

# The Case for the Creative Arts\*

Prof. Colin Coulson-Thomas

The creative arts are not new. Throughout the ages they have been an indicator of our humanity and they have left their mark. Early groups decorated themselves and painted representations of the living world around them on the walls of caves and rock faces. It is possible that they did this for themselves as well as for others. They had the means and the motivation for expression.

## Our Artistic Heritage

Before and since the renaissance the creative arts have evolved and they been periodically reinvented. Certain art forms have been mainly for a few, whether believers or an economic and social elite, while others have reached wider audiences. Our views of different periods of history and civilisations are influenced by the artefacts they leave behind.

Some artefacts celebrate great achievements, victories and individuals who have made a mark. Others tell a story, or capture a moment and are more personal. Official war artists have endeavoured to express the realities and the results of conflicts. Our artistic heritage embraces the heights and the depths of our human condition. It reflects our diversity. It reveals shared concerns.

The creative arts have been used for a variety of purposes, from inspiration and motivation, through engagement and influence to control. Some applications are manipulative, while others are enlightened and liberating. The creative arts can be used for propaganda purposes and to deceive. They can also be used to educate and inform. They can be an invitation to reflect, or a call to arms.

Our creative arts help to define our societies and our civilisation. Their outputs are incorporated into the material included on the probes and exploratory missions we blast into deep space. The purpose of such time capsules is to help inform whatever forms of existence they encounter of what we have been about. They provide a partial window to our thoughts and feelings.

## A Digital Revolution

Today the creative arts are undergoing another period of change, which some might call a revolution. A succession of digital developments have impacted upon the traditional arts and crafts. They have created new opportunities for engagement and involvement. They open up new arenas for innovation and entrepreneurship. They are democratising enjoyment of the arts and participation in the arts. We need digital creators or makers as well as digital users.

Regardless of how smart, strong or rich they are, more people than ever before can now find their voice and express their creativity. We have more ways of being creative, connecting with others and sharing our creativity than any generation in history. A global audience can be reached in seconds.

For many artists, available channels of communication have become more open, inclusive and participative. The online activities of others are monitored by one-party states that seek to control their activities and access to the internet. While dictatorial regimes might buy time by offering economic benefits, a widely felt desire for creative expression and sharing may bring them down.

## Today's Creative Arts

The contemporary creative arts are opening doors. Instead of focusing upon what we have, we can also think about who we are and who we would like to be. Rather than just display external and acquired trappings, many of which are standard products, creative artists can show their inner selves, their personal feelings and their individual and shared beliefs.

Particular creative arts and/or the creative industries generally are significant sectors in the local, regional and national economies of some countries. They generate financial benefits as well as contributing to soft power, cultural wealth and well being. The images we have of some locations are defined by their association with the arts, whether a humble craft or high fashion.

Supporters and champions of the creative arts often highlight their economic and cultural contribution. Our celebration of the former and the employment opportunities that result should not overshadow the latter, the inspiration and satisfaction gained by people as customers and patrons. For art on public display there can be both economic and cultural externalities.

### Widening Ripples of Benefit

Many purchase decisions create opportunities to improve our quality of life and that of others. Budgets for buildings, facilities, fixtures, fittings and furnishings could be used to create more aesthetically pleasing, safer and more flexible and enjoyable working environments that could accommodate a wider range of changing needs. More imaginative procurement could also lead to circumstances that are more conducive of creativity and innovation.

Aesthetic improvement of largely derelict and abandoned streets might encourage people to take pride in their immediate environment. Volunteer groups can meet to clear up rubbish and cut and replant verges. One decayed urban street to which residents started to return was enhanced to the extent of being recognised as art and being nominated for the annual Turner Prize.

People who purchase by voting with their own money in a free market are usually concerned with the quality and relevance of creative outputs and how they relate to them, rather than the class, colour or creed of the artist. We can appreciate a work of art without questioning its origins. In this sense, the creative arts can open up opportunities for groups that might otherwise be excluded.

### Addressing Social Issues and Inclusion

The creative arts can address a range of social issues. Participation in the creative arts can represent an alternative to delinquency, drug taking and crime. The creative arts offer scope for philanthropy, corporate social responsibility and social entrepreneurship. They can represent a cause.

Public support for the arts should take account of the potential for the creative arts to reach all groups in our society. They should be for all and not just a few. Opera for the urban upper middle classes should not exclude participation opportunities for the rural poor or the disabled.

We need to ensure that the potential for greater inclusion embraces those who are or could be at a disadvantage. How accessible and inclusive are the creative arts for people with particular disabilities? Those who are blind or visually impaired might want to play an instrument, compose and stage plays as well as listen to music and the spoken word. Those who are wholly or partially deaf may wish to communicate via visual images as well as observe them.

### Reaching Excluded Groups

Some groups represent more of an inclusion challenge than others. Those afflicted with leprosy have been excluded socially and economically for over two millennia. They face multiple forms of discrimination. They have been ostracised, rejected by their families and communities, ejected from towns and villages, and sent to leper colonies.

When the founders of major religions and political movements were among us there were people whom others referred to as lepers. As great leaders, thinkers, artists and scientists have come and gone those afflicted with leprosy have been ever present. Many of them have multiple disabilities as a consequence of their affliction.

Leprosy is a curable condition. It can be treated and its elimination has been judged by the World Health Assembly to be a practicable possibility. It can affect young and old. The creative arts could help to free the imaginations and inner voices of those with such physical and social disabilities.

### Falling Barriers to Entry

The creative arts are often seen as an arena for individuals, yet forms of expression such as film usually require joint effort involving people with compatible objectives and complementary skills. Greater connectivity can make it easier to assemble such groups, communities and networks. Artists can share the costs of a gallery that exhibits their work. Crowd-funding can raise the money needed for a more expensive production.

Digital developments and greater connectivity can overcome barriers of place and time. They also create opportunities for group and community creativity. People can communicate and collaborate with others. They can work collectively to produce outputs even when they are on the move. In relation to the digital arts, the cost of technology has fallen and its capability has increased.

Barriers to creative entrepreneurship are falling. Whereas once significant capital and much help and support might have been required to start a new business that could reach beyond an immediate neighbourhood, today one can start and operate an e-business from home and connect with patrons, customers and associates internationally with the technology available to most of one's peers.

### Employment and Entrepreneurship

Developments in technology, whether robotics, artificial intelligence or the use of drones could reduce the demand for blue collar and knowledge workers and professionals. Much of what is taught and learned on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) courses can increasingly be performed by combinations of software applications and digital technologies. This raises questions about the future of work, the prospects for jobs and related incomes, and how people will use their time.

In comparison with repetitive and rule-based tasks that can be automated, unstructured and creative activities are more resistant to replacement by machines and software applications. More people may realise that a key skill requirement for their organisations is creative thinking. The creative arts offer scope for self-employment and entrepreneurship for those who can identify requirements and develop offerings to address them.

Entrepreneurship and the creative arts are natural complements. Many creative industries such as film production have been sustained by an army of practitioners who operate as free-lancers and who move from one production to another as they perform their specialist roles. While some might regard their lifestyle as precarious, it enables many creative people to focus on activities they love.

## Breaking Down Barriers

Creative and imaginative thinking could be the key to less threatening and more beneficial relationships between people and machines. As we are outperformed in ever more physical and mental tasks, the creative arts could be the key to future human self confidence and a wider awareness of what is special and distinctive about our species, and what differentiates us from robots and applications of artificial intelligence.

The creative arts could also break down barriers between academic and vocational education, as intending practitioners and entrepreneurs look for both understanding and competence. Advantage and progress increasingly depend upon knowledge of how best to do things, rather than just knowledge about them.

Breaking down barriers can lead to change. As already mentioned, falling costs of entry and the greater and more widespread use of the creative arts as a means of enabling freedom of expression could erode the controlling power of centralised authorities, whether a command and control corporate bureaucracy or an authoritarian regime.

## Democratisation of the Creative Arts

Beyond greater inclusion, we may see a democratisation of the creative arts. As standard goods are produced cheaply, either locally or in the home by 3D printer, more people may want to express their individuality in other ways. Some may wish to design products themselves. We could see an explosion in the arts and crafts. This could lead to greater self-sufficiency at a local level and boost the exchange economy, as with a degree of specialisation people accept individual commissions to produce craft items for each other.

More people may use local materials to produce items that are distinctive and which could be traded, bartered or otherwise exchanged over the internet. Some of those who might otherwise be unemployed or under-employed may develop enough skill in certain arts, crafts, sports or leisure activities to teach others, or otherwise help them. The use of personal trainers may spread from the world of sport and keeping fit to creative arts activities.

One may see a blurring of the distinction between work and leisure. Time no longer required for work could be used for arts, sports and various recreational and communal activities. In post-industrial societies the creative arts and leisure activities may become more significant as both arenas of activity and economic sectors. They can be fulfilling and rewarding for individuals, teams and communities that excel in them. Creative recognition might become an indicator of wealth.

## The Creative Arts and Sustainability

When aggregated some of our personal consumption patterns cause considerable environmental damage. Many companies would be pilloried if their operations created a small fraction of the negative impacts of our collective behaviour. As concerns grow about the adverse environmental consequences of our disposable society, whether mountains of rubbish or climate change, more consumers and investors may change their aspirations, expectations and requirements.

Compared with many other sectors the creative arts have a limited environmental impact. Creative activities tend to build intellectual capabilities and cultural awareness rather than consume physical resources. If the emphasis of insecure people who are seeking to impress switched from passive individual consumption and external appearance to sharing, co-creation and achieving more of a sense of inner worth, it could lead to simpler, more active, healthier and more sustainable lifestyles.

Environmental issues are not new. In Roman times manufacturing and processing activities had an impact on the environment. Early Spanish explorers found the natural basin that is now Los Angeles polluted with smoke from Indian camp fires. More recent practices such as built in obsolescence could be reduced if we put more emphasis upon fulfilling activities such as creating simpler alternatives for ourselves and reduced our consumption of manufactured goods that consume greater amounts of natural capital.

In our disposable society there is a risk that disposable things can lead to disposable people. We should value what others have taken time to produce. If more products were designed to be aesthetically pleasing in their own right as well as functional, and if more of them were longer-lasting or recyclable, fewer of them might be thrown away. Perhaps sustainability considerations should be more explicit in design briefs.

### Changing Values and Expectations

Creative endeavours, sport and keep fit activities can all reflect changing values, concerns and aspirations. They can create opportunities for those who might otherwise be marginalised or made redundant to offer one-to-one personal services, engage in communal activities and experience a higher quality of life. More active lifestyles can improve mental and physical health.

In an age of global brands, more people may want to find ways of being true to themselves and what is unique, special or different about them. We are not categories, statistics or trends but individual human beings with distinct interests and preferences. It is likely that there are creative artists somewhere out there whose voices we can relate to and who could enrich our experience of life. Increasing connectivity and the internet make it ever easier for us to find them.

Displays of material wealth such as expensive, fuel-guzzling fast cars may come to be seen as evidence of shallow self-obsession, concern with superficial appearance and ignorance of environmental issues. Consumer behaviour may change as more people become aware of the implications and consequences of their purchasing decisions.

How we use our skills, tools and technologies and for what purpose determines the extent to which they help or harm us. While they have been in the economic ascendancy many environmentally damaging products and activities have used the services of some of the most experienced practitioners in the creative arts to increase their appeal. Many of those in search of commissions have tended to follow the money. As the values and expectations of consumers, clients and patrons change so will the assignments and projects undertaken by practitioners.

### Desire for Active Involvement

For a high proportion of their waking time people are exposed to a variety of messages, images and other communications. While working we may experience background music or be influenced by design. Even our dreams can be influenced by our experiences of the creative arts. If like the mayfly we were to have but one day on this earth, lets make it an enjoyable one.

The creative arts can provide a counter balance to various pressures upon us. Without their stimulation and challenge we run the risk of becoming passive recipients of standard and one-way messages and slaves of consumerism and mass production. The creative arts vary in their reach, but they can engage us as individuals as well as collectively. In many cases we can interact with them.

We can also become active participants. There are ever more possibilities for people to become

creative artists. Involvement and participation has also become more affordable. The opportunities are all around us. Often, the more involved people and communities become in creative activities, the more they appreciate excellence and meaning in the creative expressions of others.

The distinction between art and sport is not always clear cut. When does gymnastics become a performing art? The arts and sport can both be participative and observed and enjoyed by others. They have a multiplier effect. Their externalities are positive. They enrich lives. In both arenas we see more people wanting to become actively involved. Both the arts and sports can build bridges. They are complementary. They can overcome boundaries of social class, creed, tribe and time.

### Overcoming the Urban-Rural Divide

Cultural and creative activities can act as a magnet. They can attract people to urban areas and cities in particular. Yet greater bandwidth and connectivity could help to bridge the urban-rural divide, distributing and democratising opportunities for participation.

An acid test of rural inclusion might be the achievement of an equivalence or even an inversion of quality of life opportunities. One scenario could be rural dwellers revelling in being close to nature and valued members of vibrant and healthy communities, living longer, healthier, simpler and less materialistic but more fulfilling lives, while urban dwellers live isolated lives trapped in high rise apartments looking down at the life shortening pollution of congested and dangerous cities.

Rural and urban environments can inspire in different ways. The creative arts can transform the lives of individuals and communities. They also offer hope to the ageing and elderly, providing new and evolving opportunities for participation and self-expression at different stages of life. The desire for self-expression can be latent or felt at any age. It can arise at any time. Graffiti appears in the most unlikely of places.

Posh art, primitive art and commercial art all have their place. A fisherman painting a local scene for holiday makers can capture a sunny day. L S Lowry adding his matchstick men to a canvas can evoke an industrial age. Recordings, prints and digital images allow creative works to be captured, communicated and shared. What might become a treasured item may be available and affordable to those with shallow or deep pockets across a wide budget spectrum.

### Creativity and the Nature of Humanity

Creativity is an inherent element of our humanity, but aspects of it are not limited to our species. Various birds, marine mammals and land animals show an ability to solve particular problems and share their solutions. Their cooperation and collaboration, particularly in the search for food, sometimes displays creativity, practicality and an ability to communicate and learn. These qualities are valued by creative arts practitioners and prized by those who use their services.

The creative arts say much about our civilisation and who we are. They reveal our feelings and preoccupations and our hopes and fears. Exposure to them can stimulate creative thinking and innovation. Creative artists in residence and creative arts activities can unleash energy and imagination across work groups, communities and organisations. The creative arts could also open doors to new ways of communicating with other species and with other worlds.

We are born with a natural drive to reach out, connect and learn. We are driven to explore and understand who we are and our place within our family and wider communities. We need to ensure our working and learning environments liberate people and do not blunt and inhibit this aspect of our humanity. It needs to be encouraged and supported rather than frustrated and repressed.

## 'New Leadership' and Performance Support

I have long been an advocate of what I call 'new leadership' and a champion of performance support. In evidence-based research reports I have put the case for shifting the emphasis from directing, motivating and monitoring people to helping and supporting them. We need to provide people with the personalised support to share insights, emulate the approaches of high performers and remain current, relevant and vital in contexts that may be changing, uncertain and insecure.

The evidence I have collected suggests performance support that is available on a 24/7 basis whenever and where-ever it is required, including when on the move, can represent a quicker, more affordable and less disruptive route to high performance organisations than many widely adopted approaches [1-3]. Applications can allow directors and managers to trust people, set them free and enable responsible innovation. It can allow multiple objectives to be achieved simultaneously for the benefit of people, organisations and the environment.

When social networking is incorporated, performance support can allow rapid responses to emergent challenges and narrow windows of opportunity. Solutions can sometimes be rolled out globally to problems which people did not know they had at breakfast time earlier in the day. Whether they are responding quickly to a pressing requirement for inspiration, or taking time to perfect their work, we need to ensure creative arts practitioners and others are equipped with the support and tools that will enable them to give of their best.

## Education and the Creative Arts

The liberal arts can encourage people to think, question and challenge by exposing them to what "recognized" authors, philosophers and political, religious and other thought leaders have written, said and done over the years. They can be invited to comment on and discuss the views expressed. The creative arts can also do this. They can expose people to various physical/tangible expressions of individuals, movements and prevailing views from different ages, arenas and societies. In addition, the creative arts can also enable people to produce designs, artefacts and other works that express their responses and views in a richer variety of ways than just the written or spoken word.

Some creative activities are spontaneous and ephemeral. Others are planned and leave physical reminders. Particular sites are associated with certain arts. In the past some art forms have been largely limited to them. Others are more portable. They are brought to us or are accessible to us. They can travel with us. The arts have followed journeys of our ancestors who populated the planet.

Creativity is especially important in education, particularly for capturing the attention of learners. Many people are assailed by media through a variety of channels. On remote dirt tracks they can see with their mobile devices, engaged and/or distracted. Only with innovation and creativity in content and its communication, and with entrepreneurship in models of access, business, delivery and support will available and future technology be used to its full potential.

An education in the creative arts can enhance, enable, enrich and empower. It can help to stimulate the creativity and commitment that can lead to successful invention and entrepreneurship. Sir James Dyson the inventor, industrial designer and entrepreneur who pioneered better and bag-less vacuum cleaners was educated at the Byam Shaw School of Art and the Royal College of Art. The role of the School for the Creative Arts is to give people the understanding, skills and confidence to express themselves and become successful practitioners.

With low barriers to entry in many of the creative arts, and their potential for enriching working and

leisure activities, they represent an arena of opportunity for enterprise and social entrepreneurship that embraces not just creative artists but the various audiences and followers who enjoy their work. A wider range of people and organisations might benefit from programmes to encourage and develop creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship for leadership in the creative arts.

## References

1. Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2012), *Talent Management 2, A quicker and more cost-effective route to the high performance organisation*, Peterborough, Policy Publications
2. Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2012), *Transforming Public Services, A quicker and affordable route to the performance public organisations*, Peterborough, Policy Publications
3. Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2013), *Transforming Knowledge Management, A quicker and affordable route to the high performance organisation*, Peterborough, Policy Publications

## Note

Details of forthcoming programmes at the School for the Creative Arts to encourage and develop creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship for leadership in the creative arts will be available on [www.sca.edu.gh](http://www.sca.edu.gh).

## Author

Prof. (Dr) Colin Coulson-Thomas is Chancellor and a Professorial Fellow at the School for the Creative Arts, Honorary Professor at the Aston India Centre for Applied Research (Aston University) and holds a Distinguished Professorship at the Sri Sharada Institute of Indian Management-Research. In addition to board and academic roles, he is Director-General, IOD India, UK and Europe, leads the International Governance Initiative of the Order of St Lazarus, chairs the group Risk and Audit Committee of United Learning and is a member of the Advisory Board of Bridges of Sports. Colin has served on public sector boards at national, regional and local level and been the chairman and/or president of professional, voluntary and representative bodies. The author of some 70 books and reports and over 1,000 articles he has held professorial appointments in Europe, North and South America, the Middle East, India and China. He has helped organisations in over 40 countries to harness more of the potential of their people in order to build a business or deliver better services, improve performance and simultaneously deliver multiple objectives. He has also contributed plenary addresses to over 300 national and international events, and was educated at the London School of Economics, the London Business School, UNISA and the Universities of Aston, Chicago and Southern California. A fellow of seven chartered bodies he secured first place prizes in the final examinations of three professions. He can be contacted at [colin@coulson-thomas.com](mailto:colin@coulson-thomas.com). His latest publications on quicker, more affordable and less disruptive routes to high performance organisations are available from [www.policypublications.com](http://www.policypublications.com).

## \*Publication

A position paper published by Adaptation to support a plenary presentation by Prof. Colin Coulson-Thomas at the 2017 Dubai Global Convention for Excellence and Innovation. The convention was organised by the Institute of Directors, India and held from 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> April 2017, at Hotel The Grand Hyatt in Dubai, UAE. The citation is: Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2017), *The Case for the Creative Arts* [Position Paper No. 1/17], Peterborough, Adaptation