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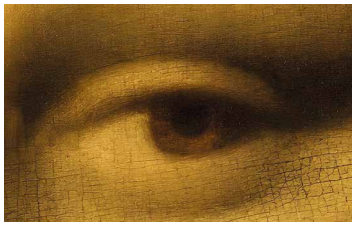


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Science is art – art is science

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Agnieszka Sikora, PhD

EDITORIAL SECRETARY
Tomasz Płosa

PROOFREADING OF THE POLISH VERSION
Katarzyna Wyrwas, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof.

TRANSLATION OF THE ENGLISH VERSION
Artur Adamczyk

TEXT AUTHORS
Adam Bała, Weronika Cygan-Adamczyk, Julia Galas, Tomasz Grząślewicz, MA, Małgorzata Kłoskowicz, PhD, Olimpia Orządała, Tomasz Płosa, Agnieszka Sikora, PhD, Maria Sztuka

COVER
Tomasz Kipka, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof.

GRAPHIC DESIGN, PREPARATION FOR PRINT
Patrycja Warzeszka

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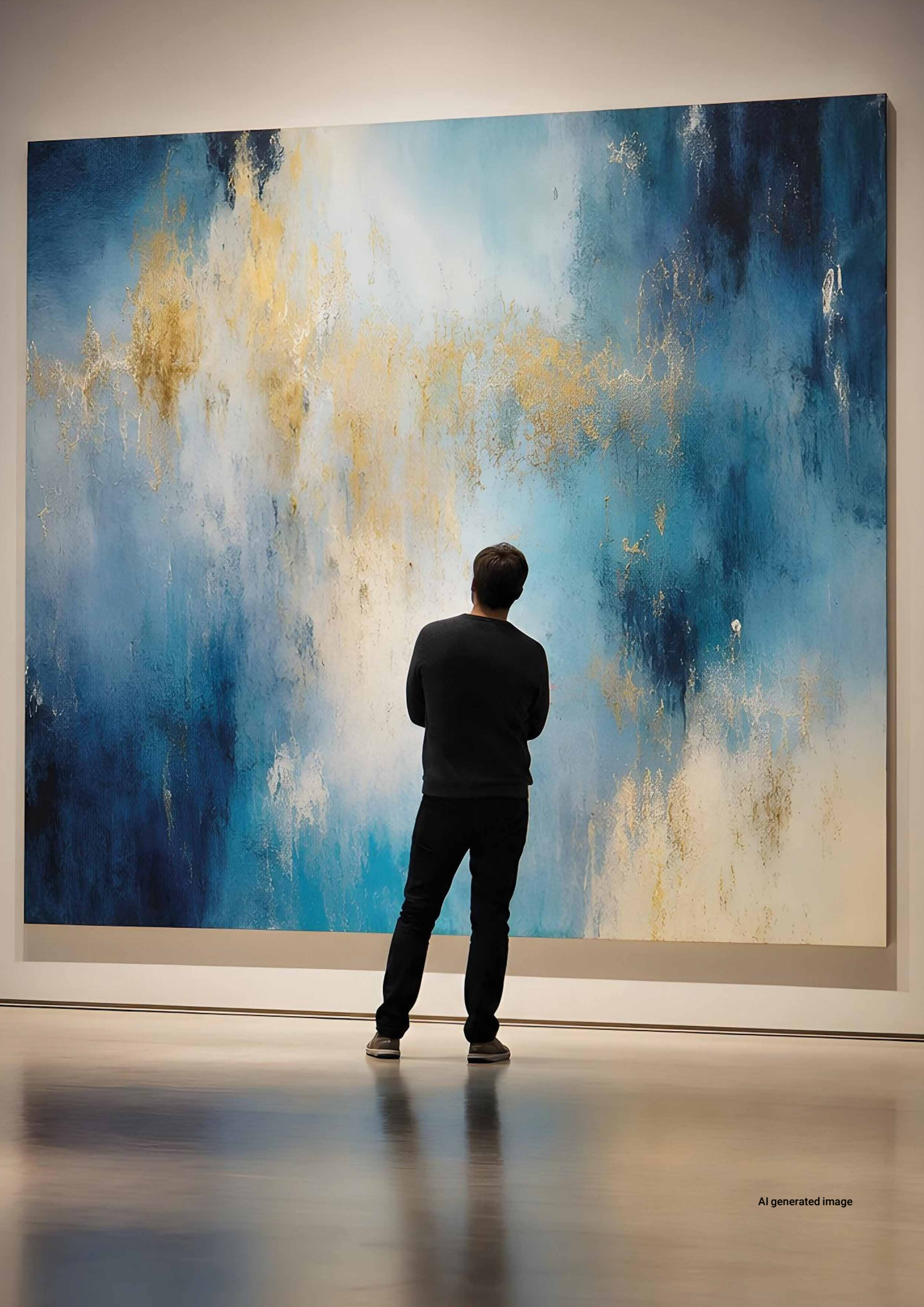
A SENSE OF BEAUTY INSCRIBED IN NEURONS

How come one painting can catch our attention while the other does not impress us in the slightest? What makes us tear up when hearing a couple of sounds arranged in a certain order? Even though art might seem to be the domain of imagination and subjective experiences, its reception has a biological dimension as well. Each encounter with a piece of art lights up in our brains a complex network of processes responsible for perception, attention, memory, and emotion. Neurons in our brains analyse shapes, colours, and proportions and compare them to those we have experienced previously to then make sense of them and assign them a certain meaning. What's created is something more than just an image or a sound – it's an aesthetic experience.



Agnieszka Sikora, PhD

Jacek Francikowski, PhD
Institute of Biology, Biotechnology and Environmental Protection
Faculty of Natural Sciences
University of Silesia in Katowice
jacek.francikowski@us.edu.pl



AI generated image

Researchers have been studying the processes taking place in the human brain while experiencing art for decades. Thanks to modern imaging techniques, they can now track the activity of specific areas of the brain and gain a better understanding of why some works of art appeal to almost everyone, while other resonate only with a select audience. Is there a neuronal recipe for beauty? And what can brain studies teach us about ourselves?

'The creation and perception of abstractions fall within that sphere of the mind's functioning which we regard as particularly subjective. While reception, i.e. what we perceive and how we perceive it, as well as emotional or motor responses to specific stimuli, is relatively easy to study, it is much more difficult to grasp what happens 'inside', at the level of interpretation and assigning meaning', explains Jacek Francikowski, PhD, a biologist at the Institute of Biology, Biotechnology and Environmental Protection at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of University of Silesia in Katowice.

BEGINNINGS

If we are to answer the question of when humans first began to create art, we must first determine what we understand art to be. Might it be the abstract marks, patterns and symbols engraved on the tools of early humans? Or perhaps figurative depictions of animals, humans, or items painted on cave walls? Were these images intended to depict the world, or did they tell specific stories, such as those of hunts? The definition of art will change depending on how we answer these questions. Generally, we can assume that it is a type of human creation, which evokes aesthetic, emotional, or intellectual experiences by means of images, sounds, words or other ways of expression.

Particularly noteworthy are the depictions coming from the Blombos cave (Republic of South Africa). Pieces of ochre were found there, covered with regular, geometric patterns carved by humans around 75,000–100,000 years ago. Some researchers see them as the earliest manifestations of abstract art or at least of symbolic thinking.

In turn, first images depicting reality are dated to around 45,000 years ago, e.g. the painting of a wild pig discovered on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia. This was a monumental discovery because for decades the consensus was that the figurative art had its beginnings in Europe – in such caves as Lascaux or Chauvet. What is interesting, Spanish caves contain paintings that may be over 64,000 years old, suggesting that they were created before Homo sapiens appeared in Europe. If the dates are correct, this means that Neanderthals were creating art or at least symbols.

From a neuroscientific perspective, these findings are particularly interesting because the earliest evidence of human artistic creation testifies not so much to manual skills as to something far more significant: the emergence of the ability to create and understand symbols. Many neuroscientists regard this very ability as the foundation of art, language, religion, and science alike.



Cave painting from the Chauvet Cave | Photo: Thomas T., CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

ARE HUMANS THE ONLY ONES TO EXPERIENCE BEAUTY?

For a long time, the prevailing view in academia was that aesthetic experience is a uniquely human characteristic and occurs when people interact with sensory objects with a particular mindset. However, contemporary research shows that basic mechanisms responsible for aesthetic assessment can also be present in animals. This does not, of course, mean that a chimpanzee becomes captivated by Impressionist paintings or that a wolf ponders the architecture of a Gothic cathedral. But it is likely that many species possess the ability to evaluate the stimulus in terms of its attractiveness and harmony or their aesthetic preferences. A good example is bowerbirds (*Ptilonorhynchidae*). Males use sticks to build complicated structures, i.e. bowers. They decorate them with colourful items: flowers, shells, fruit and even bits of plastic. Females choose their mates based on the attractiveness of those structures. Peacocks and certain fish also exhibit similar behaviour; in these species, mate

selection depends on the assessment of colours, symmetry, patterns and complex displays of movement. Charles Darwin himself suggested that the attractiveness may have emerged in evolution earlier than in humans and played an important role in sexual selection.

Then, what is the difference between human and animal sense of beauty? As researchers point out, this probably does not concern the experience of aesthetic pleasure itself, but rather its interpretation. Humans do not merely react to beauty – they are also able to ponder its meaning, relate a work of art to their own experiences, recognise symbols and metaphors, and experience art as a source of reflection on the world and on themselves.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE BRAIN OF A PERSON EXPERIENCING ART?

Research shows that encountering a work of art does not activate a single, specific 'beauty centre' in the brain. Instead, several interconnected regions spring into action – from those handling basic visual or auditory signals to the emotional circuit, the pleasure-driven reward system, and the networks that process memory, meaning, and interpretation.

In short, when we take in a painting or listen to a piece of music, the brain isn't just 'seeing' or 'hearing'. It is constantly evaluating whether what we are experiencing is interesting, pleasing, surprising, familiar, or significant. Our sense of beauty seems to emerge from a dynamic interplay between perception, emotion, and cognitive appraisal.

'Everything we experience, including our encounters with art, is rooted in how the brain processes information. It involves both incoming sensory data and the internal resources our brains already hold: our knowledge of the world, past experiences, beliefs, and ingrained cognitive patterns. How we respond to art is always a product of these elements coming together', explains Jacek Francikowski.

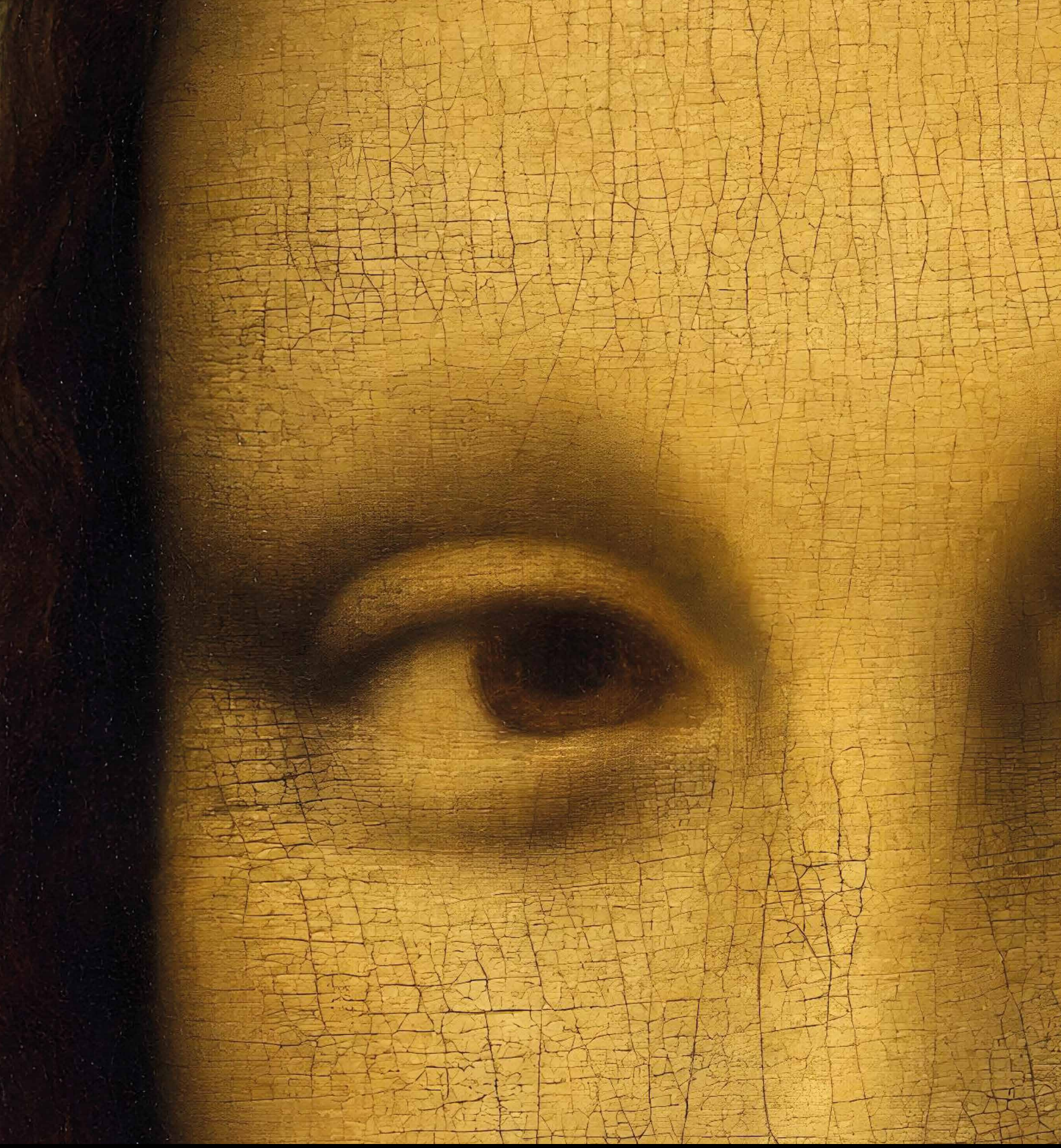
The prefrontal cortex plays a pivotal role here, orchestrating higher cognitive functions like experiencing stimuli, synthesising information, and weighing up its significance. It is in these regions that much of the groundwork for interpretation and subjective experience takes place. 'When studying how people perceive art, we see activity across emotional centres like the amygdala and insula, and structures responsible for the evaluation and integration of information, including the prefrontal cortex. At the same time, lower-level processing areas are also involved, i.e. those responsible for the basic analysis of visual, auditory, and tactile inputs', explains the biologist. 'In the case of complex art forms, such as theatre and opera, we are additionally dealing with the integration of multiple sensory modalities (senses) and narrative layers. The brain must simultaneously process visual imagery, sound, movement, and plot, making the whole experience vastly more complex'.

Blind people present an interesting case. Even though their appreciation of art relies mainly on auditory and tactile modalities, research shows that the visual cortex may be activated even without sight. This means that regions originally dedicated to the processing of visual input appear to be repurposed, taking on tasks like processing of spatial information or mental imagery.

'This does not, however, mean that the brains of blind people "see" in the same way as those of sighted people. Rather, they create different, specific forms of mental representation that cannot be directly compared with visual experience. It's a striking demonstration of the brain's flexibility – its ability to reorganise its own functions, known as neuroplasticity', adds the scientist.

Only a few decades ago, scientists thought that the mature brain was not subject to significant change, and that its ability to form new neural connections was very limited. Today, we know the brain rewires itself throughout our lives: building new connections between neurons, strengthening some neural networks while pruning others, and occasionally even reassigning entire regions. This neuroplasticity allows us to learn new skills, adapt to a changing environment, and recover function after injury. It also fundamentally shapes how we engage with art. Every encounter with a creative work leaves an imprint on our neural wiring, enriching our perspective and altering how we process future stimuli. This is why an art historian, a professional musician, and someone with no prior exposure to a particular art form can come in contact with the exact same painting or a piece of music and walk away with entirely different experiences. Shaped by different backgrounds, their brains have created distinct patterns of perception, association, and emotional response.

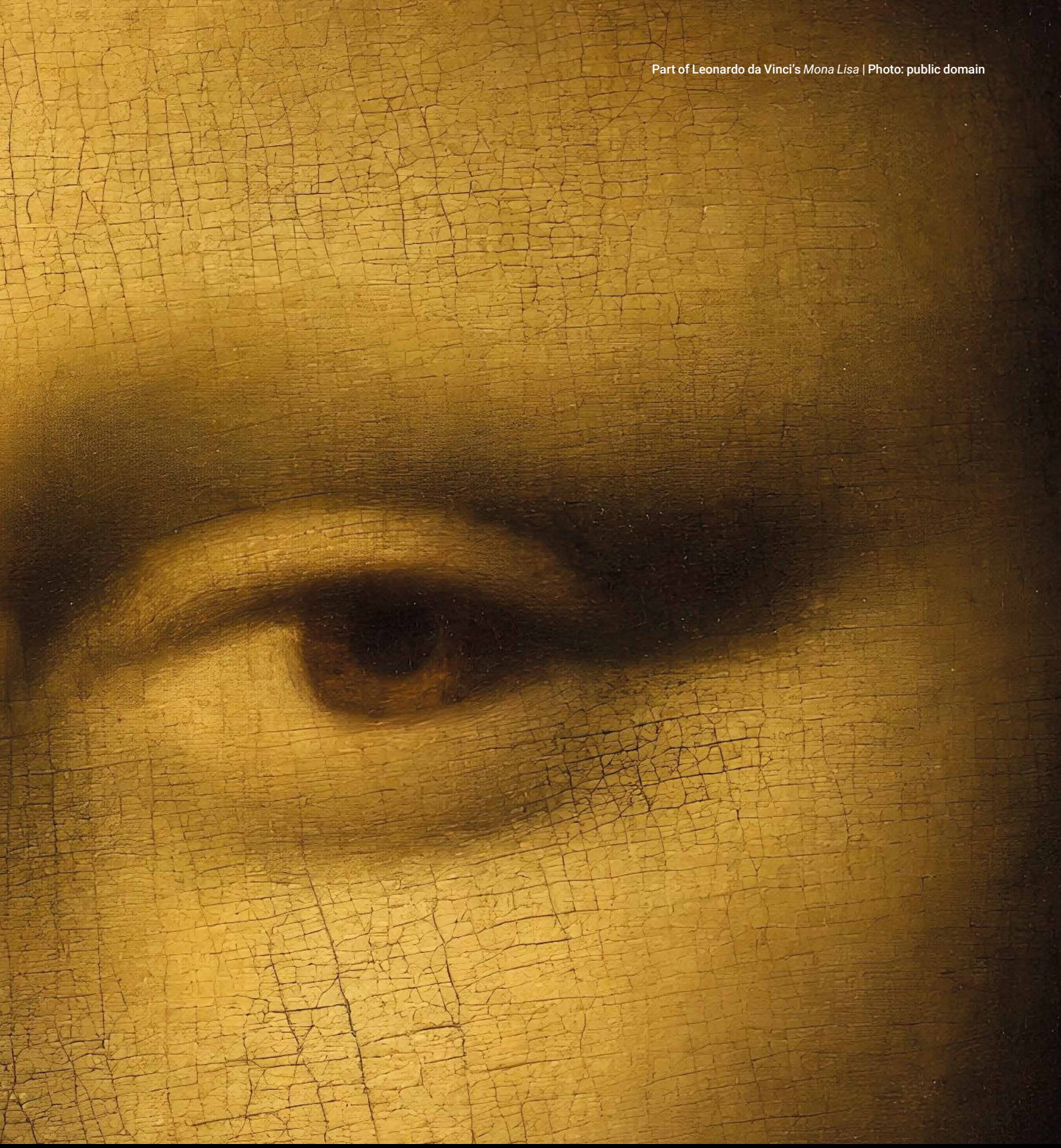
It is worth noting that beyond cognitive and emotional benefits, engaging with art may also support our long-term health. Keeping the mind actively engaged and regularly stimulated over a lifetime is linked to a slower rate of cognitive decline in later years. Research suggests that diverse intellectual and sensory pursuits – art included – help build so-called cognitive reserve, i.e. the brain's ability to compensate for neurodegenerative changes. While these do not guarantee protection against such conditions as dementia, they may delay the onset of symptoms and soften their impact.



Małgorzata Kłoskowicz, PhD

Barbara Lewicka, PhD
Institute of Sociology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Silesia in Katowice
barbara.lewicka@us.edu.pl

MONA LISA
IS LOOKING AT YOU



Part of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* | Photo: public domain

30,000 – that's how many visitors the Louvre welcomes every day. As the world's most visited museum, it has become a staple of mass tourism and a must-see on any list of places to visit in Paris. However, this huge interest has led to overcrowding, making it physically difficult to view the masterpieces. The rise in the popularity of museums is transforming an intimate aesthetic experience into a superficial social one, in which the act of engaging with a work of art gives way to cultural rituals and the pressures of social media.



Tourists taking photos of the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre in Paris (2023)
Photo: APK, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The Mona Lisa – an icon of global culture – epitomises this phenomenon. Her image is used extensively by filmmakers, advertisers, manufacturers of merchandise and clothing, and creators of internet memes.

It was already stirring up a great deal of excitement long before now. In 1911, for instance, it captured the attention of millions when Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian immigrant, decided to simply take it from the Louvre to his own flat. This incident caused a worldwide sensation, and one of the consequences was the decision not to loan the masterpiece to other museums. An exception was made for the first time in 1963, when the Mona Lisa crossed the ocean to meet with American audiences at the request of Jacqueline Kennedy. Witnesses claimed that it was indeed a spectacle worthy of a Renaissance masterpiece. On a frosty January night, several thousand people waited to witness the unveiling of the painting. Exhibited first at the National Gallery of Art and then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it attracted millions and generated enormous media interest. Her face appeared on the front pages of newspapers across the country. Due to the huge interest, the museums had to extend their opening hours, and every visitor had just a few seconds to view the work.

'Andy Warhol summed up this phenomenon perfectly, pointing out that people did not go there to see the painting, but to take part in a social event. Nobody wanted to feel left out. If the French had sent a copy instead of the original, hardly any visitors would have even noticed the difference. Warhol's commentary on the Mona Lisa's trip abroad took the form of a famous colour lithograph', explains Barbara Lewicka, PhD, from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Silesia, a sociologist specialising in American art from the late 19th- and early 20th-century.

What was an ironic hypothesis for Warhol, contemporary museum institutions are beginning to use as a deliberate strategy for dealing with mass audiences. Rather than fighting the visitors' urge to capture the encounter with art in a photograph, they offer alternative solutions.

The National Museum in Kraków made an interesting choice: between 2017 and 2019, while the Czartoryski Museum was undergoing renovation, visitors could view another famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci at its venue. 'The Lady with an Ermine is here', proclaimed a huge billboard partially covering one of the museum walls.

'The specially designed space encouraged a more intimate encounter with the masterpiece, but photography was not permitted. However, the museum put a copy of the painting nearby for those who wished to take a photo documenting their encounter with the artwork despite the restrictions', says Barbara Lewicka. This type of an encounter involves very specific experiences. First, you stand in a never-ending queue, only to find yourself moving in a mechanical rhythm from canvas to canvas within a confined space. You have to constantly watch out for the exhibits and the people brushing past you. The air becomes heavy, thick and stuffy, filled with the hum of the crowd. And the painting itself? You can only glance at it in passing for a mere few seconds, feeling the pressure of the crowd surging behind you.

'The world's largest museums have become tourist attractions and can now be compared to amusement parks. If these are organised tours, there often isn't much time, which means that participants are constantly in a rush', says the researcher.

'I should add that, a dozen or so years ago, the director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence decided to remove the sculptures from the museum's main hall. His motivation was precisely the huge influx of tourists. People gathered there in such numbers that the presence of the sculptures significantly impeded the smooth flow of visitors. People were practically tripping over them, which was deemed impractical and dangerous – both for the sculptures and visitors', says the researcher.

The mass nature of art appreciation is also linked to a shift in etiquette. The sociologist recalls watching the Chopin Competition with her grandfather in the early 1990s.

'Our attention was briefly caught by the audience members. Amongst people in evening attire sat a man in a Batman sweatshirt. My grandfather was appalled. What was an even more difficult experience for me was a concert I once attended in the Golden Hall of the Vienna Philharmonic. The orchestra was playing Brahms in a masterful fashion, and yet the men sitting next to me were glued to their phones the whole time', adds the researcher.

This is one of the consequences of a shift resulting in such places losing their original function and becoming tourist attractions.

The very notion of a museum as a monumental, classical building where certain standards apply has its roots in the 19th century. Previously, various collections were housed in so-called cabinets of curiosities. The Louvre was initially a fortress, then a royal residence where a private art collection began to be assembled. It was not until the French Revolution that the building's doors were opened to the general public. The famous glass pyramid was added in the 20th century.

The sociologist points out that 19th-century museum buildings – and concert halls – were designed to emphasise their role as temples of art and to command respect. In museums, works were displayed in chronological order to familiarise visitors with historical periods. Today, exhibitions that juxtapose objects from different periods are becoming increasingly common.

Great works of art also become symbols, elements of our social identity, as evidenced by an incident in 2022, when two members of the organisation Just Stop Oil poured tins of tomato soup over Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* at the National Gallery in London. Footage of the incident went viral, though the painting itself remained undamaged thanks to protective measures. Similar stories concern the *Mona Lisa*, which over the past seventy years has been subjected to various forms of protest, including attacks with acid, spray paint, cake, and soup. The security system has protected these works and preserved them for future generations.

'The choice of protest method was no accident. It was a strike against a specific symbol. I do not believe that pouring a tin of soup over a great work of art is ever a justified action, but I must admit that these people knew how to attract the media's attention', explains the sociologist.

It turns out that in a world dominated by mass tourism and high-profile protests, art can also be experienced in a different manner, for instance, by visiting storage facilities usually reserved for art historians and conservators. The Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam opened its unique storage facility to visitors while the main building was undergoing renovation. The storage is an extraordinary mirrored structure resembling a huge bowl that reflects the city's skyline.

This is part of a wider trend towards experiencing different spaces, not just traditional exhibitions. The Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, as Barbara Lewicka explains, allows visitors to see endless rows of storage shelves full of paintings through a glass wall. Currently, the San Marco monastery in Florence is hosting an exhibition of Mark Rothko's paintings, set amongst beautiful polychrome frescoes. The researcher emphasises that the setting is not accidental, as the colours of the ancient frescoes can be found in the American painter's splashes of colour.

'What I enjoy most is visiting small, private museums. They often house extraordinary art collections', says Barbara Lewicka. Perhaps it is precisely there, far from the overwhelming queues, camera flashes, and hustle and bustle, that art regains its former power. And the Mona Lisa? I've seen her once, and that's enough', concludes the researcher.



First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy at the opening ceremony of the *Mona Lisa* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington | Photo: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (public domain)

MORE THAN WORDS

PHOTO: BARBARA KUBSKA



The ‘The Moon is a Woman’ workshop, aimed at women, focused on fostering a positive relationship with oneself and one’s body. The participants created a shared moon mandala, on which they recorded their experiences from the previous lunar cycle.

Can poetry be a product of scientific research? Can photography help us understand emotions better than a questionnaire? More and more researchers are turning to art-based research – an approach that combines science and art to describe human experiences in greater depth. Magdalena Hyla-Zając, PhD, from the Institute of Psychology of the University of Silesia, discusses the possibilities and applications of this method. We often associate science with something that stands in opposition to art. According to the researcher, the two worlds can be successfully combined.

HOW ART HELPS US EXPLORE HUMAN EXPERIENCES

Psychologists have been using questionnaires and interviews for years to better understand people. However, words are not always enough, which is why some researchers turn to art-based research. In this case, the tools of inquiry can include, amongst other things, photography, poetry, and film.

'This method has developed, among others, from the belief that there is no single, fully objective perspective capable of describing human experience. In research on human beings, value lies not only in measuring and comparing phenomena, but also in exploring them in depth from a humanistic perspective. Art can help in this regard because it allows us to tap into the physical, emotional, and creative dimensions of experience, which do not always come to light in conversation or in a questionnaire', explains the psychologist.

THE (UN)PRESENT RESEARCHER

Many classical scientific approaches assume that the researcher should be an impartial observer. Art-based research takes a different approach.

'The assumption is that it is not possible to completely separate the researcher from the research process. Therefore, the researcher does not conceal their presence, and sometimes even creates works themselves, inspired by encounters and the experiences of those taking part in the research', explains Magdalena Hyla-Zając.

Art-based research also has a social dimension. The results do not necessarily have to take the form of a scientific article.

'They can be published as poetry, short stories, or exhibitions. I am particularly drawn to dialogical art, in which the audience not only learns about the research findings but can also add their own story and become part of the conversation', says the researcher.

According to the psychologist, this approach also helps to communicate scientific issues more effectively.

'We live in an age of information and disinformation overload. If the language of science is too difficult for the audience, they are easily tempted by the appeal of simplistic explanations. That is why it is our task to convey knowledge in an accessible and responsible manner', believes Magdalena Hyla-Zając.

Professional ethics are also important.

'Some people put forward certain theories, but when their actions lead to suffering or harm, they do not take responsibility for it. In science and psychology, accountability for one's words is extremely important', emphasises the researcher.

FROM POETRY TO PHOTOGRAPHY

Magdalena Hyla-Zając combines academic work with psychotherapeutic practice. In her view, art opens up access to areas of experience that are difficult to reach through conversation alone. However, drawing or more complex artistic techniques don't suit everyone – which is where photography can be especially helpful.

'We make use of photos to stimulate conversation. This also works well in group work, as images help people open up and talk about themselves', says the psychologist.

The researcher also uses art in her research projects. As part of a grant from the National Science Centre, she created poetry based on women's accounts of their first period.

In 2025, together with Prof. Katarzyna Krasoń and Prof. Jolanta Jastrząb, she published the book *On the journey. In search of an artified every day* [W podróży. W poszukiwaniu codzienności artyfikowanej], which is an example of the practical application of art-based research.

'We ran workshops with older people in hospices and at universities of the third age. Later, each of us recounted these experiences through our own medium: poetry, film and painting. In this way, we demonstrate that classical qualitative research, statistics, and art can complement each other', says Magdalena Hyla-Zając who is currently continuing her work with women exploring their relationship with their bodies, developing her own model of contextual behavioural art therapy.

ART THAT SHIFTS PERSPECTIVES

According to the researcher, art can support people on a social, biological, and psychological level. It helps to build bonds, triggers memories and emotions, and facilitates a better understanding of one's own experiences. Therapeutic activities using visual art serve as an example.

'When women create self-portraits from the perspective of strength, agency, or happiness, they begin to perceive themselves differently. Such experiences get imprinted not only in their minds but also in their bodies and emotions', she explains.

In her therapeutic work, the psychologist also uses less obvious media, such as Dixit cards or Lego bricks.

'I remember a client who used the bricks to create figures symbolising different parts of himself. This made it easier for him to accept aspects of his personality that he hadn't liked before. It allowed him to work through certain difficulties much more quickly than if we'd simply talked about them', says the psychologist.

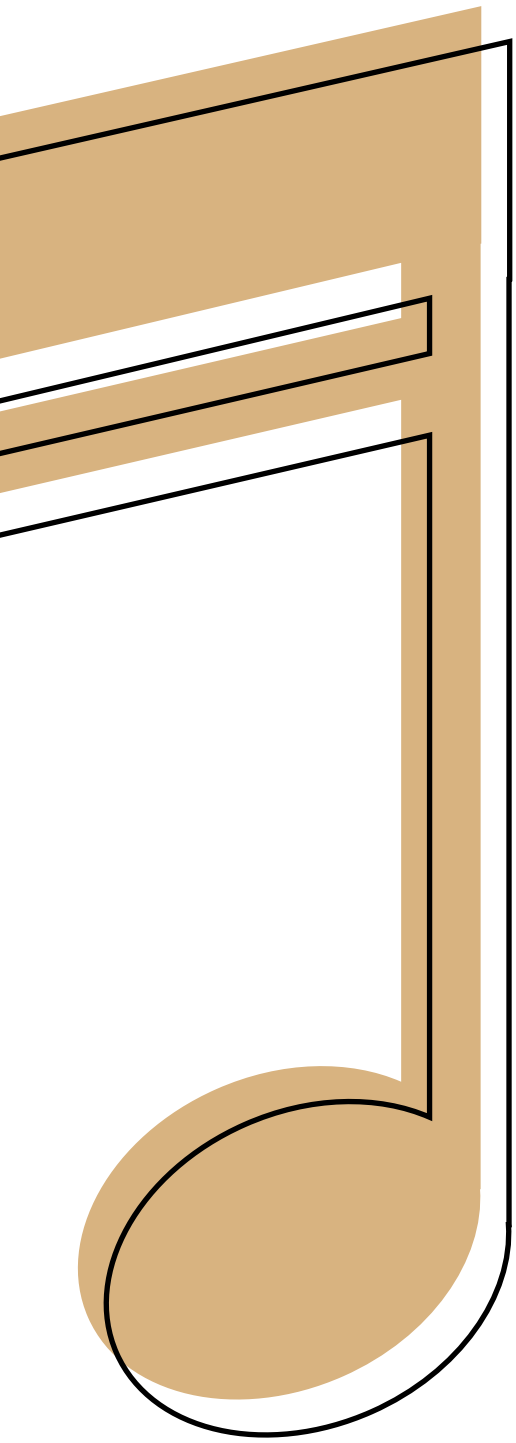
For Magdalena Hyla-Zając, art is not merely an optional component of research or therapy. It is a way of gaining knowledge about human nature and, at the same time, a tool for conveying that knowledge.

'I would like to emphasise: let us be responsible researchers and seek out different ways of reaching people. Art is not merely a painting, a song or a drawing. It is, above all, a way of thinking, an openness, and a process of getting to know people', concludes the psychologist.

Olimpia Orządała

Magdalena Hyla-Zając, PhD
Institute of Psychology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Silesia in Katowice
magdalena.hyla@us.edu.pl

Julia Galas



FILM SOUNDSCAPES: HOW MUSIC BUILDS THE WORLD OF CINEMA

Sight is very often the first sense we associate with the cinema. To truly see a film, however, we must also hear it – discovering its full complexity would not be possible without the sound revolution and film music, which has become an integral part of the stories told on the big screen. Music invites viewers to journey through the characters' emotions, diverse locations, and plot twists, weaving individual scenes into a coherent whole. Thanks to it, we cease to be mere spectators: we become a part of the world depicted on screen and active participants in the unfolding story.

Bogumiła Mika, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof.
Institute of Arts Studies
Faculty of Humanities
University of Silesia in Katowice
bogumila.mika@us.edu.pl

MUSIC IN THE SCORE OF CULTURE

'The shift towards audio in culture, as well as growing knowledge of how to tell stories through sound, is placing ever-greater demands on film music today. It is no longer merely a backdrop to a sequence of scenes: music creates an additional space, encouraging us to watch (and listen to!) a film more than once and allow the soundscape to help us discover further dimensions of the narrative', says musicologist Bogumiła Mika, PhD, DLitt. Assoc. Prof., who researches the significance of musical styles and the role of instruments in various types of film music.

Music shapes the way we understand a given scene – having been brought up in a particular culture, we are 'programmed' with certain ways of interpreting sounds, which enables us to accurately interpret what we see and hear on screen. Music remains inseparably linked to the era in which it was created, thus introducing a context specific to that era into the film and building deeper narrative layers. The researcher also notes that a conscious composer draws on the knowledge that classical and art music – shaped over generations – brings to film music. The same applies to instruments – each one emerged at a specific moment in history, and its presence was motivated by a particular purpose and method of use. For this reason, the very choice of instrument suggests to viewers whether it will be, for example, a love scene (violin) or a victory parade (trumpet). Ludwig Göransson makes excellent use of this potential in the film *Oppenheimer* – violin leads the soundtrack and, thanks to the various ways of using the bow, takes on both a lyrical and an unsettling tone.

SOUND STORYTELLING

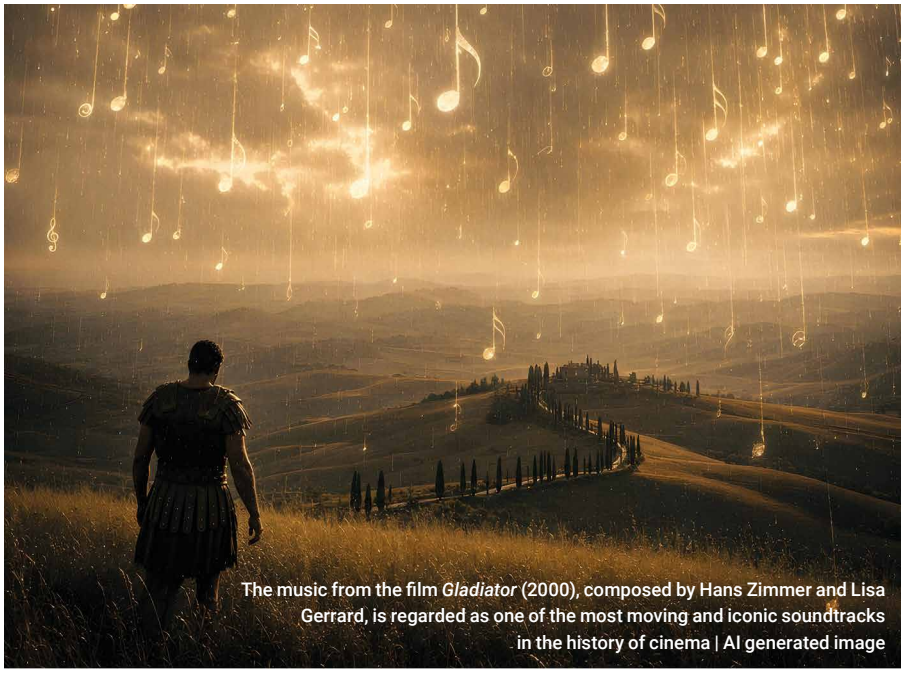
Well-chosen music lends a film greater depth, while its sound narrative complements the existing screenplay. Changes in musical motifs, as well as the number and manner of instrument use, successfully signal the successive stages of the story: a single note may, for example, be assigned to just one character, while an orchestra indicates a gathering of many characters on screen. This allows us to analyse successive scenes in terms of both the narrative and changes in the music. In the aforementioned *Oppenheimer*, when the protagonist decides to become involved in the development of the atomic bomb, we hear a piano melody, which is associated with the character of his wife. Although she does not appear in that scene, the music suggests that she will bear the greatest consequences of her husband's choice (loneliness, the hardships of parenthood).

'The heroine's sad reality becomes clear, even though there is no explicit justification for it in what we see on screen. It is a narrative that emerges through sound: many storylines that we would describe in successive book chapters can, in a film, be conveyed solely through well-composed music', explains the researcher.

STRATEGIES OF MASTERS

Prof. Mika emphasises that the work of a composer who creates film music in a thoughtful manner is based on three pillars: the history of music (the development of musical styles and instruments across the ages, melodies and timbres characteristic of various classical compositions), its connections with culture (the presence and significance of sounds in different cultures) and knowledge of films (the use of specific types of sounds in cinema). This type of attentiveness and musical and narrative sensibility characterise two masters of film music: John Williams and Hans Zimmer. It is worth noting the differences in the composers' working methods: Williams draws on his knowledge of classical music, which enables him to assign distinctive leitmotifs to individual characters and worlds. As a result, not only is each character uniquely described through sound, but the relationships between them are also reflected in the music we hear. Hans Zimmer, on the other hand, links many scenes with a single, evolving theme, weaving various scenes into a coherent and expanding soundscape. To achieve the desired effect, the composer uses electronic music as well as instruments specific to particular cultures, which he plays in a traditional manner or by giving them new sounds.

His body of work is full of surprises and unexpected sounds that swiftly become part of the cultural canon; a case in point is his score for *The Lion King* and the sonic portrait of Africa it created, which has stayed with us ever since. This phenomenon demonstrates how skilfully Zimmer uses his compositional craft and range of instruments to build emotions and a world that extends far beyond the confines of the screen', concludes the researcher.



The music from the film *Gladiator* (2000), composed by Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard, is regarded as one of the most moving and iconic soundtracks in the history of cinema | AI generated image

Maria Sztuka

THERAPY IN MUSICAL NOTATION



AI generated image

Music as a therapeutic medium is not a modern invention. Even in tribal times, shamans would induce an ecstatic trance during healing rituals, aided by the steady rhythm of drums, hypnotic chanting, and expressive dances. These healing practices gave way to medical knowledge, which for centuries overlooked music. It was not until the 19th century that Canon Howard began to use it to help patients relax in London hospitals. However, music therapy did not emerge as a scientific discipline until the 20th century.

Surprisingly, the world wars played a part in its development. Wounded soldiers and psychologically traumatised veterans were subjected to music-assisted therapy. Playing an instrument and listening to soothing sounds helped to ease the images of bloodshed and provided respite from painful memories, effectively acting as a form of treatment. Music therapy was recognised as a standalone field of study for the first time in 1944 at a university in Michigan. Polish medicine began to recognise the therapeutic properties of music in the 1950s. The first degree programme in music therapy was launched in 1973 at the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław; other institutions soon followed suit, including the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the Academy of Music in Katowice. In 2015, the profession of a music therapist was included in the Classification of Occupations and Specialisations, and today certified specialists work in numerous hospitals.

Between 2018 and 2022, an international research project called LongSTEP was carried out in five countries – Poland, Norway, Israel, Colombia and Argentina – with the aim of analysing the impact of early music therapy intervention on premature babies and their parents. Łucja Bieleninik, PhD, DLitt (University of Gdańsk), who led the project on behalf of Poland, invited Sara Knapik-Szweda, PhD, from the Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Silesia – an educator, clinician, a certified music therapist (MT-C) and supervisor (a graduate of the Music Therapy degree programme at the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice) to participate in the project. As a result, the hospital in Ruda Śląska, where Sara Knapik-Szweda currently works and conducts research, became the first hospital to introduce professional music therapy.

Extremely premature babies struggle with the underdevelopment of almost all their organs; they face breathing difficulties, unstable body temperature, and feeding challenges due to their inability to suckle. The sight of a baby fighting for its life is also a traumatic experience for parents who are sometimes prevented from holding their child because of the severity of their condition and are left with no choice but to watch from outside the incubator.

The work of a music therapist in a neonatal unit requires a great deal of attentiveness and is preceded by meetings with the parents, during which their emotions, needs, and musical preferences are explored. The course of the therapy depends to a large extent on the quality of this cooperation.

Recorded music is not used when working with premature babies. The primary therapeutic tools are live music and the parents' natural voices. Mums and dads are encouraged to sing softly, hum lullabies, and speak tenderly to their baby. Vocal ability is irrelevant – what matters is authenticity, a calm rhythm, and adapting one's voice to the baby's state. The baby recognises the parent's voice from around the 24th week of pregnancy; this strengthens the sense of security, supports regulation, and helps build a bond.

'The baby's reaction to a parent's voice or a soothing lullaby is visible on the monitors, which register the baby's oxygen saturation, heart rate, and respiratory rate. Physiological parameters begin to normalise as agitation and crying subside. In subsequent sessions, coordination skills related to feeding are reinforced. Listening to the parent's voice also helps to alleviate pain, which in turn makes it possible for the baby to achieve a state of self-regulation. Another extremely important aspect of music therapy is its non-invasive nature. Should overstimulation occur – although this has not yet happened – the session can be stopped at any time, as we always adapt to the child and observe them closely', emphasises the therapist.

Music therapy brings nothing but benefits to the lives of premature babies. The main benefit – as parents have pointed out – is the formation of very strong emotional bonds, a better understanding of the child's behaviour, reactions, preferences, and fears, as well as the ability to interpret their expectations, which results in strong relationships with the child. Supporting the physiological, behavioural and emotional aspects of the child's and parents' well-being contributes to the child's healthy development. This therapeutic approach is known as Family-Centred Music Therapy – a method used by Sara Knapik-Szweda in her work.

Many therapists note that the musical aspect that develops in a person is a natural reflex; this is demonstrated, for example, by a baby's first babbling, which is a jumble of sounds and an element of non-verbal communication. So should music be part of our lives? A layperson might say – perhaps, but not necessarily; science says unequivocally – yes!

'Music supports neural connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, and even enhances the capacity to form synapses', emphasises Sara Knapik-Szweda. 'It stimulates the brain and hormone secretion, influences neurogenesis, and synchronises brain waves. It also develops the facial motor system (responsible, amongst other things, for emotional reactions) and supports sensory-motor integration because it naturally provokes emotional expression. It causes the brain to seek out new solutions and new connections, sometimes lost for various reasons', argues the researcher.

There are currently five hospitals in Poland offering professional music therapy for premature babies and their families, and the issue is by no means marginal: every year, around 20,000 children are born before the end of the 37th week of pregnancy.

'I believe that the number of hospitals which recognise the importance of music therapy will continue to grow', says Sara Knapik-Szweda.

Sara Knapik-Szweda, PhD
Institute of Pedagogy
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Silesia in Katowice
sara.knapik-szweda@us.edu.pl

Adam Bała

VISUAL IDENTITY IS NOT DECORATION

IT IS A SYSTEM OF MEANINGS

Tomasz Kipka, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof.
Institute of Fine Arts
Faculty of Arts and Educational Science
University of Silesia in Katowice
tomasz.kipka@us.edu.pl

In the popular imagination, graphic design is often reduced to mere aesthetics and superficial embellishments. Modern academic thinking, however, urges us to move away from thinking in terms of 'pretty pictures' and instead treat visual identity as an advanced cognitive, social, and cultural tool.



Silesian Water Centre (hybrid presentation) – Fusion of the letter 'Q' (Quality/Aqua) with an organic shape of a droplet and wave; logomark paired with a full typographic layout based on friendly lowercase lettering | Design: Tomasz Kipka

MORE THAN JUST A LOGO

What exactly is visual identity? Should we understand logos, colours, and fonts solely as a set of graphic elements, or rather as an autonomous language and a system of spatial and symbolic orientation?

'Visual identity is not mere decoration, but a coded narrative about an institution, a city or a brand. When embarking on a design process, you need to decide whether you are operating in the realm of fine art, applied design, public communication, or perhaps identity management strategy. All these spheres overlap', says Tomasz Kipka, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof. from the Faculty of Arts and Educational Science of the University of Silesia.

It is important to understand why a logo alone is never enough to create a recognisable and lasting identity. The logo is merely the tip of the iceberg. For the entire visual system to function effectively in the social sphere, it must be rigorously consistent, structurally simple, repeatable and able to evoke appropriate emotions. Above all, however, it must remain in absolute harmony with the authentic values that the institution is meant to represent.

DESIGN THAT LEADS THE WAY

Visual identity is one of the most common examples of applied art. It accompanies us in the visual presentation of projects and events, in the identification of individuals, in the most mundane of places such as bus stops, as well as on packaging, signage, social media, and websites. The question of where art ends and a pragmatic message begins is increasingly losing its relevance, as these two spheres need not be mutually exclusive but can in fact reinforce one another. Well-designed everyday visuals genuinely improve our quality of life.

'The best graphic design is almost invisible. It leads us by the hand through information layouts at railway stations, signage systems in government offices or the virtual space of university websites, as long as it functions flawlessly. We only become painfully and acutely aware of it when it fails – giving rise to chaos, frustration and a sense of disorientation. Art does not need to be confined to sterile art galleries; we encounter this form of applied art at every turn – its most important test takes place in our everyday living spaces, both real and digital', explains the researcher.

PSYCHOLOGY OF ORDER: WHY DO WE TRUST DESIGN?

Trust in well-designed spaces and messages does not come out of nowhere.

'It stems directly from the evolutionary structure of our cognitive apparatus. The human brain processes and decodes images incomparably faster than complex textual messages. Tools such as colour, rhythm, contrast, proportions, and a precise hierarchy of information directly determine our perception of reality – they instil in us a subconscious sense of security and the credibility of a place', explains Tomasz Kipka.

The average person rarely consciously analyses a font or the structure of a logo. They intuitively sense the order, organisation and professionalism of an institution. Colours and proportions influence emotions and decisions. The researcher highlights the destructive power of visual chaos, which can effectively weaken and discredit a message, even when the substantive content behind it is extremely valuable and significant.

VISUAL MIRROR OF IDENTITY

Since an image speaks to who we are, the visual identity of contemporary public institutions or universities can reveal the true nature of an organisation before it is articulated. A visual system acts as a mirror – it communicates to the outside world openness, modernity, tradition, a willingness to experiment, local roots or international elitism, sometimes completely contrary to the intentions of the decision-makers themselves. An outstanding design can bring out and reveal an institution's hidden identity, one of which it is not yet fully aware itself.

'Designing for a university is a complex process: the system must harmoniously blend the solemnity of academic tradition with a modern, dynamic language that will appeal to younger generations. Colour and typography become vehicles for community values, credibility and universal accessibility. The situation becomes complicated due to the fact that the university communicates simultaneously with many different audiences: prospective students, current students, distinguished academics, international partners, the media and the business world. Each of these groups interprets this image through their own set of circumstances', explains Tomasz Kipka.

Therefore, the brand identity must reflect the institution's stature, be approachable, and at the same time be semantically broad enough to coherently integrate autonomous departments, research projects, and events.

ORDER IN THE URBAN JUNGLE

Stepping outside the institution and moving into the macro-scale, we find ourselves in the modern city: a vast, overwhelming visual landscape comprising shop signs, advertisements, murals, road signs, and the aesthetics of public transport. The researcher points out that today's public space is drastically overloaded with stimuli, resulting in visual smog. The role of professional brand identity and urban information systems is to organise and humanise the city, not to add to the noise.

'If a design becomes part of the visual clutter, it means that information architecture has failed. Well-thought-out signage that contributes to spatial order, along with standardised signs, fulfils an important psychosocial function. By helping people orient themselves in the city, it directly influences mental well-being and fosters a sense of pride, attachment, and local belonging among its residents', emphasises the researcher.

ACCESSIBILITY PARADIGM

'Design cannot be focused solely on satisfying the sophisticated needs of those with an "eye for aesthetics"', cautions Tomasz Kipka.

Visual identity in public spaces must remain fully legible to older people, those with visual impairments, neurodiverse individuals, foreign nationals who do not speak the language, as well as any user operating under severe stress, in a hurry, and on a small smartphone screen. The researcher emphasises that a beautiful design which becomes illegible due to an excess of form cannot be considered good – it is simply bad practice. Do the standards resulting from the need to balance aesthetics and accessibility limit the designer's creative freedom?

'On the contrary – they provide a stimulating framework that compels deeper design discipline, resulting in solutions that are both beautiful and as useful as they can be for a highly diverse range of social groups', replies the researcher.

SYSTEMIC SINS. A BRAND BOOK IS NOT ENOUGH

Tomasz Kipka lists randomness, an excess of stimuli, the uncontrolled proliferation of logos, a lack of clear rules, chaotic use of colour, and succumbing to the particular tastes of individuals rather than considering the needs of the target audience – which is diverse and varied – among the most common sins of visual identity in the public sphere. What is interesting is that organisations very often create visual chaos despite having professional brand books. This stems from the fact that implementing and maintaining the system requires ongoing training across the entire institution, not just within the narrow confines of marketing and graphic design departments. Without mechanisms for the effective enforcement of guidelines, any visual identity – even the best – will be quickly diluted by local habits. The passage of time is also a significant factor. Some systems look archaic after a few seasons, while others retain their strength for decades – this depends on their resilience to fleeting trends.

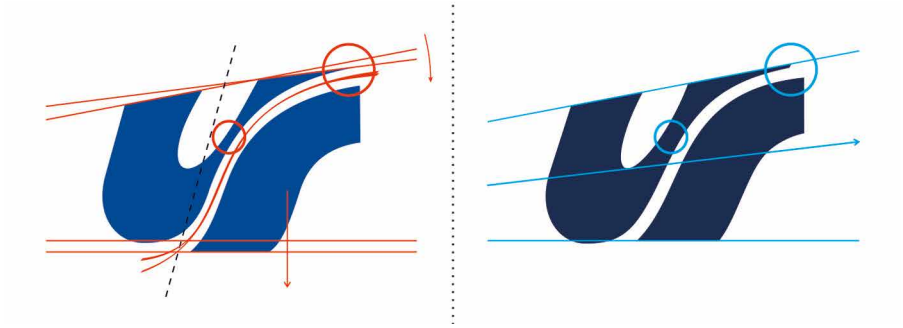
'A good design must be timeless. Rebranding makes sense when it maintains the continuity of identity in an evolutionary way and simultaneously freshens up the image. If it is nothing more than a costly cosmetic change without a deeper strategy, it becomes a mistake. A public institution cannot change its image every season, succumbing to the newest trends, nor can it remain frozen in a bygone era', the researcher points out.

VISUAL SENSITIVITY IN THE AGE OF AI

Visual identity is moving away from paper in favour of screen-based media, animation, apps, augmented reality, and short-form video formats, such as TikTok. The traditional, static logo is slowly losing its monopoly as it gives way to dynamic, flexible and responsive systems that react instantly to the context of use. Contrary to what you might expect, this is not at all about complex animations, but rather about the logical variability of the logo and selecting the best possible versions for a given space. The digital age has already redefined the role of the logo. Generative artificial intelligence is also an inevitable part of this evolution. We are faced with the question of whether AI will be a clever tool supporting designers' craft, or rather an uncritical factory of derivative, mass-produced visual chaos. The answer depends on our knowledge and expertise.

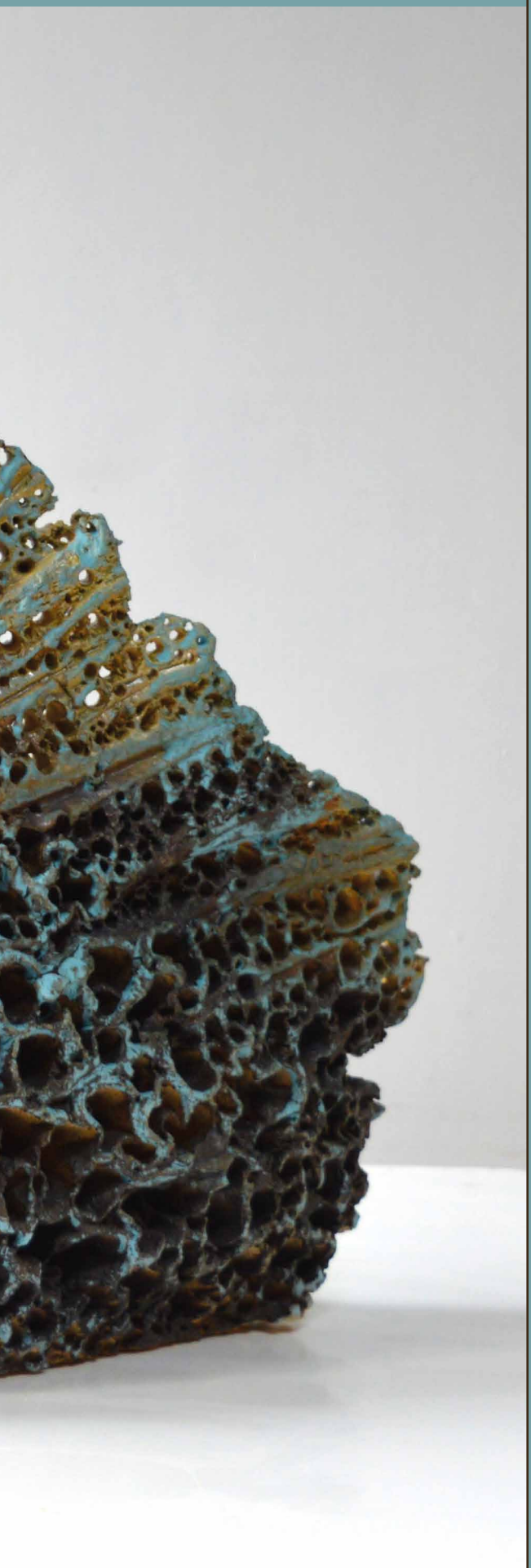
'Instead of focusing solely on mastering new interfaces, we must return to the basics – to cultivating a fundamental visual sensibility. It is precisely the conscious use of colour, rhythm, contrast, proportions and a precise hierarchy of information that directly shapes our perception of reality. The key to the future lies in human consciousness and the strategic management of meaning: technology changes, but the need for a clear, safe and coherent visual code remains constant', concludes the artist-scientist.

University of Silesia (structural analysis) – Evolutionary rebranding showcasing precise adjustment of the mark's geometry. The study illustrates the alignment of structural axes and the guiding line, correction of the wave's counter-space, and optical optimisation | Design: Tomasz Kipka





Ceramic sculpture from the *Erosion* series (2026), chamotte clay, high-temperature glazes, engobes firing temperature: 1230°C



Inspiration alone doesn't cut it.

Ceramic art requires knowledge

The recipe for a ceramic product? First, carefully prepare the right components: the type of clay, the appropriate oxides for decoration, and finally the glazes. Ensure the mould is properly designed, choose the right drying method, and include any additional internal supports to prevent warping in the kiln. Finally, set the temperature to 800–1000°C for the first firing of the clay. For the second firing, you can heat the kiln up to as high as 1300°C. Of course, remember to adjust the temperature according to the type of clay and the glazes used. At the same time, closely follow the firing curve – the appropriate change in temperature over time – which is crucial for achieving the desired results. Don't forget to sprinkle a little creativity over top.

Weronika Cygan-Adamczyk

Jolanta Herma-Pasińska, PhD
Institute of Fine Arts
Faculty of Arts and Educational Science
University of Silesia in Katowice
jolanta.herma-pasinska@us.edu.pl

Jolanta Herma-Pasińska, PhD

Ceramic sculpture from the *Searching for essence* series (2025), chamotte clay, high-temperature glazes firing temperature: 1230°C





Ceramic sculpture from the *Destruction* series (2021), chamotte clay, high-temperature glazes, firing temperature: 1220°C

Behind the scenes, ceramic art bears little resemblance to the process we usually associate with imagination, creativity, and inspiration. To the unaware, it may seem that a painting, print or sculpture comes into being in an almost magical way, brought to life by the artist's brush, chisel or hands, flowing from the creator's mind into reality. It is hardly ever that simple. The creative process can be extremely demanding, time-consuming, and often marked by numerous setbacks. Of course, creativity is essential in any artistic endeavour, but we rarely stop to consider just how much an artist must rely on knowledge and experience, and how much their efforts resemble the work of... a scientist.

Unending experimentation

'You cannot practise ceramics successfully without a thorough understanding of the technology involved. I think that this is the most demanding field of visual arts. You need a great deal of knowledge from various disciplines: a bit of chemistry, a bit of physics. The entire process of preparing and creating ceramics must be carefully thought through', says Jolanta Herma-Pasińska, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Educational Science of the University of Silesia. The artist's ceramic works have been showcased at numerous exhibitions in Poland and abroad, including in Germany, Croatia, Austria, Spain, and Italy. She has been working with the Fine Art Gallery Art of Ceramics (a member of the prestigious International Academy of Ceramics), an institution entirely dedicated to the art form, and her works can be viewed, amongst other places, at the Silesian Museum. The final result of a piece made from clay can be influenced by seemingly trivial factors, such as whether the object being fired is positioned closer to the back wall of the kiln or placed on the top shelf. Even the number of items matters, as neighbouring pieces can influence each other's glaze colour through the evaporation of certain chemical compounds. Although many uncertainties can be significantly reduced in the electric kilns commonly used today, the expert notes that it is still impossible to predict exactly how closely the final product will match the original concept.

'I suppose that's why ceramics is so fascinating – because its like a constant race against the material. I'm always curious to see whether it will win this time, or whether I will. Every time I open the kiln, my pulse quickens', says the artist.

For novice ceramists, this inherent capriciousness of clay can be a source of great frustration. And yet, it is not uncommon for an object – first dried and then fired – to exceed the creator's expectations. Even experienced ceramists, despite being thoroughly familiar with a particular type of clay and glaze, often have only a rough idea of what they will manage to achieve. It is precisely experimentation that they often like to rely on. It is different in painting – the colour of the paint does not differ that much before and after it is applied to the canvas. In the case of ceramics, the glaze before firing looks completely unlike the one we see once it is taken out of the kiln. Moreover, before a specific idea is brought to life, numerous test pieces are usually produced to check the behaviour of the clay, its shrinkage, the glaze, and its reaction to a given temperature. Despite all the efforts to perfect the craft of ceramics, failure is sometimes unavoidable. Dozens of hours of work can end in disappointment when, for example, an excessively high temperature in a wood-fired kiln causes the clay to melt. Failure remains a lesson for the artist, who uses it to gain a deeper understanding of the material they are trying to shape.

A pinch of salt

Art is more than just the end result, i.e. the work that the artist presents to the world. It is also the process of its creation. This is perfectly evident in the production of ceramics, which can take months. Such was the case for the installation that Jolanta Herma-Pasińska spent two years working on, attempting to combine clay with salt. The artist began by immersing fired objects in trays of brine to grow crystals on the ceramic bodies.

'The original idea was to create large, dark objects made from highly porous chamotte clay and combine them with white porcelain elements. It was on the porcelain – a highly sintered, low-porosity clay – that the salt crystals were to be deposited. However, it turned out to be a very laborious process', recalls the expert. After a few weeks, when the desired results did not materialise, she began testing other types of clay. She noticed that the salt reacted differently depending on the clay and glaze. Finally, on some of the pieces, she observed stone-like crystals. Others showed delicate lines, highlighting micro-cracks in the ceramic glaze. The final product exceeded even the artist's own expectations.

In ceramic art, taking risks can really pay off.

'Ceramics offers unlimited creative possibilities. After more than twenty years of working with it, I'm still discovering new approaches', says the expert. Among the particularly demanding projects, she mentions structures over two metres tall (the risk of deformation, stress, and cracking during firing increases with the size and weight of the piece) and those with a perforated surface, i.e. weakened by holes cut into the material. The whole process is about trying to 'outsmart the clay' by testing just how willing it is to cooperate with the artist.

To strengthen the structure, artists use internal ribbing or reinforcing flanges – invisible from the outside – which make it easier to prevent deformation. The ordering and thickness of the glaze or engobe (coloured clays) layers also matter, as does whether the form they wish to give the object is to be more geometric or organic. It is precisely this simplicity that seems to be the most difficult aspect of ceramics. Geometric shapes experience much greater stresses during shrinkage – leading to cracking – than rounded, irregular organic shapes. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that during firing and drying, ceramics shrink by 8–14%.

Contemporary archaeology

The uniqueness of ceramics lies not only in just how demanding the craft can be. It also has a remarkable ability to blend modernity with history. This is evident, for instance, in the ever-growing popularity of alternative firing methods. More and more people are turning to the techniques used by our ancestors. These include pit firing and the use of primitive techniques. Ceramics created using such 'old-fashioned' methods are in no way inferior to those produced using modern techniques. Indeed, the reconstruction of these long-forgotten processes is now a significant source of historical knowledge and enables us to study antiquity more effectively.

'A few years ago, I had the opportunity to explore the ancient Etruscan technique of decorating clay objects known as 'terra sigillata', whose extraordinary beauty – with its silky, smooth surfaces – continues to inspire awe to this day. Following in the footsteps of our ancestors (remains of vessels made using this technique have also been found on our soil), I learnt how to achieve a semi-matt finish on ceramics, with a range of earthy tones and a soft feel to the touch, using only different types and shades of clay of varying consistencies and by polishing the surface of the ceramic body appropriately', recalls Jolanta Herma-Pasińska.

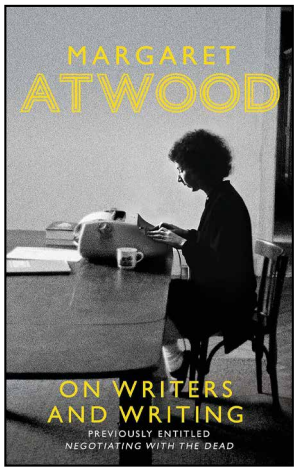
Ceramic goods can also be produced using modern technologies, and this is not just a matter of ever-improving electric kilns. There are already 3D printers that can handle various types of clay. This method requires the object to be designed in advance using suitable software, and thanks to the machine's much greater precision, it is possible to produce items with far more delicate structures than those created by hand.

Among the various manifestations of human creativity, ceramics provides exceptionally compelling evidence that combining art with science is possible – and, in many cases, inevitable. Thanks to knowledge and experience, it is possible to create better and more durable works, and artistic inspiration can help push science onto new, uncharted waters.

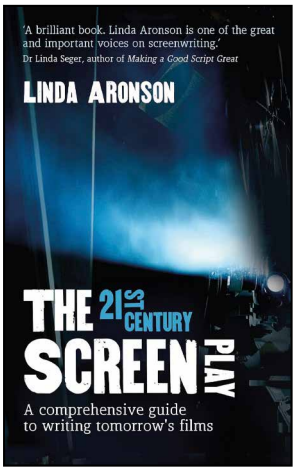
Can the art of writing be learned?

It comes as no surprise to us that people performing in theatre, film or on television – with a few exceptions – are graduates of drama schools. We also take it for granted that someone can study painting and sculpture at an art college or learn an instrument at a music academy. Meanwhile, in the case of another form of artistic activity – creative writing – we do not intuitively associate it with university-level education.









Anyone wishing to learn the art of writing outside the framework of a formal degree programme may wish to consult the following works: Margaret Atwood's *On Writers and Writing*; Olga Tokarczuk's *Czuły narrator* [The Tender Narrator]; Mikołaj Marcela's *Jak pisać, żeby napisać swoją książkę* [How to Write in Order to Write a Book That's Yours]; Katarzyna Bonda's *Maszyna do Pisania* [The Writing Machine]; Linda Aronson's *The 21st-Century Screenplay*; Adam Kulawik's *Poetyka* [Poetics]

And yet, just as an aspiring actor needs good diction, a future painter should be able to distinguish colours, and a future violin virtuoso must have a good ear for music; similarly, anyone with ambitions to write prose, poetry or film scripts will not succeed without a set of certain core competencies – in this case, these are a fluent command of language and a fundamental feel for it. And those can certainly be improved over time.

'It is telling that we even ask whether it is possible to teach someone the art of writing, as we do not pose this question in relation to other forms of artistic education. It makes it seem "unteachable", which I find hard to agree with', says the researcher, poet, and literary critic Grzegorz Olszański, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof. from the Institute of Polish Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia in Katowice.

Prof. Olszański traces the origins of these doubts to the fact that, counterintuitively, the Romantic paradigm still holds sway in Polish culture (even though Maria Janion, an eminent literary historian, has argued that it is now in decline). In this context, the process of creating literature – or, more broadly, writing – is treated as a phenomenon of an almost mystical nature, impossible without divine inspiration or a flash of genius, which the writer experiences at the right moment.

'From antiquity through the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, there were many collections of rules to follow when composing a text within a specific literary genre – we refer to these as "poetics". Mastering these rules was a craft in itself, and writing thus became, as the ancient Greeks would have put it, *techné*, a practical skill. Romanticism, which saw a relaxation of creative rules, marks a turning point in this sense as well, given that poetics have never really returned since then', says the Polish studies expert from the University of Silesia.

It is also noteworthy that the oldest Polish music academy (now the Chopin University of Music in Warsaw) was founded in 1810, and eight years later the country's first academy of fine arts was established in Kraków, which is now named after the painter Jan Matejko. Yet it took nearly two full centuries for Poland to establish its first fully-fledged degree programme dedicated to teaching writing – The Art of Writing, launched in 2014 at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Prof. Grzegorz Olszański has been the director of this programme since its inception.

Regardless of how a student approaches the writing process – whether they are more inclined to break the rules in the spirit of avant-garde practices, or whether they adhere to the classical principles set out in poetics, and nowadays more commonly in the various types of widely available textbooks – their linguistic skills will be of no use unless they are reinforced by writing and reading practice. Therefore, on the one hand, the programme in question emphasises writing from the very beginning, while on the other hand it relies on literary studies, i.e. covering knowledge of literary history, theory, and literary criticism (albeit not at the same level of depth as in 'standard' Polish studies).

'Stanisław Lem's son, Tomasz, once paraphrased one of his father's three laws as follows: "Nobody reads books these days, but everyone writes them", recalls the researcher with a smile. 'I believe that there is no writing without reading, and that the characterisation of writer and reader as opposed is false. Only extensive reading practice – both historical and theoretical, as well as casual, everyday reading for pleasure – can properly shape a writer, not least through a comprehensive knowledge of conventions, that is, the set of predictable elements that govern genre fiction and which the reader knows well'.

Writing the best possible text that fulfils its original aims (genre-related, aesthetic, and functional) is, of course, an end in itself; nevertheless, the head of The Art of Writing programme also emphasises the importance of the very act of writing. Literature, as once stated by Ryszard Koziołek (literary scholar, writer, and Rector of the University of Silesia in Katowice) is ultimately a force that gives shape and order to our reality, allowing us to express our intellect, emotions, mental states, and beliefs more precisely: in short, to express who we are. Viewed this way, writing is not merely a simple tool, but a medium that helps us refine our thinking and the way we engage with the world.

Tomasz Płosa

Grzegorz Olszański, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof.
Institute of Polish Studies
Faculty of Humanities
College of Individual Interdisciplinary Studies
University of Silesia in Katowice
grzegorz.olszanski@us.edu.p

Tomasz Grząślewicz, MA

Tomasz Grząślewicz, MA
Institute of Literary Studies
Faculty of Humanities
University of Silesia in Katowice
Doctoral School at the University of Silesia in Katowice
tomasz.grzaslewicz@us.edu.pl



A scene from the play *Środula. The Landscape of Maus* at the Theatre of Zagłębie in Sosnowiec | Photo: Jeremi Astaszow



SPIEGELMAN, SOSNOWIEC AND THE ART OF RESEARCH

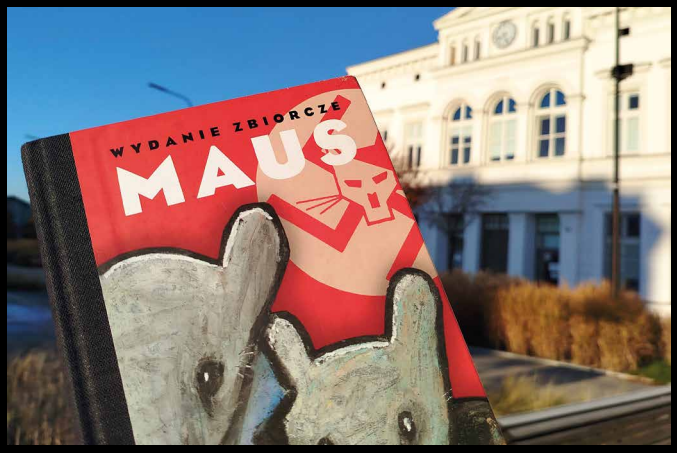
‘Anja and I didn’t have where to go’. With these words, Vladek Spiegelman – the protagonist of the comic book *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, created by his son Art Spiegelman – comments on the desperate decision to leave his hiding place within the liquidated ghetto of Sosnowiec-Środula. Holding hands, Anja and Vladek set out in search of a chance to survive, and their desperate plight is embodied by the swastika shape formed by the intersecting roads ahead of them. The other elements visible in the drawing – slag heaps, smokestacks, an industrial plant, and a tenement house – demonstrate the American artist's good reconnaissance of the area. His famous work was created based on years of research, which included the topography of Sosnowiec – the city where a significant part of *Maus* is set.

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus. A Survivor’s Tale*, honoured with the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, is considered a milestone in the recognition of comics as a medium capable of conveying ‘serious’ – in this case, traumatic – subject matter. The plot unfolds across two timeframes. The ‘present-day’ timeline is 1970s New York: following his mother's suicide, young Art regularly visits his father and questions him about the past. The stories told by Vladek transfer us to the German-occupied Poland, where a Jewish family from the Zagłębie Dąbrowskie region struggles to survive the Nazi hell. The backdrop to a significant part of their story is Sosnowiec – the place where they live and conduct business, then face successive stages of persecution, and ultimately end up in the closed ghetto, from which they are to be deported to KL Auschwitz.

Translated into dozens of languages, *Maus* has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies and publications. However, the role of Sosnowiec as the work's setting has not previously been the subject of detailed research. Spiegelman’s comic is often analysed in the context of Holocaust memory, the relationship between survivors and their children’s generation, testimony, trauma, and the comic book form. In Poland, the initial reception of the work was dominated by a discussion – or, more aptly, a controversy – regarding the specific form of graphic representation employed by the artist. In his work, Jews are portrayed as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs. On the other hand, the public is hardly aware of the connections between the events in the comic and actual locations in Sosnowiec.

Reading *MetaMaus*, which is a kind of self-commentary on *Maus*, we gain insight into the author’s creative process. We see the successive stages of the comic’s creation: pop-culture inspirations and references, family trees and photographs, as well as preliminary sketches. Among the source materials accompanying the aforementioned publication, the transcripts of the original conversations between Art and his father are of particular significance. Vladek does not tell his story in a linear, detached, and orderly fashion. His memory skips about and jumbles the order of events, and on top of that, he passes it on to his son in rather poor English. Art, for his part, shows a great deal of curiosity, asking about aspects of life in Sosnowiec that are unfamiliar to him – such as how the tailoring shops operated, what the backyard sheds looked like, or what the distance between Sosnowiec and Dąbrowa Górnicza is ("as far as from here to New Jersey," he hears in reply). This striving to understand and convey the truth about their parents' wartime experiences as precisely as possible resulted in a work deeply rooted in the reality of Sosnowiec. At one time, a letter in which Art Spiegelman protested against the *New York Times Book Review*’s inclusion of *Maus* on the ‘Fiction’ bestseller list gained considerable attention. An analysis of the Sosnowiec-related elements in the comic book leads one to agree with the author, despite certain historical inaccuracies and concessions stemming primarily from the nature of the chosen format.

Although more than thirty years have passed since the events described, Vladek provides a wealth of precise information about the places and events that Art later processed in *Maus*. Sosnowiec's main shopping street, Modrzejowska, appears in the work several times. During the war, Vladek comes here to conduct illicit business, and his son’s drawing successfully captures the atmosphere of the city’s central hub, with its dense urban fabric and cramped courtyards. Mandelbaum’s confectionery and Szklarczyk’s shop operated on this very street; both establishments are mentioned in the comic. On Modrzejowska, Vladek narrowly escapes a German roundup; as we know from numerous eyewitness accounts, the street was indeed particularly prone to such incidents. A public execution, during which four Jews were hanged, was also carried out here. Although in reality they were hanged from a tree, in the comic we see them



Maus in Sosnowiec | Photo: Tomasz Grząślewicz


A guided tour of Sosnowiec in the footsteps of *Maus* | Photo: Artur Ptasiński

on the gallows. Art Spiegelman frequently employs symbols unequivocally associated with wartime trauma and suffering. He did not witness the events he describes; the imagination of a child of survivors is saturated – to use a term proposed by Marianne Hirsch – with 'postmemory': an inherited memory constructed from, among other things, stories, photographs, films, and cultural representations. That is why certain details that appear in his comic are rather universal than locally precise – for instance, the barbed wire with which the Sosnowiec-Środula ghetto was not actually surrounded. Details of this kind do not necessarily align with what is confirmed by documents and accounts concerning Sosnowiec. However, they serve an important function: they show how the 'second generation' imagines a trauma they could not witness firsthand.

On the other hand, many of the images of Sosnowiec presented by Spiegelman correspond precisely to the facts. In one of the scenes, we look through the window of the tenement house at Kołłątaja 6, co-owned by Israel Zylberberg – Vladek's father-in-law. A family is sitting at the table, discussing current events during the meal. 'Each of us gets coupons for 8 ounces of bread a day, and a tiny bit of margarine, sugar and jam per week. That's it', comments Vladek's brother-in-law. The food rations he cited are in perfect agreement with the accounts of surviving witnesses. Equally convincingly portrayed are the circumstances of the so-called stadium selections, which resulted in the deportation of several thousand Sosnowiec Jews to Auschwitz in August 1942. Many accounts of those days contain details strikingly reminiscent of Vladek's embellished story: thousands of elegantly dressed people on the streets, closed stadium gates, the categorisation of people, and the stamping of documents. As with the previously described execution, here too we find a symbolic element – a railway car placed on the sports field – heralding the impending deportation to a death camp.

From the perspective of a researcher focused on literary topography, relatively easily identifiable landmarks – such as Modrzejowska or the sports fields by Mireckiego Avenue that still exist today – prompt the question: how many more comic book panels can be linked to real-world addresses, people, and events? In the case of less obvious locations, archival German documents, among other sources, prove helpful. It was thanks to them that it was possible to establish that the Szpigelman and Zylberberg families were forced to move three times within Sosnowiec during the occupation. Unfortunately, none of the buildings – located respectively at 1 Maja 17 in the city centre, Matki Teresy Kierocińskiej 8 in Stary Sosnowiec, and Okrzei 54 in the Środula ghetto – has survived to the present day. It is worth noting, however, that the location of these officially confirmed sites aligns with *Maus*'s narrative, thereby allowing us to place further pins on the map of Sosnowiec based on Art Spiegelman's work.

The need for such a map is evidenced by the turnout at events organised in 2022–2023 in conjunction with the premiere of the play *Środula. The Landscape of Maus* at the Theatre of Zagłębie and the 80th anniversary of the liquidation of the Sosnowiec-Środula ghetto. Hundreds of people eager to discover little-known aspects of the city's history took part in literary-historical walks and lectures on Spiegelman's comic book at the time. The global popularity of the work – based on extensive research covering areas including Sosnowiec – offers an opportunity to spark international interest in the largest city of Zagłębie Dąbrowskie. A bilingual trail following the path of the graphic novel *Maus. A Survivor's Tale* could be the ideal tool for achieving this goal – whether situated in the urban landscape, existing in a virtual format, or perhaps even taking both forms.

How come one painting can catch our attention while the other does not impress us in the slightest? What makes us tear up when hearing a couple of sounds arranged in a certain order? Even though art might seem to be the domain of emotion, imagination, and subjective experiences, its reception has a biological dimension as well.

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'Design is not a matter of taste, but a discipline of the mind. The *Tribute to Massimo Vignelli* serves as a reminder that great visual art is underpinned by scientific precision, geometry and the rigour of the logical systems that organise our world' – *Tribute to Massimo Vignelli* (2021), Tomasz Kipka. The work was created to mark the 90th anniversary of the Italian master of modernism's birth. Vignelli treated design not as decoration, but as a structure based on logic and mathematical accuracy. Viewed in this light, design approaches the exact sciences – it requires mathematical precision, the structuring of information and the search for universal laws governing visual space.

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