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The Apotheosis of Homer by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres: paintings by Ingres were among those that produced the most powerful "pleasure" responses among research subjects.

Painted love

Do people visit art galleries because they know it will improve their wellbeing or is that just an added bonus?

IN 1853, William Dargan, the engineer who constructed Ireland's first railway line between Dublin city centre and Kingstown, now Dún Laoghaire, and went on to lay more than 800 miles of rail crisscrossing the country, made arrangements for a substantial display of artwork to be included in the Great Dublin Exhibition held at Leinster Lawn, a space facing Merrion Square in Dublin.

Such was the enthusiasm of the visiting crowds for the art exhibited that the decision was taken to house a permanent public art collection in a custom-built gallery on that very spot as a lasting monument of gratitude to Dargan. A statue of the visionary who brought public art to Dublin was erected in front of this fine building.

So why did our predecessors demonstrate such enthusiasm for art and why do natives and visitors alike continue to flock to our many art galleries? The answer lies in the positive effect that looking at an attractive work of art has on our sense of wellbeing. Sometimes the beauty we encounter in art can be overwhelming. The condition that renders the observer of beautiful artworks so overcome by what they see that they swoon or experience a sensation of weakness and dizziness even has a scientific name.

Stendhal syndrome, a psychosomatic illness that causes dizziness, fainting, elevated pulse, confusion and, in extreme cases, hallucinations takes its name from the 19th-century French novelist and art critic Stendhal (aka Henri-Marie Beyle), who experienced this phenomenon during his 1817 visit to the beautiful Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence.

In his book, *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio*, he describes it thus: "As I emerged from the porch of Santa Croce, I was seized with a fierce palpitation of the heart (that same symptom which, in Berlin, is referred to as an attack of the nerves); the well-spring of life was dried up within me, and I walked in constant fear of falling to the ground."

The syndrome was given his name as recently as 1979 when Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini observed and documented more than 100 similar cases among visitors to the galleries of Florence.

Earlier this year, in a series of brain-mapping experiments, Semir Zeki, professor of neurobiology and neuroaesthetics at University College London, concluded that viewing beautiful art can give us as much pleasure as being in love. When his research subjects

were shown artworks that they considered particularly beautiful, the blood flow to the relevant area of the brain increased by as much as 10 per cent – the same effect that is triggered by gazing at a loved one.

By studying MRI scans of this brain activity, it was evident that the viewing of beautiful art causes a surge of the positive neurotransmitter dopamine into the medial orbito-frontal cortex of the brain. This leads to feelings of intense pleasure.


Beauty is subjective but paintings by the English romantic artist John Constable, the French neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Italian Baroque artist Guido Reni produced the most powerful “pleasure” responses among subjects.

These findings have significant implications for Government policy. At a time of economic hardship when arts funding is constantly under threat and the need for public art is relentlessly questioned, it is encouraging to learn that the availability of such beauty to the citizens of Ireland does genuinely have a positive effect on our psyche.

ELEANOR FITZSIMONS



“ Pictures that I love tend to be ones that remind me of a particular time in my life; a childhood memory or a significant event or moment in adulthood, now I’m left wondering if being in love is more connected to my sense of security than I originally thought – Ciara, Meath



“ I love the Turner watercolours in the National Gallery. They’re so beautiful and you can only see them for one month each year. That makes them even more special. – Evelyn, Dublin

