



The Art of Primates

*by Benjamin
Langsam*





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Introduction

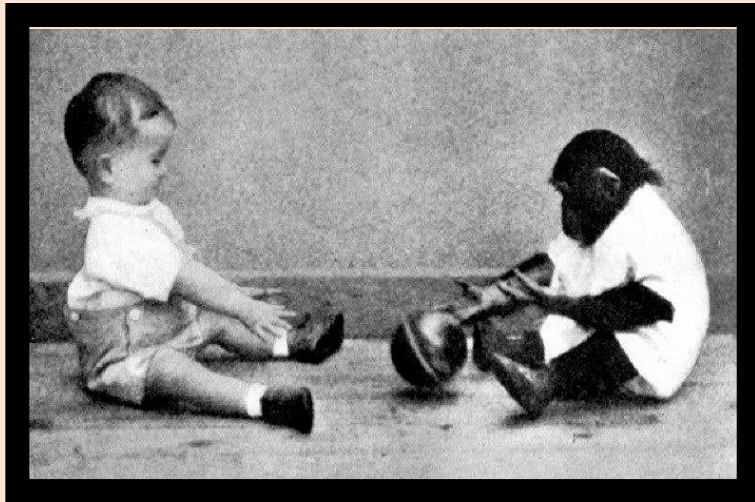
Ever since the 1950s there's been a debate on whether or not monkeys and primates can create art. Primates are any member of the biological order primate, the group of various species commonly related to the lemurs, apes, monkeys, and the category of human beings. This might be because of the qualitative differences between human beings' innovative behaviors and the non-human species. It has been observed that primates' behavioral repertoire consists of two kinds of behavior, some repetitive and a small portion of novel action, which are different from the former regular behaviors. Innovative behavior among primates is one of the novel behaviors, and this brings us to the topic in question, "do primates have creative abilities or functions?" Also, if they do, which are the different primates that have created art, and the similarities and differences between human beings and primates during the creative process.

This book is less of a debate in whether or not they can create art, but more of a look into pieces created by monkeys and primates. The more we discover about how advanced primates may be in areas we haven't extremely looked into is very exciting to think about and we get to see many examples here.

One of the first published reports of primate picture-making. In 1931, a seven-and-a-half-month-old female chimpanzee called Gua was separated from her mother. Gua was loaned for a period of nine months to a young professor of psychology, W. N. Kellogg, and his wife, at Indiana University. The Kelloggs had a son ten months old and the boy and the ape lived together as companions during the experimental period. The results of this study were published in 1933. (The Ape and the Child by W. N. and L. A. Kellogg.)

Day by day, during the nine months the ape spent with them, the Kelloggs tested, observed and examined every conceivable similarity and difference between the two infants. One of the many tests was drawing on paper with a pencil. There was no special attention focused on this particular test by the experimenters either before or after the results were obtained. The discovery that the chimp, like the child, would scribble if given the chance. These are the only observations made on Gua's scribbling responses, except for the following description of a 'play' pattern seen when Gua was thirteen and a half months old:

"Probably one of the most astonishing and genuinely childlike forms of non- social or self-play in which Gua ever indulged, was to occupy herself with the moisture of her breath which had condensed upon the window pane. She would make marks in the fogged area with the nail of her index finger and also with the end of the finger itself. Of course her tracings had no particular direction or shape; yet the very fact that she would draw them in this fashion was in itself, it seemed to us, an unusually high type of behaviour, comparable probably to early scribbling in children. It cannot be said that she deliberately blew her breath upon the pane for the 'purpose' of making marks, as our observations suggested that the presence of the mist there was incidental to her previous looking through the window. The well-developed tendency to point her finger at new or strange objects no doubt predisposed her to this kind of reaction."



Donald & Gua, 1931

In 1913, Mrs Nadie Kohts began a detailed study which paralleled in many ways the Kelloggs' later child-ape investigation. Despite its early start, however, the Kohts report was not published until 1935, years after the Kelloggs' book had appeared.

The Kohts study differs in one important respect from that of the Kelloggs. The latter studied their chimp and child simultaneously for nine months, whereas Kohts studied her chimpanzee (Joni) for three years, from 1913 to 1916, and her child (Roody) for four years, from 1925 to 1929. Comparisons by Kohts are therefore being made between responses separated in time by a minimum of twelve years. However, one or two points of fundamental importance are made in connection with differences in the development of the drawings of the two species.

Kohts mentions that for the first time that chimpanzee scribbles can change and develop. Joni's early drawing differs considerably from his later one, the simple lines changing to highly characteristic criss-crossing in which bold long lines are crossed with shorter ones, usually at right angles. This later stage of drawing clearly involves a deliberate intersection tendency and is therefore the first recorded example of visual control in ape drawing.

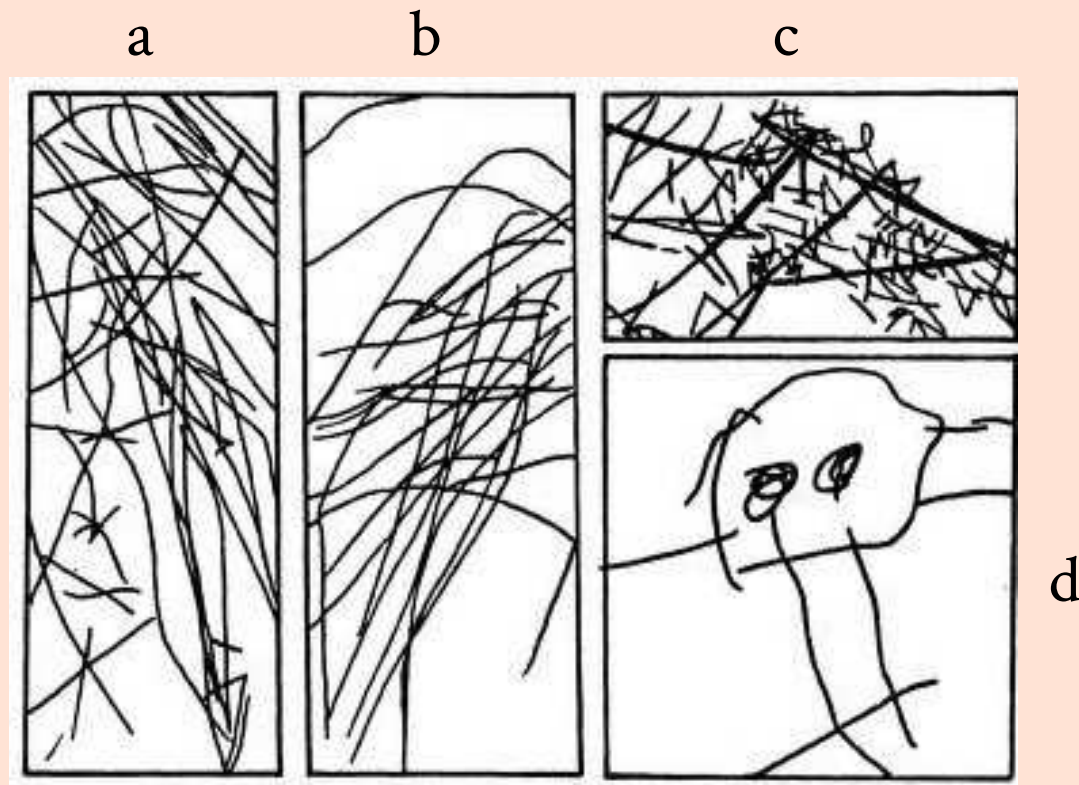


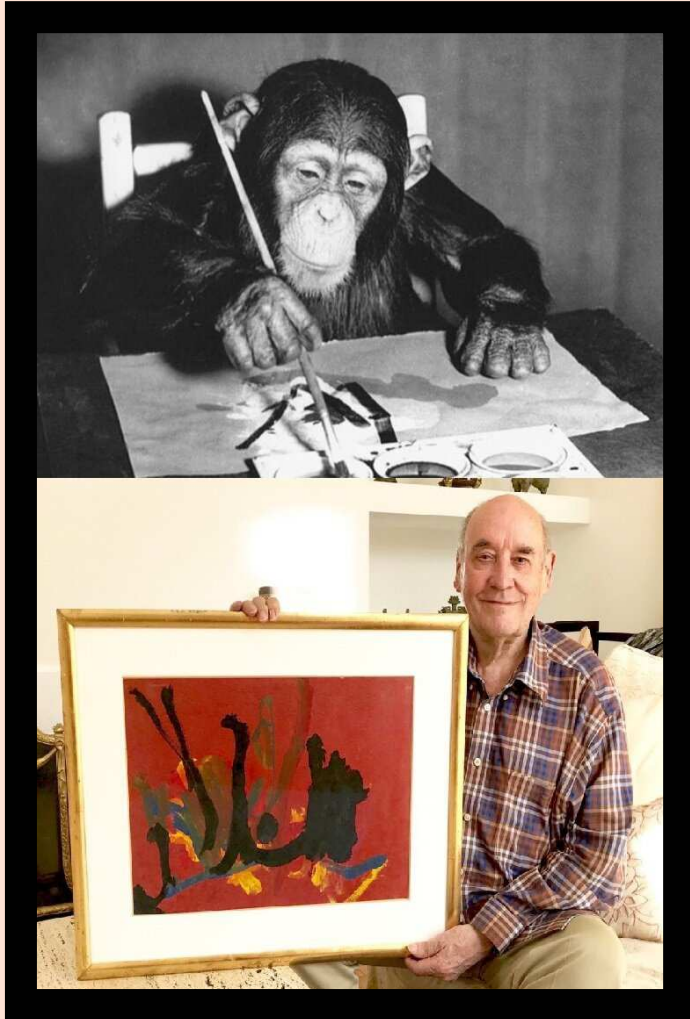
Fig. I. Four drawings from the Russian study by Kohts showing: (a) Early scribble by chimpanzee Joni. (b) Early scribble by the experimenter's son Roody. (c) Later drawing by Joni showing greater control and with distinct intersection tendency, but no imagery, (d) Later drawing by Roody showing development of recognizable image

In 1956, the chimpanzee that would become the face on primate art and pioneer a path for many others, Congo, was brought into care of zoologist, author, and painter, Desmond Morris. Morris said that it took a little time to have Congo become used to captivity, but once he did, he became very interested in paper and pencils. Morris retold the story of Congo's first drawing:

"I held out the pencil. His curiosity led him towards it. Gently I placed his fingers around it and rested the point on the card. Then I let go. As I did so, he moved his arm a little and then stopped. He stared at the card. Something odd was coming out of the end of the pencil. It was Congo's first line. It wandered a short way and then stopped. Would it happen again? Yes, it did, and again, and again. Still staring at the card, Congo began to draw line after line and, as I watched, I noticed that he was beginning to concentrate the lines in one particular region - a part of the card where there was a small ink blot. This meant that, even in this very first scribble, Congo's lines were not just random scratchings... he carried in him the germ, no matter how primitive, of visual patterning."

From that point on, Congo produced picture after picture, and his popularity continued to grow and grow. Congo produced many paintings and drawings and he helped inspire many of other caretakers to allow their primates to explore in art and creation.

Congo painting and Morris with
the painting 60 years later



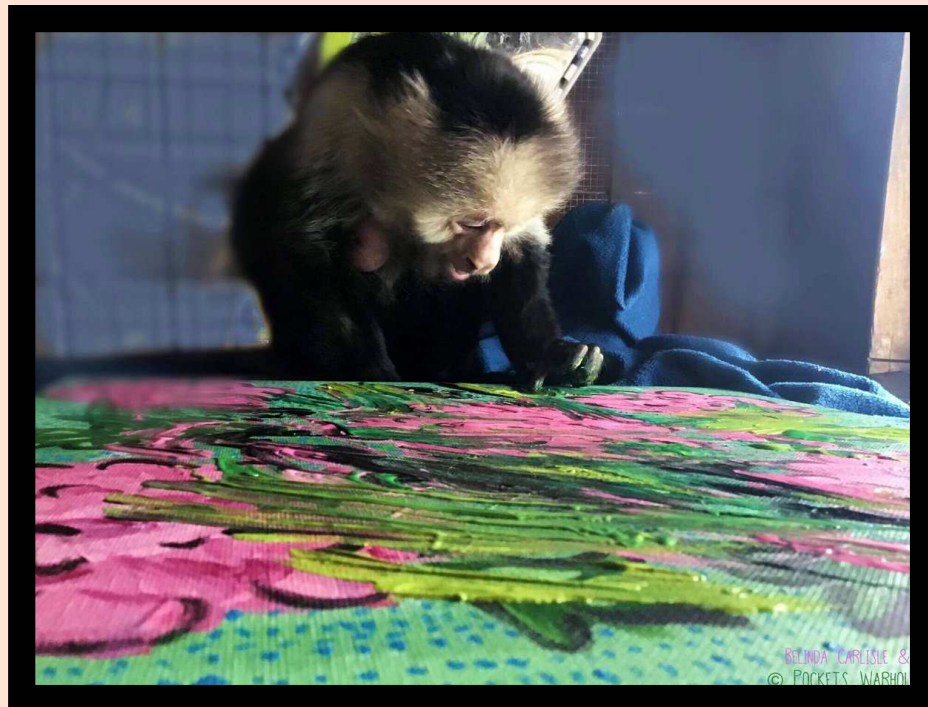
Congo and Morris

A painting by Congo



Nowadays there is a good amount of primates creating art pieces and expressing themselves in a more natural manor. One of the most famous ones right now is a Capuchin monkey named Pockets Warhol.

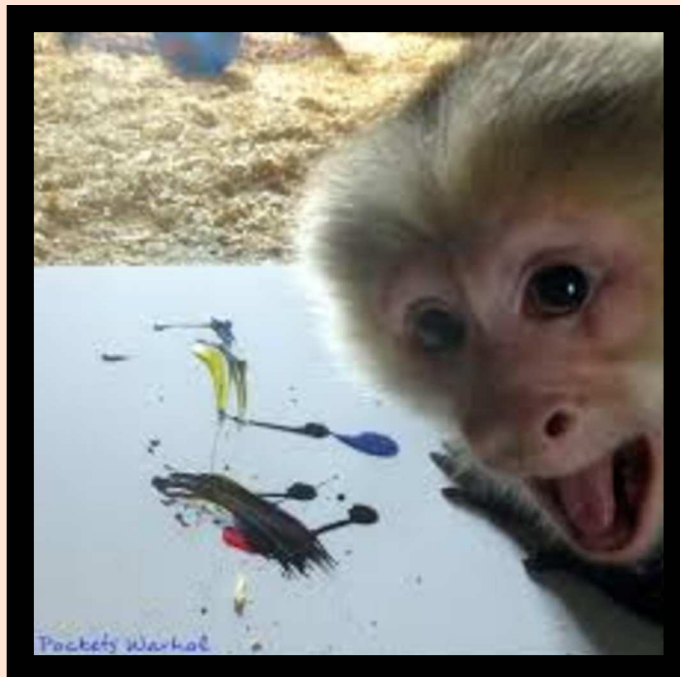
I had the honor of asking Pockets' caretaker some questions about him and his artwork. With direct communication to someone who is very experienced and knowledgeable in primate art, I can truly learn a lot.



Pockets working on a painting

His caretaker says that Pockets picked up on painting as soon as he was introduced to it as a enrichment activity. When talking about the difference between him and other monkeys they said:

" Some of the monkeys I gave artwork to had no interest only pockets wanted to paint. I think that art is something that is intuitive to Pockets as it would be to humans, similar like the cave paintings in France and other areas, some humans painted on the cave walls and others did not. They did not have to learn this, it came naturally as it has for Pockets and many other animals that paint in sanctuaries or zoos."



Having examined the ape material in detail it is now possible to establish just how far it can help us in understanding human art as a biological, or behavioral, phenomenon.

The best examples of primate artists are Congo and Alpha (one who I didn't talk about but made nearly 200 paintings). Both of them were studied intensively and major similarities between these two included (i) a tendency to fill a blank page, but not to scribble outside it, (2) a tendency to mark a central figure, (3) a tendency to balance an offset figure, (4) a tendency to become calligraphically bolder as time went on, starting with simple lines and changing more and more to multiple scribbles.

In the case of Congo, the calligraphic growth of his patterns took him as far along the human developmental path as the 'diagram stage', with the production of complete circles. In addition, several chimpanzees showing a crossing or intersection response. The patterns that primates are able to recognize visually and translate it into motion is truly amazing at shows us that art is biological in some ways.

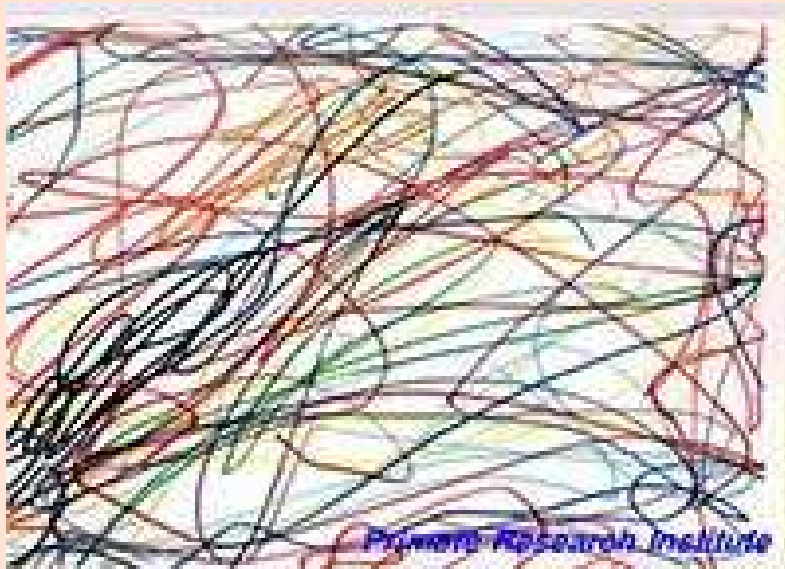
Thank you so much for reading, the next few pages are art pieces done by different primates.



Ai the Chimpanzee



Ai and her caretaker Tetsuro Matsuzawa



Cheeta (Jiggs IV) the Chimpanzee



Cheeta with his caretaker Dan Westfall



Betsy the Chimpanzee



Betsy's caretaker Jon Waters with one of her pieces

Koko the Gorilla



Name of Event, Date

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