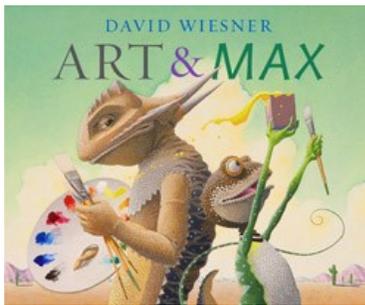


Deconstructing the Artistic Impulse through an Examination of David Wiesner's *Art and Max*

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In *Art and Max*¹ David Wiesner explores the tools and processes of artistic creation. This book does so in an unusually self-referential way as the very illustrations themselves are the subject focus for deconstructing and reconstructing the meaning of art. While this is a picture book with simple text and most likely aimed at very young children, we can find here a rich mine of ideas for “children of all ages,” any of us who are puzzled by the meaning of art. This text can be a wonderful guide for reflecting on the nature of art, the requirements for artistry, and problematizing of how art relates to the world.

Overview of the Story

This picture book tells the tale of two desert creatures, an iguana and a lizard, and their somewhat fractious relationship through art. The title brings with it a delightful ambiguity: is the reference to *Art* and *Max* or *Arthur* and *Max*, or indeed are both implied? The story line has Arthur, the artist, completing a portrait of another lizard while Max bursts into the scene enthusiastic about art and wanting to join in the painting experience. Arthur first dismisses him as unable to paint but then offers him a canvas and cautions him “Just don’t get in the way.” When Max has stared at the blank canvas for a while he interrupts Arthur with the question, “What should I paint?” Arthur, with a self-congratulatory look on his iguana face, replies, “Well you can paint me.” And then it starts.

Max takes the advice literally and begins to splash colors all over Arthur, resulting in a technicolor version of his mentor. “MAXXXX, screams Arthur, and the colors burst away in a two-page spread of color fragments flying everywhere. The result is a rainbow-saturated Arthur who is thunderstruck while Max is delighted. No worries! Maxes solution is to push a large fan over towards Arthur, and when turned on, it blows all the colors off. When Arthur demands a glass of water, the

colors melt away and leave...a penciled outline of our Iguana artist. Max loves it but when Arthur tries to leave, Max grabs hold and the lines that make up Arthur begin to unravel, like wires. We have a picture of Max, surrounded by a heap of tangled wires or threads asking with a worried look on his face, "Arthur?" Where did Arthur go? He must be reassembled and so Max sets out to recreate Arthur by shaping the wire into an Arthur shape. Hmm... his first attempt is a strange creature who looks nothing like Arthur. "More detail, I think" muses Max. Max continues to reshape the wire-like lines and Arthur begins to emerge, even to the point where he can offer advice, "Acceptable, I suppose, but don't forget my foot." At this point, Max takes off, returns with a vacuum cleaner and sprays paint colors all over our liner version of Arthur. The result? A pointillist version of Arthur but one that he can apparently live with. The new Arthur has been transformed in more ways than simply how he looks as he and Max now team up to paint the desert world with colors.

What does this picture book suggest about creativity and the artistic impulse? How can we introduce this delightful book into a philosophical inquiry about art? I would suggest the following philosophical prompts to help explore ideas embedded within the pictorial text:

1. What are the rules of art? Is there a right way to do it?
2. In creating art are we showing a world or showing our view of it? Creating a world or re-creating it?
3. How does color and line define objects in art? In the world?
4. Does creativity emerge in thought and planning or in action?

Who is the artist? What are the rules?

In many classrooms and indeed in all art education, there are techniques to be learned and mastered through practice. Draughtsmanship may be seen as an essential first step. Picasso was a master draughtsman but then choose to break the rules of representational art in seeking to get closer to the "truth" of his subject. But first, he learned to draw, and draw quite well. For centuries art making was seen as a teachable skill and thereby a craft accessible only to those who had gone through the arduous and long training overseen by experts, masters. The artist was separated from the "average person" or non-artist by the gulf of time spent in that training process. Arthur's first response is to dismiss Max's desire to paint because he is not an official artist, not one of the guild, so to speak. He would not have either the knowledge or skill to make art. Can one be an artist if one has neither gone through the process of training nor been accepted by the community of artists? The answer is often yes; but especially revelatory is that in many cases we dismiss the art of children based on these same working assumptions.

However, all the training in the world will not yield artistic talent or genius; that seems to emerge from the ideational font of the person making the art. In Western art history we see this tension arise in the 19th and 20th century with respect to naïve art or non-representational art. If the artist is not a member of the academy, the art community, and has not paid her "dues,"² so to speak, can we consider her work as art? When we consider art by children, the question becomes even more acute. Given the child's age and immaturity, how can what they produce really be considered 'art'? What is the status of the child [Max] artist?

In an essay entitled “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Child”³ I wrote about the question of whether children could be considered artists. Philosopher Gareth Matthews in his text *The Philosophy of Childhood*⁴ speaks precisely to this issue. He references a work that his own young daughter had created and how he had hung it up in their home. While every parent can probably relate to such a valuing of their child’s work, could we expect the work to be taken seriously as, well, art? A movie from several years ago *My Kid could paint that*⁵ explores just this question through a documentary of a four year old gifted artist, Marla Olmstead, who lives in Binghamton, NY. This movie begins as a story about a young artist who creates gorgeous huge canvases with color block abstract images that a local gallery owner offers to exhibit, perhaps as a lark, but which begin to fetch upwards of five figures in the art world. The media hears about the artistic phenomenon and she is featured in the *New York Times*⁶ and around the world as a new Picasso. The documentary story takes a dark turn when it covers a *Sixty Minutes*⁷ episode on the artistic phenomenon and the interviewee was the psychologist Ellen Winner, co-founder of Harvard’s Project Zero which studies creativity. She suggests that the art was simply typical pre-school art, thereby offering the expert view that Marla’s work was ‘nothing special.’ Where a piece seemed to be truly outstanding, she hints that she was unsure whether the girl had done this work herself. A scandal ensues. The documentary film maker stays with the story, interviewing the distraught parents who insisted the pieces were all done by their daughter, the jealous and jaded gallery owner (a painter himself of tromp d’oeil art) who questioned whether this revealed the hoax of all abstract art, and the offhand comments of Marla herself which deepened the suspicion that there was something inauthentic about the entire situation. In the end we are left with questions about whether Marla did the works entirely by herself, whether abstract art is a sham, and most importantly whether the adult world used a four year old girl for self-aggrandizement. But all of these doubts are generated by the initial suspicion that a child cannot be making real art—just as Max’s claim that “I can paint too!” is met with Arthur’s response, “You, Max? don’t be ridiculous.” And while he gives in and offers a blank canvas to Max he mostly enjoins him not to get in the way—that is, not in the way of the real artist and the making of genuine art.

Art and creating a world

Wiesner’s story challenges us to think about this possibly artificial partitioning of artist from non-artist. Max stands in for the child who enthusiastically embraces the chance to paint the world around him—in this case, painting his friend Arthur is the work of art itself. But, is he creating Arthur or recreating him? There is a nice metaphysical twist here as Arthur fades away into a linear outline, only to have that crumble and leave... nothing? It is up to Max to rebuild his friend and bring him back “into the picture.” The author takes us into the act of making an image, deconstructing it into color blocks, and then into a simple linear sketch. The initial splatter paint version of Arthur (Arthur-as-art-object for Max) explodes into a color block representation. Arthur is still Arthur in that he speaks and challenges Max, “What have you done [to me]?” Arthur has been transformed into a color field created by Max. Arthur is no longer an iguana as found in nature but one which has been imagined by the artist—a technicolored iguana. However, the next step in the process has the fan blowing all the colors off of Arthur and he begins to fade away. Without the artistic rendering, he begins to disappear and drinking the water further washes out any remaining color-substance. We are left with a sketched linear version.

How has the artistic renderings of Arthur by Max changed how he appears to the viewer? Who/Where is Arthur? One is reminded of the famous portrait of Gertrude Stein by Picasso. When told that it did not look like her, Picasso replied, “Don’t worry. It will.” The linear sketch of Arthur is still clearly Arthur, until he tries to leave and Max grabs hold of a line which then leads to the unraveling of the entire image. The artist Max has disassembled his work and in doing this has lost Arthur. Rich imagery indeed! Consider these question threads:

- Do artists create their representations and in doing so, re-create, reassemble the reality that inspired the art making activity?
- Does the world only exist as the artist presents it to us?
- We speak of the artist as a creator; in this story we see Max as both a destroyer and creator. But which is he and when?



As Max struggles to reassemble Arthur, we see him going through the process of learning how to draw, how to construct an image. Ah, so perhaps we see here a subtle plea for skill acquisition. His first attempt resembles one of those Ugly Dolls, a crude outlined figure that fails to capture pretty much anything of Arthur. But as he persists we see him improving on his bending and shaping of the wire lines until they begin to bring back Arthur—but still as a linear image. But as the image takes shape so does Arthur emerge and his voice returns as he begins to advise his pupil, “Don’t forget my foot.” He has been reassembled, recreated by the power of the apprentice Max. But we still are missing the three-dimensional Arthur and Max’s solution is to add the density and dimensionality of color. In a glorious act of Pollockian randomness, Max blows a wind of colors upon the linear Arthur. The result is not Arthur as we met him but as re-envisioned in a pointillist version of Arthur. The painter has become the painted but in a transformational way which even he can accept. But let us back up for a moment: was Arthur ever really absent or simply present through a different imaging? Is realism the goal of art? Even in Wiesner this cannot be said to be fully the case as Arthur in the end of the story is not the same presentation of Arthur at the beginning. Art has transformed him into an artistic rendering by Max.

Locating Creativity

This story invites to consider the nature of creativity. Does Max have an idea of what he wants to do or does he simply let the material guide him? Confusing Arthur’s suggestion to “paint me” with the act of putting paint on Arthur rather than an image of Arthur on the canvas, Max gleefully splashes paint all over his mentor. But has he really misunderstood or is he taking art out of the rectangular canvas into the world, perhaps much the way artists in the 20th century have responded with found art, performance art, pop art? Creativity can be the act of creation within rules, but outside of them as well. Max takes the challenge to paint and responds with a dedication to color and form in the shape of his friend. He colors ‘outside of the lines’ and in doing so breaks the rules but the result is a newly fashioned image of Arthur. Where in the process was Max in control, if at all? So, is creativity a matter of letting go and following what surprises result? Or does it still need order and rigor? One reading of the title directs us towards the development of Max into an artist through his creative renderings of his work. But we can also read the title as signaling the relational nexus that is Max and his friend/mentor, Arthur—who himself becomes Max’s artwork.

Using *Art and Max*

As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, this book is written with young children in mind but it fully respects their ability to tease out the problems as they develop. It does not sell them short. And clearly the ideas therein are richly problematic and can be used to generate much thinking and dialogue over art, artists, and creativity among any age group, including teens and adults. Return to our initial guiding questions here:

1. What are the rules of art? Is there a right way to do it?
2. In creating art are we showing a world or showing our view of it? Creating a world or re-creating it?
3. How does color and line define objects in art? In the world?
4. Does creativity emerge in thought and planning or in action?

Let's build upon them by asking our children or young people to comment on the characters, the assumptions behind the comments of Arthur and the ingenious responses of Max. What have the odd characters taught us about how art seduces us to re-examine our ways of looking at the world, demands a response from us that challenges us to create new visions and new solutions. Finally, I invite readers of *Art and Max* to speculate on the role of the silent lizard witnesses to the entire process between Max and Arthur. Who is the art public and what role do they play in this story and in the art world?

Endnotes

- ¹ David Wiesner, *Art and Max*, New York: Clarion Books, 2010.
- ² There was an apocryphal story that I heard about all the artists in Paris inviting Henri Rousseau to a dinner allegedly in his honor but really as a mockery of his naïve works. Rousseau had a marvelous time and supposedly completely missed the mockery intended.
- ³ Contained in *Conflicts in Childhood*, edited by Miriam Damrow and Helen Hearn, Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2014.
- ⁴ Gareth Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, Chapter 10, Harvard University Press, 1994.
- ⁵ See <http://www.sonyclassics.com/mykidcouldpaintthat/>
- ⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/28/nyregion/28artist.html?_r=0
- ⁷ Sixty Minutes is a weekly news/magazine television program that features stories of general interest for viewers.
- ⁸ See <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/203858320606454148/>

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