



Art is BIG at Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden

To most, a blank canvas, several vivid shades of non-toxic paint, a large bag of fresh produce, and a 3,500 pound rhino have no correlation.

However, these are all items used to create unique works of art at Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden in Evansville, Indiana! Greater one-horned rhino Mechi, affectionately referred to as the Zoo's Picasso in training, began painting shortly after her arrival to Mesker Park Zoo a year ago. Zookeepers introduced painting as a form of enrichment to add variety and stimulation to Mechi's daily routine. It is obvious she enjoys her art enrichment sessions by her quick response when given the opportunity to paint.

Zookeepers use an animal training technique referred to as "target training" to aid in accomplishing everyday tasks such as shifting animals from exhibit space to behind the scenes housing. Target training is a very useful technique not only for everyday animal care, but also during veterinary exams and procedures. To target train, the zookeeper will first ask the animal to find their target. When the animal finds the target, the zookeeper will whistle, confirming to the animal that they have exhibited the correct behavior. This whistle is called a bridge. Immediately following the bridge, the animal receives positive affirmation (fresh produce in Mechi's case) as a reward for their actions.

Mechi's painting sessions utilize the target training technique. Paint is applied to a canvas and Mechi is told to target. She finds the target with her mouth and her prehensile lip acts as a brush, quickly moving paint around the canvas, creating colorful swirls and designs. The zookeeper will bridge and reward her until she is finished with her painting. This abstract form of art is not only an enjoyable hobby for Mechi, it is also snack time. While Mechi is painting, she munches on her rewards of fresh produce such as carrots, bananas, and sweet potatoes.

Mechi's paintings are very coveted among the staff at Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden. They have been made into Zoo stationary, given as special thank you gifts to donors, and raffled to benefit Indian rhino conservation. Painting will continue to be a form of enrichment for Mechi, and her technique will be showcased to the public on special occasions throughout the winter months. A limited supply of Mechi's original artwork, prints, and cards based on her work will be sold in the Zoo's gift shop, beginning on November 26 or "Black Friday."

Mechi Fun Facts:

- Upon studying her paintings, many people have found what looks to be a rhino in them! Zoo staff jokingly call these her "self portraits."

- Like Grandma Moses, Mechi blossomed at an advanced age as an artist, creating her first painting at the age of 24.
- Mechi was wild caught in Nepal after her mother was poached. She was donated to the National Zoo in Washington D.C. by a prince in the Mechi zone of Nepal. Directly before her transfer to Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden, Mechi lived at the White Oaks Conservation Center in Yulee, Florida.
- Mechi's favorite treats are pumpkin and watermelon.
- Mechi responds positively to bath time, especially when being scrubbed with her scrub brush.
- Recently greater one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) populations in India have begun to recover due to strict protection and the species has been upgraded from Endangered to Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.TM The greater one-horned rhino's future in the wild is not secure and is still in need of ongoing protection.
- Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden makes a yearly donation to the North American Save the Rhinos Campaign, which is managed by the International Rhino Foundation

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