

culture vulture blog



Thursday December 15 2005

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By Andrew Dickson / Art & Architecture 04:39pm



If you're happy and you know it ...

Spare a thought for scientists. Plugging solidly away, doing valuable, detailed work, making small but significant steps towards the furtherance of knowledge. Then what? One of your colleagues goes and does a piece of research that makes you look like a bunch of noddies.

According to [research published in New Scientist](#), the Mona Lisa is "mainly happy". This gem comes to us from boffins in Illinois, who used a computer developed at the University of Amsterdam (how embarrassing – two sets of noddies, some of them the

otherwise sensible and cultured Dutch) to conclude that Leonardo's most famous sitter is 83% happy, 9% disgusted, 6% fearful and 2% angry. (Good to be precise. Stops us thinking.)

The [abstract says](#) that the software looks at "key facial features such as the curvature of the lips and crinkles around the eyes, then scores each face with respect to six basic emotions." Six – so many!

The point of doing all this – it isn't just a stunted effort at art criticism, disappointingly – is [to develop smarter software that can understand human expressions](#). Given that this seems most likely to apply to issues of identification, it's a shame more of us don't have the luck to have our passport photos done by a quattrocento master. It might take the indignity out of being forced to acquire an ID card.

You wonder why they have to stop there, of course, although fortunately specially created GU software enables us to carry

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Ho ho hop to it

This week's recommendations have to be alternative Christmas songs. We're all more than familiar with the ones they play on a constant, punishing loop in department stores. So, no Slade, Bing Crosby or anything else that appears on this album....

Smile. Please

Spare a thought for scientists. Plugging solidly away, doing valuable, detailed work, making small but significant steps towards the furtherance of knowledge. Then what? One of your colleagues goes and does a piece of research that makes you look like...

Shop talk

If you happen to be wandering down London's Gloucester Road this evening, might I recommend that you knock on the door of No 46? Oxfam's newest bookshop is opening its doors there tonight, at 7pm tonight. The charity, which is.....

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this bold new research much further. Munch's Scream? 89% angst, 7% terror and 4% sheer boredom, the system says. Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergere? 60% ennui, 23% aggression and 17% embarrassment at being made to stand in front of a weird bloke with a moustache. I'm sure you can come up with others. Please do.

But really. [Two cultures?](#) Thank God there are.

Comments

What a pathetic bunch of no-hoppers these poor scientists are!

Any artist, or art historian who has studied da Vinci or knows anything about him, (other than aquired through an even bigger waste of space – The da Vinci Code.) Will have learned that Leonardo liked to play with images, to him it was a game to do create works that baffled his audience.

The fact that such nerds have pondered the meaning of 'La Gioconda' 500 years after he painted her, will have Leonardo rolling in his grave laughing at the fact they've completely missed the point!

Posted by Paul Arrowsmith on December 15, 2005 10:45 PM.

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This is the only way many people can digest their art, not only safely figurative (without the danger of nudity) and unquestionably "great" (as declared by years of critics and by the length of the line at the Louvre), but without scary doubts attached: she is not merely "said to be smiling," she is provably, absolutely, 83 effing percent happy. Only proof that Da Vinci was tickling her with a brush as she posed (and she was 97 percent enjoying it) would be better art news to the average reader, who doesn't, after all, like art but does like simple facts about cultural icons.

But it's a story about a story about a story. Scientists report fluff like this because reporters (including New Scientist reporters) fall for fluff like this because readers (especially New Scientist readers) fall for fluff like this. The research (the original story as told by the researchers) probably isn't nearly as silly as the New Scientist article about the research, and you can't be blamed if your blog entry a story about a story about a story) misses important details.

The real research is not a study of the Mona Lisa and has nothing to do with art, it is a software development project for government and corporate snoopers: "Software capable of recognising human emotions just by looking at photographs or videos could lead to PCs that adjust their response depending on the user's mood, as well as smarter surveillance systems." Mona Lisa and her "enigmatic smile" are thrown in to make sure the research is reported, the researchers are known, and the money keeps flowing to their

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lab.

Posted by [Malcolm](#) on December 16, 2005 11:43 AM.

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78% annoyed, 12% bemused, 11% embarrassed , 9% bored.....

Posted by [deaddad](#) on December 16, 2005 01:00 PM.

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110% unable to add up too.....

Posted by [deaddad](#) on December 16, 2005 01:01 PM.

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