

And what about artists such as Mondrian, whose paintings consist exclusively of horizontal and vertical lines encasing blocks of colour? Mondrian's works are deceptively simple, but eye-tracking studies confirm that they are meticulously composed, and that simply rotating a piece radically changes the way we view it. With the originals, volunteers' eyes tended to stay longer on certain places in the image, but with the altered versions they would flit across a piece more rapidly. As a result, the volunteers considered the altered versions less pleasurable when they later rated the work.

In a similar study, Oshin Vartanian of Toronto University asked volunteers to compare original paintings with ones which he had altered by moving objects around within the frame. He found that almost everyone preferred the original, whether it was a Van Gogh still life or an abstract by Miró. Vartanian also found that changing the composition of the paintings reduced activation in those brain areas linked with meaning and interpretation.

In another experiment, Alex Forsythe of the University of Liverpool analysed the visual intricacy of different pieces of art, and her results suggest that many artists use a key level of detail to please the brain. Too little and the work is boring, but too much results in a kind of 'perceptual overload', according to Forsythe. What's more, appealing pieces both abstract and representational, show signs of 'fractals' – repeated motifs recurring in different scales. Fractals are common throughout nature, for example in the shapes of mountain peaks or the branches of trees. It is possible that our visual system, which evolved in the great outdoors, finds it easier to process such patterns.

It is also intriguing that the brain appears to process movement when we see a handwritten letter, as if we are replaying the writer's moment of creation. This has led some to wonder whether Pollock's works feel so dynamic because the brain reconstructs the energetic actions the artist used as he painted. This may be down to our brain's 'mirror neurons', which are known to mimic others' actions. The hypothesis will need to be thoroughly tested, however. It might even be the case that we could use neuroaesthetic studies to understand the longevity of some pieces of artwork. While the fashions of the time might shape what is currently popular, works that are best adapted to our visual system may be the most likely to linger once the trends of previous generations have been forgotten.

It's still early days for the field of neuroaesthetics – and these studies are probably only a taste of what is to come. It would, however, be foolish to reduce art appreciation to a set of scientific laws. We shouldn't underestimate the importance of the style of a particular artist, their place in history and the artistic environment of their time. Abstract art offers both a challenge and the freedom to play with different interpretations. In some ways, it's not so different to science, where we are constantly looking for systems and decoding meaning so that we can view and appreciate the world in a new way.