

Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.

ArtPrize

By Tom Kirvan

FESTIVAL TURNS MICHIGAN CITY INTO ITS OWN EXHIBITION HALL

The West Michigan city of Grand Rapids is abuzz in early fall, teeming with visitors carrying maps, phones, coffee cups, and opinions. Sculptures rise in public plazas, paintings hang in restaurants, installations glow inside museums, and strangers stop in the street to ask one another the same question: "What have you seen so far?"

This is the essence of ArtPrize, one of the most unusual art festivals in the United States. It is not confined to a single museum, gallery, or fairground. Instead, the city itself becomes the exhibition hall. For a few weeks each fall, downtown Grand Rapids turns into a walkable maze of creativity, where almost any space can become a venue and almost anyone can become an art critic.

ArtPrize began in 2009, founded by Rick DeVos as an experiment in making art more public, more democratic, and more surprising. The idea by DeVos, an entrepreneur and the grandson of Amway co-founder Richard DeVos, was simple but bold: invite artists from anywhere to exhibit their work, allow venues throughout the city to host them, and let visitors help decide which pieces deserve prizes. From the start, the event challenged the traditional art world by putting public conversation at the center of the experience.

The festival is held annually in Michigan's second largest city, usually from mid-September into early October. ArtPrize 2026 is scheduled for September 12 through October 3, with a preview week before the main competition period. During that time, the city fills with paintings, sculptures, photographs, digital works, murals, performances, and large-scale installations. Some pieces are quiet and personal. Others are huge, strange, funny, political, beautiful, or impossible to ignore.

The first impression is variety. A visitor might begin the morning at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, step outside to find a sculpture in Rosa Parks Circle, cross the Blue Bridge to view an installation over the river, and then discover another artwork inside a brewery, hotel lobby, church, office building, or public park. ArtPrize is built on movement. To experience it fully, you walk, look, vote, talk, and walk again.

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One of the most popular features is the public vote. Visitors are not just spectators; they are part of the event's identity. They can vote for favorite works, debate with friends, and compare their choices with juried selections made by art experts. This combination of public opinion and professional judgment gives ArtPrize its energy. A piece that moves everyday visitors may not be the same one praised by critics, and that tension is part of the fun.

The prizes also help create excitement. ArtPrize awards hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants and prizes to artists, including major public vote and juried awards. For emerging artists, the event can offer visibility that would be difficult to find elsewhere. For established artists, it offers a rare chance to show work directly to large, diverse crowds outside the usual boundaries of the gallery world.

Grand Rapids is an important part of the story. Once known heavily for furniture manufacturing, the city has grown into a regional center for art, design, health care, education, craft beer, and tourism. Its downtown is compact enough to explore on foot but large enough to feel active and layered. The Grand River, historic buildings, museums, restaurants, and public spaces give ArtPrize a setting that feels both urban and approachable.

Attendance is one of the festival's defining features. ArtPrize regularly welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors, with recent organizers reporting roughly 800,000 people during the event period. For a city the size of Grand Rapids, that kind of turnout changes the rhythm of downtown. Hotels fill, restaurants extend their rushes, parking lots crowd, and shops see visitors who may have come for the art but stay for dinner, drinks, and shopping.

The economic impact reaches far beyond the artwork itself. A 2024 study found that ArtPrize generated more than \$71 million in economic activity for the Grand Rapids community. That spending supports hotels, restaurants, transportation, retail, event services, and local attractions. The festival also gives the city some things harder to measure but just as valuable: national attention and civic pride.

What makes ArtPrize memorable is not only the art. It is the way the art changes ordinary places. A bank lobby becomes a gallery. A bridge becomes a gathering point. A restaurant wall becomes part of a citywide conversation. People who might not usually visit an art museum suddenly find themselves discussing color, meaning, technique, and emotion with strangers on the sidewalk.

By evening, downtown Grand Rapids takes on a softer glow. Lights reflect off the Grand River, crowds move between venues, and conversations spill out of galleries and cafés. Some visitors leave with a favorite piece in mind. Others leave unsure what they liked best, which may be the better answer. ArtPrize is not designed to make everyone agree. It is designed to make everyone look.

ArtPrize is more than an art competition. It is a citywide invitation, a public conversation, and a reminder that art does not have to wait quietly inside a museum. In Grand Rapids, it steps into the street, fills the buildings, and asks visitors to become part of the story.

Image credit: ArtPrize (2017). 2017 Public Vote Grand Prize Winner: A. Lincoln – Richard Schlatter [Photograph]. ArtPrize. Retrieved September 1, 2026 from <https://www.artprize.org/2017-winners>