

ELEPHANT ART

Well is it art, or isn't it? Of course, this is a question that has provoked a huge amount of discussion and an equal amount of controversy over the years. Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain', a urinal he submitted for exhibition in 1917, was quickly rejected on the basis that it was not art, but the ensuing uproar, particularly from the Dada movement that rose to challenge perceptions of art, soon committed it to history. In 2004, a group of 500 people eminent in the field of art voted 'Fountain' as the most influential artwork of the 20th century. Have a look at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcel_Duchamp for more on this fascinating artist.

Duchamp, at least as far as I could find anyway, had precious little to do with elephants but I do feel there are reminiscences of the Dada movement when I first saw an example of the stimulus offered to you here, that of elephant art. Here's one link to an example - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oU-uegsu6Js> – but there are lots of others around. Check out one website that deals in elephant art for some background - <http://www.exoticworldgifts.com/servlet/-strse-Elephant-Paintings/Categories> - and also one website that calls itself the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project here - <http://www.elephantart.com/catalog/>.

So, plenty of stuff to go at here then. The first of the three elephant art videos I would suggest might be most suitable for Year 6 onwards, simply because the main thrust of the video is whether this is actually art or not. There are some very interesting points made – that the elephant art, for example, has a sense of 'elephantiness' – I'm still not sure if I've spelt that correctly – and that one particular elephant is the Picasso of the elephant art world.

Questions I might ask in response to this are:

- Could you tell if an elephant has painted a painting?
- Do you think the elephant is aware of what he or she is doing?
- What's the important thing about an elephant? (See Margaret Wise Brown's book, 'The Important Book'. Thanks to Steve Williams for finding that one.)

The second of the three videos is really engaging for children from Year 1 upwards, I've found, simply because it's something they're familiar with – an elephant – doing something they're also familiar with – painting – but they would probably never have connected the two. It's quite fascinating to see the elephant not just paint a series of brush strokes, but to paint an elephant better than I could and once the children have seen something like that, they are really ready to talk about it. Here's a few things you might like to ask should the opportunity arise:

- Is elephant art any different to art that humans make?
- Is there such a thing as 'good art' and 'bad art'?
- If an elephant can make art that sells for lots of money, can anyone?

There never was much money in philosophy, so where's the paintbrush...?