LIKEABLE LIKENESS: PERSONALITY, EXPERIENCE AND PREFERENCE FOR ABSTRACT AND LOW COMPLEXITY ART

Agata KRAJEWSKA and Anna WALIGÓRSKA

Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poland

This study investigated preferences towards abstract vs. realist and low vs. high complexity paintings in context of personality traits (measured with NEO PI-R Inventory), selected demographics and art experience (aesthetic interests, knowledge and preferences). 134 participants completed an online survey, rating attractiveness and artistic value of 48 paintings grouped on two continuum scales: abstractedness-realism and general complexity of the composition. Art experience and Openness to Experience positively (while Neuroticism and Conscientiousness negatively) correlated with high judgments of abstract and low complexity artworks. High Extraversion level was positively correlated with high ratings of abstract paintings. The findings support some and contradict other previous results, reflecting the need of application of stylistic dichotomy scales (rather than style differentiation) into future research.

Key words: personality, art experience, aesthetic preferences, abstract art, realism, complexity

INTRODUCTION

Personality and art have constituted areas of interest for many authors. Recently, researchers have also been trying to explore links between personality traits and specific artistic preferences. The nature of this relationship is undeniably complex and multidimensional, and therefore scientifically challenging. An artwork has the ability to evoke psychological reactions, influenced also by other factors including personality traits (Chamorro-Premuzic, Furnham, & Reimers, 2007; Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, Hsu, & Ahmetoglu, 2009, Furnham & Walker, 2001b, previous experiences (Heinrichs & Cupchik, 1985) and cultural expertise (Seifert, 1992; Waligórska, 2006; Winston & Cupchik, 1992).

However, results obtained in different studies show inconsistency of directions for predictors of aesthetic preferences; for example Furnham and Walker (2001a) found that women more than men prefer abstract art, while Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2007) described contradictory findings—e.g. men rated cubism more highly than women did. Also, Furnham and Walker (2001b) reported that Neuroticism was positively correlated with high ratings of abstract and pop art while Furnham and Avison (1997) did not found any association between Neuroticism and preference toward any art style. The analysis of these results suggests that participants in their preferences may have been influenced by
other qualities of the presented artworks, rather than paintings’ affiliation to a certain historical convention. Additionally, some of the artworks were presented partially, which impedes further conclusions (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009).

An artwork is a complex and difficult stimulus in empirical studies. It is difficult to unequivocally claim which exact components of a composition have an impact on the aesthetic preferences of participants. Therefore, when setting up a study design it is crucial to establish clear and well-defined dimensions for the formal selection of the stimuli.

Careful selection of aesthetic dimension (rather than affiliation to the particular art movement) enables researchers to identify aspects of the composition significant in predicting participants’ artistic choices. The importance of the application of stylistic dimensions was highlighted by Heinrichs and Cupchik (1985) who stated that categorical and dimensional qualities of a painting should be precisely explained and agreed upon by both empirical aestheticians and art historians. Similar view on this issue is shared by Peterson (2010) who emphasized the importance of knowing and understanding both perceptual and projective characteristics of stimuli in order to clearly comprehend their meaning and value.

Basing the selection of the stimuli only on general distinction of art movements (which is common practice in such research) can lead to huge differentiation of materials, which might be reflected in uncertain results. An affiliation to a certain art movement is a capacious variable and therefore very difficult to control. It consists of many heterogeneous components, which when not precisely extracted and defined, cannot be properly controlled. In consequence, it is challenging to indicate which particular characteristics of a painting influence viewer’s preferences, which might question the validity of implementing this distinction as a main one in the art related research.

Then, it is very important to refer to additional attributes of the artworks, which enable more accurate assessment. Berlyne (i.a. Berlyne, 1963, 1972; Berlyne & Crozier, 1971) distinguished twelve categories of a stimulus specifity, both common and referring to traditional dimension pleasure-displeasure such as complexity, balance, or definition. He also described other characteristics important in any artwork, particularly theme of the image, novelty, applied colors, regularity of shapes, realism, symbolism, artistic expression and many more.

In the present study, stimuli are selected on a basis of two independent aesthetic dimensions: abstractedness-realism and general complexity. The combination of the two scales is responsible for a wide variety of images and reflects many of the terms listed by Berlyne.

First aesthetic category applied in this study is realism of the composition, characterized as objective representation of the world, conveying reality of the observation. On the opposite end of the abstractedness-realism dimension, abstract art does not depict any recognizable subjects, expressing it’s meaning through purely pictorial elements, such as color, lines, contrast etc. This category is reported to relate to aesthetic preferences, based on viewers experience (Seifert, 1992), sex (Furnham & Walker, 2001a), and personality (Furnham & Walker, 2001b).

The most general observation (Seifert, 1992) indicates that untrained art viewers tend
to prefer representational over abstract art because it is more similar to their life experience. Winston & Cupchik (1992) have extended this position, finding that training activates the urge to explore the formal features of composition, while untrained viewers tend to concentrate on the subject of the painting. Therefore it seems natural that naïve viewers should prefer representational, realistic art.

Many findings refer also to the viewers’ personality. Openness to Experience is positively related to the general art preference, however there are also significant contradictions in results. In the studies conducted by Furnham & Walker (2001a, 2001b), open to experience participants tended to rate highly all presented paintings (including abstract and realistic, representational art). On the contrary, Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2007) observed that Openness to Experience was positively associated with preference toward untraditional art styles like abstract and cubism, though negatively correlated with preference for representational paintings.

Preference for representational art is associated with Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2007), while preference for abstract art seems to correlate with Neuroticism (Furnham & Walker, 2001b), and Extraversion (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009). This view on association between extraversion and high rating of abstract compositions contradicts the results of Jamison (1972), who stated that introversion rather than extraversion is related to preference toward abstract forms.

A second aesthetic category in question is another fundamental dimension, in empirical research referred to as complexity, while in art history more likely identified with decorativeness. Tatarkiewicz (1980) highlights that besides extreme values dominating on the decorativeness continuum in certain art movements (like Baroque), the ratio between high and low decorativeness fluctuates between periods where decoration was preferred to the ones where it was completely eliminated. Decorativeness, understood as theoretical construct, describes artistic composition as highly diversified in terms of lines and colors used; decorative composition consists of multiple, contrasting elements. In non-decorative artworks (sometimes described as minimalist, in the most general understanding of this term) the vital feature is the simplicity of the composition. The number and complexity of artistic elements are reduced to minimum. However, despite well-defined meaning of decorativeness as artistic characteristic, the term complexity is far more common in the research on visual perception. Therefore in further analysis we will refer to complexity dimension, understood as the pictorial feature of the composition, not including semantic, emotional, symbolic and similar artistic aspects.

The complexity dimension was extensively explored by Berlyne (e.g. 1963, 1970, 1972). His observations on preference for the medium complexity level was confirmed in some further research (e.g. Imamoglu, 2000), but were also subject to major criticism (Silvia, 2005). Recent findings show multidimensional relations between complexity and perceived artistic value; in experiment by Roberts (2007) complexity explained exclusively

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1 In art theory minimalism is conceptualized twofold: as (1) feature of the artwork, constituted by reduction of elements (Kovacs, 2007), and (2) specific art movement (Chave, 2008). In this text minimalism is understood as an opposition to decorativeness at the same continuum of pictorial complexity, and not as any particular art style.
preference for non-artistic stimuli. It is important to notice that despite the common use of this concept, definitions of complexity in art significantly differ between researchers (referring alternatively to the number of elements, specific of expressions, multidimensional emotional expression etc.). Partly for that reason, research findings on personality and art reception are often contradictory. Complexity scales used in the studies relating to aesthetic preferences differ greatly among each other. Complexity is being measured either on a basis of subjective value computed into a composite score (Chamorro-Premuzic, Burke, Hsu, & Swami, 2010), references to tolerance of ambiguity and sensation seeking scales (Furnham & Avison, 1997) or paintings’ affiliations to certain artistic movements—contemporary (complex) vs conventional (simple); Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009).

Generally, in the complexity context (similarly to the abstractedness-realism dimension) also the preference for various types of stimuli is enhanced by Openness to Experience (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010).

This personality factor was also the most significant in developing art experience through engaging into related activities, such as visiting museums, watching programs and reading books about art (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2007). Similar results were obtained in previous research, where Openness to Experience was substantially and positively correlated with interest in art, explaining 33% of variance (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2004).

Many of other personality traits have proven to be significant, though unsystematic predictors of engaging in the art-related activities. For example Agreeableness and Conscientiousness have been significant in predicting engaging in activities such as visiting art galleries and museums or reading books about art (McManus & Furnham, 2006). Moreover, Conscientiousness was also related to accuracy of art judgment (Furnham & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2004), whilst Neuroticism was negatively correlated with the latter (Karson, 1980).

The purpose of the present study is to explore the relations between personality and artistic preferences in systematic way, referring to the aesthetic dimension rather than particular art movements. It is possible to anticipate that the results obtained through such categorization may bring higher reliability and replicability in future research on this subject.

Basing on the previous research our hypotheses were: (1) Openness to Experience would be associated with preference for all types of art stimuli presented, (2) Aesthetic experience will be positively correlated with judgements on visual art in general and with abstract art in particular. We expected also (3) Neuroticism and (4) Extraversion to correlate with preference for the abstract art, though the relation of these factors is viewed as more complex in existing research.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 134 participants took part in the study. There were 103 women and 31 men, ranging in age from 18 to 61 years, with a mean age of 26.92 (SD = 9.08). Participants anonymously completed the survey online (without group assignment—all participants rated all presented paintings). The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.
Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

| Variable                  | N    | Percent | Min | Max   | M    | SD  |
|---------------------------|------|---------|-----|-------|------|-----|
| Age                       | 134  | 18      | 61.08 | 26.92 | 9.08 |
| Sex                       |      |         |      |       |      |     |
| Men                       | 31   | 23.1    |      |       |      |     |
| Women                     | 103  | 76.9    |      |       |      |     |
| Education                 |      |         |      |       |      |     |
| Primary                   | 4    | 3.0     |      |       |      |     |
| Secondary                 | 69   | 51.5    |      |       |      |     |
| Undergraduate             | 45   | 33.6    |      |       |      |     |
| Postgraduate              | 15   | 11.2    |      |       |      |     |
| Educational preferences   |      |         |      |       |      |     |
| Humanistic                | 92   | 68.7    |      |       |      |     |
| Scientific                | 19   | 14.2    |      |       |      |     |
| Other                     | 22   | 16.4    |      |       |      |     |
| Interest in art           |      |         |      |       |      |     |
| High                      | 39   | 29.1    |      |       |      |     |
| Medium                    | 40   | 29.9    |      |       |      |     |
| Low                       | 54   | 40.3    |      |       |      |     |
| Number of visits to museums |      |         |      |       |      |     |
| High                      | 20   | 14.9    |      |       |      |     |
| Medium                    | 45   | 33.6    |      |       |      |     |
| Low                       | 68   | 50.8    |      |       |      |     |
| Years of art education    | 134  | 0       | 18  |       | 3.42 | 3.43|

**Materials**

Paintings. Selection of the stimuli was based both on the judgment of art experts (art historians) and on pilot survey.

After a throughout analysis of the stimuli used in previous research (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009; Furnham & Avison, 1997; Furnham & Walker, 2001b) and a consultation with art historians, it became apparent that there might be a better controllable and reliant way of categorizing the artwork to the study than its affiliation to a certain historical style. Several components of the composition of the visual stimuli were extracted in search of the most liable characteristics of pictorial representation in serve of the purpose of the study. Of these components (i.a. those previously indicated by Berlyne, 1972) two dimensions were identified as the most distinctive ones, also most often referred to in existing research. As described in the introduction the first one was abstractedness—realism of the composition, the second one was minimalism—decorativeness.
(defined through the number and complexity of pictorial elements, later renamed as complexity scale to avoid misidentification with the XX-century art movement).

The expert raters divided the initially selected set of 180 paintings (executed in various techniques including oil, watercolor, tempera etc.) according to their level of realism and complexity on the two 5-point scales. Distinction between realistic vs abstract paintings was based on accuracy of depiction—from detailed, precise presentation in realistic artworks to purely pictorial form, not representing any definite object in abstract ones. On the other hand complexity of paintings reflected number and complexity of depicted elements of the composition\(^2\). The two dimensions were independent of each other—for example some realistic artworks were characterized by high\(^3\), while other by low complexity\(^4\). Of all rated paintings 117 met inclusion criteria to the following categories: representational, semi-representational, abstract, highly-complex, moderately-complex and low-complex artworks.

After this initial selection a pilot study was conducted on the 20 psychology students experienced in areas of art history and visual communication. Students ranked 117 paintings previously selected by experts on two 5-point scales: abstractedness-realism and complexity (defined through indicators described above). The instruction for raters and whole list of paintings along with their ranks on both dimensions are available on request from the first author.

Based on the results obtained in the pilot study, 48 paintings were assigned to six groups, eight paintings per group. As the described two dimensions are independent of each other (i.e. high complexity can characterize both abstract and representational art), each group consisted of artworks carefully controlled along the selected criterion, and diversified across the other, to avoid accidental correlations between these two dimensions. Stimuli were grouped as follows (exemplary artworks in the footnotes):

1. a) highly abstract artworks, bearing none or very faint resemblance to real objects\(^5\)
   1. b) semi-representational paintings, depicting abstract, yet still recognizable objects\(^6\),
   1. c) realistic works, portraying in detail specific objects or persons\(^7\);
2. a) low-complex group, characterized by utterly simple composition, not exceeding three elements, including background\(^8\);
   2. b) moderately-complex artworks, presenting more than seven moderately contrasted elements\(^9\)
   2. c) highly-complex paintings composed of multiple diversified and contrasting elements\(^9\).

Similarity of artistic genre was preserved, as in each group there were two: portraits, landscapes, still lives and animal representations. Each group consisted of classical and modern/contemporary artworks to avoid stylistic bias. There were no significant differences in perceived attractiveness and artistic values between groups.

\(^2\) For example the least complex (non-decorative) compositions consisted of max. 3 pictorial elements including background, while the most complex (decorative) paintings consisted of highly numerous and elaborated elements.

\(^3\) Floris Claesz van Dijck, _Still life with fruit, nuts and cheese_, 1613, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; http://www.franshalsmuseum.nl/en/collection/search-collection/still-life-with-fruit-nuts-and-cheese-225/

\(^4\) Albrecht Dürer, _Young hare_, 1502, Albertina, Wien; http://sammlungenonline.albertina.at/default.aspx?lng=english2#f876a009-1337-4bb7-a84d-8d4ca1ec25fd1

\(^5\) Marc Rothko, _Orange and yellow_, 1956, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo,NY; http://www.albrightknox.org/collection/collection-highlights/piece:rothko-orange-yellow/

Franz Marc, _Birds_, 1914, Lenbachhaus, Munich; http://www.lenbachhaus.de/collection/the-blue-rider/marc/?L=1

\(^6\) Henri Matisse, _Interior in yellow and blue_, 1946, Centre Pompidou, Paris; http://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/ressource.action?param.id=FR_R-f54b54aef3f5532046f26f2816ec5a&param.idSource=FR_O-a306af81a463e2f15516ec8c274b0

Gustave Courbet, _Donkey_, Petit Palais, Paris.

\(^7\) Georgia O’Keeffe, _Green apple on a black plate_, 1922, Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama ; Anthony van Dyck, _Portrait of a young woman_

\(^8\) Gustave Courbet _Sunset over lake Leman_, 1874, Musée Jenisch, Vevey; Paul Klee, _Goldfish_, 1925, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

\(^9\) Friedensreich Hundertwasser, _Green town_, c.1978, Albert Joseph Moore, _Still life I_
Measures

**NEO PI-R Inventory.** Personality traits were assessed by the NEO PI-R Inventory by Costa and McCrae (1992) in Polish adaptation by Siuta (2006). This inventory measures five main personality factors such as Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.

**Demographic survey.** Survey consisted of questions regarding descriptive demographics, general interests and educational background.

**Art experience.** Art experience was measured threefold in survey, through (1) number of years of attending art classes at all levels of education, (2) interest in art (measured on five-point scale from 1—not interested to 5—very interested), (3) frequency of visits to art galleries and museums (on five-point scale from 1- very rarely/never to 5—few times a month).

There was also an additional test of art knowledge on completion of research; participants were asked to name the title, author and the year of creation for nine reproductions, belonging to three groups (well-known masterpieces, artworks known for people with some art experience, paintings known mostly to art history graduates).

**Visual art preferences.** All paintings were measured on two 5-point scales: attractiveness (min. 1 = very unattractive, max. 5 = very attractive) and artistic value (min. 1 = low artistic value, max. 5 = high artistic value).

**Procedure**

Research was conducted using correlational method. Emails with an invitation to take part in the research were sent to participants. In the email there was a link to the online survey, containing the information about the study, its purposes and procedures. Participants agreed to take part in the study by clicking the relevant button.

In the first part of the study participants were rating attractiveness and artistic value of 48 painting varying on the realism and complexity dimensions, presented on grey, neutral background in randomized order for each person. Each painting was exposed for 30 seconds, but participants could have moved to next painting if they rated it sooner by clicking the button.

In the second part of the study participants personality traits were assessed using NEO PI-R questionnaire (Costa & McCrae, 1992, in the Polish adaptation: Siuta, 2006). In order to move to the next part of the study all questions in the questionnaire needed to be completed.

The third part of the study was art knowledge test, described above and a short survey on demographics, general interests and aesthetic experience. Data were automatically transferred to SPSS version 17.0 for analysis. All data collection, analysis and preparation of the manuscript were conducted with no involvement of external funding sources.

**RESULTS**

**Descriptives and Intercorrelations**

Correlations between all factors for the relevant groups of painting are shown in Table 2. Evaluations regarding attractiveness and artistic value for all paintings were computed as one factor—General Attractiveness. The parallel between ratings of these two factors, including similarity in statistically significant relations with other aspects of art reception along with high inter-correlation ($r = .78; p < 0.01$), allowed creating one indicator of preference.

Openness to Experience was positively correlated with perceived attractiveness of abstract and low-complexity paintings (respectively: $r = .27; p < .01; r = .30; p < .01$), and was not related to the preference for the realistic and high-complexity artworks. The similar correlation exclusively with preference for abstract and low-complexity paintings was also observed for art experience, measured as interest in art ($r = .30, p < .01; r = .32, p < .01$), visiting art museums ($r = .24, p < .01; r = .33, p < 0.01$), and art knowledge
Declared art interest appeared to be a particularly good indicator for measuring correlation with aesthetic preference, while time of artistic education proved to be irrelevant. Additionally, Openness to Experience (as the only personality trait) was positively correlated with art experience ($r = .34; p < .01$).

Partly along with expectations Extraversion was positively correlated with high judgments on abstract art ($r = .21; p < .05$), but not on any other group of paintings. Contrary to hypothesis Neuroticism was negatively related to preference for abstract ($r = -.20; p < .05$) and low-complexity paintings ($r = -.20; p < .05$).

All other factors were insignificant.

**Analysis of regression**

In order to determine which factors best predicted aesthetic preferences hierarchical analysis of regression was performed. First, Art Experience (created as one factor from following variables: interest in art, frequency of visits in museums and art galleries and art knowledge), age, sex, personality traits (Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, Extraversion and Neuroticism) were entered into analysis of regression.

| Variables       | General attractiveness ratings of paintings classified as |          |          |          |          |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                 |                                                          | Realistic| Abstract | High complexity | Low complexity |
| Age             | -.06                                                     | .08      | -.02     | .08      |          |
| Education level | .03                                                      | -.06     | -.04     | -.03     |          |
| Art education   | .03                                                      | .05      | .06      | -.01     |          |
| Art interest    | -.05                                                     | .30**    | -.07     | .32**    |          |
| Museums         | .02                                                      | .24**    | -.00     | .33**    |          |
| Art knowledge   | .01                                                      | .22*     | .00      | .25**    |          |

Personality Factors

| Extraversion    | -.06                                                     | .21*     | -.05     | .09      |          |
| Neuroticism     | .04                                                      | -.20*    | .05      | -.20*    |          |
| Openness to     | -.03                                                     | .27**    | -.03     | .30**    |          |
| Experience      |                                                          |          |          |          |          |
| Conscientiousness| -.00                                                     | .05      | .01      | -.14     |          |
| Agreeableness   | .02                                                      | .07      | .13      | .00      |          |

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed)  ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

$(r = .22, p < .05; r = .25, p < .01)$. 
Analysis of regression for attractiveness of artworks’ styles (computed in one factor from attractiveness and artistic value and explored for the two described pictorial dimensions) was not significant.

In proposed model Art Experience proved to be a significant predictor of abstract paintings preference $F(7, 124) = 3.35, p < .05$. The relationship between predictor and high judgment of abstract art attractiveness is positive ($\beta = .22$). In regard to preference for abstract art it was the only one control measure that was statistically significant. The higher art experience was related to the higher judgments of attractiveness for abstract paintings.

More factors were assessed as able to predict preference for low-complexity art than for any other artistic characteristics.

Model proposed for predicted preference for low-complexity art proved well fit to data $F(7,124) = 4.80, p < .001$. All four factors allowed to predict significantly liking of low-complexity art. Notable, the level of Neuroticism was the strongest predictor ($\beta = -.23; p < .05$). The higher Neuroticism levels are, the lower are judgments of attractiveness of low-complex compositions.

Another significant predictor in the model is Openness to Experience ($\beta = .19; p < .05$). The higher level of Openness to Experience relates to more positive ratings of low-complex paintings.

Third significant predictor is Conscientiousness ($\beta = -.21; p < .05$). Conscientiousness is negatively associated with judgments of attractiveness of low-complex compositions.

The fourth factor, positively related to preference toward low-complexity art is Art Experience ($\beta = .22; p < .05$). Total variance explained by the model is 21.3%.

All other participants’ characteristics (including sex, age etc.) did not prove to be a significant predictor of any artistic style preference.
The purpose of the present study was verification of relationships among personality traits, art experience (measured as interest in art, visiting galleries and museums, artistic education and knowledge), and aesthetic preferences of participants. In the research a number of significant correlations were observed, partly confirming previously established assumptions, some of them showing opposite relationships, which can indicate a new, possible direction for the future research.

Assumptions regarding the positive relation of high ratings of artworks’ attractiveness and developed art experience were confirmed. Child (1965) suggested that with the increase in art knowledge, personality traits become less important in predicting aesthetic preferences. Paintings reproductions chosen as study stimuli were all created by world-known artists, but with an intention to present least known artworks. Therefore, the fact that participants who frequently visit museums, are highly interested in art and have excellent level of art knowledge judged all of the paintings highly on both attractiveness and artistic value scales can indicate their better familiarity and ability to appreciate high art. Additionally, artistic education was not associated with higher judgments of attractiveness and artistic value of artworks, which can suggest that attending art education classes is not equivalent to art experience.

Results obtained in the present study confirmed some earlier findings in this area. Openness to Experience was found to be a strong predictor of untraditional painting styles, such as abstract or cubism (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2007; Furnham & Walker, 2001a; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009). Our hypothesis stating that high level of Openness to Experience is associated with high ratings of attractiveness and artistic value of all types of art was confirmed exclusively in regard to abstract art preference. Openness to Experience was also positively correlated with art experience, which confirms similar conclusions from previous studies (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2004a; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2007). The assumption of enhancing general art preference by Openness to Experience was not confirmed, contrary to findings of Furnham & Walker (2001a, 2001b), but in accordance with later results cited above.

Furthermore, interesting results were obtained regarding the relationship between personality traits and artistic value of low-complexity art. Neuroticism and Conscientiousness were negatively related to preference for this type of artworks, while Openness to Experience was a predictor of higher judgments of such paintings. Thus, Openness to Experience correlates with preference of both abstract and low-complexity art—which as either nonrepresentational or ambiguous can constitute a bigger aesthetic challenge.

Hypothesis suggesting that high level of Neuroticism would be correlated with a preference toward abstract over representational art was not confirmed. On the contrary high Neuroticism was associated with low preference toward abstract and low-complexity art. Low judgments of both these types of artworks may reflect preference for unambiguous stimuli that would not arouse or evoke negative emotional response.

Neuroticism has proven to be strongly positively correlated with responding to
uncertainty with distress (Berenbaum, Bredemeier, & Thompson, 2008). Thus, it can be suggested that more neurotic individuals will prefer stimuli that are explicit and understandable. Wiersema, van der Schalk, and van Kleef (2012) confirmed that preference for clear, comprehensible world and aesthetic stimuli, described as need for cognitive closure (NFC) is an important factor in predicting aesthetic preferences. Individuals with high—NFC scores preferred figurative, clear in meaning paintings, over abstract, equivocal ones (Wiersema et al., 2012).

Neurotic processes have impact on reality testing, causing a distortion in the aesthetic judgment, understood not as a matter of opinion but objective value (Karson, 1980). This may suggest a general tendency of more neurotic subjects to avoid meaningful and vivid stimuli, which results in the reluctance toward art related activities, leading to observed poorer aesthetic judgment (Karson, 1980). Consequently, it is possible that neurotic individuals shun from empty or abstract and therefore ambiguous compositions, enigmatic and open for projection, which may cause their uneasiness or anxiety. Serfass and Sherman (2013) found that individuals with high level of Neuroticism might interpret the stimuli as more dangerous than those with low level of the trait. When describing the ambiguous visual stimuli (TAT pictures) they tend to perceive more of negative, emotional aspects of depicted situations, such as criticism or tension (Serfass & Sherman, 2013).

Our assumption that participants with high level of Extraversion will prefer abstract art was confirmed. As expected extravert individuals, revealing high activity and sensory stimulation needs, more likely perceived abstract art as attractive. These results conform to previous research revealing high impact of Extraversion on preference toward abstract art over representational (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009). It may be argued whether this preference reflects aesthetically challenging (and therefore more stimulating) character of abstract representations—or the Jungian idea of compensation in aesthetic preference. According to the latter assumption aesthetic choices reflect not the conscious, freely expressed attitudes toward reality (reality-oriented in extravert individuals), but rather suppressed, and unconscious aspects of self (Jung, 1921/1971). However, this explanation shuns empirical verification, partly because of ambiguous conceptualizations and lack of inverse relationship—preference for representational paintings by introvert viewers.

Few previous researches suggest the importance of the Extraversion dimension and other personality features in aesthetic judgments. For example Burt’s research (1933) has shown differences in aesthetic preferences in groups of psychologically stable and unstable introverts and extraverts. Stable extraverts tended to choose realistic images, unstable extraverts preferred romantic art (irregular shapes), and stable introverts judged higher classical art while unstable introverts chose impressionist paintings. These findings open interesting approach to take under consideration in future research. They involve however the selection of the stimuli on a basis of historical affiliation, not their aesthetic expression, which hampers the interpretation of results.

Conscientiousness and Agreeableness haven’t affected the preferences towards abstract or representational art. It appeared however that high Conscientiousness relates to low preference for low-complexity art. Conscientious individuals are characterized by meticulousness and reliability. Some authors indicate also a negative relation of
Conscientiousness and creativity (Wolfradt & Pretz, 2001). Perhaps again results can be explained by ambiguity of presentation of low-complexity art. Perceived scarcity of elements may evoke the demand for an interpretation of such unusual representations. These suppositions need however more future research for any further exploration.

It is important to add, that despite acknowledged role of both aesthetic experience and personality in shaping art preference, there are many factors potentially strongly influencing art appreciation not included in this research and worth further investigation. Some of these factors are (a) emotional aspect of both pictorial representation (including colour palette, dynamic of presented forms etc.) and conveyed meaning, and their relation to the viewers’ emotions (Ruda, 1983; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010; Leder, Gerger, Dressler & Schabmann, 2012; Wiersema et al., 2012), (b) individual experience of participants, influencing their reactions and interpretations (Heinrich & Cupchik, 1985), (c) symbolic and cultural aspects of the artworks (Seifert, 1992; Haanstra, Hoorn, & Damen, 2011).

For example depicting the bird image as representative for the whole group should be carefully considered, as animalistic presentation can show extensive symbolism and evoke a variety of association. Birds may be metaphor of hope, soul, or arrival of the spring. The particular species bear also specific meaning, for example the pelican is a symbol of Christ (Battistini, 2005). These examples show how susceptible is image content to individual interpretation (Carr-Gomm, 2000). Perhaps, it would be fruitful for the future research to include in analysis the emotional and symbolic aspect of presented artworks and—if possible—to examine the participants’ subjective reasons of choice which underpin their aesthetic preferences.

Irrespective to these postulates, for the perspective of the future findings (which hopefully will allow to form more complex—and complete—model of art preferences) it seems vital, that a careful attention was paid to the selection of the stimuli, which should not only be based on the historical convention but also on consistent aesthetic construct with well established, multiple dimensions (Berlyne, 1963, 1972; Berlyne & Crozier, 1971; Heinrichs & Cupchik, 1985; Peterson, 2010; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). This approach will not reduce the challenges involved with this research subject—art is going to remain empirically demanding, multidimensional phenomenon. However, it is possible to hope, that dimensional approach to art investigation may help to diminish limitations of the future research, facilitating to look not only for the relationships—but also, possibly, to more causal attributions.

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