

# create

Perspectives on the value  
of art and culture



**Andrew Marr**

To Make is to Live

READ ON

**Three years ago Andrew Marr had a serious stroke. He tells us how art has been vital to his recovery.**

Statistically, I suppose, most artists must be middle-aged, chugging on in the intervals between filling in tax forms, arguing with their children and trotting off to the gym. In the popular imagination, however, the great creatives tend to be very old or very young. If you are not killed by circumstances, excess or the impossible torment of your own creativity – Mozart, Schubert, Keats, Modigliani, Morrison, Winehouse – then you seem to have a very good chance of making it through to a tempestuous, late final period – Rembrandt, Titian, Verdi, Haydn, Matisse, Picasso, Sibelius.

So although I don't know of any conclusive scientific studies about the connection between making art, of whatever kind, and good health, my intuition and wider reading has led me to believe that people who have a strong drive to create may well thrive longer than those who don't.

It makes sense because we all feel the difference between passive dullness and the energetic thrill of actually doing something. I remember watching footage of the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid when he was very elderly, smoking and taking his whisky defiantly. You could almost see the energy crackling off him: he still had plenty he needed to say and didn't feel he was going to go anywhere until the job was done. I feel the same about the painter Howard Hodgkin. He may not be in the best of health, but he is brimming with marks and images. Out of all of this, we might compose a motto: to make is to live; merely to consume, however, isn't.



**‘Out of all of this, we might compose a motto: to make is to live; merely to consume, however, isn’t.’**

Of course, being artistic, or even plain brilliant, is in itself no guarantee of good health. Think of the creative minds who have had to face enormous obstacles: Milton, blindness; Beethoven, deafness; Jacqueline Du Pre, multiple sclerosis; Stephen Hawking, motor neurone disease. All flesh is as grass. I don't believe that a positive outlook cures cancer, or that avoiding a stroke is a matter of having the right attitude.

And yet, after I had my stroke, a big one, nearly three years ago now, art became very important for me. I found myself asking the simple-seeming question: 'So, now what shall I do with myself?' There were the obvious answers – rest, do lots of physiotherapy, eat well, listen to the doctors – which would, fingers crossed, lead to further obvious answers – relearn how to dress yourself, walk, and eventually go to work again.

So far so good, if not so easy. I have always written and talked for a living and rather urgently wanted to carry on doing that. I've managed it. But something else was going on. After a serious illness one becomes much more conscious of the reality of the body, and asks oneself what it's really for – this awkward blob, stuck in a four dimensional reality for a very limited amount of time.

I started drawing at about the same time as I started speaking. All my life I have scribbled – on walls in the family home, on school jotters, the leaves of books, on tabletops, and eventually in pads of paper and on canvases. I have never regarded myself as an artist. But the urge to make images with lines and colour was always just there. Before my stroke, I went off outside by myself with an easel and paints. I love to work in the open air. Now, because of physical limitations, I really can't.

But as soon as I woke up in my hospital bed I reached for a notebook and began scribbling drawings – of the sheets, of my damaged body, of anything I could see. In recovery, I've been lucky to be able to rent a studio where I'm painting pictures 'out of my head' – generally non-representational and some properly abstract. In a good week I make three or four visits, and work for two or three hours at a time.





**‘In terms of any art market, what I’m producing is probably valueless; but without it I wouldn’t feel alive.’**

What’s going on? I explored a similar question recently in a film about the artistic passions of Winston Churchill, who starting in his 40s painted with fantastic energy; and after talking to his granddaughters, curators, and other Churchill experts, I came to the conclusion that painting had kept him sane, especially in his moments of deep gloom.

Perhaps it’s partly that painting, like gardening, like making music, is a physical activity as well as a mental one. You have to stand and mix and grind and stab. The mind is completely engaged in something that is both difficult and absorbing – ‘pure’ problems of tone, harmony, line and so forth. The body is working, the mind is at full stretch, time disappears and out of it all comes – well – something or other.

In terms of any art market, what I’m producing is probably valueless; but without it I wouldn’t feel alive.

Art is a direct, ancient form of creativity. Drawing, and mark-making seem to be present in the earliest Palaeolithic societies. I’ve been down in ancient French caves and seen the handprints reproduced by blowing pigment, made by some of the first people on the great migration out of Africa. I can’t think of a single human society for which art hasn’t been a prime concern.

If art is essential to the human experience, does it not follow that it is likely to reinvigorate those who make it? And if they are – well, to put it simply, feeling a bit better as a result – aren’t they more likely to want to continue to live and therefore to behave in a way that promotes rather than degrades physical health?

Many major hospitals seem to think so. This doesn't mean that everybody coming round for a major heart operation is forced to turn out freshly made pots, but it does mean that everyone who'd like to feel the world around them anew gets help, crayons, photography – and encouragement. One of the worst aspects of the hospital experience is the enforced passivity. You lie in a bed with plastic tubes stuck into you, being told what's going on (sometimes) with various forms of media, often unselected by you, being broadcast at you. You might be able to read a book or a newspaper but essentially you can't do anything. Picking up a pencil and drawing becomes a way of fighting back – an assertion that you are an active, thinking presence.

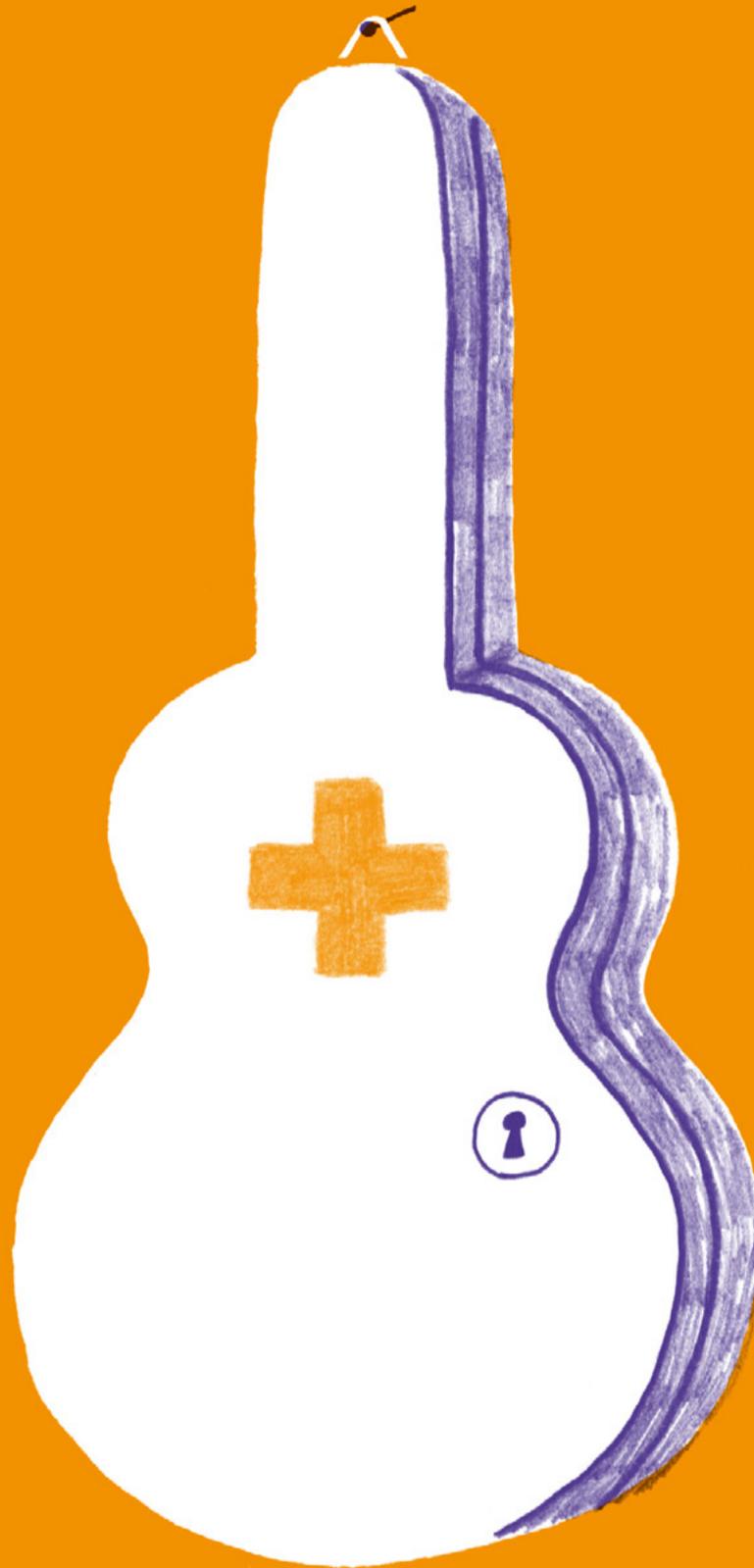
Back out in the world, does it still matter? Out of hospital, we want to return to being ourselves, and the majority of us don't paint or draw. But we do other things, which can be as relevant. We are social creatures; and anecdotally, it seems it's group art activities – singing in choirs, amateur dramatics, local orchestras, communal gardening – are particularly good at cheering up and revitalising those in recovery.

Social health is not simply about survival rates after stroke or cancer, or indeed human longevity itself. It's about bringing people together, outside the market and the workplace, where we can experience each other as more than the buyers and providers of services. A healthy society is a loud and colourful one, a society that makes noise, music, beautiful objects, not simply pre-tax profits.

It's become a commonplace that gross domestic product is a poor way of measuring social success – that it pushes all the important stuff to the margins, and picks over the merely necessary. The important stuff is the making, the art; and the more we need it, the more we tend to notice it.

**‘A healthy society is a loud and colourful one, a society that makes noise, music, beautiful objects, not simply pre-tax profits.’**





*Arts Council England recognises that there is an increasing awareness of the ways in which arts and culture can contribute to our individual and collective wellbeing. We believe we need more research in this area. That's why we are committed to a research programme in partnership with leading academic institutions. You can find out more about this work on our blog.*

**[MORE FROM CREATE](#)**