

Working as a portrait artist, I run into a strange cross section of people. I used to make my living doing portrait sketches for next to nothing on street corners. With a little bit of showmanship, you can make a fair bit of money, but it is still a great way to feel underappreciated. Each portrait sketch goes for only a couple dollars, and no one seems to appreciate that, however simple and cute, they are still getting an original work of art done by a university educated artist. It is sad when you think about how portrait sketching used to be regarded. Portrait people were some of the most valued artists in Europe at one time. Every king, in fact, had a portrait artist or two in his court. These artists would be paid extremely well and treated like honored guests, provided they could create works that flattered their patrons. Times really have changed!

Nonetheless, it is not going too far to say that the portrait sketch is, slowly but surely, coming back into its own. You see, realism is running out of steam. When the portrait sketch first became popular, it was because there was no other way to record a visual image. The rich and famous would go to sit for a portrait, subjecting themselves to hours of sitting still so that an artist could record their image for all time. These personal portraits would be treasured works of art, passed down from father to son or mother to daughter for generations.

Then photography came along and changed things. Suddenly, you could get something that looked much more realistic than a portrait sketch. Since then, photographic portraits have been the standard. After a few hundred years, however, people are starting to get restless. They are longing for another way to keep an image, something that has more of an artistic touch. Although few people sit for portrait sketches, the numbers are growing. There are even artists who will draw out a sketch portrait for you from a photograph, sparing you the inconvenience of having to sit still in a studio for so long. People are starting to realize that there are things that a good painter or sketch artist can do that a photographer can't. Getting a truly personal impression of someone down on paper is still best done with pencils and brushes. And that is where people like me come in!