

What Asperger's syndrome has done for us

By Megan Lane
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Michelangelo might have had it. So, too, may Einstein, Socrates and Jane Austen. All are claimed to have had Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. What is it about this developmental disorder that can lead to genius?

We will never know for sure if the genius of past greats may have been a symptom of a form of autism.

Informed speculation that Michelangelo might have had Asperger's syndrome is just that - the Renaissance artist was never diagnosed in his lifetime. Indeed, Asperger's was only identified as a separate condition in 1944, and not until the mid-90s that it was a clinical diagnosis.

Instead, two medical experts have drawn this conclusion from studying contemporary accounts of the artist's behaviour - his single-minded work routine, few friends and obsessional nature - and comparing it with traits displayed by adults who have been diagnosed today.

It's a theory which has been rubbished by art historians, but which has piqued the interest of Eileen Hopkins, of the National Autistic Society. The artist's meticulously observed figures and high work rate resonate with such a diagnosis.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

A complex, lifelong developmental disability
It involves a biological or organic defect in brain function
Autism (including Asperger's) is said to affect about 500,000 people in the UK today

"This reflects the positive side of this gene, that people with it can contribute in many ways. Being single-minded, it gives them the chance to focus on something which interests them. Their talents are not diluted by the everyday interactions that take up so much time for the rest of us."

The same posthumous diagnosis has been made of other historical figures, among them the scientists Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein and Marie Curie, politician Eamon de Valera, poet WB Yeats and Pop Art giant Andy Warhol.

Attention to detail

What is the link between this condition and creativity, be it in the arts or sciences?

Professor Michael Fitzgerald, of Dublin's Trinity College, one of the experts who posed the Michelangelo theory, says it makes people more creative.

"People with it are generally hyper-focused, very persistent workaholics who tend to see things from detail to global rather than looking at the bigger picture first and then working

backwards, as most people do."

But Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, of Cambridge University, says it is more accurate to describe this creativity as "systemising" - a strong drive to analyse detail.

"This might be in mathematics, machines, natural phenomena or anatomy, to identify rules that govern a system and any variations in that system."

While those whose strength lies in rational analysis are by no means exclusively male, it is described as a male brain trait compared with the so-called female ability to empathise - a characteristic weak spot for those with Asperger's.

"The condition does tend to affect men more than women, especially among those who are high-functioning. Males outnumber females nine to one in this diagnosis," he says.

DEFINING TRAITS INCLUDE:

Find social situations confusing

Hard to make small talk

Good at picking up details and facts

Hard to work out what others think and feel

Can focus for very long periods

Source: Cambridge Lifespan Asperger Syndrome Service

Thus it is thought possible that some maths and physics experts, far from being bright but anti-social misfits, may actually have had Asperger's. One whom Mr Baron-Cohen has helped diagnose is the British mathematician Richard Borcherds, the 1998 winner of the Field's Medal - the Nobel Prize of the maths world.

The naturalist and TV presenter David Bellamy mentions in his autobiography that although undiagnosed, he believes he has a form of autism. And Microsoft boss Bill Gates' personality quirks have been compared to those of an autistic.

"This goes to show that people who get by without a diagnosis have found a niche where they can use their skills to make a contribution. This need not be dramatic - perhaps they are a very methodical worker, who understands the rules of their chosen profession," says Mr Baron-Cohen.

On a lighter note, fictional characters said to display characteristics of those with Asperger's include Mr Spock, Lisa Simpson, Mr Bean and Cliff from Cheers. And one of the school boys in Grange Hill, Martin Miller, has the condition and so has found himself in difficulty after taking a mate's advice on girls literally.

"Mr Spock is an extreme example of someone driven by logic and systemising, but who has no interest in the feelings of others," says Mr Baron-Cohen. "But he is very much a caricature."

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