

# Opening the Cave: The Necessity of Art in Society

Willow Winston

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*Wide-ranging art practice, including engraving, painting, and theatre design, laid the foundations of Willow Winston's sculpture. Her metal constructions embody in material form the beauty and emotional power of abstract mathematical concept. With work in public collections in the USA, the UK, and Canada, she has exhibited on both sides of the Atlantic and taught from postgraduate to primary level. Committed to collaborating on innovative educational methods, she is developing ways of using art to teach sciences. Recently she was appointed Patron of Centrepieces Arts Project for Mental Health.*

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Fig 1. Venus and Mars (Sandro Botticelli c 1485, tempera and oil on poplar, 69.2 x 173.4cm). © 2021 The National Gallery, London.

If the doors of perception were cleansed then everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Once upon a time ..... a true story ..... I lived in a cave.

A four-day journey on a rattling bus across Europe carried me to Greece when I left London after quitting journalism. It finally became clear the work was imprisoned in a web of commerce, with ideals at best an occasional flimsy afterthought. Truth and justice were liked but not essential. Making money through pandering to thoughtless appetites was. Murdoch's Fox is the flower of 50 years' evolution since then.

What is meaningful, true and humane in this labyrinth of life? At seven years old I fell in love with Botticelli's painting *Venus and Mars*. The peaceful dream of the gods drawn with such perfect clarity and painted in colours balanced between subtlety and lusciousness, all amazed me with beauty. When I reached 12, Man's continuing history of inhumanity through war, Holocaust, nuclear bomb, slavery, and starvation horrified and angered me. At 15, Keats' line from *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', seemed the key to understanding. Ten years later the doors to my inner life were more fully opened in my cave.

This hidden shelter was up a cliff on a rocky island in the middle of the myriad blues of the Aegean Sea. Big enough to house one person, its spiral form had been carved by sun and wind from the limestone escarpment. The sandy floor moulded comfortably to my sleeping

body. The pale stone inner tip of the spiral swirled up in front of the opening making a partial screen. Inside, a ledge provided storage for my few belongings and a place for a candle at night. There, alone, I was immersed in the fundamental essences of life—earth, fire, air, and water. Asleep at night embraced by encircling stone, each morning I would be woken by the sudden glare of the sun as it rose above the hills opposite and shone hot on my face. Sparkling air all round, turquoise sea lapped into the cove below my cliff. In such simplicity the connection was forged between my inner being and the great forces outside.

This experience has been coursing through my life ever since, opening me to a Universe in which the miracle of consciousness aligned with the wonder of imagination have evolved in us. Looking to the night sky, its beauty balances out fear of its impossible depths. To observe with the naked eye Saturn 800,000,000 miles away on the other side of the Solar System, as we were able to after twilight for the last months of 2020, is to be transfixed by the beauty of the planet and the idea of its being. Seeing that minute, perfect circle of pale pink light in the darkness confirms we belong here with it. We connect in the pattern of mutual existence, the space between us shrinks, and loneliness is assuaged. We know a little more of where and what we are.

‘Where are we?’ ‘What are we?’ ‘Why are we?’ These questions have been asked for thousands of years since the first enquiring gaze to a sky filled with stars connected us to its mystery. We know some of the answering stories, but the original words are gone along with sound of song or movement of dance. It is visual art which leaves its permanent mark. Stories willed to us by prehistoric ancestors are those directly told through the beauty, energy, and intelligence of the paintings and engravings made most often in the protective environment of caves.

With the exception of 2,300-year-old Chinese manuscripts concerning cave art, it is barely 150 years since prehistoric tools and artefacts were found by us and intelligently noticed. In 1879 Maria Sanz de Sautuola and her lawyer father, an amateur prehistorian, discovered the ravishingly beautiful paintings of bison herds on the walls of the Altamira cave in Spain. We do not need to know precise cultural causes for their creation. Why these paintings were made sits wordless in the works themselves. Strong sweeping lines describe with masterful accuracy the muscular forms of the bison. Perfect strokes lead down haunches to delicate cloven hooves which suggest the precision and speed of the animals. Love drove the early cave artists to constantly observe and practice—just as it has continued to drive artists throughout the ages to attempt to capture the mystery of the beauty of life. The Altamira masterpieces are of similar age to the fabulous 17,000-year-old paintings discovered on the walls of the Lascaux caves, France, in 1940. Since the invention of modern dating techniques, there has been a speeding up of discovering further Palaeolithic art in caves all over the world, including recently a 45,000-year-old painting of a magnificent purple pig in Indonesia.

Striving to know when human consciousness was born, we hope to find ourselves back there then to make more sense of being here now. Toolmaking was for a time considered the practice that defined humanity until we discovered that great apes, with whom we share common ancestors, modify natural objects to make tools for obtaining food and even as weapons.

No—the evidence we seek is not in artefacts but in art.

What is art, and from where? It comes from noticing everything around us with our conscious mind and from noticing everything around us with our subconscious mind. It comes from fears, desires, and dreams, the imagination and language that emerged during the separation between us and other animals. Fear became wonder. We turned our experience into recorded form intentionally in rituals of remembering, projecting, and invoking. It is love and beauty, physical and metaphysical—the very heart of being human.

Beauty is life itself resonating with more power than usual. We feel more intensely at the encounter whether the cause is sorrow or joy. In his *Poetics* Aristotle said the experience given by the tragedies, a heightened, transformative awareness, opens to catharsis—the cleansing necessary to move on.

Ceremonies and rituals have used all functions of the arts to give access to expanded consciousness so we can let go of fear and embrace being more fully alive.

Recently the art of performance poetry was powerfully set at the centre of much-troubled America in a highly symbolic ritual—the Inauguration of President Biden. The ceremony took place on the stage of the opened cave of the Capitol. The young poet Amanda Gorman, her yellow coat the shaman’s cloak evoking the rising sun after so many months of darkness, her slender hands moving with grace and beauty to the rhythm of her words, entranced those who heard and saw. Her incantation enchanted; a spell to heal us out of sadness towards belief in the unity and goodness of our future.

It is only with principles of justice, the balance of sharing and generosity, that we will be able to build lasting, creative civilisations. This virtue is practiced in abstract form in art through various polarities including symmetry–asymmetry, order–chaos, stasis–kinesis, crystallinity–amorphism, and many others, which reflect the constant juggling of forces as life changes over time and new patterns emerge.

Reading about the 100,000-year-old painters’ workshop in the Blombos Caves, South Africa, filled me with the joy of fellowship. Adding pleasure to my sense of connection is a photo showing the landscape to be similar to that around my cave in Greece.<sup>1</sup> The organised system of paint production that was in hand in Blombos Cave suggests it was both studio and laboratory; art as the first science. Analysis of paint on neatly stacked pallets shows that animal fats were used as binders for the ochre pigments which were ground there. For the past 600 years linseed oil has been used to bind oil paint. The methods are closely allied.

Art has been the binder of human history for hundreds of millennia, fundamental to cultures in every part of the world. It connects us to our origins both through looking and through practice. It finds pattern in the unpredictable so that we can feel at ease, not just survive. It exercises human hand, eye, mind, and heart and supports self-discovery for confident participation in the world. This is what makes it so important in education.

The creative mind needs exercising as do all other parts of the body.

A function of art is to open up the cave in every one of us.

A major function of education is to help people discover their innate creativity. Art revolves round the exploration that draws

1 Bruno David, *Cave Art* (Thames & Hudson 2017).

these abilities out, validating imagination as well as contributing to intellectual learning and evolving morality. Advances made by educators during the past 40 years have focused on how to stimulate students' creativity to enable them to participate more actively in their own education. Recently an unimaginative government has reversed this approach, re-establishing old, narrow formulae which are easier to administer and measure but disadvantage large groups of people. Now emphasised is training—for reiteration of data, rather than education—for expression of understanding. Two subjects which have been cut significantly are art and music.

Art has defined us for more than 300,000 years. How can we possibly expect to nurture civilisations if we remove from the process the core characteristic of our humanity?

Art practice uses body as well as mind. Eyes and hands are exercised by use which feeds neural pathways in the brain. Its combined physical, emotional, and intellectual stimuli give people of widely differing abilities a chance to find their way through the maze and to share their discoveries with each other. Collaborative projects can provide a format wherein students initially explore and express themselves individually, then form groups to exchange and design together, reinforcing the sense of belonging with pleasure of shared responsibility.

Academic subjects taught with art can engage students at many levels. Shortly before the first COVID-19 lockdown I was privileged to teach chemistry through art to a large group of 11–13-year-olds. The project was in praise of the Periodic Table of the Elements, which had filled me with wonder when I was their age. I wanted these students, too, to be inspired by the beauty of the structure of the atomic universe. Each participant chose an element to research and create as sculpture in response. The commitment of the group, the varied beauty of their sculptures, and the way they

helped each other and discussed their methods and meanings, were inspirational. Academic children deserve encouragement to open and explore their inner poetic world with the practical exercises art offers; the less obviously academic deserve opportunities to identify with the processes of science which can be made more accessible through art. Young, inattentive minds can open suddenly to academic work after practicing art.

Simple exercises can open up experience in surprising ways. I often ask classes to start drawing with eyes closed. You never know where it will take you and that is the point. You don't need to know where you are going. You just need something that sets you on the journey, that gives you confidence to dare.

Society publicly declares its relationship with art through the environment it makes. Psychological spaces erected throughout cities point to the quality of our shared inner life. Unfortunately, that is becoming increasingly mechanistic. Undue profit prevails. Buildings are the new investment bank: 3D savings accounts that do not cater to the community visually, socially, or spiritually. Increasingly we neglect how to integrate with nature, the principle by which all beautiful cities of the world were built.

London City Island in the River Lea was developed recently on the dominating monetary principle. What an opportunity missed! No visual harmony is attempted between curving river and concrete. There stand dull boxes, most with dull-coloured cladding, seven to 27 storeys high, crowded top-heavy onto the slender peninsula. Strictly identical windows divide each façade. No change in rhythm, it is all spondee—the monotonous meter used by Virgil in his poem the *Aeneid* to emphasise the brute horror of the one-eyed cyclops in his cave.

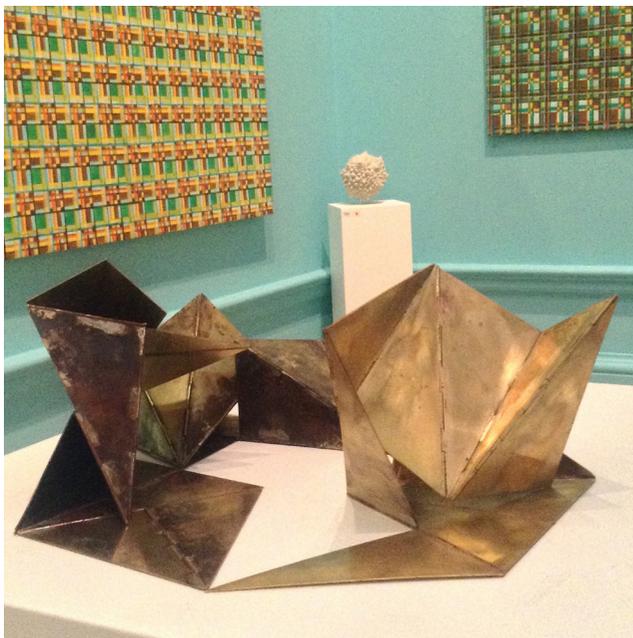


Fig 2. Hexagons in Arpeggio (Willow Winston 2018, brass, variable configuration) at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2018. One example of the innumerable possible static positions. Willow Winston.



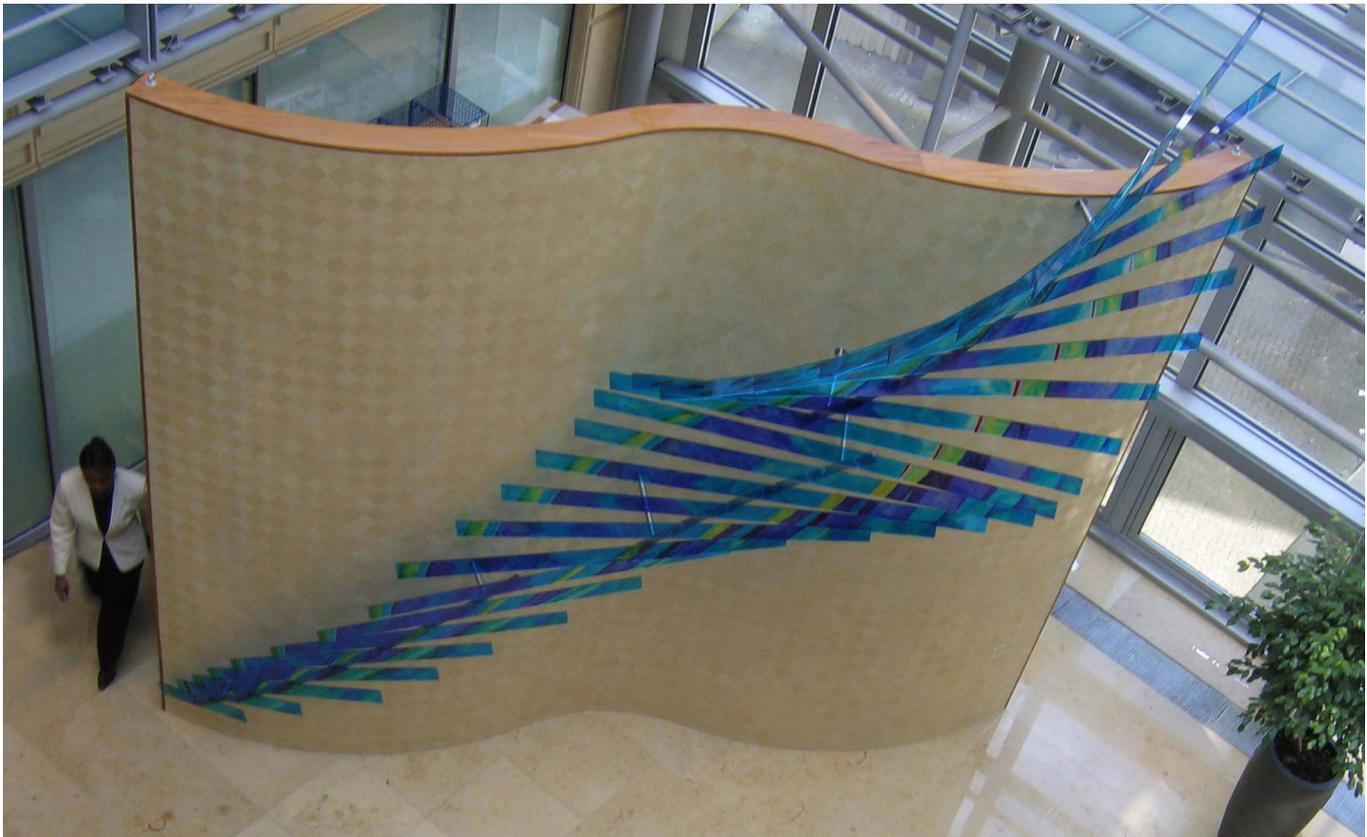
Fig 3. Hexagons in Arpeggio (Willow Winston 2018, brass, variable configuration) at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2018. Sculpture changed by visitors into different configurations. Willow Winston.

Why are we building towers that resemble high prisons? If we must build on a vast scale to make our civilisations function economically, much higher standards of public aesthetics are essential or we will destroy what we love. However, without laws that loosen the grip of corporations which control most of the building industry, without making planning processes transparent and truly accessible, without genuinely including communities in choices during development, and without splitting enormous profits, currently made by the few, for fairer sharing with communities where development takes place, our yearning for widespread humane architecture will be unrequited.

From junior education onwards, Environmental Studies, using both art and science, should become a core subject. By infusing art into a critical curriculum more of the population may consciously demand fulfilling environments, as with growing science awareness they are demanding action to counter climate change. These go hand in hand.

An imagined international cooperative, [www.Super-Bauhaus.com](http://www.Super-Bauhaus.com), would collate world heritage building design for study in every architecture and engineering school. Paintbrush and pencil would be used exclusively one day each week with some designs made with left or non-dominant hand to banish habit and release the unexpected. World music, too, would be included in courses to promote deeper exploration of rhythm in every aspect of building. Dance, including Laban's theories on the body moving through Platonic geometries, would open minds to how shaped space affects emotion.

Effective application of these studies for large-scale building will require future generations of computers to incorporate organic function and accessible personal programming. Individual creativity could then be applied more directly than current limited, predictive programmes allow. The human race, of infinite variety, abilities, and potential, is a treasure of the world's future. Dedicated to beauty and truth through art and science, the cave and tower could integrate in harmony.



**Fig 4.** Thames Tide Rising (Willow Winston 2004). John Laing Equion Head Office, London.