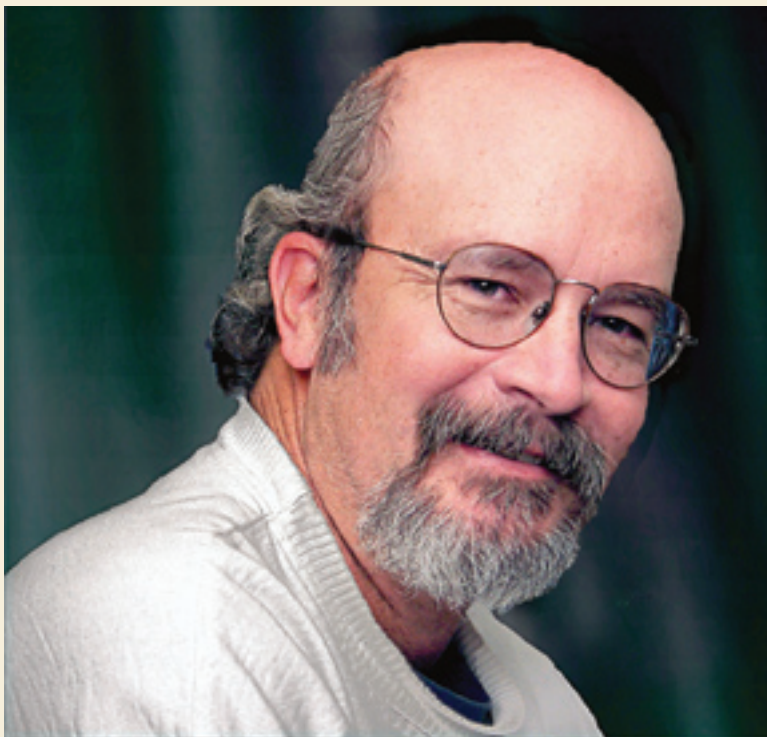




Headache

Gaze Angle in Portrait Photography



Seeing You Seeing Me

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Experienced judges differ, sometimes very pointedly, about whether the subject in a portrait should face the lens or be looking out of the frame. This writer has had some success photographing with both those approaches but has also worked with pictures that have an *inner* line of sight where the eyes of the subject are not even seen. Given that personal starting point, it seemed that a Web-based research on the topic of gaze angle might provide insight regarding the pertinence of choosing a given picture for submission to both local and international photography competitions.

As it turns out, the way people respond to a portrait can be influenced by both the gaze direction of the model and by his/her facial expression. This is because gaze direction signals a person's focus of interest while facial expressions convey information about the mental state. These are two key elements underlying the efforts of a small army of researchers who use photography to study social cues and advertising. These workers come from many disciplines ranging from Media Studies (TV, Film, &

Marketing), through Neurology & Psychology, to Brain Imaging...and no simple *one size fits all* conclusions can be drawn from their combined literature. Part of the response to a photograph is wired into the very circuits of our brain, yet at the same time; nearly every response is affected by each viewer's own culture and ethnicity.

The study that had the most direct application for this article was done by Dr. Claire Conway, of the University of Aberdeen in Scotland with her colleagues. They investigated the effects of gaze direction, gender, and expression on peoples face preference judgements. Participants were divided into four different groups and asked to rate the attractiveness of the images they were shown. The study found that identifying the factors that govern our facial preferences is a very complex process and whether or not we find a photographic subject to be facially attractive is dependent on a combination of factors. For example, we are more attracted to happy faces of the opposite sex, which are directly looking at us. Dr. Conway noted: "When asked to think of examples of attractive facial characteristics, most people think of physical traits such as healthy looking skin, symmetrical features or a strong jaw. Here we show that gaze direction can also be important for attraction. Faces that were looking directly at the viewer were judged more attractive than faces with averted gaze. This effect was particularly pronounced if the face was smiling and the opposite sex to the viewer. This shows that people prefer faces that appear to 'like' them and that attraction is not simply about physical beauty."

Similarly, another research group (Andrew Bayliss et al) found that "Target objects looked at with a happy expression were liked more than



Maria



Now How Does This Work?

objects looked at with a disgust expression." They concluded that facial expression does modulate the way that observers utilize gaze cues and that observed gaze direction signals the focus of another person's interest. They suggest a phenomenon known as *joint attention* for the image viewer's shift of attention to the same view as that of the model in the image. They also note that observing another's gaze direction can modulate personality judgments of the observed faces: "... Thus, it seems reasonable to expect behavioural responses to faces that differ in the emotion they express to also depend on where each face looks, and vice versa." This *joint attention* shift is quite likely something that our judges and we are unaware of as it occurs.

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It is a basic assumption that the functioning of such brain systems is the same in all people in all countries world wide, and yet cultural differences are routinely found. That fits with other research on culture and visual perception. The general finding is that people in East Asian cultures tend to focus on collectivism and harmony above the individuality valued in Western cultures. These social values are so powerful; that they may shape what is neurologically

Urban Cowboy



Jim Hawkins

perceived as attractive rather than reward prediction being simply an innate hard-wired response in our species.

For decades, it was believed that all humans perceive faces in a piecemeal fashion: first scanning across the eyes and then down to the nose and mouth. The idea meshed well with other findings that Westerners generally process visual information analytically, one bit at a time, like a computer. However, more recent research shows that East Asians process the same information more by looking at the whole. That was tested directly by Roberto Caldara, a psychologist at the University of Glasgow. His team tracked eye movements and the eye-tracking confirmed that Westerners tend to dart from the eyes to the mouth and back again. Conversely, the East Asian students fixated on central points in the face and viewed all its information at once. Both groups scored about the same on recognition and categorization tasks, showing their methods were equally effective in identifying faces. Caldara notes: "In this difference, there is still something common and universal."

In a much earlier but clearly related work, Michael Watson (1970) also found cultural variability in the intensity of gaze. He distinguished



Mary's Candid Viewpoint

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Wide-eyed Innocence

between three forms of gaze: *Sharp*: focusing on the other person's eyes; *Clear*: focusing about the other person's head and face; *Peripheral*: having the other person within the field of vision, but not focusing on his head or face. Parenthetically, we can notice how those categories have an amazing parallel in the focus metering modes of our modern digital cameras: *Spot Metering*, *Central Metering*, *Pattern Metering*. Of the groups he studied, Watson showed that the sharpest gaze was found among Arabs, followed by Latin Americans and southern Europeans; the most peripheral gaze was that of the northern Europeans, followed by Indians and Pakistanis and then Asians.

So, where does this leave us in deciding on what will be a competitive entry for a given photographic competition? I happened to have two printed exhibition catalogues on hand for making comparisons, one representing *Western* judges and one representing *Asian* choices.

The Western (North American) judges chose a good number of single person close-up portraits. One medal winner was cropped so close as to remove the subject's ears! Pictures of those facing the camera outnumbered those looking diagonally out of the frame by a 2:1 ratio. Usually those facing the camera were actually locked on the lens. In some cases however, the eyes were focused on something beyond the photographer. There were several pictures of subjects with closed eyes.

The Asian (Chinese) catalogue was markedly different. There were just two full-face close ups of people looking directly at the camera but these were mug shots of the organizer's not competition photos! Nearly all the pictures (specifically including the portraits) showed social interactions. These usually involved three and sometimes many more people



Willy

(How does one define a 'portrait'?) Only three single person close-ups were chosen as award winners in the competition and all of them had the subject looking obliquely out of the frame. A good number of the shots contained people with their eyes closed. In *Monochrome Prints*, the image given the *Gold Trophy* shows an ancient woman holding a young child. We can't see the lady's eyes but her gaze angle is down toward the child. The little girl faces the camera but looks into space past the photographer's left shoulder. It is magnificent but it is also a view most westerner's would not set up for.

Thus, regarding the original question as to whether the subject in a portrait should best face the lens or be looking out of the frame, we can see it might make a difference for the judges. Subject expression, whether an implied 'I like you' or involving actual social interaction may be important as well. Apparently, however, the venue may often be the most important factor in choosing which way to go. Finally, in pursuing this topic, the writer has discovered he is not as unique as he thought in working with an *inner* line of sight where the eyes of the subject are not seen. As always, East or West, someone has already done it well. ■