

THE FACE ON MARS

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

A half-century ago, NASA’s Viking 1 lander spotted something odd on the surface of Mars.

It was something *strange*. Something *creepy*. Something *easily explainable*.

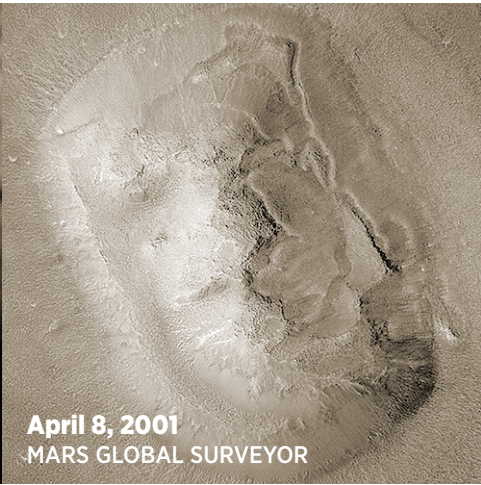
HERE’S LOOKIN’ AT YOU, KID ...

On July 25, 1976, NASA’s Viking 1 spacecraft was orbiting the planet days before it released its lander. The orbiter was snapping close-up pictures of the Martian surface in hopes of finding a suitable spot for the Viking 2 lander, which was still a couple of weeks away from Mars.

Scientists at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, California, got a surprise, however, when they received a photo that appeared to show a sphinx-like artifact on the surface of the red planet.

A week later, NASA released the image to the public. The caption described “a huge rock formation” that resembled a human head “formed by shadows giving the illusion of eyes, nose and mouth.” The idea, apparently, was that the photo would drum up some interest in the upcoming Viking landings.

That idea backfired in a big way. The image went viral in a time before the word “viral” had been coined. The Face on Mars was featured in TV shows, movies, books and



— the photos proved the Face on Mars was no face at all. It was just a lump: an 800-foot-high, 1.2 mile-long mesa, to be precise, located in the transition zone between crater-filled highlands of western Arabia Terra to the south and comparatively smooth, lowland plains to the north.

In 2001, the orbital camera platform took another high-resolution look at the mesa. Again, no evidence to suggest an ancient civilization or an oversized tribute to Jack Kirby was found.

It’s called *pareidolia*: a psychological phenomenon that causes people to see images — especially faces — where none exist. The best example, perhaps, might be finding objects in cloud formations.

In the case of the original Face on Mars photo, the angle of the sun caused minor depressions atop the mesa to look like an eye and a mouth. A small ridge happened to resemble a nose. The black dots that appeared throughout the image were, in fact, transmission errors: missing pixels. But one fell precisely where one would expect to see a nostril, adding to the effect.

But again: There is no face on Mars. It’s just a mountain.



especially grocery store tabloids.

The idea of an ancient civilization leaving a face-like image on the surface of Mars wasn’t exactly new. Jack Kirby, who would later achieve fame working for Marvel Comics, had dreamed up that very story way back in 1958.

Conspiracy theorists, especially, loved the image and said it proved the existence of life on Mars. In some

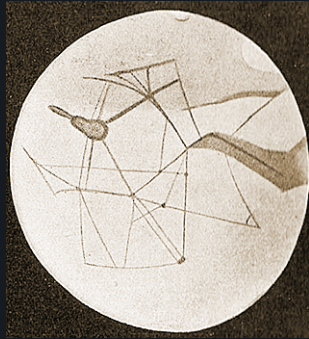
cases, these were the same folks who claimed that NASA never landed on the moon and that the U.S. government kept deceased alien bodies in a morgue at Area 51 in Nevada.

So when the Mars Global Surveyor arrived in Martian orbit in 1997, the so-called Face on Mars in the Cydonia region of Mars’ northern latitudes was high on the priority list for further photographic examination.

The Mars Global Surveyor sent back those pictures in 1998, at a resolution more than 10 times sharper than the 22-year-old original picture. And — to the surprise of virtually no one at JPL

OTHER STRANGE THINGS THAT CAN BE SEEN IN SPACE

This wasn’t the only time scientists have found unusual-looking things on Mars or elsewhere in the universe ...



As early as 1877, astronomers believed there were canals on Mars — evidence of civilization. This was a sketch by Percival Lowell.



Mars Global Surveyor found this smiley face in the crater Galle on Mars in 1999. Apparently, Martians were having a nice day.



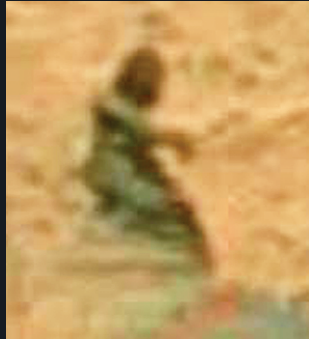
The Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter spotted this 1.2-mile-long heart in 2009. It appears to be some sort of sinkhole.



Hidden Mickeys aren’t just a thing in Pixar movies and at Disney World. This one was captured by the Google Mars project.



Also from Google Mars: This picture from the Mars Express Orbiter that some say resembles Mahatma Gandhi of India.



In 2004, NASA’s Spirit rover found a rock formation that, in the right light, looks a bit like Bigfoot, strolling on the Martian surface.



That’s no space station. That’s Mimas, a moon of Saturn that features a crater that makes it look a lot like the Death Star from “Star Wars.”



This nebula — discovered in 1888 in the constellation of Orion, 1,500 light years from Earth — resembles the head of a horse.



The Helix nebula in the constellation of Aquarius looks like a giant eyeball — but only when photographed by an infrared camera.



The Hubble space telescope found “the Finger in space” nebula in 1999. The less said about this, perhaps, the better ...