



# The art of observation

As a star of stage and screen, **Una Stubbs** has made a career out of representing character through her acting skills. But unbeknownst to many of her fans, her interest in people is also expressed through her talent for art. Words: Martha Alexander

**S**he's a well-known face for telly addicts and theatre-goers; with roles such as Aunt Sally in *Worzel Gummidge* and Rita, Alf Garnett's long-suffering daughter in the television comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* making Una Stubbs a household name.

It is ironic, although perhaps completely logical, that someone who has lived much of their life in the spotlight, should be so fascinated by Joe Public. This interest has resulted in a vast collection of sketched and painted vignettes of people she has observed and recorded out and about in London.

These works are neatly stowed away in compact sketch books in a small studio in her tidy apartment, a stone's throw from the cafés and patisseries she visits in Piccadilly, which more often than not contain the perfect person to capture on paper.

"Mainly people are oblivious, but sometimes they do notice what I'm doing

and I can see them thinking 'why has she picked me?'" says Stubbs, who keeps a pad and a little roll of pencils in her handbag at all times, in case the opportunity to sketch arises, which it often does. Anything from a naughty terrier to a girl in a bright red beret or an old man reading the newspaper can have Stubbs reaching for an HB.

Clearly, Stubbs needs to draw quickly and has now perfected the art of one-minute sketches, often followed by a dash home to "splodge some paint on", or just go straight in with pen or paint on a fresh piece of paper, using the sketches as reference. Her style is loose and free, which she believes is a prerequisite of good watercolour painting.

Stubbs has sketched since childhood, although embroidery became her initial hobby as an adult, until her eyesight made creating the tiny stitches difficult, and her mother suggested she try painting. She bought every instructional book on the

market and set to work learning to paint watercolours being particularly inspired by Alwyn Crawshaw (see Issue 274).

Keenly promoting her medium as versatile, she accepts it is notoriously hard to master and prone to preconception.

"When people ask you what you paint in, you can see in their face that they are probably thinking 'Oh yes, very twee', and that is quite hard to avoid. But I am a fan of the American watercolourists, whose paintings are much bolder and more vivid. Watercolour as a medium is something that needs a lot of work. It's like painting with smoke because it's so elusive at times, and once a mistake [is made], it stays a mistake."

Aside from documenting moments from the lives of others in her sketchbook, Stubbs puts her skills to work for friends in the form of personally illustrated greetings cards, including 'first night cards', which she gives to fellow cast members before their first ▶



Una Stubbs has filled endless sketchbooks with her watercolours



“In rehearsals I’m inclined to stare at people and do little reference sketches in my script”



public performance.

“Over a period of rehearsal you’ve always got your script to hand and a pencil for writing notes. I’m inclined to stare at people and do little reference sketches in my script of their eyes or noses.”

There is no doubt in Stubbs’ mind that the ability to make one-minute sketches that pick up characteristics so well is as a direct result of her acting.

“People have remarked that I can capture a face well, and I think this is only because of the observation as an actress you pick up on other people’s character quickly.”

She is a member of the Hesketh Hubbard Art Society, the largest life drawing group in London, where she goes once a week to sit anonymously in a sea of hundreds of other artists and concentrate without worrying her subjects might wander off or turn away halfway through. This is perfect for honing her skills, but the subjects are a far cry from the often extraordinarily ordinary latté-drinking or dog-walking public she normally encounters.

“I do often long for a craggy old man as a model with a wonderful worn face, or a lovely fat person, but that never happens,” she sighs, “Sadly, the models are always very glamorous.”

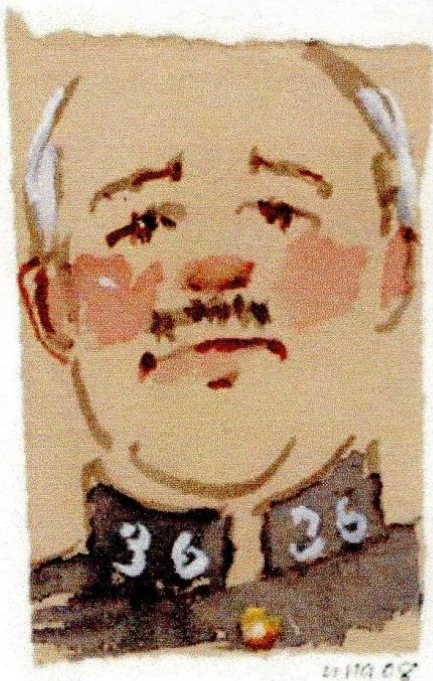
Frequent gallery visits have been highly instrumental to her learning, with her being inspired by the

likes of Kyffin Williams, Pierre Bonnard and most of the Impressionists. She once visited New York to go to a John Singer Sargent exhibition of watercolours and spent every day in the Metropolitan Museum with a magnifying glass just to try and see what he had done.

Her passion for art extends beyond a hobby; conversation is littered with references to artists. Her perfect dinner party guest list would consist of Tracey Emin (for her character), Christopher Wren (to tell him St Paul’s Cathedral is still “the most loved building in London”) and Van Gogh (“I’d like to tell him what his paintings are going for he can talk to Tracey, she’d have to sit on the side that his ear’s working”).

In every aspect of her painting, Stubbs is excitable and just a little bit dramatic. She has enthusiasm for the faces she captures, for the days she likes spending in her studio with the radio on, and even for the shops where she buys her art materials.

She buys her art supplies from London Graphics Centre “you could spend all day



in there with a thermos it’s magical.” She prefers to use tubes of watercolour rather than pans and cites Winsor & Newton and Schmincke as her favourites.

“You really see the difference after a while. It’s not the texture so much, but the colour. I always get paints as presents, but if they are not good quality, I really do notice as the colours are a bit crude.”

Stubbs works on a very small scale and is genuinely modest about her work. She is hesitant to publicise herself, finding it hard to believe that people

are impressed by the nuggets of human life shown in her paintings. She has had two exhibitions at Panter & Hall in Mayfair, yet she is reluctant to have another, saying she is content painting just for herself.

“I’m not confident enough to think my work is worthy of a high price; I was mortified by the prices. I’ve been asked to do another exhibition, but they do get me into a state,” she says smiling, an indication that the performer in her might secretly still be keen to show human character in a gallery, as well as on the stage and screen.

**Una Stubbs** is a British actress who has appeared in films such as *Summer Holiday* with Cliff Richard, and many TV shows including *Worzel Gummidge*, *Eastenders* and *The Catherine Tate Show*, as well as on the West End stage. For many years she has sketched and painted people and scenes from her acting career as well as strangers she finds interesting out and about in London. She is represented by Panter & Hall ([www.panterandhall.com](http://www.panterandhall.com)).



FOTOS: LYNN PARR