

Is Looking at Art a Path to Mental Well-Being?

With new research suggesting that viewing art might improve mental health, some doctors are prescribing museum visits. Is art really a shortcut to happiness?



Photo: SABINE VILLIARD / TRUNK ARCHIVE

By Christina Cacouris
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During a dark period in his youth, Bill Murray thought about killing himself while wandering the streets of Chicago. “I was ready to die,” the actor said at a press conference several years ago. That day he decided to visit the Art Institute and found himself in front of Jules Breton’s 1884 painting *The Song of the Lark*, which depicts a young woman looking skyward, sickle in hand, a violent orange sunrise behind her. Suddenly, Murray felt hope. “I just thought, Well, there’s a girl who doesn’t have a whole lot of prospects, but the sun’s coming up anyway and she’s got another chance at it,” he said. “That gave me some sort of feeling that I too am a person, and get another chance every day the sun comes up.” Murray credits the painting with saving his life.

Though making art has long been regarded as a form of therapy through self-expression, recently, the passive participation—the *looking* at art—is now being assessed as a different way of improving mental health. “We know that for a lot of people, making art can be very therapeutic,” says Tim A. Shaw, artist and co-founder of the arts and mental health charity Hospital Rooms. “But also, making art isn’t usually an easy, relaxing thing for artists; it’s an uncomfortable pleasure.”

A few months ago, doctors at one of Brussels’s largest hospitals partnered with—and began prescribing visits to—the city’s fine arts museums. “We’re in the middle of a crisis [that has] brought so much stress to people, and I think that culture may be the answer,” says Delphine Houba, alderwoman for culture in Brussels. The World Health Organization, in 2019, also released a 146-page report that recommends the inclusion of arts in the treatment of mental

health. In the U.K., Hospital Rooms has been transforming dozens of psychiatric wards by painting their walls and filling them with art, commissioning works by artists like Nick Knight and Gavin Turk.

Beautiful environments could impact both our mood and physical well-being, according to several studies in publications including the *Journal of Psychiatric Intensive Care* and *Frontiers in Psychology*. “Generally, beauty and music or art is very rewarding to the human brain,” says Wendy Suzuki, a neuroscientist and professor of neural science at New York University. “It can activate our natural, de-stressing part of our nervous system called the parasympathetic nervous system that slows our heart rate down. And I think that’s so important these days because our stress and anxiety levels are so high.”

A number of [studies](#) have shown that hospital patients who visit gardens or even just have window views of nature often recover faster than those who don’t. But beautiful views are not intrinsic to hospital designs, so bringing art into facilities helps provide that same sense of tranquility. Artworks can also encourage conversation among patients, says Shaw. “It goes beyond decoration. It’s much more about bringing some humanness to a space,” he says.

Much of the current research is contributing to the growing field of what’s referred to as neuroaesthetics, studying how the brain reacts to different forms of art, and how aesthetic appreciation can affect mental health. Which will enhance your mood: a Pollock or a Monet? That, says Shaw, is too personal for conclusive data. “What we’re trying to get away from is the very simplistic research that’s out there that says people like blue more than red, or that people like landscapes, because it doesn’t really take in the nuance of individuals’ preference or history with color and imagery and aesthetics,” he says.

At the dawn of a new year, as resolutions are set, many will focus on wellness in the form of gym memberships and dieting. Is looking at art a shortcut to happiness? Though it may be a more seductive option, Suzuki isn’t fully convinced. Rather, she says, beauty and art are “wonderful for de-stressing, for inspiring, and those are emotional states that can help counteract anxiety and depression. But there are many things that are strongly scientifically backed that can improve your mood immediately, with exercise being No. 1 on my list.”

Or, you can do both: So run, don’t walk, to your nearest museum.