

The science behind our appreciation of art

February 6 2014, by Ian Richards



From the mystery of the Mona Lisa's smile, to the shock of a shark suspended in formaldehyde, the question of what defines a piece of art as a great work has raged for centuries.

A new book by a professor of psychology at the University of Lincoln, UK, explores what the latest advances in [cognitive neuroscience](#) and other disciplines can tell us about humankind's passion for visual art, and what art can tell us about the workings of the human brain.

The Psychology of Visual Art, by George Mather, Professor of Vision Science in Lincoln's School of Psychology, draws together new and established theories from psychology, [art history](#) and philosophy to consider fundamental questions about art's unique appeal to our species.

Beginning with the pre-historic cave drawings of Homo sapiens dating back more than 30,000 years, and culminating with the 'anti-art' movement of 20th Century postmodernists, the impulse to express creativity through forms such as drawing, painting, sculpture has been a feature of human societies since the dawn of recorded civilisation.

Professor Mather said: "Millions of people all over the world attend art exhibitions each year. Some will pay vast sums of money to purchase perceived masterpieces. Visual art is all around us, in both the public and the private spheres. Everyone seems to have an opinion about art, whether it's a love of a particular artist, or a dislike of a certain genre.

"The question of where this passion originates is fundamental to understanding who we are as a species. Visual art is inextricably linked with the [human brain](#)'s evolved capacity to make sense of the complex pattern of light which enters our eyes from the natural world. So science has a crucial role to play in helping us to understand visual art, even though science alone cannot claim to have all the answers. Insights from other disciplines, such as art history and philosophy, provide their own perspectives on this uniquely human experience."

The book, which draws heavily from new research into the human visual system, considers such topics as the impact of eye and brain disorders on art, the limitations imposed by the brain's capacity to process different kinds of visual information, and the relevance of Darwinian principles to judgements of aesthetic merit. Important concepts are illustrated with specific art examples.

More information: *The Psychology of Visual Art: Eye, Brain and Art* by George Mather is published by Cambridge University Press (2014). ISBN: 9780521184793. More details about the book can be found at: www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/...rt-eye-brain-and-art

Provided by University of Lincoln

Citation: The science behind our appreciation of art (2014, February 6) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-science-art.html>

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