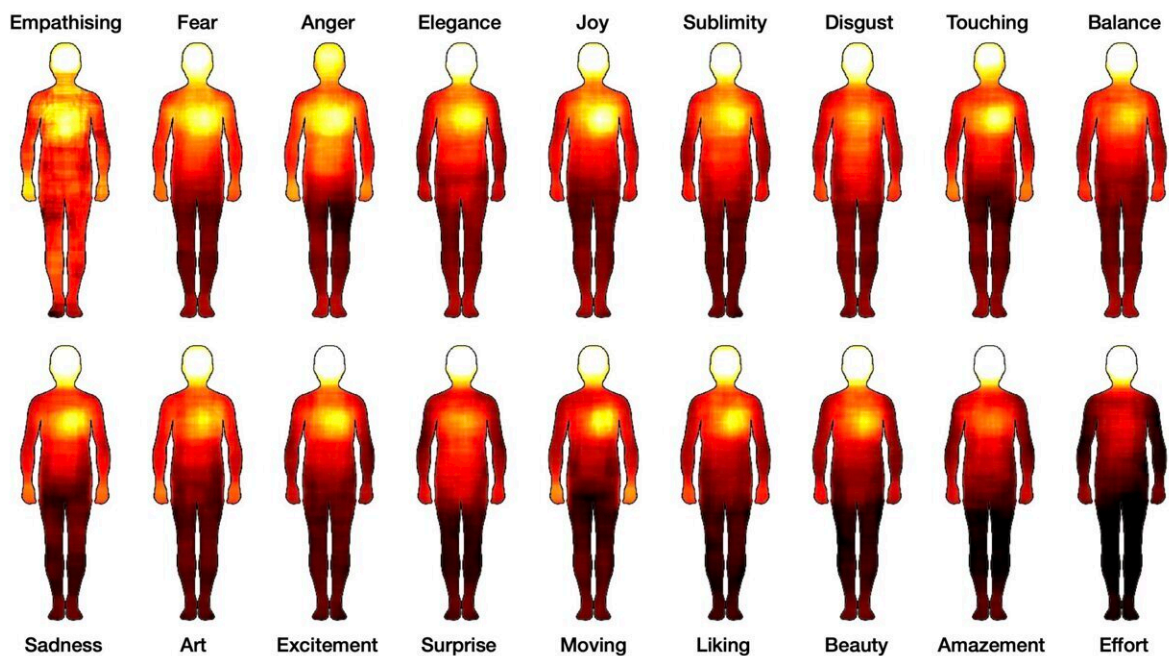


Study reveals that art has a powerful effect on people's bodies and emotions

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A) Bodily sensation maps



B) Interest maps



The image shows the bodily sensations evoked by art (A) as well as the most interesting areas in the paintings (B) and eye movements while viewing the art (C). Credit: Lauri Nummenmaa

A new study from the University of Turku and Aalto University in Finland published in the journal *Cognition & Emotion* reveals that art has

a powerful effect on people's bodies and emotions.

People all around the world are drawn to creating and consuming art, and [human emotions](#) are often a central subject in visual artworks as well as in music and performance art. However, the mechanisms underlying the feelings that art evokes remain poorly characterized.

A new study reveals how viewing visual art affects our emotions. The [research subjects](#) viewed different kinds of artworks and described the feelings that the art stimulated in their bodies. The researchers recorded the subjects' eye movement while they viewed the art. In addition, the subjects assessed what kind of emotions each piece of art evoked.

"Viewing the art evoked many different kinds of feelings and emotions in people. Even though many of the pieces handled sad or scary topics, the emotions that the people experienced were mainly positive. The bodily sensations evoked by art also contributed to the emotions: the stronger the body's reaction was to the [artwork](#), the stronger were the emotions experienced by the subject," says Professor Lauri Nummenmaa from the Turku PET Center at the University of Turku, Finland.

"In the artworks, human figures were the most interesting subject and were looked at the most. People have a tendency to empathize with each other's emotions and this is probably also the case when we view human figures in art. The human emotions presented in art pieces can be absorbed by the viewer unnoticed, through so-called mirroring," says Academician Riitta Hari from Aalto University.

Altogether 1,186 people from different countries participated in the study and they assessed the emotions evoked by more than 300 artworks. The research was conducted with online surveys and eye movement recordings in the laboratory.

"Our results suggest that our bodies have a significant role in the aesthetic experience. Bodily sensations can draw people to art: art evokes feelings in the body, and such stimulation of the body's pleasure centers feels pleasant to the viewer. This is why the emotions and [bodily sensations](#) evoked by art can be used, for example, in mental health rehabilitation and care," Professor Nummenmaa recounts.

More information: Lauri Nummenmaa et al, Bodily feelings and aesthetic experience of art, *Cognition and Emotion* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/02699931.2023.2183180](#)

Provided by University of Turku

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