

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Biggest Little Artist in the World

By LeeAnn Blankenship
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In this informational text, LeeAnn Blankenship discusses the success of Willard Wigan, a famous artist who creates sculptures that can only be seen using a microscope. As you read, take notes on why Willard creates tiny art.

- [1] Five-year-old Willard Wigan struggled to tell the difference between an *M* and a *W* or a *6* and a *9*. Unfortunately, his schoolteacher knew nothing about dyslexia, a learning disability that can make letters and numbers confusing. She didn't try to help him.

Not surprisingly, Willard didn't like school. Usually, his mind drifted — to playing outside, to his dog Maxie, or to the ants that lived near his family's garden shed. Willard was especially curious about those ants. He felt like them — small and insignificant.¹



"The Four Seasons, as seen in the eyes of four needles" by Rex Features via AP Images is used with permission.

Building Ant Houses

Willard noticed that the ants were coming and going from a hole in the dirt. One ant was carrying a blade of grass, and Willard thought, *He's trying to build a house, so I am going to help him!*

Gathering splinters of wood and carefully splitting them with a shard of glass, Willard constructed a little building. Then he sprinkled sugar inside to encourage the ants to move in. When they did, Willard built more houses.

- [5] At school, Willard still struggled, but now he knew he could do something special. Maybe he wasn't a failure after all. If he had trouble with his reading or math, Willard later went home and created tiny furniture for the ant houses. Sometimes, he made ant coats and hats with fabric scraps. He even built an ant school, with teeny swings, ladders, seesaws, and a merry-go-round.

His artistic skill increased, and a love for little things began to grow in his heart.

Carving on Toothpicks

At age nine, Willard began carving faces on toothpicks.

1. **Insignificant (adjective):** unimportant

He discovered that his ability improved when he held his breath as he worked. When he showed his mother the carved faces, she said, “This is what you do well. You must strive² to be the best in the world.”

With her encouragement, Willard continued. When he quit school at age 15 to help support his family, Willard still spent his spare time³ carving. His confidence grew as more people appreciated his talent.

- [10] Eventually, he quit his factory job to pursue his dream of becoming one of the best artists in the world. Willard’s mother advised him, “The smaller you carve, the bigger your name will become.” So he began to carve even smaller.

The Tiniest Artwork

Now, years later, Willard carves the tiniest artwork in the world! His sculptures are so small that several can fit on a period at the end of a sentence.

Using a powerful microscope, Willard carves grains of sand, flecks of gold, bits of fiber, and even specks of dust.

To make his carving instruments, Willard drills a hole in the point of a needle and inserts a diamond shard for cutting. As he carves, he holds his work with a tiny hook. But static electricity⁴ sometimes causes a sculpture to flit away — lost forever.

Willard works best at night when there are few disturbances.⁵ He calms his body and, holding his breath, he carves between heartbeats when blood is not pulsing through his fingertips. He often works for months to complete a sculpture. Then he paints it with bits of acrylics.⁶ Willard’s favorite paintbrush is one hair from the back of a dead housefly!

- [15] For details like the ropes on a ship, he has found that cobwebs or strands of glue are perfect.

To move his sculptures, Willard uses an eyelash. But even that can be tricky. Once, while moving a microscopic⁷ Alice in Wonderland, his cell phone rang. Startled, Willard took in a quick breath. When he looked back, Alice was gone. After laboring⁸ for weeks to carve her, he’d accidentally inhaled her! Willard had to start all over again. Luckily, the second Alice was even better than the first.

Willard sculpts everything from famous people to fictional characters. His subjects range from dragons and polar bears to the Statue of Liberty.

Because of their beauty and rarity,⁹ his sculptures have made Willard a wealthy man. But he says, “Success isn’t about material things like an expensive watch or a costly ring; it’s about persevering¹⁰ and achieving your dreams.”

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2. **Strive (verb):** to make great efforts to achieve something
 3. time when one is not working
 4. when the build-up of electrical charges is moved to another object
 5. **Disturbance (noun):** an interruption of peace
 6. a type of paint
 7. so small that it can only be visible with a microscope
 8. **Labor (noun):** work
 9. **Rare (adjective):** uncommon and therefore valuable

Willard Wigan, microsculptor, has done just that. The man who felt small as a boy has shown the world that something small can really be BIG.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence describes the central idea of the text?
 - A. Small art requires more talent and creativity than big art.
 - B. Willard found something that he loved and worked hard to succeed at it.
 - C. Art is an important way for kids to express themselves.
 - D. Willard was supported by his teachers and family to pursue art.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Willard was especially curious about those ants. He felt like them — small and insignificant." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "If he had trouble with his reading or math, Willard later went home and created tiny furniture for the ant houses." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "Eventually, he quit his factory job to pursue his dream of becoming one of the best artists in the world." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "He calms his body and, holding his breath, he carves between heartbeats when blood is not pulsing through his fingertips." (Paragraph 13)

3. How does the author organize the information in "The Biggest Little Artist in the World"?
 - A. The author discusses Willard's struggles early on in life, and then how he became a successful artist.
 - B. The author explains what Willard's art looks like, and then discusses its significance to Willard.
 - C. The author provides a step-by-step guide for how Willard creates each one of his tiny sculptures.
 - D. The author describes how Willard was treated before he was a famous artist and compares it to how he is treated now.

4. What is the relationship between Willard's troubles in school and his interest in art?
