SCIENCE SAYS ART WILL MAKE KIDS BETTER THINKERS (AND NICER PEOPLE)

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A new study supports our hunch that kids who are exposed to the arts gain benefits beyond just being "more creative."

Those who would consider themselves part of the creative class would probably agree that art is an important part of primary school education. Since school boards concerned about the bottom line don't necessarily agree, a team of social scientists at the University of Arkansas is trying to scientifically prove the benefits of exposure to art. What they found, in a recent study published in the journals [*Education Next*](http://educationnext.org/the-educational-value-of-field-trips/) and *Educational Researcher*, is that students who are exposed to cultural institutions, like museums and performing arts centers, not only have higher levels of engagement with the arts but display greater tolerance, historical empathy, as well as better educational memory and critical thinking skills.

"The changes were measurable and significant," says [Jay P. Greene](http://www.fastcompany.com/person/jay-p-greene), professor of education reform and a researcher on the study. In particular, a single museum tour was found to make "a definite impression on students." According to Greene, students on this tour remembered what they'd learned "even without an external reason for doing so—like a grade or a test."

ONE GIGANTIC FIELD TRIP

When the 50,000-square-foot [Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](http://crystalbridges.org/) opened in Bentonville, Arkansas, two years ago, the museum offered 11,000 students free school tours. Each visiting group (chosen by lottery) viewed five paintings over the course of an hour. The tours were student-directed, which means curators did not lecture. Instead, they gave students minimal information about each painting and spent the majority of the time facilitating discussion.

Roughly three weeks later, students filled out a survey about their museum experience. In addition to recalling information about the paintings they'd seen, they were asked general questions about their tolerance toward others and whether they felt able to empathize with people from different historical periods. Finally, they were asked to write a short essay about a new painting—[*The Box*](http://www.bobartlett.com/paintings/2002-the-box.html) by Bo Bartlet—which was not on display at the museum. Students who had entered the lottery but had not received group tours, formed the study's control group. They were also given a survey asking about empathy and tolerance and directed to write a short essay about *The Box*. Independent judges then coded all the essays based on a well-regarded critical-thinking-skills assessment program.

ART MAKES YOU SMART—AND SENSITIVE

Greene’s team was surprised by how much "academic" information the test group had learned and remembered about the museum paintings. Students were able to recall that one painting dealt with price supports during the Great Depression and that another depicted abolitionists boycotting sugar.

"These historical details were not standard in the curator’s introduction," Greene explains. Which means that the discussion-based format compelled students to ask both important and relevant questions about the paintings. But something about the museum experience also enabled students to*remember* this information nearly a month later. That's remarkable, considering how quickly most kids forget knowledge they've learned for tests.

Further, when it came to analyzing the unfamiliar painting, Greene says there's "a big increase in how observant students were if they went to the art museum. They were much better at seeing details in the new painting than those who did not go." They were also better at relating the painting to their own experience, identifying subtext in the art, and allowing for multiple interpretations of the art. They were able to empathize with the people and scenarios depicted in a way that the control group did not.

GET OUT OF SCHOOL

"Before the study, a lot of people told us that the kids would just stare out the windows," says Greene. "Well, no, they don’t. They’re paying attention and absorbing information." Partly, this is linked to the non-lecture format of the experience. But Greene suspects the reason is also linked with removing students from their usual school environment and putting them in a culturally engaged setting.

"You can give students a high-quality reproduction of a painting but it's not the same," he says. "It’s the difference between watching a televangelist and going to church. It’s why museums and churches invest in architecture. The act of going gets people into a mindset to receive the experience."

It's not surprising that in Bentonville, a city with "a dearth of cultural experiences," according to Greene, the biggest discrepancy between the museum-goers and non-museum goers were students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Kids who were visiting the museum for the first time showed dramatic increases in critical thinking, empathy, and tolerance.

Of course, the school boards still want to know if the experience of visiting an art museum can help students improve their critical thinking skills in more traditional subjects. "We don’t know if art makes you better at critical thinking when solving a puzzle or a math problem," says Greene. "But we don’t have to translate math and reading into art to know they’re good. Why should we have to translate art into reading and math? Art is doing something on its own and that’s what we care about."