



Black Cat Resting
Ono Tadashige
(1909 - 1990)

Cat

Alexis Rago

Cats have had a close association with humans for a long time. The earliest evidence for cohabitation between the two dates back to the Middle East ten thousand years ago. This time coincides with the establishment and proliferation of agricultural practices. Pottery not having yet been invented meant that food was particularly vulnerable to rats and other vermin. Wild cats, living in the region were attracted to the pests, and were accepted as an ideal presence as mouse catchers, so much so, that they also gradually became domestic pets. But domestic is not the same as domesticated. Cats are essentially semi-wild animals, enigmatic, mostly solitary, and still able to breed with their wild cat cousins to this day. Their senses are highly tuned to hunting and they

cannot survive long without meat. Protein is essential for female cats to produce litters and the only other available source of energy is their own muscle tissue which is clearly not a good thing in the long term. The majority of cats are highly sensitive to whether a particular person is well disposed to them or not. It is the norm for cats to be discerning of strangers. Their behaviour has made them appear aloof and capricious, mercurial and inscrutable. Their apparent reluctance to be faithful and diffident in sharing their affections with us despite their everyday proximity, has not only had consequences on how they have been perceived and treated throughout history, but also on how they have been depicted in art.

Some of the earliest figurations of cats are found in Ancient Egypt. Bastet (pronounced various ways, often Baast or B'sst) was a divine being, protector of Lower Egypt and descended from a formidable lion goddess. Cats were worshipped, adored as pets, and paradoxically bred in catteries to be killed and mummified in religious rituals. This ambivalence towards the cat presaged the equivocal relationship people would have with cats from there on. The sexually potent Bastet was, as with all deities in those times, depicted in the severe Egyptian aesthetic of an impassive and monumental anthropomorphic god. Later, she would eventually be represented simply as a cat. Subsequent civilisations would continue to be associate the cat with the female sex: Artemis in Greece and Diana in Rome. This entanglement with pagan religions influenced attitudes towards cats during the Middle Ages. What was considered to be their licentious behaviour was antithetical to the Christian church and cats were readily ascribed to be demonic in nature and the familiars of witches, women who had willingly given themselves to the powers of Satan. Despite the potent imagery in beliefs and folklore, cats were generally under-represented in the visual arts. Feline depictions were generally reserved for higher status animals such as tigers and lions, animals that had always been held as symbols of power

and dominion... and male. Negative associations of cats with women survived well after the witch-hunt period into the nineteenth century. The Irish painter Nathaniel Hone painted numerous portraits of girls and women with cats and kittens. His portrait of the well-known courtesan Kitty Fisher, painted in 1765, shows her posing demurely while a kitten paws at a fish bowl with an unaffected ruthlessness. This has been interpreted as a reference to the greedy and mercenary nature of Fisher's trade. Indeed, Cat and Kitty were names associated with prostitutes who worked in 'catteries', another word for brothels.

The cat has also been revered for its motherly attentiveness to its young. Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, cats, or rather kittens, began to be looked upon as a symbol of vulnerability, innocence and playfulness. This sentimentality subverted previous negative connotations and followed the trend in a growing middle class, for mothers becoming disassociated from motherhood in a newly industrialised society. Cats rapidly became sentimentalised and imagery showing cats and kittens behaving as humans proliferated during the Victorian Era. This overt projection into human territory, opened up the possibility for other representations. But it was not until the twentieth century that the psychology of the cat was explored to its fullest extent, often inspired by the likes of Edgar Allen Poe's exploration of guilt in his short story *The Black Cat*, first published in 1843. One hundred years later, films such as *The Cat People (1942)*, created a psychological eroticism catalysing a proliferation of feline femme fatales. This was preceded by DC Comic books' first appearance of *The Cat* (1940) as a love interest to Batman's rather sterile life. Her love-hate relationship with the super hero could be seen as a reflection of perceived cat behaviour. This pattern between male and female counterparts would proliferate into the current era with a gradual rebalancing of roles as women have gained a stronger hold on decision making in society.

But the story of cats in the visual arts during the twentieth century is not confined to feline eroticism. Paul Klee painted his companion Bimbo in *Cat and Bird* (1928), showing the moggy's heart's desire, a bird, emblazoned on its forehead with the warmth of a lifelong cat lover. This content idyll was later shown in a different light with Picasso's painting of *Cat Devouring a Bird* (1939) on the eve of the Second World War. It depicts the cat in the moment after the hunt nonchalantly disemboweling its prey. Giacometti's *The Cat* (1954) on the other hand, is a lean and hungry searcher with a vigour and purpose which perhaps symbolises the optimistic momentum of post-war times. There is also a parallel development of male cats in popular culture. Cartoon characters such as Sylvester, Top Cat, and Tom of *Tom and Jerry*, have shown the male as predatory, transgressive, cunning and often violent, and large cats, again lions, tigers, and pumas to name a few, continue to be almost invariably reserved for dominant male identities. Perhaps because most have been created by men. However, natural history documentaries have gradually altered such biases as they show the female story in greater detail. As for optimistic portrayals of cats, social media has of late proliferated countless cat antics and paired the cat down to an anodyne icon of cute harmlessness in the form of *Hello Kitty*. Is this the future for cats everywhere, a neutered world of 'rag-dolls' and antiheroes?

The creation of anthropomorphic cats, as in T.S. Elliot's psychological-behavioural, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), or Dr Seuss's instructive and entertaining, *The Cat in the Hat*, have brought the world of this emotionally elusive animal closer to us without that unease that is at times engendered by the untamable: as conduits to our animal self. But it could also be interpreted as our inexhaustible desire to control nature, to turn the whole world into a garden and all its inhabitants as conversant, subsidiary partners. We have done this, to a large extent with dogs, but the cat stubbornly refuses to conform to the roles we

ascribe to it. It quietly sits and ponders and plots in a world that is not our own. We can only project into this world what is our own. In this way, artists' relationships with cats, whether close or distanced can only be metaphors through which we glimpse a part of our animal self. The cat is a link with the savage wild, an untamed part of Nature that deigns to share our urban domestication and artificiality. Self-reliance is something that many of us aspire to in a society where we all depend on one another. The cat embodies that solitude and independence that we often yearn for. We share her space but can only enter it if she allows us to. We may be invited to enter his or her territory, they hold the power to refuse. This relationship often translates into art that is at times wistful, at others whimsical, and often full of earthy mysticism.

But what of the future? With global warming and the need to reduce meat production, how will this affect the place of the cat in *our* world? Cats, unlike dogs who have evolved a digestive system to mirror our own, cannot become vegetarian or vegan in the space of a few years as our descendants may well have to. The ubiquity of cats in the house may be reduced to those who can afford the expensive synthetic food that would need to be manufactured for their feline pets. The cat may recede back into the undergrowth of life and our imaginations, re-emerging Rouseauian-like as a myth of large proportions. At least ten thousand years have passed since the earliest evidence I spoke of at the start. It suggests that someone had taken a cat on a boat, from somewhere on the mainland of the fertile crescent to the Island of Cyprus, and established a farm with its co-immigrant as pet and guardian. But in the era of climate change, the nature of our acquired closeness to this animal may change again, and with this so might art depicting *Felix catus domesticus*.

26 April 2020