

# Preserving Koko's Legacy through Portraiture



Article by Elizabeth Sobieski

Before the esteemed British portrait painter Richard Stone entered Koko's quarters at the Gorilla Foundation near San Francisco, the charismatic and linguistically legendary ape had been introduced to Stone through photographs of the artist and catalogs of his exhibitions.



One catalog cover depicted Stone's 1992 portrait of Queen Elizabeth II seated upon a throne and attired in ceremonial robes. When the artist entered Koko's home, the L-shaped building where the renowned gorilla lived, Koko seated herself upon a large blue drum and cloaked a blanket in her favorite color, red, around her nearly 300-pound muscular form, and signed, "Koko Queen": Koko is the queen.



And she was. Koko, who died in her sleep on June 18, 2018, just days before what would have been her 47<sup>th</sup> birthday,

served as a global leader, an ambassador for her endangered species and the entire nonhuman animal world, and literally a 'spokesperson,' using a modified form of American Sign Language (ASL), the predominant system of communication employed by most deaf American humans, to express a thousand words, while understanding spoken English.



The Gorilla Foundation was incorporated in 1976, just four years after Dr. Francine “Penny” Patterson and Dr. Ronald H. Cohn began to work with the one-year-old Koko, in order to learn the extent of a gorilla’s gestural language skills, unaware that they would be committed to her for the next 46 years; the blonde and photogenic Stanford-trained

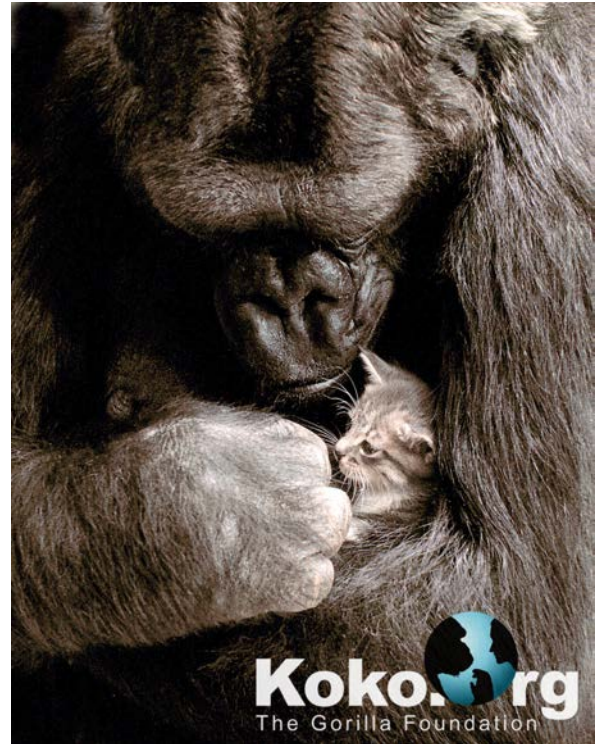
Developmental Psychologist Dr. Patterson serving as both teacher and family, and biologist Dr. Cohn videographing and photographing their interactions, as well as shooting the extraordinary *National Geographic* cover of Koko and her pet kitten, whom she named All Ball. The history of that relationship, illustrated with Cohn’s photographs, was eventually transfigured into a best-selling book.

The book, *Koko’s Kitten*, as well as footage of Koko interacting with such personalities as Robin Williams, Betty White, and Mr. Fred Rogers, with whom



she discussed the concept of love, brought the world's attention to Koko as well as to the revolutionary work of the Gorilla Foundation.

Currently located in Northern California, the Gorilla Foundation seeks to open a gorilla sanctuary upon a verdant hillside on the Hawaiian island of Maui, the first climatically appropriate gorilla preserve outside of Africa, which would serve as a safe haven for formerly captive gorillas in



need of a sanctuary home. There would be hidden cameras in the sanctuary and internet viewing available to great ape aficionados everywhere.

Patterson emphasizes that, "Gorillas enjoy their privacy. As a species, they are not suited to being on exhibit."

The Gorilla Foundation presently leases 71 acres on Maui and is hoping to expand the eventual sanctuary to 350 acres.



Gorilla Foundation COO, Dr. Gary Stanley, trained as a research scientist, is working on the 'Koko app' which will help teach both humans and gorillas to sign and apply other methods of interspecies communication. Stanley has already developed a prototype to be used by zoos, schools and sanctuaries to promote conservation, communication and greatly enhance the care of gorillas confined to zoos. The ape app will also feature videos and e-books, including *Koko's Kitten*, *Michael's Dream*, and a new children's book: *A Wish for Koko*, which will educate people about the great ape mind and the crises gorillas face, as well as providing the language tools that can be used to save them. Dr. Stanley says, "The app will also help the foundation transcribe its thousands of hours of interspecies communication video data, through an entertaining application of crowdsourcing, facilitating the translation of the signs between the human users and the gorillas."



Some of the gorillas that will dwell in the preserve may be exposed to ASL, but Patterson says, "All gorillas use gestures to communicate. Studies have shown that both free-living and captive gorillas use about 100 different signs."

Another goal of future interactive research with gorillas will be to learn more of *their* language, possibly using ASL as an intermediate language from which to translate.



Through the magic of Zoom video conferencing, I was able to speak face to face with the artist Richard Stone, as well as to Drs. Penny Patterson, Ron Cohn, and Gary Stanley.

I observe Stone seated in his UK studio, nattily attired in a blue blazer and pinstriped shirt; I notice numerous wooden shelves, charcoal sketches, and a portrait of Margaret Thatcher.

Although he can hear me now, he explains that in 1955, at the age of four, he suffered a devastating accident in which he fractured his skull and was



rendered profoundly deaf for five or six years before regaining hearing in his left ear.

Stone says that as a deaf child of that era, he was taught lip reading but never signing. As a lip reader, his observations of the human face, his visual communications and awareness of nonverbal cues, became more intense than those of most people. He says, “That gave me an interest, a fascination with people’s faces. You can see that the germs of my obsession with portraiture go back to that time.” He adds that if he had learned to sign, “It would have been the most marvelous sort of communication with Koko, but having said that, she understood English perfectly.”



He shows me the completed oil portrait of Koko, and I find it astonishing — so much wisdom, depth and majesty in the gorilla’s face.

At age 22, Stone had painted an exceptional picture of Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, who became “the best agent I ever had.” He has since completed 60-70 portraits of members of the British Royal Family, as well as such subjects as Luciano Pavarotti, Nancy Reagan, and Nelson Mandela, about whom he says, “He was warm, kind and generous to me” and after one of several

sittings, the anti-apartheid hero engaged him in a private tour of the predominantly black Johannesburg suburb, Soweto. Stone says, “He changed my life. Like Koko, made me a better person.” That portrait raised \$1M, with proceeds going to the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the 46664 AIDS Charity.



And while Stone felt transformed by his sittings with the Nobel Peace Prize winner, he admits that his most extraordinary subject was Koko.

Richard Stone’s involvement with Koko was generated by his son William, now a recent Oxford graduate, who, as a small boy was fascinated by gorillas. William adored the book, *Koko’s Kitten*, and when Stone would travel to New York, he would return to Britain with large and lifelike plush toy gorillas from FAO Schwarz. When William did a school project about gorillas, he became



conscious of the work of the Gorilla Foundation, asking his mother to bake gorilla-shaped cookies to raise funds at a bake sale, and requesting that his father paint Koko's portrait and donate it to the Gorilla Foundation. Stone recalls, "I said 'Sure' and we composed the letter and the reply was, 'We should meet your father and we should meet you and it all depends on whether Koko likes the idea.'"

Ron Cohn remembers the first meetings between Koko and Richard Stone: "Koko liked older men with white hair. She had a very warm greeting with him." He adds, "He cut a frame out of a large piece of paper and Koko immediately held it up to frame her face. She was looking through it."



During Stone's initial interactions, while Penny Patterson translated Koko's signs and Ron Cohn filmed, the artist was stationed outside Koko's trailer, and

he was very careful, as requested by the foundation, to not look directly into her eyes, make the first move or talk across her, any of which could be perceived by a gorilla as attempting dominance.

Koko would ask Stone to lie on the floor, and she would snake her hand through openings in the enclosure, toying with the prone figure. “A bond was established,” says Stone. And despite “knuckles the size of walnuts,” he noted her “smooth leathery skin, that luxurious hair. Oh, my goodness, she was always in peak condition and was clearly very happy and pleased to welcome me.”

During Richard Stone’s third visit, Koko signed to Patterson that she wanted him to enter her trailer. As with any portrait, the artist knew he had to allow his subject to grow accustomed to him, to trust him.

Hunching low to the ground, he entered. He recalls, “Penny gently whispered, ‘She would like you to move closer.’ It would be so close that our knees would be touching.... She takes my head in both her hands and draws my head closer to hers so I’m looking directly into her eyes and she in mine. This is a heart stopping moment. She had the strength of six men. She could lift my head off my shoulders without thinking about it. It was her initiative, her hosting me, part of this intimacy, my nose pressed up against hers and those extraordinary eyes, and she would blow at me. When she started blowing, I was fully expecting bursts of halitosis, but being an herbivore, she had the sweetest smelling breath imaginable. There was something hugely sensitive about it, almost sort of loving if you want, and she would caress my cheek. I

know this must sound bizarre, but this was all part of her getting to know me. I'm reacting, and being sensible, I said, 'Koko, I'm frightened.' I thought honesty was best. Her reaction was to rub my shoulder and my leg in a sort of caring reassuring way."



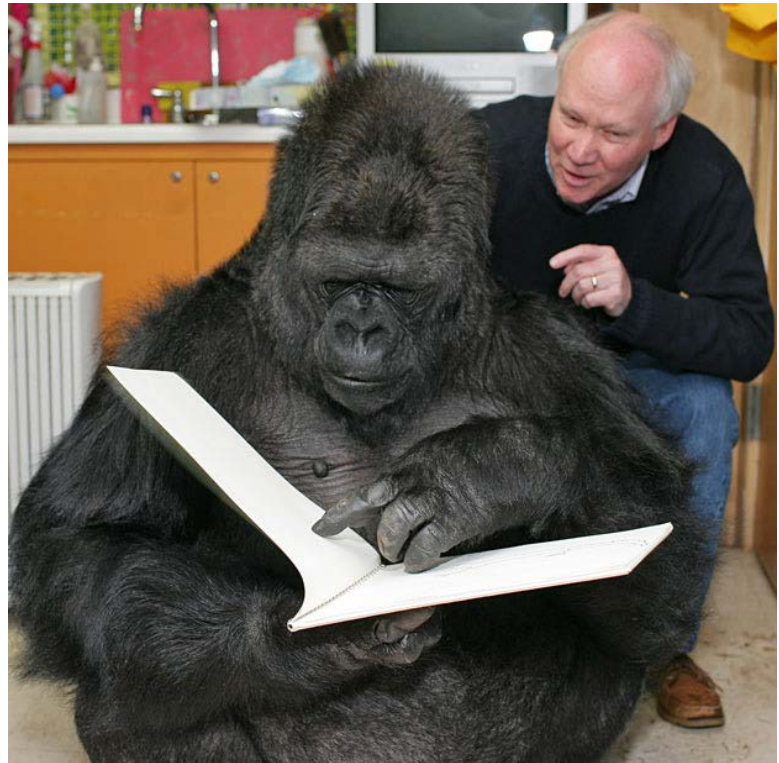
Over dozens of visits, Stone brought art materials, including two sketchbooks, one for himself and one for Koko. Koko would draw her favorite toys and would be delighted when he would recognize her depictions of her toy crocodile and plush snake. He says, "She was the only sitter I ever had who would ask to play chase and end up in a heap to be tickled. As yet, Her Majesty hasn't gone quite that far."



He adds that while the twosome had fun, “She was always interested in the process of me drawing something she would recognize.” He stresses, “I adored her. There was never a moment when I felt threatened by her at all.”

And eventually the sketching was followed by the work of painting. And when the portrait was complete, the friendship continued.

Richard Stone never traveled to California without visiting Koko.



Drs. Patterson, Cohn, and Stanley are seeking to garner funding through Richard

Stone’s donation of the remarkable portrait. The eventual buyer can maintain the portrait at home, but the Foundation hopes that it will be donated or loaned to a major museum, perhaps the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, which already possesses one entirely non-human portrait in its collection, a close-up of a beagle’s face with a blue background from 1974 by the Pulitzer prize winning photographer Eddie Adams.

The tagline of the Gorilla Foundation is ‘Conservation Through Communication’. Ron Cohn says, “Sign language is the means by which we were able to enter into the conversation across another species.” He adds, “No

one has come anywhere near this breadth of knowledge, of how they think and how they do things with their brains. While interspecies communication studies have been successfully achieved with chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans, Project Koko is the only such study with gorillas, and has become the longest interspecies communication study ever done.”

Penny Patterson also emphasizes, “Once we are in a conversation with a species, we can learn from them things that can help enhance conservation activities in Africa. We can share this information with those who are there and they can choose to either hunt them or protect them, learn what gorillas are saying and engage them in an empathetic relationship.”



Speaking with Dr. Patterson and observing her facial expressions, even though I am not as good a face reader as Richard Stone, her loss is palpable. Of Koko, she says, “She was smarter than most humans we know.”

She notes, “Here’s the thing about sign language and gorillas. I couldn’t have taught them if they didn’t already have the capacity to do it. They do it anyway. A hundred different signs have been recorded for free living gorillas. And the same for ‘untaught’ zoo gorillas. Koko was signing from the beginning. She was asking questions, using the correct inflection style of signers a month into the project.” She adds, “They come equipped. It’s not just gestures. It’s a whole system.”

The Foundations’ COO Gary Stanley states, “All gorillas are Kokos,” meaning they all have the innate ability to communicate with us. He explains, “The next phase of our mission is to make that possible everywhere that gorillas are in captivity. There’s no reason why they shouldn’t be telling us what they want, what they need. So that Koko doesn’t have to remain the only superstar in the world. It becomes the norm.

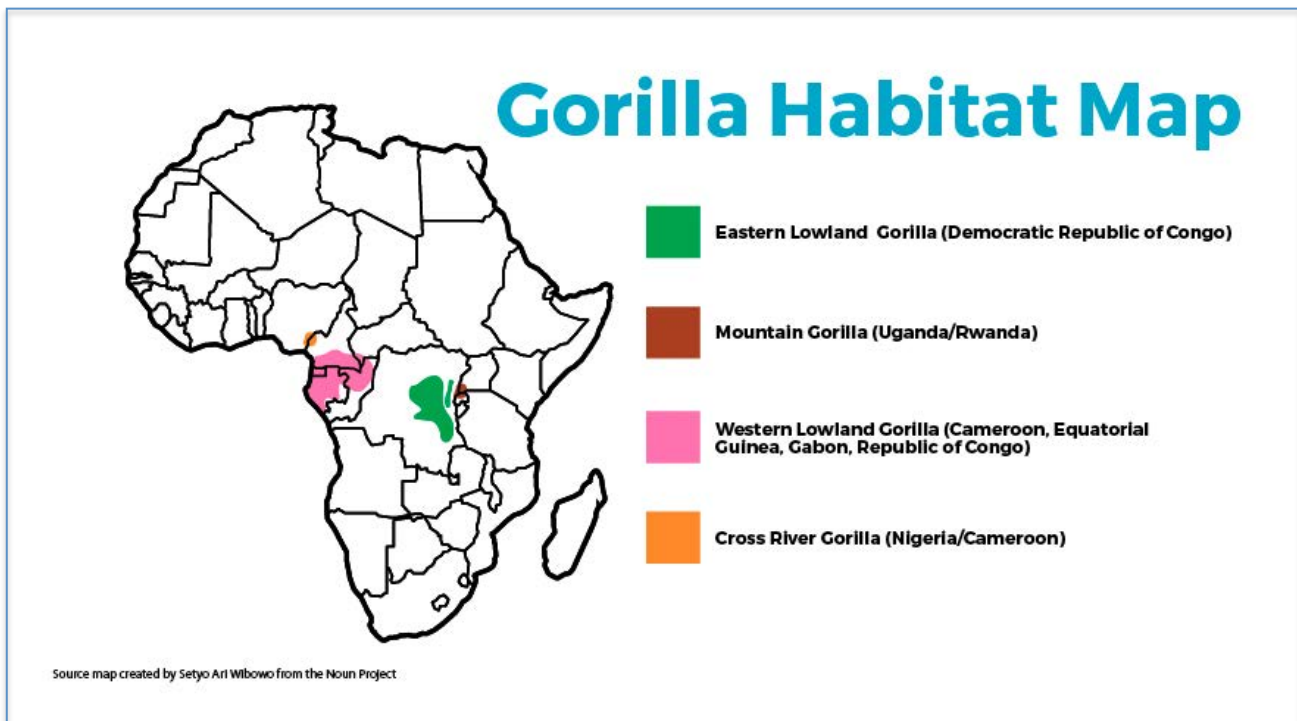


And when people see how intelligent, emotional and communicative they are, then it really becomes hard to justify what is going on in Africa.” He stresses,



“Thousands of western lowland gorillas are being killed and eaten every year in Africa, in what’s referred to as the ‘bushmeat crisis.’ Most people don’t know about this; they are mainly aware of the 800 or so ‘mountain gorillas’ who live in the well-protected volcanic mountains of Rwanda and Uganda, thanks to the vital work of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund.

“Today there are approximately 100,000 ‘free-living’ gorillas remaining in the wild. Whether that number sounds large or small, it’s not the absolute number that is the issue, it’s the numbers that are being destroyed and/or orphaned each year by mindless bushmeat hunting, habitat destruction, and disease transmission — by people who simply aren’t as aware as we have become through years of research and care, that ‘all gorillas are Kokos.’”



Koko outlived most gorillas in captivity, whose average life expectancy is 35-40 years. Upon her death, thousands of mournful letters poured into the

Gorilla Foundation. Penny Patterson believes that Koko was aware of her upcoming demise. The beloved gorilla did not tell Patterson or Cohn, who were like surrogate parents to her and were shocked when she passed in her sleep on June 19, but she had informed a Buddhist monk who volunteers at the Gorilla Foundation that it would soon be her time. She also, according to the monk, prepared her friend Ndume, the other gorilla dwelling at the Foundation.

Ndume, now 37, Koko's companion, has not been formally trained to sign by Dr. Patterson, although, like all gorillas, he does naturally gesture, and Koko taught him some ASL. And he too understands spoken English. When not outside in the large field where he and Koko so often played games, he enjoys being read to, favoring books by Carl Sagan, and listening to music with his dedicated caregivers.



When Koko was very young, an interviewer had asked her where gorillas go when they die. She replied, “Comfortable hole goodbye.”

According to the monk, Koko has continued to communicate with him. Patterson says that the exalted Buddhist told her, “Koko says, don’t be sad.’ She said to him, ‘I’m here. I’m every blade of grass. I’m every flower. “

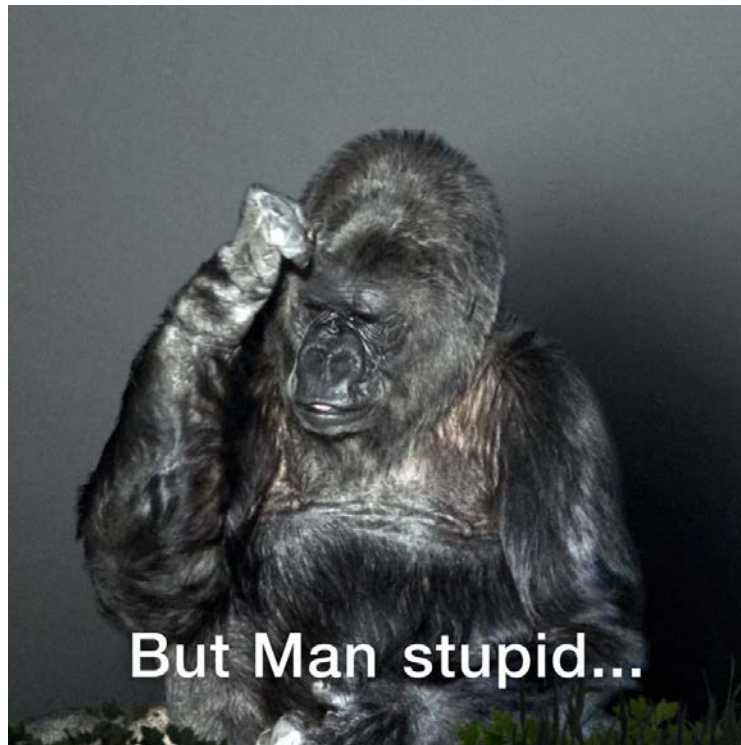
Before her death, the monk had asked Koko, ‘What is the most important thing?’ and she had replied, ‘Love’.”



Patterson says, “Koko was asked to contribute to a video for the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference, as the ‘Voice of Nature.’ Koko signed, ‘Man



Stupid.” Dr. Penny Patterson adds, “We don’t understand what we are doing to the planet.”



I never had the opportunity to meet Koko, but years ago, I did spend a day at Howletts, one of two of the Aspinall Foundation’s wildlife conservation preserves for endangered species in Kent, England. The late John Aspinall allowed my daughter and me to touch the human-like hands of a silverback and some younger gorillas dwelling in a high mesh enclosure, feeding them the most colorful and ripe-appearing exotic fruit I had ever seen, donated by Marks & Spencer on a daily basis. The Aspinall plan was to reintroduce the gorillas they were breeding and raising to native soil in Africa, helping save gorillas from extinction. Now directed by John Aspinall’s impassioned son Damian, they have done so, reintroducing some Kent gorillas to wildlife preserves in Gabon and Congo.

Both the Gorilla Foundation and the Aspinall Foundation believe that there is a need for a natural sanctuary outside of Africa, for those gorillas who are neither suited for zoo life nor the challenges of adaptation to Africa. The potential gorilla preserve that The Gorilla Foundation is committed to creating on Maui could provide a safe and beautiful environment for this purpose, an ideal gorilla habitat that will only be viewed remotely, via video technology.

The proceeds from the purchase of Koko's portrait could help make this a reality.



The artist Richard Stone admits that there was another hand involved in the creation of the magnificent portrait of the amber-eyed gorilla. No, he did not have a team of assistants helping him with his artwork, like his countryman Damien Hirst. He had only one.

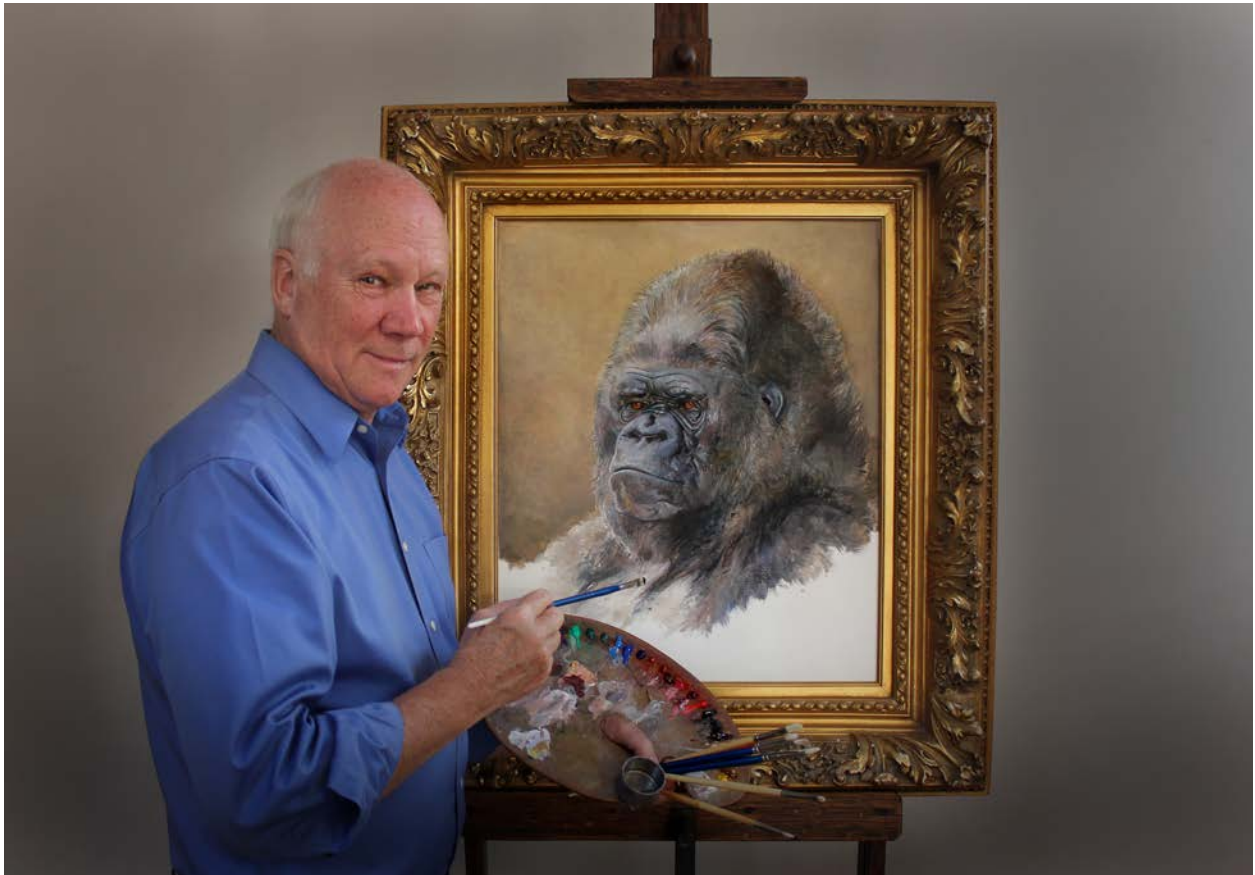
When Stone arrived at The Gorilla Foundation and showed Koko her nearly completed portrait, featuring her proud and intelligent visage, her deep-set eyes, her carriage of an elder stateswoman, Koko expressed a desire to add her own artistry to the painting. Richard Stone worried, as his palette

contained many colors. Would she slash the portrait with bright gobs of paint? He had worked hundreds of hours on the painting. What would the gorilla do to it? “I gave her one of my brushes and told her to be very careful. Given her strength, she could just push the brush straight through the canvas.



“She looked really carefully at the palette. Minutes passed while she made the choice as to which color. I’m holding my breath. I don’t know which color she’s going to go for. I know her favorite color is red. I was bracing myself for cadmium red. Instead, I’m very surprised. She goes for a color called Payne’s grey. Payne’s grey, if you can’t picture it, is the color of her hair. And she very gently lifts this brush with a blob of dark gray paint on the end and she looks at the canvas...looks very carefully at what I had done and puts the brush with the paint right next to where I have been working. She paints in short but sensitive feathery brushstrokes. It was so remarkable; I have not painted over

it. It connects superbly with the rest of the artwork. In effect, on her shoulder, there is a dark patch. That's Koko's painting.



“She could have destroyed the picture. She didn’t. What she did was contribute to it in the most sophisticated way.”

As with seemingly all those I spoke with, Richard Stone loved her: “She knew she was important. And she knew she was a gorilla. And was proud of it.” (When asked by Dr. Patterson if she was a gorilla or a person, Koko had signed: ‘Fine Gorilla Person’). Richard Stone adds, “She was enormous fun to be with,” and looking downward, says, “It’s impossible to summarize the whole experience.”



The portrait is now the work of two artists: Richard Stone and Koko.



**Elizabeth Sobieski** is a novelist, film producer, and freelance writer, based in New York, covering arts related subjects. She has written for such publications as New York Magazine, Cosmopolitan, Automobile, The Huffington Post, The New York Post, and was a Contributing Editor for The Art Economist Magazine. She has also been an advocate of great ape conservation for many years.