

Enchanting cats through the ages

By Kim Nagy for WebVet

From the bright glow of a cat's gaze to the slow, almost sultry, sashay of a passing tabby, ancient Egyptians found feline qualities overwhelmingly mystical. In fact, many even believed cats to be daughters of Isis, the powerful moon goddess.

In ancient Egypt, the glance of a cat was believed to hold actual sunlight, while statues of cats were placed outside of homes to ward off evil spirits. A cat's mere presence was thought to bring luck, love and healing.

Among the Egyptian deities associated with cats are Mafdet, the first Egyptian feline deity; Bastet, the goddess of love, often shown with the head of a cat and the figure of a woman; and Sekhmet, usually depicted with a lion's head.

Gods and goddesses

That cats were viewed as manifestations of gods and goddesses in ancient Egypt was not at all uncommon. In fact, affection and respect for many animals permeated daily culture, particularly during the era of the "New Kingdom" (1540 to 1069 BC). Yet, while dogs, geese, and sometimes even gazelles and monkeys were also kept as pets and sometimes even mummified after death, cats held a special place in the hearts of Egyptians.

Initially adopted into households for their hunting abilities – cats killed snakes and other dangerous animals – cats gained such reverence in ancient Egypt that to kill one, even accidentally, could be punishable by death. What's more, cats were often fed as lavishly as human beings.

When a cat died in ancient Egypt, it was mummified with the same level of care with which human beings were preserved and honored. In some cases, elaborate funeral rites would offer food and flowers to the spirit of the animal. Most often, after a cat's death, owners mourned the pet by shaving their eyebrows, as a sign of respect.

The feline mummification process required the removal of the cat's organs, after which the body would be coated with oils and positioned sitting. Finally, the cat would be carefully wrapped up in linen. Cats were sometimes placed in tombs with mice and milk in order to ensure their satisfaction in the afterlife.

Troubled times for cats

In ancient Rome, cats enjoyed respect, though on far more secular terms, as their independent ways embodied symbols of liberty. And in the Far East, they were valued for their hunting ability.

Yet, by the Middle Ages, Christians grew to fear and systematically destroy cats. Demonized, cats were believed to be witches, and were burned at the stake and killed en masse. Indeed, men and women trying to feed or help cats were punished. Some historians even attribute the rise of the plague – which killed between 30 and 60 percent of the European population – to the dwindling presence of cats by the 14th century, as cats would have provided a natural check to the rodents that spread the disease so rapidly.

The public image of cats began to shift again in the 1600s. Cats traveled to North America from England during the 17th century, as sailors valued their ability to keep the mice and rat population down. By the 18th century, the earliest laws against animal cruelty began to be passed in England.

Present day

Today, the presence of cats might predict a broad range of occurrences from good fortune (a black cat means good luck in Britain!) to changes in the weather (Indonesians wash their cats to bring on the rain). A Dutch and French myth warns women not to step on cat's tails if they wish to marry that same year. And many theatres still make sure a cat is around on opening night to ensure a good run.

For thousands of years, cats have fascinated, enchanted and even terrified the human imagination. And cats continue to be viewed with affection and respect as beloved companions in many different cultures all over the world.



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