

Who drew this? Children appreciate visual style differently than adults

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Abstract

When viewing a painting, we can discern not only its *content* – what is being depicted, e.g., a mountain – but also its *form* – the manner in which it is depicted, e.g., an impressionist sketch. What are the origins and developmental trajectory of our capacity to distinguish content and form? In 3 experiments, we introduced participants to artists who produced scenes with distinct contents and styles. Then, participants saw a critical third scene whose content matched one artist’s drawing but whose style matched the other. Participants were asked which artist produced this critical scene. Whereas adults attributed the critical scene to an artist based on style (E1), children aged 4-7 years attributed based on content (E2; replicated on Children Helping Science in Experiment 3). This work supports two conclusions: (1) The capacity to distinguish content from form arises early; but (2) the way this capacity is applied shifts throughout development.