



# Celebrating the

BY GILLIAN J. FURNISS

# Artmaking of Children with Autism

**T**his article addresses the art process of some celebrated artists with autism, such as Nadia (1977), Stephen Wiltshire (1987, 1995), and Jessica Park (1967, 2001). There is a limited amount of literature and research in the field of art education on children with autism who demonstrate talent and skill in the visual arts. A recent study reported that 1 out of every 150 children is diagnosed with autism in the United States (Carey, 2007). When engaged in artmaking, some children with autism demonstrate repetitive behavior and a narrow area of interest. The likelihood is high that an art teacher may have a student with autism in an inclusive art classroom (Furniss, 2007). Artmaking for some children with autism may be an opportunity to learn in the arts, as well as an opportunity to learn other subjects through the arts (Furniss, 2008).

## What Is Autism?

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder, and one of the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). In the 1940s, Dr. Leo Kanner was the first to identify autism in the US (Park, 2001; Frith, 2003). Although once considered to be caused by psychopathology, it is now accepted to have neurological origins. Today, the criteria for diagnosis are impairments in social communication skills, impairments in interpersonal skills, and repetitive and restrictive activities or interests. Other minor symptoms that may manifest are hypersensitivities in processing sensory information such as sound, touch, or sight. Often individuals with autism display delays and/or impairments in speech and language abilities. Many prefer sameness and dislike changes in routine. Children with Asperger's Syndrome often have good speech and language abilities, but may find it challenging to establish friendships with peers ([www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)).

## The Artmaking of Children with Autism

Artmaking is a significant, meaningful, and pleasurable process for many young children with autism (Selfe, 1977; Sacks, 1995; Kellman, 1999; Park, 2001), as well as for typical children (Burton, 1981; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987; Hurwitz & Day, 1995). The artmaking of young children with autism demonstrates a mental and physical process of self-expression, imagination, and creativity (Sacks, 1995; Pring, Hermelin, Buhler, & Walker, 1997; Kellman, 1999; Park, 2001; Hermelin, 2001). The art

product acts as tangible evidence of what these children are thinking about during the art process. Often these drawings as visual representations of thoughts are repetitive obsessions or preoccupations of a narrow interest (Selfe, 1977; Sacks, 1995; Park, 2001).

There has been an extensive amount of research conducted over a long period of time on the artistic development of typical children in the field of art education (Burton, 1981; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987; Hurwitz & Day, 1995). However, there is a limited amount of research on the artmaking of children with autism (Selfe, 1977; Pring et al., 1997; Hermelin, 2001). Therefore, it is critical for more research to be conducted in the field of art education to address the learning needs of these children with autism.

Many individuals with autism demonstrate a remarkable ability to excel at visual spatial skills but often lack adequate verbal skills (Grandin, 1995). Some young individuals with autism who demonstrate artistic ability speak, using words that are associated with the art process. Stephen Wiltshire ([www.stephenwiltshire.co.uk](http://www.stephenwiltshire.co.uk)), the celebrated British artist with autism, was mute as a child, and exhibited "virtually no understanding of or interest in the use of language" (Sacks, 1995, p. 197). However, Dr. Oliver Sacks witnessed at some later point the young Stephen Wiltshire requesting "paper" in order to draw (Sacks, 1995).

Drawing of Mufasa from the Disney movie, *The Lion King*, by Benjamin, a 13-year-old with Asperger's Syndrome.

## Jessica Park: A Young Artist with Autism

Jessica Park is an artist with autism. As a young child, she demonstrated a delay in speech and language development, and impairments in social communication skills (Park, 1967; Park, 2001). Throughout her childhood, Jessica Park engaged in artmaking at home and in the art classroom of her local public schools in Massachusetts. She frequently made drawings and paintings that, as her mother Clara Claiborne Park explained, visually recorded her unique mental processes (Park, 2001).

Clara Claiborne Park has spent her life advocating for her daughter with autism to receive a public school education, supporting other parents of children with developmental disabilities, and educating the public about autism. She is one of the founding members of Autism Society of America ([www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)). She has lectured frequently and written numerous articles on autism. Park is the author of *The Siege: A Family's Journey into the World of an Autistic Child* (1967, 1982) and *Exiting Nirvana: A Daughter's Life with Autism* (2001). She is a remarkable individual because she transformed what might have been a family tragedy into a family triumph.

There were many significant individuals who played an important role in the artistic development of young Jessica Park. Her mother and other significant caregivers including companions, classmates, and public school teachers taught her how to engage in artmaking using various art materials. Park explained that children with autism must be taught artmaking; they will not learn artmaking simply by observing others. Over time, Jessica was able to express her unique thoughts, feelings, and life experiences in her artwork. Park stated,

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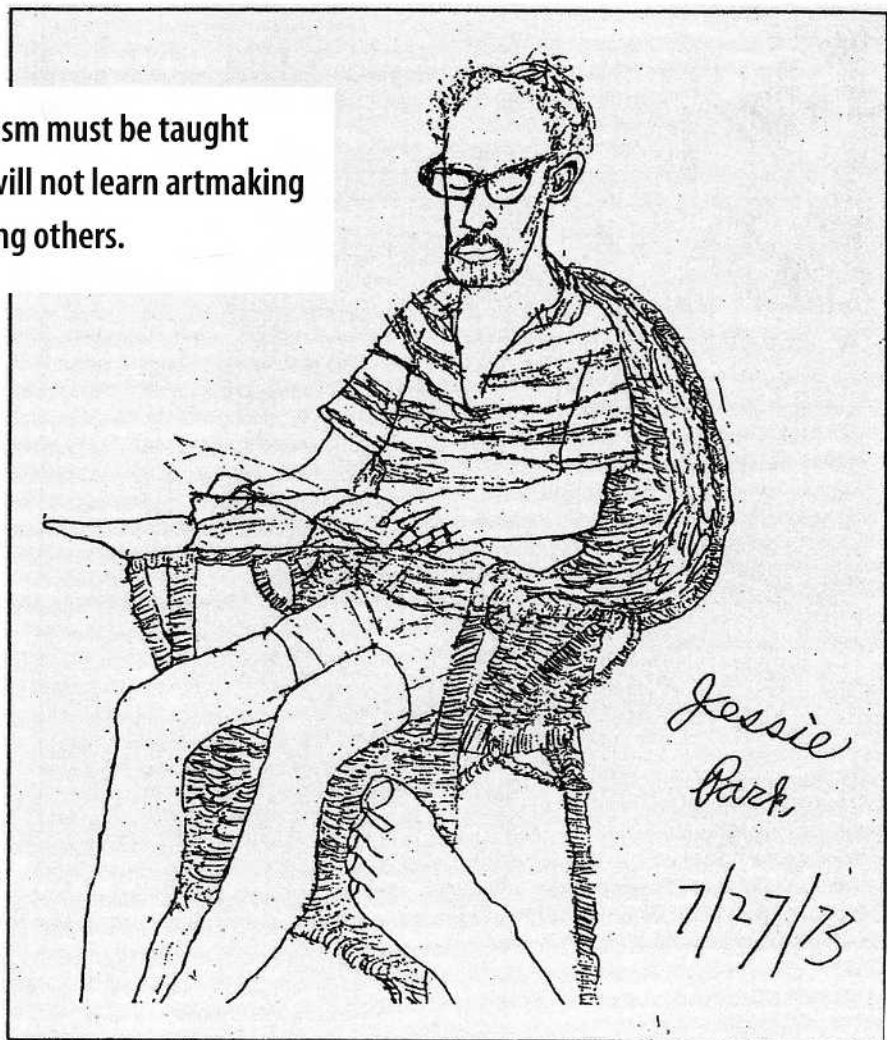
Portrait of David Park by Jessica Park, a young artist with autism. Reprinted from Clara Claiborne Park's *Exiting Nirvana*, 2001, Back Bay Books.

"From numbers, colors, and common objects she created complex, intricately ordered systems, some of which she used, it seemed, to structure her world, and some of which she merely played with, endlessly delighted by their order" (Park, 2001, p. 69).

Artmaking for young Jessica Park was a creative process that was extremely meaningful and pleasurable to her. Although there were art skills that Jessica Park needed to learn, there were also natural talents she proved to have innately such as hyper-sensitivity to color and patterns, and a sense of proportion in composition (Park, 2001).

Now an adult, Jessica Park is a professional artist who displays her acrylic paintings on her own website ([www.jessicapark.com](http://www.jessicapark.com)) and

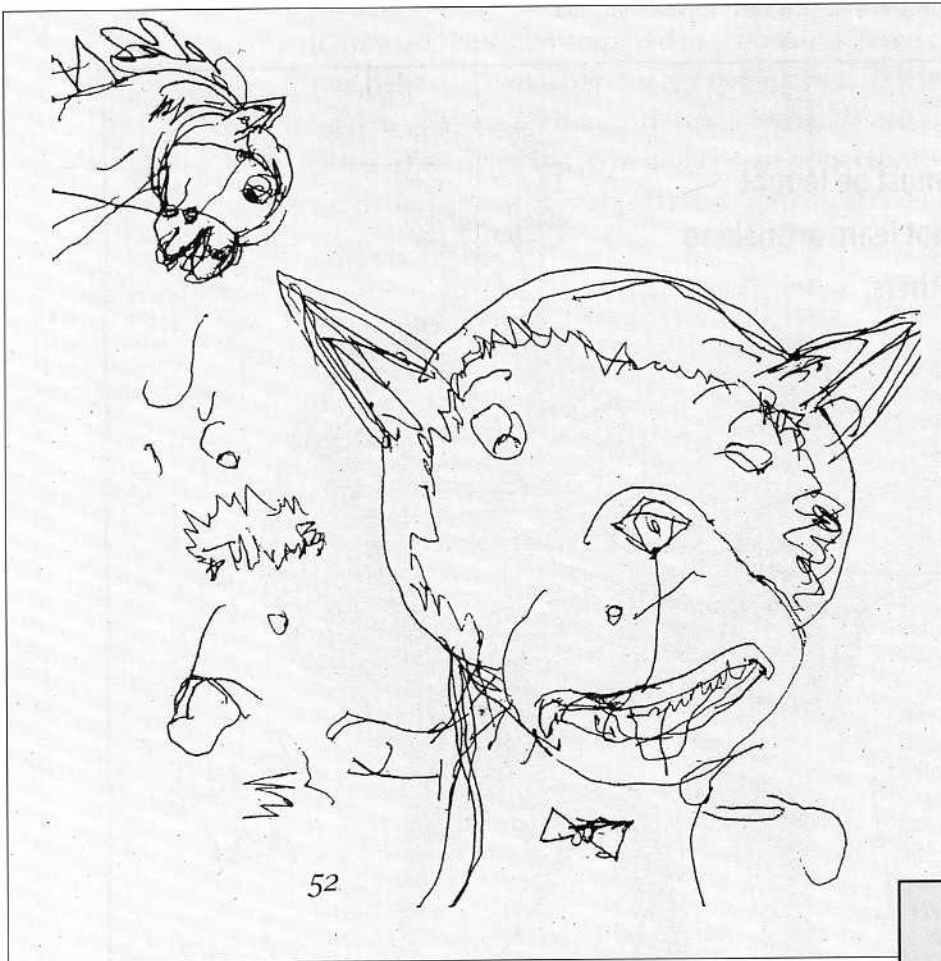
at various art exhibits, such as those sponsored by Pure Vision Arts ([www.purevisionarts.org](http://www.purevisionarts.org)), an art studio and exhibit space for artists with developmental disabilities in New York City. Clara Claiborne Park described her adult daughter's painting of a church: "With her sable brush and steady hand she has rendered every brick, every curlicue of the Corinthian capital, every nick and breakage in the old stone, accurately, realistically, recognizably. Except that the capital is a vivid, penetrating, astonishing green." Park continued, "Bizarre becomes original in the language of art, becomes surreal" (Park, 2001, p. 4).



Right: A drawing of Royal Crescent, Bath, England by Stephen Wiltshire, a young artist with autism. Reprinted from *Drawings*, 1987, London, J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd.



Below: A drawing of cat and horse by Nadia, a young artist with autism. Reprinted from L. Selfe, *Nadia: A Case of Extraordinary Drawing Ability in an Autistic Child*, 1977, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

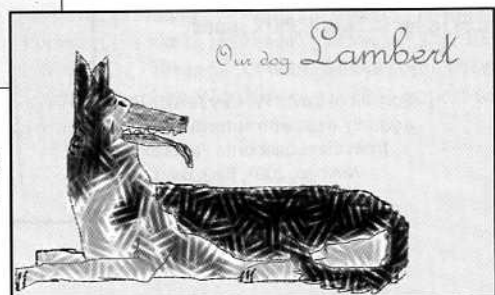


### More Examples of Artwork

Many describe the artwork of individuals with autism as being more than merely a representation, but rather a unique interpretation, of the world around them. Stephen Wiltshire, the celebrated British artist with autism, demonstrated that when inspired he could reproduce in a drawing more than just what he had observed but rather transform the images into “meaningful, coherent pictorial representations” (Hermelin, 2001, p. 147). Stephen attended a prestigious art school in England where he was able to acquire skills to enhance his natural artistic talent (Pring et al., 1997). Today, the artwork of Stephen Wiltshire is exhibited and sold at The Stephen Wiltshire Gallery in London ([www.stephenwiltshire.co.uk](http://www.stephenwiltshire.co.uk)).

More than 10 years ago, Dr. Oliver Sacks in *An Anthropologist On Mars* (1995), asked the significant question: Is there such a thing as a ‘distinctive autistic art’? He pointed out the perceptual accuracy in the drawings of Stephen Wiltshire (Sacks, 1995). Sacks referred to Wiltshire’s drawings as ‘most unchildlike’ (Sacks, 1995, p. 199) and “accurate, but not in the least mechanical—on the contrary, they

“Our Dog Lambert” by Jacob, a young artist with autism. Produced at computer graphics summer camp.



**Her drawings revealed that she had “a sense of space, an ability to depict appearances and shadows, a sense of perspective such as the most gifted normal child might only develop at three times her age” (Sacks, 1995, p. 194).**

were full of energy, spontaneity, oddity, life” (Sacks, 1995, p. 196). Stephen Wiltshire began to draw when he was about 5 years old. By about the age of 10, he was preoccupied with drawing landmark buildings in London (Sacks, 1995). When asked if he liked Venice during a childhood drawing expedition through Europe, Stephen responded, “I prefer Chicago,” because he saw so many of his favorite American cars while visiting there (Sacks, 1995).

In *Nadia: A Case of Extraordinary Drawing Ability in an Autistic Child*, Dr. Lorna Selfe (1977) documented the drawing of a young British girl of Ukrainian descent with autism who demonstrated artistic abilities. When she was about 3½ years old, Nadia suddenly began to draw horses, roosters, and cats from magazine illustrations, depicting them in a way that psychologists thought impossible for a child her age (Sacks, 1995, p. 194). This book is dated in terms of its understanding of autism in general. However, it documents that she was able to draw horses, for example, in perspective, motion, and profile—all unusual for a child so young. Her drawings revealed that she had “a sense of space, an ability to depict appearances and shadows, a sense of perspective such as the most gifted normal child might only develop at three times her age” (Sacks, 1995, p. 194).

Selfe pointed out that the artistically gifted Nadia preferred to draw with a black pen. Attempts to work with paint were unsatisfactory for her and she soon grew frustrated with the medium. Likewise, Nadia did not seem to enjoy working in color. She seemed to prefer to work with a black pen because of its exactness of line and its ability to convey detail. Selfe took detailed notes and video taped Nadia’s art process—her preference for art medium, subject matter, artistic surface (such as paper and cardboard), sequence in creating an image (such as beginning with drawing the neck when drawing a horse), in addition to how frequently Nadia drew (Selfe, 1977).

### **Artmaking as Visual Communication**

The primary function of spontaneous artmaking for some children with autism may be to record a visual thought for its own sake, not to communicate the visual thought to others (Park, 2001). Often these visual thoughts as represented in artmaking are obsessions or preoccupations. For many years, Jessica made picture books with illustrations frequently drawn in pencil that often visually represented her life experiences. Park explained, “[Jessica’s] books were made for her own satisfaction, not to communicate experience but to record it ... though intentional, eager communication ... lay far in the future. The books, with their successive layers of explanations, allowed us glimpses of the world within” (Park, 2001, p. 98).

Art educators recognize that the visual arts are a form of communication (Efland, 2002). Artmaking for many young children communicates a way of understanding that other forms of communication—such as speech and language—do not (Lowenfeld, 1987; Hurwitz & Day, 1995; Efland, 2002). There are some experts who refer to the artwork of children with autism as a form of communication (Pring et al., 1997; Kellman, 1999; Evans, 2001). Art educator Dr. Julia Kellman (1999) argued that children with autism are able to “develop a visual vocabulary that seems to both create and express meaning for the child” (Kellman, 1999, p. 2).

### **Visual Thinking**

Dr. Temple Grandin (1995), a high-functioning adult with autism who is a professor at Colorado State University, wrote that many individuals with autism are visual thinkers. Grandin explains that she is not a language-based thinker but rather a visual thinker. She stated in her book *Thinking in Pictures*, “I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me” (Grandin, 1995, p. 19). She argued that after questioning how other people “accessed information from their memories” (Grandin, 1995, p. 20), she came

to understand that her visualization skills far exceeded those of most “normal” individuals. She explained that adults with autism who are able to speak about their thought process state that most of them “think in visual images” (Grandin, 1995, p. 25).

Grandin explained how she processes information in a particular way because she is a visual thinker. She stated, “My memories usually appear in my imagination in strict chronological order, and the images I visualize are always specific” (Grandin, 1995, p. 28). She explained that her mind has a “video library,” which contains a visual image for everything she has heard, read, or seen. When Grandin thinks of a dog, she thinks of a specific dog. Grandin explained that as a very successful designer of livestock-handling facilities she translates this extraordinary power of imagination into a practical use (Grandin, 1995). Grandin’s detailed architectural drawings of the livestock facilities she designed were exhibited at the conference *Pure Visionaires: Artists on the Spectrum* in New York City, sponsored by Pure Vision Arts.

### **Visual-Spatial and Visual Memory Skills**

Some children with autism demonstrate high levels of **visual-spatial** skills (Wing, 2001) and visual memory (Sacks, 1995). These alternative strengths are sometimes revealed by young children with autism during the art process (Selfe, 1977; Sacks, 1995; Kellman, 1999; Park, 2001). Dr. Sacks stated that Stephen Wiltshire’s drawings demonstrate a “prodigious visual memory, which seemed able to take in the most complex buildings, or cityscapes, in a few seconds, and to hold them in mind, in the minutest detail—indefinitely, it seemed, without the least apparent effort” (Sacks, 1995, p. 199). Unlike the visual memory of typical individuals, many artists with autism do not generalize images they have seen, but rather can retrieve specific details of an object with great accuracy (Sacks, 1995). Stephen Wiltshire “did not make any sketch

or outline, but just started at one edge of the paper ... and steadily moved across it, as if transcribing some tenacious inner image or visualization" (Sacks, 1995, p. 205). Sacks wrote about how he asked Stephen to draw the author's house from memory a few times over several years. The result was that each drawing was similar in major respects but different in detail—one drawing had a flagpole in the front yard, another had two windows on the first floor rather than one window (Sacks, 1995).

### **Appreciating an Alternative Life Experience**

There is much to be learned from artists with autism about how diverse the human condition can be, including talent and intelligence. Learning more about the function of artmaking for artists with autism not only contributes to our understanding of

autism, but to our overall understanding of the function of artmaking for all humans. As Park explained, "[Individuals with autism] challenge us to perceive differently, think differently, feel differently, to stretch our imaginations to apprehend, even appreciate, an alternative world" (Park, 2001, p. 24).

### **Implications for Teaching Art**

It is critical for all students, including those who are atypically developing such as those with autism, to have access to an art experience at school. It is also important for practitioners in the field of art education to acknowledge and appreciate the artistic abilities of some children with autism. Preservice and inservice art teachers need to learn about effective intervention techniques to best teach children with autism who are mainstreamed in their art classroom. Art lessons must be designed so that the

objective is appropriate for their type of learning. These children will be most likely to demonstrate their artistic talents and skills with an art lesson that enables them to use their preferred art materials and to express their unique visual preoccupations (Furniss, 2006) and to subsequently expand over time their visual repertoire. All children learn in multiple ways and have particular strengths. The goal of the art teacher should be to encourage all art students to reach their fullest potential by giving them every opportunity to succeed. Only then can these children be assessed accurately for their creative abilities.

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### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Judith M. Burton, my doctoral advisor at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Clara Claiborne Park, for their support, guidance, and encouragement. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. Pamala Rogers, Director of Pure Vision Arts.