Segment about Johnny Depp

When he takes on a role,Johnny Deppoften paints a watercolor portrait of the still-forming character to help find his face and personality. After putting the finishing touches on his painting for “Alice in Wonderland,” Depp looked down at theMad Hatterstaring back at him from the canvas and giggled.

“I was thinking,” the actor said, “‘Oh my God, this one will get me fired!’”

Depp’s extreme vision for the character — who arrives in theaters on March 5 — creates yet another vivid screen persona for the Hollywood chameleon who has playedSweeney Todd,Willie Wonka,Edward Scissorhandsand a certain scoundrel namedJack Sparrow. The 46-year-old actor said his Hatter’s springy mass of tangerine hair became a particularly important detail because of one of the suspected origins of the term “Mad as a hatter.”

In the 18th and 19th centuries, mercury was used in the manufacture of felt, and when used in hats it could be absorbed through the skin and affect the mind through maladies such as Korsakoff’s syndrome. Hatters and mill workers often fell victim to mercury poisoning which, in Carroll’s time, had an orange tint — hence Depp’s interest in adding brushstrokes of that particular watercolor to his portrait.

“I think [the Mad Hatter] was poisoned  — very, very poisoned,” Depp said. “And I think it just took affect in all his nerves. It was coming out through his hair and through his fingernails, through his eyes”

Depp’s research also took him down some unexpected literary rabbit holes with the writings of Carroll.

“There’s a great line in the book where the Hatter says, ‘I’m investigating things that begin with the letter ‘M,’” Depp said. “So I started kind of doing a little researching, reading a bunch. And you start thinking about the letter ‘M’ and Hatters and the term ‘Mad as a hatter’ and ‘mercury.’”

Depp was also intrigued by one of the Mad Hatter’s nonsense questions during a dizzying tea party: “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” “I think he is referencingEdgar Allan Poe,” Depp said, referring to the haunted author of “The Raven,” which was published in 1845, two decades before Carroll’s surreal tale reached the public. Depp let the two ideas germinate in his head and it informed his own Hatter concoction.

Burton, whose background in art and animation is well known, also draws his characters, and when he and his star compared their handiwork they grinned like theCheshire Cat. “They were,” Depp says, “very close.”