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Is there a forward bias in human profile portraits?

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Abstract

Humans favor pictorial representations of agents with more space in front of them than behind them. This preference has been evidenced in forced choice (Palmer, Gardner, & Wickens, 2008) and drag and drop tasks (Palmer & Langlois, 2017), and has been referred to as a forward bias in aesthetic preferences for spatial composition. It has also been documented in depictions of animals and referred to as an anterior bias (Bode et al., 2011). We extend the study of this bias by looking at the evolution of portrait painting in Europe (where classical rules demanded centering). For this we analyze profile-oriented portraits from two datasets: one Pan-European subset of the one used in Redies et al. (2007), and a second one compiled from the London National Portrait Gallery's online collections. We confirm the bias and discuss links with underlying mechanisms of animacy and agency perception.