

Lost Art

Jane Goodall was taking a young naturalist wanna-be into the wilds of Borneo. They ran across a colony of gibbons. “Stay here,” she told the naturalist. “and see if they make tools. Meanwhile, I’m going to go off and see if I can find the never-before-observed Asian chimpanzee.” The naturalist hid behind a large rock and observed the colony. To his surprise, he noticed that hidden in the trees were rectangles hanging from the branches, composed of many exquisite ceramic tiles. Some looked like abstract geometric shapes. There was a tessellation of mangos. One was what could only be called a gibbon Madonna with Child. To hell with tools! Some gibbon was making art! But which one? He noticed that one of the gibbons lingered around the art, sometimes adjusting their positions. This must be the artist. But could he prove it? He shot the gibbon with a tranquilizing dart, dragged him back to camp, and put him in a cage with every possible tool and material to make ceramic tiles. But the gibbon just screamed. When Goodall returned, she was outraged. “You idiot! What do you think you’re doing? No gibbon is going to exhibit normal behavior unless he is in his own niche, his natural environment.” Chastened, the naturalist brought the gibbon back to his colony, and as soon as he and Goodall hid behind the rock, the gibbon started creating a new piece. As the hundreds of tiles took shape, it became clear that they formed a likeness of the naturalist, hideous with fangs. Goodall was not in the least surprised, for she knew: Gibbon in niche, and he’ll make a tile.

