

Australian Teacher

Prodigies, Savants & Geniuses



Stephen Wiltshire

The Human Camera

Stephen Wiltshire is an autistic savant artist who has an amazing talent for drawing detailed and accurate sketches of cities after having only observed them once, briefly.

As a child Stephen was mute, and did not relate to other people. At age three, around the time he was diagnosed as autistic, his father died in a motorcycle accident. Stephen had no language and lived entirely in his own world.

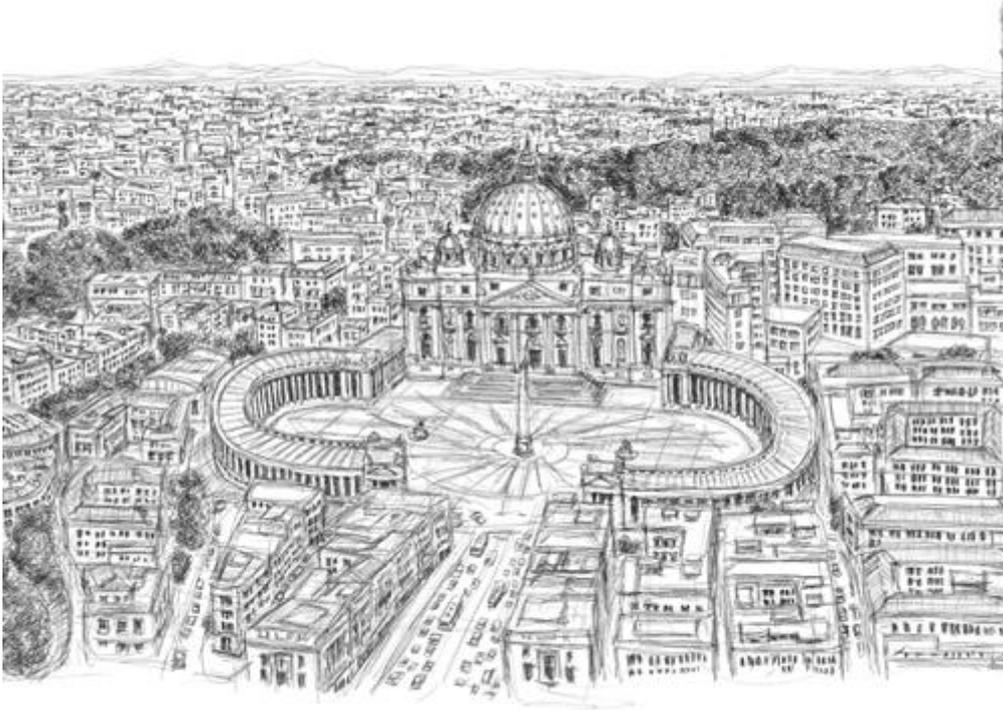
At the age of five, Stephen was sent to school in London where it was noticed that the only pastime he enjoyed was drawing. It soon became clear that he communicated with the world through drawing; first animals, then London buses, and finally buildings. At the age of eight, he started drawing imaginary cityscapes and cars. His teachers had always encouraged him to speak (sometimes 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”. Stephen’s ability to speak gradually improved and by the age of nine he could speak fully.

When he was ten, Stephen drew a sequence of drawings of London landmarks, one for each letter, that he called a “London Alphabet”. The drawings featured places from the Albert Hall through to the London Zoo.

Now an adult Stephen can look at a scene once and then draw an accurate and detailed picture of it. He once drew the whole of central London after a helicopter trip above it.

In May 2005 Stephen produced a panoramic memory drawing of Tokyo on a 3 metre canvas following a short helicopter ride over the city. Since then he has drawn several other major cities, all after brief flights over them in a helicopter.

After viewing Rome from the air for just 20 minutes Stephen drew the many hundreds of buildings and streets below him, all in great detail, including the exact number of columns in the ancient temple, the Pantheon.



See Stephen sketching Rome [here](#).

Talk about or Write about

1. Stephen is an autistic savant *artist*. What other types of autistic savants are there?
2. What challenges might Stephen have faced as a very young child who could not speak?
3. Would you say that Stephen is a genius? What is a genius?
4. Who benefits from Stephen's special gift with drawing?
5. What could possibly explain Stephen's amazing photographic memory for detail? (in other words, how might his brain differ from ours?).



Zerah Colburn

The Human Calculator

Zerah Colburn (1804-1839) was a child prodigy of the 19th century who gained fame for his astonishing mental feats with numbers.



Zerah Colburn was born in Cabot, Vermont (USA) in 1804 and educated at Westminster School in London.

Apparently Zerah had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot.

He was thought to be mentally retarded as a very young child. However, after six weeks of schooling his father overheard him repeating his multiplication tables. His father wasn't sure whether or not he learned the tables from his older brothers and sisters but he decided to test him further on his mathematical abilities and discovered that there was something special about his son when Zerah correctly multiplied 97 by 13.

When he was seven years old he took six seconds to give the number of hours in thirty-eight years, two months, and seven days.

By age eight Zerah was able to carry out amazing feats of mental arithmetic. When asked the question, “How many seconds in 2 000 years?” he replied, “730 000 days ...which is 1 051 200 000 minutes ...which is 63 072 000 000 seconds.”

Zerah’s abilities developed rapidly and he was soon able to solve such problems as the product of 12 225 and 1 223, or the square root of 1 449.

Zerah could solve complex problems. For example, to find whether the number 4 294 967 297 is prime or not Zerah calculated in his head that it was not because it can be divided by 641.

His father soon began to capitalize on his boy’s talents by taking Zerah around the country and eventually abroad, demonstrating his son’s exceptional abilities.

Although Zerah’s schooling was rather irregular he also showed extreme talent in languages.

Zerah Colburn died in 1839 aged just 35.

Talk about or Write about

1. Zerah had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Do you think this may have assisted him with his numerical mental powers?
2. When Zerah was seven years old he took six seconds to give the number of hours in thirty-eight years, two months, and seven days. Using a calculator, time yourself to see what Zerah’s answer was. How many seconds did it take you?
3. When he calculated how many seconds there are in 2 000 years Zerah arrived at the answer 63 072 000 000. Can you say this number?
4. His father soon began to **capitalize on his boy’s talents** by taking Zerah around the country and eventually abroad. What do you think the clause in bold letters means?

