Journal of Psychiatry Research & Reports

Research Article

Salvador Dali: Autism and the Painter Who Never Grew Up

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Abstract

This commentary on Salvador Dali (1904-1989),) argues that his life history and artwork provide sufficient evidence of the presence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Such commentary affords a deeper understanding of his paintings and a novel perspective on rationale for his approach to his artistic expression. His features of autism included stereopathy with his stubbornness suggesting a preference for sameness, narrow special interests and atypical social relationships. His condition was characterized firstly, by deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, secondly, deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors as used in social interactions and thirdly, expressions and nonverbal communication. These characteristics can reliably explain his deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships. Individuals with autism vary in the intensity of their challenges in the domains of social communication and stereotypical behaviours. Paintings by Dali reflect this intensity in his compulsion to shock. Through the pioneering impact of his paintings, he attempted to discover and circumscribe the metaphysical delimitations of his own ingenious creativity. He found expression within an irenic lacuna in which to paint. His early family life illuminates evidence as to why his behaviour would later grow increasingly challenging. He was emotionally strained by his father who overtly distanced himself from his son. Dali would ensue with wrenching himself from any bonding with both his mother and sister. While still a child, nascent symptoms of personality disorders began to incarnate. He exhibited impulsivity and a fervent challenge to all forms of authority. With hypersensitive visuality, he reacted against any external hyper stimulation and physically, he struggled with motor control. This challenged him and engendered deep stress in him as a painter. From an early age, social skills lay on the weak end of the spectrum while he depended on the comfort and predictive skill offered by every behavioural repetition available to him. With a gnarled sense of ontological proportions, he derived perverse pleasure from advertently misguiding others towards a state of anarchy. To boot, his writing displayed typicalities of autism with its sententially disjointed narratives. His immaturity remained throughout his life, never having fully invested himself in the social world of empathizing, a world he resisted on even a tactile level.

He filled his life with a bloated sense of entitlement, attention-seeking and narcissism. As a child he had acted mendaciously and would explode into unpredictable tantrums. He exhibited disturbing pathological, non-verbal and stereotypic patterns of behaviour.

Keywords

Salvador Dali, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Neurodiversity in Art, Artistic Genius and Psychopathology, Neurodevelopmental Disorders.

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Received: 11 November 2025; **Accepted:** 24 December 2025; **Published:** 06 January 2026

Citation: McCann Brian, Michael Fitzgerald. Salvador Dali: Autism and the Painter Who Never Grew Up. J Psychiatry Res Rep. 2026; 3(1):1-6.

Introduction

'What is when the mind is more vivid than the world around me?'

Salvador Dali

The greatest Spanish painter post-Picasso was Salvador Domingo Felipe Jacinto Dalí i Domènech, Marquess of Dalí of Púbo more famously known simply as Salvador Dali (1904-1989), whom Marie Dali called 'an old clown' air [3]. His high functioning autism lent him talents that irradiated across many artistic plains. He became a notable painter, filmmaker, author, poet, animator, fashion designer, graphic artist and photographer; His surrealistic paintings reflect his absence from a social matrix, an absence of any cohesion of social bonds that necessitates a logical universe of meaning. Dali subsisted within an alternative universe of arbitrary connectors. His artistic creations had an axial relationship to three principles: juxtaposition, transformation and dislocation.

The most recent DSM-5 [2] circumscribes autism as necessarily displaying 1. Social and communication difficulties and 2. Repetitive actions. Creative genius occurs in autism when neurological, environmental and behavioural vectors intersect at an apposite node Immense mental and creative powers can then manifest in autistic individuals. This has been documented throughout history. Research has shown that a transfer occurs of cerebellar strengths from the left to the right hemispheres and has been found to produce extraordinary artistic and mathematical skills in many individuals. Examples abound in the history of art: Van Gough [2] Jack B. Yeats [2] Andy Warhol, [2] Cezanne [2] and, of course, Caravaggio.

Dali had a number of personality disorders, criteriorolgically accounted in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illnesses (DSM-V) throws light on why his artifacts manifested as atypical creations. Herein, we concentrate one of them: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and frame Dali through a posthumous diagnosis of ASD.

Autism is a neurological condition that affects the capacity for social and communication skills. Dali met all of the following criteria. Firstly, a compulsion for stereotyped repetitive behaviors combines with hypo or hypersensitivity to sensory input that shapes an atypical neurology. The diagnosis comprehends a persistent deficit in emotional reciprocity, non-verbal communicative behaviours and in creating, nurturing and sustaining relationships. Highly restricted, fixed interests vary in intensity. Creative genius, as is found in Dali, occurs in autism when neurological, environmental and behavioral vectors intersect. We begin by observing Salvador in his early life and explain how his behavior matched that of the above said criteria.

Even in childhood, autistic signatures revealed themselves in Dali in his way of withdrawing from ontic world structures and channeling his being towards the drawing of a world of dreams through drawing. Art became a refuge from the sensory and social overwhelm engulfing him, a sanctuary that his gentle mother had encouraged him to nurture. Thus, art became his war cry, an expression of the phantasmal incubus that populated the realm of dreams. He created the paranoiac-critical method that allowed him entry into dreams.

The Surrealists

With World War 1 in the past, society was searching for an alternative lifestyle. Ali painted a floating space, influenced the powerful disintegration of the matter caused by the atom bomb. The Surrealists filled this gap and developed as a movement that examined and painted the world of dreams that Freud had been examining as a meaningful and valuable repository of the subconscious. Freud said that the unconscious mind was responsible for chaos, a perception that appealed to Dali, whereby normal epistemological and ontological structures could be bypassed to legitimize his own dam burst of dreams.

With this Freudian fascination with dreams and the subconscious, the Surrealists articulated and prompted a methodology of automatism, which encouraged artists to write or draw whatever came to mind. Thus, a rationale behind Surrealism became one of shock and awe and Dali stepped right into this ambience, fitting like a glove. He used their principle to express shamelessly his deepest visions.

Early Family Life

When his older brother died, Salvador became a replacement 'rainbow' child. 'Dali hated, even detested his family and as he grew older wanted nothing to do with any of them' [3]. By the end of his life, his family had grown both embattled and embittered' [3], lost to each other in an entangled emotional quagmire. This can, with moderate distribution, occur in families of a person with autism. When he was born, his parents believed that theretofore, their 'dead son had been reborn through Salvador' [3]. Salvador himself held the same belief that his brother died at the age of seven years. He preferred to say that his brother had died of meningitis, when the truthful cause lay in gastroenteritis. Salvador also had a sister called Ana Maria with whom he was close as a child. Dali said

'…it was during my childhood that all the archetypes of my personality, my work and my ideas were born. The inventory of those psychological materials is therefore essential.' [3].

This was largely untrue because the real issue lay in his autism and in his genetics.

His father, with whom he was also very close, died in 1962. Although he held a great interest in his son, Salvador, as a family man, his personality projected as stubborn, perplexing and moody. Indeed his image, 'would recur with dream-like repetitiveness in his son' [3] yet Salvador maintained that 'he was the sum of his father's life' [3]. He had constantly jousted verbally with his father and was 'aggressive, obstinate and outrageous in argument' [1] towards him. Salvador was grossly spoilt and over-protected as

a child. He was fantastically precocious but fortunately, for the sake of social relationships, maintained a sense of humour. *Prima facie*, his father may have harboured a range autistic traits. He was a contradictory figure and had the ability to 'espouse a dozen conflicting positions simultaneously' [3]. He perceived Salvador as 'irrational, eccentric, childish and dependent' [3]. Another cousin stated that Salvador's father was a 'difficult man, very honest but with a violent personality' and prone to having 'fights' [3]. Salvador stated that his 'father's look was addressed as much at my double as at me personally' [3]. His father said of his son Salvador that, ', as far as he was concerned, … was only half of myself, one being too many' [3]. Joseph Pla stated that 'the Dali name came from a certain Irishman called Colonel O'Daly [3]. This man was governor of an area close to Cadaques, one of the so-called Wild Geese immigrants from Ireland although his ancestral story befogs any clear account [3] also notes a story that an ancestor, 'the grandchild of a blacksmith, ' had joined the middle classes as a 'stockbroker'.

His mother constantly worried about Salvador and his possible death. She was middle class and fairly well off. She died of cancer in 1921, whereupon his father indulged in an affair with an aunt. Later, Salvador wrote on one of his pictures that 'I spit on my mother' [3]. Dali's distancing of himself from his father and sister later reached a point of callousness. This strain in family and sibling relationships appears a periodically in persons with autism.

Salvador disenchanted his teachers in opposition and defiance of their wishes in school. At that time, he was a rebel without a cause. In primary school he was savagely bullied, being a strange child, and he came across in class as though he ranked as low IQ. Indeed, the truth lay in quite the obverse. Then, the teachers and abandoned him to himself in dismay. He was an attention-seeking liar and an impulsive risk-taking, reckless child. He was a boy who would impulsively make a leap into the dark. His single mindedness and anti-authoritarian behavior rendered him difficult child, as did his hypochondria.

Contrary and impossible to deal with, he invariably insisted on having whatever he wanted and once thwarted, would erupt into endless temper tantrums. His motor skills disobeyed him as a child, a phenomenon oftentimes present in persons with ASD. He exhibited an extremely provocative stubborn streak, which points to an autistic insistence on a preservation of sameness. Oddities in the domains of obsessions and fears abounded in Dali. *Exempli gratia*, he was 'obsessed with his own death' and very fearful of 'grasshoppers'. *Sumum sumarum*, he was very highly sensitive to visual stimuli, which would have affected his life, on the one hand tortuously and on the other it would have enhanced his sense of colour, light and shade.

The Daliesque Approach to Painting

He received teaching at Les Fosos and the Municipal School of Drawing in Figures. He was stimulated by every 'artistic stimulus' and did not settle until about twenty-five years of age into one style [3]. He enjoyed total support from his father. In his mid-teens, he showed that he was not just proficient but splayed out into a multitalented young man as a strong writer and also a poet of worth. He could hyper-focus on whatever interested him. His hyperkinesia glided him along in his *mode de vivre* as an incessant worker. He trained also in Madrid where they described his gaze one emanating with 'mesmeric eyes' [3]. At art school, he came across as 'work obsessed, reclusive and diffident' [3]. He used to scream 'blood is sweeter than honey' [3] and 'punctuating each battle cry with one of his admirable high jumps' [3]. Unsurprisingly, other students said of him, 'Dali is crazy as a goat' [3]. Suspension and ultimately expulsion from art school ensued for walking out of a lecture. When examined, he thought of the examiners as unfit to examine him. Other teachers thought that he was as 'cold as ice' [3]

Salvador once said, 'the difference between me the Surrealists is that I am a Surrealist' [3]. Salvador declared that at art school when the 'interior world' was mentioned, he felt

'…absolutely indifferent' and that he 'rejected every human emotion and at that moment (he) (*sic*) became a devotee of geometry; my preferences only had room for largely intellectual sentiments.' [3].

This describes an autistic narrative.

Dali and His Process of Painting

He get out of bed, does not wash, sits in front of the easel, searches his imagination for images by

'…the profile of a rabbit's head, whose eyes also served as the eyes of a parrot and the eye serves still another head, that of a first enfolding the other two'… [3].

He also described painting as indulging in hypnogogic hallucinations, which occur before sleep. He resolved to pain the inner visions as 'accumulates as carefully as possible and to allow instinct to dictate how they should be placed on the canvass' [3]. Bunel said that Salvador was a 'peerless writer, talker and thinker' [3], His emotional immaturity combined the ability to see things as though through the eyes of a child. Dali was quite paranoid and suffered much anxiety and panic throughout his life.

He showed an extreme preservation of sameness and dyspraxic clumsiness. Control of motor skills lay beyond his natural capacity. He had trouble tying his shoelaces and was clumsy. He had right/left disorientation or discoordination. His preservation of sameness affected the most rudimentary of natural activities such as eating. 'Each day he ate the same things in the same restaurants and took the same walks' [3]. He suffered from complete impracticality in daily living and 'could not even take the metro' [13 He displayed plentiful emotional labiality, changing moods at an instant as though impacted by change or jarring sensory inputs. He made a film with Bunel and interestingly, interacted well with him, albeit on a one-to-one interlocutive level. The title of his paintings appears to show autistic narrative which means 'ever more abstruse' [3]. Secrest stated that Dali wanted to convince 'people of the absolute

reality of his obsessions', an ontology of fantasies. Dali developed the paranoiac critical method whereby he endeavoured to paint the irrational, the unconscious fantasy using free association of ideas. His paintings and life history both testify to a sensation seeking and novelty seeking mindset [2], professedly to generate and discover ontological parameters in a Byzantine world. He relished risking reputational ruin with forgery, again, ostensibly testing the ever-shifting parameters of his social territory. The Times reported on their being informed how he had 'forged drawings, watercolors and oils with the full blessing of Dali and his wife' [3].

Social Relationships: The Grand Puzzle

While in Madrid he avoided 'the temptation to talk to other students'. He spent his time in his room painting on his own [3]. He wanted to paint every style. He was a workaholic and an autodidactic man. He was a voracious learner. He steeled 'himself against the world's suffering, the desire for human contact' [3]. He used to scream and recoil when dancers approached him too closely in Paris. The gallery owner, David Levy, who met him, found him 'disquieting' with single-minded intensity and frankness.

'He fixed his piercing black eyes on me, he crowded me, his restless hands alternatively picking at my sleeve or fluttering emphatically as he described his very newest Dalian theory' [3].

Gala, a Long-term Partner

She was called before she met him, 'the muse of the Surrealists'. She was rather hysterical and indeed highly emotive. She said she was insane' [3]. Lou Ernst described her as 'silent avaricious' and reminded one of a 'panther' [3]. For Dali, 'Gala was his twin, his double, his other half – for him, Gala was 'an extension of him' [3]. He seemed to very often psychologically merge with this turbulent woman. Gala abandoned her daughter and husband for Dali. It appeared that for him, merging with Gala gave him some sense of completion. She mothered him as a child, which typifies how partners often interact with persons with autism. Prince de Faucigny-Lucinge [3], described Gala, 'as a witch' who kept him at work. She was hard and heartless'. Dali felt that Gala was a 'true medium' and was never wrong [3]. Gala pleasured him with her eccentric, perverse and sadistic ways. In this sense, perversity and sadomasochism significantly intertwined the relationship of Dali with Gala.

Deportment and Physiognomy

His friend, Sebastian Gasch stated that he had 'had a stiff, inexpressive wax doll's face, his face, his tiny, feverish, terrible, menacing eyes shone with extraordinary intensity' [3]. They were 'the eyes of a madman' [3] This piercing gaze approximates the classic autistic stare of persons with ASD, albeit to the point of mania in the case of Salvador. His thus face etiolated all emotion. His exiguous emotionality suffered both a dearth in empathy and a weakness in understanding the emotions of others, thereby dechromatising his face and affecting it as lifeless and flattened. This can occur in persons with ASD. He spoke monotonously and engaged himself in 'mad laughter' [3] and wore a 'bizarre assortment of clothes' [3] His eccentricity extended to him using a walking stick most of the time whether for stability or to prop a sense of insecurity. His appearance displayed a dandy, conspicuous image, perhaps with his will to attract attention and in so doing shore up a more robust sense of identity.

The Whirlwind of Identity Diffusion

He insisted he not a homosexual and refused to have sex with Lorca, the poet. He did however, have identity diffusion and dressed up as 'Nefertiti and wearing a skirt' [3]. One photograph of him survives with his 'right arm in a graceful curve, for all the world, Miss Universe' [3]. As a child, he 'experimented with being a girl, and even painted himself as a baby girl' [3]. He used to push his 'sexual parts back out of sight and squeezed them between (his) thighs so as to look as much as possible like a girl' [3]. An element of transsexuality most certainly obtained within him, fluctuating between ambiguities of gender. He wanted to be 'like a beautiful woman' [3]. He clearly struggled with knowing who he was. He read Freud to try to understand himself. Dali stated, 'I'm in constant interrogation: where does the deep philosophical valid Dali begin and where does the looney and preposterous Dali end?' [3].

A Skewed Perissology

He exhibited the classic autistic mode of pronoun reversal and would produce 'maddening references to himself in the third person'. For the person with autism this expedient expresses an objective observation of the self. It eases a situation where a subjective sense of positionality remains impossible due to a dearth in any sense of self. The usage of third person pronouns provides a necessary arch view of the self, whereas a reflexive view remains impossible to establish. Referring oneself as he or she becomes a savior for the person with autism as it articulates their message to an interlocutor but comfortably obviates any reference to the self.

Confusion and Mystification

His acute sense of the absurd empowered both his painting and his writing. He explored the endless delights to be found in Gordian confusion and mystification.

'Dali's autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali* for instance, was more confused than ever. There was one judicious assessment, since his closest associates seemed to have adopted enthusiastically the same obfuscatory vocabulary, not to mention the master's uncritical view of his own genius' [3].

It contained 'much clear fabrication' [3]. Secrest (*Ibid*) noted that 'Dali's autobiography is transparently designed to confuse and befuddle the reader with what he artlessly calls 'false memory'. He was a great storyteller with all the non-verbal facial additions.

In 1921, he was described as 'articulate, logical, coherent' [3] with his autobiography being described as something of an autistic, Daedalian narrative [2]. Some of his writing was seen as 'without emotion, and really without personality' [3]. There was 'a distinct coldness at the very core of the book, a kind of chilling detachment,

as if he were observing himself in a very infinity of mirrors' [3].

In an *Infinity of Mirrors* and the novel *Hidden Faces*, he 'showed a ferociously complicated plot and labyrinthine style' [3]. His social language was so poor that Gala felt compelled to keep prompting him. He was a great mystifier, too, conjuring an impressive public persona. His narratives [1] roamed and meandered between fact and fiction, as well as between science and art. His repetitive behavior loved the certainty it provided him by creating prescience with every repetition, thus offering the skill of prediction. He would speak of a narrow, repetitive theory that he mentioned over and over again. Language was used by him not for clear communication, which over challenged him anyway, but for mystification and confusion. He gleaned a perverse pleasure from witnessing the chaos he engendered by deliberately misdirecting others. The gallery owner, Carlos Lozano, described a Dali sentence as, 'you, you and you but not you' [3]. Another acquaintance said, 'he had a habit of not ever completing a sentence' [3]. Dali said, 'I exaggerated to the maximum, my taste for mystification' [3].

Indications of Autism

Secrest [3] notes that the reviewer of Dali's autobiography stated that

'…the book had been written as if its author had never lived and had an air of insubstantiality, of having been invented by a fantastical … ethereal, imagination...'

…and that he was like the

'…Ancient Mariner seizing the reluctant wedding guest, that he was the second Salvador' and that 'he had been born twice, and was therefore a double-self, a half a person, someone who did not really exist.'

His writings preserve recognizable elements of the autistic narrative style: disconcatenated, mystifying and bewildering.

A Brother Dies

Dali told the painter, Edouard MacAvoy that 'he had actually become his brother' and would visit his brother in the cemetery and say, 'I no longer know whether I am alive or dead' [3]. Dali was preoccupied with death from an early age. His dead brother was one of the themes of his life. Dali described his own art as 'largely autobiographical' [3], though he exaggerates here. The politician, Ramon Guardiola, notes that [3] Dali was 'dead, like his dead brother' and that he 'didn't exist for himself', implying that his sense of self invariably evaded him, like a will-o-the-wisp.

As with Hamlet, it was said of Dali that 'I am but mad north – north – northwest; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw'. He was always emotionally immature and as a child, had a sense of 'aloneness' [3]. He lived in 'a world of his own invention' 13 At school he did 'not want anyone to touch him, to talk to him, to disturb what was going on in his head' [3]. He alternated between shyness and exhibitionism and invariably wanted gaze at his own star as in the ascendant, above all others in the sky.

Dali cut 'Lorca (the poet) out of his life brutally', which was one more sacrifice to his 'Dandyism', to his aesthetic, to his scorn for tender feelings, constrained as weakness [3]. He could be vicious and perverse in his criticism of a friend. He transmuted his perversity into art. His aim was to transgress all past art and become the paragon of all artists. In relation to the Surrealist Yves Tangy he said to Tangy's niece, 'I've snitched everything from your uncle Yves Tangy' [3]. When his friend, Lorca was shot, Dali shouted 'ole'.

Perversity clutched Dali in its talons. At one point in his life, he came in contact with a boy racked with psychosis but rather than muster sympathy within himself for the boy, 'Dali amused himself by aggravating the psychosis … with impersonal malice' [3]. On yet another occasion, he made a cruel, discriminating remark about a fellow student's painting and said 'I had sacrificed him. Yet another victim to the growing 'Dandyism of my mind' [3]. His great capacity to manipulate others further testified to his perverse nature.

An Intrinsic Narcissist

He roamed through fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance and in doing so, he felt himself to be special. He lived a, unique life but with a sense of entitlement and a dearth of empathy. On an interpersonal level, he could fumigate any social situation with an exploitive, arrogant and haughty air. His personality enwrapped identity diffusion, problems with empathy and a solipsistic attention seeking in a chronic and an irrepressible need for self-validation. Dali said, 'nothing is more important than me' [3]. He maintained a biased, 'uncritical view of his own genius' [3]. Dali 'had so exploited his own psychological abnormalities that he trivialized the gifts he had undoubtedly begun with' [3]. He craved the center of attention as though it were his divine right. Even when his house went on fire, his narcissism restricted his attention from extending beyond his own needs. He wallowed in such attention, particularly towards the end of his life. He was a kind of 'shock jock' in that his utterances could reverberate seismically throughout whatever social discourse in which he was infixed. Dali insisted rather narcissistically that 'every recent development in painting had been anticipated by him' [3]. Towards the end of his life his 'vanity would not allow him to expose himself to the pitying smiles of old friends who might see him in his present sad state' [3]. He admired Napoleon and emulated Napoleonic notions of self-grandeur. In self-abnegation from expressing such bridled feelings, he would suddenly explode into narcissistic rages. Because of his narcissism he was 'fascinated by self-portraits' [3]. As a child he was the 'absolute monarch of the household' [3]. Dali said he was the last of the great artists, heir to Vermeer and Velazquez [3]. He called himself the 'Divine Dali' [1]. When he met Picasso his competitive, deep voice announced, 'I had to show my metal in order to eclipse him' [3].

The Final Years

Considerable controversy and nonsense prevail regarding his late works (1981 – 1983), that the 'slightest evidence of his hand, be it as little as a scrawl mark was enough to transform the work for other artists into a genuine Dali' [3]. He experienced extreme pain in his later years. His health later developed into 'advanced cerebral sclerosis' [3].

Conclusion

Dali was a man with autism and a painter of genius, one of the greatest Spanish painters who ever lived. Evidence from his life history and artistic productions present a clear case for the presence of autism. Such indications include pathological non-verbal behaviour, preservation of sameness, unusual social relationships and narrow interests. To boot, motor skill challenges pervaded and overshadowed his entire life. He encompassed many features of narcissism in his autism, where the need for empathy with others lay fallow. He was a cerebral, intellectual type of person, lending him a faraway, abstracted look. He often came across as a Walter Mitty-type character.

His imagine world of distortions commanded him the control he craved; it empowered him to manipulated, predict, understand and find solace away from his perceived maelstrom of sensory and logically breached relations in the ontic realm. It found him a soothing, eternal transcendence in his paintings of the vivid dream world.

His life continued along unconventional lines until his death, never recognizing the rational, undergirding normal social behaviours and invariably attempting to subvert them in his paintings, embracing his neurodivergence as a power. His compulsion to shock irradiated in centrifugal emotional waves in an attempt to discover and circumscribe the metaphysical limits of his being. He was rebelling against the epistemological constraints of reality. It might be said that without autism, we might never have known of such a uniquely talented painter [3].

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