



Breaking Boundaries Building Bridges

The Arts as a Universal Language

T H E
MACKINTOSH
FOUNDATION

By Glyndwr C Jones
Foreword by Lord Vaizey of Didcot



This booklet is launched on 11 February 2026 at a reception in the European Union (EU) offices in London. The evening is introduced by the EU Ambassador to the United Kingdom Pedro Serrano, Lord Vaizey of Didcot and Glyndwr Jones (Director of the Council for Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre, Secretariat of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Performing Arts Education and Training, and writer on constitutional topics.)

In forming this booklet we would like to thank the following for their inspiration:

- The Cameron Mackintosh Foundation
- The EU Delegation to London
- The European Union Network of National Institutes of Culture in London euniclondon.org
- The APPG for Performing Arts Education and Training at Westminster

Text developed by Philippa Bunting
Research supported by Emily Maloney



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Foreword

Lord Vaizey of Didcot



The arts are often described as the universal language of humanity because they communicate ideas, emotions, and experiences that transcend borders, cultures, and spoken languages. Long before written language existed, humans used art through cave paintings, music, dance, and storytelling to express identity, beliefs, and shared understanding. Even today, the arts continue to connect people across the world by appealing to what we all share as human beings.

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A melody can express joy, sorrow, or hope regardless of whether the listener understands the composer’s language or cultural background. Similarly, a painting can communicate struggle, beauty, or love through colour, texture, and form alone. These emotional responses are instinctive, allowing people from different cultures to feel connected through shared reactions. In this way, the arts bypass linguistic barriers and speak directly to the human heart.

The arts also preserve and share cultural stories while remaining accessible to others. Dance, theatre, and visual art often reflect traditions, history, and values unique to a community. Yet, even when audiences are unfamiliar with the specific cultural context, they can still understand the underlying themes including family, conflict, freedom, faith, or resilience. This balance between cultural specificity and universal meaning allows the arts to educate, build empathy, and foster respect among diverse societies.

In a world often fragmented by differences, the arts remind us of our common humanity. They give voice to feelings that are difficult to express and create spaces where people can connect, understand, and heal. By transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries, the arts truly function as a universal language—one that speaks to the shared emotions, experiences, and values that define us all.



The arts have always been more than mere ornamentation or entertainment, more than an optional embellishment of human life. Through time and across civilizations, the arts, be they visual, theatrical, musical, literary, and beyond, act as powerful forces to disrupt limitations, dismantle walls of misunderstanding, and forge connection where divisions, natural or constructed, might otherwise prevail.

To examine how the arts break boundaries and build bridges is to explore the deepest impulse of human creativity: the need to imagine, to express, to communicate, to connect, and to remember. The arts help individuals to understand themselves and one another more deeply, and allow societies to negotiate identity and navigate change. They empower nations to relate across linguistic, cultural, and political divides. Intimate and collective, deeply personal yet public, whilst rooted in particular experiences they are nonetheless capable of reaching far across time and space.

This booklet explores these features of the arts across three levels: individual, societal, and global. At each level, the arts reveal their extraordinary capacity not only to transcend boundaries, whether cultural, political, economic, geographic or psychological, but also to build bridges that bring people into new relationship with themselves, with one another, and with the wider world. In doing so, the arts affirm their role as essential to human nurturing, social cohesion, and international understanding.

Glyndwr Jones
January 2026

Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges Within Individuals

Art ignites in the individual human imagination. The very act of engaging with, or creating through, the arts opens pathways into self-reflection and emotional awareness. Through visual art, music, theatre, poetry, dance, and digital media, individuals use artistic forms to process experiences, articulate feelings that defy ordinary language, and explore dimensions of themselves that may be difficult to access through rational discourse.

For example, a painter could express deep grief through use of colour; a musician a sense of longing through a melody; a dancer their joy through movement. These forms of expression allow individuals to break internal boundaries between conscious and unconscious thoughts, internal experiences and their external manifestations, private struggles and public communication, and encourage them to articulate complex emotions that might otherwise remain unexpressed, unresolved, or misunderstood.

In similar spirit, the arts play a growing role in psychological healing and well-being. Over the last century, disciplines such as music, dance, movement, drama and art therapy have emerged as powerful

tools for psychological care. These disciplines recognise that mental illness, distress and trauma often operate beyond verbal articulation, rendering traditional talking therapies insufficient for many.

Artistic engagement allows individuals to process, project, and reconfigure emotional experiences. For instance: painting can be a vehicle for trauma survivors to regain control over the narrative of their lives and the way they have been represented; dance can help them reconnect with their own bodies after dissociation; drama can provide a powerful opportunity to rehearse new ways of responding to life's challenges, and music can soothe anxiety, regulate physiological responses, and create connection.

The arts cultivate empathy by inviting individuals to inhabit perspectives other than their own. Reading expands our imaginative capacity to experience life through different characters, cultures, and historical moments. Theatre brings to life the emotions, motivations, and conflicts of others. Film immerses us in lives distant from our own, while music allows us to convey universal sentiments across linguistic and cultural barriers.



Through experiences in the arts, we develop emotional literacy, learning to recognise, engage with, interpret, and value feelings that may not match our own, nurturing social understanding at the interpersonal level. If we are fully to participate in, and contribute to, the diverse societies in which we live, built on relationships rooted in sensitivity and compassion, the ability to empathise deeply, to see the world through more than one lens, is essential.



Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges Across Society

The arts function as a mirror that reflects social realities: triumphs, defeats, and injustices alike.

Artists expose truths that may be unspoken or suppressed: realist writers and painters highlight issues of poverty, inequality, and exploitation; documentary filmmakers expose corruption and amplify marginalised voices; playwrights challenge political systems or social conventions, and music genres serve as platforms for resistance and empowerment among oppressed communities.

Through acts of reflection and critique, the arts can break boundaries of silence and conformity, opening public dialogue about matters that may otherwise remain hidden or normalised. When society confronts its own contradictions through the

arts, it becomes possible to imagine alternatives and pursue collective transformation.

The arts also build social cohesion.

Cultural traditions, including storytelling, music, dance, religious practices and observances, food, dress, customs and crafts, help sustain group identity across generations, building bridges between past and present, linking memories, values, and aspirations, and affirming continuity even in times of social change, displacement and migration.

In culturally diverse societies, the arts offer common ground where people can connect across difference and cultivate shared identities. Cultural festivals showcase the plurality of traditions. Museums preserve cultural

heritage while creating spaces where multiple narratives coexist. Literature and theatre open dialogue on topics like race, gender, and identity that might otherwise simply provoke tension. The arts do not only reflect society but can actively shape it by nurturing understanding within communities, strengthening social bonds, and weaving connections.

An education in the arts is therefore a foundational element in social development for all, not just those preparing to enter creative professions. Schools that integrate arts into their curricula nurture creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. They teach students how to observe closely, appreciate multiplicity and nuance, express ideas with clarity, and question assumptions, all skills essential for participation in modern

societies where problems are complex, and perspectives vary.

Moreover, the arts inspire civic participation by humanising political issues. A documentary on climate change can mobilise viewers toward environmental action. A concert can be a catalyst for raising awareness or collecting funds for social or humanitarian causes. A play about refugees might motivate audiences to advocate for humane immigration policies. A public art installation could provoke dialogue about societal issues such as urban development, gentrification, or environmental justice.

Through these multiple avenues, the arts build bridges between individuals and collective responsibilities, thereby energising civic life.

Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges Between Nations

Whilst specific meanings may vary across contexts, the emotional and sensory impact of the arts often transcends linguistic, cultural, or national boundaries. A melody composed in Romania can move listeners in Portugal. A painting created in Finland may resonate with viewers in Greece. A film made in Georgia can captivate audiences in Ireland.

This universality makes art a powerful tool for cultivating global understanding. Through touring performances, international exhibitions, cultural exchanges, and festivals, artistic works and practices circulate across borders, carrying with them stories, values, insights and perspectives. Encounters with them nurture curiosity and help dismantle stereotypes. They reveal shared human experience, such as love, grief, hope and conflict, building

connection where political, cultural or linguistic boundaries might otherwise induce division.

Recognising this, nations increasingly invest in cultural diplomacy, which humanises international relationships, emphasising person-to-person, and people-to-people connection rather than ideological or military power. When one country shares its cultural treasures with another, it signals openness, respect, and goodwill. The arts become a neutral ground where dialogue can occur even in times of political tension. Endeavours such as national orchestra tours, art exhibitions, international collaborations and co-productions highlight innovation and expand networks, facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation.

The arts therefore serve as a platform for international solidarity, particularly in response to shared challenges such as social injustice, pandemic, war, or climate change: virtual global concerts raise awareness about humanitarian crises; international documentaries expose environmental threats, and cross-border creative projects advocate for human rights. In times of crisis, the arts remind humanity of its interconnectedness: a bridge linking diverse populations in a shared commitment to human dignity, and to the planet.

In the 21st Century, global migration has created a world where identities are increasingly fluid. Immigrant and diasporic communities use artistic practices to maintain connections with their homelands while adapting

to new cultural contexts. Traditional customs and rituals, dances and songs, reinforce continuity. Simultaneously, as communities blend influences from multiple cultures, new hybrid art forms emerge and in turn become part of lived experience.

These transnational artistic expressions break rigid national boundaries. They challenge the idea that culture is static or confined to geographic territories, instead demonstrating that it is dynamic, and evolves over time. Through such expressions, various communities build bridges between their cultures of origin and their adopted nations and societies, and vice versa, promoting multicultural understanding.



Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges New Frontiers of Connection

The digital age has dramatically expanded the boundary-breaking potential of the arts. Digital platforms enable artistic content to circulate instantaneously around the globe. Musicians can release songs online and reach millions in different countries within hours. Visual artists can share their work through digital exhibitions and global social networks, and filmmakers upload documentaries accessible to audiences in multiple languages.

This democratisation of access breaks boundaries of geography, economics, and privilege. People who cannot afford travel, tickets, or tuition at cultural institutions can now experience artistic masterpieces, learn from experts, and participate in creative communities online.

Digital technology also enables new forms of global cooperation. Musicians record collaboratively from different continents; designers co-create artworks in virtual environments; writers co-author narratives in real time; digital artists remix and reinterpret works across cultures. These collaborations not only enrich the arts but also model new forms of cooperation across nations and identities.

Virtual reality platforms push these frontiers even further by immersing participants in shared artistic spaces that defy physical constraints. Artists and audiences worldwide can enter the same virtual gallery, stage, or studio, exploring digital artworks that could not exist in the physical world. Artificial Intelligence (AI), whilst an issue of impassioned debate in creative circles currently, may yet yield something of value to the world of the arts in the long term.

Another vital technological contribution is made by digital archives. Museums, libraries, and cultural institutions are digitising artifacts, manuscripts, and artworks, making them accessible worldwide, preserving heritage endangered by climate change, conflict, or decay, and allowing scholars, artists, and the public to engage with artistic history in new ways, supporting cross-cultural learning. A student in Iceland can study ancient Egyptian papyri; a musician in Türkiye can analyse medieval French scores; a photographer in Poland can explore the textiles of Indigenous communities in India, opening unparalleled opportunities for global cultural cross-fertilisation.

Challenges and Limitations

While the arts possess profound potential to build bridges and cultivate understanding, there are nevertheless some challenges to overcome when it comes to considering individual, social, and international contexts.

A primary challenge is unequal access. Sadly, socioeconomic inequality often limits participation in artistic activities, creating a gap between those who can afford to engage and those who cannot. Not having the resources to access tickets, tuition and creative resources more generally can exclude already marginalised communities further, thus undermining the potential for the arts to promote cross-cultural understanding and create social cohesion by ensuring not all are able to take part.

Geographic and infrastructural barriers can also play a role. Individuals in conflict-affected, deprived or rural regions are likely to have limited exposure to artistic programmes, cultural institutions, or international collaborations. Whilst digital technology has partially mitigated this for some, elsewhere digital poverty continues to limit opportunities to a relatively privileged minority.

While the arts are ripe for the cultivation of empathy, understanding, and dialogue, these effects are not guaranteed. Cross-cultural collaborations may build temporary goodwill, yet this can be undermined by deep-seated societal or political

tensions, beyond the scope of artistic intervention. This limitation highlights the importance of integrating the arts with complementary approaches across the fields of education, policy, community organisation and diplomacy to maximise their beneficial potential.

The arts' ability to bridge divides is sometimes further constrained by the political and ideological context. Geopolitical tensions may prevent artists from working across borders internationally or sharing their creations worldwide. Political polarisation can influence how art is received, with works intended to cultivate understanding occasionally provoking controversy or backlash. In some societies, artistic expression may be suppressed or co-opted for propaganda, restricting the prospects for authentic dialogue.

Of course, global artistic exchange can also raise ethical questions regarding representation, consent, and narrative control. Who takes part? Who gets to tell whose story? Who benefits from the cross-cultural collaboration? Ensuring that the arts function as bridges rather than instruments of exploitation demands transparency, inclusivity, and respect for all participants.

While the arts may have unrivalled power to overcome such obstacles, their power to bridge divides in any given situation cannot be taken for granted. This is work that requires intentional effort, deep understanding, sensitive negotiation, and courage.



The Arts as a Universal Language Conclusion

The arts, in all their diversity, are fundamentally forces for building connection. They break internal boundaries within individuals by revealing inner truths, cultivating empathy, and promoting healing. They break social boundaries by challenging injustice, cultivate collective identity, and inspire civic engagement. They break global boundaries by enabling cross-cultural exchange, strengthening international relations, and building transnational solidarities.

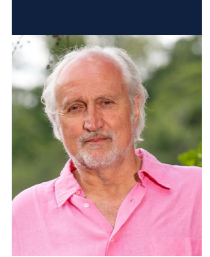
Across individuals, society, and nations, the arts function as bridges: structures that span divisions, create pathways, and invite movement. Bridges that connect emotions to expression, individuals to communities, cultures to one another, and humanity to its shared destiny. They remind us that despite differences in language, geography, or experience, we have a shared capacity for creativity, imagination, and emotional resonance.

In a world increasingly marked by uncertainty, tension and polarisation, the arts offer hope. They show that boundaries, though real, are never absolute, that creativity can transcend walls, imagination can envision common ground, and that storytelling, image-making, and performance can bring people closer together.

Ultimately, the arts do not merely break boundaries—they reshape them. They remind us that connection is not accidental but crafted, nurtured, and continually renewed. They teach us that our greatest bond lies in our shared humanity, expressed through the universal impulse to create, to communicate, and to understand. Through the arts, we encounter one another not as strangers divided by circumstance, but as co-creators of a world shaped by empathy, expression, and the ever-expanding horizons of the human imagination.

Afterword

Nick Allott OBE, Vice Chairman of Cameron Mackintosh Ltd



The creative industries stand as one of the most dynamic and influential forces shaping the cultural, social, and economic life of the UK and Europe. From film, theatre, fashion, design and publishing to music and digital media, creativity does not exist at the margins of society; it sits at its very centre. As this work concludes, it is clear that the value of the creative industries extends far beyond aesthetics or entertainment. They are powerful engines of growth, innovation, and identity.

Economically, the creative industries generate billions in revenue, create millions of jobs, and stimulate related sectors such as tourism, technology, and education. In the UK, creativity has become a defining export, projecting soft power across the world through globally recognised brands, artists, and institutions. Across Europe, creative ecosystems support regional development, revitalise cities, and offer opportunities for small enterprises and freelancers to thrive in an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

Culturally, the creative industries preserve heritage while constantly reimagining it. They give voice to diverse communities, challenge social norms, and provide spaces for dialogue, reflection, and change. In times of political uncertainty and social transformation, creative expression helps societies understand themselves and others, fostering empathy and shared values across borders.

Moreover, creativity drives innovation. As digital technologies reshape how we live and work, creative thinkers play a crucial role in designing human-centred solutions, bridging art and science, tradition and progress. Europe's creative industries demonstrate how cultural richness and economic competitiveness can coexist and reinforce one another.

Looking forward, sustained investment, inclusive policies, and cross-border collaboration will be essential to ensure these industries continue to flourish. The creative industries are not simply contributors to the UK and Europe; they are architects of their future, shaping how economies grow, how cultures evolve, and how societies imagine what comes next.

In a world often fragmented by differences, the arts remind us of our common humanity. They give voice to feelings that are difficult to express and create spaces where people can connect, understand, and heal. By transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries, the arts truly function as a universal language—one that speaks to the shared emotions, experiences, and values that define us all.

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