

Face Facts

Using a simple pencil and paper and her artistic skills, Lois Gibson has aided in the conviction of killers and she has also helped build a visual picture of relatives or children, who may have been missing for years, through age progression techniques.

Mrs Gibson, who has been working as a forensic artist for 23 years and is the author of a book on the subject, *Faces of Evil*, was compelled to become a forensic artist after becoming a victim of a horrific attack herself and continues to push the technique as a key tool in helping to secure convictions.

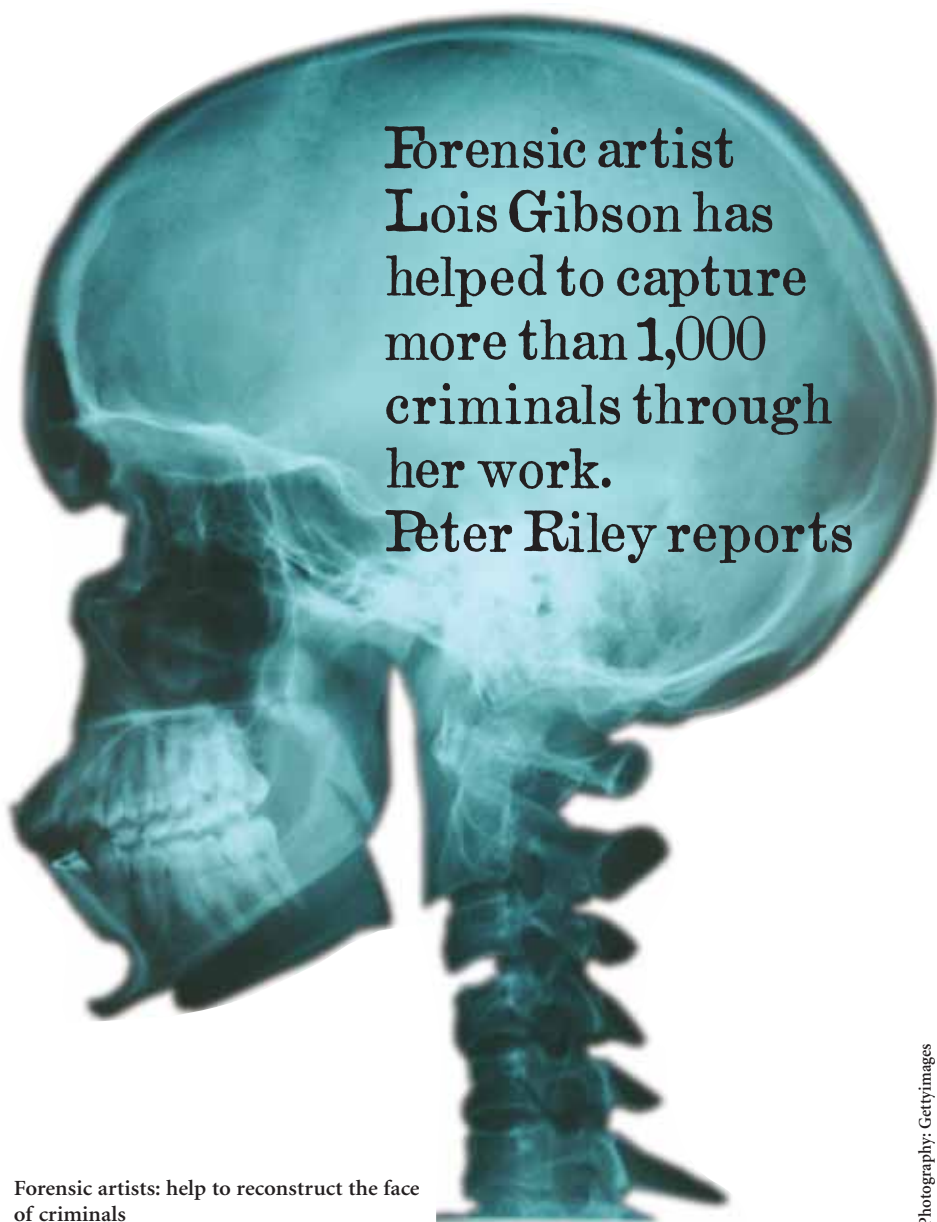
She said: "Someone tried to kill me for fun when I was 21. I know what it is like to want justice so bad it takes up all your thoughts, and then I know how wonderful it is to see justice done."

Weeks later she was driving somewhere when she got lost and took a wrong turn. She found herself driving down the street where the attack happened and actually spotted her attacker, a serial rapist, getting arrested for another crime.

From that traumatic time, Mrs Gibson has built herself a reputation as a forensic artist in the USA and now completes around 200 sketches a year. She went on to gain a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with Honours at the University of Texas, and later

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produced 3,000 fine art portraits for visiting tourists before realising that



Forensic artists: help to reconstruct the face of criminals

Photography: Gettyimages

her talent could benefit police work. She moved to Houston where she discovered that with more than 700 murders a year her experience in portraiture could help capture some of the killers. Despite the fact that every third sketch that she did for the Houston Police helped them solve a crime, it still took more than seven years to be offered a job. She also completed a Forensic Art course held at the noted FBI academy in Quantico, Virginia and taught forensic art at

Northwestern University in Illinois.

Mrs Gibson adds: "Although my success rate is around 30 percent for general identification work, my rate soars to almost 60 percent when I deal with 10-year-old witnesses because they are so observant (see sketches). I take about an hour to do each drawing, but it does also depend on how good the witness is."

However, she still finds that many law-enforcement agencies are reluctant to adapt to a system which is different to e-fits, even though she believes it is

Forensic artist Lois Gibson has helped to capture more than 1,000 criminals through her work. Peter Riley reports

more flexible and is more successful. She spent seven-and-a-half years trying to persuade the Houston Police Department to give her a job as a forensic artist and she is outspoken and dedicated to her craft.

She says that there are only 16 full time forensic artists in the entire USA and adds: "I am the only voice promoting forensic art. The UK should have a dozen full time artists and as far as I know they have very few. I am actually trying to make something happen before I die. I may not see it happen, but other artists need to pick up and do what I do.

There are tens of thousands of artists with enough talent to draw faces well enough to do the work. I'm just trying to help others identify murderers and stop people who rape."

She adds that her entry in the Guinness Book of World Records is not something she set out to achieve but that she kept a detailed record of how many cases were solved through her sketches and it was to try to compel, by example, other forensic artists to keep track if their sketch solves a crime.

"It is necessary to use a sketch in the right way to achieve a name through likeness which can then take detectives forward in finding the evidence they need to convict a criminal."

"I got the record by my actions because many artists don't keep track of their success, which is insane. My Guinness entry allows me to spread the word throughout the world, because every country needs forensic artists."

In the UK, one of the top forensic artists called upon by police forces is Janet Richardson, based in Leicestershire, who also runs her own website on 'evidential art', offering her services on contract to police forces across the country.

Having worked for Northamptonshire



Sketches: Lois Gibson

The sketch on the left was taken from a description by a shop owner robbed by the man on the right. He was a hit man for the mafia. He turned state's witness against John Gotti in a New York trial. The US Marshals gave him a new identity, \$25,000 for plasticsurgery and moved him to Houston. During his 28th holdup, a shop owner shot him to death



Sketches: Lois Gibson

USA example: The sketch on the left was taken from a man who had romantic notions about this woman. When they were alone, she put some drugs in his food and he passed out for more than a dozen hours, when he awoke, he had been robbed of money and jewellery

Police for 27 years, Ms Richardson has accumulated a comprehensive knowledge of police operational procedures. She has vast investigative experience coupled with a complete and inclusive knowledge of the complex field of facial identification as well as extensive specialist training received in both the UK and the USA.

She has gained experience as a scenes of crime officer and latterly as the force coroner's officer, undertaking full responsibility for facial identification and now offers an independent and

specialist service to all police and investigative agencies.

Ms Richardson said: "Recognising someone's ability is vitally important when considering doing a sketch that can help police, because all witnesses don't have the same recollection of what they have seen. We have to be sensitive to this and produce a sketch that goes some way to helping to solve a crime. Sketches in Britain are never going to be the sole evidence for convicting someone, but are more of an investigating tool. It is necessary to

use a sketch in the right way to achieve a name through likeness which can then take detectives forward in finding the evidence they need to convict a criminal.

“The training of forensic artists in the UK is quite limited but there are plans being mooted to try and get a nationally recognised scheme or course, including a degree course in Scotland, to remedy this, but it may take another couple of years yet. I still use sketches which offer, in my opinion, much more expression than e-fits or other composites. E-fits need an operator experienced with a graphics program, and though they can achieve a lot there can be difficulty if they are operated by someone who is not competent with the program. It is also always helpful for those using the graphics program on computer systems to have some artistic background to implement their skills in understanding the face and providing a realistic likeness into the composite.

“An artist offers greater flexibility to the witness or victim in giving choice of the most appropriate method to retrieve either a computerised or freehand image. Freehand style offers the option of obtaining specific items or images the witness may recall, for example unusual clothing, design, weapon or a tattoo.

“Although we are a charity we need to make the police forces in the UK more aware that we are here and that by forensic artists working with them we can often make their job a whole lot easier.”

“What should always be considered is that forensic artists are only as good as their witnesses or their interview techniques, but a lot can be achieved in a couple of hours with the right approach. The success rate we have in identifying suspects is around 40 percent, but we should also remember that this high rate is



USA example: The sketch on the left was done from description by 10 year old girl raped by this man. When he saw the sketch on TV, he turned himself in

dependent on who sees the sketch at the right time.”

Ms Richardson’s words are endorsed by Terri Blythe, head of the identification and reconstruction division of the National Missing Persons Helpline. She said: “Not all police forces realise what we can do to help them or even realise that we are here. We don’t have a standard system in Britain and it varies from force to force, and in many cases the chief constables of these forces don’t necessarily realise the benefits of forensic artistry.”

The Helpline, a charitable trust which raises cash to help trace many of the 70,000 people who go missing each year in Britain, spends much time and effort in trying to identify missing people, particularly finding forensic art useful in publicising pictures of corpses found in rivers and other places where they may have lain undiscovered for days or weeks and where a photograph would prove either impossible or unethical. Here the forensic artist’s skill truly comes to the fore, for their sketches of the corpses can bring them ‘back to life’ through the subtle tones used.

Ms Blythe added: “When taking a crime scene we have to use a bit of artistic merit, and in various cases some pictures look like the missing person while some don’t, particularly in cases where we are dealing with the identification of remains. It all depends on who sees it. I primarily do the unidentified cases and although we

are a charity we need to make the police forces in the UK more aware that we are here and that by forensic artists working with them we can often make their job a whole lot easier.”

Despite the majority of their time being spent on trying to identify criminals, there is also another side to their talent, that of age progression, where a photograph of a missing person who may have been gone a number of years is ‘aged’ to look similar to the way they may look in the present day. This has helped families and friends to track loved ones.

Mrs Gibson says: “I was given a photo of a one-year-old baby boy who was a long lost loved one. At the request of his sister, I aged him to 31 years and then got the sister, who was taken away from him when she was four years old, onto the US TV show *Unsolved Mysteries*, and within moments of the sketch being broadcast, the wife of this man called the show from Virginia and long lost brother and sister were reunited. That is a great ending.”

For more information on the subject click on:
www.evidential-art.co.uk
www.loisgibson.com or