

Incredible Science (9):

From the secret archives of the IgNobel committee

Chickens Prefer Human Beauty

Faces not only tell us a lot about the phenotypes of potential mates but also a great deal about their genotypes. For example, those who best resist parasitic ravages during development will be less distorted by them, going on to display more regular features than their infected peers. Many biologists therefore think the reason why the rather dull and regular faces of Kate Moss, Heidi Klum and Gisele Bündchen nevertheless succeed in making a distinct impression is because their features are highly symmetrical.

Furthermore, the human face reflects ethnicity, sex and age. A fact that certainly could be helpful in making mating decisions! Imagine a typical tête-à-tête candle-lit dinner where merely studying the face opposite is influential in deciding whether or not it will



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be worth undressing as the evening progresses.

Three colleagues from Stockholm, however, found this view to be far too humanised. Therefore, they tested as to whether

evolutionary history could have coded this preference for symmetrical regularity even deeper within our brains. If so, they claimed, visual pre-sex examination within any one species would be nothing more than the result of a more universal hard-wired “Code for Beauty”.

After special training with titbits, four hens and two cockerels learned to “really like” a standardised face of the opposite chicken-sex (calculated by superimposing 35 photographs). Meanwhile, they found six real, but less even, faces to be rather less interesting.

In a parallel experiment, seven male and seven female biology students were shown photographs of human faces and asked to whom they were most attracted. Now, here’s the crunch. The same human photographs were also shown to the chickens.

The result showed that the students were indeed keener to have a stroll (and more) with the most symmetrical human faces. But so were the chickens! Their pecking rate went up with the symmetry of the human face opposite their beaks. In fact, with $r^2=0.98$, the two preference curves resembled each other to a downright unearthly degree. There wasn’t a single exception where the poultry and the humans judged the “quality” of the human faces differently.

IgNobel’s final assessment for these simple but painful results: The IgNobel award of 2003 for Interdisciplinary Research.

The three Stockholm colleagues came to the award ceremony and celebrated together with the attendant pack of asymmetric cranks.

(Ghirlanda S., Jansson L. and Enquist M., 2002,

Chickens prefer beautiful humans. Human Nature 13, 383-389)