

mirror in the bathroom

SEEING AND BELIEVING

What really goes on when we gaze in a mirror? Maybe not what we think.

by Linda Dyett | Wednesday, October 30, 2013

Gazing at our reflected image is a trick we humans have practiced since, well, the dawn of recorded history, as (bear with me, please) the following paragraph will reveal.

Way back, we recognized ourselves by peering at the surface of a still, dark pool of water, a shiny flat stone, or — an American Indian device — the glistening body of a fish, freshly plucked from the water. The ancient Egyptians turned to sheets of obsidian, the Celts and Romans to silver and bronze. In the Middle Ages, mirror use, along with speculation about the self, was frowned upon. It wasn't until the 11th century, with the advent of romantic love and, by extension, the awakening of self-awareness (and urgently wondering what others thought of the way we looked), that lead-backed mirrors appeared. By the 14th and 15th centuries, mirror production was thriving. By the mid-16th, in tandem with the rise of modern consciousness, carrying a mercury- or tin-backed pocket mirror had become a commonplace in the West.

Today, aluminum-backed mirrors are found in probably every household in the world. Even soldiers and refugees carry pocket mirrors. Even prison cells come equipped with framed sheets of polished steel. And on a cosmic scale, mirrors are essential components of those huge observatory telescopes peering into outer space.

But let's stick with the human dimension — *how* we look in the mirror, and what that tells us about being human. It's this process of recognizing ourselves that fascinates me. For the record, the only other animals who recognize their mirror image are higher primates such as chimps, and, inexplicably, dolphins. (Out of curiosity, I hoisted my ornery one-year-old cat, Dexter, up to the bathroom mirror, and he didn't even deign to look.)



At midlife and beyond, what we see in the mirror is not a pretty picture, presumably, which is why I'm guessing Purple Clover has chosen to run a series on mirror rumination about our aging faces, and how we confront the wrinkles, brown spots, jowls and receding hairline staring back at us.) And yes, we all harangue ourselves about our mirror image. But beyond that, I'm a contrarian about what actually goes on when we look in the mirror. I'm convinced that, no matter our age, the *last* thing we truly have a view of in the mirror is ourselves — at least not for any sustained length of time.

Plastic surgeons, who are expert at assessing their patients' self-assessments as they peer in a hand mirror during consultations, also say that none of us has a spot-on idea of what we really look like. We all suffer from facial dysmorphia, exaggerating small and insignificant imperfections, ignoring more prominent flaws. "We fixate on the bump on our nose, but fail to notice the deepening nasolabial folds or the basic asymmetries in all of our faces," says Raffi Hovsepian, MD, an assistant clinical professor of plastic surgery at the University of California, Irvine, with a practice in Newport Beach and Beverly Hills. What's more, "the angle at which other people look at you every day and the way you view yourself in the mirror are not the same," points out Paul Jarrod Frank, MD, a clinical assistant professor at the New York University Medical Center.

It's also a fact that many of us, when we're on the move out in the world and encounter our image in those large, ubiquitous mall, lobby and elevator mirrors — frequently don't recognize ourselves at first. And when we do, it often comes as a shock. *That's me?*

So, what actually goes on when we look in the mirror?

In those seconds when we first confront our reflected image, it's my hunch that our brain computes the variables, makes allowance for flaws and obligingly concludes that this is *us* — and not our grandmother or some two-bit impostor.

After that, I think self-recognition quickly shuts off. Whether we're putting on makeup or shaving, we quickly and efficiently divide our face into zones — and we focus on the cheek stubble that needs tending, the nose that needs powdering. In so doing, we've ceased looking at our *self* and are gazing instead at a kind of Cubist deconstruction.

And all the while, our mind wanders. We review last night's dinner. We plan the day ahead. We practice a joke we recently heard. One busy woman I know says her morning makeup session is her only time of the day for catching up on the news on the radio. But for most of us, face-fixing in a mirror means going into a reverie.

One good reason for this, I suspect, is that mirrors are hypnotic. Maybe the reflected light lulls us into a semi-trance. Maybe the prolonged confrontation with our face — which is to say, our aging, mortal being — is fraught with terror and can't be sustained.

No wonder mirrors abound in mystery, danger, and superstition. No wonder Izanagi, the creator-god in Shinto mythology, instructed his children to gaze in a mirror until all evil thoughts and passions disappeared. Even today (as I discovered in the ladies' locker room of a Tokyo gym), some Japanese women are known to stand before a mirror, reviewing every inch of their face until all traces of emotion have been wiped away.

You out there, reading this on your not very reflective computer monitor — now that this article is about to end, please check in with your bathroom mirror and try focusing on your face. You probably can't, for more than 30 seconds or so. What I'd like to know is where your mind wanders. Results will be compiled herein.

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