

Stephen Wiltshire



Stephen Wiltshire was born in London to West Indian parents on 24th April, 1974. His mother, Geneva Wiltshire had come from St Lucia and his father, Colvin, from Barbados. Colvin was killed in a motorcycle accident when Stephen was three years of age. His sister, Annette, is two years older than her brother. He lives with his mother in West London.

As a child, Stephen was mute and did not relate to other human beings. Aged three, he was diagnosed as autistic. He had no language, uncontrolled tantrums and lived entirely in his own world.

At the age of five, Stephen was sent to Queensmill School in London, a school for children with special needs, where it was noticed that the only pastime he enjoyed was drawing. It soon became apparent he communicated with the world through the language of drawing; first animals, then London buses, and finally buildings. These drawings show a masterful perspective, a whimsical line and reveal a natural innate artistry.

Aged eight, Stephen started drawing cityscapes after the effects of an earthquake (all imaginary) as a result of being shown photographs of earthquakes in a book at school. He also became obsessed with cars and illustrations of cars at this time (his knowledge of them is encyclopaedic) and he drew most of the major London landmarks.

The teachers at Queensmill School encouraged him to speak by temporarily taking away his art supplies so that he would be forced to ask for them. Stephen responded by making sounds and eventually uttered his first word - "paper." He learned to speak fully at the age of nine.

Wiltshire's early illustrations depicted animals and automobiles; he is still extremely interested in american cars and is said to have an encyclopedic knowledge of them. When he was about seven, Wiltshire became fascinated with sketching landmark London buildings. After being shown a book of photos depicting the devastation wrought by [EARTHQUAKES](#), he began to create detailed architectural drawings of equally devastated - but imaginary - cityscapes.

In 1987, the BBC QED programme, 'The Foolish Wise Ones', featured Stephen's astounding talent. The programme was devoted to three autistic savants: musical, mathematical and artistic. Stephen was introduced by Sir Hugh Casson (past president of the Royal Academy), who described him as "the best child artist in Britain". Stephen's work has since been the subject of numerous television programmes around the world, and the writer and psychologist, Oliver Sacks, has devoted an essay to Stephen in his book *An Anthropologist On Mars* (Picador 1995). Stephen is the only artistic autistic savant in the world whose work has been recorded and published since his childhood. His

third book - Floating Cities (Michael Joseph, 1991) - was number one on the Sunday Times bestseller list.

Meanwhile, Stephen's artworks were being exhibited frequently in venues all over the world. In 2001 he appeared in another BBC documentary, Fragments of Genius, for which he was filmed flying over London aboard a helicopter and subsequently completing a detailed and perfectly scaled aerial illustration of a four-square-mile area within three hours; his drawing included 12 historic landmarks and 200 other structures.

In October and November 2003, thousands flocked to the Orleans House gallery in Twickenham near London, England, to see the first major retrospective of Stephen's work. The exhibition covered the 20-year period, from 1983 to 2003, and comprised 150 examples of Stephen's drawings, paintings and prints.

In May 2005 following a short helicopter ride over [Tokyo](#) he drew a stunningly detailed panoramic view of the city on a 10-meter-long canvas from memory. Since then he has drawn [Rome](#), [Hong Kong](#), [Frankfurt](#), [Madrid](#), [Dubai](#), [Jerusalem](#) and [London](#) on giant canvasses.

In January 2006 it was announced that Stephen was being named by Queen Elizabeth II as a Member of the Order of the British Empire, in recognition of his services to the art world. (No specific mention of his disability was made in the citation) Later that year he opened his permanent gallery at the Royal Opera Arcade, London.

Calls and letters poured into the BBC, from viewers seeking to buy his artwork. Wiltshire now has his own gallery in London, where he displays his drawings, accepts commissions, and meets with his many fans. He still appears frequently on television, and in March 2007 he was prominently featured in Beautiful Minds: The Memory Masters, an hour-long program broadcast on the National Geographical Channel.

Speaking in London in May 2007, Ivan Corea of the Autism Awareness Campaign UK said: 'Stephen Wiltshire wonderful role model to all young people. Here is a young diagnosed with autism, who has overcome barriers to become a leading architectural artist in the world. Stephen Wiltshire has made a difference. I urge the Government to Stephen Wiltshire as a classic example of success, in education campaigns aimed at young people.' The landmark debate on autism was launched in Westminster Hall on 7th March followed by a question on autism to the Prime Minister in Prime Minister's Questions on 21st March.



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Chris Marris, one of Wiltshire's teachers, took a particular interest in him; he accompanied his young student on drawing excursions and entered his work in children's art competitions, one of which garnered Wiltshire a prize. At about age 10 Wiltshire

embarked on an ambitious project called "London Alphabet," a group of pictures depicting landmark structures in London, listed in alphabetical sequence - from Albert Hall, a famed performance venue, to the London Zoo.

Wiltshire left school in 1990 and, at the suggestion of his counselors, found part-time work at a bakery, as part of a government-sponsored job-training program. June Southworth, in an article for the London Daily Mail (December 13, 1995), expressed understandable incredulity at this waste of his prodigious talents: "How did he employ his genius there? I did a lovely chocolate cake to take home. And I did some packing and washing down." With Hewson's help, he enrolled in a three-year degree program (followed by a one-year postgraduate course) at the prestigious City and Guilds of London Art School, where he studied drawing and painting. Although he had not mastered crossing the street alone until he was a teen, he often commuted by himself on the London underground-rail system.



In January 2006 it was announced that Wiltshire was being named by Queen Elizabeth II as a Member of the Order of the British Empire, in recognition of his services to the art world. (No specific mention of his disability was made in the citation.) "It's an absolute honour," his sister, Annette, told Geoffrey Wansell for the London Daily Mail (January 3, 2006). "It brought tears to my mum's eyes and to mine, because we've all worked so hard for Stephen." Later that year, with the encouragement of Annette and her husband, Zoltan, Wiltshire founded his own permanent art gallery, in London's Royal Opera Arcade, an upscale shopping area.

Many observers have noted that Wiltshire, contrary to the accepted stereotype of autistic people, has an engaging personality and a strong sense of humor. He currently resides in Maida Vale, West London with his mother.