



The Art of Death: Contrasting Perceptions of Death-Related Paintings



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Introduction

The awareness of one's mortality is fundamental to the human condition. Studies derived from a prominent theory in psychology, terror management theory (TMT), suggest awareness of one's death motivates a wide range of human behavior. A seemingly unrelated but equally present institution of human life is art. Our goal was to better understand the connection between art and death. How do different representations of death via art impact a person's psychology?

Current Investigation

In this experiment, we investigated the effects of death-related art on people's psychological reactions. We began by analyzing how positively or negatively participants reacted to paintings with death-related themes across multiple dimensions.

Methods - Pilot Study

Our research was hosted on Amazon Mechanical Turk. In an initial pilot study ($N = 836$), participants evaluated a series of paintings containing death or neutral themes and were asked to rank them according to different criteria:

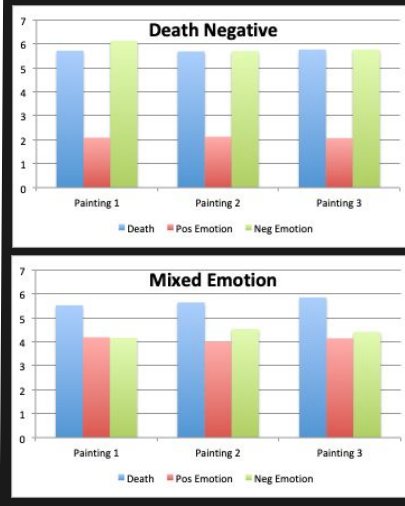
- Does this painting make you think about death, dying, or mortality?
- To what extent does this painting evoke positive emotions?
- To what extent does this painting evoke negative emotions?



Portrait of Pope Innocent X - Example of painting with death themes

Results - Pilot Study

Based on the pilot study ratings, we selected paintings that equally evoked thoughts of death, but differed in their emotional content, for use in our main study.



Methods - Main Study

Participants ($N = 513$) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions:

- **Death Negative:** viewing paintings portraying death with high negative emotions (and low positive emotions).
- **Mixed Emotion:** viewing paintings portraying death with mixed emotions (both positive and negative).
- **Writing Prime:** writing about the thoughts and emotions evoked by death.
- **Control:** viewing paintings with a non-death theme.

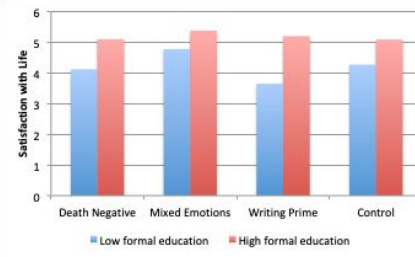
Participants were then asked about their satisfaction with life (SWL) and to complete a demographic survey assessing age, level of education, and sex.

Results

There was a trend for SWL to differ by condition, $F(3,509) = 2.20, p = .087$. Means by condition are presented below:

Death Negative: 4.78 (1.57)
Mixed Emotion: 5.13 (1.46)
Writing Prime: 4.66 (1.69)
Control: 4.79 (1.56)

This effect was moderated by amount of formal education, $F(3,496) = 2.31, p = .075$.



George Pratt, Nazi Zombie
-A Death Negative Condition Painting



Unfulfilled Dreams
-A Mixed Emotion Condition Painting

Discussion

This study was conducted with the goal of understanding how varying depictions of death in art impacted a person's psychology, if at all. Our findings suggest that death depicted in art with mixed emotions leads to higher reported SWL compared to other reminders of death and a control condition.

Additionally, we found that those with more formal education reported higher SWL than those with less formal education generally, but this effect was attenuated when death was elicited via art with mixed emotions.

Overall, our findings tentatively suggest that art might be a useful medium for engaging with mortality and death. Death is an inevitable but a much maligned topic in our society. Using art as a means to help people confront their concerns about death can break down some of those barriers, perhaps helping to enhance people's quality of life.



Zdzislaw Beksin, Lovers
-A Mixed Emotion Condition Painting

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