

## The Role of the Arts in Australia

The arts play a central part in the way we live, the way we think and how we feel about ourselves. Almost everybody in Australia listens to music, reads books, goes to the theatre, concerts or dances, goes to galleries and art museums or is interested in fashion and design. In homes, workplaces, cars and trucks across the country people of all ages enjoy music as part of their daily routine. We love watching films in cinemas, on television and today even on our mobile phones. According to the study *Australians and the Arts*, nine out of ten Australians think it is important to have some creative skills.

The arts are also a great source of pride for Australians. They made a very large contribution to the success of two of the biggest single events in recent Australian history: the Sydney Olympics and the Melbourne Commonwealth Games. The opening and closing ceremonies were artistic events, presenting distinct Australian images to the world.

This fact sheet examines the role of the arts in Australian society. It looks at the way the arts shape our lives and the life of the Australian community.

### Historical background

Indigenous Australians, the original inhabitants of the great southern continent, have one of the world's longest-surviving artistic traditions. Australia has some of the world's oldest rock art dating back more than 20,000 years. Indigenous communities still place great importance on artistic activity as a way of sharing experiences and emotions, teaching, developing communities and supporting people with employment. Indigenous arts activity is not only about preserving a time-honoured cultural tradition. Today's Indigenous arts represent a vibrant contemporary culture. Indigenous artists working in dance, painting, film and music are reaching into the heart of mainstream Australian society, bringing renewed pride to their communities and making a real and practical contribution to reconciliation. Films such as *Samson and Delilah*,

*Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Bran Nue Dae* have put Indigenous issues into the minds of most Australians.

The non-Indigenous Australian arts also have a historical pedigree, even if it is not as old. From the early days of the colonies, theatre, music, fiction writing and painting played a role in the establishment of a new nation. The birth and growth of modern Australia has from the outset been documented like that of few other countries. Visual artists accompanied Captain Cook and the first fleet. The pictures they brought back to England quickly began to shape the European image of the Australian continent and its inhabitants. Europeans were astonished at the flora, fauna, geographical features and light of the newly discovered continent and the first seeds of an Australian identity had been planted.

For the first settlers in the new nation the arts were often seen as a way of maintaining some of the traditions and trappings of the "civilization" they had left behind or been taught to revere. Basic theatres and music halls soon sprang up in the early settlements and became an important source of entertainment and social activity. By the 1850s the first tours of international theatre companies were arriving in Australia after the discovery of gold brought new wealth to the colonies. Over the next 150 years Australia developed a thriving arts sector which has brought Australian arts and artists to the attention of Australians and the rest of the world.

Despite this success, many Australians, even today, often underestimate the importance of the arts in our society and play down the status of our culture. Up until the 1960s, many creative people felt the need to move overseas to further their careers and "make it".

But after the upheaval of World War II, Australian artists began to reject this view and the next generation of emerging visual artists, filmmakers, composers and writers started to explore Australian themes in their work.

The painter Sidney Nolan painted his famous series of paintings about the life of Ned Kelly in the late 1940s and they became highly influential for new Australian painting. Patrick White's novel, *The Tree of Man*, received international acclaim when it was published in 1955 and, in 1973, White was awarded the prestigious Nobel prize for literature. Robert Helpmann choreographed *The Display* for the Australian Ballet in 1964. The composer Peter Sculthorpe wrote the first of his *Sun Music* series in 1965. Musicians in Australia were also developing a local take on the latest new music for young people: pop and rock 'n' roll. Films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) and *Storm Boy* (1976) showed Australian stories with a new confidence and became very popular with audiences. David Williamson's 1971 play *Don's Party* initiated a new era of Australian theatre and Barry Humphries' *alter ego*, Dame Edna, taught us how to laugh at ourselves and showed that we had the confidence to do so.

Today Australia has its own unique arts "voice" featuring an irreverent humour combined with a youthful, optimistic and innovative outlook. If there is any remaining doubt about the success of the arts and artists in Australia, recent achievements in the international arena should dispel it. Many major European performing arts ensembles, orchestras and venues have outstanding Australian artists and arts managers working in them. Australians have been regular Oscar winners since Ken Hall and Damien Parer became the first Australians to win an Academy Award in 1942 with a film about the Kokoda trail. (The film, *Kokoda Front Line!* is an example of the way film making has helped shape our understanding of history and national character and was a precursor of Peter Weir's 1981 epic *Gallipoli*). In more recent times, for instance, filmmakers such as Adam Elliot and George Miller have won Oscars, as have numerous Australian costume designers and cinematographers. In acting, Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman and Russell Crowe have all won Oscars and helped inspire other young Australians to reach for the stars. Australia's best-known contemporary author, Peter Carey, has won the prestigious Booker Prize twice. Australia's music industry has also been very successful on the international scene, with performers such as Kylie Minogue, Nick Cave, and AC/DC having taken Australian music to the world.

The arts in Australia have also developed into an important industry employing many people and making a valuable contribution to the economy.

## Identity

From the outset, the arts in Australia have played a central role in shaping our shared identity. In the early days it was poetry such as Banjo Paterson's *Man from Snowy River* or Dorothea Mackellar's *I Love a Sunburnt Country*, along with songs such as *Waltzing Matilda* and paintings such as Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams* that began to give Australians an idea that they had something in common; that they were part of a community that was different from the ones they had left behind; and that gave meaning to the idea of being "Australian".

But what is cultural identity? Often people are unaware of their cultural identity because it is something we grow up with from early childhood and absorb continuously from our social environment. It is constantly changing and hard to pin down. For many people the first time they clearly see their cultural identity comes when they are confronted by a different identity, for example, when they first travel overseas. Our cultural identity is the set of beliefs, values, history, attitudes, artistic practices and aspirations we share with others in the communities to which we belong. We all have a multifaceted cultural identity, or perhaps multiple overlapping (and even conflicting) identities.

To understand cultural identity and its importance, it may be helpful to imagine life without one. Without a personal cultural identity, friendships are very difficult because in the absence of a shared set of interests, opinions or sense of humour, it is very difficult to connect with other people. On the broader scale, a national community without its own recognisable culture and identity is just a "branch office" of someone else's world with its values, goals, ambitions and traditions (i.e. its "identity") imposed on it by external producers of culture. Such a group of people would soon feel inferior and dispossessed, like second-class citizens, unable to shape their own future.

For Australians it is important that we get to watch our kind of stories on the big screen (with our accents and language), see our land and cities on television, hear our bands on the radio and read books that deal with our

history, our way of life and our dreams. At the same time we need to see ourselves as part of a global network of different cultural identities and aspirations.

## Self-expression

Many people, particularly young people, turn to music, film, dance, acting, fashion etc. to express their ideas and feelings, explore issues affecting their lives, share experiences with other people, contribute to political and social debates as well as to make a living doing what they love. Surveys have shown that Australians rate being creative as important and many studies have shown that active involvement with the arts has benefits for individual mental and physical well-being. Expressing yourself through the arts can build self-esteem and confidence.

“Together we do better”, says the slogan. And communication is the essential prerequisite for doing better together. But communication is much more than just language. The arts provide a communication medium that allows us to share with each other many thoughts, feelings and dreams that are hard to get across in words. Young people in particular turn to music, videos and film, visual arts, theatre and fashion to share their experiences.

## Fostering creativity

Our economic and environmental future depends to a great extent on our creativity and innovation. Today a single small idea can be worth more than many a gold mine. Just think of a successful idea such as the iPad. We need to work smarter, not cheaper. This means that the ability to “think outside the square” is increasingly important.

The arts play a vital role in helping Australians become more creative and innovative. As young children we are encouraged to learn through being creative but all too often our early engagement with creativity drops off until by the time we are young adults we have forgotten the talents and creativity we once had. The arts expose us to different ways of thinking, alternative ways of seeing the world, new ways of solving problems; all the core features of creativity. The arts help us explore how we can challenge and adapt rules and traditions, how we can combine different talents to make something new together and how we can help shape our future. Successful business leaders are now taking art classes to help them become more creative and innovative. Life-long learning has become

an important and rewarding part of working life for many people. The next trend may be life-long exposure to active participation in the creative arts.

## Community building

As well as helping to create a shared identity as described above, the arts bring people together and provide shared experiences. Statistics show that more people in Australia attend arts than sports events. Arts activity can also help communities deal with difficult issues and possibly bring healing and understanding. In many Indigenous communities art making can be a social event. Similarly, the many music and film festivals around Australia bring together tens of thousands of people every year. The arts are frequently at the cutting edge of setting and changing community values and attitudes. They can provide a forum for reflection and debate about human rights and about community norms, reconciliation and evaluation of our history.

The arts can also bridge gaps between cultural groups and different generations. Our attitudes to cultural diversity and mutual respect in a multicultural nation have been shaped in large part by debate stimulated through film, community arts, theatre, writing and music. Every year festivals and arts events provide an opportunity for community pride as well as a chance for others to explore the culture of their neighbours and workmates. These events provide the glue that holds our society together.

## Creative industries

Finally, the arts are part of what are today called the creative industries. This is a substantial and rapidly expanding sector that employs many of Australia’s most creative people. At the time of the 2006 Census, more than 285,000 people in Australia said that their main work was in the cultural industries. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that the 2005-06 value-add output of the cultural and leisure industries totalled over \$13 billion. The arts are generally labour-intensive. This means that they are a valuable source of employment.

The arts are also important international ambassadors for Australia. The way the rest of the world thinks about Australia is to a considerable extent shaped by our films, performers, television programs, music and books.

Australians are sometimes surprised to learn how much the television show *Neighbours* has influenced British images of Australia in the last decade. Similarly, films such as *Crocodile Dundee* changed American ideas about Australia. Whether we like it or not, the arts are very influential in forming people's attitudes. The importance of the creative industries is much greater than mere profits and economic performance can ever reveal.

Australians are also highly valued in the creative industries around the world. Australia's expatriate professional artists have a reputation for professionalism, a "can-do" attitude, high levels of technical skill and the ability to "think outside the box".

## Summary

The arts have a long tradition of shaping our society and an important part to play in our future. They help define and negotiate who we are, what we believe in, what we value and what we aspire to. The arts inspire Australians and help us express ourselves to other people. The arts play a central role in creating and maintaining culture and society in Australia.

## Useful sources

Costantoura, P. (2001), *Australians and the Arts*, Federation Press, Annandale, NSW.

Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2010), *Arts and Culture in Australia: A Statistical Overview, 2011*

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/8EBoAA3F1775AC35CA257B02000ECD50?opendocument>

This report gives good statistical data on the arts in Australia.

The Australia Council website is a good source of information on the arts in Australia:

<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/>

Young People and the Arts in Australia has many useful resources online: [www.ypaa.net](http://www.ypaa.net)

## Authors

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