Personality Predictors of Artistic Preferences as a Function of the Emotional Valence and Perceived Complexity of Paintings

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This study explored associations among the Big Five personality factors, unconventionality, selected demographics, and preference for 4 distinct visual art genres (portrait, abstract art, geometric art, and impressionism). In total, 3,254 participants completed an online survey assessing individual difference and preference ratings for different paintings. Participants were also asked to rate each observed painting for emotional liking and perceived complexity, which enabled examination of whether personality could predict artistic preferences when the latter was classified on the basis of consensual, rather than researcher-led or art historical, taxonomies. Correlations and structural equation models showed that the correlates and predictors of artistic preferences were stronger when art was classified using consensual ratings (particularly in the case of complex art) than according to researcher-led or art historical taxonomies. Although these findings are somewhat exploratory and more comprehensive measures of individual differences and art preferences could be employed, they suggest that trait-congruent classifications of aesthetic stimuli may improve prediction and understanding of individual differences in artistic preferences.

Keywords: artistic preferences, Big Five, openness to experience, artistic personality

Although the experimental psychology of aesthetics has a long history (for a review, see Swami, 2007), it is possible to discern at least two major strands in contemporary research. On the one hand, some researchers have investigated the components of a composition that make it aesthetically pleasing (e.g., Arnheim, 1988; Locher, 2003; Swami, 2009; Swami, Grant, Furnham, & McManus, 2008). This body of work has suggested that a composition elicits maximal aesthetic appeal only if its components are organized in an expressive and intuitive structure; that is, an aesthetically appealing composition is one in which the artist has found the correct, or “visually right,” representational and figurative balance between components (Carpenter & Graham, 1971, p. 25).

On the other hand, a growing body of research has focused on the observer in the belief that individual difference traits can reliably predict artistic taste and preferences (for a review, see Chamorro-Premuzic, Furnham, & Reimers, 2007). For instance, early studies in this area have variably reported significant associations between artistic preferences and such individual difference traits as conservatism (Eysenck, 1940, 1941; Wilson, Ausman, & Matthews, 1973), tolerance of complexity (Child, 1965), sensation-seeking (Furnham & Avison, 1997; Furnham & Bunyan, 1988; Rawlings, 2003; Rawlings, Twomey, Burns, & Morris, 1998), and tolerance of ambiguity (Furnham & Avison, 1997). More recent work has similarly reported significant positive associations between artistic preferences and cognitive ability (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2004a, 2004b).

However, by far the most comprehensive body of work on observer traits and artistic preferences has focused on the predictive utility of the Big Five personality traits (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2007). This research has invariably found that the Big Five factor Openness to Experience, a trait that assesses individual differences in intellectual curiosity, preferences for novel experiences, creativity, and aesthetic sensitivity, is associated with a stronger preference for art in general as well as a higher appreciation of nonconventional art forms (such as abstract, pop, and modern art, as opposed to impressionist and traditional art; Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, Hsu, & Almetoglu, 2009; Feist & Brady, 2004; Furnham & Walker, 2001a, 2001b; McManus & Furnham, 2006; Swami & Furnham, 2009). These studies have also found that the more open individuals are, the more likely they are to report interest in art and engage in art-related activities.

This has led some researchers to suggest that Openness to Experience is a central component of what has been termed the “artistic personality”: Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, et al. (2009), for example, point out that open individuals have qualities that “are harmonious with the notions of abstract art being more modern, unconventional, and depicting subject matter through intrinsic qual-
ities rather than literal representational forms” (p. 503). More specifically, it has been suggested that the relevant qualities of more open individuals include their higher levels of imagination and creativity, their lower authoritarianism, and their higher degree of liberal attitudes and unconventional cognitions. These traits, in turn, are believed to translate into a preference for more complex, contemporary, and challenging artistic compositions.

Nevertheless, the focus on Openness to Experience should not obscure the other Big Five personality traits, although reported associations have been more equivocal. For instance, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Agreeableness have all been correlated with a preference for nonconventional art forms, although different studies have reported associations in different directions (Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, et al., 2009; Furnham & Rao, 2002; Furnham & Walker, 2001a, 2001b; McManus, 2006; Swami & Furnham, 2009). Moreover, the associations between artistic preferences and these four personality traits have generally been weak, and often become nonsignificant when moderating variables such as cognitive ability are included in statistical analyses.

Except for Openness to Experience, the inconsistent associations between the Big Five factors and artistic preferences may, in part at least, reflect the way previous studies have classified artistic composition. That is, the reported correlations may be weak or inconsistent because researchers have traditionally relied on a priori categorization of compositions, typically as a function of art historical convention. Clearly, however, art historical movements share no real conceptual overlap with individual differences in personality or any of the Big Five traits. More generally, it is now accepted that there is a degree of subjectivity in lay appreciation of different artistic styles (Heinrichs & Cupchik, 1985; Swami, 2007), which may necessitate a posteriori classification based on observer understanding of different artistic genres.

That is to say, to the extent that visual art (like all forms of art) elicits perceptual, emotional, and intellectual responses on the part of the observer, a more appropriate form of classifying artistic styles should be based on consensual observer ratings of compositions. Two candidate classification components, which we examined in the present study, are emotional valence and perceived complexity. In both instances, it may be expected that stronger associations will emerge between the Big Five personality traits and artistic preferences if the latter is classified in trait-congruent manners. Below, we briefly discuss the rationale for focusing on emotional valence and perceived complexity and suggest possible associations with the Big Five factors.

### Emotional Valence

In the first instance, artistic compositions clearly have the capacity to increase arousal and elicit positive and negative emotions on the part of the observer (see Zuckerman, 2006). For instance, a small body of work has shown significant positive associations between sensation-seeking and emotionally negative photographs (Zaleski, 1984) as well as unpleasant paintings (Rawlings, 2003), although it should be noted that classification was made by the researchers rather than on the basis of consensus among observers. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that artistic compositions should elicit positive or negative affect on the part of the observer, and that preference for such compositions may vary as a function of observer personality traits.

Specifically, to the extent that extraverts seek positive emotions and excitement in life (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and prefer stimuli with high arousal potential (Zuckerman, Bone, Neary, Mangelloff, & Brustman, 1972), it seems plausible that they should show a stronger preference for artistic compositions that elicit positive emotions. Indeed, related work has shown that extraverts prefer musical genres that are consensually classified as being “happy,” with gregarious and energetic tones (Chamorro-Premuzic, Fagan, & Furnham, 2009). Conversely, to the extent that Neuroticism is associated with a tendency to experience more negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, and sadness (Costa & McCrae, 1992), it may be expected that neurotic individual should show a preference for compositions that evoke negative emotions (see Rawlings, 2003). This is certainly consistent with Kazimierz’s (1983) finding that neurotics prefer dark and cold, over warm and intense, colors.

### Perceived Complexity

The perceived aesthetic complexity of a painting may also influence an individual’s preference or liking for that composition (Barron, 1953). Research consistently has shown that more open individuals have a preference for complex and reflective forms of music (e.g., Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) and works of art (e.g., Furnham & Avison, 1997; Swami & Furnham, 2009). Openness to Experience is also correlated with sensation-seeking (Aluja, García, & García, 2003), a trait that has been found to be associated positively with a preference for more complex forms of artistic representation (for a review, see Zuckerman, 2006).

In a similar vein, extraverts may show a preference for more complex visual art because such art has the higher arousal potential that extraverts seek. Indeed, previous work has shown that Extraversion is positively associated with a preference for complex forms of art, such as surrealist paintings and neoplasticism (Furnham & Avison, 1997; Swami & Furnham, 2009). Finally, it is possible that neurotics will show a lower preference for complex forms of art, which is consistent with the finding that Neuroticism positively correlates with a preference for simplistic art forms such as abstract and pop art (Furnham & Walker, 2001b).

### The Present Study

In summary, the present study examined the association among the Big Five personality factors, selected demographics, and preference for four distinct visual art genres (portrait, abstract art, geometric art, and impressionism). To extend previous work in the area, however, we also asked participants in the present study to rate each observed painting for emotional liking and perceived complexity. This allowed us to examine whether personality could predict artistic preferences when the latter was classified on the basis of consensual, rather than researcher-led or art historical, taxonomies.

In addition, the present study extended previous work examining the association between personality and artistic preferences by focusing on a narrower facet of Openness to Experience. Specifically, we examined the association of artistic preferences with unconventionality or individual differences in the propensity to hold unusual or eccentric attitudes, values, and prefer unconven-
tional activities and products. Although unconventionality has been studied quite extensively in social psychology, there is no well-established or dominant psychometric tool to assess it. The closest measure is arguably Openness to Experiences, although investigations into the structure of Openness to Experience and the Big Five show that Openness to Experience and unconventionality are related but different constructs (Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004). Given previous suggestions that one reason why open individuals may prefer complex art compositions is because they tend to be more unconventional (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, et al., 2009), this seemed a rather neglected construct in relation to research into personality and visual art preferences.

Overall, although some of the present work was exploratory in nature, we were guided by several general hypotheses: Openness to Experience in general and unconventionality in particular would be associated with a preference for visual art in general and with emotionally positive and complex art in particular; Extraversion would be associated with a preference for emotionally positive and complex artworks; and Neuroticism would be negatively associated with anything you want except ‘normal’ or ‘average’”). The full scale is available on request from the first author. Internal consistencies for all personality scales are reported in Table 1.

### Method

#### Participants

In all, 3,254 participants completed the survey online. There were 1,001 men and 2,253 women. With regard to age, 16.6% of participants were younger than 20 years, 25.0% were between 20 and 30 years, 18.8% between 31 and 40 years, 19.9% between 41 and 50 years, 14.6% between 51 and 60 years, 5.2% between 60 and 70 years, and 0.9% older than 70 years. With regard to educational level, 41.7% had a school certificate, 39.6% had an undergraduate degree, and 18.7% had completed a postgraduate degree.

#### Measures

The Big 5-Short Inventory (BSS; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2008). The Big Five personality traits were assessed via a 10-item, self-report questionnaire (Ahmetoglu, Swami, & Chamorro-Premuzic, in press). The measure includes two items for each of the five major personality dimensions (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness), which are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items were adapted from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) Web site and scale (Goldberg, 1999), for which data on 91,692 participants were collected for a different sample (Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, et al., 2009). For each Big Five factor, the four items with the highest loadings were collapsed into two items (reversing one of them). Two pilot studies (n = 309 and 257) were carried out to test the convergent validity of the BSS in regard to another well-established, 10-item inventory (Ten-Item Personality Inventory; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) and the 50-item IPIP Big Five, respectively (using two additional samples). On the basis of a sample of 16,030 participants (61.0% women), Ahmetoglu et al. (in press) reported an average internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) of .52.

### Unconventionality index (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009)

This was a purpose-designed scale that assesses individual differences in unconventionality, defined as the tendency to have unusual preferences and prefer nonconformist behaviors. Items were selected using the same method described for the Big Five above. Ten items were selected and responded to on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items included statements about conformity (e.g., “More often than not I make up my own mind instead of following others’ opinions”), adherence to traditional values (e.g., “Traditional values are very important to me”), and being average (e.g., “Call me anything you want except ‘normal’ or ‘average’”). The full scale is available on request from the first author. Internal consistencies for both personality scales are reported in Table 1.

#### Visual art preferences

Twenty paintings were used to assess visual art preferences. The paintings were selected to fit into the following categories, with five paintings in each category: (a) portraits (e.g., Cézanne’s Portrait of Victor Choquet, ca. 1876–1877; α = .75); (b) abstract bright colors (e.g., Rothko’s Red, 1958; α = .72); (c) noncolorful geometric (e.g., Rothko’s Black on White, 2008; α = .78); and (d) impressionism (e.g., Cézanne’s Château Noir, ca. 1900–1904; α = .73). A full list of paintings is available on request from the first author. For each painting,

### Table 1

**Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Target Measures (N = 3,254)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>Impressionist</th>
<th>Portrait</th>
<th>Geometric</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Complex</th>
<th>Sad</th>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Happy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>1.54</td>
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<td>.16**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.06**</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>-.05**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.09**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.08**</td>
<td>.05**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>.04**</td>
<td>.05**</td>
<td>.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to museums</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.16**</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.05**</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.06**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
<td>-.08**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
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<td>.73</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.05**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.08**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconventionality</td>
<td>15.17</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>-.05**</td>
<td>-.05**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.06**</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
participants provided three ratings on 5-point scales: (a) preference (1 = hate it, 5 = love it); (b) emotional valence (1 = very sad, 5 = very happy); and (c) complexity (1 = very simple, 5 = very complex). Thus, 60 ratings were provided by each participant for all visual art preferences.

In addition to computing four factors corresponding to the artistic categories described above, we computed composite scores for happy, sad, simple, and complex paintings. These categories were computed using the consensual scoring technique reported in Chamorro-Premuzic, Fagan, et al. (2009). Specifically, this involves calculating descriptive statistics for all paintings on each of the emotional valence and complexity dimensions. Means on these variables are indicative of the overall perceived happiness, sadness, simplicity, and complexity (as rated consensually by the whole sample) of each painting. As the cutoff point, the five paintings with the highest score for each category were used to create each composite. (The simple and sad composites were created by choosing the lowest scores on the complexity and emotional valence scales, respectively.) Thus, for each participant, four new composites were created to assess the extent to which they preferred paintings that the overall sample perceived as sad, happy, complex, and simple (alphas were .72, .74, .73, and .69, respectively).

Visits to galleries/museums. This was a single-item measure to assess how frequently participants visited galleries or museums. Responses ranged from 1 (never; 20.4%) to 3 (frequently [at least once or twice a month]; 9.6%), and had a midpoint of 2 (occasionally [once or twice a year]; 70.0%).

Procedure

Once ethical approval for the study was obtained, the survey was advertised through the British Broadcasting Corporation (the TV channel BBC1 and the BBC Web site). Advertising (a brief description of the survey and mention of the URL) was placed for free in exchange for a brief report on the findings, which the aforementioned TV channel would disseminate. The survey was completed online via a Web-portal designed by the first author. The site remained active for 2 months. Participants completed the questionnaire without any time limit. First, they completed a section on basic demographic information. Next, and on a separate page, they completed the B55 and unconventionality index, which were randomized (items from both questionnaires were mixed and the order of items was randomly presented using an algorithm). Next, they rated each of the 20 paintings on the three scales described above; presentation of the paintings and scales was also randomized. After completing the survey, participants received instant feedback on where they ranked in relation to the overall sample, as well as a brief explanation of the meaning of the Big Five personality traits. There were no missing data points as each item had to be responded to in order to submit valid data. Data were loaded and stored automatically onto a spreadsheet and transferred into SPSS Version 15 for analyses.

Results

Descriptives and Intercorrelations

Descriptive statistics, including internal consistencies, and bivariate correlation coefficients are shown in Table 1. As seen, age was positively correlated with preferences for impressionist, portrait, simple, and happy paintings, and negatively correlated with preference for geometric, colors, complex, and sad paintings. Women tended to prefer impressionist, simple, colorful, and happy paintings, whereas men tended to prefer geometric, complex, and sad paintings. Educational level was positively related to preference for all paintings except geometric figures, and frequency of visits to museums was positively linked to preferences for all styles. With regard to personality correlates of artistic preferences, Openness to Experience and unconventionality were the strongest correlates, correlating with preferences for most styles, particularly complex paintings. In the case of unconventionality, negative correlations with preferences for impressionist, portrait, and simple paintings were found. Conscientiousness was negatively correlated with preferences for portrait, geometric, complex, and sad paintings. Extraversion was positively correlated with preferences for geometric, colorful, complex, and happy paintings, whereas Neuroticism was positively correlated with preferences for geometric and sad paintings. It is noteworthy, however, that most of the correlations were modest in size (the significance being attributed to the large sample examined).

Structural Equation Modeling

Bivariate correlations do not take into account the simultaneous effects of multiple predictors on different criteria. Consequently, structural equation modeling was carried out using AMOS 6.0 (Arbuckle, 2005) to (a) account for the overlap among different predictors, (b) account for the overlap among different criteria, (c) account for variability in preferences for specific types of paintings (removing the variance related to generic preferences, i.e., for all paintings), and (d) assess the validity of a hierarchical model in which the same factor can be both predictor and criterion.

In the first model (see Figure 1), the Big Five personality traits were tested as predictors of a latent factor of general artistic preferences (modeled with the observed factors of preferences for the four artistic genres). Intercorrelations among the Big Five personality traits were allowed in line with Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2006) and Digman (1997). Paths from the Big Five to art preferences were saturated. The hypothesized model explained the data well: \( \chi^2(20, N = 3254) = 78.4, p < .01 \); comparative fit index (CFI) = .96; parsimony goodness-of-fit index (PGFI) = .44; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .03 (low = .02, high = .04); Akaike information criterion (AIC) = 128.4; Hoelter’s critical N (CN) = 113.1 However, several paths (dotted lines) were not significant. Thus, only Openness to Experience and Extraversion had significant effects on general artistic preferences, that is, the extent to

1 The following fit indices were used: chi square (Bollen, 1989), which tests whether an unconstrained model fits the covariance/correlation matrix as well as the given model (although nonsignificant chi-square values indicate good fit, well-fitting models often have significant chi-square values); the PGFI (Mulaik et al., 1989), which measures power and is optimal around .50; the CFI (Bentler, 1990), which compares the hypothesized model with a model based on zero correlations among all variables (values around .90 indicate very good fit); for the RMSEA (Browne & Cudeck, 1993), values < .08 indicate good fit; the AIC (Akaike, 1973) provides an estimate of the extent to which the parameter estimates from the original sample will cross-validate in future samples; Hoelter’s critical N (CN; Hoelter, 1983) provides the maximum sample size for which a model with the same sample size and degrees of freedom would be acceptable at the .01 level.
which participants liked paintings in general. Moreover, preferences for portraits did not load onto the general factor of artistic preferences (although it was correlated with preferences for impressionism). In total, the Big Five explained 5.0% of the variance in the general factor of art preferences.

In a second model (see Figure 2), the Big Five were tested as predictors of preferences for happy, sad, simple, and complex paintings (again, saturated paths between the Big Five and art preferences were drawn). As seen, artistic preference factors were allowed to correlate, and correlations among the Big Five are as shown in Figure 1. Openness to Experience had positive effects on preference for complex and happy paintings, Agreeableness had negative effects on preferences for sad paintings, Conscientiousness had negative effects on preference for complex pictures, and Neuroticism was positively linked to preferences for sad pictures. The fit of the modified model (with the dotted paths removed) was good: $\chi^2(17, N = 3254) = 93.8, p < .01; \text{CFI} = .97; \text{PGFI} = .47; \text{RMSEA} = .04 (\text{low} = .03, \text{high} = .04); \text{AIC} = 131.2; \text{CN} = 57$.

In a third model (see Figure 3), unconventionality, age, and sex were added as predictors. As effects from Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness on art preferences were nonsignificant, they were removed from the model. The model provided good fit for the data: $\chi^2(11, N = 3254) = 106.4, p < .01; \text{CFI} = .97; \text{PGFI} = .30; \text{RMSEA} = .05 (\text{low} = .04, \text{high} = .06); \text{AIC} = 156.4; \text{CN} = 41$. In this model, sex had positive effects (higher preference among women) on preferences for happy paintings and negative effects (higher preference among men) on preferences for sad and complex paintings; age positively affected preferences for simple and negatively affected preferences for complex paintings; Openness to Experience and unconventionality positively affected preference for complex paintings, although the former was positively linked to preference for happy and the latter positively linked to preference for sad paintings. The highest percentage of variance explained in the outcomes was for complex paintings (16.0%).

In a final model (see Figure 4), educational level was added as an exogenous variable and visits to galleries as a mediator. As shown, there were no significant effects of educational level on any of the artistic preferences (although a positive effect of visits to and frequency of gallery visits was found). Frequency of visits was also positively linked to all preferences, as well as being affected by sex (women were more likely than men to visit galleries).

**Figure 1.** Modified model of Big Five predictors of geometric, colorful, impressionist, and portrait art styles. *Note: N = 3,254. Coefficients for full lines are significant at $p < .01$; for dotted lines, $p > .05$; unidirectional arrows are standard beta values; bidirectional arrows are covariates (Pearson’s $r$); % are $R^2$ values (variance explained).**

**Figure 2.** Modified model of Big Five predictors of happy, sad, simple, and complex paintings. *Note: N = 3,254. Coefficients for full lines are significant at $p < .01$; for dotted lines, $p > .05$; unidirectional arrows are standard beta values; bidirectional arrows are covariates (Pearson’s $r$); % are $R^2$ values (variance explained).
The model provided good fit to the data: $\chi^2(17, N = 3254) = 102.3, p < .01; \text{CFI} = .98; \text{PGFI} = .31; \text{RMSEA} = .04$ (low = .03, high = .04); AIC = 178.3; CN = 51.

**Discussion**

The first part of the present study examined the associations between the Big Five personality factors and preferences for four distinct artistic genres, classified a priori by the researchers. Our results replicated previous work in showing a significant positive association between Openness to Experience and preferences for visual art in general (Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, et al., 2009; Feist & Brady, 2004; Furnham & Walker, 2001a, 2001b; McManus & Furnham, 2006; Swami & Furnham, 2009). It thus appears to be the case that the personality trait of Openness to Experience is a core component of what Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, et al. (2009) have termed the “artistic personality.” Specifically, this association may be predicated on the association between Openness to Experience and such psycho-

![Figure 3](image3.png)

*Figure 3. Modified model of demographic and personality predictors of preference for happy, sad, simple, and complex paintings. Coefficients for full lines are significant at $p < .01$; for dotted lines, $p > .05$; unidirectional arrows are standard beta values; bidirectional arrows are covariates (Pearson’s $r$); % are $R^2$ values (variance explained).*

![Figure 4](image4.png)

*Figure 4. Modified model of demographic predictors (including education), visits to galleries, and personality predictors of preference for happy, sad, simple, and complex paintings. Coefficients for full lines are significant at $p < .01$; for dotted lines, $p > .05$; unidirectional arrows are standard beta values; bidirectional arrows are covariates (Pearson’s $r$); % are $R^2$ values (variance explained).*

logical traits as imagination, creativity, liberalism, nonconventional attitudes, and sensation-seeking.

Our results also showed that Extraversion was positively associated with artistic preferences in general. In previous work, Extraversion has been correlated both positively and negatively with artistic preferences (McManus, 2006; Swami & Furnham, 2009), although all studies, including the present work, suggest that it is a weak predictor of preferences. Indeed, it should be noted that, overall, the Big Five personality factors explained only 5% of the variance in artistic preferences across genres. In sum, then, it appears to be the case that the Big Five factors on their own are weak predictors of artistic preference in general, although Openness to Experience consistently and reliably emerges as a positive predictor in all studies.

It is interesting that our results showed that significant associations emerged between the Big Five personality factors and artistic preferences when the latter was classified a posteriori according to emotional valence and perceived complexity. Specifically, and as predicted, Openness to Experience was significantly and positively associated with a preference for emotionally positive (i.e., paintings that evoked a positive observer response, such as Mark Rothko’s *Orange and Yellow*, ca. 1956) and complex paintings (i.e., paintings that were perceived as comprising many intricate and interconnected parts, such as Francis Bacon’s *Head VI*, ca. 1948), whereas Neuroticism was positively associated with a preference for emotionally negative paintings (e.g., Claude Monet’s *Camille Monet sur son lit de mort*, ca. 1879). One unexpected finding in this regard was the negative association between Conscientiousness and a preference for complex paintings. It is possible that this association is predicated on the association between Conscientiousness and conservatism, where the latter has been associated with general dislike of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Wilson et al., 1973).

More important, perhaps, our results also showed that individuals who scored higher on Openness to Experience and unconventionality showed a stronger preference for complex compositions. Indeed, it was notable that the model depicted in Figure 3 explained 16% of the variance in preferences for complex art, a value that increased slightly when educational level and frequency of gallery visits were entered into the model. Clearly, preferences for complex art were more related to individual differences than preference for simple paintings, as well as art classified according to its emotional valence.

Although frequency of gallery visits was assessed with a single item, it is informative to compare its effect on art preferences with those of personality. As seen, frequency of gallery visits had a positive, albeit modest, effect on preference for all paintings—the size of these effects was similar to that of the two personality traits of Openness to Experience and unconventionality. Moreover, although sex, age, educational level, Openness to Experience, and unconventionality all had significant effects on frequency of gallery visits, their effects on artistic preferences were still significant even when frequency of gallery visits was accounted for (with virtually unchanged beta coefficients). This, therefore, suggests that aesthetic preferences as a function of emotional valence or perceived complexity are influenced by demographic factors and personality traits independent of individuals’ typical levels of art-related activities.

A number of limitations of the present study are worth nothing. First, although our recruitment method allowed us to attract a large number of participants who were fairly representative of the British population, it is important that there was a large gender skew in favor of women. Although it is unlikely that this had any major effect on our results, future work would do well to obtain more balanced numbers of women and men. Second, we have clearly not exhausted the list of potential artistic genres, candidate a posteriori classification methods, or possible predictors of artistic preferences. As such, there remain numerous avenues for future research that may afford researchers a more comprehensive understanding of the association between observer traits and aesthetic preferences. In particular, it may be useful to compare categorization of paintings by participants themselves and an independent group that is not asked to rate the paintings, as the former group may be subject to halo effects.

Finally, because we were keen to maximize participation, we relied on a brief measure of the Big Five that showed only moderate internal reliability for two factors (Openness to Experience and Agreeableness). Indeed, the relatively low reliability of the Ten-Item Personality Inventory may help explain the weak correlations between the Big Five and target variables. On the other hand, the inclusion of a novel measure of unconventionality, as a facet of Openness to Experience, may prove useful for future research. Specifically, we suggest that there may be value in examining the association between artistic preferences and narrower facets of Openness to Experience, such as unconventionality, as we have done in the present study. In a similar vein, future research may also examine the association between artistic preferences and narrower facets of other Big Five factors (such as conservatism in relation to Conscientiousness) or other behavior measures that are conceptually closer to aesthetic preferences.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study contributes to the literature by showing that the predictive utility of the Big Five personality traits and selected demographic variables is increased when visual art is classified according to participant-led taxonomies rather than researcher-based assumptions about art history. Our results suggest that understanding subjective appreciation of compositions, particularly in terms of perceived complexity, may prove a more useful means of understanding the associations between observer traits and aesthetic preferences. This suggests that personality traits are more closely tied to aesthetic preferences when we examine categories defined by individuals’ subjective aesthetic experiences. Thus, our research shows that one’s art preferences can say something about one’s personality, but rather than simply asking what an individual likes, it is more informative to ask why an individual prefers a particular piece of art. This result paves the way for future studies that further examine the taxonomy of individual aesthetic experiences. For example, it would be interesting to examine personality while contrasting subjectively formed categories rated independently (by another group) with those rated by the subjects themselves. Although our current research examined only the perceptions of emotional valence and complexity, future studies can examine a richer range of aesthetic responses. This can be achieved by conducting a general survey that solicits aesthetic responses and then uses clustering and factor analysis to determine the key dimensions relevant for subjective art appreciation. By better understanding the dimensions along
which individuals experience art, we can better understand its relationship to individual personality.

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