ARTS AT MIT

The arts (http://arts.mit.edu) are a fundamental component of MIT’s core curriculum and research community, reflecting and enhancing the Institute’s creativity, innovation, and excellence while advancing the self-discovery, problem solving, and collaborative skills needed by leaders meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

Over 50 percent of all MIT undergraduates enroll in arts courses each year—with nearly half of students participating in music and theater classes or performance groups—and many major or minor in arts-related subjects. MIT’s arts faculty includes eminent artists such as Pulitzer Prize recipients composer John Harbison and writer Junot Díaz, as well as composer and musician Evan Ziporyn, composer Tod Machover, director Jay Scheib, architect Antón García-Abril, designer Neri Oxman, and visual artist Renée Green.

Each year MIT’s performing groups and outside artists present over 300 music, theater, and dance events. Productions range from chamber music to electronic “hyperinstruments,” and from Shakespearean plays to science theater. MIT’s world music program features Boston’s only Balinese gamelan, a Senegalese drumming ensemble, and an acclaimed South Asian performance series.

Art, Culture and Technology. The Department of Architecture’s Program in Art, Culture and Technology (ACT) (http://act.mit.edu) operates as a critical production- and education-based laboratory focusing on artistic research, advanced visual studies, and transdisciplinary collaboration within the context of MIT’s technological community. Its weekly lecture series is open to the public.

Dance. Extracurricular dance activities at MIT are sponsored by the Folk Dance Club, Tech Squares, Ballroom Dancing Club, Dance Troupe, and various international student groups, providing regular opportunities for dancers at all levels of ability. Access their websites (http://theaterarts.mit.edu) for additional information.

Literary Arts. The Comparative Media Studies/Writing (CMS/W) Program (http://catalog.mit.edu/schools/humanities-arts-social-sciences/comparative-media-studies-writing) offers courses in fiction, nonfiction prose, poetry, science writing, and digital media, taught by award-winning faculty. Its own publications and the Ilona Karmel Writing Prizes help highlight and distribute the very best in MIT graduate and undergraduate writing. The Literature Section (http://catalog.mit.edu/schools/humanities-arts-social-sciences/literature) sponsors readings by visiting authors that are open to the MIT community as well as the public. Its Pleasures of Poetry series meets every weekday during IAP, bringing together faculty, staff, students, and others from the community who share a love of poetry. Together with the MIT Libraries, Literature also sponsors the MIT Literary Society, an undergraduate reading group focused on literary discussion outside the classroom.

Media Arts. An international leader in the development of innovative digital media and information technologies, MIT’s Media Lab (http://media.mit.edu) is a uniquely flexible organization where faculty members, research staff, and students from numerous, seemingly unrelated disciplines—with backgrounds ranging from computer science to psychology, music to graphic design, and architecture to mechanical engineering—work together “atelier style,” doing the things that conventional wisdom says can’t or shouldn’t be done. The goal is to develop technologies and concepts that foster creativity—empowering people of all ages, from all walks of life, in all societies, to design and invent new possibilities for themselves and the communities around them. Research opportunities for students are available through the Program in Media Arts and Sciences (http://catalog.mit.edu/schools/architecture-planning/media-arts-sciences), based in the School of Architecture and Planning, and through the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program.

CMS/W (http://catalog.mit.edu/schools/humanities-arts-social-sciences/comparative-media-studies-writing) offers an innovative program that applies critical analysis, collaborative research, and design across a variety of media arts, forms, and practices. Through its undergraduate and graduate programs and hands-on research groups, it develops thinkers who understand the dynamics of media change and can apply their insights to contemporary problems. It cultivates practitioners and artists who can work in multiple forms of contemporary media.

Music. MIT’s music (http://catalog.mit.edu/schools/humanities-arts-social-sciences/music-theater-arts) faculty includes internationally acclaimed composers, performers, and musicologists. Students can choose to pursue a full or joint major, a minor, or a HASS concentration in music. They can also take private lessons with financial support from the Emerson scholarship program; music subjects in theory, composition, history, jazz, and world music; or participate (for credit or not) in faculty-led performance ensembles. These include the MIT Symphony Orchestra, Wind Ensemble, Festival Jazz Ensemble, Chamber Music Society, Concert Choir, Chamber Chorus, Balinese Gamelan Galak-Tika, and Rambax MIT (a Senegalese drumming ensemble). In addition to ensemble performances and student recitals, concerts are also presented as part of the MIT Faculty, Affiliated Artists, Guest Artists, and MIT Heritage of the Arts of South Asia (MITHAS). Artists of national and international stature frequently come to perform at MIT and to interact with students in and out of the classroom.

In addition to the performance opportunities offered by the music program within the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, there are many student-directed ensembles and a capella groups that perform on campus as well. Visit the website (http://arts.mit.edu/groups/performance-groups) for more information.

Theater. MIT’s programs in theater arts (http://catalog.mit.edu/schools/humanities-arts-social-sciences/music-theater-arts) afford opportunities for serious study and training in acting, directing,
playwriting, dramaturgy, stagecraft, and design. Classes are small, and students work directly with renowned faculty and guest artists, or initiate independent student workshop productions. Students may choose a minor or HASS concentration in theater; it is also possible to create an individually tailored theater major. A wide variety of theatrical performances are presented by MIT Dramashop and Dance Theater Ensemble, the co-curricular student production group of MIT Theater Arts. These productions, directed by professionals in their fields, often offer interested students opportunities to further develop their work in professional settings. Extracurricular student organizations such as Shakespeare Ensemble, Musical Theatre Guild, Gilbert & Sullivan Players, and the improv group Roadkill Buffet offer additional performance and production experience.

The new theater arts building opened in 2017, and houses a two-story flexible blackbox theater with 150–180 seats, state-of-the-art rehearsal spaces and design studios, offices, and dressing rooms. The building was designed with production in mind and to maximize the possibilities for experimentation with new theater technologies. Other studios in the building provide space for smaller performances, faculty and student workshops, rehearsals, and classes in theatrical practice, design, and technical arts. An annual Theater Arts Open House on Registration Day in early September allows students to meet the people who produce theater events and to learn more about opportunities to get involved in various productions.

Visual Arts. From large-scale public art to film and photography, the visual arts are celebrated in innovative ways at MIT. Excellent opportunities exist for members of the MIT community to view and create art in a variety of media (see Student Art Association, List Visual Arts Center, and MIT Museum below). The Program in Art, Culture and Technology offers undergraduate classes in public, installation, and media arts, and has a prominent master's program. MIT students can take classes in traditional fine arts at Harvard, the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and Wellesley College through cross-registration programs (https://registrar.mit.edu/registration-academics/registration-information/cross-registration).

The Office of the Arts at MIT oversees, coordinates, supports, and facilitates arts activities. The office’s branches include the Council for the Arts, Student Programs, Visiting Artists Program, and Arts Communications. For general information on arts programs and activities at MIT, visit the website (http://arts.mit.edu) and see the arts calendar (http://arts.mit.edu/events-visit/calendar).

The MIT Center for Art, Science & Technology (CAST) (http://arts.mit.edu/cast), established in 2012, facilitates and creates opportunities for exchange and collaboration for artists with engineers and scientists. A joint initiative of the Office of the Provost, the School of Architecture and Planning, and the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, the center is committed to fostering a culture where the arts, science, and technology thrive as interrelated, mutually informing modes of exploration, knowledge, and discovery. As an umbrella organization, CAST’s activities include soliciting and supporting cross-disciplinary curricular initiatives; managing visiting artist residencies; overseeing undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral research; and organizing programs such as performances, exhibitions, installations, and a biennial symposium.

A flourishing Visiting Artists Program complements the curriculum, allowing students to engage with distinguished visiting artists, including visual artists Tomás Saraceno, Vik Muniz, Anicka Yi, and Trevor Paglen; architect Santiago Calatrava; filmmaker Katerina Cizek; violinist Johnny Gandelsman; and jazz pianist Jason Moran. For more information, visit the website (http://arts.mit.edu/visiting-artists).

The Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts at MIT (http://arts.mit.edu/mcdermott) recognizes rising, innovative talents and offers its recipients a $100,000 cash prize and campus residency. Past recipients include singer/actress Audra McDonald, composer Tan Dun, video artist Bill Viola, conductor Gustavo Dudamel, multidisciplinary performance and media artist Robert Lepage, visual artist Olafur Eliasson, and architect David Adjaye.

The Council for the Arts at MIT is a volunteer group of alumni and friends established in 1972 by MIT president Jerome B. Wiesner to support the visual, literary, and performing arts. The Council for the Arts recognizes distinguished artists from all disciplines with one of the country’s most esteemed arts prizes, the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts at MIT. Since its inception, the council has awarded over 3,500 individual grants; it also administers annual student prizes in the arts, including the Sudler Prize, the Laya and Jerome B. Wiesner Student Art Awards, and the Harold and Arlene Schnitzer Prize in the Visual Arts.

Council programs directly benefit MIT students by providing free tickets to the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Boston Chamber Music Society, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and Radius Ensemble, free admission to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and discount tickets to a number of concerts, theater, and ballet performances throughout the year.

The Council for the Arts’ Grants Program encourages the dreams and talents of the MIT community, providing the opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to apply for funding for arts projects in all disciplines. Grants range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars.

Student Programs. Several programs encourage students to engage in the arts. First-year undergraduate seminars led by MIT faculty and staff introduce participants to the many academic and performance programs in the arts at MIT and the Boston area. Arts Scholars (http://arts.mit.edu/participate/arts-scholars) is an honors program that enables students who are active in the arts to attend exhibitions, plays, and concerts with experts in the respective arts disciplines. The Grad Arts Forum (http://arts.mit.edu/groups/grad-
Arts at MIT encourages interdisciplinary communication among graduate students through a series of presentations and informal discussions of artistic work by grad students. Student Programs also administers the annual mural competition for currently enrolled MIT students, as well as the $15K Creative Arts Competition, which awards $15,000 to the team whose business plan has arts at its core.

The Student Art Association (http://arts.mit.edu/saa) offers noncredit classes and facilities for many visual arts activities including animation, ceramics, photography, painting, drawing, printmaking, and machine art.

List Visual Arts Center (http://listart.mit.edu), just as MIT pushes the frontiers of scientific and intellectual inquiry, the mission of the List Visual Arts Center is to explore contemporary art in all media. Each year, the center presents a challenging exhibition program that looks beyond art’s traditional aesthetic functions to examine the cultural, social, political, scientific, or economic contexts that inform the work. Exhibitions are presented in three galleries on the first floor of the I. M. Pei-designed Wiesner Building (Building E15) and the Dean’s Gallery in the Sloan School (Building E60). All are free and open to the public. Nationally distributed catalogs, artist talks, gallery tours, and symposia accompany the exhibitions.

The List Center also manages MIT’s permanent collection of artworks, including a student loan art program of approximately 500 works that enables students to borrow original pieces of art, such as prints and photographs, for up to a year, and a sizable collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, and photos sited throughout the campus.

The MIT Museum’s (http://web.mit.edu/museum) mission is to make research and innovation accessible to all. The museum collects and preserves artifacts that are significant in the life of MIT, creates exhibitions, face-to-face programs, and online services that are firmly rooted in MIT’s areas of endeavor, and engages MIT faculty, staff, and students with the wider community. Nearly 150,000 people visit the museum and its galleries each year.

The Mark Epstein Innovation Gallery features interactive displays from a variety of departments and research labs at MIT, and a popular public programs space. Regularly changing exhibitions are mounted in the Thomas Peterson Gallery and the Kurtz Gallery for Photography, which presents the rich legacy of work in photography at MIT by luminaries such as Minor White, Harold Edgerton, and Berenice Abbott, as well as contemporary photographers from outside MIT. Other galleries show ongoing exhibitions on robotics and artificial intelligence, holography and spatial imaging, and the kinetic sculptures of Arthur Ganson.

In addition to the main collection of over 1 million items at 265 Massachusetts Avenue, which is used by MIT students and faculty for research and teaching, the MIT Museum directs the Hart Nautical Gallery in Building 5 and the Museum Studio at the Compton Gallery in Building 10. The Museum Studio connects MIT undergraduate and graduate students with the unique learning opportunities of the museum. Here, students can pursue original technology projects for display in the galleries. The studio supports project-based coursework including an undergraduate subject, “Exhibiting Science,” offered through the STS Program.