



Creature Comforts, HM Prison and Young Offenders Institution Askham Grange,
First-Time Entrant Award for Craft, 2019



A Big Hello from Koestler Arts!

We write to you from Koestler HQ which, sadly, was shut from late March until the middle of May because of the coronavirus lockdown. Our staff team continued to work during this time but we all had to work from our respective homes which, as you can imagine, impacted heavily on what we were able to do and our ability to contact our entrants and our Associates. This is why it has been some time since you last heard from us.

But we are back!!! Well, not everyone is back working at the Koestler Arts Centre just yet - staff who can do their work from home continue to do so. However, with the 2020 Koestler Awards to run the house is a hive of activity again - even with less staff on the premises - as there are thousands of entries to unwrap and log in.

If you wrote to us during the period of time we were closed your letter won't have been lost but, as we have only just started working our way through the many parcels and envelopes that have arrived, please bear with us if you haven't had a reply just yet. We will get back to you eventually!

This newsletter provides a bit of an update on what we've been up to as well as something to read - a blog post written by our Senior Arts and Exhibitions Assistant, Lee, on his experience of isolation in prison.

So, what have we been up to?

Whilst our normal work was interrupted, we put a lot of thought into the role Koestler could play in continuing to encourage creativity.



Love and Life, HM Prison Grendon, Sir Hugh Casson Gold Award for Portrait, Platinum Audience Choice Award, 2015

A lot has happened across the world in the last few months and it is our job to continue to offer the Koestler Awards as a platform for unheard voices. We want to thank all our entrants for continuing to engage us and our audiences in vital debates around race, identity, politics, and everything in between.

Like many other arts organisations, we have been using social media as a platform to share Koestler artwork with our audiences during lockdown. One of our most popular recent posts read:

'Love and Life' won the Platinum Audience Choice Award in 2015 at our national exhibition. It is just one of the many pieces that reminds us of the words of our 2016 exhibition curator, Benjamin Zephaniah: "Promoting people to be creative is one way that people can speak who normally can't speak". #WeStandTogether

The New Deadline - Tuesday 7 July

We hope you may have heard via *Inside Time*, *Way Out TV* or *Prison Radio* that we extended the 2020 Awards Deadline. We know that many of you will have faced significant difficulties in getting your work to us so this extension was made to give people extra time to send their work - you now have until **July 7** to get your entries to us. However, if you can, please send your work sooner to give us more time to process your entries.

We have also extended the maximum number of entries per person to 10 (previously 5). We realise that some of you will have already submitted work to us before lockdown started and may have continued making since, so we are giving you an extra 5 entries to give you the chance to enter work made during lockdown.

The deadline extension means that our existing time frame for delivering the awards this year will be slightly altered. But, apart from asking for your entries to be with us by July 7, we haven't announced any other date changes yet. Please rest assured even if it happens a lot later your entries will be judged, certificates printed, and feedback given.

Art Aid Sheets

Since the beginning of April we have been producing weekly activity sheets, called Art Aid, to be distributed in prisons. Each week they feature 1 or 2 creative tasks that can be completed in cell with just a pencil and paper. The tasks aim to provide inspiration to writers and visual artists, and each task suggests several Koestler Awards categories to enter. Some tasks are set by the team at Koestler Arts; some are set by former Koestler mentees who have been in prison themselves; some are set by prison staff; and some are set by creative partners of Koestler. We also made a Bonus Art Aid pack aimed at our younger entrants in YOIs.

We have been distributing Art Aid sheets through our contacts across the prison system. We hope some of you will have come across them.

We've received some lovely feedback on Art Aid and hope to see lots of responses in the 2020 Awards!

'The brilliant @KoestlerArts have put together art challenges to help people on the inside.'

Tweet by HMP Brixton

'Thank you so much, I took these into Warren Hill today and they are proving very popular AND I am getting some entries as a result...'

Message from Staff at HMP Warren Hill

Connecting with our Mentoring Community

We have also been finding new ways to support our mentees - people who have successfully applied for our mentoring scheme post-release from prison. Usually mentees meet their Koestler mentors roughly once a month to discuss their progress and ideas and often to visit galleries and exhibitions together. Not only are all galleries and museums, cafes and libraries currently shut - but lockdown also means that mentees and mentors have not been allowed to meet in person.

We have been writing fortnightly newsletters to help us stay connected with our mentees and mentors. Each newsletter has included some creative tasks, lists of resources (for example of virtual exhibitions), and our outreach team's own creative projects. We've had some lovely feedback from our mentees and have really enjoyed having a reason to get creative ourselves!



Examples of printmaking, cross-stitching, drawing and sculpture by our Outreach Team.

Blog Post - On Isolation

This blog post was written by our Senior Arts and Exhibitions Assistant, Lee, for the Longford Trust. Lee is a former Longford Trust Scholar, Koestler Award winner and Koestler mentee. He now works as an artist alongside his job at Koestler Arts, and has published a book of soap carvings reflecting on his time inside:



I know a bit about isolation. In fact, after three years in prison I am an expert. Through this coronavirus crisis people keep asking me, 'What's it like in isolation? How do you cope?' as they deal with anxiety and worry about separation from friends, colleagues and family. Everyone is searching for reassurance and tips to cope with curtailed freedom, albeit at home.

It's got me thinking.

They say your first day in prison is the toughest. For me it came about six months into my sentence. The first day in a young offenders prison was certainly confusing and a struggle, my whole understanding of the world feeling flipped upside down, but I still had some freedom, as prison goes. This was because I was on remand, waiting for a judge to sentence me. I could work, attend classes in education, mix with others in prison - 'associate' as they call it inside, and go to the gym.

Just a few months on, I started to understand the environment, in an odd way, I felt part of a community. Then I was sent to Crown Court to receive my sentence. At that time, the now thankfully abolished indeterminate sentence was popular. It was a lottery whether I'd get one, carrying the real fear of never knowing when I might ever be free again. But my case was adjourned, pushed to another date. It was in the next, different young offenders prison where the pain of isolation really hit.

In limbo, I spent days and months on end in a single cell with only myself for company, locked up for 24 hours a day, with access to two phone calls and two showers a week. The prison was overcrowded, understaffed, and those under 18 were given priority to work and education. I was unlucky I was 18 years old. Though looking back, my mind felt a lot younger and I had never experienced anything like this before.

In the first few weeks I distracted myself with the television and the radio, anything to get a sense of a world beyond my four walls. During the day I'd talk with my next-door neighbour through the gap in the pipes at the end of the cell. It was at night I'd struggle with my thoughts. It's an understatement to say the next few months were a challenge. I'd think, and think, and think. I'd think about the mistakes I had made, how they had affected people, I'd think about my family, the events that led to my situation. I wondered if it would be like this forever. It was sending me crazy. I knew I had to change, and that I'd need to teach myself how.

And then an unexpected opportunity presented itself - a pencil.

An officer had left a pencil in my cell by accident, I used it to write down my thoughts and feelings onto any scrap of paper I could gather. It took the negative thoughts out of my head, and by seeing them in front of me, it somehow helped me to understand where they might have come from, how I could change them. I began making drawings of my cell, I'd draw the sink, the bed, the window, anything in front of me. When I ran out of paper, I would draw into bars of standard prison issue soap. The soap was free on the wing and it was much more accessible than a piece of paper.

Funnily enough, I didn't see myself as an artist, I found a creative side within me. I didn't know anything about art, I don't even think I liked art much at the time but I knew that making was helping me.

A few months later I was sentenced, avoiding the dreaded indeterminate sentence. This time I moved prisons again. In the new prison I had access to more arts materials, more time out of my cell. Officers and other inmates saw my drawings and soon started to give me photographs of their loved ones and pets to draw. They'd 'pay' me in toiletries and food. Looking back, I guess these were my first commissions.

It's odd thinking back to those times. It feels like a different me then, and yet those times, and the isolation, have contributed to the person and the artist I am today. I've been out of prison for ten years now, have completed a BA degree in Fine Art, with support from the Longford Trust, got a postgraduate at the Royal Drawing School. I now have a much sought-after job with Koestler Arts - encouraging people in prisons and other secure settings to engage in the arts. I am proud to say I have achieved what many artists never manage, exhibiting in the prestigious Royal Academy, Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Christie's, the upmarket auction house and the Royal Festival Hall. And I am now a mentor for an artist through the Longford Trust who is studying a distance-learning degree in prison. I often think about what life is like for him being creative in his prison, I can see confinement shapes his work.

As we all face the isolation of coronavirus and restrictions in our daily lives and relationships I wouldn't wish this uncertain period of confinement on anyone. One silver-lining is perhaps the insight it offers, a window into imprisonment. The lack of control, unable to go out when you feel like it, prevented from learning in a classroom or library when you choose, no longer seeing or hugging a grandparent -the punishing impact of not doing what used to be normal. I hope and trust we will all dig deep in this coronavirus, finding some hidden talents - as myself and my mentee have done with art. Spare a thought for the 80, 000 plus men, women and children in overcrowded, often dirty prisons across England and Wales who know isolation and resourcefulness all too well. Next time someone says prison is too 'soft' remember this time and remind them what it felt like during the coronavirus crisis.

- Lee, Senior Arts and Exhibitions Assistant, Koestler Arts

Remember, Koestler Arts is still here to support your creativity!

As always, you can write to us for free using 'FREEPOST KOESTLER ARTS', but please allow a little longer than usual for us to reply. **If you are not entering the 2020 Awards but would like to remain a Koestler Associate, please write to us to let us know.**

We can't wait to see all your 2020 Koestler Awards entries!

Take Care and Stay Safe

The Koestler Team