

## CHAPTER ONE

# CREATIVITY, THE WEST, AND HISTORY

All around us are structural, technological, institutional, artistic, economic, and social creations of the past. From the Brandenburg Concertos to computers, to agriculture, to a custom like shaking hands, forms of life have been invented which have had so much staying power that we take them for granted. It is obvious that they influence who we are and how we create. We have also been shaped by our predecessors' ideas about these changes, and their support or repression of creativity. In other words, despite the focus on "newness" in our current definition of creativity, what we create is against the backdrop of the creations we've inherited, for what we understand creativity to mean has itself evolved through a long tradition.

While all of human history might be viewed as the history of creativity, it is nonetheless probable that neither any past society nor the traditional ones existing today would recognize our concept of "creativity." Examples of early human creativity, which have endured and influenced civilization, such as the invention of the wheel, music, agriculture, writing, and ceramics, were manifestly valued by vast numbers of people in countless generations, but more than that, we cannot always say, because few written records are available to us. How many times did the secrets die with the discoverers before they were preserved? Was there initial societal resistance? Were the inventions immediately attributed to the gods?<sup>1</sup> What did it mean to introduce something "new"?<sup>2</sup>

While we cannot know the answers from the preliterate past, these kinds of questions are what I intend to analyze in this sweeping review of Western history of the past three thousand years. Specific creations will, of course, be mentioned in the following, but only inasmuch as we can infer differences in attitudes or perspectives on creativity expressed in these works.

In many ways, these inferences are a matter of guess work; this is true even when we find explicit statements about creativity, because the views publicly expressed may stand only in loose relation to the actual creativity of a given society. For one thing, the lag time between the introduction of a new idea and its acceptance may have been anywhere from a few days to a few centuries, and once introduced,

techniques and inventions have tended to spread more easily and widely than the scientific or conceptual reasons which had originally led to their development (Needham 1954–1985, I:238-39). Furthermore, the elite literary and philosophical minds of an era (the ones whose views about creativity have been passed down to us) may have had diverse motivations (conscious and unconscious) for what they said. They may or may not have been well acquainted with creators in fields other than their own, and they may have been blinded by a number of prejudices or assumptions.<sup>3</sup> And, of course, their ideas usually determined the community's evaluation of creativity only to the extent that those in power tolerated or encouraged those ideas. Many creators produced brilliant works but never passed on thoughts about creativity or its relative importance in society. According to Socrates, the poets could barely speak intelligently about their own work (Plato, *Apology*, VII: 22). History is filled with examples of powerful groups conquering and subjugating other peoples, destroying or simply disregarding their creations. Thus, for example, it took Europeans four hundred years to begin viewing African sculpture as "art," and even though Spanish invaders were fascinated by the rubber balls used by the Mayans, Europeans took credit for the invention of rubber three hundred years later. Slaves and "free" women as well certainly created beautiful, useful, and important things, but they generally had little opportunity to publicly express themselves. Indeed, the areas of creativity which were valued throughout much of history were areas of activity usually restricted to particular classes of men.

Over and above these complications, the whole idea of writing a history of anything might well be suspect—only a willingness to bracket out vast parts of reality and accept the limitations of one's own placement in history allows one to plunge ahead. And such a plunge is good to take, I think, as long as we recognize its limitations. Whatever else might be the case, it seems indubitable that our concept of creativity has been greatly influenced by the works viewed in past epochs of Western history as unique and also by what was said about those works.

#### THE WEST

Most people have a pretty clear idea what we mean when we speak of "the West" or "Western culture": the culture of Europe, particularly western Europe, North America, particularly Canada and the United States; Australia and New Zealand also belong to it. This sweeping generalization must be taken with many grains of salt, however. Countries which experienced long-term political-cultural dominance or influence by Europeans (Brazil, South Africa, Israel, perhaps India) might be counted as part of Western culture. For that matter, European influence has been great throughout the world for some centuries. Is Japan's participation in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) a sign that Japan should be counted as "Western?" Are the poorest and least democratic countries of

eastern Europe part of the West simply because they are geographically in Europe and have linguistic and religious links to other European countries? Are all the inhabitants of the unambiguously Western countries (France, Germany, the United States, for example) Western in their attitudes and behavior, despite their diverse class positions, ethnicities and religions?

We do not need to resolve these questions. But most of us today understand “the West” to be both a geographic term and a cultural-political-economic one as well.<sup>4</sup> As I hope to make clear, moreover, our concept of creativity is intimately bound to the West’s definition of itself, vague as that definition is.

In this book, I use the expression, “the West,” as shorthand to refer to a wide range of phenomena in the realms of art, economics, religion, politics, technology, philosophy, psychology, science, and society which people around the world refer to as Western. One of the distinguishing features of the West is its two thousand year long sense of cultural continuity with ancient Israel and Greece. Following from this bond are ideas of Christianity, capitalism, the scientific method, representative democracy, and historical change which have made Western culture somewhat different from the cultures of China or the Aztecs.

To a certain extent, this difference might be thought of as an emphasis on “creativity”—in our contemporary sense of the term. Another distinguishing feature of the West has been its relative economic-military-scientific-technological power for the past few hundred years, which has allowed the West to dominate other cultures.

The history of the West has included a long-standing belief that it is very different from the rest of the world. This difference was usually exaggerated and was often coupled with condescension and hostility. It ignored the debt the West had to other cultures and the degree to which the West was not monolithic, but itself, quite multicultural. Today, many might wonder if the West even exists as a separate reality of any kind. The South Korean business-person and the Ecuadoran concert violinist may carry with them far more of the ideas we associate with the West than does that American truck driver who just went by . . . but if that truck driver also happens to study Chinese martial arts or African drumming on the weekend, then he or she, like the Korean and Ecuadoran, might actually be viewed as a member of the “global culture”<sup>5</sup>—which the West has brought about and continues to dominate.

Part of the history of the West is also, therefore, its key role in transforming the whole world through trade, war, missionizing, tourism, telecommunications, and so on. The result is that we live in an increasingly global society, where the West is, to some degree, everywhere but nowhere. Fifty years from now, one hundred, at the most, I believe, the term, “the West,” will have mainly historical reference. For now, the term is helpful in explaining the past and pointing to important current tendencies within the global culture.

In a perhaps less helpful way, "the West" is commonly used by those who feel concerned about the dilution of separate cultures and the rise of a global one. For many nationalists outside of Europe and America, the West is the frightening bogeyman who is corrupting their countries' way of life. For some nationalists in Europe and America, fears of multiculturalism and internationalism have prompted efforts to reassert "traditional (Western) values." It is my contention that these reactions are not only about political and economic power and cultural identity, but also about conceptions of creativity. The Western definition of "creativity" as bringing something new into being and the West's valuation of creativity as "good" have become key elements in the emerging global culture. Resistance to this dominant conception has come from many directions—for example, fear, the desire of locals to retain power, thoughtful concern about tradition and cultural identity. These efforts have, in their way, also helped to modify this dominant conception, even as the world tends more and more to adopt what seems to be a global ideology of creativity.

Therefore, if I devote many pages to the West, it is not necessarily because I consider all the works of the West more creative—who could possibly say that Chartres Cathedral is "more creative" than Angkor Wat? Rather, it is because my focus is on conceptions of creativity, and it seems to me that it has been the West which has given birth to the term, most debated its meaning, most expanded the opportunities for people to be creative, and most successfully disseminated its conceptions throughout the world. Furthermore, it seems to me that when we speak of "global culture" today, our reference to its multi-sidedness and cultural diversity is an acknowledgement of thousands of cultures in our world, while our reference to the common characteristics of global culture is an acknowledgement, of what the West has influenced or imposed on others. Therefore, while different conceptions of creativity from around the world are noted throughout this book and highlighted in part two, "Cross-cultural Variables," the dominance of Western ideas of creativity in today's global culture means that the evolution of the concept in the West is worthy of special attention.

#### HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF WESTERN CULTURE

If defining "the West" is difficult, tracing its history is even more so. Western civilization might be said to go back twenty thousand years to the caves at Lascaux, France, or those in the Coa River Valley, Portugal, where stone tools have been found and extraordinary paintings cover the walls, telling us of animals, the hunt, death, and probably religious and sexual matters. Or we might look at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey, or the Divje Babe site in Slovenia, where a bone flute and other artifacts dating back forty-five thousand years were recently discovered. Further back still, the most basic tools, methods of social organization, customs of parenting and

eating, language, strategies for hunting, and so on were developed and passed down throughout prehistoric times, perhaps dating even from early, common, African ancestors.

It is hard to say much about the prehistoric conceptions of creativity beyond the obvious facts that many new things were brought into being and that some human beings considered some creations valuable enough to pass on to following generations. However, numerous myths and legends have been passed down as well, and some of the most important of these myths tell us of how certain things originated. The creation of the cosmos, of humans and animals, of various arts and institutions, have been explained by Germanic, Celtic, Slavic, Etruscan, and other early European peoples in different ways, and these myths have worked their way to some extent into Western culture. This is obvious in the survival of Christmas trees, Easter eggs, the Maypole, and other traditions. It is also visible in certain legal structures, artistic motifs and place names. Remains like Celtic carvings, Scandinavian runes, and Gothic jewelry reveal obvious artistic creativity, however, it is less obvious how we might decipher conceptions of creativity in the cultures which produced these works.

In truth, the Western cultural inheritance has been strongly influenced by the written word, and the largely oral European cultures were ultimately pushed aside by the literary cultures of ancient Greece and Israel—primarily because of the military power of the Roman Empire and Christianity's successful repression of the indigenous European religions. The glories of Greece, Rome, Israel, and Christianity became the cultural "stuff" of the West and propelled the distinctive Western notions of creativity.

For their part, the Greek and Israelite conceptions of creativity were strongly influenced by traditions from other cultures of the ancient Near East, especially the powerful and literate ones of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. These peoples created great empires, invented cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing, made great advances in mathematics and astronomy, invented glass, produced magnificent statues, ceramics, gold work, monuments, cities, systems of irrigation, and much more.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Mesopotamians and Egyptians had many direct interactions with the Greeks and Jews whose writings preserved and passed on these cultures to the West.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the inhabitants of Europe were long more familiar with the cultures of the ancient Near East than they were with the cultures of the early inhabitants of their own neighborhoods.

If we try to determine some of the most influential of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian ideas about creativity, we should note to begin with that many of the artistic creations of these cultures were painstakingly preserved, given as gifts, pilaged, and/or carefully laid to rest with the dead, and this clearly shows that they were valued. Still, it is difficult to say that these works were valued as "creations." For the most part, they seem to have represented wealth, power, status, or religious

significance. Meanwhile, the status of the creators of these works was relatively low. In Mesopotamia, there were apparently no words for artist or for inventor, and the social status of artisans was, for the most part, just one step above that of slaves. In Mari, for example, the term, *mar ummenim*, referred to "singers, doorkeepers, brewers, scribes, and animal fatteners, as well as various craftsmen"—all the people who had some kind of "skill" regardless of what kind (Mathews, 1995, 455).

In Egypt, artisans had the creator god, Ptah, as their patron, and the status of the human creators may have been somewhat higher. Still, "in pharaonic Egypt, there was no concept of individual creativity marked by the stamp of an 'artist's' unmistakable personality. Instead, other qualities were valued, such as mastery of traditional rules and their correct application and a knowledge of craft techniques that was handed down from generation to generation" (Drenkhahn 1995, 339). Indeed, by 2500 B.C.E. the social structures were "codified" and the artistic canons "set" for the next two thousand years (Schiff 1999, 110–116). In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, of course, the idols of the gods had to be made according to strict formulas, and the creator was understood to be a servant of the divine. Regardless of the subject matter, virtually all paintings and sculptures were anonymous, and except for a few names, we hardly know of any artists, architects, or craftspeople at all. To serve the wishes of the patron, especially a royal one, was apparently a creator's greatest achievement.<sup>8</sup>

Without a doubt, the most important people in the society were the rulers, and the significance attributed to founding a city and establishing laws was great. While this might correspond to our ideas about innovation, it seems that the main point was that the act of establishing or founding something indicated the power of the doer.

This emphasis corresponds to the ancient creation myths of the Sumerians and Akkadians, which tell of the beginnings of the world, and which had a major, though indirect influence on the West, primarily through the ways in which the Hebrew Bible adopted them.<sup>9</sup> In the *Enuma Elish*, the young God, Marduk, defeats Tiamat, the Goddess of watery Chaos; the other gods view Marduk as their savior; dry land and civilization arise. Marduk "fashions artful works": he "creates . . . savage man" to serve the gods; order is established (Speiser 1958, 31–39). This mythical structuring of the cosmos parallels Hammurabi's great historical initiative of codifying the laws, through which the order of society is given (very explicit punishments are prescribed for different classes of people and for particular wrongs). The myth also parallels the achievement of irrigating the area of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers: stability and solidity replace flooding and arbitrariness. (This order/chaos dualism evolved in late sixth century B.C.E. Persian and Babylonian thought—especially in Zoroastrianism—toward ideas of light and life versus death and darkness and heaven versus hell, notions which carried over into the Bible and beyond.)

Probably the most significant creation from our perspective (for it demarcates prehistory from history), was that of writing (ca. 3200 B.C.E.). According to one Sumerian text, the king of Kullaba (Uruk) was the first to set words on clay tablets. Previously, writing had not existed, "But now, as the sun rose, so it was!" (in Wilford 1999, D2). While it is puzzling how the king wrote without anyone able to read, these lines show that the ancient Mesopotamians, too, recognized the significance of this invention—in fact, the "so it was" echoes descriptions of divine creation. But even if kings could create like gods, that hardly meant that other mortals could do so.

Among the most lasting of Babylonian inventions were astronomy and astrology, the former having considerable influence on Western history, the latter holding great and ongoing appeal despite rejection from Western religious and scientific communities. Astrology might be seen to express a significant feature of the Mesopotamian understanding of creativity: what we humans do is "written in the stars," not invented by us. If our lives are so determined, then we have no responsibility for our actions, and "creativity" in the modern sense of the word would seem to be a near impossibility. Nonetheless, even if many people of this area did feel this way, it did not prevent some of them from creating great works of art, engineering, and statecraft . . . they may have done so in the belief that they were acting in accordance with transcendent forces expressed in the stars.

The Egyptian belief in *maat*, however, meant that one was responsible for one's actions—in fact, it would determine one's rebirth. Indeed, the pyramids were created because rulers took this responsibility so seriously. In general, ideas of creation in Egyptian religion seem to have been directly tied to ideas of death and rebirth; and although ancient Egypt boasted magnificent temples and other monumental work, much of it was dedicated to sheltering royalty in the afterlife (and honoring the gods). The pyramids and the artwork in them (for example, the famed tomb of Tutankhamen), are extremely impressive, and they tell us that the Monarchs who commissioned these works hoped to live in the afterlife surrounded by creations at least as magnificent as the ones they had known in this life. Material beauty and comfort were important; the uniqueness and splendor of the artifacts also seem to have mattered greatly, as in our society. However, since most of the pyramids were in the desert, and since their artistic contents were locked and sealed, it is clear that there was no thought of a popular audience for these creations: they were made for the dead and for the gods only.

The Egyptian dream of rebirth and recreation gave rise to the image of the Phoenix, and this has held great symbolic power for Western culture as well. Indeed, the idea of birth, death, and rebirth seems to be quite a universal one, and myths and rituals about this were common throughout the ancient Near East and Europe as well. Many of these myths and rituals were tied to fertility cults and the planting and

harvest seasons. Ancient sculptures and small carvings from throughout Europe present what probably were "mother goddess" symbols. Creation, in this culture, seems to have meant primarily seasonal fertility, so that the modern sense of creation as bringing something new into being, once and for all, hardly seems present.

These ideas, so briefly noted here, were transmitted to the West and contributed in some major and some minor ways to the Western conception of creativity. Nonetheless, the manner in which Egyptian and Mesopotamian conceptions of creativity were handed on to Europe was scattered and diluted. One reason was that the sole means of translating ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Greek *Rosetta Stone*, was lost and not deciphered until 1822 C.E. For the classical Greeks, the Persian invasion of their country seems to have led them (and subsequently, the Romans) to view the people of Mesopotamia as powerful enemies who had to be resisted, then conquered, rather than as a source of cultural inspiration. While Herodotus expressed admiration for the inventors and creators of ancient Egypt, his historical works received a mixed reception from Greek readers. And the magnificent civilization in Egypt, which awed the Romans in the age of Cleopatra, was sufficiently Hellenized, that Romans continued to honor the Greeks, rather than the Egyptians, as their teachers. In the Bible, moreover, a negative bias against ancient Egypt coexisted with respect for its power, for Jewish abstract monotheism defined itself in sharp opposition to the polytheistic idol worship of Egypt, and the emancipation from slavery celebrated in the Book of Exodus resonated as a distancing from Egypt in almost every way. The same was true regarding the Mesopotamians. What the West initially inherited were these biblical, Greek, and Roman attitudes; then, with the rise of Christianity, many of the beliefs derived from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, which smacked of "paganism," were consciously excised from Western culture.