

Portrait

Derrick Oswald

It was a slow day at the tail end of the tourist season, so I had packed up my Conté and charcoal intending to take the rest of the day off when I spotted her. I hadn't collapsed my easel yet so the price placard must have caught her attention.

Sketch 10.

Caricature 15.

Portrait 20.

She made up her mind and started coming over, so I stopped folding up my camp chair.

“Hi” she said. “Can you work from a photo? I'd like a portrait with my husband, but he's not here.”

“Sure” I said, “but I'll have to charge you forty for a double portrait.”

She agreed and paid.

“I have a few photos to choose from,” she said, pulling out her cell phone, “but they're from a while ago.” While she thumbed the screen she said “Can you make him look older? He died ten years ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. We could try AgeMe,” I said, “it's free on the app store.”

After several minutes, we both agreed it wasn't working, so I said “Maybe just tell me about him and you, so I can piece it together.” I took her phone with the best picture and started to sketch on my scratch pad.

“Well, we were pretty normal – suburban, two grown kids – and led a fairly active lifestyle – tennis, golf, skiing – with very few problems to speak of. We often said we'd come here for a vacation but...” she trailed off.

I drew an insouciant stance, a little paunchier, a little less hair, ruddy complexion, a little droop to the shoulders.

As I asked questions, she talked, I sketched. Eventually, I felt I could put myself in their social circle and visualize them as a couple and recognize him on the street. The face was the hardest bit – it has to be right. The face puffs a bit and sags with age. The eyes get a little softer. The teeth flatten.

“OK, let's get you to pose with the library and clock tower as a background” I said. “A little to your left. Good. Pretend you're head is on his shoulder. Put your right hand in the crook of his arm and your other arm behind, yeah, and hang your hand on his waist. Smile. Perfect.” I snapped a photo and told her to go get a coffee and relax for a half hour.

I forget what happened next. You get into that zone and all time and external stimuli fall away. She came back before I was quite finished, but at that point I was just adding the usual boilerplate cityscape I'd done thousands of times.

“That should do it” I said. I'd drawn her as lifelike as I could, and placed him, slightly less real, right beside her. I turned the easel full towards her and waited for the usual corrections - 'can you make me look skinnier' or 'happier'.

She was quiet a long time. I thought I must have really screwed up. Then tears started welling up in her eyes. She cocked her head to look at the painting and the city square at the same time.

“Anything wrong?” I asked, expecting the worst.

“No. You've nailed it.”

So I signed it, sprayed fixer, and rolled it up for her.

The last I saw of her, she was walking down the lane – the roll under her arm and her other hand holding someone's who wasn't there.