

## Paper Mache for 4-24-26 by David Read

I think I've mentioned in a recent column that since 2019, April has been designated by the state as Arts, Culture & Creativity Month. Some months in the arts feel routine. Others feel historic. This past week in Sacramento carried the unmistakable sense that something larger was unfolding. The California Arts Council State-Local Partner Convening, the Californians for the Arts conference, and the celebration of the California Arts Council's 50th anniversary came together not as separate events, but as a kind of three-part civic symphony, part reunion, part strategy session, part affirmation of why public support for the arts still matters. I was honored to be one of the participants.

There was plenty to celebrate. Fifty years is no small milestone. Founded in 1976, the California Arts Council emerged from a bold idea that the arts are not a luxury, but a public good. That idea has shaped generations of artists, arts organizations, educators, and communities. This week, that legacy was honored not only in speeches and ceremonies, but in the presence of the people doing the work today. The anniversary celebration at the Sacramento Memorial Auditorium had the scale and symbolism such a moment deserved. Founding figures were honored. Contemporary artists and cultural leaders were recognized. Performances brought vitality to the occasion. And Gavin Newsom's proclamation recognizing 2026 as the Council's 50th anniversary underscored something important: arts advocacy is not happening at the margins. It is part of the civic conversation.

What struck me most, however, was not nostalgia. It was momentum. The State-Local Partner Convening reminded everyone that California's arts infrastructure is not abstract. It lives in rural agencies like Yuba Sutter Arts & Culture, in community theaters, cultural districts, teaching artist networks, and neighborhood organizations. It lives in places where creativity is often built through persistence more than abundance. There was also a simple but meaningful benefit seeing, in person, the familiar faces I usually encounter on screens, from Modoc to San Diego and everywhere in between.

This all matters, especially in rural regions like ours, where arts organizations are often asked to be presenters, educators, community builders, preservationists, and economic catalysts all at once. The convening acknowledged this reality. It centered relationships and created opportunities to exchange ideas about grantmaking, equity, policy, storytelling, and local leadership. It reinforced something many of us know: the arts ecosystem works best when state and local leaders operate as true partners.

The Californians for the Arts gathering pushed that conversation outward. This year's theme, "Boundless Culture & Creativity: The Essence of Freedom," felt less like branding and more like a challenge. How do we build stronger cultural policy? Sustain creative economies? Defend arts education, expand access, and position culture as part of California's future rather than an afterthought? These are not symbolic questions. They are budget questions, democracy questions, and community questions. Increasingly, they are economic questions as well.

Again and again, one idea surfaced: the arts are not peripheral to public life. They are central to belonging, identity, civic imagination, and community resilience. That may be the real significance of this anniversary, not simply that the Council has lasted 50 years, but that the argument for the arts feels stronger, not weaker.

There was also something reassuring in the gathering itself. At a time when institutions can feel fragile, there was evidence of continuity, new voices alongside veteran leaders, emerging artists alongside longtime advocates, celebration paired with strategy. That balance may be the week's lasting lesson. This anniversary asked not only what has been built, but what comes next. And maybe that is the real work of turning 50, not preserving a legacy in amber, but using it as a launchpad.