award may be a fit if you:

- Are based in the Arts Midwest region of North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, or the Native Nations that share this geography.
- Have a folk arts or traditional cultural practice, that you have engaged in for at least 10 years. We acknowledge that this will look different for applicants across experiences, cultures, and practices. For example, the applicant's experience may or may not be in consecutive years and may include years of experience in both adolescence and adulthood. Practices may include craft, storytelling, dance, performance, visual arts, language preservation, and foodways, among others.
- Prioritize sharing your practice with others, including the next generation of practitioners.

This award is not a fit if:

- You are based outside of the Arts Midwest region.
- You were a recipient of this award in 2024.
- You are not practicing a folk arts or traditional cultural art form.

## How to Apply

Arts Midwest uses SmartSimple grants portal for applications. You must register in the system before you apply, if you are a new user. Please follow the steps below to complete your registration and your application.

You may enlist assistance from another person to complete the application. We also allow nominations with consent from the individual being nominated.

Informational Overview Video: <https://youtu.be/r9mRwiT6r3g>

SmartSimple Registration Instructions: <https://artsmidwest.org/get-support/smartsimple/>

SmartSimple Application Walkthrough video: <https://youtu.be/iZbGRybJDAw>

### Step 1: Registration (for new users only)

1. [Register in our SmartSimple grants portal](#)
2. On the registration page, click “Individuals”

3. Input your information. If you are nominating someone, please input your information as the nominator; you will share the nominee's information in the application.
4. Once you have filled out your registration and submitted, you will receive an email with a login link. Click on the login link.
5. The link will take you to a screen where you will create a new password for your account. Then click submit.

Once you have created the password, you will receive a verification code in your email. Copy the verification code from that email and paste it in the box on the login page.

Now you're in the SmartSimple portal! Make sure your profile is correct. Go to the top right corner with your first initial and click on Personal Profile. Confirm the info is correct from your registration.

## Step 2: Application

Navigate to the Individual Portal Home. To begin the application, click on "Begin a new application." Click "Apply Now" on Midwest Culture Bearers Award 2025.

1. Click save and begin your application.
2. For the first question:
  - a. If you completed the registration for yourself, click "I'm filling out this application for myself." Your registration information will appear.
  - b. If you registered yourself as the artist and are getting assistance with the application, you may click "I'm getting assistance filling out this application for myself" and it will prompt you to share your assistant's contact information.
  - c. If you registered to nominate an artist with their consent, click "I'm nominating someone" and it will prompt you to fill out the artist's contact information.

## Accessibility

We want this opportunity to be accessible to all and will work with applicants who need to use other means to apply. Alternative application options may include, but are not limited to:

- Using an adapted form in Microsoft Word (available upon request)
- Sharing a video application (available upon request)

Please contact Crystal Celeste Price, program manager, as early as possible with accessibility requests. We may not be able to accommodate requests made after Thursday, July 17, 2025. Crystal can be reached at [MCBA@artsmidwest.org](mailto:MCBA@artsmidwest.org), or you can sign up to attend an informational session or office hours (see schedule and details below in 'Timeline' section).

You may also enlist assistance from another person to complete the application. Please see the "How to Apply" section for more information.

## Application Questions

- Contact Information

### Artistic discipline

- **Your Artistic Journey (Past):** Tell us your artistic history. How did you get started practicing this art form? How have you learned more about it during your practice? *Maximum of 300 words, minimum of 100 words.*
- **Your Current Practice (Present):** Please describe your work. How does your work honor or contribute to the culture it comes from? *Maximum of 300 words, minimum of 100 words.*
- **Next Generation Approach (Future):** How do you share this practice with others so that it will continue in the future? Please describe any apprentice learning, mentorship activities, or efforts to engage the next generation in learning this practice. *Maximum of 300 words, minimum of 100 words.*

Please upload 3-5 work samples of your folk arts practice. The work samples may be in the form of images, and/or video files (no longer than 3 minutes in total). You may share a website or social media link that displays your work, but work sample files are preferred. Please share the URL link and a description of what the panel should specifically be viewing as your work sample(s). Please provide the full URL link of social media pages or posts, not just the social media handle or profile name.

- The following file types are allowed: jpg, gif, png, mov, mp4, pdf.
- Once you have uploaded the files, please rename the files with the title, year, and medium. You can do this by visiting the properties editor on each file you upload in the File Manager and click “Rename.” Example: “Berry Basket, 2021, woven ash wood strips.” or “Cultural Storytelling Workshop, 2024.”
- Please acknowledge if AI is part of your artistic practice or work samples. While we do not prohibit the use of AI in our programs, we do require disclosure of its use. If you use AI in your work, you will be given the option to briefly explain your use of it in your work (100 words or fewer).
- Please note that if you are selected, the work you submit will be featured on Arts Midwest’s website starting in the Fall of 2025. Staff will confirm selected pieces with awardees before posting.

## Panel Review Process & Criteria

You will receive an email confirmation to confirm receipt of your application. Arts Midwest staff will contact you if we have any questions.

Awardees will be selected by a compensated panel of individuals. The panel will represent perspectives of culture bearers and folk arts and cultural workers, as well as regional arts leaders.

### Review Criteria

- The panel will use three criteria in the review process: **your artistic journey (past), your current practice (present), and next generation approach (future)**. Each of these criteria has corresponding application questions that inform scoring, in addition to work sample review. Each criterion is scored on a scale of 1-5 points for a maximum of 15 points per application.

Criteria: Your Artistic Journey (Past) (5 points max)

- The applicant's folk art and cultural knowledge is clear and based in a dedication to learning the craft. Scoring will be informed by "Your Artistic Journey" question response and work samples.

Criteria: Your Current Practice (Present) (5 points max)

- The connection between the applicant's practice, experience, and the work samples is clear. The culture bearer's practice ties into work samples, and skill is evident. Application scoring will be informed by 'Your Current Practice' question response and work samples.

Criteria: Next Generation Approach (Future) (5 points max)

- The applicant's prioritization of supporting future generations is clear. Scoring will be informed by 'Next Generation Approach' question response and work samples.

## Timeline

- June 23, 2025: Application opens
- July: Office Hours
- July 21, 2025: Application closes at 11:59 pm CST
- August 2025: Applications reviewed by an independent panel
- September-October 2025: Applicants notified, awards made, and awardees announced

- December 2025 – April 2026: Awardees featured on Arts Midwest website and in stories (optional)
- November 2025 – February 2026: Virtual professional development and networking (optional)

## Office Hours + Resources

To begin, we ask that you watch this detailed informational video:

<https://youtu.be/r9mRwiT6r3g>

If you have additional questions, we invite you to join Program Manager Crystal Celeste Price for office hours. You can sign up for office hours at the links below:

- 12:30-1:30pm CST, Tuesday, July 1, 2025. Sign up [here](#).
- 4-5pm CST, Wednesday, July 9, 2025. Sign up [here](#).
- 3-4pm CST, Thursday, July 17, 2025. Sign up [here](#).
- 10-11am CST, Monday, July 21, 2025. Sign up [here](#).

You can also email Crystal with your questions at [MCBA@artsmidwest.org](mailto:MCBA@artsmidwest.org).

Other resources you may find helpful:

- SmartSimple Registration Instructions: <https://artsmidwest.org/get-support/smartsimple/>
- SmartSimple Application Walkthrough video: <https://youtu.be/iZbGRybJDAw>

## Funders and Supporters

The Midwest Culture Bearers Award is supported by Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts for project management.

Arts Midwest is also generously supported by the Illinois Arts Council Agency, Indiana Arts Commission, Iowa Arts Council, Michigan Arts and Culture Council, Minnesota State Arts Board, North Dakota Council on the Arts, Ohio Arts Council, South Dakota Arts Council, Wisconsin Arts Board, 3M, and individual donors and partners.

## Frequently Asked Questions

What is a culture bearer?

- Individuals who are deeply rooted in the practice and preservation of a cultural tradition(s). They may identify as folk and traditional artists, folk arts and culture practitioners, taproot artists, elder artists, ancestral knowledge bearers, or culture bearers, among other titles.

Is this award for a specific culture?

- No, this award is not exclusively for any specific culture. Folk arts and culture bearer practices are often generational, connected to community and prioritize sharing with the next generation. Cultural identities include and are not limited to family traditions, geographic communities, or occupational groups.

Geographic communities may share knowledge, histories, and experiences related to a place. Examples of geographic communities are Native American communities, immigrant communities, nomadic groups, and more. E.g., Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, Iroquois, Potawatomi, and other Native communities practice black ash basket weaving from the geographic region where black ash trees have historically grown.

Occupational groups may share unique tools, histories, and knowledge. Examples of occupational groups include metal workers, miners, agricultural workers, hunters, fishers, nurses, hairdressers, and more. E.g., miners in Appalachia have foodways they have developed for their occupation, such as pizza rolls based on their Italian heritage, which travel well to the mine.

Are collectives, duos, or organizations eligible?

- No, only individual artists are eligible for this award.

Am I still eligible to apply if I've received an award from Arts Midwest or my state arts agency?

- Yes, except for 2024 Midwest Culture Bearer awardees, who are not eligible for the 2025 award.

What should I do with the award?

- There are no expectations or requirements for how you spend the award, though we encourage awardees to use it toward furthering their career.

Can I apply on behalf of someone else?

- Yes. We recommend assisting the applicant in filling out the application if possible. But nominations are also welcome. Please get consent from the person that you wish to nominate. Fill out the application with the person's information and indicate that it's a nomination.

Can I apply as an individual, as well as nominate others for this award?

- Yes. You can apply as an individual as well as submit multiple nominations. Please get consent from the person that you wish to nominate. Fill out the application with the person's information and indicate that it's a nomination.

Is there a match required for the \$5,000 award?

- No match required

What are the final reporting requirements?

- None

How can awardees expect to be featured and celebrated by Arts Midwest?

- Arts Midwest will make a public announcement of awardees in October 2025. Additionally, working in collaboration with awardees, we will feature awardees through stories on Arts Midwest's website from December 2025 through April 2026. All storytelling is optional.

What else will awardees receive?

- In addition to the award money, awardees have the option of being featured in a story published on Arts Midwest's website, participate in networking with other awardees, and access professional development offerings. These opportunities are encouraged but not required. We anticipate gathering ideas from the awardee group in fall 2025 and providing sessions virtually from November 2025– February 2026.