

# ARCHIVES

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Stable by Ping Lian Yeak. See page 323.

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COVER ART

## The Autistic Artist, "Special Faculties," and Savant Syndrome

**W**HEN J. LANGDON H. DOWN, MD, gave a lecture to the Medical Society of London, London, England, in 1887, he described in keen detail what has come to be now known as Down syndrome. In that same lecture, Down also described "an interesting class of cases" with "special faculties which are capable of being cultivated to a very great extent."<sup>1</sup> We now call that circumstance savant syndrome—a rare but remarkable condition in which spectacular "islands of genius" are seen in stark contrast to overall handicap from developmental disorders, including autism, or other central nervous system disorders or diseases.

Among the 10 patients Down described in his lecture was a youth "who can draw in crayons with marvelous skill and feeling."<sup>1</sup> Other cases of his had musical or mathematical skills; all had marvelous memory. It is interesting that with all of the abilities in the human repertoire, in the many cases of savant skills reported since Down's initial description, those skills narrow to 5 general areas: art, music, calendar calculating, lightning calculating, and visual or spatial skills.

As many as 1 in 10 children on the autistic spectrum show some savant skills ranging from more common splinter skills to much more rare prodigious savants.<sup>2</sup>

Music is the most common of the savant skills, but art skills when present can be astonishing in quantity, quality, and digital camera-like fidelity. Some well-known savants of the past include Gottfried Mind, known as the "Cat's Raphael" and whose pictures were purchased by King George IV, and Richard Wawro of the present era, whose spectacularly beautiful Swiss oil crayon drawings have been owned by Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II. The case of Nadia<sup>3</sup> also gained considerable attention because of her loss of her prodigious childhood drawing ability—a dreaded trade-off—when she was sent to school to learn better language and social skills.

The most well-known autistic savant artist at present is Stephen Wiltshire, whose astonishingly accurate architectural drawings—window pane by window pane—drew raves from art critics who described him, as a child, as a "rocket of young talent which explodes and continues to shower us with its sparks."<sup>4</sup> After a 45-

minute helicopter ride over Rome, Italy, for example, Wiltshire can then produce over a 3-day period a 5½-ft drawing of that scene street by street, building by building, and column by column. Wiltshire now has his own gallery in London.

Childhood savant artistry continues, rarely but spectacularly, to explode on the scene and to display remarkable talent, and we are its beneficiaries. The picture on the cover of this issue of the ARCHIVES is by Ping Lian Yeak, a 13-year-old autistic savant artist now living in Australia. His pieces are colorful and attractive, and they are produced with startling rapidity and quantity. The good news is that for Yeak and other autistic savants, "training the talent" through the use of special skills works as a conduit toward normalization, producing gains in language, socialization, and daily living skills. Fortunately, the dreaded trade-off such as that described in the case of Nadia does not occur in other instances. Instead, training the talent helps in some measure to eliminate the defect.

Interested readers can learn more about savant syndrome and Wawro, Wiltshire, Yeak, and other savant artists at <http://www.savantsyndrome.com>. The streaming video of Wiltshire as he draws his "human camera" impressions of Rome after a 45-minute helicopter ride over the city is particularly astonishing and documents the remarkable literal memory that autistic, artistic savants possess.

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