

THE MAYOR GALLERY

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CONGO THE CHIMPANZEE

THE BIRTH OF ART

3 – 19 DECEMBER 2019



Congo using the primitive grip, 1956 © Desmond Morris

“It is the work of Congo, not that of the prehistoric cave artists, that can truly be said to represent the birth of art.”

– Desmond Morris, 2005.

Surrealist artist and zoologist Desmond Morris is selling his private collection of paintings and drawings by Congo the chimpanzee, with whom he famously worked from 1956-1959, observing and recording the ape's interest in creating 'art for art's sake' and sharing his findings with the public through books and television.

The Mayor Gallery's exhibition of some 55 paintings, pastels and by the chimp will be the last opportunity to acquire work by Congo, who made some 400 artworks during the experimental three-year period. Morris, whose research methods were extremely rigorous, worked with a number of other apes over the years, but none exhibited Congo's ability to focus. "No other apes were controlling the mark making and varying the patterns as he was," Morris recalls. "I originally picked Congo out as one of the more boisterous at the zoo and felt that his strong personality would respond well to focused periods of working together."

Morris' efforts were rewarded and approximately 70 paintings were created during what he describes as Congo's 'peak phase', in which the chimp began to experiment with balancing forms, creating repeated motifs and elaborating on what had become his familiar 'fan' pattern. Morris saw this progress as evidence of primates' – and therefore man's - innate urge to make and play with visual patterns and was able to observe the intense pleasure that Congo derived from the sessions. A selection of paintings from this period were exhibited at the ICA, driving a flurry of interest amongst collectors including Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Roland Penrose, Herbert Read and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Now 91 years old, Morris has continued to explore the subject, publishing *The Artistic Ape* in 2013, in which he brought his studies of animal picture-making up to date, including substantial material on Congo, but also dealing with other animals, and tracing the evolution of human artistic endeavour over three million years. His first volume on the subject of ape art, *The Biology of Art* (1962) was the first book to deal with this topic. His book *The Naked Ape* (1967) was translated into 29 languages, hailed as a landmark study on human evolution and was listed among the top 100 best-sellers of all time.

The gallery's exhibition *Ape Artists of the 50s* (2005), which showed the work of Congo alongside two other primates, was held in the same year as the momentous Bonhams auction of Congo's work, in which three of the chimp's paintings were sold for £14,400, more than 20 times their estimate.

Morris says, of his decision to sell all but one of his favourite paintings at this time, 'I am holding onto the serious, scientific research notes that I made during my years working with Congo, but, at 91 years old, I now would rather that the paintings and drawings be made available to other collectors, to whom I hope they will bring as much pleasure as they have to me.'

To accompany the exhibition, the Mayor Gallery is publishing a 200 copy, limited edition Catalogue Raisonné, illustrating Congo's entire output, which will be on sale during the show, with all catalogues signed by Morris.

Press enquiries: Amy Baker at The Mayor Gallery: amy@mayorgallery.com

Opening times: Monday – Friday 10 am – 5.30 pm