



## The agony and the ecstasy, or why bad art really is a pain

THE power of art to heal emotional wounds is well known, but could contemplating a beautiful painting have the same effect on physical pain?

To investigate, Marina de Tommaso and a team from the University of Bari in Italy asked 12 men and women to pick the 20 paintings they considered most ugly and most beautiful from a selection of 300 works by artists such as da Vinci and Botticelli.

They were then asked to contemplate either the beautiful paintings, or the ugly painting, or a blank panel while the

team zapped a short laser pulse at their hand, creating a pricking sensation.

The subjects rated the pain as being a third less intense while they were viewing the beautiful paintings, compared with contemplating the ugly paintings or the blank panel. Electrodes measuring the brain's electrical activity suggested a reduced response to the pain when the subject looked at beautiful paintings (*Consciousness and Cognition*, DOI: 10.1016/j.concog.2008.07.002).

While distractions are known to reduce pain in hospital patients, de Tommaso says this is the first result to show that beauty plays a part. "Hospitals have been designed to be functional, but we think that their aesthetic aspects should be taken into account too," she says.