

## Foundations of a Blackstock Drawing

The question most often asked artist Gregory Blackstock is, “How do you choose what to draw?” A logical question as the artist has drawn nearly 400 individual subjects, ranging from accordions to World War II planes. Blackstock’s usual response is to shrug and say simply, “from my own head.”

While he has always had a prodigious memory for detail, the ability for self-reflection and accurate historical reporting are very difficult for this autistic man. Therefore, understanding the genesis of many of his artistic “lists” requires a bit of archeological sleuthing of his past.

Observation of his process leads us to understand that the foundations of a Blackstock drawing likely include attraction, memories, research, lists, and repetition. While attraction and memory play a large part in his selection of subject, he is relentless in his research (via librarians and books) in order to make a “complete” representation of his topic. As he researches, he makes lists, often dividing into subsets. Sometimes he creates but a single shape, with the colorations making up the subset. The colors themselves are meaningful to him, and he uses the official Crayola color names as unequivocal fact.

### **Music:**

Blackstock’s father played the accordion and bought his son an instrument and enrolled him in lessons when he was still quite young. He easily learned to read music and did well with the repetitive nature of understanding an instrument, and it was an added bonus that he has near perfect pitch. He continued these lessons even when, as a young adolescent, he was sent away from home to a special school in California. His preferred instrument was made by Petosa, a celebrated local accordion maker. As a youngster, Blackstock would often go to the roller rink and he especially enjoyed the popular songs blaring over the loudspeaker. Decades later, he could still recall his favorites and created his own sheet music for dozens of these songs – usually changing the key and drawing colorful covers for them.

### **Things that Make Noise:**

The senior Blackstock also nurtured the young boy’s love of racing boats and fireworks, both subjects making frequent appearances on paper. He spent many hours in “the pits” getting to know hydroplane drivers and was in thrall when the engines tuned up with their mighty roars. When in California, his aunt and uncle often took him to the airport to watch the planes take off and land, and he learned to mimic the exact sounds the different engines made. His older brother was a history buff and introduced the artist to books and models of WWII airplanes. Learning about war planes from various countries remained a lifelong interest. He greatly enjoys looking at his completed works, repeating aloud facts, sound effects, and the origin stories from his past.

### **Life Sciences:**

A letter dated 1958 to his parents from the director of the “camp” where the twelve-year old Blackstock was then living, had this to say: “Greg spends a great deal of his free time studying life science books such as material on reptiles, insects, trees, flowers and birds. These books have been very stimulating and he is constantly seeking information concerning the subject matter. Many of the books have been completely memorized...” After his return home, he wanted to build on his introduction to gardening, which was a camp activity, and he created a small garden in his mother’s yard. He became a reader of

seed catalogues and experienced the ruinous effects of cabbage moths and other garden pests. He later gave up gardening, but still loves studying the colors and varieties of vegetables and flowers, as well as further investigating those garden troublemakers.

### **Things that are dangerous:**

Blackstock has been a devotee of the early television programs “Wild Kingdom” and Disney wildlife documentaries. He has entire sections of dialogue memorized and happily re-watches threadbare VHS copies he made from them. He especially loves the ones about the most dangerous of the big cats and bears, and has perfected the ferocious roars they make, often to the distress of his seatmates on public transportation!

### **Language arts:**

At nearly 15 years old, a “progress report” from the second boarding school he attended praised his knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and paragraph construction, as well as his regular use of the dictionary and encyclopedia. Yet the school put Blackstock’s reading at fourth grade level. Reading comprehension tests are (were) difficult for autistic persons who do not understand figures of speech such as idiom, simile, irony, euphemism, or internalize shared experience. This is likely how he developed a fascination with the thesaurus, which offered multiple alternatives for words, yet this could not overcome his struggle with nuance, context, and significance. At some point he began creating personal “lists” of synonyms and would add his own interpretations of words or phrases which might belong. On the other hand, he found learning other languages quite easy. The director of this boarding school spoke German and offered to teach the language to Blackstock, who became nearly fluent in the two years he lived there. His instructor might have been surprised to learn that the teen would go on to learn, on his own, the basics of many other languages, including Czech and Mandarin.

### **Other Attractions:**

In the early 1970s, Blackstock was working as a janitor at a large hotel near the airport. He became fascinated with the various tools in the maintenance room and began sketching them as a group when at home. The resulting drawing, labeled simply “Tools” was the first known taxonomic drawing he created and he was eager to present it to his mother, a portrait artist, when she returned from a lengthy trip. She expressed delight, but told him it was “too big.” Some years later he began again, creating drawings which were smaller, generally focusing on the subset of tools, such as *The Trowels*, *The Housekeeping Tools*, *The Wrenches*. He returned to the original theme in 2001 and produced *The Miscellaneous Tools*.

### **An Invitation:**

As you enjoy the vast variety in the work by this remarkable man, we invite you to discover a little bit of Gregory Blackstock’s life as revealed in his art.

---Dorothy Frisch, June 2021