

Art, Beauty, Brain, & Neuropsychology

Dahlia W. Zaidel

University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

Art is one of several independent communicative systems supported by the human brain; it conveys ideas, concepts, and signals in ways not afforded in language alone. Many would argue that spontaneous art production is unique to humans (with the possible exception of the bowerbird). There has long been a puzzle over what it is in the human brain that gives rise to this unique capacity since communication modes in animals are widespread and are as varied as the number of species inhabiting the earth. Sophisticated symbolic cognition has been argued to be the key underlying factor in the development of art practice. When and under what circumstances this capacity arose is a question that is much debated. Given a work of art, though, what attracts attention to it, in my view, is the aesthetics; beauty in art is a signal that serves to attract the observer to the art's message just as facial beauty serves to attract attention to the owner's face. This would presuppose millions of years of brain evolution modified by adaptive biological strategies. In this talk, I will describe some of the neuroanatomical underpinning of art production and appreciation based on observations in established artists with brain damage, the relationship between art and other communicative biological displays, including human facial beauty, and describe art and beauty in the context of evolutionary human brain development.