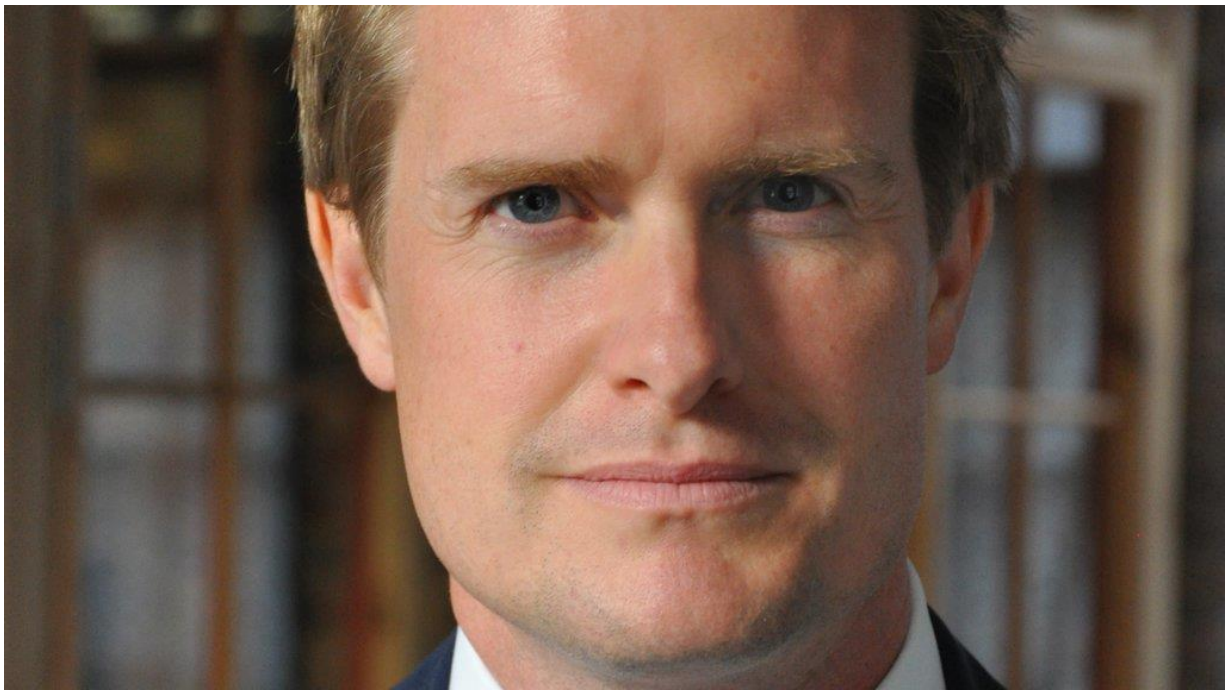
Leaders in SHAPE: Tristram Hunt

Speaker: Tristram Hunt

Chair: Professor Conor Gearty FBA

As part of the Leaders in SHAPE *series, Director of the V&A and former Labour MP Tristram Hunt joins Conor Gearty to discuss his life and career.*

This talk is available to watch on YouTube



The following transcript was developed using speech recognition software and human transcribers. Although all care has been taken to check, proofread and correct the transcript, it may contain errors.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:01:13] Hello and welcome to *Leaders in SHAPE*. My name is Conor Gearty. I'm a Vice President of the British Academy. We're interested in this series – we've done a bunch of them now with more to come – in really talking with influential figures within and beyond the academia, those who are shaping the future of social sciences, humanities and the arts.

Today we have somebody who comes from so many different of the various of our sectors – Tristram Hunt. Tristram used to be an academic. He's also led television programme series. He's been a politician – an MP for Stoke for a number of years. He's written books. He has his PhD, and he's now the director of Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). So he's polymathic from the SHAPE perspective.

We're going to get a chance to talk with him collectively because I'll be leading the conversation but we're very keen to get questions from you all through the Q&A mechanism which should be at the bottom of your screen now as we remain remote. We'll weave in the questions as we begin and carry on our conversation, so don't wait. Get the questions in early and I'll try and put them to Tristram as we work our way through the 45 minutes or so.

Tristram, it's unavoidable to start with a question which I can pose to no other participants in this series. You've been an academic, you've been on TV, you are a director of a distinguished museum, you have been in politics. From the perspective of this series – how to lead in shaping our culture – where do you put those four?

Tristram Hunt [00:03:26] Conor, it's lovely to be with you, first of all. I support all the work that the British Academy is doing, particularly in supporting the humanities and making the case of that.

I think being in the role I am in at the moment in terms of an institution with – in a good year – four million visitors, with people seeing our exhibitions around the world, with publications, with research into material culture. In terms of the different places I've been in, this is a role in which one can have the greatest impact in terms of shaping culture.

Stepping back, whether you look at the work of culture ministers in the past or whether you look at the work of specific publications. I think people at moments, be it in politics or literature, all institutions in all of those spheres, can make profound impacts when you've studied people in moments when those two forces come together.

As a politician, I hopefully – in Stoke-on-Trent side – made some impact in terms of culture in that city. But stepping back, I was always in opposition. When Jeremy Corbyn was the leader of the opposition, I was in opposition. So my impact was pretty limited.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:05:05] Now, what's been fascinating to watch is you leave politics to take a job in a museum. A few years ago, we'd have been looking forward to a conversation about which things to put before the public, or whether to pay or not to pay, or how to cope with this or that rule. Now you've left politics to enter politics and what's extraordinary is the range of powerful cultural issues that are thrown up by the current commitment to various things which have an immediate impact on places like the V&A.

You wrote a very interesting piece in *Prospect* and you were talking about – I think – it might even have been your term "imperial trophy hunting". So no one denies that things went on in the past and the V&A is connected quite a bit to the East India Company. And this has been recognised increasingly in our culture.

We've got the Holocaust Return of Cultural Objects Act, which is about the Nazis. So it creates a framework for return – at least obscurely. We've had a remarkable intervention by the President of France about this. We have the human rights of indigenous peoples, which you've acknowledged. There's a lot going on – guidance from the Institute of Art and Law is due. The pressure is building, isn't it?

The pressure is building and maybe rightly building. Not pushing it too hard to just say "Look, stuff we got in certain kinds of ways, the time has come to acknowledge that and put them back where they belong." How do you react to this growing energy?

Tristram Hunt [00:06:43] Well, we should absolutely be having this discussion because it's kind of the core, particularly to a museum like the V&A, to step back one moment. So the East India Company repository, which was the Museum of the East India Company – and the psychology of colonialism was intimately bound up with collecting – became after the 1857 collapse of East India Company, a part of the South Kensington Museum. So we've had this very long history of colonialism.

The history of the British Empire is embedded within South Kensington. We also have within the collection specific items from, for example, Ethiopia which were looted in 1868. We've also had the items from the Ashanti, which were taken by Sir Garnet Wolseley in a punitive raid in 1874. So we've got multiple items collected from multiple colonial pasts. And that's important because all of these have different histories.

All of these objects have different pasts. And much that was in the East India Company repository, for example, some was taken as loot but a lot was acquired as gifts. A lot was purchased. Yes, in an unequal economic relationship but at the moment, do you know what? China is buying an awful lot in an unequal economic relationship.

The Gulf states are buying an awful lot in an unequal economic relationship. Money, art and power often go together. So there are specific items, for example, the restitution of the Ethiopian collections where we're in a detailed dialogue with the Ethiopian Embassy. Similarly, our Ashanti collection, where we're in a detailed dialogue with museums in Ghana.

You have to begin with the object, and the specific history of the object, rather than that kind of macro idea that Britain was very powerful in the 1800s, ergo, everything in the collections in that time is wrongfully acquired and needs to be dispersed.

For the Savoy and Sarr approach which President Macron commissioned, they have effectively argued – and it's very radical but it's also very clear – that everything in a French museum between 1880 and 1960, which was acquired from countries with which France had a colonial relationship, for which there is not a specific and detailed invoice of receipt, should be returned. I think that blanket political approach is not the right approach.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:09:36] Well, we have to some extent intellectually sold the past because we need to put a comma "unless it's the Nazis". So in the UK, we have a system – I mentioned it. There's an advisory panel. It's supposed to look into things, but it's very narrowly defined. So how can we say "unless it's the Nazis" and maintain the credibility of our objection? Is the objection not exactly the same for the Nazis, Tristram?

Tristram Hunt [00:10:02] The difference with the Nazi spoliation is private property rights. The families need to come forward for the specific family rights that pertain to them. At the V&A we have returned artefacts to families that were stolen by the Nazis in the 1930s. But I think, you look at that and you say "Well, hold on. That was stolen by the Nazis in the 1930s, but this was looted in the early 1900s. What is the big difference here between those items?" And I think we will debate that over the coming years.

For a museum like the V&A and the British Museum and some others – what's called deaccessioning – nothing can be removed from the collection. So my way around this – and I'm passionate about sharing our collection much more widely – is to think about long-term loans of what we have in the collection. But then, colleagues in Ethiopia rightly say to me "Hold on, you want us to borrow stuff from you that you looted from us?" And at the moment, that's all we can do.

We've done it with colleagues in Spain where items were looted and we've returned those to Spain on a long-term loan. So there are ways around it. But this will have to be solved at a political level. At a certain juncture.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:11:42] By something like a directive in legislation. And then you've got a radical critique. We're getting our questions and one is here from Dan Hicks. And you know Dan – I think – a strong, engaged figure. Daniel is saying – and I'm quoting his terms here – "this is about facing up to and actively dismantling the infrastructure of institutional racism that persists in our colonial-era museums."

Dan is not talking about you guys in particular. It's a general critique. But how can the V&A meaningfully address systemic racism beyond just claiming it's a historic topic that needs better interpretation? That's not what you've been saying, but how do you meaningfully address systemic racism?

Tristram Hunt [00:12:33] So, the collections are one part of it. I think programming, for example, an exciting upcoming exhibition on Africa's fashion, for which we're acquiring new items today. I think the staff body. I think the research programme.

So dealing with as it were issues of restitution and repatriation is one part but it's not the totality of the conversation. Actually when you talk to colleagues – again this is just pertaining to us in Ethiopia and Ghana and elsewhere – there's this absolute issue around some of these collections, but there's a much broader conversation that they want to have about research, collaboration, scholarship and conservation approaches.

We had a very brilliant conversation with Kwame Anthony Appiah last week about cosmopolitanism and not losing sight of the important role of museums as places of cosmopolitanism, and how he wrestled as someone with a Ghanaian-British identity with his enormous pride in having items from the Ashanti in museums in London, but also thinking that more of those should be back in Ghana.

Similarly, David Olusoga has spoken about that in terms of the Benin items. So museums also have this role of celebration of culture, cosmopolitanism as well, particularity around the loss of artifacts from sub-Saharan Africa.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:14:18] It's interesting what you're saying there because I'm thinking also of something you said in *Prospect*. The logic of your position isn't "we keep because we're better". The logic is that we share. But then you wrote a sentence which – I have to say – reminded me a bit of what the colonial office used to say when they were trying to postpone colonial independence "in time".

I hope that's not too unfair to a historian. You tell me, "in time" we hope to share these items far more equitably". So when is the time right for a radical rethink? Is it depending on the stability of countries out there? Is it depending on some judgment that they have jumped hoops? When is "in time"?

Tristram Hunt [00:15:00] The boring practicality of this is that there are legal obstacles to insurance that we want to get these items abroad as swiftly as possible, but in order to get them there, we need an acceptance of ownership. And quite rightly and understandably, colleagues were dealing with – in some of these countries – the same. We're not going to say "these belong to you". We're trying to work through the politics of this. Can we just say "in this particular situation for this moment" because this will allow us to insure them, which will allow us to get them?

I certainly hope that within the next five years, our Ethiopian collection will be on display in Addis Ababa. And I think our Ashanti Collection will hopefully be on display in Ghana. But we're obviously dealing in some situations with royal collections and national collections and there's a complexity there.

It also – just to sort of flip it around – shouldn't just be on our timetable because it's politically suitable for me to try and get these items out of the door within the next 18 months or so. Actually, this should be a conversation of generosity. Not generosity in a kind of patronising way but a collegiate generosity which says "Okay, when you're ready and on your timetable, then we're going to be in the right place to share this."

So, it's not a sense that these sites are not ready in terms of the physical infrastructure. When we've got the legalism sorted out, we're going to have our conservation teams on the

ground to make sure the humidity rates are right and all of that kind of stuff because trustees do still have a legal responsibility for these collections. But I think within the next five years.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:17:08] Very interesting. What I'm going to ask about now is the sister subject. I talked about politics being unavoidable. There is the here and now. The contested presence. There's a lot of criticism about the securers. There's a lot of head of steam about contemporary funders.

I work at the LSE, we were extremely badly burnt by associations with funders. Everywhere is risking it. You've got this thriving association with China. Different parts of China. You mentioned it already. That's a country that doesn't like being criticised for its human rights record. There are people in Britain whose careers have been ended just recently by criticisms about their treatment of the Uyghur, for example.

How do you – as the top guy in the V&A – navigate this contested presence as well? With people saying "get rid of Cyprus, get rid of the connection with China", won't let you bring in BP – the new ethic. How do you manage to navigate that one, Tristram?

Tristram Hunt [00:18:09] It's part of the job, and one doesn't always get it right and you have to make these calls. The background is that we have a mixed economy model of political funding and that's good and bad. On the bad side, it means that we spend a lot of time having to make sure that we're raising the money in the appropriate ways and connecting with people. The good side is that it reduces our overdependence on government. It makes us connect with business which is important.

The V&A began out of the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. The Crystal Palace was described as a great kind of department store. So we have this commercial past and we also are proud to have in our shops work by designer-makers, by craftspeople. So we don't regard commerce as grubby. We like commerce at the V&A.

Actually, one of the original titles was the Museum of Manufacture. And what's the alternative? The alternative is, in Russia, you go around the wonderful Hermitage and each room isn't sponsored because the entire thing is taken care of. Similarly in France, and there's more political control there.

So raising money from a mixed economy model gives us some level of criticism of dependence on this. But also at another level, independents are a problem at the moment in that the V&A has been very enterprising, and in the last year enterprise has fallen away. So we're actually very dependent upon the government at the moment.

The China question is really interesting. And again, we're all going to wrestle with this. We have over 20,000 objects from China. To say that we shouldn't be engaged with China while holding this phenomenal collection, some of which was taken from the burning of the Summer Palace, would – to go back to your earlier questions about colonial mentalities and the Western stances – also expose us to that criticism in a different light. So we work with partners that we feel connected to, supportive of and are progressive in moving in the right direction. But it's always a risk.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:20:53] I was briefly on the committee of LSE, where we worked out reasons why we shouldn't take money because we were so anxious. If somebody turned up with a few million, we'd say "What's wrong with them?" And we'd research everything from parking tickets to wholesale fraud. Do you have any kind of ethics committee which is a sort of "anxiety warning slot"?

Tristram Hunt [00:21:11] Oh, absolutely. We've got a traffic light system and we've turned down money. I turned down funds only the other week and we also report to the audit committee on this, so trustees are aware of it. Just as with everything, some things get through the net. But we're also delighted people want to be involved with the board and be supportive, and the vast majority actually are philanthropic. And that's to be admired and supported.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:21:47] You mentioned money, Tristram, and we should acknowledge, not only the government money falling – but my goodness COVID year – £40 million drop in your revenues. Robert asks, "In terms of shaping the past for the future, how influential do you think the introduction of lottery funding has been in British cultural heritage?"

Tristram Hunt [00:22:14] It's transformative. What the lottery did was democratise the notion of heritage and access to heritage and put money behind the celebration of diverse narratives and identities through heritage in the UK, as well as – if you remember – the state of the British cultural infrastructure in the mid-1990s was appalling. The leaking roofs, the terrible facilities.

The lottery fund came in and did both a huge amount of really important work on infrastructure and this kind of diversifying of ideas of heritage. The success of UK museums over the last 20 years, and we should be absolutely clear that this is a massive success story of more people coming to see more objects, and to be excited by more understanding of the past. Part of that is predicated on the lottery investment.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:23:32] Relatedly, we talked a little bit about reaching beyond the shores of the United Kingdom, but an interesting anonymous question, "How important is it to have large national museums with bases or run programmes outside London?" Now you've got Stratford. We should talk a little bit about the Stratford initiative and how it's coping with the whole COVID world. But more than just London, as a former MP for Stoke, is it something you are developing out there?

Tristram Hunt [00:24:02] Yes, hugely important. Again, the history. The South Kensington Museum, this model of applied and decorative arts museum, was the inspiration for the

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, the Nottingham Castle Museum, the National Museums in Scotland and in Dublin.

The V&A always had this very strong regional sensibility. And we're obviously, along with the other national museums, a big lender and loaner of objects to exhibitions around the country. Our footprint is national now. V&A Dundee, a really important regeneration project by the Tay is Scotland's leading design museum now. We share our collections there.

People are cynical about the "Bilbao effect" of the role of museums in regeneration. It's doing the job in Dundee. The amount of inward investment coming into that city. The excitement now, even talk of a new Eden project up there. It's really exciting there.

Secondly, my big campaign while I was a Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent Central, was to support the saving of the Wedgwood Museum. Part of that deal was that the Wedgwood collection, 80,000 objects from the world's greatest potter, became part of the V&A collection. What we're now doing is really investing in V&A Wedgwood Collection, Stoke-on-Trent.

So Dundee and Stoke, and then also our other big partner is in Blackpool, where they're building a new museum, Showtown Blackpool, around theatre performance. We are privileged to have the theatre performance collection within the V&A, so we're supporting, in Blackpool, a really exciting kind of popular entertainment theatre performance museum there.

So to the anonymous questioner, it is essential and it is the right thing to do. What we should be doing is making sure we're sharing our expertise and our collections as widely as possible.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:26:15] And another anonymous questioner "in this difficult year" – their words not mine though clearly, it is a difficult year – "have you bonded with other museums and cultural institutions as you all navigate the same challenges?" Has it brought you together in some peculiar, paradoxical way?

Tristram Hunt [00:26:34] Definitely both nationally and internationally. And we've come together as museums to make sure we're making the right ask of the Treasury and working together. It's very collegiate. We share information around how our ticketing process is, how we're going to reopen, when we're going to reopen.

We've all been through really tough restructuring programmes and redundancy programmes and thinking about how we support colleagues in those situations. So there is a strong collegiate feel within the museums.

Internationally, we're in the same place as many of our colleagues in America. Our colleagues on the continent have been more protected because they have more state funding. The loss of exhibition ticket sales and food sales doesn't hit them so much.

It has been a moment where we've come together and work together and not just within the museums, but across cultural institutions – theatre, music, dance – because we've all felt the impact. We are sociable places and the pandemic rips that apart.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:27:53] You wrote a piece in *The Guardian*. What kind of culture do you want to return to? And here's some heretical thought. We make much of the wonderful power of remote access to keep our spirits up during COVID, and yet, there's some truth in it. So you say, "there's nothing that beats [the experience of] seeing in the flesh." But what about this? Look, you have to travel to see it. You have to find it in a museum. You have to pay. And then when you get to it, unless you're lucky enough – with respect to you being the director – you're being moved along pretty quickly.

So I'm wondering whether or not a new model would not be wholly inappropriate with serendipitous exposure to the collection via the web and then a fairly rigorous queuing process to get into a much quieter, emptier V&A, where you're brought along by a curator because you've predetermined what you want to see. Is there a way in which – here's the aggressive bit – the V&A is like a giant Debenhams? It's a bit of a white elephant in the world of the web. Is that possible? You'd save money immediately.

Tristram Hunt [00:29:09] I like the proposition. You've researched it online first, you know you want to go and see Turner and Constable and the Three Graces and then you pre-book and you take that. But what that takes away and what I feel a desperate sense of loss of, is one of the great wonders of living in an urban environment, of just coming and going from a gallery. And this is a privilege for those who live in London or Edinburgh or Manchester or Liverpool.

That serendipity as well, that I'm going to turn left, not right. I can go into the Buddhist galleries rather than the Rafael court, I go to see something I hadn't known before. So I got this strong sense we've all been told what to look at. If you like this, you like that. That kind of algorithm of predictive capitalism has funnelled us down ever narrower corridors. The great wonder of the British Museum or the V&A is to wander and enjoy. And that's been one of the great losses.

We will still have to plan, just as we have to book our place at the swimming pool or in a restaurant. We're going to have that, one way or another, for another year, probably. But my ambition is, as soon as we don't have to have it, to get rid of it. Even if we lose some sort of data sets on the back of it. Free civic virtue of wandering into these great places of learning and discovery, and crucially in London for free, is really important.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:31:02] Yeah. So being free is essential to that model, isn't it? It collapses if you charge.

Tristram Hunt [00:31:10] The economics of it are such that if you charge, your numbers fall by 50 per cent. Free entrance means that people are coming to the shop, they're coming to the cafe, they're coming to the exhibitions. So they're paying in a different way.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:31:31] The other way in which politics is unavoidable is something wholly unexpected in British culture, which is that civil society, broadly the BBC, the museums – I would include the universities – even now, the law, are coming under pressure from a very popular government led by a very popular figure, to conform to visions of what that government believe Britain to be and to become.

We see occasionally people resigning as trustees. We saw Sir Charles Dunstone pull out the Royal Museum Greenwich. We've seen some pressure on the Science Museum Group. I'm talking about pressure from the government to conform – I'm using words explicitly and recklessly – to an agenda. Government meets you, you all have to agree on things. Do you feel under pressure to represent a certain way of doing culture that whoever the latest culture minister is – if he's or she's called a culture minister – approves of?

Tristram Hunt [00:32:35] Well, obviously I have to be careful what I say, because I know I am a public servant. First of all, I was a sitting Labour Member of Parliament, appointed the director of a cultural institution. So, there was some cross-party generosity around that, which would be churlish not to acknowledge.

I've never felt under any pressure about an exhibition, a publication or a kind of partnership from political forces. But I also think it's good for ministers to understand – just as with the BBC – that the strength of these institutions around the world is born of their independence and their sense of autonomy. And this is the great irony – that they help to project an idea of Britain because they're not connected to the government and the language.

Soft power can go quite swiftly if you are regarded as an agent of the government. The strength of the BBC is very different to Russia Today because we know there's a distinction between it. So however frustrated ministers are about – "I'm the Minister for Culture, why can't I be in charge of culture?" The whole point is that for the success of British cultural institutions, both at home and abroad, ministers have to step back and realise that autonomy is important even if it is supported by taxpayers' money. And that's difficult to swallow.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:34:29] Even if stepping forward involves arguments where ministers eventually lose but they get the votes. So what maybe they've happened upon is a new idea which is this quarrelling with the fashionable metropolitan types is good for political business at a crude level. And so they don't have to win. They don't have to break up the V&A. They don't have to break up the BBC. They just have lots of energetic discourse about how metropolitan we all are and that's enough for them.

Tristram Hunt [00:35:00] You see certain instances, but almost both sides enjoy that there is a sort of attempt to, on the more radical left, regard museums, universities, the BBC – all of these traditionally regarded as progressive parts of the fabric of civil society – as inherently racist, sexist, capitalist or invalid in terms of some contemporary identity politics. And on the right, as a sort of irredeemably woke and metropolitan and cosmopolitan, and all those words which – I think – are the good ones.

Our role is not to be party political. Our role – I'm absolutely vehement about this – is to know what we're doing, stick in our lane and keep going. Our mission is to broaden horizons through the exploration and celebration of material culture and not to be involved in party political battles about funding levels and arguments over the nature of flags and identity.

We explore that through doing wonderful exhibitions on African fashion. We explore that through doing wonderful exhibitions on "Epic Iran" which we're about to open. We thicken the conversation through our actions rather than having the kind of totemic struggles which on left and right will be enjoyed almost too much.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:36:51] Liz asks, "Government has announced it is halving funding for high-cost courses that they do not deem strategically important." And then the question – which is very connected to what we just talked about – "How do we address this narrative that the arts are recreational rather than a vital part of the UK's cultural and economic health? The arts are not a business, though we are entrepreneurs in some ways. The arts is culture." How do we do that? How do we address that narrative? Take it on.

Tristram Hunt [00:37:20] It's so important that you can have a clear argument – which organisations like the Creative Industries Federation pursue very well – of the importance of the creative industries to the UK economy and what we sell abroad, our film industry and our culture industry.

Then you could also have a strong argument – which is not being made either on the political left or right in terms of party politics at the moment – on the merits of vibrant artistic culture, the merits of having an effective infrastructure for art and culture, the merits of having design, music, dance and all of these components of a successful society. The people who make those arguments most effectively are indeed the makers, the designers and the artists. I would like to hear more from both political parties about the merits of that but alongside the more obvious conversation around the economic merits.

The argument I always make when I go into schools is around the fourth industrial revolution and the importance of creativity. Young people are going to have five, six, seven jobs in their lives and they're going to need resilience. They're going to need ingenuity and all of these elements that actually an artistic education helps to teach them because if they don't have that, the robots are going to steal their jobs. The kids get it but the parents don't.

You have got to tell the parents that it's really important that their children study music, design, art and drama because actually they are future-proofing them against some of the extraordinary changes that are going to happen in the future.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:39:29] Well, here's a fan who is anonymous "V&A used to be known as the world's greatest museum of art and design. This slogan has changed to include performance now – the greatest museum of art design and performance. I love this change and will be interested to know how this increased commitment to performance came about?" Is it before your time? Is it on your watch? How did you end up with this brilliant insight about including performance?

Tristram Hunt [00:39:55] The theatre collection was part of the V&A and then became the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden, then came back into the museum after the closure of the Covent Garden exhibition. So the theatre and performance department became part of the museum again.

One of my very brilliant predecessors, Mark Jones, turned us from art and design to art, design and performance, and it's a really important part of what we do. I've just been to see the final stages of the building of our "Alice in Wonderland" exhibition, which is curated by Kate Bailey, who works at our theatre performance department.

What you have there, in a brilliant V&A way, is an account of word and image. The literary history of Lewis Carroll, the artistic history of the incredible illustrations and then an account of Alice in theatre, film and music. And that's the V&A story that you can take these remarkable components of culture and understand them in so many different facets of material culture.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:41:09] Will Brexit, provincialise British culture?

Tristram Hunt [00:41:14] I hope not. We've got to wrestle with some of the bureaucracy of loans. But at the V&A, we're a national museum – we spoke about Stoke and Dundee. We're a European museum – Albert and Victoria were European thinkers. And we're a global museum because of the East India Company connection and more widely. So we just have to make it work. It's our responsibility in a sense.

I campaigned for Remain in the referendum in Stoke-on-Trent Central, which voted 70 to 30 out so I know about the case for and against Brexit, but it's done. And it's the responsibility of a museum like the V&A to not allow this moment to presage a retreat from all our wonderful continental partners. I'm involved in a network of design museums in Hungary, Vienna and Paris to make sure that we keep those conversations alive.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:42:32] There is another question. "Navigating a return to normality will be a priority over the next five years and your job has done a lot and it's a five-year term. What else are you keen to do in the next five years?" I don't know whether that means leaving the V&A and going to do another five different things, or whether it means within the V&A, but answer as you wish. Where are the next five years going?

Tristram Hunt [00:42:55] Hopefully, very much here. But the big change of the coming years – which you alluded to Conor – is the two new sites in Stratford and the V&A's transition to a multi-site museum out from our heartland in South Kensington.

We've had our Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green since 1874 in different ways, but what we're doing on the Olympic Park in Stratford is remarkable. We're building a new collections and research centre so you will be able to walk through the storage facility of the V&A. That

age-old question of everyone at museums – “Where have you hidden the other stuff?” Well, now you’ll be able to go and see where that is.

Then there’s a new waterfront museum, part of the East Bank development, the kind of Southbank of the 21st century, alongside Sadler’s Wells Theatre, the BBC, London College of Fashion. We’ve got a brilliant new director there, Gus Casely-Hayford. And that is celebrating the culture of making in East London, thinking about the history and what that means for today. We will be saying more about it in the coming months and years. But that will be the big transition in the coming years.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:44:06] Well, it sounds as though it may well be the V&A for a while yet. Now, I’ve got one last question. We’ve covered some of the questions. Sorry to those who we haven’t been able to fit in. This is a short last one because we’re running out of time. If you get a phone call, Tristram, from Keir Starmer. And he says “My goodness, it didn’t go so well, did it?” Give me one single piece of advice to revive Labour. Now, forget you are a civil servant. Forget you’re the director. Pretend you’re at a dinner party in metropolitan London with me. How would you answer that? What advice would you give?

Tristram Hunt [00:44:43] I think it’s been so hard, not least because of – from my view – what he inherited but also the pandemic. I think that Keir needs to get the backstory right about him. Him as the prosecutor. What he achieved there, and then how that translates to the leadership you provide for the Britain of the future. Having a policy vision – everyone says this – but having a backstory, a clear idea of what the leadership entails and then an easily understandable policy framework for the future in quite narrow, tight terms is really important. But it’s so easy to say that. The ability to actually deliver that in the face of it, I think about Stoke and it’s so hard.

We saw what happened in Scotland in the aftermath of the referendum there. And all the fears that people thought about in terms of traditional Labour areas and the impact then of the Brexit referendum on disconnecting people from the party. All of those fears look like they are coming true, and so I feel for the leader of that party.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:46:32] Thank you very much. The next one of these *Leaders in SHAPE* is on the 14th of June. It will be with Simon Baron-Cohen, the psychologist who is a leading expert on autism. I hope that those of you here who have enjoyed this can tune in.

For now, were we in a proper room, we would be enjoying the opportunity to applaud Tristram Hunt for his tremendous contribution this afternoon. So Tristram, on behalf of all of the people watching, listening now and later, thank you very much for joining this leadership series at the British Academy.

Tristram Hunt [00:47:07] Well, thank you very much.

The Leaders in SHAPE series features the most influential figures shaping the social sciences, humanities and the arts in conversation about their lives and careers.

For future events, visit our website

Subscribe to our email newsletter