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Horse takes up painting, has works exhibited

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Horse began painting after its owner handed it a brush dipped in watercolors
- Its original pieces have sold for \$900 and as high as \$2,200
- Cholla's paintings have been featured in art exhibits from San Francisco to New York
- The horse's works will go on display in a juried art competition in Italy

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He won't be going abroad, however, to bask in the aura of great Italian masters.

Instead, this artist will remain at home, contemplating his next masterpiece while gnawing on his paintbrushes -- between mouthfuls of hay.

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Cholla is a mustang-quarter horse mix whose paintings have been featured in art exhibits from San Francisco to New York and now overseas.

His creation, "The Big Red Buck," was selected for exhibit in the 3rd International Art Prize Arte Laguna, October 18-November 2, Mogliano Veneto, Italy.

More than 3,000 [paintings](#), sculptures and photographs were entered in this year's competition.

In painting, there were 1,770 from artists around the world. The international contest is organized by the Italian cultural association MoCA in collaboration with Arte Laguna and is aimed at promoting contemporary art.

A spokeswoman for the competition acknowledges there was some consternation among the judges when they realized Cholla was of the equine species.

"We have to admit that we did not expect the application of a horse," Arte Laguna spokeswoman Cristina Del Favero said in response to an e-mail inquiry by The Associated Press.

"At first we were very perplexed, but we subsequently looked for more information about Cholla on the Web and the jury decided to accept his application by considering his prestige in the USA."

While Cholla was not eligible to win any cash prizes, "he obtained a special mention," Del Favero said.

Viviana Siviero, president of the four-member jury, said she at first was suspicious of Cholla's entry.

"All of us knew that Cholla is a horse. When the organization informed me about that, I was at first doubtful and incredulous," Siviero said, adding she researched Cholla to ensure his authenticity. "Sincerely, some of the jurors were perplexed or even angry. Some others were amused about it."

In selecting his work as an honorable mention, Siviero said, the jury "did not value ... his gesture nor his chromatic choice, since it has to be considered the result of casualty."

Cholla's acceptance in the juried show prompted interest from another gallery in Venice, Italy, where a solo exhibit of Cholla artwork is being planned for next spring.

Rosalba Giorcelli, curator at Giudecca 795 Art Gallery, said she and her associate were curious, after seeing Cholla's work, why he was not eligible for a special award in the upcoming Arte Laguna.

"We could not understand until we browsed the Web and found out he was ... a horse!" she said in an e-mail. "The more we were learning about Cholla, the more we were thrilled and excited about offering a solo exhibit."

Renee Chambers, Cholla's owner and assistant, says his international acclaim proves his artistic talents.

"Yes, it's a novelty that a horse can paint," she said. "But it's not about novelty anymore. It's about his validation as an artist."

Cholla's painting career began by accident, Chambers said. He'd follow her around when she'd paint the corral each year, and one day her husband quipped, "You should get that horse to paint the fence."

Chambers instead tacked a piece of paper to a railing, bought some watercolors, mixed them up, and handed a brush to Cholla, who gripped it in his teeth and stroked the paper.

"He's been painting ever since," she said.

If art, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, then Cholla -- named after a species of cacti found in the desert southwest -- certainly has a following and a growing reputation.

John Yimin, an art lover and critic, wrote on his Web site, www.outsiderart.info: "The brush stroke Cholla uses to get his vision down on paper ... the watercolor's dance ... and especially the fascinating completion of the works ... Cholla clearly grabs me and holds me as I watch him paint with the fire of Pollock and fixed gaze of Resnick."

Yimin said he started his site "to connect to artists and build them a popular place to show their work."

"As for Cholla, when I first got the submission, I had to bend the rules a little because I don't accept submissions from agents, dealers or anyone other than the artist. Because I remember 'Mister Ed,' I took a look and figured I'd see some dopey horse tied to a tree with a paintbrush taped to its forelock," he said, referencing the 1960s TV comedy about a talking horse.

"Instead, even in a small frame video, I saw intelligence, purpose and a differing vision exposed to me for the first time. I was and remain awed," Yimin said.

The 23-year-old bay has only been painting for four years, but original pieces have sold for \$900 and as high as \$2,200, said Chambers, who busies herself as Cholla's agent.

He exhibited this summer during a Western show at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, and will have a solo show at The Art Cafe in Davison, Michigan, in November.

Is work created by an animal truly art?

"We live in a world with constantly shifting boundaries and obviously expanding definitions," said Kurt Kohl, curator at The Art Cafe.

"The horse is creating art on the level of a very young child," he said. "There may not be a lot of thought behind the process, but one could also ask the same question about Pollock or De Kooning or Rothko."

"The action of the art is in the viewers response to it," Kohl said. "And that's why we decided to hang it on our walls."

Siviero agreed.

"Cholla's work is to be considered as an action, a product that gives life to emotions, controlled neither by the horse nor by the observer," she said.

Comparing Cholla to Jackson Pollock, an abstract painter, she said, "Pollock preferred to work on a wall or on a floor than at easel, since he liked hard surfaces better.

"In a way, Cholla is more impressionist, at least in his habit, since he finds his inspiration in the open air, next to his portable easel."

In 2005, Cholla was featured on "The Martha Stewart Show." The lifestyles diva proclaimed, "Cholla painted a beautiful horse drinking from a champagne glass, a flute, making a toast."

Chambers, a tiny woman trained in ballet, shrugs off naysayers who may think Cholla is a gimmick.

"It's an innate ability he has," she said. "He wants to paint. It's in him."

Chambers prefers to believe Cholla's talents are evidence of the wonders of evolution.

"I totally believe in the evolution's creative energy," she said. "If we can have it, why not an animal? Art is an expression of intelligence and Cholla's highly intelligent.

"It's not a stupid pet trick."

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