

# A GUIDE TO DRAWING AND PAINTING WITH ADULTS WHO ARE AUTISTIC

By Ian Wilson

First of all, it's necessary to point out that not everybody loves art. Not everyone wants to be an artist and to take part in painting or drawing. This is a fact and for whatever reason they give or don't give, their choice has to be respected. Do not expose yourself to their anger and criticism, or become angry and critical yourself if you cannot achieve what you think they ought to want.

*Art is for believers only.*

Sometimes relatives try to show their concern, love and affection for the 'disabled' member of their family by buying some very expensive art equipment, maybe hog hair brushes and oils, or a water colour set with costly sable brushes that the individual can't use. This is a waste of their money and will lead to crisis and discouragement. Don't do it.

What I am going to tell you about is something so simple and obvious that it hardly ever occurs to anyone to mention. It is this - **drawing and painting are a way of saying who you are to the world and what you want.** Getting other people to like you and telling them that you like them too can be done with a flick of a brush and this is what all the art in the world is about. Don't pay any attention to the high fallutin' art critics who write those great big wordy tomes that are impossible to read and take all the fun out of art; Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael were simply showing off.

I am writing this guide to help you teach autistic people to be artists, if they want to be artists. The issue for me is using the gallery wall as an intermediary, a kind of helping hand that will bring joy to the public and respect and admiration for the artist. I know that this works. It can also help with behaviour, and the axiomatic aim is that the drawing or painting says what the artist wants to say in the way that they want to say it.

Sometimes, if the artist is being helped by an art student, the student will use them as if they were a brush and the artist will make pictures that look like their teachers' pictures, on other occasions the educated eye of the teacher will encourage their pupil to turn out imitation Van Gogh's or Rothko's. I don't get strung up about this kind of approach because of the difficulty for all parties anyway, but clearly a different approach could produce the work an artist with disabilities might prefer to have originated themselves.

Occasionally a teacher will try to 'therapise' their art, offering them materials and techniques that they think will help them communicate or offload their emotions and ideas a lot better, but I don't really go along with this because it's based on some false concepts about expression in art. It's true that some people do enjoy slinging thick paint on to a canvas but I suppose I try to avoid anal art, usually because they can often do a lot better, with greater clarity and coherence, with sympathetic support of their physical and conceptual problems.

## *Now let's get to it*

### **Support**

Because of their communication and practical difficulties, autistic adults often need a lot of support but as I've suggested above, you have to draw a very broad line depending on their level of need. There are possibly cases when you might do the whole piece of work for them because their functional level is too low for them to be able to collaborate but even then, you should try to involve them in some way. This rarely happens by the way, you can often find a way to involve them with a little help.

## **Imitation**

Avoiding the traps that I've described above is less important than getting something down on paper anyway and again, autistic artists quite often copy a style or subject or a picture they like and repeat it ad infinitum and I have met autistic artists who just want to copy pictures from a post card or from a biscuit tin and keep on trying to make facsimiles of them. In the normal world this might draw down opprobrium upon the head of any artist who is, or so it is thought, a mere copyist but in our case, it doesn't matter at all, because some autistic people want more than anything else, to fit in, to conform and good luck to them!

## **Introducing new subjects**

People with disabilities don't always know what's available to help them and in the same ways as an English teacher should try to introduce their students to a dictionary and thesaurus the art teacher should find ways of introducing subjects that the autistic artist knows well or have some idea that they might like, even if they don't seem likely to begin with. They may or may not take the hint, by now you may be beginning to see that what I'm describing is a very different kind of creativity. In fact, it's often a different set of values altogether and it's the teacher who needs to show the flexibility.

## **Working with Sensory Issues**

It's become accepted that autistic people have sensory differences. So, for example, some have palette and odour differences, some have visual differences and some have touch differences, but it's less often concluded that when you add all of these differences together you get differences in perception as a result. Not many people can believe what falls outside of what they hear, see, touch and smell etc., so that for these people, this is their world and unless they're told, or experience a revelation in some other way, they will not believe otherwise. What they come to know as the world is a naturalism known only to them.

Most of the autistic people I've met, including the ones known as high functioning, have conditions that enable their perceptions or otherwise. I am talking about conditions known under the umbrella term as Agnosia's and Apraxia's and together with Olga Bogdashina's Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome[1] and a book about patient's who have suffered what are known as 'Strokes'[2]. If you have read these books, you will understand the behaviour of autistic people a lot better. People who you know as being autistic will suddenly become comprehensible.

[1] Bogdashina Olga (2016) 'Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome' 2nd Edition. Jessica Kingsley, London.

[2] Freishat B., Siev E., Zoltan B., 'The Adult Stroke Patient' Revised 2nd Edition. Slack Inc. NJ.

## **Shared realities**

I've never met anyone who is so different from the rest of us that they have no realisation at all that reality is shared. It's worth bearing in mind when we initiate practises and methodologies that are sufficiently effective to have been understood to be universal, which enable us to plan and speculate and cope with life's' diversities, that we think that these are the only practises and methodologies which can be useful in that way. A shared singularity so to speak, a hypothesis of conformity.

Drawing and painting are purposeful activities that we share as if we were sharing an opinion, to such a degree that we feel that drawn or painted strokes are unwaveringly true. When they are disrupted, we assume that they still have something to say to us collectively, but of a different kind but still universally. In their absence we assume that nothing has been intended and when they are consistent to a certain repetitive degree, we conclude that they have nullified or reinforced any useful intention.

Frozen moments, pauses, moments of repetitive behaviour and the art that accompanies them suddenly become logical and reasonable and conversely, the techniques, practices and structures of conventional art will seem pointless

## **Improving Anxiety**

Senses can become more or less sensitive, more or less active and shut down completely too. Normally, senses operate in a co-ordinated way, coming to the fore when needed and receding when unnecessary; they act together in support of one another without conscious control most of the time but of course, can be manipulated and stimulated at will. For artists, two of the most important are vision and movement, when working together as in drawing and painting, they are often known as co-ordination. Apraxia's and Agnosia's are permanent but can be improved or made worse by anxiety and, as sensory inadequacies do not help the autistic individual navigate the real world, anxiety is often their default state.

Visual techniques may not help the autistic artist because they do not represent the values and experience of the world perceived by the autistic artist. Conversely, the amount of support that an autistic artist may need to make a conventional representation can be much greater than the support offered to someone who is not autistic, and the finished product may not conform to the aspirations and needs of the artist concerned. The natural product of that autistic artist may be more attractive and interesting than the badly wrought conventional picture that the autistic artist didn't want to make in the first place.

## **Closing Thoughts**

The fixity of the perception of the autistic artist may lead to the conclusion that it's a lot easier and a lot simpler to follow the available path and reserve changes for the future, in any case such changes need to be undertaken with caution and with sensitivity because it's THEIR picture, not yours!

*Written by Ian Wilson*

*10.15am*

*31st March 2022*

**© Life & Learn 2022**