

VIEWPOINT

The Art of the Smile

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Humans have the most complex array of facial musculature in all the animal kingdom, and correspondingly the most elaborate and subtle mechanisms for controlling those muscles. Facial expression has evolved as one of our most important social skills, and our ability to both recognize and communicate our feelings through often tiny facial movements is unparalleled, and is of enormous, irreplaceable value in strengthening our social bonds. Babies smile by their 6th week (the cry comes first, appearing in utero, as proved by sonograms), and their ability to produce other facial expressions is innate, as is their ability to read them on the faces of others. With the simple act of smiling, babies cement their place in their new family.

Our ability to read expression is so robust that it is independent of many other brain functions, surviving the type of brain conditions that remove one's ability to recognize other faces; such people can still tell smiles and scowls, just not the identity of the one expressing those feelings.

The smile is the most frequently displayed of all facial expressions, and like the other cardinal expressions, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust, it is universally recognized, and completely cross-cultural.

Facial plastic surgeons evaluate and change the facial expressions of their patients on a daily basis. In some cases, we use nonsurgical methods such as neurotoxins or fillers of various sorts to influence muscle actions or add volume. For the smile specifically, the shape of the lips and perioral subunit can be adjusted with fillers and the excursion of the oral commissure is influenced with neurotoxins. In patients with facial paralysis, as compared with normal individuals, observers perceive less joy and more negative emotion. Following smile reanimation observers perceive more joy and less negative emotion.¹ Given the importance of the smile in human communication, it is of interest to understand how artists who analyze human expression, and to some degree set the standards for what is attractive, have depicted the smile throughout history to the present time.

Artists have of course been highly sensitive to the importance of expression. Artists have depicted the smile for centuries, for example, with painted, drawn, and sculpted smiles going back as far as we have realistically depicted faces. We have examples of smiling, sculptural angels on the façades of gothic cathedrals (Supplementary Fig. S1), smiling Noh masks from many centuries of the Japanese theater (Supplementary Fig. S2), and masks of comedy (and tragedy) from the ancient Greeks. Smiling and laughing statues of the Buddha go back to the 10th century, and depictions of the smiling Dionysus (or Bacchus) and his at times laughing entourage decorate ancient Greek vases. Later revivals of mythological art often feature smiling figures, most famously the smiling Venus in Botticelli's Birth of Venus, and the drunken peasants in Velazquez's Triumph of Bacchus (Supplementary Fig. S3), and Caravaggio's titillating, smirking Cupid (Supplementary Fig. S4).

The Mona Lisa (Supplementary Fig. S5) belongs to the not very extensive tradition of smiles appearing in Western art in formal portraits, perhaps reflecting the oddness of someone smiling when appearing to be by themselves. Smiles are overwhelming associated with, and created by, social interactions, and although women smiling in formal portraits are more common than smiling men, this perhaps reflects a request by the male patron who typically paid for the work (Supplementary Fig. S6).

Mona Lisa (her exact identity is still disputed) exhibits a closed-mouth smile, and examples are few indeed of formal portraits of any era where the smiling lips are parted and teeth are displayed. The display of teeth is related to the intensity of the smile. In the laugh, the most intense display of joy, the upper teeth are fully visible, the jaw is dropped, and the space below the teeth appears. With less intense emotion, the jaw is closed, and less and less of the teeth are visible. Some people rarely if ever smile with their mouth open, perhaps a symptom for certain people of less intense amused feelings being the norm,

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Fig. 1. A-maze-ing Laughter, Yue Minjun, Bronze, 2009 (Detail). This sculptural installation, located on English Bay in Vancouver, consists of 14 larger-than-life self-portraits of the artist, laughing uproariously.

or it may be in the nature of a habit. In many Asian societies, for women to display their teeth in the smile has traditionally (times are changing) been thought to be indiscreet, and the familiar gesture of Asian women raising their hand to cover their smiling mouth is symptomatic of this cultural bias. Loss of volume in the soft tissue and bone around the mouth can create a long lip with no teeth showing during a smile—widely interpreted as a sign of aging. These individuals benefit from a lip lift that in a subtle way increases the “joy” in their smile.

It is the category of genre painting (people in their everyday lives) rather than formal portraiture, which gave rise to the majority of smiles in Western art. Peter Brueghel, the inventor of genre painting, often fills his paintings with grinning dancing townsfolk, and his later followers such as Jan Steen added drunkenness to the mix, painting scenes often far more debauched (with a much wider variety of smiles) than those of his Flemish predecessor (Supplementary Fig. S7).

In the Dutch Golden age, a fascinating hybrid evolved—the genre portrait. In such works, lower status figures associated with pleasure and drink, particularly musicians, were depicted in the manner of a formal portrait, but playing a musical instrument or hoisting a glass, which allowed for a broad teeth-displaying smile (Supplementary Fig. S8). Vermeer famously painted a laughing woman having a drink with a well-dressed soldier, her mouth fully open and her eyes sparkling (Supplementary Fig. S9). Few eras in traditional art featured as much suggestion of sexual possibility as in this period, and smiles of every degree of intensity are a natural accompaniment to the fun.

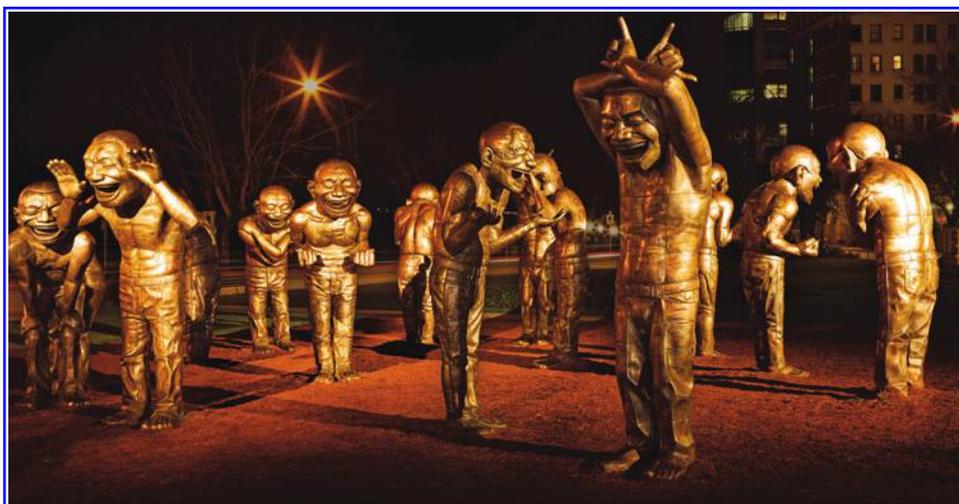


Fig. 2. Another view of A-maze-ing Laughter, by Yue Minjun. The authentic expression of laughter always includes strongly squinted eyes, a detail here carefully observed and depicted by the artist. If the eyes are even slightly opened, the expression of uninhibited laughter loses its power and credibility. Photo credit: Vancouver Biennale; artist: Yue Minjun; photographer: Dan Fairchild; and the City of Vancouver Parks.

Oddly enough, the uninhibited, eye-squinting, jaw-dropping laugh is surprisingly scant in its appearance in art, no matter what the type of art or period. Contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun is trying his best to correct this omission, and he has created an entire body of work in painting and sculpture, featuring a rather grotesque version of himself laughing uproariously, unprecedented in the history of self-portraiture. A famous installation in Vancouver features around a dozen large bronze Yue Minjuns, each one seeming to laugh more uncontrollably than the next (Figs. 1 and 2). The international success of his is testimony to the power of such depictions, and our amusement at seeing them. We are instinctively drawn to the faces of our fellow humans, and if they are animated by a strong expression, they are all the more engrossing.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Figure S1
Supplementary Figure S2
Supplementary Figure S3
Supplementary Figure S4
Supplementary Figure S5
Supplementary Figure S6
Supplementary Figure S7
Supplementary Figure S8
Supplementary Figure S9

Reference

1. Dusseldorp JR, Guarin DL, van Veen MM, Jowett N, Hadlock TA. In the eye of the beholder: Changes in perceived emotion expression after smile reanimation. *Plast Reconstr Surg.* 2019;144(2):457–471. doi: 10.1097/PRS.0000000000005865.

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