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Nice picture . . . and it's all from memory

Once artist Stephen Wiltshire has observed a skyline it stays with him forever

PENNY DURHAM

HE came, he saw, he drew Sydney in front of a live audience.

Autistic savant artist Stephen Wiltshire, who is able to draw cityscapes from memory, has been brought out from London by Autism Spectrum Australia to demonstrate his phenomenal gifts. After a trip up Sydney Tower yesterday to soak up the panorama, the 36-year-old Briton started his latest work in Customs

House at Circular Quay, and will finish tomorrow.

Even for a savant with extraordinary skills, the job is hardly effortless. He said memorising a cityscape was "quite hard work".

But once he has learnt and drawn a city, "I remember it forever; it stays in my head".

Sydney will be in good company, up there alongside London, Tokyo, Toronto, Paris, Rome, and his favourite, New York City, where he's been four times to admire the skyscrapers, crowds and yellow cabs. So it's a compliment when Wiltshire says Sydney is "so beautiful, like an American city with an American skyline like New York or Chicago."

A small, softly spoken man in loose clothes and a baseball cap,

Wiltshire needed only minimal preparation yesterday. His sister Annette helped arrange his pens at the easel and they quietly discussed scale. Then he put in his earbuds ("Motown, some Barry White", said Annette) and began mapping out the city. First, a long vertical blob in the centre of the paper; behind it a small half-moon. When the paper was full of scribbly shapes, the lines became firmer and the blob crystallised into the MLC Centre, the half-moon into the Harbour Bridge.

Trevor Clark, executive director of education and research at ASA, said about 20 per cent of people on the autism spectrum had a special ability.



AMOS AIRMAN

Autistic savant Stephen Wiltshire works on his drawing of the Sydney skyline as seen from Sydney Tower yesterday

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