

american  
**craft**

Winter 2024





# The Scene: Craft

Six local artists share the people and spaces that define this city, which is built on the handmade.

# in New Orleans

STORY BY KATY RECKDAHL AND JENNIFER VOGEL / CONTRIBUTOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY CEDRIC ANGELES

**New Orleans craft is not static.** It doesn't tend to sit on a counter or hang on a wall. "It comes to life," says Charles DuVernay, whose beaded tapestries are drawing crowds to New York City galleries these days.

Like many New Orleans artists, his craft is only one part of his life. "I don't see myself as 'artist Charles,'" says DuVernay, who sews mostly at night after a day of working on the Mississippi River, where he tests the quality of sugarcane that arrives by barge. "Because in New Orleans, everybody does art."

As sculptor and visual artist Hannah Chalew puts it, "There is a spirit of creativity endemic to this place."

Long a gathering spot for Native Americans, New Orleans was settled by the French in 1718 on a high-ground rectangle along the Mississippi River that became the French Quarter. The port drew people from all over, including the Eastern Seaboard, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean, particularly the French colony of Saint-Domingue, now Haiti. New Orleans became known for its trade of cotton, sugar, and human cargo, sold here in the country's largest slave market.

Much of the city's well-known architecture was built either by enslaved carpenters and artisans or by French-speaking Afro-Creole free people of color, known as *gens de couleur libres*, who made up more of the population of New Orleans than anywhere else in the nation and whose story is still told everyday by the docents at Le Musée de f.p.c. on Esplanade Avenue.

As a child, DuVernay watched his grandfather, Otis DuVernay, a well-known master carpenter, create dramatic arches and intricate, decorative trim for both fancy French Quarter townhouses and the humble shotgun-style houses that make up most of the streetscape in his native 7th Ward, a short walk from the Quarter.

Many 7th Ward families were, and still are, headed by craftspeople, seamstresses, and jazz musicians. One can argue that the city itself is a work of art that constantly requires skilled tending, fixing, and restoring by blacksmiths, plasterers, and other artisans.

Born in 1922, Allison "Tootie" Montana, a lathe worker by trade, created some of the structural framework that underpins the city's ornate plasterwork. At home he was known as Big Chief Tootie of the Yellow Pocahontas tribe, one of the city's Black Masking Indian tribes. Montana, calling upon both his Native American and Creole ancestry, used his talents to shape corrugated cardboard and other materials three-dimensionally, revolutionizing the look of the beaded and feathered suits his family had worn during Mardi Gras since the mid-1800s.

Kids growing up in these traditions learned to shape cardboard for play. They watched wrestling matches on TV and folded cardboard into elaborate wrestling belts. They won class awards for mini Mardi Gras floats made from shoeboxes, an annual New Orleans school competition. Still today, although gentrification has made it less common, children host second line parades along local sidewalks, pounding on drums made from boxes and buckets, and perhaps even toting a Big Wheel over a shoulder, pretending it's a sousaphone.

The city simply has a unique approach to art, says ceramist and Xavier University of Louisiana department chair MaPó Kinnord. "In New Orleans, it's a way of life. It's so much a part of the culture."

Artists often credit these deep traditions with inspiring them to both create traditional craft and innovate with more experimental and interpretative expressions. You'll read more about that in the following pages of this, *American Craft's* second installment of The Scene.

As Kinnord views it, New Orleans has "an art community, not an art world. In fact, we don't care what the art world thinks."

You can see that swagger on Sunday afternoons, when members of the city's social aid and pleasure clubs, dressed in one-of-a-kind suits and custom-made leather shoes and carrying feathered and beribboned fans, strut and dance through neighborhood streets, serenaded by brass bands, for hours-long second line parades.

No stranger to tragedy, New Orleans was hard-hit by the coronavirus; Mardi Gras 2020 was a super-spreader event, as tourists brought the virus to the celebration. Its poverty and per capita murder rates are among the highest in the nation. Its coastline is eroding faster than nearly anywhere else on Earth. The inequitable rebuilding of the city after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 triggered more gentrification, pushing Black families—and artists—farther out of the city.

Chalew believes the city's natural relationship with craft may be an effort to find beauty within hardship. "New Orleansians live in the moment and prioritize celebration and joy," she says, "because we know how quickly everything can change." —Katy Reckdahl

*Note: The following lists of artists and craft-related spaces are based on the recommendations of our contributors and are not comprehensive.*

This hand-beaded Mardi Gras Indian suit is just one of many on display at the Backstreet Cultural Museum in New Orleans.

Photo by Cedric Angeles.



## CONTRIBUTORS

### HANNAH CHALEW

Visual artist, educator,  
environmental activist  
hannahchalew.com | @studio.hnnh.chlw

Chalew's family moved from Baltimore to New Orleans when she was 12, so "I can't claim to be a native but I definitely consider myself to be 'from' New Orleans." She describes her hometown as "an incredibly beautiful city, both architecturally and because of the lush tropical landscape that envelops the built environment. People living in New Orleans really value arts and culture, and there is a spirit of creativity endemic to this place. However, this is also a city plagued by crumbling infrastructure, poverty, and violent crime. New Orleans, like America as a whole, is still haunted by the legacies of colonization and enslavement which endure through structural racism that leaves a lot of people, mostly Black, living precariously, struggling to get by. Our city is also perched on the bleeding edge of climate change; as our coast erodes, mostly because of interventions by the oil and gas industry, this same industry continues to extract



ABOVE: Hannah Chalew in her studio. LEFT: Chalew creates pigments and inks from her surroundings. OPPOSITE: The artist's sculpture *Bottomland Chimera*, 2023, is made from materials including metal, lime, and recycled paint; paper made from sugarcane and plastic waste; ink derived from brick, goldenrod, copper, fossil fuel pollution, oak gall, and more; and soil and living plants; 90 x 115 x 85 in.

and burn fossil fuels, which raises sea levels and strengthens the hurricanes that barrel through the Gulf of Mexico each year." Still, she says, this state of vulnerability feeds the culture. "New Orleanians live in the moment and prioritize celebration and joy because we know how quickly everything can change. As such, this city is both an incredibly inspiring but also complicated and nuanced environment for creatives."

**ARTISTS CHALEW ADMIRES:** Ceramist and educator **MaPó Kinnord**, mixed-media artist **John W. Taylor**, master weaver **Janie Verret Luster**, bousillage restorer and artist **Dale Pierrottie**, and beader and Mardi Gras Indian suit maker **Big Chief Demond Melancon** of the Young Seminole Hunters.

mkinnordart.com | @nolamapo  
joanmitchellfoundation.org/john-w-taylor  
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demondmelancon.com | @qadamawi

Photos by Cedric Angeles.





Located in a former church, Mo's Art Supply & Framing promises, "You will be converted."

## PLACES AND SPACES

### Where to Buy Supplies

"Most of us get our clay from **Alligator Clay Company** in Baton Rouge," says Kinnord. The company manufactures and distributes over 30 kinds of moist clay.

southern-pottery-equipment-amp-supplies.shoplightspeed.com/moist-clay/alligator-clay

DuVernay says he gathers suit-making materials—whether canvas, feathers, sequins, or beads—at "Miss Helen's," referring to **Broadway Bound Costumes** on Canal Street, which was run for decades by the late Helen Koenig. [broadwayboundcostumes.com](http://broadwayboundcostumes.com)

"**The Green Project** is an incredible resource," says Chalew. "It's a salvage store for construction materials and a great place to shop and support." [thegreenproject.org](http://thegreenproject.org)

"That's my go-to," says DuVernay of **Jefferson Variety Stores**, located just outside New Orleans in Jefferson. The store, an institution for locals, specializes in costume fabric, sequin and rhinestone appliques, and beads. [jeffersonvariety.com](http://jeffersonvariety.com)

"**Mo's Art Supply & Framing** is an art supply company on Bienville Street, close to my house," says Kinnord. "They have a lot. I go there for paints and all kinds of other stuff." Chalew agrees, adding, "If I really need a specific art material, Mo's Art Supply is a superb local art store in the city." Declares Frisbie-Calder, "They are the best in NOLA!" [mosartsupply.com](http://mosartsupply.com)

The motto for the shop **NOLA Craft Culture** is, "It's not a hobby, it's a way of life." DuVernay, who calls this his "exclusive shop," couldn't agree more. "They're gonna have stuff that nobody else is gonna have." [nolacraftculture.com](http://nolacraftculture.com)



"I strive to make my studio practice as fossil-free as possible, so most of my materials are found or foraged," says Chalew. "For the ink that I make, I gather oak galls below local oak trees around the city." Still, she has go-to spots for supplies that can't be gleaned. "When I need metal, I head to **Poland Scrap Metal**," a scrapyard on Poland Avenue also favored by Frisbie-Calder. [polandscrapmetal.com](http://polandscrapmetal.com)

"I work a lot with reclaimed sinker cypress that I source from the swamps surrounding New Orleans," says Hol-dren. "I buy from guys who go out and literally get in the mud and dig these ancient logs out. **Riverside Lumber** has an incredible selection of rare woods and reclaimed local products, too." [riversidelumber.com](http://riversidelumber.com)

Photos by Cedric Angeles.



### SPOTLIGHT Backstreet Cultural Museum

In this jewel in the Tremé neighborhood, the late Sylvester Francis curated the Backstreet, an ode to New Orleans Black culture that he called "a powerhouse of knowledge." It is now run by his daughter Dominique Francis-Dilling and her staff, who can tell stories for days about skull and bone crews; baby dolls; Black Masking Indians, also known as Mardi Gras Indians, who annually create beaded-and-feathered suits; and social aid and pleasure clubs that host yearly Sunday afternoon second line parades, when club members dance through the streets while being serenaded by brass bands.

—Katy Reckdahl  
[backstreetmuseum.org](http://backstreetmuseum.org)  
[@backstreetculturalmuseum](https://www.instagram.com/backstreetculturalmuseum)

## Museums

**George & Leah McKenna Museum of African American Art** collects, interprets, and preserves "the visual aesthetic of people of African descent in North America and beyond." [mckennamuseum.com](http://mckennamuseum.com)

**The Historic New Orleans Collection** is a museum, research center, and publisher dedicated to preserving the history and culture of New Orleans and the Gulf South. Spread over three campuses, the collection features restored historic buildings and the French Quarter Galleries. [hnoc.org](http://hnoc.org)

Founded in 1976, the **Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society of St. Bernard** is housed in the Los Isleños Museum Complex in St. Bernard Parish. The society's mission is to preserve the folklore, history, language, music, and traditions of Canary Islanders in New Orleans. [losislenos.org](http://losislenos.org)

To be steeped in the city's musical history, visit the **New Orleans Jazz Museum**, which boasts a large collection of memorabilia, sheet music, clothing, and handmade instruments, such as a one-string guitar from 1915 and an Old Peach cigar box violin from around 1894. Some highlights include Fats Domino's white Steinway piano, refurbished after Hurricane Katrina souped his home with 10 feet of water, and a Lyon & Healy cornet played by a young Louis Armstrong. The historic **French Market**, which covers five blocks and features everything from alligator heads to handcrafts to beverages and food, is located just behind the museum. [nolajazzmuseum.org](http://nolajazzmuseum.org)  
[frenchmarket.org](http://frenchmarket.org)

**New Orleans Museum of Art**, the city's oldest fine art institution, opened in 1911 with just nine pieces. Today, its permanent collection encompasses nearly 50,000 works, including glass, textiles, and decorative arts. Don't miss the impressive **Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden**, which occupies more than 11 acres in City Park adjacent to the museum. [noma.org](http://noma.org)

Established in 1999, the **Ogden Museum of Southern Art** holds an expansive collection of Southern art and is lauded for its exhibitions, public events, and educational programs that examine not only visual art, but music, literature, and culinary traditions in order "to provide a comprehensive story of the South." [ogdenmuseum.org](http://ogdenmuseum.org)

## Artists' Spaces

For a quarter century, **Ashé Cultural Arts Center** has provided programming and support to foster "human, community, and economic development" among the African diaspora in New Orleans. With 10,000 square feet of gallery space and 20,000 square feet of performance space, the arts center produces more than 350 music, theater, dance, spoken word, and multidisciplinary events per year. [ashenola.org](http://ashenola.org)

The **Creative Alliance of New Orleans** supports artists, cultural changemakers, and the overall revitalization of the city through training, education, and informational programming. [cano-la.org](http://cano-la.org)



## PLACES AND SPACES (continued)



Sheleen Jones's 2010 life-size sculpture of Allison Big Chief "Tootie" Montana in Louis Armstrong Park.

### Artists' Spaces (continued)

Launched in 2015 by the Joan Mitchell Foundation, which supports visual artists, the **Joan Mitchell Center** hosts residencies on its two-acre New Orleans campus. [joanmitchellfoundation.org/joan-mitchell-center](http://joanmitchellfoundation.org/joan-mitchell-center)

The 31-acre **Louis Armstrong Park**, located in the Tremé neighborhood, is full of stunning public art, including the bronze sculpture of Allison Big Chief "Tootie" Montana by local sculptor **Sheleen Jones**. The park is home to historic **Congo Square**, where enslaved Africans and free people of color gathered to dance, sing, and play music—practices that influenced the development of jazz.

[nola.gov/parks-and-parkways/parks-squares/congo-square-louis-armstrong-park/](http://nola.gov/parks-and-parkways/parks-squares/congo-square-louis-armstrong-park/)  
@queensheleen

Visual artist **Willie Birch** created the **Old Prieur Community Memory Garden**, a small garden in the heart of the 7th Ward—on the corner of O'Reilly and Old Prieur Streets—that provides greens and flowers for neighbors, alongside sculpture and other artwork.

[williebirch.com](http://williebirch.com)

**A Studio in the Woods** aims to foster creative responses to thorny challenges like climate change by providing retreats to artists, scholars, and the public in a forest on the Mississippi River.

[astudiointhewoods.org](http://astudiointhewoods.org)

### Schools and Workshops

**The Black School** is a Black-centered experimental art school teaching students how to "transform social realities through Black love, healing, and self-determination." Besides running a firm that provides graphic design services, the school hosts Black Love Fest, a one-day celebration with student exhibits, art installations, and musical performances.

[theblack.school](http://theblack.school)

Located in the Gert Town neighborhood, the **Clay Center of New Orleans** offers classes and workshops for clay artists of all skill levels.

[nolaclay.org](http://nolaclay.org)

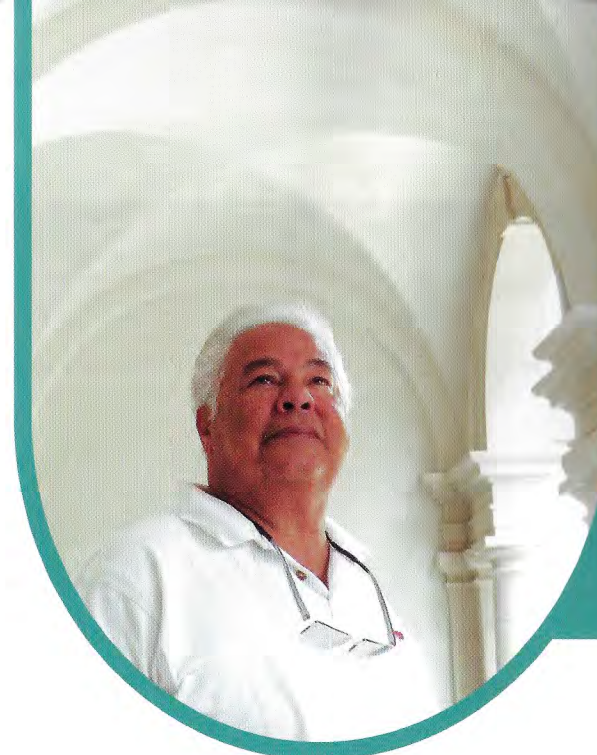
Offering hands-on classes, **Community Workshop NOLA** is a cooperative, membership-based woodshop seeking to create a safe, affordable, and collaborative space for makers.

[communityworkshopnola.com](http://communityworkshopnola.com)

### SPOTLIGHT Music Box Village

Set on the levee next to the Industrial Canal, which opens onto the busy Mississippi River, Music Box Village occupies a one-acre forest where the sounds of the river—ship horns, train whistles, and drawbridge signals—create the right ambiance for making music. Its centerpiece is a collection of artist-made interactive "musical houses," which were made in the village's own metal fabrication shop; each structure makes its own music. This sonic playground is beloved by children, but it also serves as the setting for performances and concerts, where audiences relax under the leafy cover of oak trees. —Katy Reckdahl

[musicboxvillage.com](http://musicboxvillage.com)

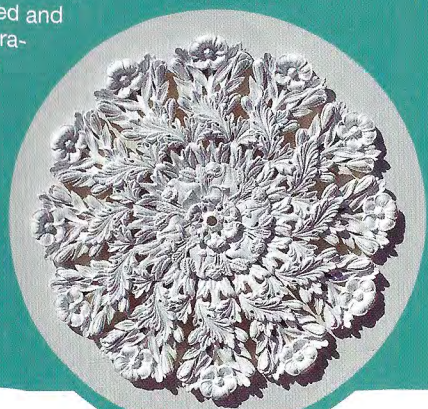


### SPOTLIGHT Jeff Poree

For five generations, master plasterer Jeff Poree and his family have created and maintained New Orleans's decorative plaster: ornate ceiling roses and medallions, crown moldings, columns, walls, beadwork, scrolls, lions, gargoyles, panels, domes, and arches. At the Poree casting shop, artisans sometimes shape up to 1,200 pounds of plaster a day.

—Katy Reckdahl

@poree\_plastering



**Crescent City Clay Connection** is a group of potters and ceramists that includes Kinnord. "It's a way for people to check out their local communities and build communities," she says. Among its benefits, the connection provides an avenue for sharing large amounts of clay. "We are able to help with resources," Kinnord says, "and spread the cost around."

[crescentcityclayconnection.org](http://crescentcityclayconnection.org)

Located in the 9th Ward, the nonprofit arts center **Material Institute** offers classes and other learning opportunities in the fields of music, fashion, and community gardening. Thanks to the guidance of participating artists, the emphasis is on experimentation and expression.

[materialinstitute.org](http://materialinstitute.org)



Curt Anderson (left) and furniture designer Peter Scheidt work on a "storytelling chair" at YAYA Arts Center.

**New Orleans Center for Creative Arts** bills itself as "Louisiana's arts conservatory" for a reason. Founded in 1973, NOCCA is a regional arts training center with instruction in media arts, music, dance, visual arts, and more. Graduates include Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Wendell Pierce, and Jon Batiste. Chalew also attended and calls it an "incredible public arts magnet high school."

[nocca.com](http://nocca.com)

A private, historically Black, Catholic college in New Orleans, **Xavier University of Louisiana** boasts programs in disciplines ranging from business to medicine to the arts.

[xula.edu](http://xula.edu)

The **YAYA Arts Center's** mission is to empower creative young people to become successful adults. With painting and glass studios, a gallery, and an impressive roster of teaching artists, this organization is having an impact.

[yayainc.org](http://yayainc.org)







### SPOTLIGHT Darryl Reeves

Master blacksmith Darryl Reeves hand-forges steel and brass furniture and railings, like this original musical bar railing on Frenchmen Street (below). He also painstakingly restores wrought iron picket fences and railings—complete with delicate leaves and tendrils and curves—that are a signature of New Orleans's French Quarter and other distinct historic areas such as the Garden District, St. Charles Avenue, and Esplanade Ridge. —Katy Reckdahl  
neworleansblacksmith.net



## PLACES AND SPACES (continued)

### Galleries, Studios, Markets

**Antenna** is a multidisciplinary cultural institution that presents exhibitions and public programs, provides financial support to artists, hosts residencies, and runs a book production facility.  
antenna.works

A contemporary art and craft gallery, **Ariodante** is located in the St. Claude Arts District.  
ariodantegallery.com

**Byrdie's Pottery** is a nonprofit community ceramics studio in the Marigny neighborhood offering classes, memberships, and a storefront shop.  
byrdiespottery.org

Originally called Defend New Orleans, **DNO** was founded in 2003 as a screen printing and T-shirt studio. At first the mission was to stop New Orleans from losing its unique culture. But after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the founders turned to focus on community and connections.  
dno.la

"**Julia Street** is the part of town with the more upscale galleries, like **Arthur Roger Gallery** and **LeMieux Galleries**, to name just a few," says Frisbie-Calder. "I have been represented by LeMieux Galleries since 2019 and find the work in this part of town to be very inspiring."  
arthurrrogallery.com  
lemieuxgalleries.com

Because of Mardi Gras, mask making in New Orleans is considered high art. **Mask Gallery** in the French Quarter, owned by renowned leather mask maker Massud Dalili, has a nice collection.  
neworleansmask.com

**New Orleans Community Printshop & Darkroom** is a collectively run, nonprofit community art space specializing in screen printing, relief printing, and black-and-white darkroom photography.  
nolacommunityprintshop.org

**NOLA DDM** is an apparel design, development, and production studio in the Marigny neighborhood that does everything from making patterns to sewing the final product.  
noladdmfashion.com

A private atelier on Magazine Street, **Pollack Glass Studio and Gallery** emphasizes lampworked glass techniques. Founder Andrew Pollack teaches and shows his work and that of others.  
pollackglassnola.com

Every three years, the organizers behind **Prospect New Orleans**, a recurring civic exhibition, invite artists from all over the world to create projects that are displayed or performed in local venues.  
prospectneworleans.org

Photos courtesy of Darryl Reeves.

### SPOTLIGHT Dutch Alley Artists' Co-op

Operating for 20 years in the historic French Market, steps from tourist staple Café du Monde, Dutch Alley is a true co-op staffed by the two dozen artists who make the work that's sold in the gallery. Shop for handmade hats, fiber art, pottery, jewelry, sculpture, photography, prints, and linoleum cuts, including Robin Daning's well-known paintings made on dominoes, Nick Conner's wooden bowls, Kimberly Parker's mixed-media visual pieces, Wanda Wiggins's African-influenced fabric collages, and Pat Lee's figurative sculptures (pictured here with the artist). —Katy Reckdahl  
dutchalleyonline.com



BELOW: Patrons gather for an opening at The Front, a gallery in the St. Claude Arts District.

"**St. Claude Arts District** is a really fun place to see a broad range of New Orleans art," says Frisbie-Calder. "With some of the more exciting and innovative work in the city, you might step into **The Front** to find yourself in a world of paper-pulp oil refineries and pipes by Hannah Chalew, or into **Antenna Gallery** to see Abdi Farah's large-scale portraits of Black football players sewn out of flags and made lifelike through layers of drawing." Holdren recommends St. Claude as well, singling out The Front and **Good Children Gallery**.  
nolafront.org  
hannahchalew.com  
antenna.works  
abdifarah.com  
goodchildrengallery.com

Since 1996, **Stella Jones Gallery** has worked to make African American, contemporary African, and Caribbean fine art accessible to all.  
stellajonesgallery.com

**MORE ONLINE!** To see more photos of artists—and read about the New Orleans bars, restaurants, and clubs they recommended—go to:  
craftcouncil.org/NewOrleansScene

♦ This story was written and edited by *American Craft* Senior Editor Jennifer Vogel and Katy Reckdahl, a reporter extraordinaire in New Orleans who has written for publications including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and this magazine. You can read her *American Craft* story about Black Masking Indians here:  
craftcouncil.org/MardiGrasSuits



Photos by Cedric Angeles.