

Credne 1.4

A very brief (and incomplete) history of creativity

Understandings of creativity have not remained static across history and across cultures. Our own contemporary views really only came into being in the mid-20th-century, and popular ideas about creativity are sometimes still haunted by ghosts from the 19th century, and even from Classical antiquity. This section of the handbook gives a very brief run-through of the way ideas about creativity have changed.

Creativity: a changing concept

A historical overview offers the opportunity to better understand the concept of creativity, and to appreciate why it often appears so elusive.

The literature shows that different disciplines have approached creativity from different (and sometimes contrasting) perspectives. Its history is complex and multifaceted.

The problem of defining creativity is closely linked with that of its measurement and its identification. So, defining creativity is not just a sterile academic exercise; it has profound and practical implications: **the “wrong” definition can lead to misconceptions, which in turn directly impact the outcome of any attempt to foster creativity.** For instance, it is common to link creativity with the arts. However, it was only during the 17th century that these two concepts became linked together. The transformation of ideas about creativity through the centuries is fascinating, and it is a testimony to its complexity. We’ll take a very brief – and very partial – tour through the history of those ideas here (bear in mind that this is very much a European narrative; other cultures have

had different perspectives on creativity at different times).

Early views on creativity

The Ancient Greeks did not link creativity to the arts. They did not even have any terms of their own that translate into “to create” or “creator”. The term *ποιεῖν* (“to make”) was sufficient to cover what we would today almost certainly identify as creativity. For the Greeks, the artists were not creators. Visual arts in the Greek world were seen merely as the act of imitating things according to the rules and laws of nature.

The partial exceptions to this rule (there is always at least one exception!) **were poetry and cosmology.** Poetry, *ποίησις* in Greek, is a word derived from *ποιεῖν*. Poetry was not an art at all since art, unlike poetry, was supposed to imitate reality. The poets were different since they had freedom in their works. Homer says, **“why forbid the singer to please us with singing as he himself will”** (Od. I 346). But even within this freedom, poets were not seen as true creators; they were instead viewed as the medium through which divine inspiration could shape itself. They were a kind of vessel, filled by the inspiration of the Muses.

The other exception was the concept of “creation” associated with **cosmology**, the creation of the world. In this case, creativity was altogether a divine attribute. From this background began the long-lasting tradition of seeing creativity as a **mystical concept.** This later caused some difficulties for those attempting to approach the topic from a scientific perspective, as we will see. Indeed, the **mystical view of creativity** still has a lingering afterlife in the 21st century.

A change occurred in the Roman world. The painters, with poets, were part of a group of people who could act freely in their creations. Nonetheless, even if the concept of creativity was also applied to the visual arts, it still had a limitation: creativity was seen as an exclusively male attribute. Furthermore, the verb *creare* (“to create”) used to have almost the same meaning as *facere* (“to make”). In other words, *creare* meant fashioning something out of nothing, and this process was believed to be impossible.

Creativity in the modern era

It was not until the Enlightenment that creativity ceased to have a divine connotation. Indeed, this period featured significant resistance to religious authority, religion and mysticism: it was the so-called **Age of Reason**. As a result of these new perspectives, the basis for some critical distinctions was posed. On the one hand, “creatio” maintained its meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*, an act impossible to humankind and reserved to God. However, since creation in this sense was perceived as a mysterious act, it was also disregarded: the Enlightenment psychology refused to accept the concept of unfathomable mystery. The artistic conception of this notion was characterised by the understanding that nothing was created from nothing. It follows that rules again compelled artists, and therefore there was no space for creativity in the truest sense.

It was from the 19th century that “creator” became a synonym of the artist, and creativity became the **making of new things**. Thus, creativity became accessible for human beings, but it remained the prerogative of artists. This particular restriction of creativity, which was seen as the personal characteristic of the lonely artist, led to the idea of creative genius. Within this frame, creativity was discussed as the preserve of the exceptional individual, internal to this person, and with no connection to groups or communities. **Environmental factors** and the **creative process** were not considered.

The association of creativity with the figure of the “lonely genius” had further ramifications. First and foremost, **only the most eminent contributions were recognised as creative outcomes**. For a long time, this led to **an extreme focus on eminent personalities**, such as Einstein, Picasso, Mozart and so on, making it hard to consider creativity more broadly.

The roots of contemporary studies on creativity are often attributed to **J.P. Guilford** (1950) and **Ellis Paul Torrance** (1962, 1974). Their studies paved the way for what followed. A **distinction between creativity and intelligence** was made, and the discussion regarding **a definition for creativity** started. The focus moved away from the traits of the lonely genius, and scholars began to

direct their attention towards the **process, the environment and the conditions that can foster creativity**. The idea of **group creativity** and **creative collaboration** was given more attention too. These days, overall, the notion has been democratised, making creativity accessible to anyone and everyone.

Further Reading

Do you want to explore the history of creativity further? Here are some suggestions for engaging reading!

Albert, R. S., & Runco, M. A. (1999). A History of Research on Creativity. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Handbook of creativity*. Cambridge University Press.

Glăveanu, V., Lubart, T., Bonnardel, N., Botella, M., Biais, P.-M. D., Desainte-Catherine, M., Georgsdottir, A., Guillou, K., Kurtag, G., Mouchiroud, C., Storme, M., Wojtczuk, A., & Zenasni, F. (2013). Creativity as action: findings from five creative domains. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00176>

Glăveanu, V. P. (2010). Paradigms in the study of creativity: Introducing the perspective of cultural psychology. *New ideas in psychology, 28*(1), 79-93.

James C., K., & Robert J., S. (2010). *The Cambridge handbook of creativity*. Cambridge University Press.

Runco, M. A., & Albert, R. S. (2010). Creativity Research: A Historical View. In J. C. S. R. J. Kaufman (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of creativity* (pp. 3-19). Cambridge University Press.