

Head Shrinker On The Subway

Middle-aged Peter Bulow, is a head-shrinker on a New York City subway train. No, he does not shrink heads to keep as trophies. He is a psychiatrist on the way to or from his job at a hospital on the subway.

Peter is also an artist who paints and sculpts. At age five he made his first sculpture of animals he saw at the Berlin Zoo in Germany. He felt connected to the animals through the clay. His family moved from Germany to New York when he was eight. As a child, he observed people in the streets from his window in East Side Manhattan and was curious about the lives of the people walking below.

After graduating from high school in New York City, Peter went on to receive a medical and fine arts degree from the University of Illinois. He had always been interested in people's inner lives and found his calling as a psychiatrist. He continued to paint and sculpt even as he did research in neuroscience.

Peter was bored on the long subway rides to and from work. In 2008, he started bringing a bag of water-based clay onto the train. Each day, he looks for an interesting face to sculpt. Today, it may be a man asleep with his mouth open. On another day, maybe a young man with dreadlocks listening to music, his eyes closed, tapping his feet to the beat. Or a mother who is cuddling her baby. There is always a fellow commuter he finds to sculpt.

As soon as he spots an intriguing face he immediately begins to sculpt because he has only a few minutes to finish one head. That passenger could get out at the next stop. He puts a clump of clay in his left hand. Using a modeling tool and his fingers, he works the clay into an emerging face the size of a small orange. He uses the tool to make lines, for example, the line between the upper and lower lips, or the lines on either side of the nose. If he forgets the tool, he uses a ball-point pen, or the tine of a fork.

The features are modeled with his fingers, thumb or the whole hand. A nose, the cheeks and other features appear and a face sits within his hand. Within minutes, Peter must get the expression and the likeness of the person. He has captured, forever, the likeness of a person he sees on the commuter train.

Sometimes, the model becomes aware of what Peter is doing. He or she comes over to the slight,



mild-mannered man to look at their startling likeness in three dimension. Often, the model smiles or even tells Peter a story about him or her. When he first began, he was nervous that someone might be offended or make him stop.

But there was only one negative response. A man in a wheelchair, apparently a war veteran, yelled and looked like he was about to hit Peter. The man thought that the clay was a plastic explosive. He smelled it and gave it back to Peter.

"Cool!" the man said.

Peter tries to connect the expression of his model with the person inside. As a psychiatrist, listening to his clients' stories is his job. He is interested in people's inner world. On the subway train, he wonders about the models' identities and past struggles, but is always aware that he cannot glimpse into their minds. Yet, he does capture a moment-in-time of that person's life. He views his subway portraits as a cross section of America, the country that is now his home.

He can finish up to four heads on one ride. He balances them delicately on his hands and fingers until he can set them down to be dried. After one week of drying, he takes them to a ceramic studio to be fired in a kiln.

Since he began using the subway train as his studio, he has sculpted about 430 heads. They are stored all over his apartment in plastic bags, old socks and even in an empty violin case. He feels connected to all of them through the clay.

Peter recalls the time he sculpted a bearded Sikh man wearing the distinctive turban (*see above*). Months later, this man walked into his laboratory to apply for a volunteer job in research. He was a neurologist!

"It was a hoot," recalls Peter. This time, Peter made a real connection with a subject.

In 2012, the city's Department of Parks and Recreation Public Art Program asked Peter to pick 12 miniature heads he had sculpted and make them into life size sculptures for an exhibition in Fort Tryon Park in upper Manhattan. The life size heads were placed on pedestals, among foliage and beneath trees from April to June that year, each with a plaque noting which train the original miniature head was sculpted on. Among them was the head of the Sikh neuroscientist.

—Fanny Wong, Chinese American author, New York.