



Drawing on the way: U-M art history alumna's art career inspired by NYC subway-goers

By Alana Valko

After a career as an opera singer in New York City, University of Michigan art history alumna (B.A. '04) Sarah Nisbett began temping and found comfort through the subway, an old office pen and the most interesting people on the subway. What started as a mindless hobby on the F train from Brooklyn to Manhattan, led Nisbett to a career as a full time artist, over 70 sketch-filled notebooks, and nearly 28,000 followers through her Instagram account, [@drawnontheway](https://www.instagram.com/drawnontheway).



Nisbett's inspiration spun out of boredom and an effort to avoid screen-time. "I was so sick of looking at my phone. I took my notebook out on the train one day and drew the first person I saw, who was this super dapper-looking guy sitting across from me in a three-piece suit," recalled Nisbett. "I knew he had some sort of cool story. I was interested in him. So I drew and it was not terrible—I actually liked it."

The next day, Nisbett took out her notebook and began drawing again. For seven years thereafter, she has drawn someone on the train at least every single day—and she's done so with the same blue ballpoint BIC pen.

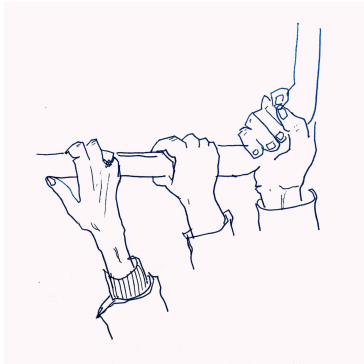
In her unique studio space underground, she's learned how to draw in motion, while standing up, and in jam-packed subway cars. Public transportation tends to be a moment people tune

out, but for Nisbett, the subway allows her to address the humanness of an often anonymous city.

“For me, there are so many stories and personhood around me on the train that I have no control over, but can discover,” she said. “The way someone tucks their feet under the chair, or drapes their hands... just one gesture can say everything you need to know about a person. Making the subway my studio space allowed me to see the different ways people tell their story.”

“The subway was accidental at first, but deliberate now,” said Nisbett. “It’s the great equalizer of the city. There are millionaires on the train, but also people who live on the train, and everyone in-between. And in this one moment everyone is briefly still in a very fast moving city.”

Nisbett draws on the subway to access everyday people who she says deserve to be seen, drawn and thought of in everyday life. “There’s a weird intimacy to the subway because you are so physically close to people,” she said.



The question of drawing celebrities and famous people, especially in a city like New York, has arised, but for Nisbett, it’s important to her that everyone is anonymous. “What is really interesting to me is everyday people. There is so much value in every person, and turning them into art is a way of validating them. Being able to turn anyone into a work of art is important to me, and is my mission.”

A typical drawing session on the subway does not come with the perks of your average portrait studio session—ample lighting, nil distraction, silence. For Nisbett, she must maneuver crowds, passengers moving on and off the train, and is able to capitalize on the quick moments of stillness between stops. She began developing tactics; for instance, she memorizes the small, lasting details of passengers, and strays away from staring too long. To work with the conditions on the subway and avoid creating discomfort for passengers, Nisbett takes only two or three looks at her subjects while drawing.

Being a classically trained opera singer and detail-oriented art historian in college, Nisbett was prone to perfecting her work to get the best result. With an uncertain amount of time to draw

before a passenger gets off from the train, Nisbett could not do the same fine-tuning she grew accustomed to.

“Sometimes people would get off and I had to be done. That often led to really interesting stopping points in a piece I would not have done before,” she said. “It trained me to not overwork pieces, and now my style is really minimal.”

Before she began sketching people on the subway, Nisbett had no prior experience drawing or making art. “I didn’t think I could draw anything from reality, so I just never did. At first I was really unhappy with my drawings because I thought they needed to be hyper-realistic,” said Nisbett, who is entirely self-taught.



Despite teaching herself to draw, Nisbett’s degree in art history at U-M helped her refine her style, and shut off the critic inside her. “I had to make a deal with myself. I knew there were many ways to represent the world through the artists I studied. I had to find my own style,” she said. She admits that while she was learning to read and look at art while in art history classes at U-M, in a way, she trained herself how to make art.



Outside of the subway, Nisbett takes her notebook everywhere she goes, capturing quiet moments of personalities and narratives along the way. She has begun live-illustrating events, and has even started live-illustrating weddings. The little details and glimpses Nisbett has learned to capture on the subway translate well into wedding drawing. “What I do works really well for weddings,” she said. “For one wedding I illustrated, the couple did not have a photographer, only my illustrations.”

Since that first day on the subway, Nisbett has drawn well over 6,000 sketches, capturing just a few passengers of the nearly six million subway-goers each day. Nisbett usually gives her portraits to the person she draws when she can, but she hopes to put a book together soon cataloging the portraits she has kept.

In the meantime, you can catch her on the subway.

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