

# Study finds 'magical contagion' spreads creator's essence to pieces, adding value

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Not all things are created equally. We don't view a Picasso sculpture in the same way we look at a hammer, for example—no matter how fancy the hammer.

The reason? We see the Picasso more as a person than an object, according to new research from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

And in some cases, we make distinctions between artworks—say, an [exact replica](#) of a piece created by the [artist](#), versus one created by a different artist.

Art, in other words, is an extension of the creator, write Professor Daniel M. Bartels of Chicago Booth, and Professor George E. Newman and Rosanna K. Smith, a doctoral student, both of Yale University School of Management.

In their paper, "Are Artworks More Like People Than Artifacts? Individual Concepts and Their Extensions," published in the journal *Topics in Cognitive Science*, the researchers build on previous studies that looked at the continuity of people. For example, if you transplant someone's brain into another body and the memories remain stored in the body, is that the same person? Identity is determined by the sameness of physical and mental states—and this view applies to art, as well.

"We have intuitions about the continuity of people and other kinds of

one-of-a-kind objects," Bartels said.

They found that people viewed copies of tools the same as the original, no matter who manufactured them. But with art, replicas created by the original artist were viewed similarly to the original, whereas they were not when another artist made the re-creations.

This has to do with "magical contagion"—the idea that the essence of the artist rubs off on the creation.

"If the artist made physical contact with the replica, it's as if the artist imbued the work with her/his essence by having worked with the (new, replica) piece—it seems like others who might make the copy or other processes by which a copy could be made can't transmit this essence in this way," Bartels said.

Newman added: "One prediction that comes out of this idea is that artwork that seems like it has really had a lot of close physical contact with the artist, i.e., you can see evidence of his or her 'hand,' may be preferred to art where that direct physical connection is less obvious."

Provided by University of Chicago

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