



CUTE ASA BUG

From baby animals to mascots, why can't we get enough of "cute"?

by Steven Heller

The adult trilobite, an extinct marine arthropod that flourished during the Paleozoic era, isn't—and will never be—cute. Its spiky, furrowed exoskeleton is otherworldly and “butt-ugly.” But squint hard enough and the baby trilobite *could* be cute. Virtually any living thing in its infant state, even a cockroach, has appeal by virtue of its diminutive features. Smallness hides many sins. Yet not all things infantile are a priori, Shirley Temple-precious or Olsen twins-sweet. The baby Jesus isn't cute; he's mystical. But the baby in *Look Who's Talking* is, or was (a cute baby doesn't guarantee a cute adult).

The word in question derives from “acute.” At some point in the 19th century, it became slang for certain kinds of alluring traits and became synonymous with adorable-in-the-extreme. Routinely applied to humans and animals (although baby vegetables are kind of cute, too), extreme cuteness often triggers the involuntary yearning to hug in an aggressive way. For example, a bunny, piglet or puppy are so delectably cute we could “just eat them up.” Likewise, parrots and parakeets dressed in pirate outfits are both cute and funny. Cute is irresistible. Lennie Small, the dim-witted character in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, stroked a puppy so hard he unknowingly squeezed the life out of it. Although extreme, it represents the inexplicable sensation many of us have to devour cuteness—to become one with it.

Cuteness is a powerful tool in the visual manipulator's toolkit, right up there with sex. There are a couple of variations, though: basic cute (i.e., oozing with sweetness) and excessively cute (i.e., Shirley Temple in *Glad Rags to Riches*). Basic cute evokes the urge to hold the cute thing for hours, while excessive (or radical) cute demands stimulation beyond the point of logic, triggering the aforementioned uncontrollable, overpowering desire to squeeze, snuggle and hug. I'm not going to examine the psychological phenomena or the philosophical constructs of cute, though; rather, I'm concerned with how cute imagery has evolved from the 20th to 21st centuries.

In 1949, zoologist Konrad Lorenz codified “cute,” observing that the typical baby face—big eyes, large heads in comparison to small bodies and noses—melts the heart in a maternal or paternal way.

This is true for living creatures and inanimate objects, including dolls and stuffed animals. The most famous cutie doll is the Kewpie Doll, a cherubic, cupid-inspired fairy conceived in 1912 as a cartoon character by Rose O'Neill, and later turned into a mass-market figurine. With its bulbous head, puffy cheeks, big bright eyes and rotund little belly, these baby dolls took the nation by storm.

Many commercial product mascots score high on the cute quotient, one of the most effective and enduring being the Pillsbury Doughboy. Created by Martin Nodell's team at Leo Burnett in 1965, the Doughboy's chubby, squishy marshmallow body has all the tactility of freshly rolled dough and the physique of a freshly delivered baby. In his commercials, when his belly is lovingly poked or tickled, he lets out an ecstatic little chuckle, and you “just want to eat him up” (or squash him, depending on your mood).

In 1983, the Snuggle Bear puppet for Snuggle fabric softener was developed by Kermit Love, and when it's animated, the adorable bear embodies the same poppin' fresh attributes as the Doughboy. Both rely heavily on matching the cutest features to the cutest voice.

Whoever thought of the Charmin Bears (named Molly, Leonard, Bill, Amy and Dylan, for the record) understood that cute adds wit to the bodily function conversation. In one recent commercial, a piece of toilet paper sticks to a bear's butt—one of the larger complaints about toilet tissue—to get to the message that Charmin is stick-free.

The Android's mascot, a robot designed by Irina Blok, is known as the “bugdroid,” and shows that nonhuman or animal characters made entirely of geometric shapes can be imbued with cuteness.

The Japanese have mastered cute (they call it *kawaii*) as well, from cartoon characters with huge eyes to miniature food. Japan enjoys a cute culture that is often a hair's-breadth away from eerie; consider the “Sweet Lolita look” (think of the film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*), where teens dress and parade around in the cutest girly gingham and frilly costumes as caricatures of fictional characters. Much of today's cute is in the form of Japanese exports, with Hello Kitty in first place.

Why is cute so popular? We just have a hunger—particularly for anything that makes us want to eat it all up. ■