



Image courtesy Cheryl Miller
(Temple Grandin's secretary).

Temple Grandin on Visual Thinking

Gillian J. Furniss

Temple Grandin is an artist known for her architectural drawings of livestock slaughterhouse facilities, an associate professor of Animal Sciences at Colorado State University, and a guest speaker at autism conferences. Her life was adapted as an HBO film, *Temple Grandin* (2010), starring acclaimed actress

Grandin is an advocate for including the arts in the school curriculum and preventing bullying in schools due to her own childhood experiences.

Claire Danes. More recently, she wrote *The Autistic Brain: Helping Different Kinds of Minds Succeed* (2013).

Grandin was diagnosed with autism as a child in the 1950s. I met her for the first time in 2005 when she spoke on the panel *Advances in Autism about Animals In Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism*

to *Decode Animal Behavior*. She encouraged me to pursue my goal of designing new teaching methods for children with autism. Her enthusiasm for my ideas gave me momentum during the long years of hard work ahead.

As a Young Artist

Grandin attended art and music classes at Dedham Country Day School in Massachusetts. She gained great satisfaction from making art with her teacher, Ms. Forbes. She was intensely interested in animals, especially horses. In fourth grade, she made a sitting horse from plasticine, an oil-based, non-stick type of colored clay that doesn't harden. She decided to make a horse sitting because she couldn't manipulate the clay to support the horse's legs if standing. Some of the art she made was "average." However, she referred to the aesthetic quality of this clay horse as "nice."

She received a great amount of encouragement as a young artist from her mother to create at home.

She remembers making a watercolor painting of a wharf. Her mother treated her painting with respect by displaying it in a frame with glass and hanging it on a wall next to "real" art.

Her high-school years were a difficult time for her because she had problems making friends. She was relentlessly teased and bullied by her peers. They called her "tape recorder" because she repeated sentences over and over. She opted out of cooking and was one of the first girls at her school allowed to take wood shop. Her carpentry assignments often incorporated cows and horses.

As an Adult Artist

Grandin learned how to make architectural drawings by watching a talented draftsman who worked with her. She studied his drawings for many hours, "photographing home in [her] memory." She then laid out his drawings so that she could look at them while she drew because "[her] video memory was now fully programmed."

Grandin was a guest speaker in 2005 at *Pure Visionaries: Artists on the Spectrum* at the Cooper Union in New York. This conference included a group art exhibition by artists with autism. Included were Grandin's architectural drawings. An example of an architectural blueprint Grandin drew was *Halal International Slaughter Facility Concept Drawing*, blueprint (23 x 36"), 1990, which was sold at auction.

On Visual Thinking

Grandin is an advocate for including the arts in the school curriculum and preventing bullying in schools due to her own childhood experiences. She discussed how many individuals with autism are visual thinkers, and some such as herself with advanced skills can think in three dimensions and in motion. She argued that young artists with autism should not make the same thing over and over again. Rather, there should be motivation in regard to their "fixation" in order to "broaden" their skills. She gave the example that

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Youth Art Month

Youth Art Month (YAM) is an annual observance each March to emphasize the value of art and art education for all children and to encourage public support for quality school art programs. To learn more about how you can get involved in and support Youth Art Month activities in your area, contact your state chairperson. Information is available through the Council for Art Education website or your state art education association.

Councilforarteducation.org



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Maker Space to create their final projects. Here they synthesized the skills that we've been building in our Innovation and Design class to create professional-looking board games. Students used Photoshop and Illustrator to create meaningful designs that spoke to the message of the game, and created boards that were laser-cut from sheets of acrylic plastic or wood. More importantly, they embraced the

creative atmosphere of the Maker Space to adapt and use new tools, such as LED lighting or mechanized gears, to fulfill the needs of their game.

That approach, in which students both applied the skills that we'd scaffolded and reached out in new directions with their own self-directed learning, demonstrates how powerful design thinking and constructionist pedagogy can be when applied in tandem.

David Gran teaches high-school art and film classes at the Shanghai American School in China and is the author of The Carrot Revolution, a blog about 21st century art education.



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if a child is fixated on drawing a specific type of car, they should next draw that car and a garage.

Grandin offered constructive suggestions about contemporary curriculum. She urged schools to test students on their visual spatial skills. By not testing the visual spatial skills of their students, schools send the message that those skills are not important in order to succeed. She said it was a "shame" art is often no longer

offered as part of the academic experience in schools. Whereas some children with autism demonstrate natural talent in art, they nevertheless need to be taught techniques, such as how to make a heavy line when drawing and a wash for watercolor painting.

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WEB LINKS

www.templegrandin.com

www.grandin.com/inc/visual.thinking.html