

Binocular Universe: Pareidolic Pandemonium

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Have you ever taken a good look at the Moon? I mean really studied it? If so, then you already know that all of the major lunar maria can be readily identified through binoculars, as can many other prominent features. Depending on the phase, for instance, the ray patterns spraying away from the craters Tycho and Copernicus are also pretty easily evident.

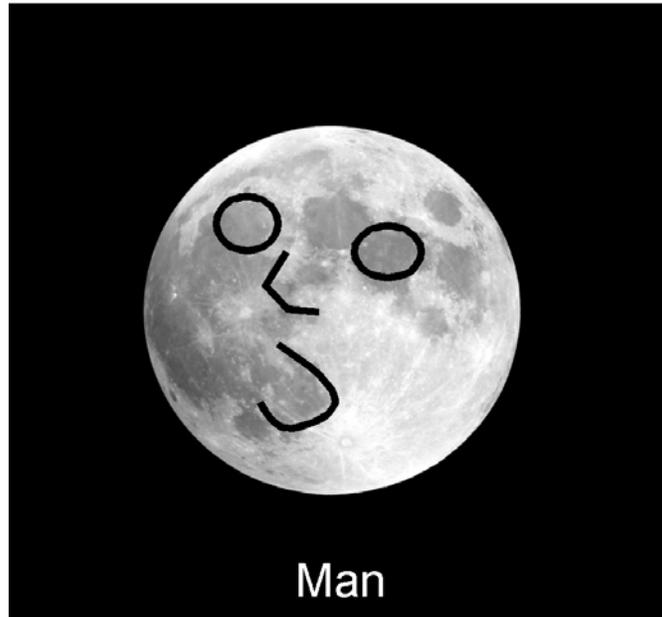
Collectively, these lunar features can be configured into several different figures, including the proverbial "Man in the Moon." Tales of a man in the Moon go back more than a millennium, with different cultures offering varying explanations for why he is there in the first place. Most legends recount his being a thief or another ne'er-do-well who was banished from society.

By studying the Full Moon and letting your imagination play with the maria, you may see some vague reference to a human face. This effect, where the human brain turns indistinct markings into concrete, identifiable entities, is called *pareidolia* and is the basis for the famous Rorschach inkblot test. Psychologists use the Rorschach test to help examine a person's personality characteristics (and quirks!).

While we won't play amateur psychologist here, can you spot the man's face? His eyes are formed from Mare Serenitatis and Mare Imbrium near the northern limb, while Mare Nubium is his agape mouth near the southern limb.



Many artists depict his nose as formed by the arc of the Apennine Mountains and the flat lava plain to their south, Sinus Aestuum. These can prove difficult to see, owing to the glare of the nearly Full Moon. Use a moon filter (or two) to help reduce the glare.

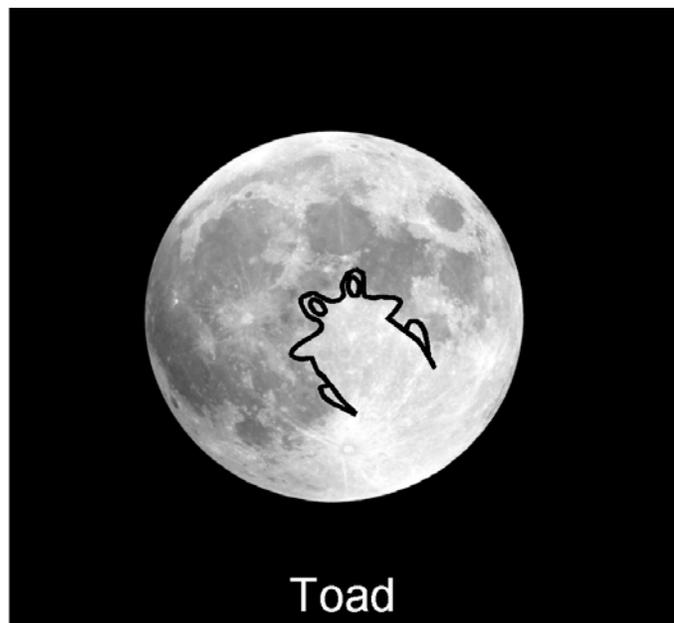


Personally, I find it easier to see some other figures drawn among the maria. First, let's find the Woman in the Moon's profile. Like the Man in the Moon, the Woman is also best seen during the waxing gibbous and Full phases. Mare Serenitatis and Mare Tranquillitatis collectively form the hair atop her head. She's wearing her hair in a pony tail, which is formed by Mare Fecunditatis and Mare Nectaris. Mare Vaporum can be taken as her eye, while the shape of her slightly opened mouth comes from Sinus Medii. The brilliant rayed crater Tycho completes the picture as a sparkling jewel that she is wearing around her neck.



There are actually two ways of drawing a Rabbit in the Moon. In one, the rabbit is facing east. Oceanus Procellarum forms its head, while Mare Frigorus marks its long ears that curve westward. The rabbit's front paws are formed by Mare Humorum and Mare Nubium, while its neck and body are fashioned from Maria Imbrium, Serenitatis, and Tranquillitatis. Finally, its hind legs are created from Maria Fecunditatis and Nectaris, and its fluffy tail from Mare Crisium.

If you prefer, use Maria Fecunditatis and Nectaris as its ears, which merge into Mare Tranquillitatis. In this version, Mare Serenitatis is the rabbit's bent-over head, Mare Imbrium and Oceanus Procellarum its body, and Mare Humorum and Mare Nubium the rabbit's crossed hind legs. This latter representation was an important part of Chinese mythology for centuries. The Chinese also saw a toad in the Moon, their goddess Heng O.



Another common image shows a man bent over pouring water on a fire. Imagine Fecunditatis as his head, Maria Tranquilitatis and Serenitatis as his torso and hips respectively, and a combination of Mare Vaporum and Sinus Medii as his leg and foot. His extended arm comes from Sinus Asperitatis, which appears to bridge the gap between Mare Tranquilitatis and Mare Nectaris. The latter is the bucket of water that he is pouring on the fire created by brilliant Tycho.



Other cultures saw anything from a moose and buffalo to a dragon.



Let your imagination run wild and see what you see among the lunar maria. Depending on what you come up with, it could explain some personality quirks, as well!

Next month, we step back out into the deep sky. So, until then, remember fellow luna-tics, two eyes are better than one.



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