



Celebrating the

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Artmaking of Children with Autism

This 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).

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), 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.

