

What Makes Hemingway Hemingway?

—On the psychology of artistic style

By *Jessica Love*

【1】 Years after my first and only art history class, I am insufferable at museums. “That’s definitely a Matisse,” I say. “You can tell because of the brushwork and the vibrant use of color.” Sometimes it is not a Matisse. Sometimes it is a Manet, and I am quiet for a while. But usually it is a Matisse, and I am smug as a picnic.

【2】 It is unsettling to learn, then, that for all of my carefully won art appreciation, I am in danger of being surpassed by an insect. In a recent study led by the University of Queensland’s Wen Wu, honeybees—whose brains, mind you, are the size of grass seeds—were shown Picassos and Monets paired side by side. Below the prints were two small chambers, one containing sugar water and the other nothing at all.

【3】 Which to enter? Bees couldn’t see or smell whether a given chamber held the succulent treat until they’d already flown inside it. But they could let the masterpieces guide them: for some bees, the reward was always under the Picasso, while for the rest it was under the Monet. Over the course of many trials, the bees learned to fly straight for the correct chamber. Indeed, they even performed slightly better than chance when faced with pairs of paintings they’d never seen before. The bees had learned to discriminate, however modestly, between the two artists’ styles.

【4】 To be sure, humans still have the edge. Last year a team of researchers at University of British Columbia led by Liane Gabora found that art students were perfectly capable of identifying which well-known artist was behind which obscure painting. Creative writing students were similarly excellent at spotting little-read passages by Hemingway or Dickinson—a skill I can only assume no honeybee has yet demonstrated.

【5】 Even more impressively, though, the students could recognize as-yet-unseen samples of each other’s work, including work in entirely different mediums. Creative writers could identify their fellow writers’ paintings and sketches; painters had a pretty good idea who’d brought which poem or clay pot.

【6】 It’s clear what the bees were doing: picking up and categorizing complex visual patterns in the pairs of images. But recognizing differences *across* mediums is altogether different. Whether we’re writing sonnets or building sculptures, Gabora and her colleagues argue, we’re doing so with the same mind: one that structures information in the same way, has been shaped by the same experiences, and yearns to express the same ideas. It should come as no surprise that our techniques and preoccupations in one domain should “out” us in another.

【7】 But still I wonder: Just what about these techniques and preoccupations did the trick? The researchers did their best to keep subject matter from ruling the day by instructing, for instance, artists who happened to be surfers not to bring in art that depicted surfing. But what of less obvious subject matter—violent relationships, or Western landscapes? And what of the tics and obsessions that seep into our work unawares? A correlational study like this one, though a fine starting point, will not answer these questions.

【8】 Perhaps my biggest question has to do with people who don’t identify as artists, and haven’t settled—or at least would claim so—on a personal style. Are their creations also a reflection of their worldview? It seems likely that, at least to some extent, bad art is all alike, while only good art is good in its own way.