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The Sheriff by Ralph Steadman

Ralph Steadman is a renowned British illustrator who is most famous for his work along side the writer Hunter S. Thompson. His art best summarized in two words: political and slightly grotesque. His 1995 piece titled *The Sheriff* is no exception.

“The Sheriff,” is a multimedia work, starting with a photo of Hunter Thompson as a base and then additional ink has been brushed and splattered over the top. In the underlying photo, Thompson is seen sitting and talking on a phone. The ink then outlines parts of his form, adds a baseball cap, cigarette and devil horns. In the center of the frame, over Thompson's face, bright red ink has been splashed and allowed to drip. The heavy, haphazard black lines frame the piece.

In order to understand the message the piece is trying to convey, one must know a bit about Hunter S. Thompson's personal history. In 1970, Thompson ran for sheriff in Pitkin county in Colorado, which explains the title of the work. Thompson, however, is noted for his unrepentant drug use. As part of his campaign, he ran on the platform that he would fight to legalize drugs for personal usage.

Ralph Steadman and Hunter Thompson were both close friends and colleagues, and although Thompson did not win the election, the memory stuck with Steadman long after the event. In terms of composition *The Sheriff* is a classic portrait, with the subject near the middle of the frame shown from the waist up. The real impact stems from the ink Steadman has applied. It is what gives the piece its meaning and, in turn, what makes it so effective. The viewer is initially drawn into the piece by the loose brushwork characteristic of Steadman's work. The

viewer is then led to ponder the meaning of the piece. The contrast between the red ink and the gray-blue photograph is visually stunning while also highlighting the duality present in Hunter S. Thompson. A sheriff, as represented by the photograph, is straight-laced and law-abiding while Thompson is bold, unrestrained and certainly not an upstanding citizen, as shown by the red ink.