

# Making the Move from Pencils to Pixels

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For over a century law enforcement has worked to re-create the faces of unknown criminals. Using little more than an eyewitness statement, early investigators were left to recruiting random artists who became tasked with memorializing the suspect's image on paper before it faded from memory. And though these artists enjoyed modest success, they lacked the training and skills to become truly successful.

In recent years, investigators have migrated toward working with trained police composite artists as their preferred method for creating facial composites. Though it has become a standard practice, it has not always proven to be the best solution. A lack of qualified police composite artists has caused law enforcement investigators to turn toward a technology solution, using facial composite software to create suspect images.

And though both have proven to be an effective solution for creating facial composites, law enforcement's use of this valuable investigative tool remains greatly underutilized. Even with crime rates at historic lows, there is still a need for police agencies to incorporate a process for creating facial composites into their investigative protocol.

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To accomplish the goal of increased use of facial composites would require a broader range of persons trained to create them. To effectively fight crime, law enforcement needs timely intelligence that can be quickly disseminated. Having a cadre of trained technicians would help them fulfill this need. Law enforcement already employs computer savvy personnel with strong interviewing skills. So, using available technology would be an efficient, cost effective solution. One that would help relieve today's strained police budgets.

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For years, law enforcement administrators have been led to believe that having a police composite artist in their agency was their best and only solution. However, few law enforcement agencies can afford the luxury of employing a full-time police composite artist. In today's economy, law enforcement administrators must look for options that allow them greater flexibility.

Traditional police composite sketch artists chafe at the suggestion that a software program can be as effective as their pencil. That was because for many years the poor quality of facial composite software allowed them to become law enforcement's only option. Today, the quality of facial composite software has improved and become less expensive leaving law enforcement with other options.

The process of training and developing personnel to become a qualified composite sketch artist can take many years and is quite expensive. For some agencies the cost can be prohibitive. Many of the classes average \$800-\$900 dollars for

a week of training. Include airfare, lodging, and meals and the costs increase dramatically.

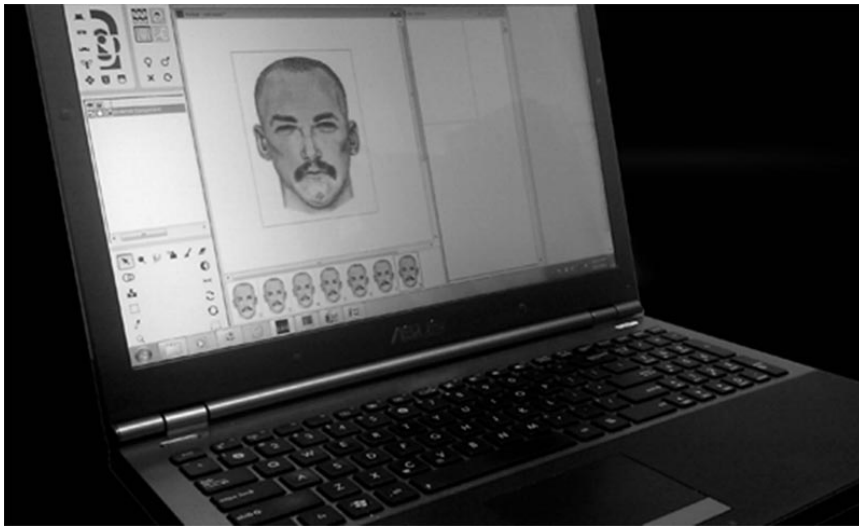
Some agencies try a less expensive route and hire civilian freelance artists on a per case basis. They typically attend composite art training at their own expense. Though some volunteer their services for free; many of them charge a modest fee for their services ranging from \$250–\$350 per sketch with the more experienced artists commanding much more. The problem for the inexperienced freehand composite artist is they lack police training which causes law enforcement agencies to be hesitant when considering contracting their services because of the potential for them to negatively impact their cases. Yet despite this challenge, there have been many civilian freelance composite artists that have persevered to become some of the country's top composite artists, however, they are the exception, not the rule.

A majority of today's police composite sketch artists already have law enforcement careers. They have duties that can be impacted when they are called away to conduct a composite sketch interview. When they are unable to schedule a sketch during their regular duty hours, it becomes necessary for them to extend their workday and be compensated for the time spent beyond their normal workday. To avoid this conflict, law enforcement agencies often train backup personnel. This is a costly solution that doesn't always solve the problem. Plus, if your composite artist retires, promotes, or transfers, the costly process of identifying and training a replacement begins all over again.

Many agencies have taken these costs into account and have shunned using a composite sketch artist, opting instead for a facial composite software program. With a variety of software programs to choose from, law enforcement agencies can now train more of their personnel for far less the cost of training one traditional police sketch artist.

With trained operators available around the clock, agencies can respond to crime more quickly and disseminate the final image with greater speed. With proper training, non-artist software technicians have proven their value by assisting with the identification of criminal suspects.

This is largely because software technology has developed to



the point where composite images can be imported into many of today's popular photo/paint programs. Having this option allows the technician to make adjustments and refinements rivaling the work of traditional police sketch artists, making it more difficult to argue that software is too limited in its ability to effectively create an image that satisfies the eyewitness.

But before a law enforcement agency begins investing in a facial composite software program, there are a few things they should be aware of. Some of the items are discussed below.

**Image Quality:** Many of today's facial composite software programs have photographic databases. The facial components often do not fit well together causing the end image to resemble a poorly constructed jigsaw puzzle. The end image can also cause confusion. People are inadvertently led to believe the person depicted in the facial composite is a real person that they should be looking for. People have been conditioned that a sketched image is an approximation that lends itself to flexibility. Another problem is that some of these same programs also create colorized facial composite images touting them to be more accurate representations. The reality is that color is expensive to print, duplicate, and can lead to inaccurate information that may be harmful to your investigation. The only time color may be useful is when the coloration of a feature component is so distinct it can be used as an identifier. Greyscale images still work best.

**Interview:** The interview is the most important component of any method for building a facial composite. Many companies boast about how quickly you can build a face using the facial composite software program. Be wary. Interviewing an eyewitness or victim of a crime can sometimes be a

painstaking process that can take several hours. After you obtain the information, the face build will come together quickly in any program.

**Training:** Look for a facial composite software program that supports and offers training, either online, or hands-on seminars.

**Costs:** The purchase cost for facial composite software can run between \$600–\$4,000. The benefit of using facial composite imaging software is that the learning curve is low and one or two persons can attend software training and return to the agency to train a number of other persons. Also, be wary of companies who charge a yearly maintenance fee. Unless you are realizing a tangible benefit, you shouldn't have to continue paying for something you've already purchased.

As the art of creating facial composites evolves, many new police composite artists entering the field are embracing software technology as a viable alternative. They quickly realize how facial composite software can help them create more composites in less time than those they hand draw. This allows them greater flexibility because they can still pursue something they are passionate about while minimizing the impact on their primary duties. And because the field of forensic art involves many facets, there will always be a need for a properly trained forensic artist who spends the time to properly hone and diversify their skills.

Law enforcement's move from pencils to pixels can be done quite easily. With careful planning and commitment, law enforcement agencies will begin realizing cost-saving results. Continued training and technology investments will encourage increased use of facial composites. Law enforcement personnel will look forward to using these programs leading to increased proficiency, not to mention the psychological first aid a facial composite image provides for the victims of violent crime. Building public trust is a positive result of integrating facial composites into everyday investigations. Try it and see. Some companies will give you a free trial of their software. And who knows? You might just catch a couple of crooks along the way and save some money doing it.

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*in the Southern California and Baltimore-Washington DC Metro areas. He is a 31-year law enforcement veteran with 33 years experience as a police sketch artist with some of the largest, most diverse police agencies in the United States, including the Los Angeles and Baltimore City Police Departments. Michael is also a Certified Forensic Artist and the owner of SketchCop Solutions (www.SketchCop.com) where he consults and trains law enforcement in the use of facial composite imaging software.*

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