The Contribution of the Arts to Society

A Lana Esslett

The arts matter because they link society to its past, a people to its inherited store of ideas, images and words; yet the arts challenge those links in order to find ways of exploring new paths and ventures. I remain sceptical of claims that humanity's love of the arts somehow reflects some inherent inclination, fundamental to the human race. However, exposure to and study of the arts does strengthen the individual and fosters independence in the face of the pressures of the mass, the characterless, the undifferentiated. And just as the sciences support the technology sector, the arts stimulate the growth of a creative sector in the economy. Yet, true as this is, it seems to me to miss the point. The value of the arts is not to be defined as if they were just another economic lever to be pulled. The arts can fail every measurable objective set by economists, yet retain their intrinsic value to humanity.

B Seth North

Without a doubt, the arts are at the very centre of society and innate in every human being. My personal, though admittedly controversial, belief is that the benefits to both individuals and society of studying science and technology, in preference to arts subjects, are vastly overrated. It must be said, however, that despite the claims frequently made for the civilising power of the arts, to my mind the obvious question arises: Why are people who are undeniably intolerant and selfish still capable of enjoying poetry or appreciating good music? For me, a more convincing argument in favour of the arts concerns their economic value. Needless to say, discovering how much the arts contribute to society in this way involves gathering a vast amount of data and then evaluating how much this affects the economy as a whole, which is by no means straightforward.

C Heather Charlton

It goes without saying that end-products of artistic endeavour can be seen as commodities which can be traded and exported, and so add to the wealth of individuals and societies. While this is undeniably a substantial argument in favour of the arts, we should not lose sight of those equally fundamental contributions they make which cannot be easily translated into measurable social and economic value. Anthropologists have never found a society without the arts in one form or another. They have concluded, and I have no reason not to concur, that humanity has a natural aesthetic sense which is biologically determined. It is by the exercise of this sense that we create works of art which symbolise social meanings and over time pass on values which help to give the community its sense of identity, and which contribute enormously to its self-respect.

D Mike Konecki

Studies have long linked involvement in the arts to increased complexity of thinking and greater self-esteem. Nobody today, and rightly so in my view, would challenge the huge importance of maths and science as core disciplines. Nevertheless, sole emphasis on these in preference to the arts fails to promote the integrated left/right-brain thinking in students that the future increasingly demands, and on which a healthy economy now undoubtedly relies. More significantly, I believe that in an age of dull uniformity, the arts enable each person to express his or her uniqueness. Yet while these benefits are enormous, we participate in the arts because of an instinctive human need for inspiration, delight, joy. The arts are an enlightening and humanising force, encouraging us to come together with people whose beliefs and lives may be different from our own. They encourage us to listen and to celebrate what connects us, instead of retreating behind what drives us apart.

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