THE ARTS, CULTURE AND LIFE

by

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The arts are the key to culture and culture is the key to life. While most people working and teaching in the arts and culture share this conviction, it needs to be revisited in view of all the dynamic changes going on in the world.

I did not begin to realize why the arts are the key to culture until I started working at the Ontario Arts Council. This was in 1965, two years after the Council was created in 1963, and eight years after the Canada Council was created in 1957.

This was an exciting time to be working in the arts. The Canada Council was providing valuable assistance to many artists and arts organizations by this time, thereby contributing to the renaissance that was taking place in the country’s artistic life. The artistic landscape of Ontario was also changing rapidly, due to organizations like the Stratford Festival, the Toronto Symphony, the National Ballet of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Canadian Opera Company, and many others. Moreover, the economy was expanding, technology was advancing, standards of living were improving, and more and more of the country’s young people were attending colleges and universities. Then there was Expo, and the Centennial celebrations. These unique events, which occurred in 1967, proved that Canada’s artistic talents do not have to take a back seat to creative talents anywhere in the world. And they proved something else. They proved the country was coming of age culturally, not only in the arts, but in all dimensions of life.

The arts were at the very centre of this process. This was reflected in the mood of the Ontario Arts Council. As the Council saw it, the Council was there to “change the weather, not pass out rubber boots and raincoats.” It believed it was possible to transform the entire culture of the province and the country through the arts. This was confirmed in the Council’s Fifth Annual Report: “We’ve done the work of animals. We’ve done the work of machines. Now please God, could we do the work of human beings.”

As I learned more about the complex connection between culture and the arts, I discovered that there are legitimate reasons for believing the arts are the key to culture. Not only has there been an intimate connection between culture and the arts stretching back to classical times, but also the arts provide much of the creativity and dynamism that is needed to propel cultures to higher levels of accomplishment.
It is by no means coincidental that it was an artist - Melina Mercouri - who first proposed the idea of “cities of culture.” She did so at the inaugural meeting of the Ministers of Culture of the European Union in Athens in 1983. Since that time, cities all over the world have vied to become cities of culture. And what is at the heart of this process? The arts. This was confirmed by Lewis Mumford, the world’s foremost authority on the role of the arts in urban life, when he said: “When the city ceases to be a symbol of art and order, it acts in a negative fashion: it expresses and helps to make more universal the fact of disintegration.” (1)

While the arts are cordoned off and set apart from the general process of development, ultimately municipal, regional, national and international development is impossible without a vigorous and vital artistic life. While political, corporate and bureaucratic leaders are loath to admit it, economic, political, commercial, social and technological development depends on healthy injections of artistic insight and imagination - the kind of artistic insight and imagination that springs from the artist’s ability to create new concepts, contexts, contents, styles, methods and techniques. This is why artists are deemed to be “the antennae of the race.”

While the contributions of artists and the arts are crucial to the development of human societies at all levels, and in every area, this is not the real reason for believing the arts are the key to culture. The real reason has to do with the fact that artists, arts organizations and the arts broaden and deepen understanding of culture as a whole. They do so through their ability to create signs, symbols, myths, legends, metaphors, stories and rituals that “stand for the whole” and provide us with a more complete understanding of the whole. The old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is a cliché, but it speaks volumes about the ability of artists and artistic works to communicate a vast amount of information about culture as a whole that cannot be communicated in any other way at all, or cannot be communicated nearly as effectively using any other device.

This process of broadening and deepening understanding of culture as a whole takes many different forms. In some cases, it takes the form of enhancing understanding of the innermost character of cultural life, as well as the complexities of social, economic, technological, political, educational and spiritual systems. In other cases, it takes the form of enriching understanding of the various cultures of the world - cultures that vary very much in terms of worldviews, values, value systems, and overall ways of life. In still other cases, it takes the form of expanding awareness of the natural environment, nature, and other species. Think, for example, of the way Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, Smetna’s Moldau, Holst’s Planets, von Bingen’s Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations, Saint-Saëns Carnival of the Animals, Vivaldi’s Seasons and
the paintings of Van Gogh and Monet - not to mention the works of Emily Carr, Harry Freedman, the Group of Seven, Alexina Louie, and countless other Canadian artists - enrich our appreciation of the beauties of nature, the grandeur of the cosmos, and the idiosyncrasies of other species. This capacity may be needed more than ever in the world characterized by environmental degeneration and ecological breakdown.

It is the capacity the arts possess to broaden and deepen understanding of the holistic character of culture that makes artists, arts organizations, arts educators and artistic works indispensable to the future. For in the process of communicating vital information about culture as a whole - and cultures as wholes - artists, arts organizations, arts educators and artistic works reduce culture and cultures to their essential features and lay bare their essence. In so doing, they help people “order their cultural universe,” as Edward Hall, the distinguished American anthropologist, so aptly expressed it. (2)

It is appropriate to ask what kind of universe this will be in view of all the dynamic changes going on in the world. Will it be a universe where priority is placed on profits, products, consumerism, materialism and commercialism? Or will it be a universe where priority is placed on people, creativity, fulfillment, equality, and achieving harmonious relationships between consumption and conservation, materialism and spiritualism, quantity and quality, and human beings and the natural environment?

If it is the former, then economics will be made the key to life. However, if it is the latter, then culture will be made the key to life. The reason for this is clear. Whereas economics places the priority on a part of the whole, culture places the priority on the whole and the need to achieve balanced relationships between the parts and the whole.

It is impossible to make culture the key to life without broadening and deepening understanding of the comprehensive character of culture and the role it is capable of playing in people’s lives.

While culture has many different meanings, ultimately it is concerned with people and the way people’s needs are satisfied in fact. Since people have a variety of needs which must be attended to if they are to live creative, constructive and fulfilling lives and function effectively in society - to breathe, bond, eat, love, create, procreate, recreate, work and survive - this gives rise to a complex set of social, economic, environmental, political, technological, recreational, aesthetic and spiritual requirements. How these requirements are dealt with in specific situations and particular parts of the world is what culture - and cultures - are all about.
While economic needs constitute a very important aspect of this, they are part of a much deeper, broader, and more fundamental holistic process. This is why Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the world’s first anthropologists, defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”(3) It is also why UNESCO defines culture as “the whole collection of distinctive traits, spiritual and material, intellectual and affective, which characterize a society or social group.(4)

This comprehensive understanding of culture is confirmed when attention is shifted to cultures. In order to develop cultures effectively, it is necessary to develop all the parts of cultures and not just certain parts. The Dutch cultural historian, Johan Huizinga, understood this only too well when he concluded following his intensive examination of numerous cultures throughout the world that “the realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man’s material well-being, must be balanced by strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral and aesthetic values.”(5) He was aware that there are problems for cultures when some parts are developed and not others.

There is much to be learned from this that is relevant to human development. For just as the challenge in developing cultures is to develop all the parts of cultures and achieve harmonious relationships between them, so the challenge in human development is to develop all the human faculties and achieve balanced relationships between them. If, as Ruth Benedict contended, cultures are “personalities writ large,” then people are “cultures writ small.”

And herein lies the secret to culture as the key to life. It is culture that provides us with the wherewithal that is needed to link all the various component parts of our lives together - spiritual, social, aesthetic, economic, environmental, technological and the like - to form a comprehensive, cohesive and coherent whole. It does so by placing priority on the whole, as well as the need to create strong and synergistic relationships between the parts and the whole.

This explains why people in the artistic and cultural fields are so concerned with the education and development of “the whole person.” Without education and development of the whole person, it is impossible to realize our full potential and live integrated and meaningful lives. Mathew Arnold, the nineteenth century British poet and critic, realized this when he talked about the need to develop all the faculties that comprise human nature in concert. He was aware that when some human faculties are developed and others are not, there are problems for people, just as there are problems for cultures.
Presumably this is why Wole Soyinka, the distinguished African Nobel laureate for literature, prefers to view culture as “*source*” - source from which all things flow and to which all things return. There is something so fundamental about culture that it forms the foundation for all life.

There is much to be gained by travelling back to “*source*” in this fundamental, holistic sense. It is culture that enables us to “travel in the realms of gold” as Keats so perceptively described it. It does so by providing us with the breadth of vision and depth of understanding that is needed to live creative, constructive and fulfilling lives and realize our full potential. It is culture, not economics, that opens up vast vistas and fertile avenues for future exploration and discovery - exploration and discovery that brings us into contact with the very best humanity has to offer and exposes us to the finest accomplishments of all the great cultures and civilizations of the world.

This is why culture deserves a central place in our lives and the arts deserve a central place in culture. It is also why culture and the arts deserve a prominent position in our educational systems, public and private policies, and municipal, regional, national and international affairs. Without this, it is difficult to see how the future can be faced with creativity and vitality rather than anxiety and apprehension.

**References**


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