



Flourishing Creativity

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Why are there certain times in history when so many geniuses inhabited the same city and changed the world together? Writes James Bolt

On the 25th of January 1504 a meeting was held in Florence to decide where to display Michelangelo's latest work David. Among those in attendance were Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Roselli, Filippino Lippi and Piero di Cosimo. Titans of their age whose work continues to be displayed centuries after their deaths and will continue to be displayed centuries after ours. All in the same room, all in the same city. So what was it about Florence in 1504 that explains such a rush of genius? That is the central question of Eric Weiner's highly entertaining *The Geography of Genius*. Why are there certain times in history where so many geniuses inhabited the same city and changed the world together?

Weiner's quest to answer this takes him across the world. He travels to Greece to study Athens, to Florence, Calcutta, Edinburgh, Hangzhou, Vienna and Silicon Valley—all possessing a golden age of creativity and genius that we still feel the effects of.



It is tough to nail down what this book is – aside from highly enjoyable. With the narratives of his travels, history lessons and practical guides to stimulate creativity in your own life woven throughout the pages, the only question you are left with harder than what stimulates genius in a city is where to store this on your bookshelf.

But keep it within reach—Weiner’s wit and friendly prose easily lends itself to second and third readings. Weiner possesses both the endless optimism and confidence to endear the reader to him, and the surly wit to deliver great one-liners where the moment requires.

So what quality did Florence possess that flourished such genius in such specific a time? Or any of the other cities Weiner visited?

What was it about the 24 of years of the Golden Age of Athens that saw Socrates, Plato and others come to the fore? What was it about the rule of the Song Dynasty in Huangzhou that saw such a flourishing of art, literature and scientific breakthrough?

Or 19th Century Edinburgh that saw its citizens succeed in such diverse fields that the steam engine was invented around the same time Adam Smith was finishing *The Wealth Of Nations*? Or Austria that ensured such a musical revolution that the city counted Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn as citizens at the same time? Or the technical revolution currently under way in Silicon Valley?

The problem is that there is no one distinct quality that combines these times. Florence in 1504 was extravagantly wealthy, able to pay artists to work in the city far more than any of its neighbours—but if wealth of a city is key to the flourishing of genius, what explains Edinburgh? Huangzhou and Silicon Valley boomed in times of peace. Not needing to focus on defeating an enemy allowed the city’s creative leaders to focus on their own passions.

But how does this explain Florence— a city so constantly under threat from its enemies (yet still so committed to rewarding the arts) that the contract for the city’s most impressive building, the Duomo, was handed out while the city was under siege?

There is no one clear answer. But there are themes that run across the cities. Themes we must replicate if we are to cultivate our own explosion of genius in Australia.

The book opens with a quote from Plato—‘What is honoured in a country will be cultivated there’. Perhaps a simple thought, but the truth. The populations of the cities studied in *The Geography of Genius* highly valued the traits that set their cities apart from their neighbours. Athens honoured thought, Florence honoured art, Vienna honoured music and so on. The geniuses of these ages received love and support from their fellow citizens—encouraging them to keep working.

But this still does not fully explain it. Athens still values thought but their government is in shambles. Florence still values art but do art tourists visit the city for their modern works? Vienna still values music.

That the trait is honoured is important, but it is not enough. Other factors must come in to play.



And one factor is that in these times of creative flourishing no one told these geniuses what they could not do. The freedom to try and to fail, to shake up conventions and upset popular knowledge allowed these people to change the world. As Weiner notes on several occasions, studies show that the best ideas are generated out of places where dissent is not just allowed but encouraged—even when the dissenters are just plain wrong.

People must be allowed to question the sacred cows of a society and to break free of the norms. Art was honoured in Florence, and therefore it was cultivated. But it was cultivated so well because the Florentine leaders encouraged its artists to explore the limits of their own talent.

Maybe Florence hosted artists before Leonardo and Michelangelo that were even more talented than those two. But before the Renaissance, conventional art was religious iconography set to a clear style. Every painting seemed similar to each other—the tyrant of conventional wisdom ruled.

Then the Medicis, the rulers of Florence in Leonardo and Michelangelo's time, set their geniuses free. They gave them money to work, and expected results, but they trusted them to create works of art. They did not stand in the way of the progress that was rushing at them.

As Weiner notes, the thought that lies at the heart of all progress is 'surely, there must be a better way of doing this'. And it is the freedom of a population to ask that question and follow that question to its answer that progresses mankind.

But for those in power, there is surely no more concerning thought in one of its subjects than 'surely, there must be a better way of doing this'. Because whatever 'this' is has contributed to the powerful holding power.

But, as *The Geography of Genius* shows, places that allow that question to be asked unleash the geniuses among its population.