

Ramona's Painting

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Elephants have been taught to paint by the Russian émigré artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid¹ in part as a way to provide a living for elephants put out of work by the closing of the local timber industries and in part as a sophisticated and amusing art world project.

The elephants paint by gripping the brush with their trunk. A picture of Ramona painting is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Ramona painting.

Ramona is an Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) living in an elephant refuge in Bali.

Ramona was born in Way Kambas National Park in South Sumatra on February 27, 1995. Her mother Karsih was an entertainer there, giving elephant rides and performing simple circus tricks for tourists. Her father was a wild bull elephant, whose name and whereabouts are unknown ... Ramona began her painting career in 1999 under the guidance of renowned New York-based artists Vitaly Komar & Alexander Melamid. Within two days, Ramona was deep in concentration, confidently applying paint to canvas ... (from the Novica website ²).

Ramona's paintings have been sold at Christie's auction house in New York. Elephants' paintings currently for sale are shown at the Novica website ², which is associated with National Geographic. The paintings sell for hundreds of dollars. The Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project website ³ also shows many paintings by elephant artists. On perusing the paintings for sale I was struck by the painting in Figure 2.



Figure 2. A painting by Ramona.

This is the very painting shown in process in the photograph in Figure 1. The painting seems to me to be a drawing of an elephant in profile looking to the right, just the way Ramona is facing in the photograph. The elephant's trunk is in red and extends down to the bottom right of the painting. To the left of the trunk are an eye and mouth in purple. In the left center of the painting is the elephant's large ear, also in purple.

The painting raises several interesting questions, among them:

Is the painting a picture of an elephant?

Is the painting a work of art?

Does Ramona know she is painting a picture (of an elephant)?

Is Ramona conscious?⁴

Which of these questions are meaningful? Answerable?

How would we know what the answer is to any of the above?⁵

Notes

1. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *When Elephants Paint*, HarperCollins, New York, 2000.
2. <http://www.novica.com>
3. <http://www.elephantart.com>
4. For interesting introductions to questions of animal consciousness and intelligence see the PBS Nature series on Inside the Animal Mind at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/animalmind> and *Minds of Their Own: Thinking and Awareness in Animals* by Lesley J. Rogers, Westview Press, 1998.
5. Thanks to Peter Kugel for his helpful suggestions.