Study of Studies [July/August 2014](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2014/07/)

# What Is Art?

Why we like what we like

[Matthew Hutson](http://www.theatlantic.com/matthew-hutson/) Jun 25 2014, 9:06 PM ET

 Last fall, Francis Bacon’s Three Studies of Lucian Freud fetched a record $142.4 million at auction. That was nearly double what Christie’s had projected, highlighting the unpredictability of art appreciation. Art isn’t science, but that doesn’t stop psychologists from trying to get inside viewers’ minds. What makes us like a few splotches of color?

First, we must identify those splotches as art. Researchers found that telling people to imagine themselves a year in the future (a tactic meant to induce abstract thinking) increased the chances that they’d say unconventional pieces such as Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* qualify as art [[1]](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/what-is-art/372281/#1). The way art is described also sways enjoyment. When subjects received an ambiguous explanation of an abstract piece (that is, an explanation including several statements, only about half of which fit the work), they liked the piece better than they did when they received an explanation that either mostly fit or mostly didn’t. Ambiguity apparently enhances intrigue [[2]](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/what-is-art/372281/#2). Backstory matters, too: when people learned that an artist was eccentric—he mangled his ear, or carried stones on his head—they liked his work more. Unless, that is, the work was conventional or the artist’s quirks were described as inauthentic (as the researchers suggested of Lady Gaga’s antics) [[3]](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/what-is-art/372281/#3).

The viewer’s own torment is another story, however: Subtly priming someone to consider his or her mortality diminishes appreciation for abstract paintings, at least among those with a strong “personal need for structure.” But the effect is reduced when people are given the artwork’s title—provided, at least, that the title is clearly descriptive. So a name like Number 12 doesn’t do much, but knowing that a Jackson Pollock painting is called *Guardians of the Secret* seems to help viewers overcome their own angst and attribute some meaning to the mess before them [[4]](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/what-is-art/372281/#4).

Seeing a piece of art over and over can also increase our affinity for it. But this effect applies only to art that critics have deemed “good.” Repeated exposure to two works by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Sir John Everett Millais enhanced subjects’ appreciation, while repeated exposure to the kitschy cottage-porn of Thomas Kinkade wore on them [[5]](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/what-is-art/372281/#5). Here’s one thing that doesn’t seem to matter, however: which way is up. When subjects were shown 40 modern artworks in four different orientations and asked which orientation they preferred, their responses aligned with the artist’s intention less than half the time [[6]](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/what-is-art/372281/#6).

Finally, casual viewers with high taste-bud density don’t enjoy disturbing or provocative art as much as others do [[7]](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/what-is-art/372281/#7). You knew all along that art appreciation was a matter of taste—you just didn’t know how literally.

**The Studies:**

[1] Schimmel and Förster, “How Temporal Distance Changes Novices’ Attitudes Towards Unconventional Arts” (*Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, Feb. 2008)
[2] Jakesch and Leder, “Finding Meaning in Art” (*The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Nov. 2009)
[3] Van Tilburg and Igou, “From van Gogh to Lady Gaga” (*European Journal of Social Psychology*, March 2014)
[4] Landau et al., “Windows Into Nothingness” (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, June 2006)
[5] Meskin et al., “Mere Exposure to Bad Art” (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, April 2013)
[6] Mather, “Aesthetic Judgement of Orientation in Modern Art” (*i-Perception*, Jan. 2012)
[7] DeWall et al., “Taste Sensitivity and Aesthetic Preferences” (*Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 2011)
Matthew Hutson is a science writer and the author of [*The 7 Laws of Magical Thinking*](http://www.amazon.com/Laws-Magical-Thinking-Irrational-Beliefs/dp/0452298903/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1402336030&sr=1-1&keywords=The+7+Laws+of+Magical+Thinking).