



Marc Bekoff Ph.D.
Animal Emotions

ANIMAL BEHAVIOR

When Animals Create Art, What Are They Thinking and Feeling?

Animals artists-in-residence offer insights into how and why they draw.

KEY POINTS

- Some animals enjoy painting and drawing and do it spontaneously with no reward.
- Creating art can be visually contagious among animals of different species, such as a pig and a sheep.
- Painting and drawing styles change with their moods.



Baansky at her easel Source: Joanne Lefson.]

I'm always fascinated by drawings and paintings created by nonhuman animals (animals). Many remind me of the artwork produced by humans, including some world-famous artists, and I often wonder what the animals are thinking and feeling, how might their artwork be an expression of their **wide-ranging creative** and aesthetic senses, and what motivates them.

I've seen a number of pieces of artwork produced by different animals and have a small personal collection of paintings by N'Kisi, an African Gray Parrot, and am especially drawn in by the collection amassed by Joanne Lefson who has been thinking about animal art for a long time and whose animal "artists-in-residence" produce remarkable paintings and drawings. Joanne proudly displays the creations of numerous animals for all to see. Jane Goodall also is intrigued by animal art and what Joanne has done, sees it as a form of enrichment for captive and rescued animals, supports the creation of an "art academy for the animals," and would like to see videos of animals drawing and painting to verify them.¹

Many people remain unaware of animal art so I'm pleased Joanne, one of the few people who has studied it, could answer a few questions about what she's learned about this fascinating topic.²

Marc Bekoff: What animals have done paintings and how have you encouraged their artistic inclinations?

Joanne Lefson: Piggasso and Baansky are the two animals who have painted at Farm Sanctuary SA. When Piggasso saw the brush, she picked it up and wanted to play with it. I encouraged her to keep playing with it which she responded to with enthusiasm. As a sanctuary, I was not going to force any animal to do anything that he/she didn't want to do. I then set up a canvas in her stall, made brushes to fit her mouth and taught her to pick up these brushes, to move towards a canvas and to move the brush across the canvas. Piggasso picked up the idea very quickly, and then developed her own 'style' of actual painting across the canvas.

How her style developed in complexity over the years is testament to her creative brain. I should emphasize that I never taught the pig to paint. I only taught her to pick up a brush and to move it onto the canvas.



Simply Fabulous, by Piggasso Source: Joanne Lefson.

The second painting animal is Baansky, a ram who learnt to paint through watching Piggasso. As a rescued lamb, he would hang out at Piggasso's art studio and watch her paint. I thought nothing of this until one day two years later when a brush accidentally landed in her stall by the sheep shearer (One of Piggasso's brushes were used to clean the hair from the shearers) and that's when Baansky walked up to the brush, picked it up, and tried to 'paint' against the wooden stall wall. It was an incredible revelation for my

team and I. Baansky's interest was nurtured in the same way as Piggasso. Both animals painted on their own inclinations, and while both were rewarded with food in between strokes, they absolutely knew that they would have still been fed/treated the same whether they painted or not.



Piggasso's penguin painting Source: Joanne Lefson

MB: How do you get animals to begin painting and is there any recognizable process or is it more individualistic? Do you think there's some sort of innate drive to do so?

JL: It all begins with positive reinforcement. When the animal picks up the brush, he/she is rewarded. The behaviour encouraged. As this point, I observe the animals' interest and intent to do the behaviour. Over time, I was able to notice that both animals enjoyed the

process, choosing to pick up the brush and paint even when no reward was given. I don't necessarily believe that there was an innate drive to paint as by human definition of the action but more an innate interest and enjoyment to do the behaviour of painting. Developing the artworks was actually my 'job' in the collaboration, but it was only the animal that ever touched the canvas. A good example of this is Piggasso's penguin painting. She delighted in painting this artwork in a horizontal position, but it was my human eye that repositioned it to a portrait position- creating the perfect penguin that Piggasso still had actually painted.



Dancy Duck, by Piggasso Source: Joanne Lefson

MB: What do you think the animals are thinking and feeling as they paint?

JL: I always got that they were enjoying the process. They always knew that they could stop and leave the painting area whenever they wanted to as there are no confined space. On every occasion, it was usually I who wanted to make them stop otherwise they would have kept on painting.

What was also notable was that their moods would change. Sometimes Piggasso would paint fast and in dramatic circular motions. Other times, slow and streaky. Baansky was the same. Their styles changed depending on their moods. I don't believe they knew they were painting as such, that's a human concept, but their creative style and desire to do the act itself, I believe is a testament of their thinking and knowing they were doing something they enjoyed.

MB: Who do you hope to reach with the animals' artwork and why should people be interested in the creative lives of these and other animals?

JL: The wider the audience, the better. Why? The more people who can see the art, the more that can make a connection to the artist and to appreciate their intuitive creativity and intelligence. Why should people be interested in their lives? I think that the more humans can widen their egocentric view of the world, the more opportunity we have to building a better future for ourselves and those beings with whom we share the planet. This is in everyone's best interest.



Source: Joanne Lefson

MB: What are your future plans with your talented animals?

JL: With Piggasso having passed away, and Baansky still missing (and having to assume the worst) I have considered the idea of another animal artist. However, at this stage I don't believe this is the direction in which I will go. I have an incredible collection of Piggasso and Baansky's artworks and at the

beginning stages of developing a global exhibition that showcase these works- along with those of other painting animals.

MB: Are you hopeful that as people learn more about this topic they will come to appreciate what their avian neighbors are saying?

JL: Yes, of course. The purpose behind every Piggasso and Baansky is to create a connection between the artists and the observer. I hope that this will inspire people to see farm animals in a new light and to make kinder (and more sustainable) choices.

References

In conversation with [Joanne Lefson](#). Joanne has engaged in a multitude of vast experiences that continue to shape and inspire her life's path and purpose. As a best-selling author, acclaimed photographer, journalist and former professional golfer, she has embarked on a number of dynamic marketing and creative projects that have mostly centred around her affinity towards animals. Her unique collaborations alongside Piggasso, Oscar, Rupee and Baansky have all been extensively featured on media channels around the world. She has appeared on the Jeremy Vine Show, Good Morning America, Saturday Night Live, ABC News and CNN amongst others. Joanne was also the associate producer of the nominated Cannes documentary, *Moved By Love*, a feature about the Donkey sanctuary in Northern India that Lefson established in 2007 and more recently, director to the highly anticipated documentary 'Piggasso.'

1) via email from Dr. Goodall.

2) Marc Bekoff: Can you give readers some information about your background and how you got interested in animal art? Joanne Lefson: I was born and raised in Cape Town South Africa and grew up surrounded by animals, mainly adopted dogs. When I finished High School, I studied Zoology at Texas A&M University on a golf scholarship. From there, I turned professional golf and later travelled around the world with my dog to promote dog adoption. In 2013 I finally flew back to my roots where I acquired some pristine land and a dream to build an inspiring animal sanctuary for farmed animals. When the barns were built at my Farm Sanctuary SA', and just before the first rescue arrived, I gave some thought as to how I would be able to sustain the project and that's when 'art' arrived into the picture. I figured that if a pig could paint, perhaps the art could sustain the sanctuary from the sales thereof, and if the art was of a high quality, it could inspire people to see their intelligence and individual nature and then make better choices at the supermarket. The seed was sown and I didn't have to try too hard. When my first little rescued pig saw the brush, she picked it up and wanted to play with it.

[The Fascinating and Wide-Ranging Creative Lives of Animals.](#)