



Brief Cultural History of the MSNHA

One of the earliest art forms to appear in north Alabama was Native American pottery, which can be traced to 2500 BCE. The Native Americans made pots, jugs, and other practical items but did not neglect to incorporate artistic designs. Many different tribes used distinct decorative patterns that were unique to them.

Another art form for which ancient Native Americans were particularly known for was basket weaving. Rivercane is similar to bamboo and is nearly indestructible, which made for incredibly sturdy baskets. Tribes across the United States were utilizing materials convenient for them in the creation of their baskets. In the Southeast, baskets were typically made from bundled pine needles or rivercane wicker. Baskets were made with various patterns and would sometimes feature contrasting colored materials for a checkerboard effect. Click [here](#) to learn more about Native American basket making across the South.

When people moved from the eastern seaboard into the Southeast, they introduced crops such as cotton to Alabama. The production of cotton and the new residents' agricultural lifestyle influenced the types of folk art, such as quilting and needlework that were produced across the region.

[Quilt making](#) began out of necessity. Quilts provided warmth to those facing the harsh conditions of the wilderness. As settlers moved into Alabama from places such as Virginia and the Carolinas, they brought their possessions with them. Their possessions included quilts. The designs of these quilts from Virginia and the Carolinas influenced the quilts which were made in Alabama. Quilts are some of the most well-preserved textiles from the early periods of American history. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, American quilt making moved away from traditional European quilt styles and embraced the distinctly American patchwork style.

Patchwork quilts were often made of scraps of fabrics and appliqued to create a larger image or pattern. Popular images for patterns include flowers, stars, and trees.



Bird Effigy Pot, Mississippian Period



Detail of a Cherokee basket, photo taken by Eamonn Walsh



Star Quilt Patterns

Quilt making afforded Southern women of all classes an opportunity to socialize. Quilting is a long and tedious process and is often done by multiple people at once. This gave rise to the Quilting Bee, where groups of women could sit and socialize while working on their quilts. Even after the South moved away from an agricultural economy to a more industrialized one, quilt making remained a popular pastime for women in Alabama.

In more recent times, the MSNHA region has given rise to many contemporary artists. Florence is home to the flagship store of noted fashion designer Billy Reid. The brand is noted for its Southern influence and its casual luxuriousness. Florence is also home to another fashion designer, Natalie Chanin. She owns [Alabama Chanin](#), a company that produces ethically made and sourced fashion and home merchandise.



Moore's photo of the arrest of Martin Luther King Jr.

The region has also been home to artists outside the world of design. Photojournalist [Charles Moore](#) took photos around Tusculumbia before taking some of the most well-known photos from the civil rights movement, including the iconic images of children being attacked by police dogs during the 1963 Children's March in Birmingham.

The Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area is cultivating new artists constantly. Throughout the year, there are many art festivals across the Shoals that display the work of many up-and-coming local artists. Click [here](#) for a list of festivals around the state.

Theatres provided a wealth of entertainment to both residents of the cities and the outlying rural areas of North Alabama. Some of the earliest theatres in the area include the Princess Theatre for the Performing Arts (Decatur), the Ritz Theatre (Sheffield), the Majestic Theatre (Florence), the Ritz Theatre (Athens), and the Bay Theatre (Red Bay).



Other noted early 1900s movie theatres included the Capital Theatre (Decatur), Elite Theatre (an African American-only theatre – Decatur), Colbert Theatre (Sheffield), The Norwood Theatre (Florence), the Plaza Theatre (Athens), the Ritz Theatre (Athens), and the Roxy Theatre (Russelleville).

Some interesting facts:

The Shoals Theatre, when constructed in 1948, was one of the largest theatres in the state and had room for 1,350 people. It was also one of only four theatres at the time to have slide-back seats.

In Decatur, the Delite Theatre was the first theatre in town to have two projectors, allowing the movie to play continuously without a break to change the film.

The Bay Theatre in Red Bay featured a soda fountain in its lobby. The soda fountain and other salvaged pieces of the old theatre can be viewed at the Red Bay Museum.

[Carnegie Visual Arts Center](#) (Decatur)

[Hartselle Fine Arts Center](#) (Hartselle)

[Kennedy-Douglas Center for the Arts](#) (Florence)

[Tennessee Valley Museum of Art](#) (Tuscumbia)

[University of North Alabama Art Gallery](#) (Florence)