

We Need the Arts
By Shruti Sharma

Coming from a family of physicians, I grew up in hospitals. When I followed my white-coat-donnated brother through the halls, I felt that while physicians could take care of the patients' disease, another type of medicine was needed to take care of the person with the disease. I have a vivid memory when it hit me that the arts could be this medicine. I was in the clinic with a teenage girl who had suffered extensive facial burns. During an arts therapy session, she wrote a poem that communicated a lot more to me than her medical record. Through her lyrical lines she expressed the trauma she had experienced and reflected on the true essence of beauty. It then came to me that beauty is reached through a deeper connection to the human experience; a connection the arts successfully facilitate.

I'm concerned that widespread cuts for the arts will excise programs like these. Recently, the UK government estimated that over £40m per year will be cut from arts funding post-Brexit. This money is currently being used to fund over 1300 art projects.¹ Moreover, with a strained connection to Europe, British artists will not have the same ability to collaborate.² Disruption to the arts will have consequences, as the arts are as important to sustaining the health of our society as is medicine. While medicine lets us live, the arts give us reason to live.

Arts and culture are the life and blood of a nation, and, thus, public funding to keep the sector alive is crucial. First, the arts give us a medium with which we can question our political thought and are a platform for diverse narratives to give light to social inequalities. Second, their proven therapeutic effects are needed in current, divisive times when the mental health of people is deteriorating. The positive effects that arts have on our society means that the arts need to be accessible to all.

Fostering a relationship between different cultures increases creativity and open-mindedness, traits shown to be important for sustaining peace.⁴ Ai Wei Wei's recent sculpture, *Law of the Journey*, discusses the refugee crises and is a result of collaboration between the East and West. The importance of intercultural collaboration has also been recognized by Arts Council Chair, Nicholas Serota, who stated:

“Culture has always made a key contribution to our soft power, making friends and building dialogue, and supports our growing creative industries. It is clear that artistic exchange that comes from international collaboration plays an important role in this success.”⁵

¹ Georgia Snow, 'Arts in England to Lose £40m Funding per Year from Brexit', *The Stage*, 21 February 2018 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/arts-england-lose-40m-funding-per-year-brexit/>>.

² Christy Romer, 'Loss of EU Arts Funding Would Hit Pro-Brexit Regions Hardest', *Arts Professional*, 2 March 2018.

⁴ Irfan Nihan Demirel and Osman Altintas, 'Relationship Between Art and Politics', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 51 (2012), 444–48 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.08.186>>.

⁵ Georgia Snow.

In the current political climate, which has highly nationalist sentiments, the arts are needed to bridge the left and right and bestow perspective on our politics. While Britain transitions away from Europe, there have been harsh political debates, that, at times, are unkind and impart a cold atmosphere to a torn country.

But instead of leading discussion through overpowering rhetoric, the arts instead allow us to question political decisions and explore complex social issues. Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* and Shepard Fairey's *Hope* portrait are past and present examples of iconic art that have had a major role in embracing new political directions.

During this politically divisive time, the arts are also needed for their therapeutic effects as they are medicine to our mind and soul. Recent statistics reported that one in three young people in Britain feel more anxious now leaving the EU. Moreover, 14% of all hospital beds in the EU are for psychiatric care and 1 in 4 people in the UK suffer from mental illness. Art therapy has been proven to reduce anxiety and depression by over 70% according to results from the Arts on Prescription project led by the leading mental health charity, Arts and Minds.

Worldwide, the therapeutic effects of the arts have been recognized and funded. Harvard Medical School founded the Arts and Humanities Initiative that funds a residential artist. Recently, a hospital in Montréal is allowing doctors to prescribe free visits to fine arts museums as complements to more traditional treatments.⁶ These visits are aimed at improving both physical and mental health.

It is particularly important that the positive effects of the arts reach all of society. We cannot solely depend on privatized funding of art as it will limit access to the nation's wealthiest. Raising the barrier to arts at a time when poverty, especially in-work poverty, is on the rise will segregate our community further.⁷ Under such circumstances, only the select privileged few will be privy to the arts.

Public funding of the arts was embraced by British society in 2001 when admission to national museums were made free through major efforts by the Cultural Secretary, Lord Chris Smith.⁸ After a decade of free admissions, visitor numbers to government-sponsored museums rose from seven million to almost 18 million⁹ Specifically, free admission has increased visits from lower economic groups. Even with the turnover of political hands in 2010, when the arts faced a funding cut of 30%¹¹, the cultural secretary secured the future of free museum admission. Yet, if

⁶ 'Montreal Museum Partners with Doctors to "prescribe" Art', *BBC News*, 26 October 2018 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45972348>>.

⁷ Chris Smith, 'Free Museum Entry Enriches Our Culture', *The Guardian*, 24 July 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/jul/24/free-museum-entry-enriches-our-culture>>.

⁸ Chris Smith, 'Free Museum Entry Enriches Our Culture'.

⁹ Ian Youngs, 'Museums Enjoy 10 Years of Freedom', *BBC News*, 1 December 2011 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-15927593>>.

¹¹ David Edgar, 'Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain by Robert Hewison Review – a Faustian Pact', *The Guardian*, 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/12/cultural-capital-rise-fall-creative-britain-robert-hewison-review>>.

funding keeps getting pulled away from arts institutions, there will undoubtedly be a tipping point between access and excellence.

One may argue that technology such as apps and virtual reality could compensate for direct access to art.¹³ But a technological experience is not a human experience. For it is only with your eyes that you can value John Constable's colorful, poignant landscapes or else appreciate the finer strokes of Ben Nicholson's somber color palette in his portraits. The feeling of transcendence can only be experienced *live* from an operatic aria in *Manon* set on a fantastical stage with trapeze acts. And the thrill of human strength is witnessed from a series of grand jetés in a ballet performance. But it is up to the individual, and only from their personal interaction with a piece can a connection be formed with a work of art.

Recently the city of Hull completed its year as city of culture and experienced the transformative effect of the arts on its people.¹⁴ Arts minister, Serota noted that:

*"...for the first time, space was created for members of the public to come together to share different ideas and values and to challenge and debate. The city today feels more confident and the community more united...At a time when the cohesion of society is threatened by visible inequalities in wealth, housing, health and education, the arts provide a place where ideas can be debated, explored and developed and new propositions can be put forward."*¹⁵

Hence, it is vital for Britain to distribute its resources to allow arts to flourish in the entirety of the country. Through adequate funding, centers for arts can continue to grow and evolve to meet the needs of society. As an example, the Royal Opera House has made progress as a "cultural center" and since September includes working spaces with free wifi, exhibits and a café. The opera house also has a variety of student schemes to introduce experiences with arts and culture early. Such programs with the arts have been further shown to elevate student confidence, and their pieces of historical significance impart to students a deeper sense of belonging. Through similar changes in all public art institutes, wider audiences can appreciate the arts.¹⁶ Moreover, widespread access to the arts will empower communities to be accepting. This will be a strategy for economic and social success in an era that will embrace globalization and collaboration.

Lyndon B. Johnson, former President of the United States left a legacy of social reform. When signing into existence the National Endowment on the Arts in 1965, Johnson claimed:

¹³ Chris Smith, 'Creative Britain: Where Have We Got To?', *The Guardian*, 18 November 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/nov/18/creative-britain-chris-smith-2013>>.

¹⁴ Nicholas Serota, 'The Arts Must Reach More People If They Are to Help Our Divided Society', *The Guardian*, 11 February 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/11/arts-council-reach-more-people-divided-society-city-of-culture-hull-nicholas-serota>>.

¹⁵ Nicholas Serota.

¹⁶ Chris Smith, 'Free Museum Entry Enriches Our Culture'.

“Art is a nation’s most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”

In these times of extreme thoughts, the Arts help us recognize perspective. In these days of Nationalism, the Arts give us a global appreciation. And, indeed, in these moments of division, the Arts remind us of the value of our shared experience and the greatness we can achieve together as a society.