Male Good Looks Take Feminine Turn

Leonardo DiCaprio and those musical Hanson brothers are, like, so cute. That's not just the opinion of throngs of teenage girls. A new study suggests that male faces with a slightly feminine shape, more rounded and smaller-chinned than the classical chiseled male shape, prove especially fetching.

A modest feminine facial shape may boost a man's reproductive odds because women would perceive this look as a sign of honesty, cooperativeness, and willingness to be a good father, theorizes a research team headed by psychologist David I. Perrett of the University of St. Andrews in Fife, Scotland.

Female faces with a pronounced feminine shape also receive higher attractiveness ratings from both men and women, the scientists found.

"We see the feminized female face as an honest signal [to others] of enhanced reproductive ability," says study coauthor Ian Penton-Voak, also of the University of St. Andrews. "It's more complicated for men. We didn't expect to find that a feminized shape improves male facial attractiveness."

Other scientists have proposed that testosterone-influenced physical features in men, such as a big, square-jawed face, reflect strong resistance to disease and the ability to provide for a family. Estrogen-influenced features in women, including small, round faces, also indicate good health, as well as fertility. By this thinking, evolved exaggerations of sex-related facial differences should be seen as signs of physical beauty.

Nature/Perception Lab, University of St. Andrews

A computer-generated male face exhibits feminized (left) or masculinized (right) shape.

Perrett and his coworkers found otherwise. A total of more than 300 men and women, either native Scots or Japanese, rated the physical attractiveness and personality traits of computer-generated faces. The researchers blended photographs of individual Scottish and Japanese college students into an "average" computerized image for each sex and nationality. In addition to these, volunteers saw faces with masculinized or feminized shapes.

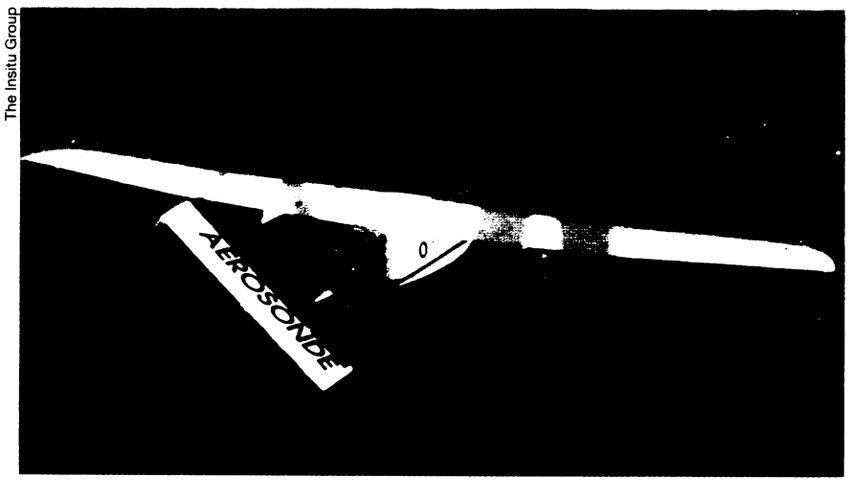
Participants of both sexes from the two countries generally rated feminized faces as most attractive, the scientists report in the Aug. 27 NATURE. Both groups preferred an even more pronounced feminine shape in the images representing their own nationality.

When asked about different traits, participants chose femininized faces as younger and more honest, cooperative, and emotional, in line with some prior findings (SN: 3/18/95, p. 165). Masculinized faces were rated as older and more dominant.

Potential mates' preferences for youthful-looking faces may have constrained the evolution of exaggerated anatomical sex differences, Perrett's team proposes.

A mix of baby-faced and mature facial features has been rated as most attractive in other research, remarks psychologist Leslie A. Zebrowitz of Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass. A masculine facial shape in men may be quite alluring if coupled with large, "feminine" eyes, she suggests. Other researchers say that it remains unclear whether pretty faces accurately advertise physical health, cooperativeness, or any other quality (SN: 2/7/98, p. 91). —*B. Bower*

Robotic weather-vane-to-be crosses sea



The Insitu Group

On Aug. 21, a miniature airplane called Laima became the first robotic aircraft to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. The 3,200-kilometer, 26-hour journey shows that drones can help plug a vexing gap in atmospheric data from above the oceans, say the plane's developers and meteorologists.

Named for Latvia's ancient goddess of good fortune, Laima was the only one of four nearly identical aircraft—called aerosondes—launched between Aug. 17 and 20 to finish the Newfoundland-to-Scotland flight. The 13-kilogram airplane, which has a 3-meter wingspan, sipped less than 8 liters of fuel during its voyage. In this photograph, taken at Camp Pendleton, Calif., a similar aerosonde lands during flight testing.

Next summer, the airplane's designers, The Insitu Group of Bingen, Wash., backed by several nations and private sponsors, expect to start trials of drones as oceanic weather-data collectors.

Since satellites replaced fleets of weather ships several decades ago, meteorologists have suffered a shortage of on-the-spot wind, temperature, and pressure readings above the oceans, says Kerry A. Emanuel of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Forecasts have likewise suffered.

"I think you're going to see [robotic planes] playing an increasingly important role in making measurements over the ocean," he says. —P. Weiss