

The HOME FORUM



BLANK STARE: Use your imagination to see this sci-fi visage in a passenger-terminal door at Boston's Logan Airport. Could that curvy reflection be a wave of hair?



CALL ME 'DWAYNE': Sleepy screw-head 'eyes' and a flipped-down 'nose' create this character in a bathtub. (You never know where you'll spot a familiar face.)

Faces in unusual places

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I noticed that a roadside electrical outlet looked like a face. So I photographed it. Later, I began to notice that ordinary items around my home - doorknobs, a bathtub drain - also seemed to have eyes, noses, and mouths.

Once I started seeing such faces, I began to spot them everywhere! Was I going crazy? No, I was just seeing my world in a new way.

Soon my observation became a photographic quest. How many nonhuman faces could I find? I committed myself to taking such pictures whenever and wherever I found them. At one point, I saw one as I hurtled down the stairs of the hotel press center during the 2002 Boston Marathon. I had to stop, blocking traffic, while I captured a feathery carpet face. (See below.)

In the middle of my project, the Monitor's art director approached me. "Look," he said, "here's a whole book of those 'faces' you've been shooting." "No, no!" I replied. "I don't want to see them! I want to find my own!" I didn't know others were seeing "faces," too.

Here's a collection of my best ones. Do you see what I saw? Are you starting to see faces, too?



CRANE MAN: A construction-hoist's comic 'expression' seems to reflect the strain of lifting heavy loads. Or is it just startled at having its picture taken?



FILM STAR, TIN MAN: Odd marks on a roll of film (above) and the creases in a smashed can (right) seem to look at you.



FACES AT YOUR FEET: A berry on a blueberry bush (left) may have had its 'eyes' created by the beak of a hungry bird. This feathery face (above) was spotted on the carpeted stairs of a hotel as the photographer hurried past on an assignment.



Even a face in outer space

YOU'VE heard of "the man in the moon," right? But have you ever heard of "the face on Mars"? The story began in July 1976. Viking Orbiter 1, a United States interplanetary probe, was sending back pictures of the Martian surface. It was looking for a good landing spot for its sister ship, Viking Lander 2, which was scheduled to touch down early that September.

On July 25, Viking 1 photographed a region called Cydonia in Mars's northern hemisphere. Cydonia has a lot of buttes (steep hills standing alone on a plain) and mesas (small flat areas atop buttes). Such formations are common in the American West, too.

Poring over the images, scientists at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, Calif., saw something odd: A human face

seemed to be peering back at them from one of the Cydonia photos.

JPL released this photo with a caption that read, in part: "The huge rock formation in the center, which resembles a human head, is formed by shadows giving the illusion of eyes, nose, and mouth." JPL thought it was an interesting coincidence.

Others saw the photo differently. They thought it was clear evidence of alien life. Martians must have carved the two-mile-long rock, they said. And wasn't that a pyramid shape nearby? Books, magazine and newspaper articles followed. The "face" was the subject of radio talk shows and even made an appearance in a Hollywood film. Those who believed the "Martians" theory accused NASA of covering up evidence of an alien civilization.

But as NASA spokesmen pointed out, signs of intelligent life on Mars would be very good news for the space agency. NASA is always defending its budget, and Martian artifacts would attract piles of government funding.

Fast-forward to 1997: The Mars

Global Surveyor (MGS) arrives on orbit in September and begins photographing Mars's surface. But instead of taking pictures from 1,162 miles up, as Viking 1 had done, the MGS takes photos from just 276 miles away. The resolution on the MGS cameras – that is, how small an object they can see – is 10 times better than those of Viking.

It took time for the new orbiter to get into position. Finally, in April 1998, the probe sent images of Cydonia. "We felt this was important to taxpayers," said Jim Garvin, lead scientist for Mars and the moon at NASA, "so we photographed the 'face' as soon as we could get a good shot at it."

Thin clouds hid the site somewhat, so doubters had to wait until April 2001 for MGS to get a better look. And what did it see? Not a face, but a natural-looking land-

form. What had looked like a face from far away with a low-resolution camera looked like a routine butte when you got a clear look at it up close.

But that didn't mean scientists stopped seeing funny shapes on Mars. They've spotted a hot dog, a butterfly, a heart, and even a "happy face." Signs of intelligent life? No – they're all naturally shaped landforms. See for yourself. Log on to: mars.jpl.nasa.gov/mgs/msss/camera/images/MENU/moc_by_date.html, then search for "hot dog," "butterfly," and "happy face."

Owen Thomas



PHOTOS COURTESY NASA



WHAT ARE YOU LOOKIN' AT?

An image (left) from a 1976 Mars orbiter showed what seemed to be a human face on a rock outcrop two miles long. (Enlargement at top.) Some thought 'Martians' had carved it. But a closer look by a 1998 orbiter (above) revealed that the 'face' was a pretty routine landform.