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# A Cat Can Also Be a Masterpiece: About the Cat in Art and Culture from Antiquity to Modern Times

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**Abstract:** As Leonardo da Vinci used to say: "every cat, even the smallest one, is a masterpiece." The text is an attempt to show the role of this domestic animal in culture from antiquity to the present day. In comparison to the dogs, they find much less reference in culture, tradition, beliefs or art. Nevertheless, cats do show up in every civilization and culture, playing both positive and negative roles as well over the centuries. In European and Christian cultures they appear much more often in negative contexts and pejorative symbolism. In some cultures they were worshiped, given inviolability, treated as a deity, in others they were ignored or even considered to be the embodiment of Satan. Although the cat does not appear directly in the Bible, it is a common symbolic theme for scenes related to Christ, such as the Last Supper and the Feast of Emmaus. Along with the spread of the cat as a companion-household member of human life, the interest in the cat in art, mainly in painting, increases, as exemplified by numerous works by masters of painting, which this text presents while recalling successive eras. In the course of history, the cat was first worshiped, then it lost its importance, only to regain it in a different form, as a companion of human life, a pet and a household member. The cat has permanently entered the canon of the world art through outstanding works of European painters, and has also found its place in popular culture.

**Keywords:** Cat, Art, Paintings, Sculpture, Culture, Literature

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## 1. Introduction

The cat, qualified by Carl Linnaeus in 1758 as a domestic cat (Latin *felis catus*) [23] accompanies a man for over 11,000 years. It is assumed that the first domestic cats appeared around 9500 years ago and come from the species of Nubian cats and the African wild cat (*Felis lybica*). The first traces of domesticated cats come from archaeological excavations in the southern part of Cyprus [39]. In the course of history, it appears wherever agricultural techniques and a sedentary lifestyle were introduced. It is assumed that the first domestication of the cat took place in the Fertile Crescent and only later in Egypt. Previously, it was believed that the first domestic cats came from Egypt [7]. The process of domestication of cats did not significantly affect their anatomy, so they are able to survive in the wild without a human. In comparison with dogs, they find much less reference in culture, tradition, beliefs or art. Nevertheless, they appear in every civilization and culture, playing positive and negative roles over the centuries both in European and

Christian culture as well. They appear much more often in negative contexts and pejorative symbolism. In some cultures they were worshiped, given inviolability, treated as a deity, in others they were ignored or even considered to be the embodiment of Satan and were burnt at the stake together with the women who were believed to be witches. Although the cat does not appear directly in the Bible, it is a frequent symbolic theme for New Testament scenes related to Christ, such as the Last Supper or the Feast of Emmaus. In the course of time while the cat becomes a companion-member of human life, the interest in it increases in art, mainly in painting, as exemplified by the numerous works of painting masters of recent centuries - Manet, Bonnard, Picasso. An ordinary domestic cat, a common animal, becomes an independent artistic and painting subject in many epochs and cultures, and thus belongs to a small group of animals to which so much attention has been paid in art. Numerous examples of works by Italian, Flemish, German and Polish artists confirm how strongly the subject of the cat influenced European art, and consequently also world art.

## 2. The Cat in Art and Culture

### 2.1. Antiquity

In Egypt, the cat was considered to be a lunar animal, and in its form, the goddess Bastet was represented - the benefactor of the man [8]. She was depicted as a kitten or a woman with a cat's head, at whose feet these animals also played. She was the goddess of fertility and the protector of birth. The Egyptians wore amulets with the image of cats around their necks, and moreover, they had numerous ornaments, figures made of crystal, ceramics and porcelain. Herodotus says that when a cat died in a house in Ancient Egypt, all household members shaved their eyebrows [16]. Some of them, more religious, mummified these animals and buried them in special cemeteries. The important cat necropolises existed at Bubastis in Lower Egypt, Speos Artemidos in Central Egypt, and Memphis near Saqqara. In these three cities, these cemeteries were used for several centuries, and thousands of cats were buried in each of them<sup>1</sup>. Many cat mummies have been found there and are placed now in museums around the world.

Killing a cat as a sacred animal was strictly forbidden - when it happened that one of the members of the Roman delegation accidentally killed the cat, the crowd lynched a soldier [18]. As a result, they were a part of the military strategy of deception - Egypt's enemies took advantage of the fact that the Egyptians did not want to hurt their deities by exposing cats in battles in front of their own soldiers fighting in the front line<sup>2</sup>. There was also a belief that while seeing the fire, cats would jump into it, dying.

The cat was also an attribute of other Egyptian deities, including creator of the world Ra (Re) - whose solar brightness was personified [18]. Cats were depicted with human attributes, e.g. grazing geese or serving mice. They appear on amulets, they become popular during the rule of the XI dynasty (22nd – 20th centuries B.C.). Papyrus from the Book of the Dead dated in 3200 B.C. depicts a cat (Big Cat of Heliopolis) killing Apophis, the serpent and enemy of the sun god [3], with a knife. This image symbolizes the sun that conquers the night. This is a reference to the 17th chapter of the Book of the Dead, which explains the origin of the gods [41]. In the murals of Theban tombs, the cat motif often appears in hunting scenes and hunting representations [31].

The oldest mentions of domesticated cats in ancient Greece come from around 1200 BC [10]. The ancient Greeks considered them to be a group of animals with negative connotations. Aristotle wrote in *Animal History* that cats were naturally lecherous. The Greeks, however, placed their images on works of art, e.g. on Attic vases from around 480 and 440 BC [15]. The cat was equated with evil because of

its association with Hecate - the goddess of darkness and magic. One from mythological legends about the so-called Typhonomachy - the fight of the gods with the monster Typhon - says that the goddess Artemis turned into a cat, running away from the terrible Typhon<sup>3</sup>. Another myth depicts Galanthis, the maid of Alkmena. Alkmena became pregnant with Amphitryon. Hera swore not to allow the child to be born, but Galanthis' trickery managed to prevent Hera's plans and Alkmena gave birth to Heracles. The enraged wife of Zeus turned the maid into a cat and sent her to the kingdom of Hecate [36].

Cats gained the greater importance in Rome. They were brought to the Empire by legionnaires, because in Roman legions' cats guarded their food supplies against rodents and together with the Romans, they participated in distant war expeditions (their images were placed on shields and banners). They were valued higher than dogs and respected for their independence and for the fact that, unlike dogs, they do not need a human being to exist. In Roman mythology, Diana took the form of a cat to scare off the giants. In Greco-Roman culture, however, cats appear rarely in art, one example is a mosaic from the 1st century BC located in the House of the Faun in Pompeii, showing a spotted cat hunting a partridge in the upper part, and ducks and fish in the lower part [30]. The cat in the bird hunting scenes is basically the only theme of these representations in Rome.

In Norse mythology, the cat was identified with the goddess of love, marriage and fertility - Freya. The goddess received two grey cats as a gift from Thor, which had been harnessed since then into her cart and she wore cat-skin-gloves [33]. One of the Scandinavian stories tells the story of a cat who helped a poor man. One day, a cat captured a silver castle with lots of gold and gems after defeating the troll. The animal literally talked to the monster, which turned to stone at sunrise. After this event, the cat ordered the man to chop off his head. When he did, the cat's body turned into a beautiful princess. Although there are no depictions of a cat in Norse art, later depictions of the goddess Freya with cats are known on the basis of mythological stories. One of them is an amazing painting on the wall of the St. Paul's Lutheran Cathedral in Schleswig, probably showing a goddess with a hunting horn sitting on a cat. The second is a work by Nils Blommér, a Swedish painter of Norse mythology and folklore dated 1852, showing Freya in a chariot drawn by two cats<sup>4</sup>.

The Hebrew Bible does not mention domestic cats at all. They appear only once in the extended translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (Septuagint) in the Letter of

1 In Bubastis, pilgrims sacrificed thousands of mummified cats. Research has shown that the animals were young and are therefore considered to have been specially bred for sacrifice and mummification [24].

2 This was done by the King of Persia, Cambyzes, at the Battle of Pelusium in 525 B.C.E. In another form, but also extremely helpful, cats during World War I. Cats were extremely sensitive to tear gas and it fell before the human could smell it. For the soldiers, their sudden death was a clear warning of impending danger.

3 The Greek gods were to protect themselves in Egypt during this war, turning into animals, thanks to which Typhon could not recognize them. (*The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis: A Translation with Commentary*, 1992, p. 87).

4 *Freja sökande sin make (Freja Seeking Her Husband)*, 1852, Nationalmuseum Stockholm.

Compare: <http://empweb84.zetcom.ch/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=artist&objectId=11841&viewType=detailView> - online access (03.12.2020).

Jeremiah, i.e. according to the Catholic ordering in the Book of Baruch, where pagan idols or rather their status are mentioned<sup>5</sup>. Considering the period of translation of the Epistle (3rd-2nd century BC) strong Egyptian influences can be seen here, especially the worship of the goddess Bastet. The cat is used here to indicate how erroneous Egyptian beliefs and the impermanent worship of Egyptian idols are.

## 2.2. Middle Ages

The cat was a somewhat mysterious animal - it does not appear in Greek physiologists - bestiaries also almost completely ignore it, it had both positive and negative meanings; however it had much more the negative ones, especially in the full and late Middle Ages [18]. The cat appears in medieval writing in the 7th century with a brief etymological mention of Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies* (in book XII - *De animalibus*)<sup>6</sup>. According to St. Isidore the cat is called *musio* in Latin, because it catches mice (*mures*) or *cattus* from the catching itself (*captura*). For the next eight centuries, this information was provided by virtually all scholar works in which the cat was present. However, when the text was also provided with a picture, the cats were immediately presented in situations characteristic for them - hence, in bestiaries, they not only catch mice, nibble butter or lie on a brazier, but also lick their backside.

In the Middle Ages, the black tomcat was a symbol of Satan, witches, and demons [9], that had its origins in Celtic mythology. It was considered to be a sign of death and darkness in many civilizations, a symbol of sin, laziness, and the abuse of the goods of this world. Thanks to their night vision, cats were associated with Satan's magic tricks [32]. It is significant that the heretics were accused, inter alia, of worshipping the devil in the form of this animal. Even the Knights Templar during their trial of 1307–1314 were forced to confess worshipping the demon of a cat's head<sup>7</sup>. In some areas, cats were found guilty by their nature, which resulted in their public killing. There were mass murders of cats associated with processions and festivals. On the second Wednesday of Lent, a public procession held in Ypres usually ended with throwing the cats from the tower<sup>8</sup>. In Paris, however, cats were publicly burnt on St. John's Day, in the presence of the king and notables and with the onlookers'

delight. Cats partially returned to favor during the great epidemics that hit Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries, because as enemies of rats and mice, they successfully exterminated these plague carriers.

Evil forces of cats were believed to be located in the tail, so small cats had their tails cut off to prevent their contact with evil spirits. Albert the Great (Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*) believed that after cutting off its mustache, the cat loses all courage, and the bile of a wild cat causes the expulsion of the dead fetus from the woman's body. Cats were also used in medicine as it was thought that some parts of their body could be used to make medicines to heal humans, e.g. a dried cat's liver was supposed to heal nephrolithiasis, and a paste of cat's blood mixed with barley flour helped with itching, and the cat's tail, buried at the doorstep, protected people from different diseases. Furthermore however, as far as the accusations of demonic conflicts were concerned, there was a conviction that cats were of a different kind. The superstitions about strangling babies in cradles have survived even today. According to Edward Topsell, a 17th century Anglican writer, clergyman and creator of *The History of four-footed beasts and serpents*, rubbing an eye with a black cat's tail helps to get rid of the sty. Lubricating the diseased area with cat fat helps for podagra, and putting ashes of a burnt black cat into the eyes three times a day with a feather can even cure the complete blindness [38].

St. Hildegard of Bingen (c. 1098–1179) argued that eating a cat's brain causes madness and that its whole body is poisonous. Some medieval naturalists and doctors also claimed that cats were the cause of night cramps and breath shortness, and even death. While cat meat was not culturally edible, cat fur was highly valued - it was similar to rabbit fur, but much cheaper than that. Wearing this type of fur was common, although it was not always considered to be respectable. St. Wulstan, the Bishop of Worcester, England, refused to wear cat fur. He was explaining that in this way: "I have never heard *cattus* Dei being sung, but only *agnus* Dei, so I do not want to warm myself with a cat skin, but a sheep skin" [43].

In a positive context, the cat was a symbol of zeal - Irish monks compared the cat's diligence in catching mice with the zeal with which they catch God's inspirations themselves [21]. In the context of Divine Justice, the cat appears on one of the quarters of the 15th-century "Table of the Ten Commandments" of St. Mary's Church in Gdańsk, devoted to the seventh commandment - two criminals, persuaded to do evil by the devil, plunder a rich apartment. They do so regardless of the gallows warning, which may be read as an allusion to the effectiveness of the law against criminals. This comment is complemented by the meaning of the theme of the cat lying next to the chest and holding the mouse in its teeth - thieves will not get away with punishment just as the mouse did not manage to escape the cat [22].

Also in Arab culture, the cat has a positive meaning, with the exception of negative references to the black cat. The legend says that the prophet Muhammad ordered a piece of

5 "They are like a log in a house: their interior, they say, is rolled down, because the worms that come out of the ground eat them with their clothes, and they don't feel it. Their faces are black with the smoke rising from the temple. Bats, swallows and other birds fly over their bodies and heads, and the cats crawl over them. Hence you know that they are not gods, therefore do not be afraid of them" (Ba 6: 19-22).

6 „Musio appellatus, quod muribus infestus sit. Hunc vulgus cattum a captura vocant. Alii dicunt, quod cattat, id est videt. Nam tanto acute cernit ut fulgore luminis noctis tenebras superet. Unde a Graeco venit catus, id est ingeniosus, π το καίεθαι" (Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum, XII, 2, 38, [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Isidore/12\\*.html#2](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Isidore/12*.html#2) – online access 03. 12.2020).

7 In some versions. More often, Baphomet was depicted as a goat-headed deity.

8 A reminder of the old rituals is the Kattestoeft festival, held cyclically every 3rd year, in which participants take on the characters of the era and dress up as cats.

his robe to be cut off in order not to wake up the sleeping Muezzi cat on it [5]. One of Muhammad's companions, Abu Hurairah, was called the father of cats because of his unusual attachment to these animals. One of the legends credited the prophet with some merit to the entire feline family. Putting his hand three times on the head of his favourite, he allegedly bestowed on her and all the cats gained the ability to fall on all four paws from any height [11]. Cats in the Islamic tradition are considered to be clean animals, so they are allowed to enter houses and even mosques. Many Muslims believe that cats are looking for praying people [13], and up till now, the law requires believers to feed at least one homeless cat. As cats guarded not only the granaries but also books against pests, they often appear in the representations of Islamic scholars.

In art, the cat was shown in the scenes of the Annunciation as a symbol of Satan who runs away at the moment of the Incarnation of the Son of God. In iconography, it appears in the decorations of the marginal pages of medieval manuscripts, canonical hours, and psalters as the theme of the cat's fight with the mouse - that is, the fight between good and evil [18], also as one of the animals of the biblical Noah's ark [40]. There are ludic threads in the wall painting, in which, for example, a cat sings from a psalter, plays various stringed instruments, defends itself in a castle besieged by mice or accompanies the holy women.

The patron of cats is St. Gertrude of Nivelles, who was summoned to fight the scourge of mice and rats [21]. According to an old legend, Satan-the tempter appeared to her in the form of a mouse. But the cat intervened in time and prevented the pious nun from being put to the test. To this day, the feast is depicted with a cat and mice at its feet, and the water from its well and the bread baked in the convent oven in Nivelles - like cats - are supposed to protect against rodents. According to the contemporary research, the depictions of the saint with the cat have a strong reference to the Norse goddess Freia [27]. The cat is an attribute of St. Martin de Porres, a Dominican from Peru from the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, founder of an orphanage in Lima, but also a shelter for abandoned dogs and cats, hence his attributes are these animals, as well as mice and rats [35].

### 2.3. Modern Times

In modern times, the symbolism of the cat is changing, it is no longer so demonic, however, there are examples of their cruel treatment in a more sophisticated form. During the procession in Brussels in 1547 in honor of Emperor Charles V Habsburg (1500-1558), the "cat organs" were presented: the animals were locked in cages so that only their tails protruded, for which they were tugged in such a way that they "played" a melody [28]. During the reign of Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), when the Queen of France and the wife of Henry II of Mercy, celebrated the takeover of Cambrai in 1587, three cats were barbarously executed - they were locked in a wicker basket and then burnt alive in front of a crowd who liked the act very much.

At the end of the 1830s, the famous cat massacre took

place in Paris on Saint-Séverin Street. Journeymen from Jacques Vincent's facility initiated the mass capture, the public trial and the execution on all the cats in the area, including Mrs. Vincent's cat. In this ritual, in a bloody way they expressed their dissatisfaction with the working conditions. What's more, they liked it so much that they staged the murderous performance more than twenty times [6]. In the attack on cats, many commentators see an indirect attack on the masters, towards whom the apprentices and students wished to express their dissatisfaction. That is why you can see here the importance of cats, almost identified with their masters.

One of the cat's apologists was the master Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)<sup>9</sup>. His drawings show his fascination with the cat's body. The drawings usually show cats in two poses - sleeping animals and cats in motion in combat scenes - probably drawn from memory. There are also known sketches depicting the Madonna with little Jesus holding a cat or playing with it, it is not known, however, whether they were to be used as a basis for a painting, or if they were merely the artist's exercises<sup>10</sup>. The Italian mannerist Federico Barocci, drawing from Leonardo, creates around 1575 painting "Madonna with a cat", showing the nursing Mary holding Saint John the Baptist and Jesus in her arms<sup>11</sup>. Baby Jesus looks towards the kitten standing at Mary's feet.

In French power circles Cardinal Armand Richelieu (1585-1642) was a great lover of cats. He was known to have as many as fourteen of them, and their names are known thanks to the nobleman's will. He treated them like household members, they could sleep in his bed, eat from the table and live in a room next to his bedroom. After the Cardinal's death, his cats, although made his heirs, shared the fate of the witches to whom the cats allegedly served - they were all burnt by a guard. In the paintings of the nineteenth-century painter Charles Édouard Delort, Cardinal Richelieu is always shown in the company of cats, accompanying him both at work and in his spare time as well<sup>12</sup>.

In modern art, the cat was used to emphasize human vices, in particular, vanity or as a symbol of the sense of sight, as in the two paintings by Bacchiacci (Francesco Ubertini) of the same title *Donna con un gatto* from 1525 and 1540. In Jean de La Fontaine's fairy tales from the 17th century, when the cat became a domestic animal and a mouse hunter, it appears as a symbol of sanctity, mischief, deception, duplicity, cruelty and cynicism. In folklore and folk culture, the cat was considered the most cunning of animals, it was identified with the fox.

The cat began to appear more and more often in art, especially in religious scenes from the life of Jesus, e.g.

9 His saying has been preserved in tradition: Anche il più piccolo dei felini, il gatto, è un capolavoro - "Every cat, even the smallest one, is a masterpiece".

10 Leonardo da Vinci, *Studio per la Madonna del gatto*, ok. 1480 [29].

11 The painting is situated in the National Gallery in London.

12 Compare: Charles Édouard Delort, *The Cardinal's Leisure*, przed 1885. (*Cavaliers and Cardinals: Nineteenth-Century French Anecdotal Paintings*, Exh. cat., Taft Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Arnot Arm Museum. Cincinnati, Washington D.C., Elmira, 1992/1993, pp. 25, 30, 38, 39, cat. 4).

during the Last Supper in the work *Ultima cena* by Jacop Bassano (1515–1592) from around 1546, in which the cat located near Judas' legs means false and treason [44]. The cat is therefore a negative animal, treated as a false creature, somehow an attribute of Judas, although it can only be pointed to the viewer as the impostor. The presence of a cat in the Emaus Supper scene can be read in a similar way in another work by the same Renaissance artist (*Cena in Emmaus*, c. 1538), where the animal is pointed to be a doubting student or it simply indicates the domestic nature of the scene - the cat tries to tease the dog lying on the floor. The Last Supper with a cat also appears in the Catalan Gothic painting *Santa Cena* by Jaume Huguet from 1463-1475, in an already known composition, i.e. with a cat by Judas' leg<sup>13</sup>. However, much more often the cat accompanies the scene of the miraculous Supper at Emmaus. Such a representation can be found in Titian's painting of the *Supper at Emmaus* from c. 1530, which depicts the moment when Jesus was recognized by the disciples (cf. Lk 24: 31). The cat placed under the table plays with the dog playfully, both of these animals appear almost always simultaneously in the works of artists who emphasize these animalistic threads. Similar compositions appear in the paintings of Tintoretto (*Supper at Emmaus*, c. 1543) and Paola Veronese (*Supper at Emmaus*, c. 1559)<sup>14</sup>.

At the Flemish Baroque painter Frans Snyders, creator of still lifes, almost every scene features a cat stealing a bird or fish from a table or a stall<sup>15</sup>. It is often barely noticed among a huge number of items. The artist, in an interesting way, juxtaposes what is dead with what is alive [19] - while in hunting scenes this combination is not surprising, but in still life scenes he was a pioneer of this type of representations. This motif appears later in the works of Sebastian Stoskopff (*Kitchen still life with fish and cat*, 1650; *Stilleben mit einer Katze und einem Rechaud*), Giuseppe Recco (*Natura morta con cesto di pesci, stoviglie e gatto*), Clara Peeters (*Still life of fish and cat*, after 1620; *A still life with carp in a ceramic colander, oysters, crayfish, roach and a cat on the ledge beneath*, undated), Jan Fyt (*Venison and Basket of Grapes Watched by a Cat*; *Cat and Still Life with Game*), Alexandre-Francois Desportes (*Still Life With a Cat*, 1724), Pieter Claesz (*A Still Life of Fresh-Water Fish with a cat*, 1656), as well as the Polish court painter of the Baroque period, Daniel Schulz [34] (*Trophies in the Pantry*, 1646; *Rooster, Chickens and Ducks*, c. 1660).

Painting by Rembrandt's student, the baroque painter Gerard Dou (Geritt Douw) *Cat in the window* from 1657 is quite unusual for the painting of this period as there is no man in the painting. It depicts a cat sitting in a window covered with a curtain. As shown by the x-rays of the

painting, the painter planned the figure of a woman leaning over the cat<sup>16</sup>. There was also supposed to be a mousetrap in the painting, which the painter gave up. Pictures of this period, especially in Dutch painting had their own deep symbolism. Perhaps the painting was supposed to symbolize a love scene and the dangers that threatened extramarital affairs - in this case the cat would be a symbol of infidelity. It is not known why the author resigned from depicting the scene in this way and made some limits to paint only the cat. In the 17th century, many paintings depicting cats were created, but most of them are still lifes, portraits of children, and sometimes also humorous pictures, e.g. dancing with a cat<sup>17</sup>.

#### 2.4. From Enlightenment to Modern Times

In the 18th century, still lifes with a cat appear in the works of the French artist Jean Chardin (*Still Life with a cat and a fish*, 1728; *Raja*, 1728). The cat is placed on the table among fish and kitchen utensils. At the end of that century, the Swiss Gottfried Mind (1768-1814) created his works and was known as the "Raphael of the cats"<sup>18</sup>. The artist suffered from Savant's Syndrome - he was intellectually retarded, but he also had an extraordinary talent for reproducing feline features. His images of cats are characterized by anatomical accuracy and knowledge of the domestic life of those animals; he presented them while hunting, playing or sleeping [42].

The nineteenth century brings hundreds of paintings with the participation of cats and many names of artists dealing with the depictions of these animals. These included: Victorian animal painter Horatio Henry Coudercy (1832-1918)<sup>19</sup>, Belgian Charles van den Eycken (1809 - 1891)<sup>20</sup>, Swedish artist Bruno Andreas Liljefors (1860-1939), painting cats as bird hunters, also outdoors rodents among the greenery, Julius Adam (1852-1913)<sup>21</sup> known as *Katzen-Adam*, the famous German painter of these animals, or the French animalist Louis-Eugène Lambert (1825-1900)<sup>22</sup>.

16 In other works by the artist, there is often a figure in the window with a characteristic curtain in a thoughtful pose or when doing household chores (often with dogs), e.g. *Old lady in the window* (c. 1650), *Doctor* (1653).

17 Jan Steen's painting *Kinderen leren een poes dansen, bekend als 'De dansles'* (*Dance Lesson, Children Teaching a Cat to dance*) from around 1660-1679 from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam shows a group of children playing with a cat and trying to make the animal dance.

18 This title will also be used for the Dutch painter who wrote a century later, Salomon "Sal" Meijer (1877-1965). Meijer painted cats in a simple, even primitive form, showing animals on a chair, carpet, and often only cat heads.

19 The artist shows especially small cats, often with their mother cat or playing in a group: *No where to hide*, 1882; *The fishing party*; *The first lap*; *Recumbent cat and dog*; *Two bonny wee things*.

20 He mainly paints cats at play: *Fun*, 1910; *Trois chats sur un bureau*; *Kittens Playing with a Pocket Watch*, 1898; *Cats at Play*.

21 *Die Einquartierung*, c. 1890; *Katzenmutter mit Iren Jungen*; *Zwei spielende Kätzchen*.

22 This artist was also called Raphael of the cats. His "cat" works include: *Chatons Jolant avec des plumes*; *Chatte et ses chatons*; *Chaton*, 1876; *Les Chalons dans le panier*; *Deux Chalons Jolant Alec une bobine*. (Lambert, Eugène (Louis E.), In: Hans Vollmer (Hrsg.): *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Begründet von U. Thieme und F. Becker. Band 22: Krüger–Leitch. E. A. Seemann, Leipzig 1928, p. 252).

13 Compare: *Santa Cena*, <https://www.museunacional.cat/es/colleccio/santa-cena/jaume-huguet/040412-000> - online access - 09.12.2020.

14 Compare: <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/supper-emmaus> - online access - 09.12.2020.

15 E. g. *Still Life with Huntsman*, ok. 1615; *Catsfighting in a larder, with loaves of bread, a dressed lamb, artichokes and grapes*, undated; *Still-Life with Crab, Poultry, and Fruit*, c. 1615-1620; *Cook in the Larder*, 1637.

The animal was the subject of the works of artists who are not directly associated with this topic, such as the French impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, author of the works: *Young Boy with a cat (Le Garçon au chat)* from 1868-1869, *Woman with a cat (Femme au chat)* c. 1875, *Julie Manet with a cat* from 1887, *Jeune Fille endormie au chat* [26] from 1880, *Fleurs et Chats* from 1881 or *A sleeping cat* from 1862, as well as Francisco Goya in the portrait of Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zúñig, a boy from the aristocratic Altamira family from 1787-1788 or the painting *Riña de gatos* ("Cat Fight") from 1786-1787 [37], which is a part of the dining room decor of the Duke of Asturias in El Palacio Real de El Pardo.

*The Woman with a Cat (Portrait of Madame Manet)* dated 1880-1882 was painted by the master of the brush, impressionist Édouard Manet. He used a classic and common motif - the gentle sex representative seated in the painting was holding a black cat on her lap. Manet's image, however, is a bit unreal, most likely due to the blurred contours that give the tomat a demonic character. Manet also featured the black cat in the highly criticized painting *Olympia* from 1863 [45]. The canvas depicting a lying naked woman (prostitute Victorine Meurent) refers to the work of Titian's - *the Venus Act of Urbino* from 1538 [14]. The painter replaced the Titian dog sleeping at Venus' feet with an energetic black cat, symbolizing not fidelity anymore, but sensuality and sexuality. The cat also indirectly points to the profession of the title Olympia, revealing in the same way that the woman is engaged in prostitution.

In the twentieth century, cats gained enormous popularity in art as a result of the spread of these animals as companions of people, even household members. Portraits with a cat were painted by, among others: Pierre Bonnard, author of *The Girl with a Cat* from 1899 and *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*, a famous art dealer from 1904<sup>23</sup>, also Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, Art Nouveau author of many graphics and posters, including the famous poster from 1896 for the Parisian cabaret *Le Chat noir* - "Black Cat"<sup>24</sup>. In the last century, cats have also had their own portraits. Léonor Fini, an Argentine-Italian surrealist, was in love with them, as evidenced by numerous lithographs, sketches, images of individual animals or whole groups<sup>25</sup>. Pierre Bonnard - mentioned above - deliberately lengthened cats' legs and necks, turning them into cats' apparitions, but in this way reflecting their disturbing spying nature, following people step by step or watching them curiously. Primitivist Henri Rousseau loved wild and predatory cats, because he was a great lover of the exotic. In his work, apart from large predators, one can find unique paintings: *Portrait of a woman*, showing the huge heroine and a small kitten playing at her feet as a peculiar

joke of the author and *Portrait of Mr. X (Pierre Loti)*, a French novelist and soldier from 1891, with the humorous overtone of a cigarette in the hand of the portrayed and a cat sitting in the foreground<sup>26</sup>. Francis Picabia, a dadaist and avant-garde painter, in his artistic output took up the subject of the cat several times by presenting white female cats and black male cats, paying attention to the mood, that is why they are often the images in the convention of horror with male cats showing menacingly through strong brush strokes or moody light portraits of lying cats [4]. Cats painted by Picabia are not the ordinary pets, their faces express emotions strongly (*Cat with green eyes*, 1923-1926; *White cat*, 1953; *Cat's head*, 1926).

One of the most famous twentieth-century paintings with a cat motif that entered the canon of contemporary art is *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* by David Hockney from 1970. The artist portrayed his friends sitting by the window in their elegant London apartment. The cat on Ossi Clark's lap looks out of the window, but clearly does not want to move and abandon the warm seat. The perfect example of a feline's life balance, in which he is absorbed by the exciting outside world and at the same time keeps his distance from the world while sitting on the owner's lap. There is also a small distortion in the painting - in fact, the cat's name was not Percy. However, the artist decided that the real name of the animal, Blanche, did not match the title of the painting. The painting refers to the *Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck [12].

Pablo Picasso was also one of the cat lovers. He believed that these were creatures, however, not devoid of a vile, typical animal element, which was clearly illustrated by "The Cat devouring a bird" and "The Cat and a wounded bird". It is different in the case of the work "The Cat and the Crab on the Beach", the composition and colors referring to the portrait of Picasso's lover entitled "Dora Maar with a cat" from 1941, in which the cat is the epitome of the artist's turbulent relationship with a woman. The cat gives the impression of an unruly playmate, as if unaware of the danger presented in the form of crab claws. The painter shows here the duality of feline nature, as cats are essentially intelligent. Picasso painted wild, predatory cats, and he confessed himself that he preferred cats hunting birds, roaming the world, rather than purebred cats lying on couches<sup>27</sup>.

In Polish painting, there are few depictions of cats, unlike other animals, mainly horses and dogs. The cat appears in Witkacy's painting "Falseness of a woman"<sup>28</sup> from 1927 - looking at the portrayed Maryla Grossmanowa, anyone can discover that the animal symbolizes independence and faithfulness to primeval nature. Similar symbolism can be

23 Approx. in 1924, the art dealer with a cat was also portrayed by Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

24 The black cat from Steinlen's poster has become a recognizable sign, transferred and disseminated through postcards, everyday objects, also gained references in films, games, cartoons.

25 She was the owner of a dozen or so Persian cats herself, for which she employed a caretaker.

26 Compare: <https://useum.org/artwork/Untitled-Henri-Rousseau-1891> - online access - 15.12.2020

27 A. Szubert-Olszewska, *Koty Picassa*, "Kocie sprawy", No. 95, 2010, online access [http://www.kociesprawy.pl/magazyn/czytelniaartykuly\\_w\\_kocich\\_sprawach/kot\\_w\\_sztuce/koty\\_picassa/przeczytaj\\_caly\\_artykul/](http://www.kociesprawy.pl/magazyn/czytelniaartykuly_w_kocich_sprawach/kot_w_sztuce/koty_picassa/przeczytaj_caly_artykul/) - 07.02.2021.

28 The so-called Portrait of Maryla Grossmanowa with a self-portrait. See: <http://www.witkacy.hg.pl/imgs/fals.jpg> - online access - 02/06/2021.



found in the drawing of the horse painter and battalier Aleksander Orłowski, "Cat's Head" from 1823, or in the work by Tytus Czyżewski, formist and colorist, "Act with a cat" from 1920 [25].

### 2.5. The Cat in Folk and Mass Culture

The uniqueness of the cat in culture and folk beliefs is best evidenced by numerous phraseologisms, phrases, sayings and comparisons, in which the cat appears as an animal more often with negative features, including deception, falsehood, betrayal, laziness, perversity, and cunning. Oskar Kolberg, a Polish ethnographer, mentioned the use of the phrase "he had to kill a cat"<sup>29</sup> in everyday language. It was mainly used when talking about cooks who cooked their dishes poorly. It was believed that such a man killed a cat and had to be punished for it. Therefore, the dishes he served were never meant to be tasty again. The rural community despised those who had deliberately killed the cat. It was even said, "Don't get in with him because he killed the cat." Harming an animal willfully was a straight path to social exclusion.

The cat was accused of sucking life from the sleeping babies' breath. The result was that it was treated more cruelly than any other animal. One of the barbaric ways to drive a devil out of a cat was to pin split wood on its tail (hence the proverb "Brace cats") or tie a bladder to its tail with a handful of dry peas inside, hence the expression meaning "to be restless / to bustle about sb" [20]. Binding cats with demonic powers, as companions of witches, into which they can transform, operated in parallel way with the belief that the cat symbolizes gentleness, freedom and independence [1]. The cat's behavior was carefully observed, because "If the cat on the wall raises its ears, the wind from the north is going to blow; if its tail will turn to fire – it is going to be frost, it licks its paws - snow, and when it licks its tail – it is going to rain; if it scrapes off its ears and washes itself - a stranger will come; if it sneezes – someone is going to have a runny nose." The cats were even believed to have the healing properties, they sometimes used to be killed to get the right parts of their bodies [1].

A characteristic Danish tradition associated with Fastelavn, a festival celebrated 7 weeks before Easter, is playing "a cat in a barrel". Originally, it was based on hanging a wooden barrel with a live black cat on a tree and breaking it with sticks. For variety, the players were sometimes blindfolded or seated on horses. The one who hit the bottom of the barrel was winning. After breaking the barrel, the cat was often (but not always) killed - the act against the animal was supposed to provide protection against evil (e.g. to prevent the outbreak of plague). As early as in the mid-18th century, the voices against the abuse of cats on the occasion of the Fastelavn holiday began to appear. This is evidenced by, inter alia, in a preserved poem by Peter Rammel from 1729: "*Oh, if only I were free and you were mice*" [17]. Around the mid-nineteenth century, a dead cat was put into a barrel, and then,

in order not to tire the real animal, a dummy of a cat made of rags.

The most famous cat, apart from the Muezzas of Muhammad, has become matter of historical interest and which is known in culture is Filuś, both the Princess Izabela Czartoryska's cat and the first Polish animal aeronaut. The cat was placed in a balloon basket and released in the summer of 1786 in the Czartoryski residence in Puławy. The balloon was one of the prototypes of Jan Śniadecki's construction. The flight ended with the death of the animal, as the balloon burned down. According to the reports of that period, a real funeral of the cat was organized in the Sarmatian style. The cats of the writer Ernest Hemingway, who was a great lover of them, are also known. In his property in Key West, Florida, he had an entire herd of these animals, over 50 of them<sup>30</sup>. All the cats had 6 fingers - the effect of a mutation called polydactyly. Hemingway believed that multi-fingered cats bring good luck. The cats were also the official residents of the UK Prime Minister's headquarters at 10 Downing Street, with the title of chief buzzard - these were Wilberforce, Humphrey and Larry<sup>31</sup>. In contemporary mass-culture, mainly related to animated productions, the following cat characters are known: Klakier in the Smurfs, the cat Garfield, Tom from the cartoon "Tom and Jerry", Philemon and Boniface from the Polish animation, "Puss in boots", the hero of the Charles Perrault's fairy tale. The animated creations of cats often duplicate the known features of these animals established in culture and art, with particular emphasis on laziness as a cat's vice resulting from their nature.

Cats also have their monuments in various parts of the world, including the one in Braunschweig in Lower Saxony, Germany - the statue of homeless cats, in Kiev near the Golden Gate - the statue of the cat Pantalemon who died in a restaurant fire or in Barcelona on the Rambla de Raval, sculptured by the Colombian sculptor Fernando Botero.

## 3. Conclusion

Due to its presence in art and culture of all epochs, the cat had and still has many meanings and symbols, including those mutually exclusive. On the one hand, it was a symbol of evil - as in the scenes of the Last Supper in Judas or in demonic performances with witches. It personified human vices like vanity, its depiction indicated passing, the inevitability of fate, as in the painting "Graham's children" by William Hogarth, after all, it was a symbol of sins and addictions - mainly in Dutch painting - symbolizing intemperate eating and drinking.

On the other hand it also pointed the positive features - domestic warmth - as in the 20th-century works by Carl

29 The history of the cat in Poland, <https://www.slawoslaw.pl/historia-kota-na-ziemiach-polskich/> - online access on 18/12/2020.

30 <https://www.hemingwayhome.com/cats/> - online access - 06.02.2021.

31 The British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was one of the cat lovers. He used to reserve special chairs for his black pet Nelson in the office and in the dining room on 10 Downing Street. During the war, the cat slept in the politician's bed. He had three other cats: Bob (found it at the steps of the mansion), Mr. Cat (found on the street), Margate (was straying after Churchill's speech in the village of that name) or Jock (a birthday gift from Sir John Colville).

Larsson's or Pierre Bonnard's. Through its relationships with goddesses, being the guardian of households, through its agility and sensuality, it was an erotic symbol, like in Manet's. It was a symbol of happiness (the white cat in Gauguin's), although it was and is associated with misfortune or bad luck (black cat). Like every domestic animal, it strongly left its mark in folk beliefs, superstitions and paradoxically, despite numerous negative references, it was an inseparable element of the Polish landscape and Polish households.

Master Leonard's words, a great cat lover, paraphrased in the title question are a summary of considerations on the presence of a cat in art over the centuries. Its presence in the people's everyday lives of all ages and cultures had its reflection in the works of art, in which the cat, an animal with rich and extremely diverse symbolism, appears as a magical animal. An apt description of the problem of a cat in culture and art is the title of Bogda Balicka's "The Bible for cat lovers" - *Cat. Holy and damned* [2]. In the course of history, the cat, worshiped in ancient cultures, lost its importance in the Middle Ages and modern times by identifying it with unclean and demonic forces, in order to "regain" its former meaning in a different form in recent centuries, as a companion of human life, a pet and the household member. The cat has permanently entered the canon of world art through outstanding works of European painters, especially those from the last century, such as Picasso or Hockney. Studies on the presence of a cat in art are more and more often undertaken in scientific circles, which is not surprising, because as presented in this work, the cat is a source of many references in everyday life, folk beliefs, it is a symbolic motif in religious and erotic art, genre scenes, finally, it is an example of the extraordinary paradox of combining positive and negative associations throughout history.

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