

# The Story Behind the Painting

## The 400th Anniversary Portrait of William Shakespeare.

by *Geoffrey Tristram*,  
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In 2015, Stratford Town and District Councils asked Geoffrey Tristram, a professional artist from Stourbridge, to create a simple front-view painting of William Shakespeare's face, which was to be used to advertise the forthcoming anniversary celebrations.

Having successfully completed this small commission to their satisfaction, Geoffrey confessed that, as a lifelong Shakespeare fan, his dream job was to paint a brand new oil portrait of the Bard. The idea was well received, and just before Christmas 2015, the larger oil painting was begun. The artist knew full well that such a picture would bring with it a massive responsibility, and he was in no doubt that it would attract criticism, both good and bad. It didn't help that, for such a world-famous person as Shakespeare, the playwright didn't appear to be overly fond of posing for artists, so there wasn't much in the way of reliable reference material to fall back upon.

Undaunted, Geoffrey set about the task in his usual forensic, obsessive

way. He dug out copies of just about every existing painting, etching, wood cut, bust and statue that purported to be of the great man. He even found a death mask that has somehow ended up in Germany. They may as well have been ten different people. Martin Droeshout the Younger's etching on the first folio was apparently approved as a decent likeness by Samuel Jonson, but the picture was naively drawn and rather odd. There were a couple of paintings, presumably showing Shakespeare as a younger man, that could have been Sir Walter Raleigh or any other Elizabethan, for that matter. Some pictures had a full head of hair, while others of the same vintage had none. On some, he looked thin, but on the Holy Trinity Church bust, another image that was considered to be an accurate rendition, he looked more like a jolly butcher.

It was dawning on our artist that he had maybe bitten off more than he could chew. Nevertheless, he ploughed on, comparing the images, allowing for the fact that we all get older, fatter and balder; artists included, and pictures of us taken at college seldom look like us at all by the time we draw our pension. Then Geoffrey sketched the familiar bald pate and Frank Zappa-style moustache and beard combination onto a sheet of tracing paper and began to overlay it on top of the various depictions of this enigmatic and elusive man, and lo and behold, he experienced a Eureka moment. All the contenders, once so dissimilar, now suddenly began to seriously resemble each other. This gave our frustrated artist heart.

He contacted his old friend, [Steve Jolliffe](#), a graphic designer and photographer, and waylaid another friend, Simon Millichip, promising a trip to sunny Stratford and a cream tea in return for reference photographs and a body double, respectively. He then hired a costume of the correct vintage and social class at considerable expense, and convinced the Shakespeare Birthplace in Henley Street that they must allow him to use the house as a backdrop (they chose the room where W.S. was almost certainly born, which seemed fitting somehow). However, due to a traffic jam on the M40, our intrepid trio ended up with just half an hour to take all the reference photographs before the first coach-load of tourists arrived. Steve Jolliffe lost a stone in weight in one hour and is still in therapy. Geoffrey, meanwhile, wore a deep groove in the old oak floorboards with his nervous pacing. As to Simon, he was mere seconds away from being surprised in the ancient bedroom with his pantaloons around his ankles, by a gaggle (if that is the collective noun) of very enthusiastic Chinese tourists.

Shakespeare's face was mainly based on the first folio etching that Jonson approved, but then Geoffrey humanised it. His mission was to create a real, living person – someone we could all believe in, the way Holbein used to do, and much later on, American illustrator, Norman Rockwell, two of Geoffrey's heroes.

Meticulous preparatory drawings were done, sleep was lost and the Tristram residence driven to the very brink of insanity. The artist virtually locked himself in his studio for two months, obsessing, painting, fretting his

weary hours at the easel and occasionally sneaking back at some ungodly time of night just to take another quick peek before bedtime. What looked great on a Monday evening was frantically altered on Tuesday morning, and duly altered again on Wednesday until it gradually returned to how it looked in the first place. This laborious tweaking and refining process went on day after day, until round about the beginning of February 2016, when he finally emerged paint-stained and weary-looking but happy. He also had an answer for every potential critic about every potential bone of contention. His research had been thorough, and if anyone really thought they could do better, they were welcome to try. Then came the frame, the piece de resistance, a hand-made Elizabethan-style beauty made by Frinton's Frames of Frinton-on-Sea, and further customised by Geoffrey, with an inscription that runs around the inner frame, namely, the song from Cymbeline, 'Fear no more the heat of the sun', a poignant comment about how death comes to us all, which seemed fitting, given that the picture was created to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Bard's passing.

Now you can all judge whether his efforts have been successful, and if you are so in love with the painting that you need to buy it, feel free to make an offer. If the original is too rich for your blood, there are a strictly limited number of beautiful signed and numbered Giclee prints available – 400 to be precise, and also an open edition version, so our advice is to order yours now.

[www.geofftristram.co.uk](http://www.geofftristram.co.uk)