

OUR ARTWORK

Harry and I both share a talent and passion for art, specifically drawing, painting, cartooning, sculpture, carving, carpentry. When he wasn't shooting films, aside from playing the piano, composing songs and story writing, Harry was indulging in art of some kind. Since I now make my living as a scenic artist, this is one of the most significant commonalities with the others being our similar personality traits, writing ability, music preference and physical appearance. Over the last 20 years, I have found a lot of evidence that indicates how prolific an artist Harry was.

Harry and I both started drawing when we were children and we were both mostly self-taught. Harry officially entered show business in 1899 when he was 15. He toured with circuses, medicine shows and minstrel troupes, and between gigs Harry returned home to Council Bluffs, Iowa where he would resume cartooning for the local newspaper or help his father who was a sign painter. (My old boss, whom I worked for painting backdrops the last 18 years was a former sign and billboard painter). Harry utilized his art skills throughout his vaudeville career which lasted from 1906-1923. He drew all the advertisements for his act, built his trick auto out of wood, painted and built his own scenery and backdrops. In the theater lobby, between acts, he would sometimes draw caricatures for extra money, but I really believe it was more of a publicity stunt. I have many candid photos from his personal life and behind the scenes of films, showing Harry drawing. I drew my first caricatures in 7th grade of our teachers and would sell copies to my classmates, but I was always drawing as far back as I can remember. You'll notice a similar look in the comparison photos of our artwork, as though they were done by the same person. Those are further down towards the bottom of the page.

dabbling in ventriloquism or traveling with the occasional minstrel show or touring company. When at home between jobs, he'd resume freelance cartooning for the *Bee*. The 1901-02 edition of the Council Bluffs City Directory lists him as a painter along with his father and brother Charles, with brother John listed as paperhanger; they all resided together in the Langdon home. But that state of affairs, if it ever existed beyond the printed page, wouldn't last long.

Between gigs, when Harry returned to Council Bluffs Iowa, where he was born and where his family lived, he would help his dad in his sign painting business or draw cartoons for the local paper. Harry was 17 in 1901. (Harter & Hayde, LITTLE ELF pg. 26)



Harry in vaudeville in 1906 doing a lightning sketch act with wife Rose. (photo from Harry Jr.'s book, NOTHING ON A STAGE IS PERMANENT)

was more forthcoming: “I began to get my experience in stage life at the Boyd Theater [in Omaha], where my father was a scenic artist and [which] turned out many shows for the small Western towns. In those days, property boys didn’t get very much money, and so to help along I sold papers on the corners during the daytime for the *Omaha Bee*.

“When I wasn’t playing hooky from school, I used to draw pictures for my own amusement of the town notables. Then Admiral Dewey came along and I made a pen drawing of him. One of the boys took it to the city editor of the *Bee*, and he thought so well of it that he gave me an assignment, and I did several ‘strips,’ and became known as the newsboy cartoonist around the paper.” Admiral Dewey’s exploits occurred in 1898–99, when Langdon was 14, and this coincides with the Harry Snyder incident.

Langdon enjoyed drawing — he would do it all his life — but the theater fascinated him. In a 1926



1920 interview with Harry (Hayde & Harter, LITTLE ELF pg. 23) and the earliest caricatures I ever did of teachers in school, age 13 in 1991...same age as Harry when he was employed as a cartoonist for his local paper.

during that time, as witness this item from September 1927: “Whenever Harry Langdon is in deep thought, he always makes pencil sketches of various objects.... While out at his house a few nights ago, I noticed sketches on the flyleaves and covers of many books and discovered a drawing on practically every page of the telephone directory. When the comedian wants to draw, he picks up the handiest object, regardless of what it is.”

1927 article by Dan Thomas (Hayde & Harter, LITTLE ELF pg. 185)

In truth, buoyed by the sturdiness and longevity of his routines, two-plus decades of live performing were exhausting, especially as Langdon was carrying the whole act on his own, absent a more balanced split among his teammates. Moreover, he was tired of the repetitive monotony and arduous traveling. If he ever felt the urge to rein in his wanderlust, this was the moment. He even contemplated opening a scenic studio, but dabbling in art would have been merely a respite that recharged his battery for performing—as it had when Harry was a boy—and eventually he would have sought another audience to entertain.

In 1923, Harry was looking for a career change. He wanted to leave vaudeville and try something else. He was contemplating opening an art studio but transitioned into movies instead. (Oldham, KING OF SILENT COMEDY pg. 43)

2. Gladys McConnell, in an interview with Edward Watz, notes that she admired Langdon's artistic talent when she saw his sketches for the film: “The set designer built this eerie-looking New York tenement with this very long staircase. I had seen sketches for this set drawn in a children's school notebook and Arthur Ripley noticed me looking them over. 'Harry Langdon drew that,' he told me. Harry carried the book with him and I noticed he had drawn many detailed sketches of how he thought different scenes should look. He had definite ideas on how he wanted this film to look on screen” (quoted in Harter and Hayde, *Little Elf*, 169).



I couldn't find out the year Ed Watz interviewed Gladys McConnell, guessing sometime in the late '70s, early '80s. She is referring to the 1927 film *THREE'S A CROWD*, which Harry also directed. I don't have examples of Harry's set design sketches, but I have a couple of my own to illustrate her quote. I'm assuming they would've looked somewhat the same. Visit Downloads section for a full size version of these sketches.



Harry Langdon's skill are cartooning and caricature is well known. He is shown here sketching a page in his guest book...in which he writes caustic captions beneath funny pictures of his pals.

COVER GERRY
505 EAST 42nd STREET
New York
Reproduction of this PHOTO
must carry our credit
This picture is loaned for one
month only and must not be so
lone or amplified. Must not be
distributed without written
permission.

1933, a photo from my personal collection with original description on the reverse



1935, behind the scenes of the film ATLANTIC ADVENTURE, Harry caricaturing his co-star, Nancy Carroll.



Harry sketching for servicemen at the Hollywood Canteen.

Langdon's life was coming full circle. He had begun his career onstage, and now he had returned to it, while still juggling work in the medium that had made him an international star. Langdon had decided, if only for the sake of his own happiness, that he did not want money—which was not coming his way anyway, he realized. He wanted to stay occupied and share himself with others. He became an active volunteer at the Hollywood Canteen, a social club for servicemen founded by Bette Davis and John Garfield. Movie stars and character actors waited on the servicemen, made sandwiches and coffee, and entertained them. Mabel remembered that she and Harry went to the Hollywood Canteen nearly every night, and Harry would set up his drawing kit. The soldiers and sailors queued up, and Harry spent fifteen minutes making "lightning-speed" caricatures of each man on an eight- by ten-inch board—much as he had done as a youth for the medicine show audiences. Mabel distributed envelopes so the men could mail the pictures to their mothers or sweethearts.



Harry in 1942 drawing caricatures at the Hollywood Canteen for the servicemen and me doing the same in 2017 at a birthday party for the kiddos. (Oldham, KING OF SILENT COMEDY pg. 268). This is my favorite image of Harry drawing.

WATCH YOUR CREDIT INTERNATIONAL NEWSREEL PHOTO
 2757 A&C LOS ANGELES BUREAU H
 (SLUG) HARRY LANGDON
 LOS ANGELES Harry Langdon, who was a cartoonist before he became a famous comedian, sketches characters at trial of a suit against him to collect on \$11,500x notes. He is declared to have given notes as part of a settlement to forestall a heart balm suit threatened by his wife's former husband, Thomas J. O'Brien, during the Langdons courtship days. SEE ALSO CAPTION # 275A. 8/16/30



would become the next line of questioning. Rountree began by bringing up the \$1,000 bill Langdon had given her. "Wasn't that money given to pay for an illegal operation, a condition for which Langdon, and not O'Brien, was responsible?" Shocked, Helen cried out, "You know O'Brien was responsible and he knows it, too!"

Rountree persisted, demanding that she confess to meeting with O'Brien in Glendale for the express purpose of intimacy, to "cover up" her misconduct with Langdon. "It's a lie! A deliberate lie!" she screamed. Sobbing hysterically, she added, "Tom O'Brien knows it's a lie! How that man can sit there and build up lies against the mother of his child is more than I can understand!" Rountree addressed Judge Blake: "Your honor, I move these comments be stricken from the record," to which Helen cried out, "You cannot strike out an answer that protects my honor and that of my little girl!"

During this, Langdon stood up and headed toward the stand, but was restrained by both his lawyers. At



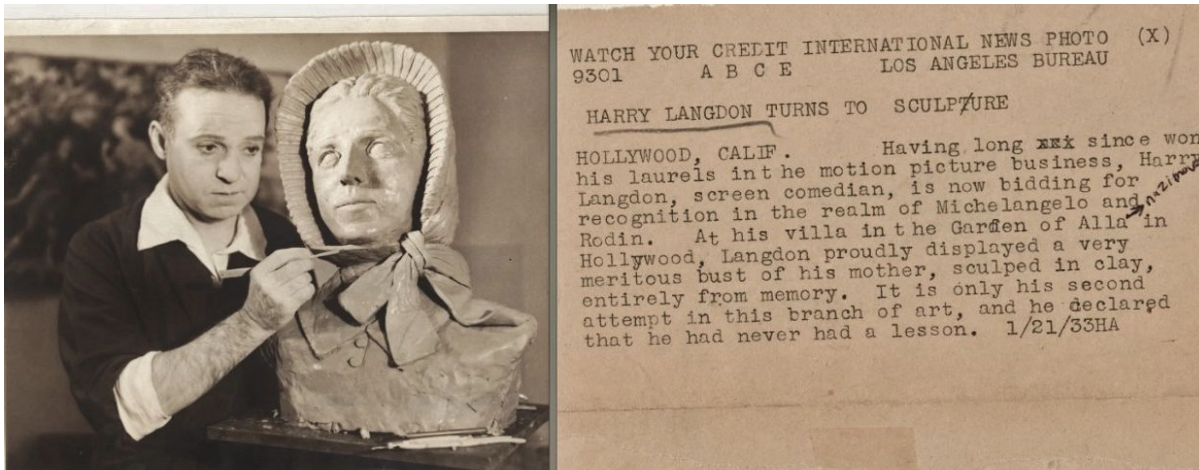
Just Can't Help Being Funny

HAS LOST NONE OF HIS TALENT

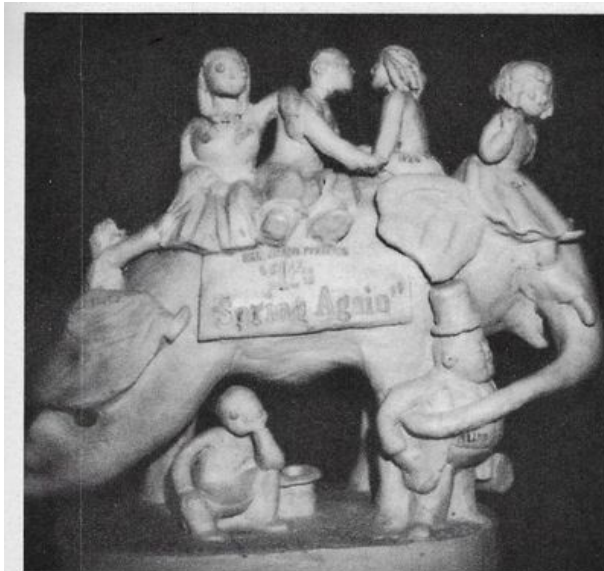
Harry Langdon, who was a cartoonist before he became a famous comedian, has lost none of his talent; the sketches above indicate. His impressionistic caricatures of persons in court during the trial reveals the spirit of fun and whimsicality which brought him fame on the screen.

Langdon sketches the principal figures in his "love balm" trial, June 1930.

On the left is a 1930 photo from my personal collection with its newspaper description on the reverse. I paired it with pg. 212 from LITTLE ELF, because it shows the caricatures Harry was drawing in that photo. I really don't like seeing these paparazzi-like images of Harry in court-- not a happy time in his life and very embarrassing, especially for someone as private as Harry, to have your personal troubles publicized in newspapers nationwide. It was yet another example of Harry caught in the act drawing, so that's why I'm including it.



A photo from my collection again with its original description on the reverse. From 1933...Harry's mom passed away in 1929, during a time he was going through a lot of personal and professional turmoil. He went through the wringer and it shows on his face. Harry sculpted mom wearing her Salvation Army bonnet.



On the elephant, left to right: Alice Brady, June Lang, Jimmy Ellis, Jean Parker, and Billie Burke. Under the elephant: Langdon and Oliver Hardy (at the trunk).

paid \$5,000 for an antique. I don't miss the expensive parties of the old days. There's more enjoyment in watching a sunset from my back porch." Moreover, although the critics were not persuaded, *Zenobia* at least thrilled Harry's son. Junior watched his father sculpt from memory a statue of the cast sitting on an elephant and a life-sized head of Hardy. Langdon worked on clay models of the elephants as soon as he left the breakfast table. Life had become simple for Langdon, and he would not challenge that blessing again.



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Harry worked with clay and wood though I have only found a couple photographic examples. In 1939, he sculpted the cast of the film, *ZENOBIA* sitting on an elephant for his son. I've carved wood, clay, alabaster stone, hard foam. (pg. 255 Oldham, King of Silent Comedy)

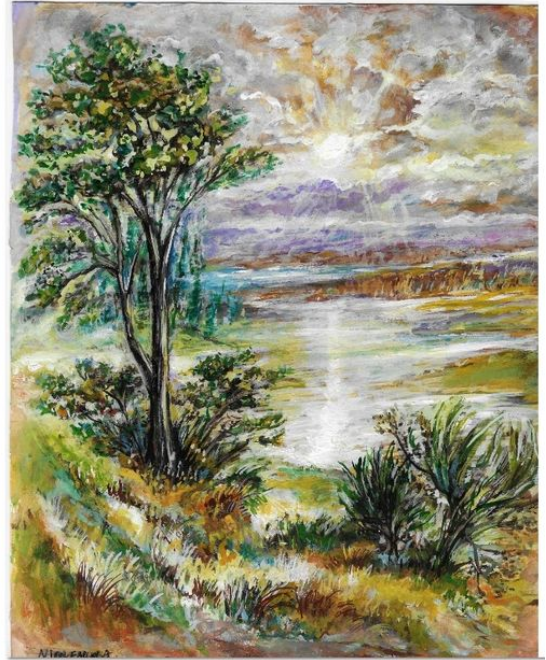
It was really a lot of fun for a young kid because of the turkeys, and we had a lot of dogs, and I used to watch my dad working in the wood shop. He had a large carpentry shop and always liked to work with redwood as it was easy to work with, almost like balsa wood. He knew that I was fond of airplanes, and one day he said to me, "Wait and see what I'm going to fix for you." We had breakfast and afterwards my dad went outside and I followed, and he had a model airplane which he had carved and which was all in pieces ready to be assembled by myself. This was the first thing that I ever became involved in as far as my dad and his hobbies were concerned. This grew and grew, and after a while we began to work together in his garage. This was the way in which he used to spend a lot of his time while he was thinking and writing; to keep his hands busy he would work an awful lot with wood. I think he instinctively was trying to teach me certain trades at a young age to fall back on. . . . He taught me to draw and to paint, and carpentry and everything to do with crafts. I even won first place at school for a model airplane! Before I was ten years old, he gave me a crash course in all sorts of trades.¹³

A quote I really admire from Harry's son, Harry Langdon Jr. (Oldham, *King of Silent Comedy* pg. 243-244). Incidentally, my own dad (he passed away in 2016) had a woodshop in our basement and garage. He did woodworking as a hobby and I picked up some rudimentary carpentry skills from him, much the same way Harry Jr. learned from his dad. Funny how things come full circle.

ARTWORK COMPARISONS



was constantly drawing



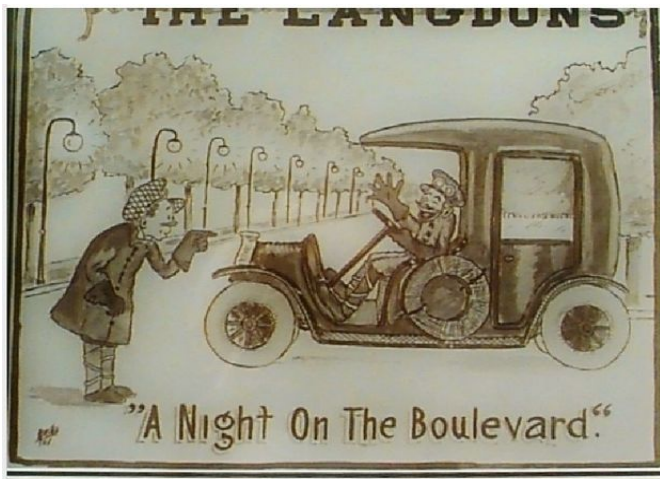
Guess which one is mine? The one on the right, and strangely enough I wasn't looking at or even thinking about Harry's artwork at the time I did any of the drawings or paintings I chose for these comparisons. I was not intentionally trying to paint "like him". I was drawing/painting in my own natural style. These are both watercolors. Harry did his in 1936 and mine was 2017. What intrigues me are the similar colors--we both used a greenish-blue in the shadows, same bright yellow green in the grass. They were done 81 years apart, completely different paint brands, different brushes, 2 different bodies AND I wasn't even looking at Harry's original at the time I painted mine....yet they look so similar. The only consistent factor between the two is that they were created by the same soul.



Harry's watercolor on the left, mine on the right. Note similar colors again. I circled his name because it was hard to find. Both of Harry's paintings were scanned from the book **NOTHING ON A STAGE IS PERMANENT**, by his son Harry Langdon Jr.



Circa 1912 11x14 advertising card for Harry's vaudeville act. Harry drew the original then had copies made at Apeda Photography Studio in New York. Harry Jr. sent me this hi res scan. I paired it with an ink drawing. I have a preference for sepia colored ink. By the way, that dapper fellow in the tux is actually Harry's brother, Tully. Harry is wearing the overcoat and cap. When I cartoon Harry these days, he looks a lot like the way Harry drew Tully.



Another 1912 Vaudeville advertisement. I got this from an Ebay listing so it's a low res image. It lacks the sharpness of the scan Harry Jr. sent me.



1921 caricatures by Harry of actors from the Broadway show JIM JAM JEMS, and a commissioned drawing I did for a friend. My friend requested specific comedians, including some modern ones. Notice how much Moe Howard resembles Ned Sparks. Once again, I was not looking at or thinking about Harry's artwork. I was drawing in my own natural style.