

In These Times, Season 4 | The Restorative Power of Art (Episode 7)

Alex Schein:

In Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man*, the protagonist, one of the few survivors of a plague searches for meaning in a world of loss, concluding that there is but one solution to the intricate riddle of life, to improve ourselves and contribute to the happiness of others. In 2022, as COVID-19 lingers on, the climate threat looms larger, and war returns to Europe, there seems to be no answer to when this era defined by loss will end. And many of us are finding that making sense of the intricate riddle of life and extracting meaning out of adversity is one of the things that art does best. In this season of, In These Times, we talk to scholars, musicians, and poets, and other members of creative communities to explore the link between making art and making meaning, and how creativity shines a light on that way out of adversity, past and present. In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

In this final episode of the season, we speak with two researchers at Penn's Positive Psychology Center about how art museum visitation and the conscious embracing of art and culture can change our lives for the better. Welcome to episode seven, The Restorative Power of Art.

When someone ascends the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art like Rocky, most of them probably aren't thinking, "time to bolster my wellbeing!" But that is exactly what visitors are accomplishing. According to an article recently published by post-doctoral fellow, Katherine Cotter and professor of practice, James Pawelski in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Katherine Cotter:

My name is Katherine Cotter and I am the Associate Director of Research with the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project within the Positive Psychology Center here at Penn. Currently within my role, my research is focused on art museums and how these institutions can help to cultivate wellbeing in their visitors, as well as potentially within the professionals who are working in these institutions. Prior to coming to Penn, I completed my doctoral work at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. During my time there, I focused on people's subjective experiences with the arts, focusing on both music and visual arts and a little bit on creativity as well. And my emphasis was on how people are engaging with the arts in their day-to-day lives. So in your daily life, when are you listening to music, when you're engaging with art and what are the impacts of those as well as conducting field studies like in art museums, to understand when we go to specific art-related spaces, what are the impacts and what are our experiences like.

Alex Schein:

Cotter's personal experience in the arts helped propel her research.

Katherine Cotter:

So I've been involved primarily with music, basically all my life. I played the flute through elementary school all the way through my bachelor's degree, but did not want to be a performer. I really enjoyed being part of a group making music. And so didn't want to necessarily follow the performative aspects professionally, but was still really interested in the ways in which the arts impact us, because it had an enormous impact. It was a very enjoyable experience, provided me with a really great sense of

community and connection to others. And so that's why I decided to flip over to psychology and instead decided to study why the arts are so vital to our lives.

Alex Schein:

James Pawelski is Director of Education in the Positive Psychology Center and Principal Investigator and Project Director of the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project. He says, one of the key factors to improving wellbeing is making sure we are connecting the dots in regards to behaviors and benefits.

James Pawelski:

My PhD is actually in philosophy, and I first heard about the field of positive psychology shortly after it was founded by Martin Seligman in 1998. And I found it intriguing because positive psychology researchers seem to be asking questions very similar to the ones that I and my colleagues and philosophy had been asking and philosophers preceding us for millennia, but coming at these questions with complimentary modes of inquiry. And so looking at things from an empirical scientific standpoint, I found quite intriguing. When I was in my first term in college, I took a required course called Humanities 101, and I was intrigued. I mean, we got to study music and art and history and theater and architecture, and literature all in one semester. And I looked around at my classmates and they were sleeping. They weren't interested. And I was intrigued by that disconnect. And I realized it was because they didn't see it as really connected to their lives in any meaningful way.

Whereas for me, it was all about my wellbeing, but then also how I fit into the larger context of my community, the larger context of my society. And so I think a lot of times work and arts and culture is guided by interests outside of arts and culture. It's guided by academic interests. In high school, we read novels so that we can increase our reading comprehension. Work in arts and culture is also guided by economic interests. So if you have a few million dollars to invest, painting might be a really good way, invest in art because the financial value of that investment may grow quickly. Now I have nothing against academics and I have nothing against economics, but that's not why we have art, or music or literature or philosophy in the first place. I believe that the reason we have these domains of human experience is connected intimately to human flourishing.

In 2014, I started the humanities and human flourishing project out of the Positive Psychology Center here at Penn. And our goal was really to look at in an interdisciplinary way, ways in which arts and culture can support wellbeing, human flourishing broadly understood. So we wanted to use the methods of inquiry of the empirical sciences, but also to integrate those and collaborate with the methods from the humanities, from the arts. So we have been both gathering groups of scholars across disciplines in arts and culture to ask them what their discipline can contribute to the conceptualization and cultivation of human flourishing. And we've also been engaging in specific empirical research to see how things like reading literature or going to an art museum can support various aspects of wellbeing.

Alex Schein:

Cotter first became interested in a topic of wellbeing as it relates to museum visitation, when she collaborated with researchers at the University of Vienna who were at the forefront of such studies. When she came to Penn, she wanted to further examine the optimization of those benefits.

Katherine Cotter:

As I joined the team, they had already garnered a National Endowment for the Arts research lab grant and distinction. And unfortunately I joined the lab August, 2020, right when we were not allowed to go into art museums and to do any of this research. And so a kind of quick pivot that we decided upon was to really get a clear understanding of what do we already know about art museums and flourishing, and where are the gaps that we can really target and what are the areas that we can collaborate with art museums to ensure that they are also getting benefits from this research and are able to promote human flourishing in its best possible ways in the institutions. And so we first started with doing a review of what we already know, and we found that going to art museums are beneficial for mental health, we'll feel more relaxed, less anxious, less depressed, less stressed after going to a visit, we find these experiences enjoyable. Our emotions are benefited. We feel more positive following these visits as well.

And something that was really interesting is that these are great spaces to also find human connection. And so now in the work that we're doing, we're both looking at things from the perspectives of the art museum professionals themselves. So how do they think about wellbeing in their institutions? Because they're fundamental to this because they're the ones curating and putting together the visitor experiences, and also to see where are the gaps. And so most of the work has really focused on how can we get rid of the negative in life? How can we reduce depression, reduce anxiety, reduce negative emotions? There are also a host of skills that we can really cultivate through going to art museums. Some things that were identified by art museum professionals themselves, including things like empathy, things like self-acceptance and finding meaning through engagement with the arts and these institutions. And so right now, what we're exploring is, what nudges can we give visitors to garner some of those benefits and what resources can we make available to art museums so that they might be able to more effectively cultivate human flourishing in their visitors.

Alex Schein:

Professor Pawelski says the pandemic shed an interesting light on research in human flourishing.

James Pawelski:

So when we think about flourishing, we think about it two different factors. On the one hand, what are the things that are obstacles to flourishing, that we can identify and help to overcome? And I think that is perhaps the way the human mind most naturally thinks because our brains evolved during times when there was great threat, were very sensitive to threat, entire domains of inquiry and practice like mainstream psychology have traditionally focused on what is mental illness? How can we identify it? How can we treat it? How can we cure it? Of course, that's incredibly important. And we believe that work should continue. We also believe though, that it's important to think about the other side of flourishing. If you just think about a garden and you just pull the weeds out of that garden and get rid of insects and pests and so forth, but you don't plant any seeds, you're not going to have any flowers, you're not going to have any vegetables, you're not going to have a harvest.

So it's important to spend as much time thinking about what human flourishing is, what are the factors that actually constitute or support human flourishing? So when you think about that framing and you go into a pandemic, then you realize that human flourishing is actually a really important thing to be studying in a pandemic, in part, because we can no longer take it for granted. So that then really underscores the value of careful investigation, collaborative investigation, using both the methods and

perspectives and rich history of arts and culture. But then also combining it with particular empirical methodologies, which can help us understand more deeply the experiences that people actually have when they listen to music, or when they go to an art museum.

Alex Schein:

Given the researchers did not have access to museums during the pandemic, they needed to be creative in how they gathered data.

Katherine Cotter:

So because the pandemic prevented us from going into art museums, something that we did notice as a trend is that many art museums had to go virtual, and really enhance a lot of their virtual offerings. And so we pivoted and used a virtual art museum to understand how people might be engaging virtually during the pandemic. And we found that people really enjoyed this and really valued it. I had a lot of people in our research email me and say, I look forward to doing this on a weekly basis. I really enjoyed doing this, which when you're a researcher, you never get those emails that, yay, I really enjoyed your research from, and they're like, okay, I did my part, give me my payment, and I'm good. So they seem to really value that form of engagement. This summer, we were finally able to get into art museums and were out in Pittsburgh, collaborating with the Carnegie Museum of Art, The Andy Warhol Museum and The Westmoreland Museum of American Art and serving people about the wellbeing impacts of going to the museum.

And people were shocked to be asked about these sorts of things, because they don't necessarily think about their wellbeing when they're going to art museums. They're like, I'm here to see some art and have a nice experience, but they're not thinking necessarily about how it's impacting them in these more fundamental ways. And so many people also talked with us about how interesting it was and how nice an opportunity it was to really reflect on their experience in a new and different way and how they might visit an art museum differently. So it seems like people may not necessarily approach the arts always with the idea of human flourishing behind it, but are still definitely getting some of these benefits. And through doing some of this research, they're actually becoming a little more self-reflective about how they might be able to get some of these wellbeing benefits out of their art engagement, which has been a really interesting and somewhat surprising aspect of doing research.

Alex Schein:

Professor Pawelski says participating in activities that benefit wellbeing is the first step, but being conscious of those benefits and optimizing participation, is the end goal.

James Pawelski:

So it's really interesting when we think about our relationship to arts and culture, and our motivations for engaging in it, what are considered to be acceptable reasons for going to a concert or going to an art museum. And I think rarely do we say to our friends, I need to bolster my wellbeing. I'm going to go to a concert, but I think a large part of the reason why we do these things is because of the wellbeing benefits they give us. Part of what really struck me in the early days of this project is that there was a lot of work being done in wellbeing that didn't involve for the most part arts and culture. There was a lot of experiencing of wellbeing in the context of arts and culture, but wasn't necessarily explicitly understood as that, that can be gleaned from an intentional approach to arts and culture.

That again, focuses on that human side, that focuses on what can I learn or how can I interact with this work in a way that sheds light on my own experience as an individual or as a part of a larger group. And I think that cultural organizations in large part through the pandemic have begun to recognize this function of their contribution and service to the public even more. So I don't think it's a strange thing for art museum curators or art museum professionals of a variety of sort to say that wellbeing is actually something that we should be taking seriously. In fact, that's one of the pieces of research that we did is to survey art museum professionals themselves, to see what their attitudes are around the connection between art, museums, and wellbeing. And one of the things we asked them was, what do you think art museums are doing well?

And what do you think art museums should do more of? And then we looked at the gaps in their answers and the domain in which there was the largest gap between what they identified as what art museums are doing well and what they should be doing more of was wellbeing. So again, we see that as in part, a function of a realization through the pandemic that arts and culture are a real important part of our mental health, of our flourishing, of our communal connections and infrastructure. And that this is something that we should pay more attention to.

Alex Schein:

The researchers are now collaborating on a number of fronts to advocate for programs at museums and beyond.

Katherine Cotter:

Something that I know James has done with the masters of applied positive psychology students with great benefits and great effect has been this slow looking. And this is something that's been widely advocated in museums as well. And this is just simply spending more time with a single artwork and allowing yourself to explore it, to notice new things. The longer you look at it to potentially reflect on your own connections with that artwork. Another direction that we're looking into is the sorts of programs that are offered within art museums and how those might be tailored specifically for wellbeing or what they might already be doing well in terms of wellbeing. And so something that's been a really recent innovation within art museums has been the idea of mindfulness, and trying to help people become more mindful in a variety of ways. Some of it's doing yoga in the art galleries, and then looking at some of the art after your maybe a bit more relaxed, others are asking people to become more self-reflective, and self-referential in the looking at the art rather than focusing on the art historical.

Alex Schein:

Professor Pawelski says he and Cotter have seen firsthand how the wellness benefits derive from participation in the arts and culture change lives.

James Pawelski:

We've already begun working with governments, with art museums and others to share some of the results from our research. And we want to do that much more as we're able to get more evidence-based knowledge about different ways in which engaging with arts and culture can support wellbeing. So this is a movement that is more advanced in places like the United Kingdom, some work in Canada as well. And this is where a doctor can prescribe to you going to an art museum, or joining a choir in the community, if the doctor believes that part of what is an issue in your overall health is kind of not connecting to

others in your society, social isolation, loneliness, or epidemic proportions even before the pandemic. So now it's really important to focus on ways of getting people connected into those groups in ways that really resonate with them.

So I've been teaching a course on the Humanities and Human Flourishing in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program I direct at the University of Pennsylvania. I've been teaching this course for more than 10 years. And early on in one of the early classes, one of the students was a woman named Julie. And as part of the class, I would take my students to a field trip to the Barnes Foundation. And so Julie reported finding a piece by Toulouse-Lautrec and beginning to look at this piece. And as she stood there looking at it, she realized that it was a painting of a woman who looked sad and Julie thought, why was I attracted to this work of art? I'm not sad. Wait a minute, she thought. I am sad. Why am I sad?

I'm sad because of my work. Now, Julie was actually Dr. Julie Haizlip. She was an intensive care pediatric specialist at the University of Virginia medical center. So if anybody should feel fulfilled by their work, you'd think it would be somebody who had such important role, but she was feeling unfulfilled, because she wanted to bring wellbeing and resilience to medical practitioners and caregivers. And she felt like that wasn't an option for her, where she was at UVA. So she continued to look at the work of art, because 20 minutes is a long time, if you're not just glancing at it. And she thought, not only does this woman look sad, she also looks determined. And furthermore, behind this woman in the painting is a window. This woman could change her circumstances if she really wanted to. I'm determined, Julie thought, surely I could change my circumstances if I wanted to, how might I do that? And as she stood there, she thought, well, there's the nursing school at UVA. They have more of a focus. At that time they had more of a focus on the kinds of things that Julie wanted to do. So as she exited the art museum, she bought a print of the Toulouse-Lautrec and took it home.

So I saw Julie some six years after that at a conference. And I said to her, you have to tell me whatever happened from that experience. Was that just an interesting moment in an art museum? Or did it have any kind of long-term effect on your life? And Julie said, it completely changed my life. She said, I went home, I called up the nursing school and I said, look, I know you don't normally hire doctors, but here's what I'd like to do. I'd like to work with you to bring these evidence-based approaches, to cultivating resilience and fighting against burnout into the nursing school.

So the folks at the nursing school said, yeah, this is something we don't normally do, but they created a new position for her. Julie took a \$50,000 a year pay cut and went to work for the nursing school. And was able to bring to bear what she was called to do and felt then deeply engaged with her work. And that has changed her life. It's changed the lives of countless people that she's been able to work with in that context. So that's just one example of what can happen if we allow ourselves to be open to, it's almost a kind of dialogue that we can have with these works of arts and culture to help us examine our own lives and our own context and ways in which we can take steps toward greater human flourishing.

Alex Schein:

This wraps up episode seven, The Restorative Power of Art, and concludes season four of In These Times, the intricate riddle of life. The OMNIA podcast is a production of Penn Arts & Science. Special thanks to James Pawelski, Katherine Cotter and all of our guests this season.

In These Times, season four was produced by the OMNIA magazine editorial team, Blake Cole, Susan Ahlborn, Loraine Terrell, Jane Carroll, Brooke Sietinsons, and myself. Our theme music was composed by Nicholas Escobar college class of 2018. Our logo design and episode illustrations were created by Marina MuunIn. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

Be sure to subscribe to the OMNIA podcast by Penn Arts & Sciences on Apple iTunes, or wherever you find your podcasts, to listen to all four seasons of In These Times.