

22 The arts

What is 'culture'?

The word **culture** also has two meanings. In this book, it is used in its anthropological sense to mean 'way of life'. But many people also use it as a synonym for 'the arts'. When it is used this way in this chapter, it has inverted commas around it.

What are 'the arts'?

The arts is an umbrella term for literature, music, painting, sculpture, crafts, theatre, opera, ballet, film, etc. It usually implies seriousness, so that particular examples of these activities which are regarded as too 'light' may not be included. These may be referred to simply as 'entertainment' instead.

Art, or **fine arts**, is often used to refer to those arts which use space, but not time, for their appreciation (e.g. painting or sculpture). This, for example, is what is covered by the subject 'art' in schools.

The word **artist** can sometimes refer only to a person working in the fine arts, and sometimes to a person working in any field of the arts. In this chapter, it is used in this latter sense.

The arts in society

Interest in the arts in Britain used to be largely confined to a small elite. Far more people read books, visit art galleries, and go to the theatre and concerts today than fifty years ago. Nevertheless, the fact remains that most British people prefer sport, television, chatting with friends and family, and other free-time activities to anything 'cultural' (What is 'culture'?).

The position of the arts in Britain may be described as a mixture of public apathy and private enthusiasm. Publicly, the arts are accepted and tolerated but not actively encouraged. As a proportion of its total expenditure, government financial support for the arts is comparatively low. There has always been a widespread suspicion in Britain that such funding is undemocratic because it merely subsidizes the tastes of the wealthy. The counter argument – that this funding is democratic because it makes the arts cheap enough for the ordinary person to have access to them – is not one that usually carries much weight in Britain. Many forms of the arts in Britain rely heavily on private sponsorship (which amounts to almost half the total contributions of public authorities). Most arts organizations say they would not be able to do what they do without private backing. They are fortunate in that British private sponsors are usually more generous than those of other European countries.

It is notable that the biggest beneficiaries of private support are organizations which do not all pertain to the arts exclusively. As well as art galleries, they are museums and heritage organizations such as the National Trust (see chapter 5). And indeed, it is museums and galleries that provide the one exception to the prevailing belief that the arts should not be subsidized. Britain is almost unique in Europe in that admission to its museums and art galleries is normally free. (It is charged only when special exhibitions are being held.) There was a brief period in the 1980s and 1990s when charges were imposed, but there was such a public outcry that a great tradition of 'free education' was being lost that they were soon abolished. Perhaps this is a key to understanding the British attitude to the arts. The arts seem to be valued most when they involve general knowledge and national heritage rather than for their purely aesthetic aspects.

In general, the arts have a low profile in Britain. In schools, subjects such as art and music, though always available, tend to be pushed to the sidelines and pupils are allowed to drop them completely at the age of 14. Television programmes on 'cultural' subjects are usually shown late at night. Each summer, tens of high-quality arts festivals take place

around the country (Some well-known annual arts festivals), but the vast majority of people do not even know of their existence. London has some of the finest collections of painting and sculpture in the world, but tourist brochures give little space to this aspect of the city.

As with the arts, so with artists themselves. Except for the most famous of them, they have comparatively little public recognition. Some British artists have international reputations, and yet most people in Britain don't even know their names. It is very rare, for example, for any British artist to use his or her fame in the arts as a springboard onto the political stage. If you were to ask the average person to name some famous painters, composers, opera singers, and ballet dancers, you would probably be given very few British names – or even none at all.

It is almost as if the British are keen to present themselves as a nation of philistines. And yet, hundreds of thousands of people are enthusiastically involved in one or other of the arts, but (in typically British fashion) with a more-or-less amateur or part-time status. For example, most towns in the country have at least one 'amateur dramatics' society, which regularly gives performances and charges no more than enough to cover its costs. All over the country, thousands of people learn handicrafts (such as pottery) in their free time, and sometimes sell their work in local craft shops. Similarly, there are thousands of musicians of every kind, performing around the country for very little money and making their own recordings under very difficult circumstances. Some amateur British choirs such as the Philharmonia Chorus are well known throughout the world.

The characteristics of British arts and letters

If there is one characteristic of British work in the arts that seems to stand out, it is its lack of identification with wider intellectual trends. It is not usually ideologically committed, nor associated with particular political movements. Playwrights and directors, for instance, can be left-wing in their political outlook, but the plays which they produce rarely convey a straightforward political message. The same is largely true of British novelists and poets. Their writing is typically naturalistic and unconnected with particular intellectual movements. They tend to be individualistic, exploring emotions rather than ideas, the personal rather than the political. Whatever critics read into them, it is quite common for British playwrights and novelists to claim that they just write down 'what they see' and that they do not consciously intend any social or

Some well-known annual arts festivals

Aldeburgh

June, East Anglia. Classical music. Relatively informal atmosphere.

Edinburgh International Festival

August, Edinburgh. All the performing arts, including avant-garde. More than ten different performances every day around the city. World famous.

The Proms

July–September, London. Classical music. 'Proms' is short for 'promenades', so-called because most of the seats are taken out of the Albert Hall, and the audience stands or (if there is room) walks around instead.

Glyndebourne

All summer, Sussex. In the grounds of a large country house. Opera.

Royal National Eisteddfod

July, Wales. Music, choirs and dance from many different countries. Mostly in the form of competitions, with special categories for Welsh performing arts.

Glastonbury

Midsummer, south-western England. By far the best known of the rock music festivals. The Reading and Leeds festivals in August are also well known.

Womad

July, southern England. Folk music and other performing arts from around the world.

Architectural disasters

There is an old cliché often used in Britain which is supposed to represent uneducated attitudes towards art. It goes: 'I don't know much about art, but I know what I like'. But in the case of architecture, what British people seem to know is what they don't like.

Architecture has a generally low profile in Britain, but in 2005, when Channel 4 (see chapter 16) asked people to name the building which they would most like to see demolished, there was an enthusiastic response. More than 1,000 different buildings were nominated.

The 'winner' of this dubious distinction was the shopping centre in the new town of Cumbernauld in Scotland. Like so many of the top ten most hated buildings, it was built in the 1960s. According to the producer of the TV programme which followed the poll, 'The depth of passionate opposition to [it] was quite incredible'.

symbolic message. The work of British artists is also individualistic within its own field. That is, British artists do not usually consider themselves to belong to this or that 'movement'. In any field of the arts, even those in which many British artists have strong international reputations, it is difficult to identify a 'British school'.

The style of the arts also tends to be conventional. The avant-garde exists, of course, but, with the possible exception of painting and sculpture, it is not through such work that British artists become famous. In the 1980s, Peter Brook was a highly successful theatre director. But when he occasionally directed avant-garde productions, he staged them in Paris!

In these features of the work of British artists (lonely individualism expressing itself within conventional formats), it is perhaps possible to find an explanation for the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, the low level of public support for the arts, and on the other hand, the rather high level of enthusiasm on the part of individual people. There appears to be a general assumption in Britain that artistic creation is a personal affair, not a social one, and that therefore the flowering of artistic talent cannot be engineered. Either it happens, or it doesn't. It is not something for which society should feel responsible.

Theatre and cinema

The theatre has always been very strong in Britain. Its centre is, of course, London, where successful plays can sometimes run without a break for years and years (*The record breakers*). But every large town in the country has its theatres. Even small towns often have 'repertory' theatres, where the same group of professional actors stages a different play every week.

It seems that the conventional format of the theatrical play gives the undemonstrative British people a safe opportunity to look behind the mask of accepted social behaviour. The country's most successful and respected playwrights are usually those who explore the darker side of the personality and of personal relationships (albeit often through comedy).

British theatre has such a fine acting tradition that Hollywood is forever raiding its talent for people to star in films. British television does the same thing. Moreover, Broadway, when looking for its next blockbuster musical, pays close attention to London productions. In short, British theatre is much admired. As a consequence, it is something that British actors are proud of. Many of the most well-known television actors, though they might make most of their money in this latter medium, continue to see themselves first and foremost as theatre actors. (This reputation means that, conversely, Hollywood actors are often keen to appear on the London stage. It enhances their credibility as 'real' actors, not just stars.)

In contrast, cinema in Britain is generally regarded as not quite part of 'the arts' at all – it is simply entertainment. (For example, in the official publication *Social Trends*, cinema attendance is discussed under 'Leisure and entertainment', separate from 'Cultural activities'.)

The record breakers

The longest-running theatrical comedy in London was the farce *No Sex Please, We're British*, which ran continuously from 1971 to 1987. But by far the longest-running theatrical production anywhere in the world is *The Mousetrap*, a 'whodunnit' from the book by Agatha Christie. It opened in London in 1952. And, more than 23,000 performances later, it's still going!

British films

Here are some of the most successful and respected British films since 1981.

Chariots of Fire (1981)
Gregory's Girl (1981)
Ghandi (1982)
A Letter to Brezhnev (1985)
My Beautiful Launderette (1985)
A Room with a View (1985)
A Fish Called Wanda (1988)
Shirley Valentine (1989)
The Crying Game (1992)
Howard's End (1992)
Much Ado About Nothing (1993)
The Madness of King George (1994)
Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994)
Trainspotting (1996)
The Full Monty (1997)
Shakespeare in Love (1998)
Notting Hill (1999)
Chicken Run (2000)
Billy Elliot (2000)
Bridget Jones's Diary (2001)
Love Actually (2003)
Vera Drake (2004)
The Queen (2006)
The Last King of Scotland (2006)

Partly for this reason, Britain gives much less financial help to its film industry than other European countries do. Therefore, although cinemagoing is a regular habit for a much larger number of people than is theatregoing, Britain produces very few films. This is not because expertise in film making does not exist. It does. American productions often use studios and technical facilities in Britain and British film directors often find work in Hollywood. Moreover, some of the few films that Britain does manage to make become highly respected around the world (*British films*). Nevertheless, films shown at cinemas in Britain are overwhelmingly American films.

Music

Listening to music is a very common leisure time activity in Britain. But for the vast majority of people in the country, it is not classical music that they listen to. Few classical musicians, whether British or foreign, become famous to the general public. When they do, it is usually because of circumstances which have nothing to do with their music. For example, the Italian tenor Pavarotti became famous in the country when an aria sung by him was used by the BBC to introduce its 1990 football World Cup coverage. Despite this low profile, thousands of British people are dedicated musicians and many public libraries have a well-stocked music section. Several British orchestras, soloists, singers, choirs, opera companies, and ballet companies, and also certain annual musical events, have international reputations.

In the 1960s, British artists had a great influence on the development of music in the modern, or 'pop' idiom. The Beatles (from Liverpool) and other British groups were responsible for several innovations which were then adopted by America and the rest of the pop world. These included the writing of words and music by the performers themselves, and more active audience participation. The words of their songs also helped to liberate the pop idiom from its former limitation to the topics of love and teenage affection. Other British bands such as Pink Floyd and Cream took a major part in making the musical structure of pop music similarly more sophisticated.

Since that time, popular music in Britain has been an enormous and profitable industry. The Beatles were awarded MBEs for their services to British exports. Although America continues to dominate popular music in a number of ways (for example, very few British singers do not sing in

Some well-known venues for the performing arts

The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford is the home of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). Most other well-known venues are in London.

Theatres include the Old Vic (the home of the National Theatre Company), the Mermaid, the Royal Court, and the Barbican (where the RSC also perform).

For opera and ballet, there is the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden and the English National Opera (formerly the Sadler's Wells Company), which performs at the Coliseum.

The South Bank area has many concert halls (notably the Royal Festival Hall), and the National Film Theatre.

Mountains of books!

For the really scholarly reader, there is the British Library, which receives a copy of every publication produced in Britain and Ireland. Its collection includes more than 13 million books, 300,000 of them in manuscript form. It possesses more than 6,000 different editions of Shakespeare's plays and more than 100 different editions of most novels by Charles Dickens. It also has nearly a million journal and newspaper titles and four million maps, three million sound recordings and eight million stamps. The collection needs more than 600 km of shelves and in 2007 it was expanding at the rate of one kilometre every month.

The arts and broadcasting

Although they have been increasing since the mid 1990s, visits to the cinema in Britain are still only a fraction of what they were in the late 1940s. The big drop took place during the 1950s and 1960s as people acquired televisions. In fact, broadcasters have taken an important supporting role in the arts. The making of some high-quality British films has only been possible because of the financial help of Channel 4. The BBC regularly commissions new works of music for the proms. Television drama and comedy help to keep hundreds of actors in work.

Moreover, television can actually help to promote other art forms. When a book is dramatized on television, its sales often rocket. This happened, for example, with the BBC's production of the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen in the mid 1990s. The most spectacular example occurred in the late 1960s. *The Forsythe Saga* was a Victorian novel by John Galsworthy which had been out of print for several decades. After an adaptation of it was shown on the BBC, half a million copies were sold.

A child could do that!

British people often complain about modern abstract painting by saying, 'It doesn't look very special to me. A child of four could do that'. Well, in 2007 in England, a child of two did that.

One of the artists exhibiting in that year at Saatchi Online, a virtual art gallery, was Freddie Linsky. His work attracted rave reviews from art experts. One of his paintings was bought for £20 by a Manchester collector. Then Freddie got an email from a gallery in Berlin asking whether he would be willing to exhibit his paintings there. Unfortunately, he didn't read the email. That's because he couldn't read. He was only two years old. The paintings were submitted by Freddie's mother as a joke.

The news of this discovery was greatly enjoyed by people in Britain. Everybody loves it when experts are made to look like fools – especially when they are experts about something that most people don't understand (and secretly believe that there is actually nothing to understand anyway). It did not occur to many people to think that perhaps a child genius had been discovered.

their own version of an American accent!), many trends with worldwide influence have come out of Britain (notably 'punk' in the 1970s). British artists in this idiom have also been active in attempting to cross the boundaries between popular music, folk music, and classical music.

Words

Although the British are comparatively uninterested in formal education, and although they watch a lot of television, they are still enthusiastic readers. Reading is only slightly less popular as a free-time activity than listening to music. Over 60 per cent of the population has a library card, and borrowing a book from the library is one of the country's most popular pastimes; much more popular, for example, than going to watch a professional football game.

In fact, the written word is the one form of the arts with which the British are generally comfortable. It has been said that Britain is primarily a verbal culture, not a visual one. While many people would struggle to name a handful of British painters, sculptors, architects, film directors or classical musicians, few would have difficulty with a list of famous British writers. In recent years, the BBC has conducted polls to find the country's most popular paintings and books, in which people were invited to phone up and nominate their favourite. The book poll attracted seven times as many votes as the painting poll (*The nation's favourite books*).

Literature written in English is, of course, not the preserve of British writers. While only two such writers (William Golding and Harold Pinter) have won the Nobel Prize for literature in the last 50 years, many, many other recipients of this prize have written in English. It is the same story with the Man Booker Prize – the most important annual prize in Britain for a work of fiction. Since 1981, about half its winners have been writers from former British colonies (e.g. Canada, India, Ireland, Nigeria).

The literary canon

	Poetry	Drama	Prose
14th century	Geoffrey Chaucer		
16th century	William Shakespeare		
17th century	John Donne John Milton		
18th century	Alexander Pope		
19th century	William Wordsworth		Charles Dickens George Eliot Jane Austen
20th century	W. B. Yeats* T. S. Eliot Seamus Heaney*	Samuel Beckett* Harold Pinter	James Joyce D. H. Lawrence William Golding

Artistic merit is ultimately a matter of opinion. But below is a list of some of the writers of past centuries who are widely regarded as the 'cream' of serious British literature. (Those marked with an asterisk (*) are/were actually Irish. But by convention, they are usually seen as part of the same literary 'world'.)

Many, more modern, writers are famous at this time, but it is too early to know whether their reputations will last.

One other author should be mentioned. In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson produced his famous dictionary. His highly individual definitions, together with other comments he made during his life, have made him the second most quoted writer in the English language after Shakespeare.

Although many of the best ‘serious’ British writers manage to be popular as well as profound, the vast majority of the books that are read in Britain are not ‘serious’ literature. Britain is the home of what might be called ‘middlebrow’ literature. (That is, mid-way between serious, or ‘highbrow’ literature and popular, or ‘pulp’ fiction.) For example, the distinctly British genre of detective fiction (e.g. Agatha Christie, Ruth Rendell) is regarded as entertainment rather than literature – but it is intelligent entertainment. As well as this, there are many British authors, mostly female, who write novels about the lives of fictional people and their relationships, usually in a historical setting, (e.g. Norah Lofts, Mary Stewart). These are sometimes classified as ‘romances’ but are actually more serious and sensitive than that term often implies. They are neither popular ‘blockbusters’ nor the sort of books which are reviewed in the serious literary press. And yet they continue to be read, year after year, by hundreds of thousands of people. From 1997 to 2004, three writers of this kind of book – Catherine Cookson, Josephine Cox and Danielle Steel – were all always among the top five most borrowed authors from Britain’s public libraries.

It is more than 200 years since poetry stopped being the normal mode of literary self-expression. And yet, poetry in the first decade of the twenty-first century is surprisingly popular in Britain. Books of poetry sell in comparatively large numbers – not nearly as large as prose, but large enough so that a few small publishers (often, though, with a small amount of funding) can survive entirely on poetry. Many poets find themselves in demand to do readings of their work on radio and at arts festivals. Many of these poets are not academics and their writing is accessible to non-specialists. Perhaps the ‘pop’ idiom and easy availability of sound recording have made more people comfortable with spoken verse than they were fifty years ago.

The fine arts

Painting is not as widely popular as music in Britain. There is a general feeling that you have to be a specialist to appreciate it, especially if it is contemporary. Small art galleries, where people might look at paintings with a view to buying them, are rare. Nevertheless, London is one of the main centres of the rich art collector’s world. The two major auction houses of Sotheby’s and Christie’s are world-famous.

The same general lack of appreciation applies to small-scale sculpture. It only makes the news when the annual Turner prize is awarded for a piece of *avant-garde* artwork that most of the media ridicules. Sculpture on a grand scale, however, is a different story. ‘Public art’, as it is sometimes called, seems to have general public approval. The two most notable examples are both near the city of Newcastle in the north-east of England. One is the 20-metre high figure of the Angel of the North, whose 54-metre wing span makes it difficult to miss. A little further to the north is an even larger earthwork that mimics the ancient British tradition of sculpting in or with the land. The Goddess of the North

The nation’s favourite books

In 2003, the BBC staged The Big Read, a competition to find ‘the nation’s favourite book’ – or, more precisely, which book the most people were prepared to spend time and money phoning up to vote for. The winner, despite the reputation of the English for anti-intellectualism, was the work of an otherwise obscure university professor. It was *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Notably, only one of the top five books was set in the real world – and even in this case (Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*) it was the real world of two centuries ago. The other four were all works of fantasy.

The Big Read project was a great success. Libraries all over Britain had to buy multiple copies of the top books to satisfy demand. Sales also went up.

However, this apparent love of books should be put into perspective. In total, about 900,000 votes were cast, over a period of six months, for The Big Read. On the same night as the ‘final’ was shown on TV, on another channel, the semi-final of *Pop Idol* attracted no less than three million votes!

The Top Ten books were:

- 1 *Lord of the Rings*
(J. R. R. Tolkien)
- 2 *Pride and Prejudice*
(Jane Austen)
- 3 *His Dark Materials*
(Philip Pullman)
- 4 *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (Douglas Adams)
- 5 *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
(J. K. Rowling)
- 6 *To Kill a Mockingbird*
(Harper Lee)
- 7 *Winnie the Pooh* (A. A. Milne)
- 8 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
(George Orwell)
- 9 *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (C. S. Lewis)
- 10 *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë)

is a huge reclining figure with breasts which are 30 metres high which stretches for more than half a kilometre between the main road and the east coast railway line to Scotland. She is made out of the earth and other waste materials that have been taken out of the ground there for mining.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How do British governments justify their policy of low spending on the arts? Does the government in your country subsidize the arts more or less than in Britain?
- 2 Which areas of the arts seem to be particularly appreciated and valued in Britain and which seem to be ignored or under-valued? In what ways does the appreciation of the different aspects of the arts vary in your country?
- 3 The British are generally very conscious of the distinction between high art of 'culture' and light 'entertainment'. In which area of the arts have they succeeded in establishing a widely accepted and approved compromise which appeals to a broad range of people from different social backgrounds and with varying levels of education?

SUGGESTIONS

Find some of the top ten books listed in the Big Read ... and read them!

Most of the major museums publish guides to their collections, pointing out their most highly-prized exhibits. Look them up online, or visit them if you get the chance.

Any biography of any of the major British theatrical figures would reveal a lot about the history of the theatre in Britain and about British theatre in general.

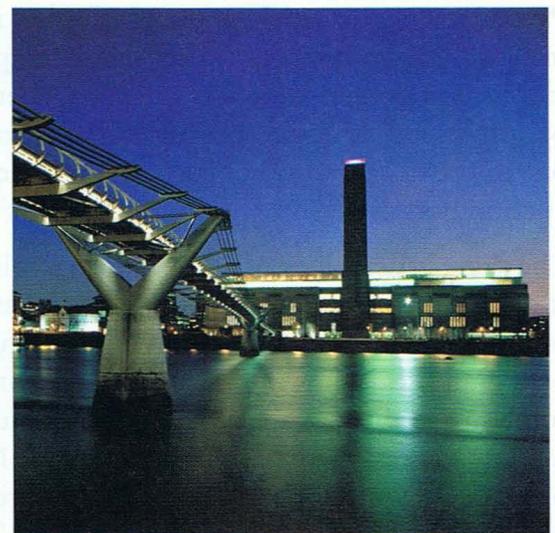
Museums and art galleries

The major museums in London are the British Museum (the national collection of antiquities), the Victoria and Albert Museum (which houses the world's largest display of the decorative arts), the enormous National History Museum, and the Science Museum. There are numerous other small, specialist museums in London and throughout the rest of the country, usually with an emphasis on history and British 'heritage'. Many of these now attract visitors by adding appropriate sounds and even smells.

Art galleries in London which house permanent collections include the National gallery, the adjoining National Portrait Gallery,

the Tate Britain, which is the nation's gallery of art from 1500 until modern times, and the Tate Modern. These galleries also hold special temporary exhibitions. The Hayward Gallery and the Royal Academy put on a series of shows, some of which are very popular.

Outside London there is the Burrell collection near Glasgow, and the Tate galleries in Liverpool and St. Ives. Most major towns and cities have their own museums, galleries and 'cultural' centres. A recently built example is the Lowry centre in Salford (near Manchester), which houses all 300 works of the town's most famous son, L. S. Lowry.



The Tate Modern, Britain's national museum of international modern art.