

*A Brief Summation of the Penciled Composite
Construction Process*

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Introduction

The information concerning the crafting of a police composite sketch is rather elusive to the research community when studying phenomenal conditions related to eyewitness and memory conditions. Concerning studies surrounding the effects of composite generation and eyewitness memory, there are differing opinions. Wells and Charman (2015) contest that eyewitness memory is impacted by the composite process whereas Tredoux, et al's., (2020) meta-analysis find the contrary. It is acknowledged there is little known how police construct composites and that more field studies are needed (Tredoux, 2020 & Wells, 2014). The intent of this article is to draw on the author's experience as a composite artist and to outline the composite construction process.

Prior to seeking a doctoral degree, the author served as a sworn police officer and detective with the Baltimore County Police Department (BCoPD) from 1991-2014. During his tenure, he worked as a composite artist from 2000-2014, in an ad hoc capacity, completing 98 composite sketches in various criminal investigations. His training originated as an apprentice with an active sketch artist at the time. He also completed a three-week training with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Facial Forensic Imaging course (studying under Betty Pat. Gatliff and Karen T. Taylor), was a member of the International Association of Identification (IAI) and attended several forensic art conferences and workshops with the IAI.

Forms of Composite Sketches

There are several mediums in which an artist can use to construct a composite. Sketch artists are typically someone who has already developed a talent in art, has exercised that talent developing competency, and received specialized training. Artist's mediums usually consist of pencil drawings, but some artists use charcoal or pastels to complete composites.

With respect to pencil drawings, there are several approaches to generate the sketch. Some artists freehand the entire sketch, generating a simplistic grid on the paper consisting of a vertical line to denote the middle of the face and two horizontal lines marking the placement of the eyes and the mouth. Other artists, such as the author, were trained to use a vellum paper that overlay on a grid that provided facial proportions based on a Caucasoid skull. For composites where the target is of a different ethnicity artists are trained to adjust the composite based on their anatomical knowledge of the Negroid and Mongoloid skulls.

Pre-Sketch Processes

The artist receives a request to complete a sketch from an investigating officer and enquires as to the facts of the case and the potential of the witness to articulate the facial features of the target. Taylor (2001) denotes several considerations for artists working with witnesses to include the time of the interview, time since the incident, physical injuries, medications, alcohol and drug use, food and sleep, simple comforts, and emotional impacts (pp. 216 – 219). The enquiry includes determining if the witness has viewed mugshots, photo arrays, or lineups, in the investigative process thus far. If the witness has, the composite is cancelled. However, once the artist has vetted the witness's uninfluenced ability to recall the target's features, the artist schedules a time to meet the witness.

The artist was equipped with a drawing board, 8x11.5-inch vellum paper, facial grid, clean blank paper, a set of drawing pencils with a variety of soft to hard lead, an eraser, and two copies of the FBI Facial Identification Catalog. Much of the equipment is prepared prior to the witness meeting with the artist. For instance, the grid and vellum paper are either taped or clipped to the drawing board with the ability to slide a blank piece of paper between to obscure the grid when the witness is viewing the composite. Additionally, the pencils and erasers are laid out and the facial catalog made ready. One catalog is provided to the witness and the second remains with the artist. As the witness selects categorized features the artist roughly sketches them in to alleviate long periods of time, fatiguing the witness.

Prior to making any selections from the catalog the artist first documents the administrative information on a Facial ID Fact Sheet (ID Sheet) and further utilizes this form to document

the process, selected facial features, and revisions.

The interview with the witness is cognitive in nature. The witness is asked to recall the event and to focus on the target's facial features. Then, in their own words, to describe the target's overall facial features. As the witness recalls the features the artist notes their comments on the ID Sheet. When the witness finishes providing their description, their attention is turned toward the catalog and an explanation is provided about its organization. Witnesses are encouraged to look through the catalog in chronological order and make selections that closely resemble their recollection of the target. Witnesses are also informed that they can select any feature from any section. For instance, if while viewing the nose section the witness articulates that the ears in the picture most represent their recollection, then those ears are sketched. This aspect allows the artist to widen to scope of opportunities for the witness when selecting features.

Selection of Features

The catalog consists of 960 photos of categorized facial features and are arranged to include: heads, eyes, eyebrows, noses, lips, chins, cheekbones, ears, hair, facial hair, lines, scars, foreheads, and irregularities (U.S. Department of Justice, 1988). Some of these categories, for instance the head and eyes sections, contain subcategories, while other sections are not subcategorized. The photos in the sections also intentionally grayed-out features of the face to allow the witness to focus on the feature at hand. For example, in the heads section, the eyes, eyebrows, nose, and lips are obscured to allow the witness to focus on the head shape. Yet, the hair and ears are visible. Therefore, witnesses are informed that while viewing features in any portion of the catalog they see the feature that best represents their memory they may make the selection even though the feature being selected is not in its assigned category. Most interesting about the facial catalog is the fact that it is solely comprised of male subjects from a variety of races, yet witnesses have selected features to create a composite of a female target.

As the witness views the categories and makes their selections the artist and witness engage in an ongoing dialogue about the features. For example, the witness may like a particular nose shape but then ask if the artist can draw the feature slimmer. In such instances the artist was able to accommodate the witness's request and made a notation of the revision on the ID Sheet.

As the witness makes their selections (each facial catalog picture has its own code) the artist renders the features onto the vellum paper without allowing the witness to see the development of the sketch until all the features have been roughed in. At this juncture of the process a cartoonish outlined rendering of the suspect is devoid of any details to include tones,

shading, and textures. The witness is then shown the sketch and asked to review each of the features and make known any needed revisions. Revisions are documented on the ID sheet and the sketch. Once the witness is satisfied with the progress the artist then adds details to the composite. During this segment of the sketch the witness observes as the process unfolds. Dialogue occurs between the artist and witness, encouraging any comments to articulate nuances about the target (e.g., skin tone, hair color, etc.). Documentation of these nuances are not conveyed to the ID Sheet, but the sketch itself becomes the documentation of the recalled features.

With respect to shading and the tones of skin, hair, or other features, the artist at times needs to exercise discretion to ensure the final composite can be rendered accurately across various media forums. For instance, if a witness articulates dark hair with a specified texture, applying too my dark lead and not providing enough contrast to reflect the texture typically led to instances where media releases of the composite were low in quality.

Post-Sketch Procedures

Once the sketch is completed and the witness is satisfied, the witness is asked for their opinion of the sketch. When first starting to complete sketches in the early 2000s, witnesses solely offer dialogued opinions such as “That’s him!” or “That’s a close likeness of him.” However, in the mid-2000s, recommendations were made to artists to include asking the witness to rate the sketch on a 10-point scale concerning the likeness of the target. This information was documented, and the sketch then sealed with a clear matte spray. Once dried, the composite was photographed or scanned, and the original sketch and ID Sheet submitted as evidence.

Conclusion

While not a thorough examination of the composite process, this article provides a glimpse into the construction of a penciled police composite. Unfortunately, this summation is limited in scope and devoid of other intricacies—such as generalization and quality of composites—that further impact the veracity of identifications in criminal investigations. Certainly, more research needs to be completed concerning the composite construction process (Wells 2015 & Tredoux 2020). As this door opens it provides a fascinating view for those unfamiliar with the composite process. Hopefully, it will also provide more data to discern what correlations exists between penciled sketches and eyewitness memory.

References

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