

by Joanne Lefson

THE email was from Rafael Nadal's PA. He had heard about the portrait and he just had to have it.

The artist was widely renowned and the painting, entitled Rafa, would be perfect for a blank space on the walls of his tennis academy in Mallorca. Could we oblige? It was a pinch-me moment. I'm a huge tennis fan and one of my sporting highlights was watching him win his tenth French Open title in Paris. And he was interested in one of our pictures — one that had been painted just feet from where I sat. Seriously?

With its bold red, black and yellow colours, it was a very striking piece of art, and within hours it was on its way to its new owner.

But there was something else extra special about the picture: the painter was a pig.

Yes, you read it right. A pig that can paint. A pig named Piggasso.

I guarantee that the story of this astonishing farmyard animal's journey from slaughterhouse to artistic superstardom is one of the most extraordinary you'll ever hear.



Easel life: Piggasso gets a well earned break and a tasty treat from owner Joanne Lefson after another art session

Sceptics may dismiss it as hogwash... but this rescued pig's masterpieces include landscapes, a commission for tennis ace Nadal — and even a portrait of Prince Harry. Introducing

PIGCASSO

PIGCASSO came into my life with her sister Rosie in the summer of 2016 soon after I'd opened the doors of my animal rescue centre for the very first time.

Exhausted and with their tails docked, the two little creatures had never even been able to lie down properly at the factory farm where they had been reared. The next stop for them would have been the abattoir. So their first night on a bed of lucious hay must have been the best sleep of the rest of their lives.

One was gentle and inquisitive with a healthy appetite. The other was more dominant and obsessed with hoovering everything up, with or without nutritional value: dust, flooring, gales, iPhones, you name it.

Although I was no expert, I knew that pigs love to play even more than dogs. I tried to encourage their sporting skills with footballs, rugby balls and Frisbees. It was a disaster. Rosie ate or destroyed everything within a few minutes, blowing her lifetime budget for playground toys in a single day.

The other little pig, who was as yet unnamed, was better behaved but still ended up doing what most pigs do: chewing everything within a trotter's reach. With one exception. The builders who had been working on the sanctuary had cleaned up when they finished but had left behind an old paintbrush, which I casually chucked into our play session one day.

The little pig nudged it, then picked up the brush in her mouth. For 20, maybe 30, seconds she just stood there as if to say: 'What next?' Then she gently dropped it.

That was the day she got her name. I toyed with others, including Franca Bacon and Vincent van Trough. But there was only one it could possibly be: Piggasso.

But I couldn't help wondering: if the pig could pick up the brush that gently, with intent, was it possible she could actually paint? It would certainly keep her entertained. I knew it was a ridiculous idea. But no matter how hard I tried to forget it, Piggasso wouldn't let me. She spent an inordinate amount of time gently playing with that paintbrush.

Like a chicken and its egg, she protected it from harm and depended on it from Rosie as if her life depended on it.

I spoke to an animal behaviourist friend. She clearly thought the concept of a painting pig was crazy, but confirmed what we both knew: that we were dealing with a highly intelligent creature who was naturally curious. So who knew what she could do? I would have to try. I

placed a few brushes in her stall, stood back and held my breath. There was always a risk she'd treat them like tortillas but, to my delight, she picked one up. Holding it firmly in her mouth, she shook her head from side to side and then up and down. I was biased, like any proud mum, but I felt we were off to a flying start.

In our local art shop I filled a trolley with a few small canvases, an adjustable easel and a selection of non-toxic paints. In no time, the sanctuary transitioned from barn to artist's studio. Not just any studio, either, but a painting pig's studio. The only one in the world.

It turned out that picking up the brush from a pot of paint came naturally to Piggasso. Getting her to dance it across a canvas took a bit more time. But, incentivised by a few grapes and subjected to a series of one-on-one lessons involving me on my hands and knees crawling around her barn with a brush in my mouth, she caught on

pretty quickly. And once she had that paintbrush in her mouth, the results were magical.

For weeks and months Piggasso pressed on. She wielded the brush with unbridled enthusiasm, her head moving frantically in all directions. Her designs were at first pretty random, lacking any sense of structure, form or flow. But as she grew, her artworks did too. Was it just my imagination?

Absolutely not. The shadows were becoming shapes: swirling, joyous, heart-lifting shapes. There was order emerging from chaos.

And then on one particular morning she almost hesitated, standing in front of the canvas before making a few strokes in black paint. And then she stopped. It was obvious to me that I was looking at something truly special, even if I couldn't quite define it. It was very, very pleasing to the eye, a picture I'd have paid good money to own.

It was then that the brainwave struck me. Maybe we could sell some of her artworks to keep the sanctuary financially afloat? I wanted to rescue a cow next, chickens after that, maybe a goat, definitely more pigs. But I knew that with all the vet and food bills I couldn't afford it. A kind friend had given me a loan to set up the

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centre but we needed a revenue stream other than people's kindness and charity. I had no idea what her paintings would, or could, be worth. A few pounds? Anything at all? I consulted Harold, the friend whose extraordinary generosity had helped me get the sanctuary going. He was a shrewd entrepreneur, as well as an art and animal lover. 'Price them at whatever you want,' he told me.

three months, double the price! As it turned out, I didn't have to make that decision. A few days later, two American visitors to the beautiful area of Franschoek, near Cape Town, where I live, turned up and asked if they could see the wonderful painting pig.

They were fascinated by our story and asked if they could buy one of Piggasso's artworks. 'How much?' they said. 'Casht totally on the hop. I didn't know what to say. 'Make an offer,' I said. 'Five hundred dollars?' 'Done!' That would be enough to sustain the sanctuary for weeks.

AFTER that, things moved fast. I decided that when it came to my genius pig's colour selection, I needed to lend a hand.

Unlike humans and several other primates who have trichromatic vision, pigs have dichromatic vision. Unable to differentiate red spectrum light, their colour perception is limited.

Not only that, I also needed to stop her, after she'd painted a beautiful shape, completely covering the page in her enthusiasm for it. From now on we would be a partnership, an artistic collaboration, and we never looked back. As Piggasso painted, I would watch from a distance. If I saw something interesting unfold, I would make a sound with a simple clicker. This was the cue for her to drop the brush and step away from the canvas. She got the hang of it at once. Then, while she was rewarded with a few grapes and other treats, I'd decide what colour or



The Blue Period: Piggasso grasps the paintbrush between her teeth to work on one of her masterpieces, which sold for £20,000

...world's most unlikely artist whose paintings have raised \$1million!



Hair-brushing: Piggasso's colourful portrait of Prince Harry



were those when she'd make incredible shapes all by herself — a heart, an initial, a number — and I would stop her, asking myself what more it needed.

A red stroke to depict a mouth? I'd grab the red acrylic, position the pot in the right spot and make sure to stop her a second after she'd made that short 'smile'.

A perfect snowman with two eyes, a butterfly, a self-portrait: they seemed too good to be true, and I knew sceptics would raise an eyebrow. I began to record her painting the artworks on my iPhone, showing that I had no hand in the painting.

A finger on the clicker, yes, but never in the paint. Apart from changing orientation, the only time I ever touched the canvas was to trim the work at the end, name it and counter-sign it after she had pressed her paint-covered snout on it — her own special signature.

Each small step felt like a long jump in the right direction, but Piggasso always knew she was the boss. If she felt like sleeping in for a few days, she did. If she wanted to eat canvas for breakfast, I had no problem with it.

Priority No 1 was ensuring she could live out her days as nature intended: hay below, sunshine above, compassion everywhere. I

shopped for her, set the stage for her, cleaned up after her and cooked for her.

There were times when she would be there, Caesar-like in all her 40st glory, and look at me with a raised eyebrow as if to say: 'All hail me! More grapes please.'

All WE went along, I posted a few images online, one of which found its way to a news agency. They called, saying they wanted to know more. I sent them more images and provided some background.

What followed was like a feeding frenzy in a piranha pond. On one social media platform Piggasso got 10 million views in under nine hours. And that was just the start.

She made headlines around the world and her name was heard on all the leading networks. In Selfridges in London she featured on their in-store big screens.

The next big break came when I received an email from the Swiss watchmaker Swatch. Would Piggasso be interested in designing their 2019 Limited Edition?

Suddenly, everybody wanted a Piggasso, and it turned out they were prepared to pay thousands for the privilege. Some bought her art as an investment, others

because they cared deeply about animal welfare and wanted to support my battle to highlight the appalling plight of so many animals, destined for supermarket shelves, that are raised in cruel, inhumane conditions.

When one of her paintings sold for \$20,000 (£20,000), she established herself as the biggest-selling non-human artist in history, beating a chimp from London Zoo named Congo in the 1990s. The real value of what she does can be seen in the many lives she has now saved: cows, donkeys, an old cart-horse, goats, sheep, more pigs and hundreds of dogs.

Piggasso has now raised more than \$1million (£780,000) for the sanctuary, which funds food, staff wages, vet bills, educational material and so much more.

Visitors are able to see for themselves the hundreds of chickens we have saved from intensive factories, where they would have been confined in wire cages barely bigger than their own bodies.

Thanks to her, all these creatures can thrive for years to come, and my sanctuary is safe. How could I ever have known that when I rescued her all those years ago, she would end up rescuing me?

WHEN my mother turned 69, I asked what she wanted. She said: 'I'd like a Piggasso.'

I was surprised because she had never mentioned it before. Doubtly so when she said that she would like two: one with multiple strokes of a mustard yellow, the other with olive green. Both to have a smear of black on top of the respective colours, and both signed. I called out to Piggasso and she walked to the canvas, picked up the brush and started to paint. A few minutes later she had completed and signed the two artworks.

Each had the base colours as per my mother's wish, but it was the black stroke on top that stopped me in my tracks. Piggasso had painted a perfect six on the first canvas, and a nine on the other. Goosebumps! When I shared the video at Mum's birthday meal later it was the ultimate show-stopper. How on earth had she known?

ON ANOTHER occasion we were busy with a painting and it just wasn't working. In a last-ditch effort to cheer it up I added some orange to the pot. She went on to do two or three abrupt strokes, and then called the morning quits. I sent the image to my mum to ask if I should give it to my uncle. Did she think it looked a bit like him?

Mum's reply landed in my inbox with just two words: 'Prince Harry!' It was the day that the famous TV interview between him, his wife Meghan and Oprah Winfrey had aired, and my mum was spot on. There, in clear view, were Harry's blue eyes, the orange hair and that broad, boyish smile. I posted it on social media, and it sold for \$3,000 (£2,700) to an art collector.

The sceptics might dismiss it as hogwash, but how do you explain it? I don't know any of the answers. But what I do know is that living and working with Piggasso has taught me many things that defy human explanation. What a girl! In the words of Farmer Hoggett, owner of the even more famous 'sheep-pig' Babe: 'That'll do, pig. That'll do.'

ADAPTED FROM PIGCASSO: THE PAINTING PIG THAT SAVED A SANCTUARY BY JOANNE LEFSON

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