



Alice Roberts

# ALICE'S

# wonderland

Famous for her TV series' *Coast* and *Don't Die Young*, Dr Alice Roberts explains why illustration is an important skill for her. Words: Lynn Parr



**S**HE TEACHES medical students about human anatomy; she has gripped TV audiences with her series on health; she has captivated viewers of *Coast* with her bright red hair and cheery manner. But there's even more to Dr Alice Roberts than her current high profile: she is also a published illustrator and painter.

It's all down to her mum, she says with her trademark chuckle. Mum is Wendy Roberts, an etcher and watercolourist.

"My mum was an art teacher and she'd always have drawing stuff around at home to get into. I used to find it very odd when I went to a friend's house and they didn't have pencils and paper."

All the sketching and painting she did as a child paid off when she was at university, training to be a doctor – she worked as a commercial illustrator for a card company.

"It was a really embarrassing range of cards for WH Smith that included pink dinosaurs. It was when *Jurassic Park* came out, so I sold my soul and did pink stegosauruses, purple iguanodons and blue triceratops dinosaurs in watercolour. But it wasn't the sort of thing I'd hang on a wall!"

Pink dinosaurs aside, she also produced a wide range of menus, posters, greetings cards and other publications, all with a delicate but sure touch. Her journal is filled with little drawings and watercolours, detailing everything from her lime-green camper van to the wildlife she has seen on her travels. But whether pen and ink or watercolour, her illustrations all share the same quality: an excellent talent for drawing.

"Art is very personal," she says. "I tend to be moved by art that gives me that visceral response, that 'Wow!' factor – though it's important that someone can draw and paint. You do see a lot of artists who don't seem to be able to draw. To me, art *is* drawing."

### The bones of a drawing

After working as a doctor in Wales, Alice did some surgical training and teaching at the University of Bristol, and loved it so much, she stayed. Now she is a full-time lecturer, teaching human anatomy to dental students, medical students and archaeology students looking at human bones and the evolution of the human body. Her artistic skills come in useful for drawing diagrams and illustrating student handbooks.

"I also teach post-graduate medics – consultants learning to do new operations. It's great teaching anatomy to people who are really using it. I love teaching."

Her first foray into TV came when she worked behind the scenes on Channel 4's *Time Team*, writing reports and identifying diseases in ancient bones.

"They invited me back for two more series. It was absolutely wonderful – they did amazing archaeology. The illustrator Victor Ambrus (see Issue 253) is totally one of my heroes. When I was first on set, the person I was most totally awed at meeting was Victor Ambrus because his drawing is absolutely amazing. We were digging at Breamore in Hampshire and there was a particular grave where there was a male skeleton and a female skeleton lying very close, with her arm bone lying over the male skeleton. In about half an hour he'd done a sketch of the burial as it had happened, and there's this man and woman lying in the grave with her arm over him. There's



PREVIOUS PAGE Alice has just started painting landscapes in oils, inspired by her travels for *Coast*, in contrast to her watercolour illustrations, inset

ABOVE AND RIGHT Alice first ventured into commercial illustration with a range of greetings cards FAR RIGHT Her illustrations are neat, precise drawings in pen and ink and watercolour

BELOW A travel journal provides an evocative record of Alice's holidays





something about those drawings that are much more vital than a computer graphic.”

After *Time Team* she was asked to do the spin-off series *Extreme Archaeology*, which involved lots of action sequences, and for which Alice had to learn to climb.

“I got trained properly by Mike Weeks and Bean Sopwith who went on to train Jack Osbourne. They’re such amazing climbers, and it was such a privilege. There were a couple of hairy moments when I was halfway up the Avon Gorge thinking, ‘What am I doing?’. It was such a small team that we couldn’t do large excavations, but we did surveys of places that archaeologists had never been able to get to before.”

Then the BBC came calling. *Coast*, an exploration of our native shorelines, was a massive hit. The third series has just finished but repeats are regularly shown on digital channels.

“I really enjoyed exploring the British Isles,” Alice says. “The thing that overwhelmed me was the huge variety of the British coastline. It’s all beautiful in different ways. For example, places like the Northumberland coast – I don’t think I would ever have thought of going there, but it’s absolutely stunningly beautiful.”

For each series, Alice was asked to paint watercolour landscapes, such as a selection of views of Southwold, Suffolk, which she then put together in a large picture.

“I was pleased with the small pictures but not with the end one. I had to do it in two hours in an art room in a school.”

### Getting out the health message

In between series of *Coast* was *Don’t Die Young*, a hugely popular series on human health in which Alice gave herself an asthma attack, looked at a real lung tumour, and showed viewers what a hardened artery looked – and sounded like – when tapped. Another series is planned for the new year.

“It seemed to work and people enjoyed it, which is the whole point, so I’m very pleased I’ve got the opportunity to go into more depth in that area. I have a firm belief that television is a fantastic way of getting the message out to a lot of people. I don’t know if any of those programmes change the way people behave, but we’ve certainly got people watching them. The big ones we didn’t do in the last series were the liver and the guts. There’s a lot of important issues, especially with the liver. The reproductive system will be particularly exciting, especially when we get to the body painting!”

Thanks to her TV appearances, Alice is a familiar face to millions, which she sometimes finds disconcerting, despite lecturing “hundreds and hundreds” of students.

“When I went on holiday down to Devon at Easter, for about three days I couldn’t get anywhere without people saying, ‘Oh, you’re her’. I just wanted to run away and hide. You start to feel quite embarrassed about it. It’s nice really, as most people are fans of the programmes – *Coast*, in particular, really struck a chord with everybody. I sometimes get mixed up with Miranda Krestovnikov [another female *Coast* presenter], which is very strange, as we look nothing like each other. People go to me: ‘You do all the diving, don’t you?’”

Also on the slate is a big series on human evolution, about “how this African ape got out of Africa and was successful at populating the world. Go back a few million years and there were lots of hominid species, but now there’s only us. It’s also interesting in terms of human diversity, and there’s quite a strong anti-racist message as well.” ▷





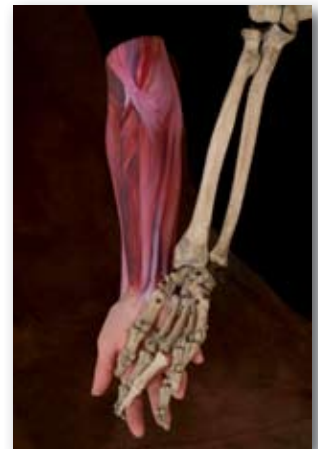
Bethan washed Easter clean, then dried her silky grey fur. She gave Easter Carrots and lettuce and dandelions.



**ABOVE** *Spurge*, in the style of Charles Rennie Macintosh

**LEFT** Part of a children's book Alice is writing and illustrating

**BELOW** Alice uses her artistic skills to teach anatomy – here, an assistant's arm serves to illustrate the position of muscles



She is also researching joint disease for a PhD – but with all her accomplishments, why does she want to? “It’s about doing a piece of work that’s larger than a single publication. It’s all your own work and you do learn about the scientific method. I find it a very useful thing to do.”

### Branching out


Whatever new project is on the cards for Alice, she will always find time for her art. Thanks to the opportunities and motivation afforded by *Coast*, she has branched out into landscape painting, and recently did a metalworking course with sculptor Simon Cooley in the Brecon Beacons.

“I’m trying oils now. When I first started using them I found I was trying to use them like watercolours, but I’m gradually getting the feel of them. I’ve just bought myself a palette knife, which is great because it

stops you taking forever to finish a painting. One of the things that always put me off oils was the turps and having to keep your brushes clean. So now I use Winsor & Newton’s Artisan range of water-soluble oils. One of the reasons for developing my oils is that I tend to overwork things. It’s easy to take that step too far.

“I think I want to do something a bit bigger, because I tend to work on a fairly small scale, and I’m also quite precise because a lot of what I’ve done in the past has been graphic and illustrative work. I just wanted to try something a bit more expressive.”

Does she follow the techniques of a favourite artist?

“I’m always blown away by Whistler. Copying artists has a certain value – it’s useful to learn techniques, but my reason to do art is to express myself, not to ape anyone.” 



### Profile

Dr Alice Roberts trained as a medical doctor and teaches human anatomy at the University of Bristol. After appearing on Channel 4’s *Time Team* she presented the BBC series *Coast* and *Don’t Die Young*.

She has worked as a commercial illustrator, using watercolour and pen and ink, and also works in oils.

As well as another series of *Don’t Die Young*, look out for her in a new series on human evolution.