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Tucson's arts are reflections of who we are

Our view: Their economic impact is powerful, the joy they bring priceless

The city of Tucson recently announced a convoluted but clever way to finance the refurbishing of the Steinfeld Warehouse, and the moving around of the artists who work in the historic structure.

The arts should be supported by both public and private dollars.

According to the Arts & Economic Prosperity III study just released by Americans for the Arts, Pima County's nonprofit fine arts groups contribute \$57.5 million to our economy. And they support 1,703 jobs in our community.

We'll repeat that: \$57.5 million economic impact; 1,703 jobs. Those are impressive numbers. Fifty-one Pima County organizations were surveyed for the study, said the Tucson-Pima Arts Council's executive director, Roberto Bedoya. And there are many more arts groups than that in our community.

But economics isn't — and shouldn't be — the only reason to support the arts.

Tucson Unified School District's impressive Opening Minds Through the Arts program brings theater, dance and other arts into the schools and integrates them into teaching reading, writing, math and science — and then independently quantifies the results. Research has found that those students participating in the OMA programs improved their test scores in reading, writing, math and science.

A few years back, we found that Tucson was one of three cities nationwide with a population of less than a million that had professional theater, opera and symphony companies. Now that we've topped that 1 million mark, we find ourselves in the company of 32 other cities, such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

That puts the Old Pueblo in some pretty exclusive company. And the arts are one of the areas companies look at when they plan their relocations.

Those are all good, solid reasons to support the arts. But we can't forget another, perhaps a more important, reason: The arts bring joy.

It's evident in the faces of the youngsters at an Arizona Opera school program, in the laughter of audiences at an Invisible Theatre production, and in the transfixed faces of people watching Tucson Ballet dancers fly across a stage.

The arts help bring clarity to serious issues confronting our community.

Last season, the Arizona Theatre Company's production of August Wilson's "Jitney" was a succinct and eloquent look into relationships; Eriks Rudans' works, now on view at the Temple of Music and Art gallery, are searing commentaries on such subjects as greed, sex and immigration.

The arts speak to the kind of people we are.

Generations from now, they won't be talking about warehouses for artists; they'll be speaking about the art those artists produced. They won't be discussing how much money it cost to keep the symphony going; they'll be talking about the music and how it moved us.

They won't be talking about the color of the A on "A" Mountain or who paid for its painting.

They'll be talking about the art we made and how it reflected what we were thinking, feeling, longing for, our aspirations.

Through our art, they'll know who we are.

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