

A full-page photograph of a dancer in traditional Mexican costume performing the Dance of the Feather. The dancer is wearing a large, ornate headdress with a white face and a colorful feathered skirt. He is holding two yellow fans and is captured in a dynamic pose, with one leg raised and dust kicked up. The background shows a clear blue sky and some trees.

SMITHSONIAN
CENTER FOR
FOLKLIFE
& CULTURAL
HERITAGE

CULTURAL VITALITY PROGRAM

Annual Report
2023 – 2024

A dancer practices the steps of the Dance of the Feather.
Photo by Luis Martinez



The Upper Egypt Tourism Initiative team visits Aswan, Esna, and Luxor.
Photo by Ahmed Mostafa Salem

WELCOME

Now in its fifth year, the Cultural Vitality Program continues to grow in reach, relevance, and impact. What began as a handful of pilot projects has evolved into a global platform for community-led cultural preservation, creativity, and exchange. This report offers a window into a year shaped by meaningful partnerships, bold experimentation, and deep investment into the future of living heritage.

The Cultural Vitality Program advances the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage's mission to connect communities across cultures—cultivating curiosity, understanding, and belonging for all people. In every project, we illuminate the richness of living traditions and collaborate ethically to create opportunities for knowledge sharing, economic resilience, and cultural continuity.

This year, our work reached from Georgian villages to the heart of Oaxaca, from festivals in North Carolina to artisan studios across Central Asia. In each place, we worked with local partners to co-create experiences that reflect the knowledge systems, creativity, and identity at the heart of community vitality. Together, we are building public resources and networks that help ensure that diverse cultures not only endure but thrive—now and into the future.

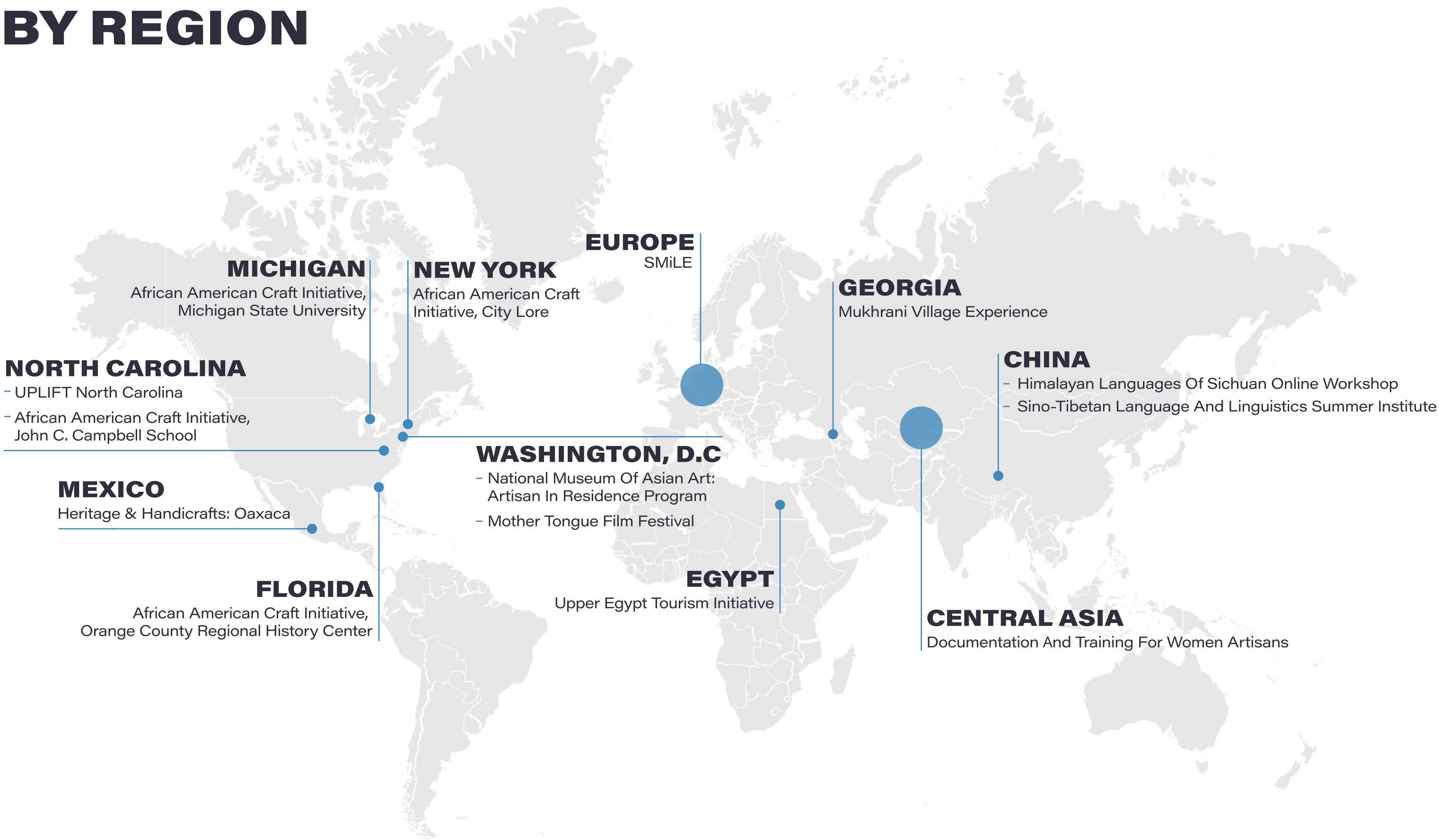
We hope this report inspires you to continue with us. Your support helps build a world where culture is not only preserved but practiced, shared, and valued in everyday life.

Halle Butvin

Director of Special Projects

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PROJECTS BY REGION



CULTURAL INDUSTRIES INITIATIVE

Culture flourishes when shared—and when communities have the tools and support to tell their stories on their own terms.

Through the Cultural Industries Initiatives, we work hand in hand with tradition bearers, artisans, and partners to strengthen both the appreciation and economic value of their creative practices.

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CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM INITIATIVE

We draw on research and presentation methods from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival to create engaging, inclusive, and sustainable community-based tourism experiences.



Photo by 64 Studio

ARTISAN INITIATIVE

We support artisans to keep their craft traditions alive—and thriving. We offer training in design and enterprise development, connect makers with new markets, and amplify their stories through research, documentation, and exchange.



Photo by Alexey Malchenko

FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL INCUBATOR

Festivals are powerful platforms for cultural expression. We share five decades of Smithsonian festival expertise through workshops, mentorship, and peer-to-peer exchange. This reciprocal learning program helps communities support vibrant cultural events.



Photo by Sonya Pencheva

MUKHRANI VILLAGE EXPERIENCE

In January 2024, the Smithsonian and the Foundation for Regional Economic Development of Mukhrani (FREDM) launched the Mukhrani Village Experience—a community-based tourism project sharing Georgia’s cultural heritage. The project began with research and local engagement.

Anthropologists Ketevan Gurchiani, Tinatin Khomeriki, and Aleksander Kavtaradze led studies in the villages of Dzalisi and Mukhrani, working closely with the local school. With students, they uncovered stories and documented daily life—creating a foundation for tourism shaped by the community.

In the spring, fourteen culture bearers gathered for a workshop at Château Mukhrani, where they learned about experiential tourism and began shaping cultural offerings. They later visited Armenia to connect with peers from the My Armenia Program who had developed similar experiences. Following the visit, nine participants received mentorship on storytelling, pricing, and promotion. By autumn, seven new experiences were tested with Smithsonian and FREDM staff.

To capture Mukhrani’s stories, local design studio Project 64 produced photos and videos. Final storytelling will continue into spring 2025, ending with media trips to showcase the village’s cultural life.

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Music instructors Ani and Mamuka share panduri tunes and songs with guests.
Photo by 64 Studio

“It is important for us that tourists are interested in Georgian culture and traditions, specifically music and folk instruments, and we are proud and happy that we have the opportunity to introduce Georgian songs, instruments, teach them how to play, etc.”

— Ani Alavardashvili and Mamuka Pholadishvili, Music Instructors

Our work in the Republic of Georgia is made possible with support from the Foundation for Regional Economic Development of Mukhrani.

A felucca ride on the Nile—Aswan's most serene and storied journey.
Photo by Ahmed Mostafa Salem

UPPER EGYPT TOURISM INITIATIVE

In 2023, Egypt welcomed nearly 15 million tourists, affirming its place as a global cultural heritage destination. As travel demand shifts toward more immersive, hands-on experiences, national tourism strategies are embracing this change. Upper Egypt, home to iconic sties like Karnak and Luxor, offers historical appeal, but opportunities for visitors to connect with local communities and learn about Egypt's living culture remain limited.

With funding from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, the Smithsonian launched the Upper Egypt Cultural Heritage Tourism Initiative—an effort to spark sustainable, community-driven tourism in one of the world's most historically rich regions.

The project began in October 2024 with virtual conversations with key stakeholders. A month later, the Smithsonian team traveled to Aswan, Esna, and Luxor—three cities steeped in Egypt's cultural and archaeological legacy—to explore how living heritage like traditional crafts, music, and foodways could be woven into meaningful visitor experiences. Meetings with artisans and cultural heritage and tourism professionals highlighted the region's largely untapped potential for experiential tourism.

Plans are underway to host research roundtables with local experts with findings to be published in Folklife Magazine.

“The initiative’s alignment with both cultural preservation and sustainable development goals is not only timely but also offers a replicable model for other heritage-rich regions. I strongly support this vision and its community-centered approach to tourism innovation.”

— Dr. Adel Moussa, Intangible Cultural Heritage Specialist and
UNESCO-accredited Facilitator

DOCUMENTATION AND TRAINING FOR WOMEN ARTISANS OF CENTRAL ASIA

In March 2024, the Smithsonian launched *Women Artisans of Central Asia: A Lookbook Journey*—a bilingual print and digital publication highlighting the artistry, resilience, and cultural heritage of 50 women-led artisan enterprises across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Available in English and Russian, the lookbook offers a window into the region’s traditional crafts—from felting and embroidery to weaving and leatherworking—passed down through generations and reimaged by today’s makers.

More than a catalog, the lookbook is a launchpad for broader storytelling. To amplify its impact, the Smithsonian rolled out a promotional campaign, beginning with six in-depth profiles in *Folklife Magazine* that brought readers closer to the lives and practices of the featured artisan. Collaborations with *Smithsonian Magazine* resulted in three immersive travel pieces showcasing Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan as cultural destinations. Features in *Women Create* and *Selvedge*, two leading design publications, placed Central Asian craftsmanship on the global stage. Every story paired with social media outreach to engage audiences and build appreciation for the region’s living heritage.

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50 women
artisans featured
in the Lookbook

11 artisans
mentored and
featured at fairs

9 artisans
featured in *Folklife*
Magazine

Embroidery by Botakoz Zeynelkhan, featured in *Women Artisans of Central Asia: A Lookbook Journey*
Photo by Alexey Malchenko



HERITAGE AND HANDICRAFTS: OAXACA

Oaxaca, a global hub for arts and culture, is home to vibrant Indigenous-led artisan traditions, and it is one of the most biodiverse places on earth. Here, artisans not only preserve natural materials and techniques but also draw inspiration from the region’s folklife and cultural heritage.

In this dynamic context, the Smithsonian partnered with the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca — School of Fine Arts and the CIIDIR Oaxaca unit of the National Polytechnic Institute to launch Heritage & Handicrafts: Oaxaca. The initiative brought together artisans from Zaachila to explore the cultural ecosystem surrounding the Danza de la Pluma (Feather Dance)—a ceremonial tradition passed down through generations.

Through a series of workshops—one in-person and two virtual—participants strengthened their skills in storytelling, marketing, design, and collaboration. In July 2024, two Zaachila-based artisans and two project team members traveled to Washington, D.C., to share their practice at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, while two others led workshops at a U.S. Embassy in Mexico City.

To extend the project’s impact, the Smithsonian helped establish a continuing education certification through the Facultad de Bellas Artes. Several artisans completed the course in August 2024 and showcased their work at a university exhibition. Though the project formally concluded in September, its influence lives: the university plans to integrate elements of the initiative into its academic programs, ensuring the artisans’ stories and skills continue to inspire.

“The Heritage & Handicrafts: Oaxaca project changed how I see promoting crafts. I learned to use marketing and storytelling and seeing other artisans’ strategies opened my eyes to the many effective resources available.”

— Karina Citlalli Ramirez, Oaxacan Artisan

Heritage & Handicrafts: Oaxaca is made possible with support from the U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Cultural Heritage Center.

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NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ASIAN ART: ARTISAN IN RESIDENCE PROGRAM

The Smithsonian's Artisan in Residence program, a collaboration between the National Museum of Asian Art and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, explores and shares Asian and Asian Diaspora craft traditions. Building on the Smithsonian Artisan Initiative, the Folklife Festival, and the robust collections and programs at the museum, the program offers immersive learning and exchange opportunities for both artisans and visitors.

Throughout the program, which concluded in May 2024, nine artisans from Armenia, China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates traveled to Washington, D.C., for week-long residencies. They led dynamic talks, demonstrations, and hands-on workshops, sharing their cultural practices with the public and forging connections with the local craft community. The residencies not only enriched museum visitors but also helped artisans build relationships with their peers and cultural practitioners across the D.C. area.

Through these free opportunities, more than 1,115 guests engaged with vibrant Asian craft traditions.

The Artisan in Residence program is made possible by support from the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art.

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“This experience will always stay in my memory as one of the best professional experiences I had in my life.”

— Sarah al Hosani, Program Participant

Smithsonian Artisan in Residence Sarah Al Hosani led hands-on sessions at the National Museum of Asian Art
Photo by Beth Ferraro

AFRICAN AMERICAN CRAFT INITIATIVE

Since its launch in 2020, the African American Craft Initiative (AACI) has collaborated with over 500 organizations and craft artists nationwide, supporting research, documentation, public programming, and network building for African American craft artists. Through our partnership with the Craft Emergency Relief Fund (CERF+) and Smithsonian Affiliations, three affiliate museums participated in the Cultural Sustainability and Legacy Planning Project, which included a train-the-trainers workshop and support to launch their own community workshops.

Though AACI officially concluded this year, the Folk School Alliance has taken over the Makers Bulletin newsletter and launched the African American Craft Alliance to continue the initiative’s efforts. The impact of AACI is also sustained through the ongoing work of participating artists and organizations.

“I can wholeheartedly say that I am so grateful and honored to have been a part of such an enriching and generative learning experience that I can now carry with me forever.”

— Dasmen Richards, AACI Participant

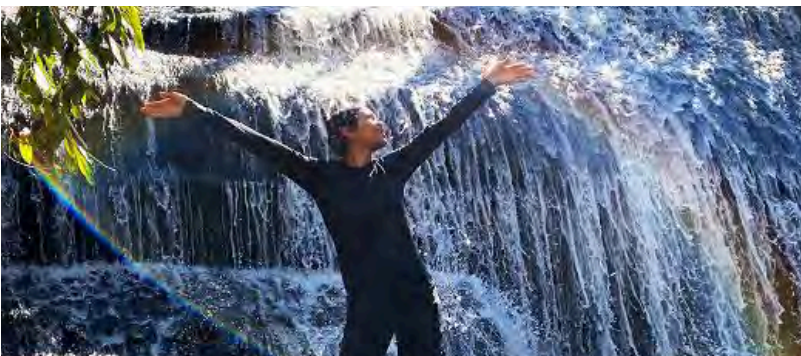
The African American Craft Initiative is made possible with support from AmeriCorps and CERF+.

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UPLIFT NORTH CAROLINA

UPLIFT North Carolina fosters community-driven tourism efforts in rural areas, working across county lines to help local leaders bring their tourism visions to life. In partnership with UPLIFT, the Smithsonian offers workshops and mentorship to support the development of festivals and cultural heritage tourism experiences that benefit both visitors and communities. Since launching in 2023, the partnership has focused on strengthening rural economies by enhancing the quality of local tourism offerings.

In September and November 2024, the Smithsonian hosted online workshops for festival and event organizers in rural North Carolina. These practical sessions, part of a “Troubleshooting Tuesdays” series, built on the in-person festival development workshops from 2023. Topics included visitor tracking and impact; volunteer management; emergency planning, cancelling, and postponing; concept development; and accessibility.



Culture Queens founder Jennifer Everett poses in front of Grogan Creek Falls in Brevard, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Everett

Our work in North Carolina is made possible with support from UPLIFT NC.

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ABU DHABI PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In partnership with the United Arab Emirates' Department of Culture and Tourism, the Smithsonian is creating an on-demand webinar series for cultural heritage students and professionals. These webinars will cover key topics like cultural festivals, curation, community engagement, and presentation, with interactive case studies to enhance learning. This series aims to introduce emerging professionals to cultural festival-making and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival methodology, helping them build valuable skills for their careers and studies.

Our work with Abu Dhabi cultural professionals is made possible by the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism and implemented in partnership with the Smithsonian's Office of Global Affairs.

Basket weaving is a significant cultural tradition in Abu Dhabi.
Photo by Halle Butvin.



LANGUAGE VITALITY INITIATIVE

The Language Vitality Initiative works alongside Indigenous and minoritized language communities to promote language sustainability through collaborative research, education, and program development.

We understand that language reclamation is a deeply rooted, generational process—one that is often challenging and closely tied to community healing and resilience, grounded in traditional knowledge systems. Our commitment is to engage in partnerships that honor each community’s cultural protocols and ethical standards, while supporting their linguistic and cultural aspirations.

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TRAIN

We conduct training sessions on skill transfer for language vitality.

INNOVATE

We encourage innovative approaches to language adaptation in a changing world.

NETWORK

We foster networking among individuals and organizations to facilitate knowledge sharing.

ADVOCATE

We advocate for collaborative efforts to create an environment conducive to additive bilingualism in the United States.

SUSTAINING MINORITIZED LANGUAGES IN EUROPE

In 2024, Multilingual Matters published *Agency in the Peripheries of Language Revitalisation: Examining European Practices on the Ground*—the volume is a key outcome of the Sustaining Minoritized Languages in Europe (SMiLE) initiative. Launched in 2015, SMiLE was a collaborative, interdisciplinary research program examining language revitalization efforts across diverse European contexts. The project culminated in a series of community-based case studies that analyze how revitalization initiatives maintain momentum over time.

Edited by Smithsonian curator Mary S. Linn, *Agency in the Peripheries* explores the complexities of agency in minoritized language revitalization across Europe, drawing from rich ethnographic research. Through localized perspectives, the book captures both the success stories where community agency has flourished and the challenges where questions of authority, authenticity, and participation remain unresolved.

ACCESS THE VOLUME →

A STREAM OF VOICES

A Stream of Voices is an initiative with the Endangered Languages Project, a worldwide collaboration to strengthen endangered languages. This project published Folklife Magazine articles that shared the traditions communities use to preserve and revitalize their endangered languages. Now officially concluded, this effort produced six articles, including three during this year.

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Sino-Tibetan Language Research Methodology Workshop student Meser shows his recordings of Tibetan singing during a course on documenting language and culture. Photo by Xiang Xun

“In the past, I thought that my mother tongue was not as useful as others, but after this workshop, I’ve found many interesting things about my language. It is special and valuable. I am also aware of the urgency and importance of keeping my language alive.”

— STLRMW Student

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SINO-TIBETAN LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS SUMMER INSTITUTE

The linguistic landscape of Tibetan regions in China is highly diverse. Beyond the major Tibetan languages—Ü-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham—there are over fifty smaller Tibetic languages and nearly forty non-Tibetic minority languages, many spoken by people who identify as Tibetan. Most, aside from the main three, urgently need preservation and revitalization. Through the Sino-Tibetan Language and Linguistics Summer Institute, our team brings together Tibetan students, community language workers, Nankai University, Qinghai’s Ancient Tibetan Texts Research Center, and Shanghai Normal University’s Tibetology Research Center to address this need.

In August 2024, we helped lead the seventh Sino-Tibetan Linguistic Research Methodology Workshop (STLRMW), a two-week intensive program of the institute that trains students from Tibetan and other minority backgrounds in linguistics, language documentation, and multilingualism. Bringing together 37 students from several language groups, the annual program featured 14 training sessions, four guest lectures, and two evenings of student presentations. Eight Tibetan PhD assistants—most alumni of earlier cohorts—played key roles in logistics and mentoring. Midway through, several alumni presented their research alongside leading linguists at the Sino-Tibetan Linguistics Forum.

Smithsonian curator Dr. Mary S. Linn gave a public talk on Native American languages, highlighting global efforts in language revitalization. She also co-led a workshop titled “Documenting Language and Culture” with Dr. Nate Sims (University of Oregon), introducing project design and video documentation while covering ethics, metadata, and archiving best practices.

HIMALAYAN LANGUAGES OF SICHUAN ONLINE WORKSHOP

The Himalayan Languages of Sichuan Online Workshop (HLOS) fosters interest in language documentation and revitalization among young speakers of minoritized languages in Sichuan, China, and helps students secure funding for related projects.

In 2024, HLOS accepted 50 students (ages 16–56) representing ten languages. Four workshop leaders (two Tibetan, two international) organized four recorded lectures and five live Q&A sessions, training students in project development, documentation, and grant writing. Three internationally recognized Tibetan linguists reviewed the following five student proposals for pilot projects, all aimed at documenting and preserving their communities' linguistic and cultural heritage. All five projects were completed and will be archived in the Ralph Rinzler Archives. The Endangered Language Fund awarded one student additional funding to continue their work.

“I would like to thank the project for its support, as well as the people and organizations that provided the platform. For me, as an ethnic minority woman who has been on the road of recording, I especially need more people, like teachers, to pay attention to us, so that our value will be reflected, and we will be more motivated.”

— PENG Xiaoli, Participant and Pilot Project Leader

“This workshop allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the current situation of the local endangered languages, and to learn about the preservation methods and techniques... It broadened my horizons in the field of linguistic research...”

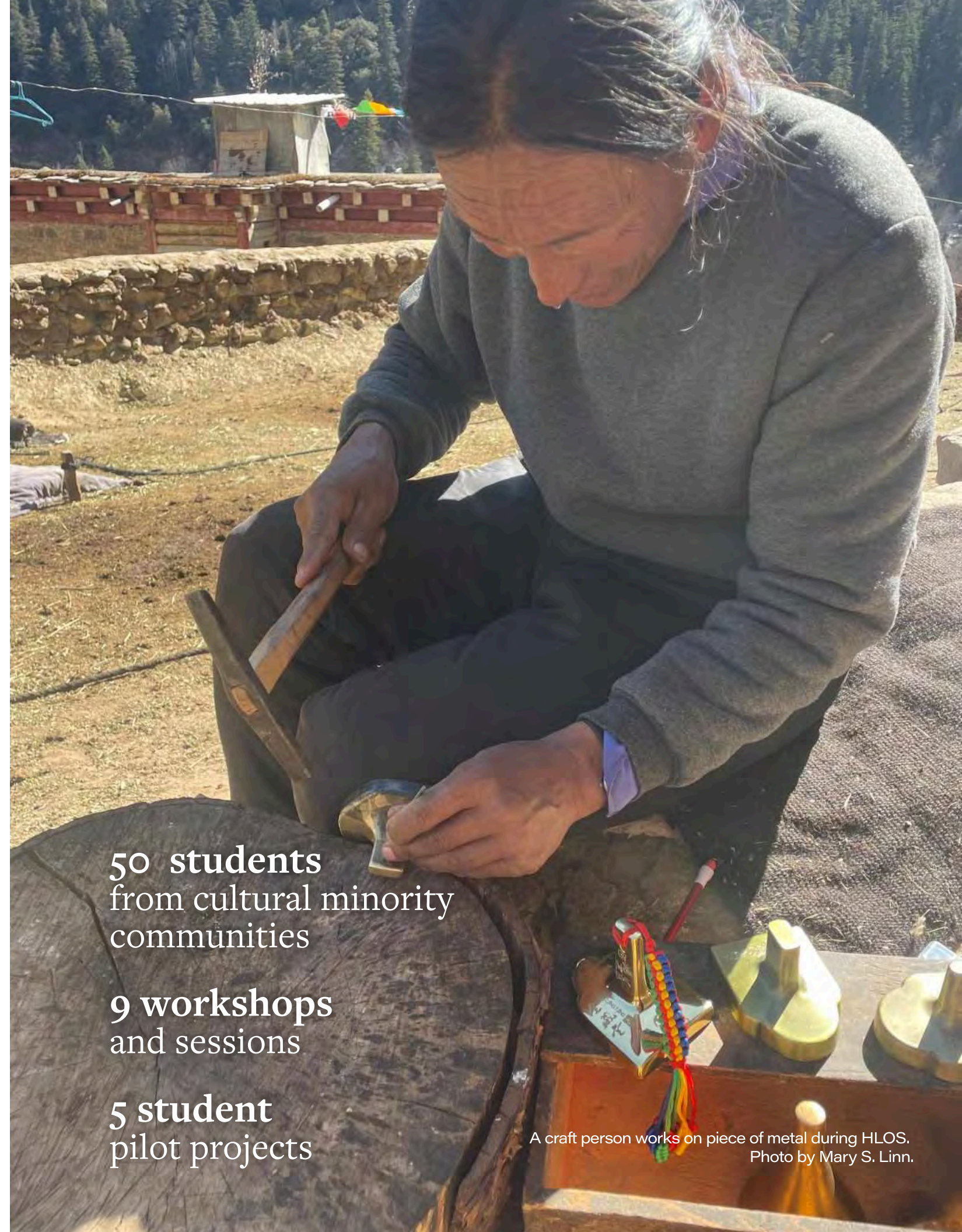
— LI Ruiyao, Participant and Pilot Project Leader


50 students
from cultural minority
communities

9 workshops
and sessions

5 student
pilot projects

A craft person works on piece of metal during HLOS.
Photo by Mary S. Linn.





A scene of “Hidden Letters,” a documentary by director Violet Du Feng, explores the bonds of sisterhood—and the parallel struggles among generations of women in China.

MOTHER TONGUE FILM FESTIVAL

The Smithsonian’s Mother Tongue Film Festival celebrates cultural and linguistic revitalization through cinema. Since its 2016 debut, the festival has showcased over 300 films from across the globe, highlighting the diversity of languages and stories.

The 2024 edition, themed “Finding Balance,” explored personal journeys examining how we cultivate equilibrium within ourselves, our communities, and the world. The festival featured 23 films in 27 languages from 12 regions, including eight feature-length films and 15 short films.

Opening at the National Museum of the American Indian, the festival kicked off with a screening of *Frybread Face and Me*, by Billy Luther (Diné, Hopi, and Laguna Pueblo), followed by a Q&A with one of its protagonists, Charley Hogan (Navajo).

Throughout the festival, filmmakers and cultural experts led engaging discussions, connecting the stories on the screen with the audience. Attendees participated in Q&As with creators like director Xun Sero, director Violet Du Feng, director Francisco Huichaqueo, and Ñuu Savi cultural experts. More than 1,200 attendees participated in screenings and activities across five venues near the National Mall.

The Mother Tongue Film Festival is a public program of Recovering Voices, a collaboration between Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and the Asian Pacific American Center.

This program received support from a variety of partners. To learn more, visit the [program page](#).

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FERRING

PHARMACEUTICALS



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CLDP

COMMERCIAL LAW DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

 **DAI**

cerf+
The Artists Safety Net



 **UPLIFT**
NORTH CAROLINA