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Turning the Left Cheek

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This article explores the fact that portrait painters have tended to paint the left cheek rather than the right one.

THE "likeness" of a person's face is seldom well conveyed when the profile is not shown, and artists have usually portrayed their subjects facing to one side. Which side? Why should it matter: the right cheek is generally as representative of the man as is the left? Yet analysis of actual portraits shows there to have been a consistent tendency to paint the left cheek rather than the right. Moreover the tendency is significantly more marked both in portraits of women than of men and in portraits showing the subject's body than in those showing just his face.

The material for this study was 1,474 painted portraits, produced in Western Europe from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. The sources of these portraits were: the National Portrait Gallery, London (571 portraits), a textbook on Elizabethan and Jacobean portraiture[1] (338 portraits), the portraits and portrait miniatures of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (231 portraits), a miscellaneous collection of art books belonging to the first author (291 portraits) and the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery entitled "The Masque of Beauty" (August 1972) (43 portraits).

All portraits showed a single person only. For each the following points were noted: the sex of the subject; the side of the subject's face which was turned towards the viewer; and the amount of the subject's body which was visible in addition to his head. Rare cases of full-face portraits were excluded from the study.

Table 1 Data by Sex

	Left	Right	% left	*P*
Men	524	408	56	<0.001
Women	376	175	68	<0.001

Of the 1,474 portraits 891 showed more of the left cheek than the right. This 60% bias to the left is highly significant ($P < 0.0001$ on a χ^2 test). Table 1 shows the data broken down by the sex of the subject. Although the left-cheek bias is significant in portraits of both men and women, the bias in women's portraits (68% to the left) is much greater than in men's (56% to the left), the difference being significant at the 0.001 level.

Analysis of the data in terms of the amount of body visible is shown in Table 2. Here the portraits have been subdivided into two groups, "head only" or "head and body", according to whether or not any of the body below the shoulders was portrayed. For both men and women the left-cheek bias is much stronger when the body below the shoulders is included in the picture. Taking both sexes together, the difference between the "head only" group (51% to the left) and the "head and body" group (65% to the left) is significant at the 0.001 level.

Several explanations may be offered for these findings. For instance, there might be bias in the artist's skill. Most artists are right-handed and it might be easier for a right-hander to draw a profile to the left of the canvas (as it is easier to write from left to right).

Second, there could be bias in the positioning of the subject relative to the artist. A right-handed artist commonly holds the palette in his left hand so that his face, the palette and the subject's face are all in line and matching of colours from the palette is facilitated. The easel is usually to the right of him. Thus the artist is constrained to take up a position such that his left cheek faces the subject, and this position might be reciprocated by the subject to strike a balance.

Third, there might be bias in the social interaction between the subject and the artist. Independently of the constraints considered in the previous paragraph there might be a general (unexplained) tendency for any two people to feel more comfortable when they are positioned in such a way that their left cheeks face each other.

Table 2 Data in Terms of Body Visible

	Men				Women			
	Left	Right	% left	*P*	Left	Right	% left	*P*
Head only	142	166	46	NS	101	66	60	<0.01
Head and body	382	242	62	<0.001	265	111	70	<0.001

Fourth, there might be some visual preference for the left side of the face; perhaps it is considered more attractive than the right. Such a preference could possibly arise from some form of "exposure learning" whereby people come to prefer familiar visual stimuli[2]: Salk[3] claims that mothers tend to carry their babies on their left breast, so that a baby is exposed predominantly to the mother's left cheek. Alternatively the preference might reflect genuine differences between the left and right sides of the face resulting, perhaps, from fashion in make-up or coiffure (for example, parting of the hair over the left temple or placing beauty spots on the left cheek?).

Fifth, there may be superiority of the left visual half-field in facial recognition. Clinical evidence suggests that the right cerebral hemisphere (hence the left visual half-field) is superior to the right in recognizing pictures, especially pictures of faces[4]. A profile drawn to the left of the canvas might thus in a sense be more readily perceived.

Sixth, the way in which people turn their heads may be biased in favour of one direction. There might be a simple motor bias such that when the head is turned aside it is more likely to be turned to the subject's right than to his left. Informal observations do suggest that when people shake their heads (as if to say no) they tend to make the first move to the right.

But the data do not give much support to any of these explanations. The difference between men's and women's portraits cannot be accounted for by any of the hypotheses except maybe the fourth. The difference between "head only" and "head and body" portraits is contrary to the predictions

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of the first hypothesis and cannot convincingly be accounted for by any of the others.

Perhaps the explanation in fact lies within the conventions of painting itself. Artists communicate more than mere physical likeness with their pictures: they attempt to convey character and status, and to do so they resort in part to arbitrary "signs". Baden-Powell instructed Boy Scouts to shake hands with their left hands in order to set themselves apart from other people: maybe when an artist paints his subject facing either to the left or to the right he is in some similar way imposing a structural classification which, as it were, puts the subject in his place. That such a system of signs should be unacknowledged either by the sender or receiver of the "message" would have parallels in other systems of human communication[5].

This last possibility, in some ways the most promising, is unfortunately the hardest to test experimentally. A semeiological analysis of the kind which has been successfully applied to symbolism in other forms of art[6] is unlikely to be fruitful when, as with the portraits of this study, too little is known *post hoc* of what message the artist intended to put over. An indirect test of the existence of a left/right sign system (which might also be used to test for left/right "preferences") would be to make mirror-image reproductions or unfamiliar portraits and to compare people's reactions to the original and its mirror-image with a technique such as the "semantic differential"[7]. A difference in people's attitudes to the same portrait reversed from left to right would argue strongly that the significant bias found in actual portraits is significant precisely because it does in fact signify.

Certainly one does not have to look far for anecdotal evidence that people have strong feelings about which side of their own face they would wish to put on show. The Royal Mint has recently revealed that when coin designs were first produced for King Edward VIII (late Duke of Windsor), he objected to those which showed the right side of his face. His misgivings, says the Royal Mint's librarian and curator, G. P. Dyer, arose from a firm conviction that the features on the left side of his face were superior to those of the right[8]. Superior is an interesting choice of word. It would appear from the original designs that the two sides of the King's face were, except for a left-side parting, almost perfect mirror images. Who knows but that it is a mark of a superior person to turn the left cheek to the world?

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3 Salk, L., *Canad. Psychiat. Assoc. J.*, **11**, 295 (1966).

4 Hécaen, H., *Introduction à la Neuropsychologie* (Librairie Larousse, Paris, 1972).

5 Leach, E., in *Structuralism* (edit. by Robey, D.), 37 (Academic Press, in the press).

6 Humphrey, C., in *Social Anthropology and Language* (edit. by Ardener, E.), 271 (Tavistock Publications, London, 1971).

7 Osgood, C. E., Suci, G. J., and Tannenbaum, P. H., *The Measurement of Meaning* (University of Illinois Press, 1957).

8 *Daily Mail*, London, March 19, 1973.

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