

STROKES OF GENIUS

While most eight-year-olds were drawing square houses and stick figures, Stephen Wiltshire was recreating the elegant domes of St Paul's Cathedral.

It didn't take long for Stephen Wiltshire to capture the art world's attention. After returning from an excursion to the centre of London, the primary schooler sat down at his desk and proceeded to sketch the buildings he'd seen in astonishing detail – right down to the correct number of floors and windows. Even more incredibly – he'd done it entirely from memory.

"I started drawing about five," he says. "I used to do animals, then people, then London double-decker buses, taxis and the tube and trains, and London landmarks." By the age of 11 he'd drawn a near perfect aerial view of London after only a single helicopter ride.

Diagnosed with autism at the age of three, Stephen communicated primarily through his artwork. He didn't learn to speak fully until the age of nine – encouraged to do so by teachers who temporarily took away his art supplies so that he'd be forced to ask for them. His first words were "paper" and "pencil."

Now 36, Stephen has his own gallery and travels the world with his sister Annette, drawing from memory the intricate cityscapes that have made him famous. In Sydney he recently recreated the view from Sydney Tower after observing it for just 30 minutes. How did it compare to New York? "It was easy," he says.

Autism Spectrum Australia, who arranged Stephen's trip, estimate 20 per cent of people with autism display special abilities – often in art, maths or music – but only about 1 in 100 have skills as advanced as Stephen's. Though quietly spoken, Stephen discusses his art with enthusiasm, poses for photographers and often draws in public, listening to an eclectic selection of R&B, Hip Hop, '70s and '80s Disco and Top 40 Hits on his iPod.

The glare of public attention has been known to break even the most media-savvy of celebrities, so it's difficult to imagine how it would affect someone who finds communication particularly difficult. I ask if he minds having so many people watching him all the time. "No," he smiles. "People see me doing my drawing, doing my work. I'm thrilled."

To see more work by Stephen Wiltshire head to stephenwiltshire.co.uk



FROM TOP Sydney Tower, London panorama, sketching Sydney, young Stephen Wiltshire, happy snap with sister Annette and working on a commission