

## Prodigies: Portrait Drawings of Unusual Characters

by James Mundie

People have always been intrigued by the unusual and uncanny, and I count myself squarely among their number. In fact, one might say I am more keenly interested in the unusual than most people or, at the very least, that I'm a bit more candid about it than most others would admit to being themselves.

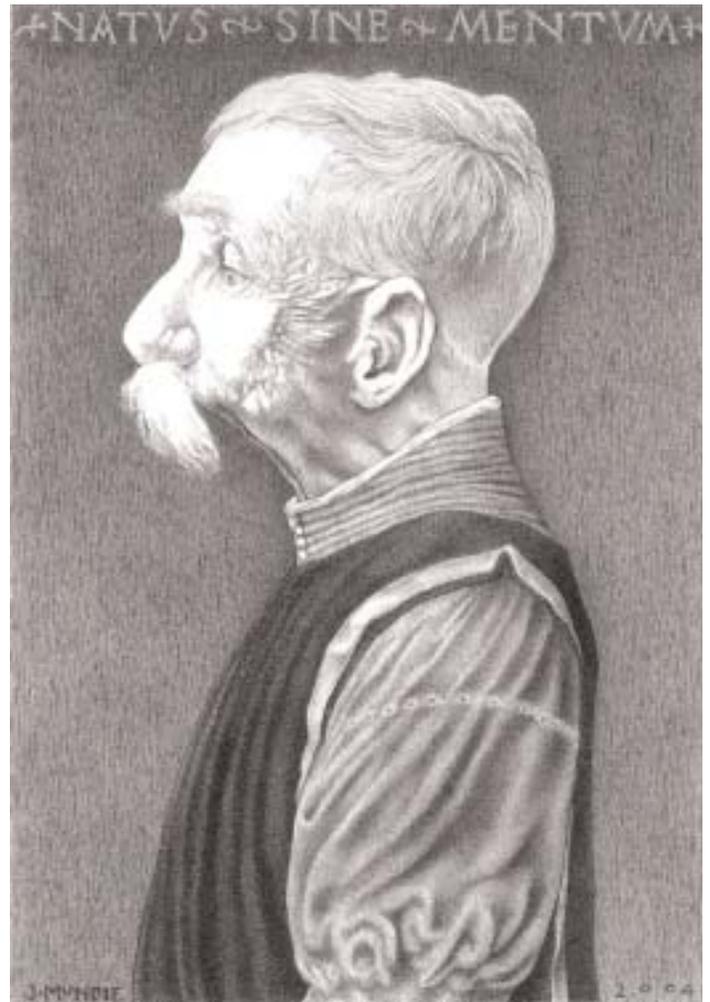
How so? I have an interest of a peculiar type that people don't often talk about in polite conversation. No, it's not something that is likely to get me arrested, but it does cause people to stare (and for good reason). If I ever find an anonymous society for people like myself, I will stand up at the meeting and proclaim, I am a portraitist of those that were once referred to as circus freaks: dwarfs, giants, conjoined twins, and three-legged men. That's right—certifiable human oddities, genuine paragons of the unusual, true to life wonders of nature. My on-going series of pen-and-ink drawings, called *Prodigies*, are portraits of these anomalous humans in contexts borrowed from artworks of centuries past.

### Step right up and take a peek! You won't believe your eyes!

Once upon a time, human oddities traveled across the country displaying the wonder of their differently made forms to enthusiastic audiences crowded into sideshow tents at a mere few cents a head. Having been successfully convinced by a silver-tongued carnny huckster to part with a little hard-earned cash, the rubes were treated to marvelous tales, incredible feats, and prodigious sights they were not likely to forget. Some went into that tent to satisfy their curiosity, some went for a giddy thrill, and some went to jeer and taunt; but nobody could go into that tent and come out unchanged by what they had seen. This was the original theatre of the macabre mixed with a healthy dose of humor and fiction, and if you were lucky a fresh batch of marvels would set up on that vacant lot on the edge of town every spring.

The seasonal ritual of the carnival and circus sideshow has receded into memory, a victim of economics and politics, and those performers who once walked the boards are

becoming fewer every year. While there are still a few excellent companies of working acts (sword swallowers, human pincushions, fire eaters and the like) appearing at Coney Island and elsewhere, the genuine born freaks don't exhibit themselves any longer.



### *David Hoag (The Man Born Without a Chin), 2004*

*A native of Canandaigua, New York, Hoag's unusual condition earned him a brief career in the sideshow. My tribute to this performer is based on one of Hoag's pitchcards and two mid-fifteenth century portraits of Lionello d'Este, Marquis of Ferrara.*

## This Congress of Oddities awaits your intimate and learned Inspection!

I am too young to have personally witnessed a ten-in-one show during the golden age, but those performers who worked the fairs have always been much on my mind. Since childhood I have had images of sideshow freaks burned into my memory. I first discovered them in the pages of a copy of the Guinness Book of Records: James Earl Hughes, the World's Fattest Man (buried in a coffin the size of a piano case!); Jojo, the Dog-faced Boy (man or werewolf?!); Frank Lentini, the Man with Three Legs (a human tripod!); freaks, strange people, human oddities! These were characters that stirred my imagination. The unsettling weirdness of these

people's otherness was unshakeable, and I find myself continuing to grapple with it. I realized that I had to do something with this intense curiosity I had for these people, so I began to research them, accumulate biographical information, and gather images occasionally picking up some nifty historical artifacts for my collection. This material would serve as a source for the drawings which would eventually become *Prodigies*.

In my small way, I feel that through my drawings I am preserving a bit of the history of the traveling sideshow and honoring those who took part, while at the same time creating a new context through which to view the society which allowed the freakshow to flourish, and in the process, perhaps some light is shed on our own.



### **Francesco Lentini as a Lutenist, 1999,**

*Collection of Marc S. Landes*  
Frank Lentini was born in Sicily in 1889, and upon emigrating to America became known on the midway as "The King of the Freaks." Frank often remarked that his extra appendage served him well as a rudder while swimming and made a convenient stool to rest upon while fishing.



### **Infanta Esau, 2003**

*During the Victorian era, hairy children, regardless of sex, were frequently advertised as "The Infant Esau." One such child was the young Annie Jones, who was once photographed by Matthew Brady.*



### **The Two-headed Mexican (Pasqual Pinon), 2002**

*Pasqual Pinon was a performer in the Sells-Floto Circus sideshow in the early part of the last century. The so-called "two-headed" man in fact had a large wen on the top of his skull which he fitted with a hollow wax replica of his actual head before appearing on stage.*

## Behold such Wonders as have delighted the Crowned Heads of Europe!

Rather than create straightforward portraits, I decided to try something a little more offbeat, something that would present a personal challenge. So much of the sideshow world was about creative presentation. The showmen would create a fictive identity that would make them appear more interesting to their audience. Typically, a dwarf might become a decorated naval hero of elevated rank, or a tattooed man was said to have received his designs through an act of ritual torture at the hands of natives of some exotic South Seas island. In the Victorian-era, master promoters like Phineas Taylor Barnum took this tradition to often comical extremes, but the bravado and ridiculousness only served to delight patrons all the more. All of this was presented in a stylized theatrical manner that would be imitated by other performers.

It occurred to me that another great interest of mine, art history, has its own formal conventions and traditions. I began to consider that if I could blend the aesthetic elements of art historical contexts with the macabre elements of traditional freakshow presentations that I would have a perfect hybrid pairing of “high” and “low” culture – especially since both appeal to one’s voyeuristic inclinations. With a little playful sketching and some thoughtful consideration, the ideas began to coalesce.

The pairing of freak and painting is achieved by allowing my subconscious to make associations and compare affinities. While thumbing through a catalogue of paintings, I might notice that certain elements of a painting remind me of something about a particular performer, whether it was a gesture, an article of clothing, or some narrative quality. Likewise, the pose of a performer in one of their pitchcards might remind me of a famous (or not so famous) painting, and that might lead me to sketch out a composition that introduces that performer into the realm of the painting. So, in my work, a setting from a painting by Gainsborough is just as likely to feature a set of conjoined twins as some minor princeling. Likewise one might find the world’s smallest woman happily inhabiting a scene from Goya. The challenge for me is to fit together the puzzle so that both elements the circus performer and the art history reference are equally served.

The resulting images confront the viewer with something that at once seems familiar, humorous and startling. When I place my sideshow performer subjects within compositions from famous paintings, the sitters are elevated above mere circus attractions and test my audience’s tolerance for aberration. It is my hope that these images compel the viewer to linger and consider their own inhibitions and conceptions in relation to a subject which many consider taboo. Though these bodies may seem at first glance to be grotesque, is there not also a queer beauty to be admired?



### ***The Woman with the Feege Mermaid, 1999***

*P. T. Barnum created quite a stir in the 1840's when he advertised the acquisition of a genuine mermaid caught off the coast of faraway "Feege." Even when the supposedly lovely creature was unveiled and proved to be the upper half of a gruesomely petrified monkey attached to the lower portions of a large fish, the crowds still flocked to see it.*

## Rare Attractions! Wonderful Curiosities!!

The drawings themselves often attract as much attention for their subject matter as for their technique. Each drawing is executed painstakingly in pen-and-ink, the result of thousands of minute strokes, stipples and crosshatches. These are fairly small works (the largest being about 11 x 9 inches), but a single drawing may take me several months to complete. For my own sanity, I tend to work on several drawings at a time. As of this writing, thirty-five drawings in the series have been exhibited singly or in groups, and eight more are currently in progress.

When I first began this series in 1997, and being by inclination and education a printmaker, I envisioned a series of etchings; but without access to a print shop at the time, I decided to get these ideas onto paper as drawings instead. Subconsciously, I must have still been thinking in terms of etching, because many have remarked that the elaborate layering of tiny pen strokes evokes the graphic qualities of that medium.



### **Ritratto di Annie Jones, 1999**

*Apart from her beard, Annie Jones was the very ideal of Victorian womanhood. As an emblem of feminine beauty, it seemed fitting I should depict Annie as one of those archetypal beauties from a Pre-Raphaelite painting.*



### **The Masters Tocci, 1999, Collection of Marc S. Landes**

*Giacomo and Giovanni Baptista Tocci, known as the Italian Two-headed Boy, were a popular attraction throughout Europe and America from 1878 at the age of four months until their retirement at the age of twenty in 1897. Rumors state that both boys may have married and had children (which caused a flurry of sexual and legal speculation in French and Italian newspapers), and that they may have still been living in seclusion in a villa outside Venice as late as 1940.*

## **They're all here and they're all alive on the inside!**

When I first exhibited these drawings publicly, I had no idea how they would be received. I was expecting a backlash of people chastising me for my decadence. To my great surprise, the reaction to the drawings has been overwhelmingly positive. I have been gratified by the public acceptance of this series, and pleased that I have so often received offers to exhibit the works. Furthermore, through the magic of the Internet, I have been able to permanently display these works (even the ones that have happily found their way out of my studio and into the hands of collectors), presenting them along with biographical material on the performers depicted, to a much larger audience than might ever wander into one of my gallery shows.

People often ask me, assuming there to be a finite number of suitable performers, how far I might take this series. I can't really say, but having been working on this project for nearly five years now I continue to find new inspiration and subjects. I suppose there is always the danger that I might get pigeonholed as that guy who draws freaks, but there are worse things for which to be remembered. At the very least, my unusual choice of material grabs people's attention. After that, it's up to me to hold their interest and help them to discover something about my subject, and perhaps something about themselves.

### **ABOUT THE ARTIST**

James G. Mundie is a graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he majored in printmaking, and the University of Pennsylvania, from which he received his B.F.A. magna cum laude. His paintings, drawings, and prints have been exhibited widely both in the United States and abroad. Mundie's *Prodigies* series will be the subject of a solo exhibition at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art (Wilmington) in September 2006. James Mundie and his wife, fellow artist Kate Kern Mundie, reside in South Philadelphia.

For his drawings, James Mundie prefers Strathmore's 400 Series papers for their weight, surface texture, and archival quality.

More images from the series may be seen on his website  
[www.missioncreep.com/mundie/images/](http://www.missioncreep.com/mundie/images/).

## Choosing the Right Paper for Ink Jet Printing

by Benjamin Frank, Senior Research Associate, International Paper

You bring home your new ink jet printer, hook it up to your fancy computer, and are ready to print out a picture of your dog, kids, or artwork. You play with the image on your computer for hours, making sure it is just right. Then you send it to your printer, and out it comes. The colors are off, the lines are blurry, and the image you get looks nothing like what is on your screen. Before you take your printer back, you may want to check your paper.

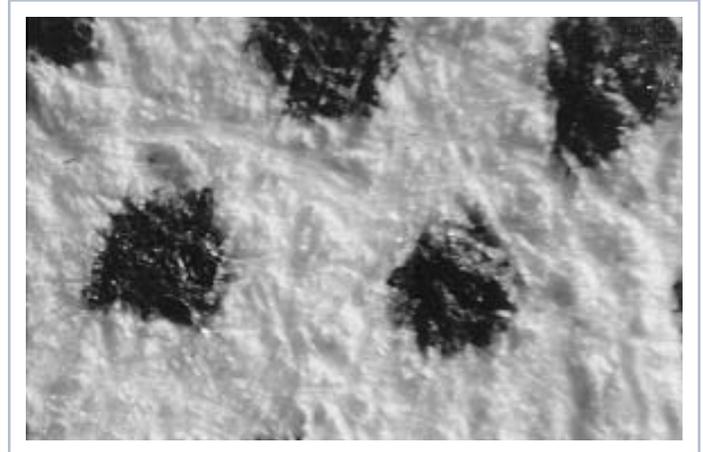
The paper you bought with the printer is often the most important part of how your print appears. While you may have spent hundreds or thousands of dollars on your home or small office computer hardware (computer, monitor, printer, etc.), other people primarily see the "hard copy" output you produce. It is the image, the output, which we generally look at in the end. To get the best print, it is important to choose the right paper.

Ink jet printing is like painting with markers or watercolors. Ink is applied to the paper and the liquid part evaporates leaving the color behind. Instead of using a brush, ink jet printing places tiny, discrete drops of ink of different colors on the surface of the paper, forming dots which your eye blends together to create the image. Ink jet printing has many advantages: a wide variety of media (glossy and matte photo paper, cards, party hats, business cards, prints from 8.5" to 60+" wide, etc.); low cost machines which are compact, versatile, and require few repairs; and the ability to print easily in black and colors.

In ink jet printing both the paper/media chosen for printing and the print settings chosen on the printer are critical in the production of the best output. If the wrong paper or settings are used, ink can flow away from where it initially lands, causing the image to appear blurry and washed out. If not properly controlled, the ink can wick along paper fibers much like water wicks into a paper towel or wax climbs the wick of a candle.

This can make the drops look "hairy." If the dots are fuzzy, the text will appear less sharp and detail may be lost in pic-

tures or photographs. If, instead of absorbing properly, the ink does not absorb fast enough, it can pool on the surface. This can cause adjacent colors to bleed together. Again, the image will be blurred. Both of these problems are due to improper paper/printer interactions, and can be fixed by choosing the right paper.



*Magnification on "fuzzy dots" on paper.*

There are many attributes of a good ink jet paper. First, for the reasons stated above, it should reduce the wicking and color bleed in the print. Additionally, a good paper should be bright. Artists paint on bright papers to get good contrast and accurate colors, and the same principle applies to ink jet printing. Further, your eye only perceives the color that is near the surface of the paper. If the ink goes through to the back of the sheet and carries the dyes there, the color will not be seen when you look at the front. Thus, a good paper should keep as much of the color as possible on the surface to provide good "print density." Finally, since the dyes come from a water based solution, they have a tendency to move around on the page when the sheet gets wet. A good paper should provide some water resistance to the image and should also keep the image from fading. All of these attributes, reduced wicking and bleed, intense colors, good contrast, and waterfast and lightfast prints, depend strongly on the paper you use for printing.

With that in mind, we can examine the different types of paper and understand why they result in the images they produce.

## Multipurpose/Dual Use Paper

This kind of paper is not the best choice for ink jet printing because it is not optimized to accept the ink. The ink may bead up or run during printing because it is not well absorbed, or it may be absorbed too quickly or spread too much. The former may lead to wicking and bleed; the latter will dilute the image since the dyes are carried away from the surface where you want them.

## Plain (Uncoated) Ink Jet Paper

Plain ink jet paper is specially designed to absorb ink properly and reduce wicking and bleed. However, the paper still absorbs all the ink and the color goes everywhere the liquid goes. Thus, some of the dye is absorbed into the body of the sheet and is not near the surface. While the image is clear and crisp, the colors may not be as bold or bright as possible since you lose some of the color during the absorption of the ink.

## Coated Ink Jet Paper

Coated ink jet paper is structured just like plain ink jet paper, with the addition of a coating layer on top of the paper. This layer traps the dye as the ink is absorbed, since the coating is on the surface, this keeps most of the color on the surface, resulting in a bolder, more vibrant image. Additionally, a good coating has the ability to fix the dyes in place so that they do not fade as rapidly and will not run or bleed if the paper is slightly rewet.

## Glossy Ink Jet Paper

Glossy ink jet paper is also coated. However, between the coating and the paper is usually a layer (often plastic) which prevents the ink from penetrating through to the paper. All the ink (and all the color) stays on the surface where your eye can see it. This also increases the time it takes for the print to dry, and so most printers will slow down when setting the printer to glossy paper. The same is true for transparencies which do not absorb the ink.

*Cont'd next page*

## Craft Project

# Strathmore Artist Papers Holiday Memory Book Project Sheet



This easy to make memory book is great for recording the holiday using your digital camera and ink jet printer. Strathmore's Pure Paper packages come with an assortment of bright colors so you can combine colors for any of the upcoming holidays. This memory book is a great gift to send to family that lives far away or to send to a family member in the service who is away during the holidays.

### Material List:

- Glue
- Xacto Knife
- Pure Paper Bright Corduroy
- Pure Paper Primary Brite Hue
- Digital Adhesive Photo Paper 4" x 6"
- Green Ribbon

Visit our website [www.strathmoreartist.com](http://www.strathmoreartist.com) to print out the full instructions to this festive memory book.

## Match paper with settings

Most printers have different settings for different types of paper. The printer may put out different amounts of ink and print at different speeds at each of these settings in order to generate the best image on the media it “thinks” it is printing on. That is why, for instance, the printer prints more slowly when set to a glossy or transparency setting: the software for this setting provides time for the ink to dry before the page falls into the print tray. It is generally not a good idea to try to “trick” the printer by setting it to print on one type of paper while using another. Too much ink may overload the paper and lead to a print without the fine details, while too little ink may leave a print looking washed out. Whatever paper you choose, it is important to make sure you use the right settings on your printer.

## The right paper for the right job

Just like any other purchasing decision, what paper to choose depends on the output you desire. Multipurpose paper is the most cost effective choice for those documents where the appearance is not critical, such as faxes or drafts. The image will not look great, but it will be readable. For premium text documents it is best to choose a plain ink jet paper. This will provide crisp clean text without bleeding or wicking. If you are printing an image with lots of color, including graphics, web pages, or reports, it is better to go with a coated ink jet paper. Matte or glossy, coated ink jet paper will keep most of the ink where you can see it, allowing the colors to be as bold and vibrant as possible. After all, you pay for each and every drop of color in your print cartridge. Finally, if you are printing out photographs and want the look and feel of a photo as if it has come from a photo lab, print on photo paper. Matte or glossy, photo paper gives your output the weight and feel of a true photograph.

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Have you seen Strathmore's new Digital Photo Paper line? The line not only includes photo papers, but also offers great product kits to take a project from start to finish. Visit our Digital Photo Papers section of our website to learn more and find a retailer near you.

