

Coastal Point

Local artists shooting for the stars

By John Denny
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An artist by trade, Milan Murray uprooted from Philadelphia after 15 years of residency and moved to the area only a short while ago, but has already carved out quite a reputation for himself.

In viewing his Web site, at atouchofmilan.com, it becomes easy to see why Murray, 38, has been so busy since arriving in Ocean City, Md., two months ago: he's been blessed with a gift to recreate images with astonishing accuracy, depth and detail, while meeting just about any deadline without his work suffering.



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Milan Murray creates one of his signature pencil portraits, this one of Rosa Parks.

Murray's specialty is portraits drawn by pencil, but he recently completed a mural for Ocean City business owner Sam Ramadan depicting the Temple of the Rock, which according to Muslim tradition is the place the prophet Mohammed ascended into heaven.

Ramadan spotted Murray carrying one of his signature pencil-drawn portraits as he passed by his ocean-side market on 18th Street, on his way to mail the piece to a customer, and was instantly convinced that he'd finally found the artist to paint the mural he'd wanted for more than a year.

"It [the mural] was done to my expectations," Ramadan said with a hint of satisfaction. "He was able to get into all the details, which I liked a lot."

Andrea Schlottman, manager of the Ocean City Public Library for the past 25 years, had a similar meeting with Murray. He walked in, hoping to showcase his work in the library display, and Schlottman, an art lover, was so impressed that she commissioned him to compose two portraits: one of her late husband, Richard, which hangs in her bedroom, and another of her granddaughter, which she gave to her daughter as a present.

"Milan is an amazing talent," Schlottman said. "He captures the essence of that person and brings a picture to life with only a pencil, and that is very difficult."

"My husband's eyes always twinkled, and Milan captured that perfectly in the portrait," Schlottman added.

Steve Patton of Davidsonville, Md., and his wife couldn't have been happier with the portrait he'd drawn of their two sons after they perused Murray's portfolio while checking their e-mail at the Ocean City Public Library before heading to a birthday party.

Initially, Patton admitted, he was a bit annoyed at the prospect of being pitched to at that particular moment, but he agreed to take a look at Murray's portfolio. And, as it turned out, Patton said, it was the best decision he made all day.

Murray completed the portrait of the Patton's two sons in two days, and when he delivered it to them, they had returned with 12 additional pictures for him to draw for a family portrait to give to their parents.

"Once I took a look at his work, I was overwhelmed," Patton admitted. "It was incredible. He truly has a gift. He can take the most difficult of details and get it exactly."

Patton noted that one of the pictures he'd given Murray to do the first portrait of his sons — a high-school picture — was marred by glare from the photographer's flash. Murray was able to omit and correct it in his rendition.

"There was a lot of glare on my son's forehead, but Milan was able to color in his hair to make it look like a natural picture," Patton said.

"I'd highly recommend him to any family who wants to get something thoughtful for a loved one, especially an aging grandparent," Patton added. "You can't seem to get them anything. They don't need a washer or a dryer or anything like that, and you start to run out of ideas. But this is something that comes straight from the heart."

Murray began drawing at 6. When other kids his age were watching their favorite cartoons, Murray was drawing a still life of the television and the surrounding objects.

At the age of 10, Murray had found his calling. He began selling his drawings to neighborhood kids for a few dollars so he could buy the things that he wanted.

"My mom always used to say, 'Something will come of him and his artwork, because that's all he does,'" Murray recalled with a smile.

Gradually, Murray's skill developed — as did his ambition — to the point where he felt confident that he could really make a living through his artwork. Murray began his professional career as an artist by printing his portraits — mainly of athletes and entertainers — onto T-shirts and wholesaling them to businesses. That eventually gave him the idea to try to get the attention of the rich and famous, and sell to them.

Murray bought floor seats to a Philadelphia 76er's game in the hopes that former Sixer point-guard Allen Iverson would catch a glimpse of the T-shirt he'd had printed with the portrait depicting the iconic basketball player and would hire him.

"I didn't even like the Sixer's," Murray brashly admitted. "I went solely to show off my work."

Sure enough, the ploy worked. Iverson approached Murray after the game and asked him where he'd bought the shirt. Murray explained that he'd drawn the image and printed it onto a T-shirt. Iverson bought one right then and there.

Actor/comedian Monique Imes also commissioned Murray to draw a portrait for her and later recommended his work to friend and fellow actor Denzel Washington, who commissioned a piece of art as well.

Now Murray wasn't chasing the stars. They were chasing him. Murray was showing his portfolio to a long-time friend and disc jockey Chamnare at Philly's Power 99 radio station when Imes, who was there to be interviewed on the show, happened to glance at his work and decided that she wanted him to draw a portrait of her daughter.

World Series of Poker star and Atlantic City rounder Nickolaos "Nick" Frangos was another high-profile customer that received exactly what he wanted. According to Murray, Frangos e-mailed a picture of himself with a request for a portrait to Murray after viewing his Web site. The only hitch was that Frangos needed it, or at least wanted it, the next day. No problem, Murray said. He had it express-mailed first thing in the morning.

"I'd never met him, but somehow he'd seen my work and e-mailed me a picture. And I worked off that all night and shipped it out the next day," Murray said.

And now in Ocean City, Murray hasn't given up on trying to sell his work to the rich and famous. As a matter of fact he's drawing a portrait of pop icon Oprah Winfrey and is sending it to her in the hopes that she'll want more work done.

But he also hasn't forgotten why he'd come to the area in the first place — and that is to make a living doing what he loves most: creating immaculate portraits for the droves of tourists who visit the surrounding beach towns during the spring, summer and autumn seasons.

"People are so used to caricatures when they think of the beach," Murray said. "They take five minutes, and you end up with a funny nose or something, and then it ends up on a shelf or in a closet somewhere. My work, on the other hand, is going to end up on the wall in your living room, or in a place of prominence."

Since arriving in Ocean City, Murray has completed 36 portraits (which equates to roughly one portrait per day, according to Murray) of varying sizes and difficulty, and soon his pieces will be displayed in the new branch of the Ocean City Public Library at 103rd Street, according to Schlottman, as well as four unspecified locations along the Ocean City boardwalk.

"Once people see his work, they'll want a portrait done," Patton said. "And he'll be a very busy man."