

Why we see faces in inanimate objects

Most people are obsessed with faces. We see faces everywhere, even in things that are most definitely not faces. The most famous example is probably the [man in the moon](#). The weirdest has got to be the person who [reportedly paid \\$28,000 for an old grilled cheese sandwich](#) whose burn marks outline the face of the Virgin Mary.

This phenomenon, called face pareidolia, isn't new (Leonardo da Vinci even wrote about it [as an artistic tool](#)). But nobody knows much about how or why our brains create this illusion. This week I came across a fascinating brain-imaging study that begins to investigate these questions. The paper, published in the journal [Cortex](#), is titled "Seeing Jesus in Toast," and this fall it won an [Ig Nobel Prize](#), awarded "for achievements that first make people laugh then make them think."

The study hinges on a clever method for inducing pareidolia inside of a brain scanner. The researchers showed 20 volunteers hundreds of "noise images" — squares comprised of black, white, and gray blobs — and told them that half of the images contained hard-to-detect faces. (The participants had been through a training period in which they saw clearly defined faces in such images, so they were used to the act of searching for a face within the noise.) After seeing a noise image, the volunteer would press a button indicating whether she saw a face in it or not. Unbeknownst to the participants, none of the noise images contained any overt faces.

Read full, original article: [Why Do We See the Man in the Moon?](#)