

# THE *Current*

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## Watching art films can make you a more creative thinker

A [new study](#) offers some of the strongest evidence yet that viewing art doesn't just move us emotionally — it changes how we think. Researchers at UC Santa Barbara found that people who viewed artistic film shorts showed measurable increases in creative thinking compared with those who watched entertaining, “non-art,” videos.

“Art confronts us with the unexpected,” said psychological researcher [Madeleine Gross](#), who led the study with co-author [Jonathan Schooler](#), also in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. “It pushes us beyond surface-level perception, into broader, and more abstract ways of thinking and perceiving. Those same processes appear to support creative thinking.”

In the experiment, nearly 500 participants were randomly assigned to watch either a critically acclaimed animated short film or a humorous home-video compilation — the kind of content familiar to anyone who's scrolled through social media reels. Afterward, each participant completed two tasks designed to capture different dimensions of creative thinking.

The first was a categorization task. Here, study participants were asked to rate how well various objects fit into a given category. For example: rate how much a car belongs in the category “vehicle.” Pretty straightforward. But what about a camel? Or a foot? That's where things get interesting. People who are more willing to accept

these offbeat examples are exhibiting what researchers call “conceptual expansion” — a loosening of the boundaries between mental categories. And when those boundaries loosen, ideas cross-pollinate, and new associations form. This is, in many ways, at the heart of creative thinking.

The second task measured creative production more directly. Participants were asked to create a short story that included three given words: “stamp,” “letter” and “send.” Some stories were uncreative and predictable: “I was writing my friend a letter, so I put a stamp on it and took it to the post office to send.” Others were more inventive, using the words metaphorically (“...her words left a stamp in my mind”) or taking the prompt in a surprising direction. Independent judges rated the stories on their originality. Once again, the group that had watched the artistic shorts came out ahead.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome was that, in general, individuals who viewed the experimental films reported that they felt worse after, compared to individuals in the control group. They rated the films lower and reported more negative emotional states. Yet they still outperformed on every measure of creativity. It seems art can produce cognitive benefits without requiring the viewer to enjoy the experience.

So what's going on? The study points to a specific mechanism. Art appears to work its cognitive magic by triggering “state openness” — a temporary shift toward a more receptive and exploratory mindset. This shift, the researchers found, fully explained the link between watching art and broader conceptual thinking. The common intuition that art “expands your mind” may be more literal than it sounds.

The films used in the study were sourced from Short of the Week, a highly selective film curation platform, and all fell into the “experimental” genre, reflecting works that resist simple interpretation, are visually surprising or narratively ambiguous. The control videos, on the other hand, were rapid-fire compilations of humorous animal clips and other domestic bloopers. They offered immediate gratification but little to chew on intellectually.

Though the results can't yet be generalized beyond artistic short films — the study carries important implications. This is the first experimental demonstration that passive exposure to everyday art can promote creativity. Much prior research in arts and aesthetics lack true experimental control. In the present study, participants were randomly assigned to view art or an active control, meaning they had an equal

chance of seeing either. The control was a strong comparison, one that could plausibly have explained the effects of art – as a product of mere entertainment or positive mood – yet didn't. This stands in contrast to prior work that lacks proper controls altogether, and it also tells us art is doing something more.

The findings also speak to accessibility. Much aesthetics research has focused on museum visits, which remain out of reach for many people particularly across socioeconomic lines. Film, on the other hand, is one of the most widely consumed and accessible art forms. That it, too, can promote creative benefits underscores the promise of everyday art engagement.

Perhaps most importantly, this work could have real time applications. At a time when arts funding faces persistent pressure in schools and public budgets, the study provides a controlled, preregistered and transparently reported demonstration that brief encounters with art can temporarily drive changes in cognition that favor creativity.

“When there are debates about whether arts programs deserve more funding, studies like this offer something concrete to point to,” Gross said, “The case isn't closed but with evidence like this, the idea that art expands the mind is starting to look less like a metaphor, and more like a measurable psychological effect.”

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