Opening extract from

The Artistic Ape Three Million Years of Art

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Introduction

THE DEFINITION OF ART

In my previous books I have focused on the ways in which human beings are similar to other animals. I have looked at our primeval behaviour patterns and the manner in which these have survived in the modern world – our sexual and parental activities, our feeding and drinking, our grooming and sleeping, and our playing and fighting. When doing this, I deliberately ignored those aspects of our lives in which we differ from other species, but now I want to turn the spotlight on one of the most exciting ways in which we have manifested ourselves as a unique animal – on the complex activity that we refer to as art.

The evolution of art has, for me, been the most fascinating of all human trends – more than any other activity it has set us apart from other species. In the past, this evolution has proved extremely difficult to define, especially for those specialists who write on the subject. In most cases, these experts are far too close to their subject to see it clearly as a general pattern of human behaviour. The result is that they offer narrow definitions that usually exclude huge segments of artistic activity. They then argue among themselves as to what is art and what is not.

'...the artistic impulse first arose in the tribal societies of our remote human ancestors...'

The cause of this confusion stems from the fact that specialised students of aesthetics nearly always lack any knowledge of human biology and evolution. So they are incapable of seeing how the artistic impulse first arose in the tribal societies of our remote human ancestors, and how it then went on to flower into the amazing phenomenon that we see all around us today. Only if we first examine and understand these biological roots of art, can we then go on to fully appreciate all the subtleties and nuances of the advanced forms of aesthetic expression. It is this examination that I will attempt in the present book.

First, what are the more general definitions of art that have been proposed in the past? There are literally hundreds, most of which are virtually meaningless. One describes art as 'the making of something to please the eye'. Another states that art is 'a creative operation of the intelligence'. Yet another that art is 'everything that is created by man and appeals to his aesthetic sense'. It is Shakespeare, in 1606, who gives us the first useful description of art, when he makes King Lear speak of art 'that can make vile things precious'. In other words, art is a transformative process. Shakespeare is telling us that art is an activity that allows us to take the unpleasantly mundane and make it remarkable and wonderful.

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In the following century Goethe comments that in art 'the best is good enough'. In 1814 John Keats adds that 'the excellence of every art is its intensity', and Elizabeth Barrett Browning asks 'what is art, but life on a larger scale?'. All three are emphasising the fact that art improves the quality of something and makes it a more powerful experience. With these definitions we are beginning to see a consensus of opinion that art is something that takes the everyday experience and somehow magnifies it. The French artist Jean-François Millet makes this more explicit when he says that art is 'treating of the commonplace with the feeling of the sublime'. In 1864 Gustave Flaubert was even more dramatic, commenting that 'Human life is a sad show... ugly, heavy and complex. Art has no other end... than to conjure away the burden and bitterness.' A few decades later, Oscar Wilde offers his conclusion that 'art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium'.

Moving into the 20th century, the art critic Clive Bell tells us that art is the means 'by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy'. And in her book *What is Art For?* Ellen Dissanayake expresses the same idea, but in more sober terms, when she says that 'art can be called an instance of making special'.

To sum up all these views, art can be seen as a human activity that rewards us by allowing us to experience an accentuated version of our otherwise humdrum existence. It makes the commonplace more impressive and the boring more entertaining. It also makes the mild more intense and the threadbare more elegant.

For thousands of years our ancestors employed this device as an accessory attached to other activities. Implements, weapons, clothing and buildings were all taken beyond the purely practical and made more complicated than was necessary for them to function efficiently. These elaborations made them seem more important because they stood out from the rest. Their visual intensity, the skill involved in

One of the surprising features of a picture-making session with Congo was the intensity with which he worked. He received no food reward for his efforts. Making the drawings was its own reward for him. He was not particularly interested in examining the finished work, but the act of creating it fascinated him. Furthermore he knew when he had finished. If encouraged to continue he would refuse, but if given another piece of paper he was immediately happy to start again on a new work. On one or two occasions, when for some urgent reason the experimenter had to stop the session, attempts to interfere with an unfinished work were met with a screaming fit and, on one occasion, a full-blown temper tantrum. It seemed extraordinary that a chimpanzee should be so upset when attempts were made to stop an activity as specialised as picture making. Why on earth should it have such a powerful appeal for an animal that shows no inclination to perform anything like it in the wild?

Congo's sessions were carried out in a quiet room with no distractions, but on one occasion he was filmed to provide a permanent record. He also demonstrated his picture-making abilities on live television. The fact that he was prepared to concentrate on this unusual activity in the presence of a film or television crew was remarkable. As he grew older and his 'family' ties became stronger, his reaction to the intrusion of strangers became more hostile. It reached the point where, if a visitor wanted to watch Congo at work, the artist was more likely to draw blood than pictures. Fortunately, by this time a large number of pictures had been produced and the Congo experiment had provided some important new information.

The pictures made by Congo belong to three main categories: drawings on blank sheets of paper, drawings on pieces of paper bearing pre-existing geometric shapes and paintings on coloured cards. The drawings on plain paper were done mostly at the start of the experiment to familiarise Congo with the procedure. The drawings done on pre-marked paper were introduced to test Schiller's claims with Alpha. Five months after the investigation had begun, the paintings were introduced to examine Congo's reactions to colours. From the first moment that he handled a paintbrush it was clear that Congo found painting much more exciting than pencil drawing. The reason seemed to be that for the same amount of physical effort he was able to create a wide, bold stroke instead of a thin line. It was a case of 'magnified reward', where an action produces a greater reaction than expected.

'From the first moment that he handled a paintbrush it was clear that Congo found painting much more exciting than pencil drawing.'

The earlier studies of primate picture making had all been done with drawings. Congo was the first non-human to create paintings. His very first one was produced on 17 May 1957 and he went on to paint many more, the last one being made on 9 November 1958. The early ones were a little hesitant, as he became familiar with this new medium, and the late ones, although bold, were beginning to show signs of boredom with the whole procedure. But in between these two extremes was a period when Congo reached a peak of visual control where every brushstroke was expertly placed exactly where he wanted it, with little or no accidental elements intruding. Congo's middle-period paintings represent the most extraordinary examples of non-human art ever produced.

The method employed with Congo's painting was very similar to that used with his drawing. He sat in the same chair and at first he was given all his paints together in a tray of small containers. He found the colours so fascinating that he spent most of his time mixing one colour with another, rather than applying them to the card.

Right Congo is seen painting with a primitive grip of the brush (top) and with a sophisticated grip (bottom).

The paintings

As already mentioned, Congo's paintings went through three phases. In the first phase he was getting to know this new medium and some of his marks were accidental. However, by the second painting session he had already begun to take control of the brushes and was able to make a simple kind of bold fan pattern. His third session took place on live television and, despite the distractions of a TV studio, he was sufficiently excited by the act of painting to produce two pictures.

It was not until his 14th painting session, on 22 July 1957, that Congo showed he had fully conquered this new medium and was painting with complete confidence. Now, as one watched him at work, it was clear that every mark, every line and every spot were boldly placed exactly where he wanted them. His original, simple fan pattern had now become a complex one. Every line was carefully positioned in relation to every other line, and the whole composition was designed to fit into the space available for it, and also to fill that space.

On the following day, when he was again painting live on television, he was so sure of himself that he produced a large, complex fan pattern. It even had a new feature in the form of bunches of stippled marks across its base. And there seemed to be a single centrally placed black spot, although this could have been an accident. In August he started varying his main fan pattern. In one instance he grabbed his grooming brush and dragged it through the wet paint, creating a central area of fine lines. He also added heavy horizontal lines across the base of his fan pattern and a cluster of five small white spots at its very centre.

By his 22nd session, on 2 September 1957, Congo had reached a peak of bold control. Now there was not a single accidental mark on the paper. Every line was exactly where he wanted it, and he used the space available to him with the confidence of a professional human artist. He was playing with his fan pattern, tilting it to one side as it progressed, creating a stippled fan bundle or splitting it in two. (Of the ten paintings he created that day, all are now in private collections in Europe and North America, including one that was obtained by Pablo Picasso and another by Joan Miró.)

In the weeks that followed, Congo continued to produce abstract paintings of a quality not seen, before or since, in any non-human animal. Each time he would explore some new variation. He created a lop-sided fan, a subsidiary fan, a fan with a curved base, a split fan with a central yellow spot, a split fan with a central black spot and a split fan with a central blue mark. He was enjoying that most human of aesthetic games – thematic variation. Those who watched him work during this phase simply sat in wonder, hardly able to accept what their eyes were witnessing.

Below Congo's painting shows a lop-sided fan pattern, 1957.

Right Congo's painting shows a complex fan pattern, 1957.