



ARTISTS *and their* CATS

BY ALISON NASTASI

ARTISTS
and
THEIR CATS

By Alison Nastasi



CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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ARTISTS
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THEIR CATS

DEDICATION

*For Griffin and Sascha, the greatest cats
an artist could ever hope for.*

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INTRODUCTION

Every artist needs a muse, and every cat needs a human . . . to rule over. The universe could potentially implode if these fundamental laws were broken, which may explain why creative personalities throughout history have kept cats as companions. When considering the great artists of our time, or the artistic temperament in general, labels like “nonconformist,” “aloof,” and “mysterious” are often applied. The clichés are worthy of much eye-rolling, but in the case of humankind’s kittenly companions, the statements ring true.

One of the animal kingdom’s most independent species, the cat is essentially a solitary creature, possessing deeply ingrained territorial and predatory traits. Despite being domesticated for thousands of years, the genetic difference between a house cat and its predecessor, the African wildcat, is whisker-thin. Dear kitty may not stalk the Hoggar Mountains in search of prey anymore, but living room furniture makes a fine surrogate for the rocky Algerian regions prowled by its ancestors.

Unlike their mortal enemy, the dog—a social pack animal that loves nothing more than pleasing humans and maintains a nine-to-five schedule—felines have minimal tolerance for human agendas and the personality quirks we seek to impose upon them. Nighttime is a cat’s life. There are toy mice to maul, rolls of toilet paper to reap, and invisible foes to battle in the dark while their human “owners” lie asleep (or awake, dreading the inevitable clamor of their alarm clocks).

It should come as no surprise, then, that artists have always found a great affinity for cats. What other creature would join them during intense bouts of late-night studio toil and be content to simply coexist? Numerous studies have illustrated that the behavioral characteristics of different animals, particularly dogs and cats, appeal to people with comparable personalities. Inevitably, many

artists buck notions of a stereotypical temperament, but researchers have long speculated that creative individuals share common attributes—which mirror those of cats.

In a 2010 study by the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, researchers polled more than 4,000 volunteers who self-identified as “cat or dog people” (and included participants who stated they were both or neither). Conducting an assessment using the “Big Five” model of personality traits (measuring openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), they concluded that the “cat people” were more neurotic, less agreeable, and more introverted than their canine-fancying counterparts, but also displayed more openness. Sound like a feline you know?

Professor of psychology Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the founder and co-director of the Quality of Life Research Center in Claremont, California, has spent more than thirty years studying the lifestyles and habits of creative people. A summary of the psychologist’s work, excerpted from his book *Creativity: The Work and Lives of 91 Eminent People in Psychology Today* magazine, notes that it’s not unusual for artists to plow through periods of intense work, followed by spells of idle self-reflection. Assuming such polarized lifestyles, artists can channel energies and organize their workflow in unconventional ways. It’s no different with cats. Domestic felines don’t need to expend energy hunting for food (we happily serve them feasts on a platter), defend themselves against predators (feisty siblings don’t count), and migrate for water and shelter (or the modern equivalent: your bed, laptop, that book you’re trying to read, your piles of clothes, or perhaps your head). Nonetheless, the essential genetics haven’t changed. Cats in the wild sleep up to twenty hours per day, and what is usually perceived as symptomatic of lazy cat-tits in domestic kitties (who average

anywhere from twelve to twenty hours of sleep per day) is actually an instinctive calling. Clearly, the loners and rebels (and possibly the habitual nappers) of the human and animal worlds are soul mates.

The enigmatic allure of cats has fascinated artists for centuries, notably in ancient cultures, where artisans transformed cats into omnipotent idols. When civilization embraced and eventually tamed the creatures, adopting them as pets, cats also became honored as religious and folkloric symbols, woven into myth. Artifacts offer countless examples of the reverence in which the beasts were held—suggesting that spoiled cat-brats are hardly a new phenomenon. The sacred species' popularity didn't start with the Internet; it was originally conceived in antiquity, some several thousand years ago.

Cats were deeply revered in ancient Egypt, where they became symbolic figureheads of their own religious sect, embodied in the goddess figure of Bastet (Bast). Devotees numbering in the hundreds of thousands would make an annual pilgrimage to Bubastis, home of the cat cult. Upon the cherished companions' demise, cats were mourned and mummified similarly to humans. And while Egypt's cat worship tends to dominate the history books, felines had a presence in other Mediterranean cultures throughout the ages. A temple dedicated to Bastet, discovered in Alexandria in 2010 and built by Queen Berenice II, wife of King Ptolemy III Euergetes, the third ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt, suggests an admiration for felines among the ancient Greeks. The Romans respected the cat's sense of independence and brought the creatures to the battlefields, using their rodent-hunting proclivities to keep food supplies and leather goods free from rats. Cats were considered emissaries of the goddess Liberty, often depicted with felines curled at her feet. According to the witchcraft lore compiled in the nineteenth-century book, *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*, another Roman deity, Diana, who ruled the moon and is associated with wild animals, was said to have seduced the god of light, Lucifer, by transforming herself into a cat in order to slip into his bedroom at night.