

Art is in the eye of the beholder

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A James Cook University researcher has found that a person's mental state affects how they look at art. Credit: James Cook University

A researcher from James Cook University in Australia has found that a person's mental state affects how they look at art.

JCU psychology lecturer Nicole Thomas said the same piece of artwork can attract admiration or rejection from different people.

"One intuitive explanation is that [personality](#) and the way in which we visually examine artwork contributes to our preferences for particular art," she said.

The work was begun with Dr Thomas' co-author Ali Simpson at Flinders University. Volunteers were psychologically assessed in relation to their personality and then shown abstract art pictures. They were asked to rate the pictures and say how much they would pay for them. The participants' eye movements were tracked as they looked at the images.

Dr Thomas said the relationship between [personality traits](#) and artwork preferences was already well established. Scientists knew, for instance, that neurotic people found abstract and pop art more appealing.

She said as cognitive psychologists, the researchers were particularly interested in the mechanisms of [attention](#) and perception.

"We found that people who tended towards neuroticism paid more attention to the left side of a picture, and those with traits related to schizophrenia looked less often at the top of a picture," said Dr Thomas.

She said this was significant because it fits well with known attentional differences in individuals with neuroticism.

"For example, we tend to look to the left side of images first and the fact that these individuals spent more time looking at the left overall suggests they find it harder to disengage their attention. In contrast, those

participants with mild schizophrenic tendencies appear to have relied on an entirely different scanning strategy. The tendency to focus on the lower portion of an image has previously been linked with deficits in attentional focus and control."

In contrast to people with these particular personality traits, she said, in general, participants' [eye movements](#) were concentrated in the upper right quadrant of their visual field.

"The right hemisphere of the brain plays a significant role in emotional processing. Artwork is inherently emotional and the emotional reactions elicited by abstract artwork might lead people to focus their attention within the upper right quadrant to better engage that [emotional processing](#)."

Dr Thomas said that activating the [right hemisphere](#) of the brain is also consistent with superior visuospatial processing, which would encourage more thorough exploration of abstract [artwork](#).

More information: Alison Simpson et al, Neuroticism, schizotypy, and scale anchors influence eye movement behaviour in the visual exploration of abstract art: An exploratory study, *Acta Psychologica* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.actpsy.2017.12.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2017.12.008)

Provided by James Cook University

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