

## DUMB BLONDES

*According to scientists, there's absolutely no link between hair color and intelligence. (There have actually been studies.) So why then does this stereotype—and all those dumb-blonde jokes—persist?*

### HEATING UP THE ICE AGE

**H**Blondes are a relatively recent addition to the gene pool. For nearly all of human history—200,000 years or so—humans had dark skin, dark hair, and dark eyes. The nomads who made their way into Europe about 40,000 years ago began to develop lighter skin (possibly as a result of vitamin-D deficiencies), but retained their dark hair and eyes. Then, a mere 11,000 years ago, a change occurred.

It was the last Ice Age and food was scarce. To survive, the men had to roam the European tundra hunting bison and woolly mammoths. Many of them perished, and before long the females outnumbered the males. Unlike in warmer climates, where women could farm or gather fruit, in frozen Europe if a woman wanted to eat, she needed a man. That predicament led to fierce competition among females—and it allowed two random genetic mutations to take hold: blonde hair and blue eyes. Neither trait had any physiological survival value, and neither may have caught on if the conditions weren't so harsh, but these were desperate times.

According to Canadian anthropologist Peter Frost, "When an individual is faced with potential mates of equal value, it will tend to select the one that 'stands out from the crowd.'" Result: When the big, strong hunters arrived with their mammoth meat, the blondes made it to the front of the line.

### DIM BULBS

But somewhere along the way to modern times, the stereotype emerged that blondes are not that bright. Some theories as to where this perception came from:

- In the Middle Ages, wealthy people spent most of their time indoors and out of the sun, which kept their hair darker, while the "dumb" poor spent their time working outside, their hair getting bleached by the sun.

Only she knows for sure: 1 in 3 U.S. Caucasian women have blonde hair; 1 in 20 naturally so.

- Only about 25 percent of women who were born blonde retain that hair color into adulthood. The same factor that connotes youth—which is attractive to men—can also lead to perceptions of childlike immaturity and naivete.
- Brunettes help perpetuate the dumb-blonde stereotype because they're envious that all a blonde has to do is look coy and a man will give her free stuff. Who needs brains when you've got blonde?

### HOW CURIOUS

Another theory: Some blondes deliberately perpetuate the dumb stereotype themselves. That's what many historians believe Rosalie Duthé was doing. Widely considered to be modern history's first "dumb blonde," Duthé was an 18th-century French dancer, nude model, and courtesan. In addition to her looks, the voluptuous blonde was famous for her habit of taking long pauses before she spoke. Did this make her stupid? No, but it didn't matter. Duthé had men hanging on her every word. This peculiar habit was satirized in the 1775 play *Les curiosités de la Foire*, in which Duthé's long pauses were stretched out even longer for comedic effect. The play was a huge hit in Paris, sending the message that it was okay to laugh at the intelligence—or apparent lack thereof—of blondes. (Duthé had the last laugh; she became very wealthy and lived to the ripe old age of 82.)

### PUTTIN' ON THE DITZ

The dumb-blonde stereotype gained traction in early-20th-century America thanks to a popular vaudeville act called a "Dumb Dora." The premise: A ditz woman (not necessarily blonde) would play dumb for laughs. Comedienne Gracie Allen perfected the persona in her stage acts with George Burns. Allen wasn't a blonde (although her hair was lightened when she appeared on TV), but her ditz persona drew so many laughs that she was often imitated.

A comic strip based on this persona, called *Dumb Dora*, ran from 1924 to 1935. Its creator, Chic Young, introduced his most famous comic strip in 1930: *Blondie*. (She started out as a Dumb Dora type, but soon transformed into a smart housewife.)

### BLONDES ON FILM

The mid-20th century was a golden age for blondes. There were

the “ice-cold blondes”—including Grace Kelly, Kim Novak, and Mae Murray—and the “blonde bombshells,” like Brigitte Bardot, Lana Turner, and Jean Harlow. But the most famous one was, of course, Marilyn Monroe (a natural brunette).

Monroe was by no means “dumb,” but she cashed in on the stereotype when she starred as Lorelei Lee in the 1953 comedy *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The character, created by author Anita Loos in the 1920s, is actually more superficial than stupid. Take this exchange from the film between Lorelei (Monroe) and Dorothy, her “smart” brunette best friend, played by Jane Russell.

**Lorelei:** Excuse me, but what is the way to Europe, France?

**Dorothy:** Honey, France is in Europe.

**Lorelei:** Well, who said it wasn't?

**Dorothy:** Well, you wouldn't say you wanted to go to North America, Mexico.

**Lorelei:** If that's where I wanted to go, I would.

Like Gracie Allen, Monroe spawned many imitators, including Goldie Hawn's ditzzy characters on the 1960s variety show *Laugh-In*, Chrissy (Suzanne Somers) on the 1970s sitcom *Three's Company*, and Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) on the 1990s sitcom *Friends*. In the 2000s, celebrities such as Jessica Simpson and Paris Hilton have lived up to that stereotype to great success. “I play dumb like Jessica Simpson plays dumb,” said Hilton. “But we know exactly what we're doing. We're smart blondes.”

#### “THERE'S WHITE-OUT ON THE SCREEN.”

That's the punchline to one of thousands of dumb-blonde jokes. (Setup: *How can you tell if a blonde has been using the computer?*) Another big reason the stereotype won't go away is the enduring popularity of these jokes. The fad, which began in the 1980s, is as strong as ever today. But are they “harmless,” as some claim? According to a study conducted by Thomas E. Ford, a psychology professor at Western Carolina University, “Sexist humor is not simply benign amusement. It can allow men to feel comfortable with sexism without the fear of disapproval of their peers.” That acceptance, concluded Ford, keeps the jokes—and the stereotype—alive.

Studies that recorded people's reactions to pictures of women all point to the same conclusion: Subconsciously, both men *and*

As uncomfortable as it sounded? The ancient Romans wore underwear called *subligaculum*.

women tend to judge intelligence, as well as likability, by hair color. In fact, one study conducted by the University of Paris found that blondes actually make *guys* dumber: Men who interacted with attractive blonde women performed worse on cognitive tests than men who interacted with attractive brunettes.

### LIFE'S A BLEACH

Many blonde women complain that it's harder for them to be taken seriously in society because of the dumb stereotype. Reese Witherspoon, who starred in the 2001 comedy *Legally Blonde*, about a seemingly dumb blonde college student whose boyfriend leaves her for a smart brunette, says the prejudice her character experienced in the movie happens to her in real life: "Immediately, when people meet me, they think of me as not being smart."

An English journalist—and brunette—named Joanna Pittman decided to find out firsthand how blondes are really treated. She bleached her hair, walked outside, and immediately noticed a difference. "I got wolfish looks from men and complicit smiles from blonde women, who seemed to acknowledge my beaconlike hair as if I was now a member of an elite club."

Inspired, Pittman began researching the history of the hair color and society's reactions to it, culminating in her 2003 book *On Blondes*. Her conclusion: "Every age has restyled blond hair in its own image and invested it with its own preoccupations. Blondeness became a prejudice in the Dark Ages, an obsession in the Renaissance, a mystique in Elizabethan England, a mythical fear in the 19th century, an ideology in the 1930s, and a sexual invitation in the 1950s."

Today, it's a punchline.

\* \* \*

### AN ELEPHANT JOKE

**Q:** How do you shoot a blue elephant?

**A:** With a blue elephant gun.

**Q:** How do you shoot a pink elephant?

**A:** Hold its nose until it turns blue, and then shoot it with the blue elephant gun.

What do the words *alcohol*, *lute*, and *magazine* have in common? They come from Arabic.