Feeling Moved by Art

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In case you missed it, the cameras were rolling at the APS 23rd Annual Convention in Washington, DC. Watch Kendall J. Eskine and Natalie A. Kacinik from the City University of New York present their research on “Feeling Moved by Art.”

“The goal of this research was to investigate which emotions underlie our positive experiences of art,” Eskine says. In particular, they researched the centuries-old idea that fear plays a key role in sublime experiences — “those experiences that are really astonishing and take people aback.”

To test how fear affects participants’ appreciation of art, Eskine, Kacinik, and their collaborator Jesse J. Prinz asked participants to rate works of abstract art after engaging in different activities such as sitting normally, doing 15 or 30 jumping jacks, or viewing a happy or scary video. They found that only the scary video led participants to provide substantially more positive evaluations of the art.

Eskine explains that fear’s relation to sublime experience may stem from its evolutionary role in motivating “fight, flight, or freezing responses to threatening situations.” Art’s ability “to grab our interest and attention, to remove us from daily life, may stem from its ability to trigger our evolved mechanisms for coping with danger.” If the same mechanisms that create fear also control our appreciation of art, Eskine suggests, positive and negative emotions may be more closely connected than we previously realized.