

Painters tend to keep one eye on center of canvas, scientist says

New York Times

A scientist who studies vision and the brain has made a curious discovery about portrait painting: Artists almost always place one eye of their subject at the horizontal center — a point halfway between the left and right sides of the picture frame.

"I have no idea why all artists do this, but they apparently do it unconsciously," said Dr. Christopher Tyler, a neuroscientist at

the Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute in San Francisco.

Neither art analysis books nor historians discuss the eye centering, Tyler said, yet artists have done it for more than 500 years.

Tyler's discovery, described in the April 30 issue of the journal *Nature*, stems from his interest in left-brain and right-brain differences. The human brain has two hemispheres that specialize in different tasks.

Tyler said he wondered

whether the left and right brains have different aesthetic appreciation for art. He decided to show paintings to a patient whose left and right hemispheres had been disconnected surgically and who essentially saw the world with two separate brains.

Tyler still has no answer to that question. But he made his other discovery along the way. Tyler had taken photos of 170 famous portraits from the past five centuries and marked the

midpoint along the top of the picture. Then he had drawn a vertical line that divided each painting at its horizontal center.

One eye or the other almost always fell on or very near the center. "Clever composition generates the overall impression that the face is symmetrically located in the frame," Tyler said. "Only when the vertical line is drawn through the picture does it become clear that one eye is at the exact horizontal center. It seems

artists go to great lengths to place one eye on this spot."

Eye placement could tap into human perception and affect our aesthetic judgments, Tyler said. For example, when heads are turned at an angle, the forward eye usually is along the center line. But when the other eye is placed there, he said, "you get the sense of a more intimate connection with the person. They are less bold. You connect with their shyness."

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