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[Debra Herrick](#)

How art opens the mind: Professor Jonathan Schooler's research on the cognitive effects of art

Art has long been seen as a means of expressing beauty, emotion and ideas. But can it also change the way we think? Beyond its aesthetic value, can art open our minds, expand our understanding and foster creativity? This question lies at the heart of [Jonathan Schooler's research](#). As a professor of psychological and brain sciences at UC Santa Barbara, he explores how art affects cognition and the ways in which it may foster greater openness to new ideas and perspectives.

"When we experience art, it's not just about understanding a message or admiring a technique," Schooler said. "It's about how art impacts us in unexpected ways — the ways it can broaden our thinking and shift how we see the world."

Schooler's latest work brings him to Rome, where he will present at a workshop co-hosted by the [The Institute for the Scholarship in the Liberal Arts](#) and the [College of Arts and Letters](#) at The University of Notre Dame and [Templeton Religion Trust](#) (TRT). This event, part of TRT's program "Art Seeking Understanding," examines whether there is an empirical connection between art and understanding. The gathering invites program grantees to share their preliminary findings on how art can influence our cognitive and emotional experiences, along with discussions of best practices for both research and collaborating across disciplines. The Rome workshop follows [a previous meeting held in Edinburgh](#), Scotland, in 2022.

In Rome, Schooler will present alongside research colleague Madeline Gross, assistant project scientist at UCSB. Together, they are investigating how art can induce a state of cognitive openness, allowing viewers to approach the world with greater mental flexibility. Their project, “Art-induced Openness: Contexts and Mechanisms Underlying the Cognitive Effects of Art,” delves into the mechanisms behind how art can unlock new ways of thinking.

“I don’t think that art is just for expanding understanding,” Schooler said. “I think that art has a value for its own sake, that there is an aesthetic appreciation that has merit in and of itself. That said, it’s really intriguing to think about how else does art affect us? Can it lead us to think about the world in different ways? Can it broaden our minds? Can it increase our creativity?”

These inquiries align with the goals of TRT, a global charitable organization based in Nassau, The Bahamas, which seeks to deepen the conversation around religion and understanding through interdisciplinary research and storytelling.

“It’s an exciting premise that art changes how we see the world and that we can dig down deep and understand that change,” Schooler added.

Media Contact

Debra Herrick

Associate Editorial Director

(805) 893-2191

debraherrick@ucsb.edu

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