



Why Homeless People Buy Candles

One depressing facet of homelessness that many people overlook is the lack of exposure to arts and culture. Living on the streets and with very little (if any) income, the homeless population has little money to spend on art, culture, and other such nonessential purchases. Yet, however, many homeless, struggling, or otherwise lower-income people make purchases that might be seen as frivolous or nonessential. Why is that?

To answer this question, we must take a deep, hard look at what our society values and why. America has long put practical skills over art, but in recent years that trend has strongly been inflated. In 2017, President Trump voted to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, following a track record of repeated budget cuts from other authorities over the years.

Repeatedly, in the past, those placed in charge of public corporations for the arts have had to fight tooth-and-nail to prevent necessary funds from being shunted away from the programs they are in charge of. Not only are they engaged in a battle with corporate interests who want more money to be funded into tax breaks, they also are fighting the well-meaning crowd who insists that art is simply frivolous or a waste of time—in other words, something that humanity can certainly do without.

The evidence, however, shows that they are wrong. Countless stories have pointed to a strong and positive link between exposure to art and good mental health. Art is responsible for a whole host of positive effects, ranging from decreased stress to increased empathy—and, in some cases, longer life spans. Music therapy has been proven to lower stress in patients recovering from severe heart infections, help in the treatments of anxiety and depression, and even improve the outcomes of ICU patients. Similarly, visual arts-based programs can help people experiencing traumatic life events, such as a sudden cancer diagnosis or the death of a close friend or family member, as it allows them to express emotions that they don't have the tools to say in words. In one study, the researchers found that women who were undergoing breast cancer treatment showed a marked increase in positive emotions, a corresponding decrease in negative emotions, and less pain and stress associated with their invasive treatments than the control group. HIV patients who participated in creative writing showed a marked improvement over those that did not, and elderly dancers retained greater mobility and independence than the non-dancers.

Given all this information, one may come to the conclusion that art is something for the ill and the infirm, for the mentally and physically battered to heal themselves with. But this simplistic worldview could not be further from the truth. Art is necessary for not just the weakest among us, but for *all* of us. So—the next time you see a homeless person buying candles or a low-income person spending a little extra on a Netflix subscription, consider this: they not only have to feed their bodies, but also their souls.

Citations

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