

Best Practice Recommendation for Facial Approximation in Forensic Anthropology



WHAT IS AN AAFS STANDARD FACTSHEET?

The AAFS produces clear, concise, and easy-to-understand factsheets to summarize the contents of technical and professional forensic science standards on the OSAC Registry. They are not intended to provide an interpretation for any portion of a published standard.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STANDARD?

Facial approximations (also referred to as facial reproduction, facial reconstruction, or facial depiction) are produced for the purpose of generating investigative leads in cases involving unidentified human remains by estimating an individual's facial appearance based on the underlying skull and other relevant information.

This best practice recommendation (BPR) was developed to provide guidance to artists and anthropologists for producing facial approximations from skeletal remains.

WHY IS THIS STANDARD IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?

Adherence to this best practice recommendation ensures the skeletal material is protected from damage during the generation of the facial approximation.

The limitations of facial approximation are clearly stated.

Practitioners are informed of the appropriate level of knowledge and skills necessary to produce facial approximations.

The recommendations indicate the types of information needed to produce likenesses that approximate the individual's facial appearance as accurately as possible.



HOW IS THIS STANDARD USED, AND WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS?

This BPR provides overarching recommendations for producing facial approximations for generating investigative leads in cases with unidentified human remains; it does not provide step-by-step instructions. A team approach, which combines the skills and knowledge of both an artist and anthropologist, is preferred.

Facial approximations should not be used as a means of identification of unidentified remains. Facial approximations are intended to depict the most likely appearance of the person in life and should not be interpreted as an exact likeness or portrait.

Facial approximations are based on available information from the recovery scene, a qualified forensic anthropologist's skeletal analysis, remnant soft tissues, and/or genetic tests. A variety of methods published in peer-reviewed journals, including both 2- and 3-dimensional techniques through various media (sketch, sculpture, and digital), are accepted means of producing facial approximations. Any practice that unnecessarily jeopardizes the integrity of the evidence should be avoided, including using the skeletal material itself as a physical base for a 3D sculpture.

Facial approximations should be evaluated by all relevant specialists (e.g., anthropologists, forensic pathologists, law enforcement, etc.) before they are publicly disseminated.