

Shipboard work for a scientific artist

Isabel Cooper wrote a long article, "Fish Portraits," on her work illustrating fish, hoping to get it published in *Asia Magazine*. It was not published. This post offers excerpts of that article, focusing on the work and working conditions, and leaving aside her colorful observations on the different kinds of fish she worked with. The full article manuscript is here: [Fish Portraits by Isabel Cooper 1925](#) in a PDF.

What follow are Isabel's words.

The ship as a workplace

Our ship was exceedingly sturdy and staunch, and broad-beamed, and well adapted to the requirements of an ocean laboratory.

On the upper deck of the laboratory-proper, neatly wedged between a chart table and the ship's laboratory, was my 'studio'. This may sound a bit cramped and crowded; studios are supposed to be reasonably spacious, with plenty of swinging-room for brushes, at least. But I assure you that the more tightly a floating studio is wedged, the [more] beneficial for the work and nerves of the artist! These boundaries fore and aft, together with the wall on the port side, made three directions in which I could not roll.



FIG. 64.—ISABEL COOPER, STAFF ARTIST, PAINTING A LIVING FISH.

Image from William Beebe, *The Arcturus Adventure*. New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1926

Possibly the most remarkable feature of my sea-going studio was the fact that it never remained quietly in one plane of space for longer than an instant...

By which mild and rather negative statement I really mean the gruesome fact that, in open ocean, the studio and its entire contents oscillated violently and almost continually through one, two, or three dimensions. This activity became really astounding at times. When the ship was merely slanting about, objects on my desk would develop the most interesting and intricate sorts of rhythm all their own. So you can see the necessity of keeping things as compact as possible. ...

My immediate surroundings on the "Arcturus" were not bad at all, — if unusual. ... To the starboard of my work-table was an open space which collected chairs and people, towards evening, and which was nightly rent asunder by the stress of arguments and discussions, — always the breath of life to me. And out of my wide, salt-splashed port there was continually to be seen the sea, — stormy

Atlantic, or sparkling Caribbean, or slow, beautiful Pacific, with the comforting level of the horizon to furnish a refuge for my thoughts, at least, on tumultuous, busy days.

I had a great deal of trouble with my paints and inks and other rolling stock on board the 'Arcturus'. All these things would tend, in rough weather, to merge gradually into an indistinguishable mass, right before my eyes, – no matter how many new and fantastic tethering devices and halters and barricades I invented.

Imagine a desk which slants in almost any direction, or else revolves with a strange, shuddering corkscrew motion. And a working light which shines indiscriminately from east or west or north or south. And models who are mostly alive and swimming. And you will have a faint picture of my "Arcturus" studio. I am thinking especially of a wild morning in Mid-Atlantic, when I had definitely made up my mind that the elements were not to hinder me from finishing a special portrait. My desk had been long since hooked firmly to the deck. And I had worked out a complicated system of paddocks for microscopes, ink bottles, brushes, etc. My model was a very small and unprepossessing deep-sea fish, whose tiny aquarium was wired to the microscope slide. As far as I can remember my paints were safely sliding about in [a?] drawer. I was sticking to my chair in much the way that a rider sticks to a frisky horse, – a matter of knee pressure. But we struck a wave whose trough just fitted the wide sides of our ship. Which means that you roll as far as possible without actually turning over completely in the water. Whereupon I was projected across the room, several of my tools jumped the traces, a whole section of heavy scientific literature moved forward in a mass, and caught me amidship. A funny moment. I suppose the microscope must have looked like the Campanile in an earthquake, with a strange pale little fish spinning off through space like a lost soul.

I was obliged to study new phases and phenomena of gravitation which had never before troubled me. And not the least of these concerned the control of my subjects. In order to achieve sketches to suit the scientists' purposes the fish had to pose alive. And they happen to be the most difficult models in the world. You cannot hold them still with any degree of comfort or success. They are nowhere near as easy to manage as my jungle models, the snakes and lizards and frogs of Demerara. Once you had a good firm grip on a snake's neck the problem was solved. And some of the lizards and frogs would even sit still of their own accord and look you angrily in the eye for minutes at a time.

Dealing with fish as subjects

There are just three ways to deal with fish. You can let them swim around in a glass tank, and regard them through the glass sides. Or you can have them flopping about in a pan of water. Or you can hold them up by the tail. If they swam, I considered myself lucky if they moved slowly and peaceably, allowing me a glimpse now and then of the pose which I wanted. But they were much more

likely to whirl about in a panic, stirring up a terrific surf in the aquarium, and gulping great gulps of fear and dismay. Or they jumped right out of the water, and landed, slime and all, in the middle of my drawing or my face.



Yellow-tailed surgeon fish by Isabel Cooper.
From *The Arcturus Adventure*

The most becoming pose a fish can take is in profile, – so that you may catch the full, charming contours of his deficient brain-case, the backward sloping forehead, and the definitely receding chin. But this profile view is almost impossible to get. They prefer to gaze at you head on, concentrating all the sadness and distrust of their bulging, jeweled eyes upon you through the glass, and biting feebly at nothingness, with their strange skeleton mouths.

A fish model who is reclining upon his side in a pan of water is far from satisfactory. He either flops appallingly, or else dies, which is just what must be carefully avoided. When you find yourself with a really adaptable and congenial fish you may be sure it is dead! I arrived long ago at the point where I was willing to hold a fish up by the tail, through they are damp, slippery handfuls at best. But it is not often that I have been able to keep a firm hold upon a living fish. They have the most slithering of contours, as well as a violent power in their flat tapering muscles, against which the strength of the most capable human hand would not function.

The element of speed enters into almost all my work from living creatures. There is always some very good reason why the sketches must be completed as soon as possible. This enforced absorption in my work is an excellent thing, particularly at sea, where it serves to keep my mind off some rather pessimistic reflections upon the activity of the ocean itself, and the very comparative pleasure of working on ships.

The pleasure of the scientific artistic work



Parti-colored bumpheads by Isabel Cooper. From *The Arcturus Adventure*

I wonder whether I will be understood when I remark that the satisfaction of turning out accurate drawings of these diverse and beautiful creatures of the sea was only enhanced by the rather exceptional difficulties involved. This is quite true. There was an extraordinary pleasure in bringing the precision of fine pen and brush work to the many problems presented by silver scales, and transparent fish finds, and weird iridescence of sculptured fish faces. And all this amid wind and rain and tossing salt spray, in a tiny studio that swung and eddied through space, entirely without benefit of gyroscope!

Art for work, art for play

Isabel was ever the artist, so even when she was not doing her work, she drew and painted. She wrote about this to Charles:

“Island of Indefatigable, alias ‘Santa Cruz’.

My procedure in this harbor is to go ashore early and mess around with feeble landscape sketching 'till it gets too hot even for my sun-helmet, then return to the ship and work all day, except when I play hooky and read or talk or just keep cool in a bathing suit.”ⁱ

ⁱ Letter, IC to CDM, from Indefatigable, April 10, 1925.