

Throughout History, Cats Counted

Learn about famous figures who loved felines — and some who loathed them.

By Allie Bullock Kagamaster

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Jock IV is the current cat living at Chartwell, Sir Winston Churchill's estate in England. Photo courtesy The National Trust, Chartwell. French researchers during a 2004 dig on the island of Cyprus reported to BBC News Online that a 9,000-year-old African wildcat was buried within inches of a notable human, suggesting the presence of a pet cat during the Stone Age. Through the ages, cats and humans connected to history have affected advancement of societies.

Praying Paws

The prophet Mohammed, rather than waking his cat who was once napping on the sleeve of a prayer robe, cut off the sleeve "to leave Muezza in peace," according to Islamonline.net. In Islam, mistreating cats is regarded as a deadly sin.

Science and Music Mousers

Sir Isaac Newton, who identified gravity, created the first cat flap by carving two holes in his lab door for his cat and her kitten to come and go. When composer Frederic Chopin's cat raced across his piano keys, Chopin spun the notes into "The Cat Waltz."

Literary Tails and Cats on Canvas

T.S. Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Cats;" Jenni Pain of Brown Lloyd James in London says the composer, raised with cats, "has two Turkish swimming cats called Mica and Ozzie."

Mark Twain was a cat lover who had nearly a dozen felines at one time. Mark Twain had as many as 11 cats at one time, says Henry Sweets, curator of the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum in Hannibal, Mo. But Ernest Hemingway's polydactyl (six-toed) horde numbered 150 in Florida and Cuba combined at one time. Of four dozen or so cats at the Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum in Key West, Fla. today, half carry the recessive gene. "We average one litter a year intentionally to keep the bloodline going," says Dave Gonzalez, events director at the national historic landmark.

When authenticating Pierre Auguste Renoir's paintings, the Institut Pasteur in Paris found cats' hairs in the paint. Edouard Manet sketched his cat Zizi for numerous works, often using watercolors.

Postmodern Prowlers

Sir Winston Churchill's black cat Nelson went to wartime cabinet meetings at No. 10 Downing Street with the prime minister during World War II. At 88, Churchill's private secretary gifted him with Jock, a Marmalade who accompanied him to his grandson's wedding. "The affection that translated into his will that there always has to be a Marmalade named Jock at Chartwell (his estate) serves as a link to the past," says Fred Glueckstein, writer for the Churchill Centre in Washington, D.C. Currently, Jock IV serves as cat incumbent.

Pope Benedict XVI shares a lifelong love of cats — a feline affection among popes that dates back to medieval Pope Paul II. Before his post as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, cats lined Benedict's house and garden in the Bavarian village of Pentling. Chico, a ginger Tabby from next door, "penned" the pope's authorized biography, a children's book, "Joseph and Chico: The Life of Pope Benedict XVI as Told by a Cat," (Ignatius Press, 2008), with "help" from Italian journalist Jeanne Perego.

But not all dynamic leaders loved cats. Some dreaded them. Historians suggest that cat haters Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte thought cats unconquerable and resented them. Benito Mussolini and Adolph Hitler shared this ailurophobia, and Julius Caesar froze at the sight of felines.

In the long history of the world, Leonardo da Vinci sums up the importance of cats: "The smallest feline is a masterpiece."



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