

Creative characters

IS GREAT ART CREATED BY NATURAL ABILITY OR HARD WORK? **MATTHEW KIERAN** CONSIDERS CASES OF HIDDEN TALENT

Lee Yenson works in a tractor factory in Essex. He has always worked there. At school they never quite knew what to make of him, and he struggled to find a direction in life. Lee was just one of nearly 1,000 subjects across the UK to take part in a series of aptitude tests for Channel 4's *Hidden Talent* TV series.

The tests sought to identify hidden talents people never knew they had, ranging from abilities to learn languages and detecting liars to art appreciation. The psychologist Norman Meier designed the art test in 1940 to get at our sense of picture composition. It is pretty straightforward. Subjects are shown a pair of images for six seconds at a time. One image (e.g. a rendering of Titian's *St John the Almsgiver*) manifests good picture composition and the other is a virtually

identical image slightly altered to make it worse (e.g. St John's left arm is slumped at his side – as opposed to stretching across to hold the cross in the original – rendering St John less dynamic and creating dead picture space). Subjects are shown a hundred such image pairs (twenty-five are double scored) and asked to identify the original (on the assumption that the original is the best).

Lee scored 110 out of 125 on the art test. This is an incredibly high score. He had never set foot inside an art gallery nor shown any interest in art. On being told he had a hidden talent for art appreciation Lee's first response was surprise. He had never been told he was good at anything before. He was also bemused. Art seemed so remote from life he might as well have been told he had a talent for gumming.

Van Gogh's first paintings were clumsy and flat

Consider these descriptions of two ink wash drawings. One is by Van Gogh. Another is by a young man from Feltham's juvenile prison and young offenders institution (produced as a result of the National Gallery's "Inside Art" outreach programme). In one the face of a strong, stoical man stares out from a white piece of paper. The square jaw, the cheek bones, the flat nose, the hooded eyes are all firmly etched with dark, heavy strokes. By way of contrast, the rest of the facial features are sparsely delineated with

finer, lighter strokes, conveying a sense of three-dimensionality. The eyes seem inquisitive yet self-assured. His beard is unruly. It is not a great work of art. Far from it. Yet it is a portrait that is alive. In the other we see the depiction of a man digging. Despite the diagonal stance the figure is entirely flat and two-dimensional. The literal, even handed treatment of rendered features allows for no sense of contrast. The viewer's visual system is only really structured by the figure's bent posture and the hands placed on the



Matthew Kieran, Lee Yenson and *Hidden Talent* presenter Richard Bacon

upper and lower spade shaft. The drawing lacks any sense of vigour, force or downward thrust. The figure is weak, lifeless and you can hardly believe the man managed to plunge the spade into the ground. The portrait is by the young offender. The digger is by Van Gogh.

A failed pastor, Van Gogh only took art up in 1880. What turned Van Gogh into such a creative artist? He knew about art and had access to the art world. He had some talent but he was by no means exceptional. His first paintings were clumsy and flat. He also knew that his figuration needed work. Indeed even by 1885 he was spending the entire summer persevering with tackling figuration over and over again. Van Gogh was strongly motivated to get things right. It was neither a matter of getting acclaim nor a case of being driven by desire for material reward. The strength and depth of his intrinsic motivation explains his extreme perseverance, courage and honest self-criticism. It also manifests creative excellence. Here is a man who persevered despite the lack of recognition, who only ever sold one picture in his lifetime, to his brother Theo, and who lived in extreme poverty in order to create his art. He went from a virtual standing start to a master of the twentieth century and suicide in ten years flat.

What is required to be a creative artist? Natural talent or aptitude is a good start. Yet we massively over attribute the role that talent or natural genius plays. Access, support and character matter much more than we presume. It takes honesty to face up to shortcomings, courage to be prepared to fail, humility and open-mindedness to recognise when one has gone wrong, perseverance and fortitude to continue to work at something for its own sake. This is partly because being creative

pushes at the limits of what someone has already done hence it is often difficult to achieve. All of which brings us back to Lee.

Lee was willing to take a risk. Here is a guy who is told that he gets art. He is happy enough – although deeply nervous – to take part in the Channel 4 show. After the test day, he took part in various visual exercises designed to skill him up. One day he was given a basic camera, told to shoot

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photos in central London, come back, upload them and discuss his favourite and worst ones. As the process unfolded, Lee went from indifference to surprise to enjoyment. There was a final test. He had to pick a Monet from three fakes by John Myatt (perhaps the biggest art fraudster of the twentieth century). He got it right. The cameras stopped, the edit got made and Lee went back to the tractor factory. He's been experimenting ever since and has a photography course planned. Van Gogh was a creative saint and Lee was curious, open minded and brave. I suspect the young offender must have had some of these qualities to take part in the National Gallery outreach project. I wonder what he is doing now. We should also wonder what those left behind by society could have been capable of.

Matthew Kieran is professor of philosophy and the arts at the University of Leeds. His "Creativity as a Virtue of Character" is due to be published in S B Kaufman and E S Paul (eds), *The Philosophy of Creativity* (Oxford University Press) and he was Channel 4's art expert for *Hidden Talent*. He gratefully acknowledges the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council.