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NEWS MAR 3 2014, 4:50 AM ET

## 'Dying Art?': Forensic Sketch Artists Face a Digital Future

by ERIK ORTIZ



Video still from a security camera of Rayshaun Parsons after she disguised herself as a hospital worker in Lubbock, Texas, and kidnapped a baby from the maternity ward in 2007, and (inset) police sketch of suspect after the incident. Lubbock Police Department



The stranger wore scrubs when she plucked the 3-day-old newborn from a Texas hospital and hid her in a handbag. Lubbock police, with the aid of the infant's family and surveillance, created a computer composite of the suspect for the public.

Then, a call came in. A witness who was there that early March morning in 2007 said the composite was wrong. Police summoned Suzanne Lowe Birdwell, a forensic sketch artist with the Texas Rangers, to help get it right.

"The woman said she was there in the maternity waiting room. She said the image they put on the television, the computer composite, looked like a white woman," Birdwell recalled.

The suspect — later identified as Rayshaun Parson, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison for the kidnapping — was black. She had been caught within 24 hours of Birdwell's sketch going out.

When digital devices fail to deliver, police still turn to the organic alternative of paper, pencil and a personal touch that a forensic sketch artist offers. It's a skill that artists say has been drawn on less and less in a world where surveillance and cellphone cameras are ubiquitous, and computer programs can be cost-saving measures.



Birdwell's police sketch was done with the help of a witness in the 2007 kidnapping of a young girl from a Lubbock, Texas, hospital. Rayshaun Parson was arrested within 24 hours of the sketch going out.


"They've been calling this a dying art for years," said Idaho sketch artist Carrie Stuart Parks, who trains law enforcement with her husband, Rick, a forensic artist with the FBI for 13 years. "It may be changing, but with what we do, you don't have to worry about technology and having computers and programs that go outdated within a year."

While Parks makes a case for her craft, agencies just don't have the resources or need to employ a fleet of full-time sketch artists.

New York City, which has the largest police force in the country, has consistently staffed three full-time artists. The Los Angeles Police Department has two.

But departments in other major cities don't have any full-time artists. Washington, D.C., for instance, trains officers to use software. San Diego has an officer who draws, but part-time.



Authorities in Somerset County, N.J., released a sketch in December of a man (l) who assaulted an elderly couple. In 2008, the Washington County Sheriff's Office in Oregon released a sketch of a man (r) wanted for robbing an elderly man at gunpoint.  Somerset County's Prosecutor's Office, Washington County Sheriff's Office

The FBI does have 11 so-called visual information specialists, but a training course that began in 1984 to help sketch artists hone their skills was suspended in 2010 because of a "reallocation of resources," an agency spokeswoman said.

Nationwide, there are fewer than 100 full-time forensic sketch artists working in about 40 forensic units in law enforcement or at missing persons groups, said Birdwell, who chairs the Forensic Art Subcommittee for the International Association for Identification. That number has stayed relatively consistent.

Sexual assaults and aggravated robberies are the most common cases for sketch artists, she added. Smaller departments will usually call on her for the bigger cases, such as homicide or serial rape, although major cities can employ sketch artists for smaller crimes.

The International Association for Identification offers courses and certification, although it isn't a requirement for a forensic artist to be certified or go through a required number of training hours.

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While surveillance cameras have helped immensely in capturing suspects, they aren't reliable on their own, Birdwell said. Sometimes, the images are fuzzy or catch only a partial view.

“You can get this over-pixelated picture. On a fictional TV show like ‘CSI’ the investigators will just zoom in, but that’s not real life,” Birdwell said. “We’ll take the video stills, and they’ll say, ‘Can you enhance this for us?’”

Some departments are turning to the aid of computer software to create drawings. Officers are trained to use the programs, which can come with hundreds of preloaded facial features for the witness to choose from.



Portland, Ore., police released sketches over the past year looking for a flasher (l.) and in a separate incident, of a man who stabbed a bus driver (r.). © Portland Police Bureau

Birdwell said she's wary of computer composites that end up looking like photos, potentially presenting an image that doesn't allow for public interpretation.

But Michael Streed, who works as the only full-time sketch artist with the Baltimore Police Department, said software technology is gaining ground in the industry precisely because most departments can't justify having a full-time artist on staff.

With his experience, he created the computer software SketchCop in 2009, and says about two dozen departments now use it.

“We can train anyone, all the way from the janitor to the police chief, to use our tool,” said Streed, a former cop in Southern California. “The software supplements their skills and allows the agency to leverage the artist's time. Otherwise, it can take a number of years and thousands of dollars in travel and tuition costs just to train one person.”


## “THEY’VE BEEN CALLING THIS A DYING ART FOR YEARS.”

Streed said he doesn’t think using a software program would be any less effective in helping the public identify criminals. Departments don’t generally keep track of how often sketches lead to an arrest — and ultimately, a conviction.

“It’s important for police agencies to embrace technology,” Streed said. “They need to get more bang for their buck in these economic times.”

But hand-drawn sketches aren’t perfect either. A sketch released earlier this year by the Lamar County Sheriff’s Department in East Texas featured a man wanted for robbing two women at knife-point. The sketch went viral online after media reports dubbed it “the worst police sketch of all time.” The face — round with big almond eyes and a line for the lips — looked more Muppet than man.



A sketch released in January 2014 of a suspect wanted in two robberies in Paris, Texas, went viral for its cartoonish features. Police apprehended Glenn Edwin Rundles, 32.  Lamar County Sheriff's Office

The sheriff’s department said they didn’t intend for the picture to be mocked, and said it was drawn based on the description provided by the victims.

Despite the sketch’s cartoonish quality, Texas authorities made an arrest in the case following its release.

“It really kind of got under our skin that people were making fun of it,” said Lamar County Chief Deputy Jeff Springer. “But it served its purpose to us.”

At the end of the day, police want results.



Robert Philios, who spent 24 years with the NYPD, was part of the composite artist unit that helped create the iconic and haunting “Baby Hope” sketch of a young girl murdered in 1991 in upper Manhattan.

Her tiny body — naked, bound and malnourished — was stuffed in a picnic cooler. She was no older than 5, which meant there were no dental records or fingerprints on file. No one came forward to claim her.


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**On Tuesday, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1991, at approximately 10:45 A.M., on the Henry Hudson Parkway and Dyckman Street, an unidentified female 3-5 years of age was found in a wooded area inside a blue and white cooler. The cooler may have been placed there anytime between July 13<sup>th</sup> and July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1991.**

The NYPD's composite artist unit created sketches of a murdered girl found in 1991 in upper Manhattan. The girl, nicknamed Baby Hope, was finally identified last fall after renewed interest in the case.    
NYPD

Philios recently recalled how it took several revisions to draw Baby Hope, whose body was too decomposed. But he realized something about the image wasn't right.

"For a young person, the head is larger than the face, and she had buck teeth, which means her mouth (in the sketch) had to be partially open," Philios said. "That had to be changed."

Finally, last October, there was a break. The NYPD had reopened the case, and thanks to a tip, Baby Hope was identified as 4-year-old Anjelica Castillo. A family cousin confessed to her brutal murder, police said.

Philios, who felt relief after hearing the case was cracked, said that sketch artists can still be assets. He estimated drawing up more than 200 sketches, mostly of wanted criminals, over his 15 years as an artist.

"That's the thing," he said about an artist's advantage, "you can draw anything."

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FIRST PUBLISHED MAR 3 2014, 4:50 AM ET

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