

# University of Tennessee lecturer investigates response to 'bad' art

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An oil painting of a piece of wood with a sad face sitting on the ground or a pink pony with Disney Princess-like hair. Would people come to like these pieces, considered "bad art" by some websites, if they became more familiar with them?

This was a question asked by an international team of scholars including a University of Tennessee, Knoxville, philosophy lecturer.

Websites like Tumblr catalogue pieces of what are deemed "bad art." However, a well-accepted phenomenon called the "mere exposure effect"—supported by the works of psychologist James Cutting, among others—suggests that repeated exposure to a stimulus enhances people's attitudes towards it. On this basis, one would predict that the more we look at sad stumps and pink ponies, the more we will come to like them. Maybe if we keep looking at those Tumblr pictures, we will come to think they are good.

UT's Margaret Moore worked with lead author Aaron Meskin and Matthew Kieran at the University of Leeds and Mark Phelan at Lawrence University to conduct a study that seems to challenge this prediction. The researchers found an increased exposure to art works does not necessarily make people like them more.

The study is published in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and is titled "Mere Exposure to Bad Art."

"Cutting's research prompts important questions about how exposure influences aesthetic preference and judgment," said Moore. "Is it the case that no matter what images people are exposed to, they will grow to like the ones they see the most? This would suggest at best an extremely limited role for [aesthetic value](#) in determining our aesthetic tastes."

To answer this question, the researchers exposed 57 students to repeated viewings of paintings from two artists, John Everett Millais and Thomas Kinkade. Kinkade, known as the American "Painter of Light," was chosen to represent "bad" art largely on the basis of artistic judgment of the authors and critics who have described his works as "so awful it must be seen to be believed," according to the researchers. The work of Millais, recognized as one of the preeminent painters of the 19th century, was chosen to represent "good" art. His paintings roughly matched Kinkade's subject matter and palette, and are not widely known.

After viewing the art over seven weeks of class periods in different frequencies, the students were shown all 60 images in succession and asked to express their degree of liking on a 10-point scale.

They found that the more often people viewed Kinkade's work, the less they liked it. Conversely, the rating of Millais did not significantly change following repeated exposure.

According to the authors, a possible explanation for the decrease in liking of the Kinkade pieces induced by repeated exposure is the low artistic value of the works. Seeing the paintings more might enable the students to see what is bad about them. Thus, exposure does not work independently of artistic value.

"Just as the first sip of a pint of poorly made real ale might not reveal all that is wrong with it, after a few drinks one would know how unbalanced

and undrinkable it really is," said Meskin. "So, initial [exposure](#) to the Kinkades might not have enabled participants to see how garish the colors are and how hackneyed the imagery is."

**More information:** To read more about their research, visit [blog.oup.com/2013/07/what-make ... -bad-exposure-effect](http://blog.oup.com/2013/07/what-make...-bad-exposure-effect). To view examples of Kinkade's work, visit [www.thomaskinkade.com](http://www.thomaskinkade.com). To view examples of Millais' work, visit [bit.ly/14pWi68](http://bit.ly/14pWi68).

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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