ART is part of everyday life, but its importance differs widely from person to person: some can’t get enough of galleries, watch art programmes on TV, and devour artists’ biographies, whereas others are simply not bothered at all. Yet psychologists have rarely explored these individual differences. Here we assess the role of established personality and intelligence factors as determinants of artistic preference, interests, knowledge, and judgment.

Conjure up an image of a person at an art museum, or pursuing a degree in art. Is the picture you paint all about age, gender, and socio-economic status? Or is having an ‘artistic personality’ about being open to new experiences, whatever walk of life you tread? Although art has always played a fundamental role in human society, psychologists have largely ignored the question of why some individuals are more interested in, and concerned with, art than others, a fact which is manifested from a very early age. Thus we set out to explore the possible individual difference factors that may best describe – and to a certain degree explain – the artistic personality.

**Art preferences**
Studies into art preferences – the extent to which individuals like or dislike different styles of paintings – have represented the dominant approach in the area of personality and art, no doubt because of the relative straightforwardness of classifying artistic products according to established schools. Even before personality traits were ‘invented’ (i.e. prior to the development of trait taxonomies), psychological eminencies such as Burt (1933) and...
Eysenck (1940) examined personality differences in ratings of different paintings. Although the literature is piecemeal, a wide variety of personality factors has been investigated, including conservatism, openness, schizotypy, tolerance for ambiguity and, in particular, sensation seeking (Furnham & Avison, 1997). These studies have shown that there are predictable links between personality and specific art preferences, notably the correlation between Conservatism or Conscientiousness and preferences for traditional/representational, rather than abstract or cubist, art. Conversely, Openness to Experience has been linked to preferences for non-traditional styles.

Even though personality traits rarely explained more than 10 per cent of the variance in art preferences, methodological and psychometric limitations may have underestimated the true importance of personality traits as determinants of artistic preferences (see box, right).

In an attempt to clarify past inconsistencies and overcome methodological weaknesses, we conducted a large-scale study on personality and art preferences. Developed to tie in with the TV series How Art Made the World, and run on the BBC website (see weblinks), 91,162 people took part in this study. Although analysis is still preliminary, one clear effect is the difference between representational art, typified by impressionism, and less representational art, like abstract expressionism and cubism. People who preferred representational art were significantly more agreeable and conscientious, and less open to new experiences, than those who rated the more abstract works.

Demographic variables influenced preferences, too. Men tended to prefer cubist and renaissance art, whereas women preferred traditional Japanese paintings and impressionism. Younger people preferred the more modern forms of abstract and cubist art, whereas older people preferred impressionism and Japanese art. But overall, art preferences seemed more dependent on personality traits than on demographic factors.

Factor analysis can help us understand how people evaluate paintings. Whilst different personality traits are associated with different styles of paintings, there is also a general tendency for individuals to like or dislike all kind of paintings. For example, you may prefer cubist to impressionism, but, at the same time, your average rating will be higher or lower than others’. The personality trait that seems most relevant when it comes to predicting higher levels of overall artistic preference is Openness to Experience, a trait that refers to individual differences in aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity, imagination, and innovation striving. Thus ‘as neurotics can be used as examples of high scores on the dimension of Neuroticism, so [so] artists can be considered prime examples of individuals high in Openness to Experience’ (McCrae & Costa, 1997; p.825).

Art interests
A second approach to the study of personality and art has focused on artistic interests or the extent to which individuals engage in artistic activities, such as visiting museums, watching art programmes, buying and reading art books, etc. Studies have long pointed out that individuals who invest in one domain of art (e.g. fine or visual arts) are also more likely to invest time and money in others (e.g. music, performing arts, theatre, etc.) (McManus & Furnham, in press). But which personality traits may account for this relationship?

As with art preferences, personality differences underlying individuals’ art interests seem to be captured mostly by the Openness to Experience dimension. Thus open individuals are more likely to both enjoy art works and engage in art-related behaviours. However studies have yet to examine which specific aspects of Openness are relevant with regard to aesthetic interests. Conceptually, one may expect the fantasy (dreamy, imaginative etc), aesthetics (original, versatile etc), and feelings (spontaneous, affectionate etc) facets of this trait to be more influential in determining artistic interests than the facets of action, ideas and values would be. McManus and Furnham (in press) have recently investigated the main (direct) and interactive (indirect) effects of demographic variables (e.g. gender, age, and socio-economic status), previous

LIMITATIONS OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

- Choice of stimuli:
  - a) Different paintings: Different studies used different paintings and styles. Some compared simple vs. complex and representational vs. abstract, others compared representational vs. surreal, whilst more comprehensive studies included abstract, Japanese, and pop-art (Furnham & Walker, 2001).
  - b) Familiar painting: Preferences for familiar paintings may be confounded with educational factors. For instance, individuals who perceive or identify a painting as famous may almost feel obliged to like it for its cultural value. Familiar stimuli are also less interesting and arousing than unfamiliar ones.
  - c) Prototypical paintings: Some paintings may not be classified purely within one school, but represent various artistic movements at once and may be more or less influenced by others.

- Personality measures: Personality has not always been assessed with the same instruments or in terms of the same framework, not least because of a longstanding debate on the identification of the best personality taxonomy to classify individual differences. The “Big Five” traits were only introduced in the early 1990s.

- Opportunity sampling: Most if not all studies examined small and unrepresentative samples such as undergraduate psychology students from prestigious universities. Such samples are known to be more ‘intellectually engaged’ than the overall population.
educational background, and personality traits in regard to broad aesthetic activities. Overall, results showed that previous education – training in the arts rather than sciences – is a significant predictor of aesthetic activities, and that highly open individuals, such as those with low Agreeableness or low Conscientiousness scores, tended to be more engaged in aesthetic activities. Whereas social class had a predictable impact, there were no significant gender (masculinity-femininity) or sex (male-female) correlates of aesthetic activities. Furthermore, aesthetic interests were found to be more strongly related to personality traits (notably Openness) than to social class, age, and gender.

**Art judgment**

Art judgment is essentially thought of as a measure of ability rather than taste, and involves judging the better of two or more products. Most of these studies have relied on old measures, such as the Meier Art Judgment Test (Meier, 1940) and the Maitland Graves Design Judgment Test (Graves, 1948), which require participants to distinguish between a genuine artwork and a fake or experimentally modified replica. For instance participants can be presented with a real surrealist Joan Miró painting next to a modified version of this painting (in which one of the abstract objects appears in a different colour or place) and are asked to identify the genuine painting. Both their accuracy and reaction time can then be measured.

Although there remain doubts about the validity of such measures (i.e. what it actually means to have a higher art judgment score), studies have shown that cognitive ability measures are significantly related to art judgment (see Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2004, 2005). Correlations in the range of r = .30 between art judgment and traditional intelligence measures suggests that intelligence may be necessary, but not sufficient to explain individual differences in art judgment.

In fact, a combination of both personality and intelligence seems more effective to predict such differences, explaining almost 30 per cent of the variance in art judgment. The personality trait that was found to be most strongly associated with art judgment ability is Conscientiousness – lower Conscientiousness is associated with higher art judgment scores. This finding is interesting because of the longstanding conceptualisation of Conscientiousness (or equivalent trait) as a negative correlate of creativity and predictor of more conventional artistic preferences. Thus, conscientious individuals would be less interested and competent in artistic appreciation.

**Openness to Experience and the artistic personality**

Clearly, the research we have looked at so far implicates very specific individual differences in the art-sensitive person. Although previous education, age, and gender show predictable links with art-related behaviours, personality (in particular Openness to Experience) appears to have a more important role in determining these outcomes.

It is plausible, then, to imagine that the curiosity and problem-solving facets of open individuals make them interested in, and willing to explore, widely different forms of art. On the other hand there is a cluster of traits associated with Conservatism and Conscientiousness which seems to determine lower interests in arts as well as a preference for traditional, representational styles.

Although research has shown that artistic preferences, interests, and judgment are highly inter-correlated, it is important to interpret these findings into a coherent model. Preferences may be regarded as an important determinant of interests (e.g. if you like X artist you will invest time and resources in studying X artists), which in turn determine knowledge (if you invest time and resources in X artist, you will know a lot about X), which in turn determines judgment (if you know a lot about X, you will be able to discriminate between X’s real and fake works). Established personality traits (e.g. high Openness, low Conscientiousness, etc.) may affect both preferences and interests; cognitive ability factors will correlate with both knowledge and judgment because individual differences in the capacity to learn and retain facts will influence these outcomes.

Naturally, there are several limitations to the findings we reviewed, and it ought to be emphasised that our findings are preliminary and exploratory at this stage. First, there is the issue of which specific processes may account for the correlation between established individual difference...
factors and art-related behaviours. Whereas analysis at the sub-facet level (for example looking at specific dimensions of Openness) may improve our understanding of such processes, data would still be correlational. Thus one may not rule out the possibility that higher levels of artistic interests lead individuals to develop an increasingly open personality, rather than vice-versa. Alternatively, third order variables might account for this correlation.

Second, there is the issue of validity, namely whether measures of art interests, art judgment and art preferences actually predict subsequent art-related behaviours, such as pursuing a formal degree in art or producing artistic works. In fact, there is no evidence that the artistic personality, as conceptualised in the present article, has anything to do with active creative behaviours; rather, it seems to refer to individual differences in art appreciation and ‘consumption’. Thus longitudinal studies are needed to identify the consequence, rather than correlates, of the artistic personality.

Last, but not least, there is the issue of determinism: if individual difference factors account for a significant amount of variance in art-related behaviours, and such factors are largely inherited and remain fairly unchanged over the lifespan, how can we motivate individuals with the ‘wrong’ personality to be interested in art? Such questions are unjustified: individual difference factors leave a great deal of variance unexplained in art-related behaviours, and, in any case, an artistic personality (like any other trait) would merely predispose individuals towards art-related behaviours.

Tomás Chamorro-Premuzic is in the Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London. E-mail: pss02tc@gold.ac.uk.

Adrian Furnham is in the Department of Psychology, University College London. E-mail: a.furnham@ucl.ac.uk.

Stian Reimers is in the Department of Psychology, University College London. E-mail: s.reimers@ucl.ac.uk.

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