

Presseinformation

Museum am Rothenbaum

Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg
Germany | markk-hamburg.de

CATS!



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Cat content is flooding social media – but what lies behind our millennia-old fascination with cats? The exhibition CATS! at the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) traces the story of what is perhaps the most versatile and multifaced animal in cultural history: from the revered Egyptian goddess Bastet to the companion of persecuted witches to today's viral internet star. Few animals embody such contradictions – the cat is cute and useful, sacred and sinister, a bringer of good luck and a symbol of misfortune all at once.

Divine, demonic, political

The exhibition explores how cats have been linked to femininity and power across cultures and centuries and remains relevant to this day. In ancient Egypt, a goddess in feline form was worshipped as the protector of mothers, and in India, the Hindu goddess of fertility Sashthi rides a black cat. Yet in early modern Europe, the same associations of femininity and fertility led to demonisation: the black cat was stylised as a witch's companion. These ambivalent attributions continue to resonate today. In the 2024 US election campaign, the stereotype of the »childless cat lady« was used to devalue women – prompting many to reclaim the cat as a feminist emblem. Similar ascriptions and self-appropriations already existed during the women's rights movement around 1900.

Across Africa, Asia and beyond, big cats such as lions, leopards and tigers have long symbolised courage, strength and power. They appear as emblems of royal power and

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military might, shaping the imagination of entire cultures. In Latin America, the jaguar holds a special place: a mysterious and sacred being that walks between worlds, bridging boundaries between life and the afterlife like a shaman.

»For thousands of years, cats have served as a projection screen for human desires and fears. They symbolise countless, often contradictory ideas – and yet remain mysteriously untouched«, says Lara Selin Ertener, curator of the exhibition.

From internet phenomenon to political weapon

Why did cats, of all creatures, conquer the internet? The exhibition examines the appeal of the cuteness phenomenon, tracing its roots to the Japanese *kawaii* aesthetic. Are cat videos a form of escapism or do they represent a new aesthetic practice with political potential? In fact, activists strategically use cat content to assert visibility in digital spaces. From the first cat short films of the late 19th century and Schrödinger's famous thought experiment to AI-generated cat depictions, cats have always been at the forefront of media innovation.

Global cat perspectives

»The exhibition examines, from a sociocultural and global perspective, the symbolic and spiritual imagery of cats, their attributed roles and their political and media representation in pop culture, cultural history and art history«, says Barbara Plankensteiner, director of the MARKK.

Drawing on the museum's global collections, CATS! combines historical objects with contemporary artworks, including pieces by Carolee Schneemann, Taewon Ahn, Melanie Cervantes and Chéri Cherin. Ancient Egyptian goddess statues, Japanese demon masks, shamanic jaguar representations from South America, domestic cat paraphernalia from European households, waving maneki-neko figures and much more highlight the cultural diversity of cat symbolism. Cat content submitted by Hamburg residents will also be featured.

An extensive program of events and educational activities complement the exhibition along with a publication exploring the cultural and historical significance of cats with humour and insight. The exhibition is sponsored by the Department of Culture and Media of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, the Hapag-Lloyd Foundation and the Hubertus Wald Foundation.

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