

THE HEAD

BY: DAVID FORREST

The head should represent everything desirable in our breed, great size and power; nobility and bearing; character and reliability; beauty and refinement; and intelligence and majesty. When some of these qualities are found in one animal we are very pleased. When they are all found together, the effect is overwhelming.

Why heads like these are able to move us so much is not easy to analyze. It is not enough to test them against The Standard point for point, find that they do not deviate significantly and conclude that therefore they must be good. The object of handsome heads is not to satisfy a standard but to please people. The Standard provides a rough outline of what a specific group of people at a specific time thought was a desirable head. As an outline it functions very well in that it can be used to test and reject inferior specimens. But within the rather broad limits of The Standard it is possible to conceive of many different kinds of head. What one viewer feels is important in the head may be relatively trivial to another and both may be within the limits of The Standard.

Finally, evaluation will rest upon your own taste and your own judgement of what the breed should be and should become. Each person will evolve a conception of what he likes based on what he values. Evaluating dogs is more an exercise of human sensibility than it is one of objective measurement. So - what follows is only what one person feels is desirable and valuable in the head of the Saint Bernard.

In only one way is the Saint Bernard extreme. He is the most powerful of all the breeds. Others are taller, shorter, more angulated, less angulated, longer faced, shorter faced, and so on. But the Saint Bernard has the most bulk and size. That fact of sheer size is a partial determinant of what is called his "Type" or "character" or "kind". The head is the most concentrated expression of his type. Whatever he is generally, his head must be to an extreme degree. The head is a summary or epitome of what the whole animal is.

Therefore, to be good, the head must be very large. Not just larger than a Dane's or a Newf's - that's not enough. It must be enormous - really overpowering. To my mind, it must appear slightly large in relation to the body. I have never seen a head on a Saint Bernard that appeared to me to be too large - either absolutely too large or in relation to the rest of the body. The opposite, however, is sometimes seen.

Heads that are small, even when they are well structured, lack majesty. Those that are small in relation to the whole animal appear ridiculous. Such heads seem to me to very seriously faulty.

The Standard asks the head be "massive". This is less a matter of absolute size than it is of general character. The head should appear to be structured of large blocks. It should have a chisled look and be made up of a system of essentially flat planes and rather straight lines. The Standard alludes to this craven character when it asks for a furrow running over the skull and muzzle. It is the effect a sculptor would get if he were to carve the head from stone rather than a model made from clay. This massive character is very desirable and rather rare. It is one of the factors that makes excellent heads from just good ones.

on the following pages are some sketches of a mature smooth-coat female of good quality, Her head is considered by her breeder, her owner and most people who see her to be quite good. One of her virtues is that she displays this quality of mass and planar structure to a nice degree. The sketches somewhat exaggerate the effect to make it more apparent. Heads that have this property will display greater dignity and power. For another example, see the photo of Ch. Questor von Alpine Plateau in "The New Complete Saint Bernard".

Size and massive structure are the opposite of one the very prevalent faults in the breed; Fineness/To my eye, almost all Saint Bernards are too fine. In the head, this fault becomes a lack of fullness and depth. The cranium should be full in every direction and from every angle. It should rise high and evenly. It should be deep from front to back and wide from side to side. Lack of breadth is a common fault, more common than lack of height. This requirement is expressed in The Standard when it asks for "Head - very powerful and imposing."

The muzzle too should be suitably full - very deep and very wide with no suggestion of snipiness. A muzzle that tapers toward the nose either in side view or top view is antithetical to the idea of the powerful dog.

The head that has been described so far would probable be a rather good one, but it is possible that within the limits outlines the head could be gross or brutish. We require in our breed that the dog be benevolent in spirit, and the head must mirror this gentleness. Therefore, it must be, in some sense, be refined. Refinement is achieved largely by balance. The mass and great size must be assembled in such a way that no part of the whole structure seems "unsuitable" or "unfitting" in either size or character. It is this integrity of form that refines the structure and makes it into a coherent unit. A muzzle that is inordinately large and full might easily appear brutish on a head that lacks breadth in the cranium. Even a detail like the nose, if it is absurdly large for the head it is on, will destroy the sense of unity. This kind of thing is not really subject to objective measurement. It is dependent on your ability to discriminate and exercise taste in rather subtle areas. It is also the reason why merely measuring the head against the written standard is only a partial test of quality.

If the head is large, massive, and refined with good balance, it can hardly be a poor one. But there are some things that make great ones. Among the most important of these is ears; their size, shape and set.

The standard demands -"very strongly developed burr (Huschel) at the base". This requirement is not made for the sake of itself, but because it has an enormous effect on the character of the entire head. When the supporting cartilage at the base and back of the ear is substantial it causes the back of the ear to stand away from the head. While the standard describes this feature as standing -"slightly away from the head at the base." I would prefer that it said "well away from the head". Any ear will stand "slightly: away from the head but the effect desired doesn't occur until the base of the back of the ear is at least an inch or two away from the skull and the front edge is rather lightly against the skull. This will put the outside plane of the ear at about 45 degrees to the head when viewed from the top. The effect of this is to give greater mass and size to the head when viewed from the front. The firm and well structured cartilage lets the dog move the ears well and permits them to be more expressive. Most people would agree that the ears of the dog are its most expressive feature. When the ears are limp like a hound and hang loosely against the head, the range of moods they can express is limited.



ADULT SMOOTH BITCH

PAGE 4 / THE HEAD BY: DAVID FOREST

Mass and power are added when the ears stand away from the head, elegance and refinement lies in having ears of correct size and vertical placement. The ears should be set so that, when looking at the head from the front, a line drawn from the angle at the extreme outside edge of one ear over the head to the same point on the other ear will be a rather smooth and deep semicircle. If the ears are set so high that this "topline" of the head approaches a straight line, then the head will be top heavy and unstable looking. The expression will seem somewhat hysterical - too charged and unstable. This kind of frantic alertness robs the dog of gravity and seriousness.

When the ears are set too low, which seems to me to be a rare fault on dogs with sufficient cartilage, the head again will not be unified. The expression then lacks alertness and understanding.

Ideal ears are those with enough size that are placed so the head and ears form a single unit and which have firm enough structure to provide breadth of skull and permit expressive movement. For a picture of good ears see "Beau-Geste" in "The New Complete Saint Bernard".

The skin on the head should be rather loose. When it is, growing maturity will bring wrinkles above the eyes and often down the side. These wrinkles must exist in order to give the dog's expression a proper sense of concern and gravity. Many dogs don't have them or don't have them enough. Occasionally it's possible to see dogs that have too much. There should be enough wrinkle to provide correct seriousness of expression and to add a bit of gentle exaggeration and finish to the underlying blocky and angular skull. The wrinkle must relate to the structure beneath. It functions as a kind of surface restatement of the bone that supports it. When the wrinkle is so extreme that it just hangs without relation to the basic structure, power and alertness is lost and the dog appears rather dopey and slow.

Often, with dogs that show considerable wrinkle, the lower eye-lids hang down and show the inside membranes of the lid. This seems to me to be a rather serious fault of which The Standard is rather tolerant. When the lids hang down extremely the expression is destroyed. The dog looks not properly grave, but actually miserable. And, of course, we hear so often "Oh! He looks so sad!" He shouldn't look sad. He should appear just serious enough to seem to be the kind of animal to do needed work.

The shape of the eyelids should relate to the eyeball that they protect. Often they do not. When they don't they can cause medical problems as well as spoil the expression. When they are turned in, they sometimes rub hair against the eyeball and cause irritation. This problem can be corrected with surgery. When the lids are too large and pendant, they can't be closed and permit irritation and infection from outside. Again this condition can be corrected with surgery. Loose eyelids are not restricted to specimens with great wrinkle. I have seen them on dogs with little wrinkle, and I have seen beautifully tight eyes on dogs with quite a good bit of wrinkle.

Good eyes are set to the front and are somewhat rounded, yielding a more humanized expression. They should be dark brown. When they are light or yellowish they have a wild, unstable, even savage look. Such an impression is, of course, completely wrong for our breed.

If, however, the eyes are dark brown and rather deeply set to give proper gravity, they should also be keen. When they are very dark brown - even approaching black, the dog seems properly serious, but also extremely alert. This expression of alertness with good judgement is very desirable. I like the black-eyed dogs I have seen.

The mouth of the dog is a working tool - a kind of hand for grasping and holding. As such it must have a powerful lower jaw, and large, strong, white teeth that mesh properly. The Standard permits either a scissors bite or an even bite, but prefers the scissors bite. Why one should be preferred over the other is not clear to me; nor can I find anyone who is able to provide a rationale for this preference. The overshot bite is an outright fault and the undershot bite is considered "undesirable." I am told that the teeth of a dog who is undershot tend to wear out early.

It seems to me that The Standard implicitly recognises that there is a correlation between good heads and a somewhat undershot bite in that it is rather tolerant of this fault. It even mentions that this bite is "sometimes found in good specimens." I believe that a fairly good case might be made for this type of structure being actually a better holding machine than an even bite.

The overshot bite is, however, a different matter. This type of bite is most often found in dogs with undesirably long muzzles. A long muzzle is, of course, a serious head fault. It seems to me that bites get an inordinate amount of emphasis when evaluating heads because they are so easily seen. There is little virtue in an even bite on a head like a Collie. The difference between a scissors bite and an undershot bite can be as little as one eighth of an inch of length in the lower jaw, but this small difference often makes a large difference in which dog wins. From the outside, this eighth of an inch cannot be detected. The degree of the fault seems to me to be important. If a jaw is so undershot that it looks "bulldoggy" or distorts the shape of the head, then it is serious. But if there is little practical difference and no aesthetic one between a scissors bite and an undershot bite, there should be little difference in their value. There are more important things to worry about in the breed than slightly faulty bites.

Head marking has a great effect on general appearance. The Saint Bernard is brown and white with blackish shading. I suppose he is two predominant colors so that he can be easily seen against any background color or some such reason as that, but whatever the reason we have learned that this coloring is "correct". Head marking in brown, white, and black is "correct" in the modern dog. When this coloring is rich and nicely distributed it can give great vividness to the expression of the dog and help to flatter the structure of the head.

I like a very dark brown to black color that covers no more than the ears, the cheeks and the eyes. This puts a large patch on both sides of the head. When these two patches of color are edged in dead black, richness is added. The border of color where the muzzle joins the skull should drop to the corner of the lip to underscore this junction. The blaze should be as wide as possible without showing white on the ears or "slipping" the eyes. When the blaze is wide the expression is more open and friendly. When it is absent or very narrow, the expression is somewhat forbidding. The muzzle should be all white to open up the expression and to make it appear large and powerful. There should be no freckles. Freckles rob the head of vividness. What is a charming beauty mark on the appealing face of puppy grown into a dirty smear on the adult dog. The nose and lips should be absolutely black to punctuate and refine the general picture. Actually they seldom are very black; usually they are a near-black purple color or somewhat brown.



ADULT SMOOTH BITCH

Once the great head has been achieved, it must have a proper setting. That is, it must be carried well. The good Saint Bernard must be regal and majestic. This implies that the head must be carried very high, and with great pride on a neck with a graceful, powerful arch. In order to be carried this way the front must be constructed well. There are some functional reasons why the head should be carried high when the animal is not under load, but are beyond the scope of this article.

Describing an ideal head is rather easy. Breeding ideal heads or evaluating less than ideal ones is very difficult. But if an evaluator conceives in his mind an image of superior value that is sensitively and logically supported with taste and judgement he will be well along in his efforts towards achieving the powerful, majestic and beautiful Saint Bernard.

THE SKETCHES

A word description of the head can do no more than provide a background for viewing real heads. Even when the description is as specific as it can be it is still very general compared to direct experience. Pictures do a somewhat better job than words so we include some informal sketches which illustrate some of the more common faults. These faults are real ones. They are those that can be seen in modern Saint Bernards of good quality and they are shown to the degrees in which they actually occur.

Sketch No. 1 shows a head that most people would agree is a basically good one. It has no major faults though some viewers might want a bit shorter muzzle and somewhat more type generally. It is well balanced in all ways. The muzzle is not too light for the mass of the skull and there is depth and breadth throughout. It is a quite adequate head.

Sketch No. 2 illustrates what is probably the most common fault of heads in the breed. Lack of depth in the muzzle. The muzzle is too shallow at the root and becomes even more shallow as it tapers toward the nose. This fineness is bad in itself and, in addition, it throws the symmetry of the entire head out of proper relationship. This head is basically the same one as in sketch No.1, but notice how the sense of power and dignity is diminished by this one fault.

This fault does not normally occur alone. Often it is coupled with the one illustrated in Sketch No. 3. This is another fault of fineness. The top of the skull is shallow and weak. The stop does not fall off abruptly and it is not high enough. This weakness in the top skull and foreshock makes the occipital bone too predominant and the total effect is one of a weak and rather unintelligent animal. When this occurs with a weak muzzle as in Sketch No. 4, the head is a very poor one indeed.

Sketch No. 5 illustrates a fault in the opposite direction. Here the stop is too extreme and the backskull is too weak. The skull is not evenly full. Again, a fault of balance. This fault is rather rare. When it occurs, it gives the head a kind of unnatural or "unlikely" look. This fault occurs often with the one illustrated in Sketch No. 6. Here the muzzle is actually too short. The face looks pushed in. The head has a "Bulldog" look. And these two faults occur often with the one illustrated in Sketch No. 7. Here the muzzle tilts up a little.

The head is badly integrated and appears to be "broken" at the root of the muzzle. When No's 5,6 and 7 occur together the head is "overdone". Good definition of skull and muzzle and a short muzzle are virtues, but when these virtues are too exaggerated the effect becomes grotesque. This is, however, a bit of a grey area. A lot depends on personal taste. The difference between these faults and superior type is not so obvious. What one man calls "overdone" may be "great type" to another. Most people are inclined to be rather forgiving of these faults because they are rare and because they are virtues carried just a bit too far. Sketch No. 8 shows all of these faults in the same animal.

Sketches No. 9 and 10 and 11 show faults relating to the ears. In Sketch No. 9 the ears are carried well enough, but they are too small, another fault of balance. They are not appropriate to the great mass of the skull. This fault is fairly common, but its opposite is not. I have not yet seen well made ears on a mature dog that seemed to me to be too large.

In Sketch No. 10, the ears are weak and "papery". They do not have enough firm cartilage to hold them well away from the head at the back or to give them shape. They just hang. They do nothing to enhance the sense of breadth and power of the head. Sketch No. 11 shows ears that are carried too high. They do not form a properly integrated unit with the head and seem to have little structural coherence.

A rather subtle fault is illustrated in Sketch No. 12. The muzzle should be deep and powerful in all directions. However, it is possible to have a muzzle that has good bone structure, but still does not have the correct massive feeling. Often the lip is not shaped correctly. In this sketch the lip does not drop steeply from the nose. It curves back from the nose too soon and robs the muzzle of some of its power.

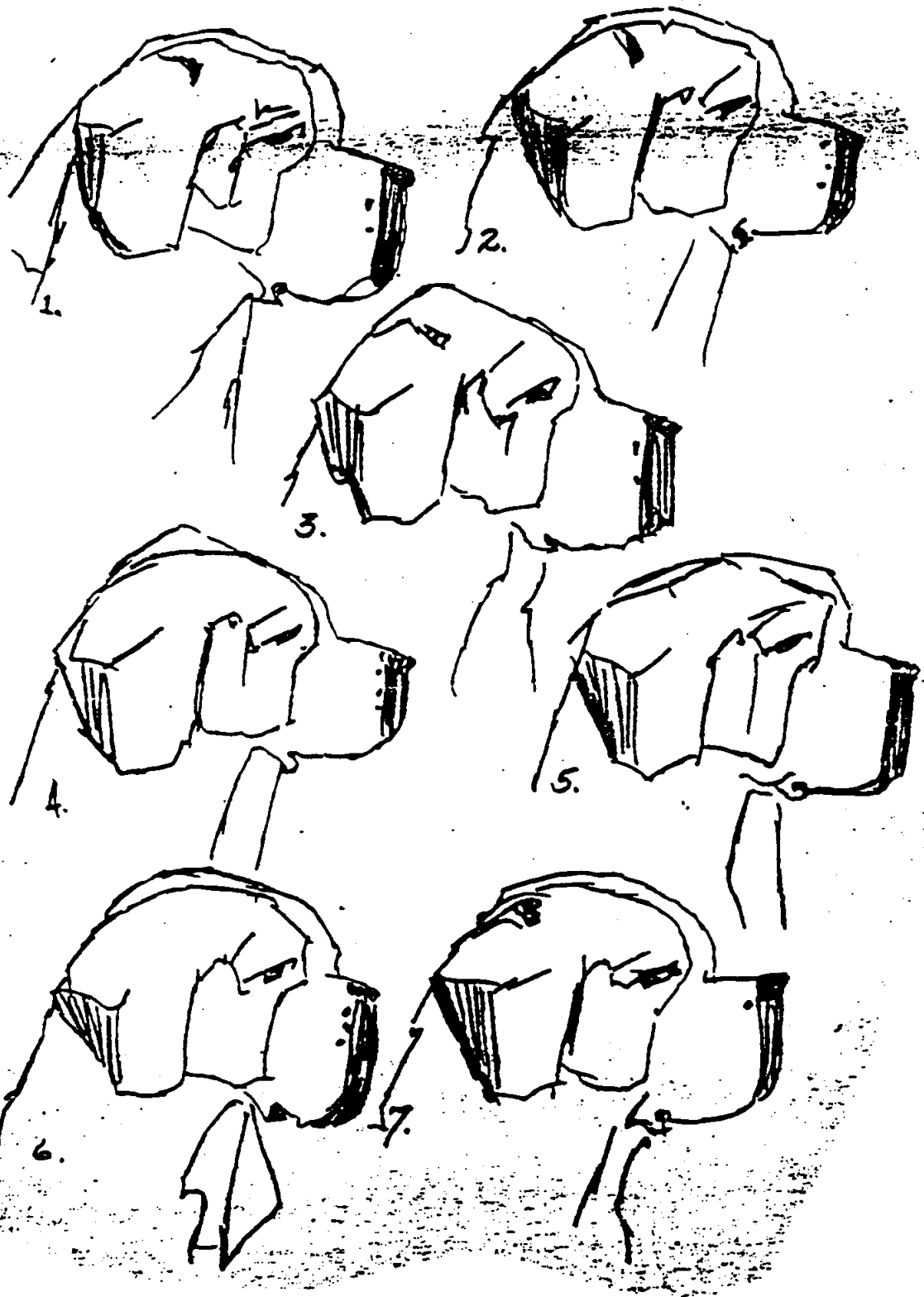
Sketch No. 13 shows another fault of balance. The cranium is too shallow from front to back. The dog looks brutish and unrefined.

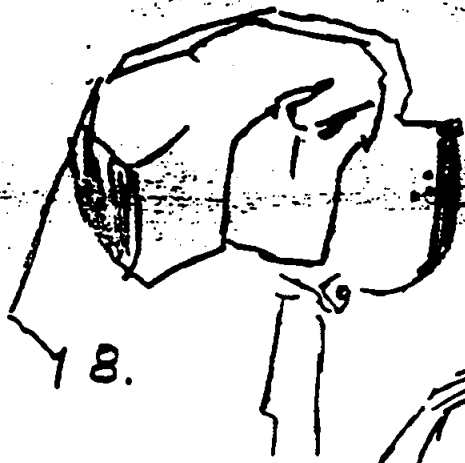
Another fault that diminishes the dog's elegance and refinement is illustrated in Sketch No. 14. Here the skin is too loose. There is an enormous amount of wrinkle. There is so much that it bears no relationship to the skull beneath and actually obscures any blockiness the skull may have. It is another factor of type carried too far.

Sketch No. 15 illustrates the dirtying effect of freckles.



ADULT SMOOTH BITCH





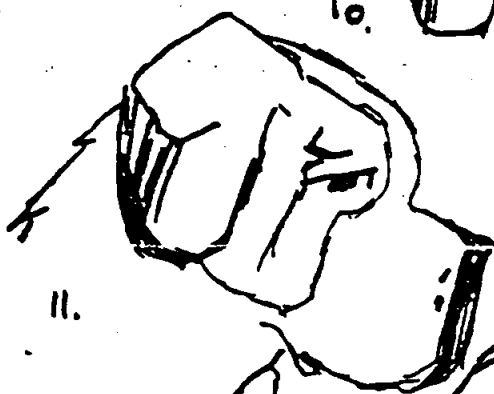
8.



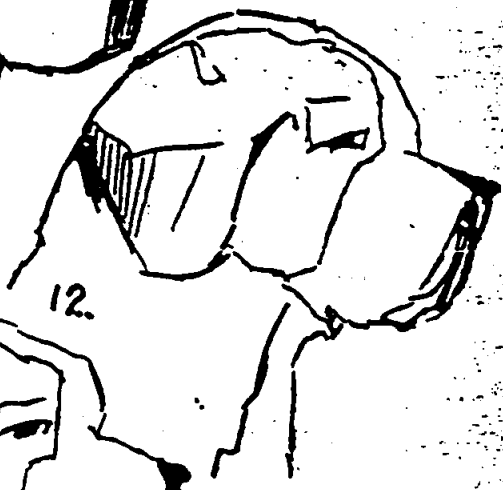
9.



10.



11.



12.



13.



14.



15.