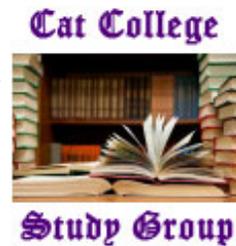




## Session 100: Art History



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Felines have been depicted in art for thousands of years, from prehistoric cave art to antiquity to Pop Art. Their symbolism, positive or negative, has reflected the cultural climate and often signaled a new artistic movement. Nineteenth-century Paris was home to many artistic movements and cats were prolifically depicted in scenes from sugary to sinister.

#### Courbet's Realism

In mid-19th century Paris, avant-garde artists moved against traditions. Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) bucked convention with his "manifesto of Realism." Courbet's credo was that he could not paint what he had not seen; therefore angels and saints, popular subjects of the day, were tossed out.

At the 1855 Paris Exhibition, Courbet held a private, self-funded exhibition of his works embodying his Realist credo. The center of his work was a canvas not only grand in size, but meaning. "Studio of a Painter: A Real Allegory Summarizing My Seven Years of Life as an Artist" ushered in the development of modern art with the cat, front and center.



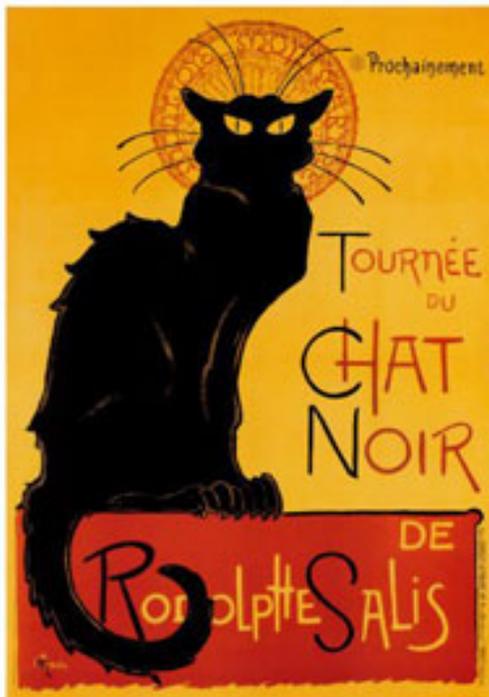


On the left-hand side of the painting are what Charles Baudelaire called “the heroism of modern life” — peasants, paupers, hunters and workers. On the right side are representations of Courbet’s life in Paris — clients, friends and intellectuals, including two renowned writers and cat fanciers, Champfleury and, seated, Charles Baudelaire. Highlighted in the center is the artist; a small child representing “the innocent eyes”; a nude model most likely representing nature or truth, a principle behind Courbet’s Realism; and a fluffy white Angora cat; one of three popular breeds in France at the time.

According to James Rubin, author of “Impressionist Cats and Dogs,” the meaning of the cat had been overlooked until 1983. If everything in the painting was allegorical and meaningful, what about the white Angora? Experts speculate it most likely belonged to Champfleury, who penned a book called “Les Chats,” and was Courbet’s close friend.

During the French Revolution, the cat became a symbol of freedom. Rubin writes that the cat represents artists’ independence, since Courbet refused to submit to official commissions and the governmental control. The color white often symbolizes purity, so what better artistic symbol of freedom, independence and purity than a white cat?

### **"Le Chat Noir"**



In the late 19th century, the Symbolist movement emerged and swung the cat’s image to the darker, mysterious side, evocative of sin and decadence. Concurrently, Art Nouveau arose, intended for the people and to beautify Paris. The style’s sinuous

curves perfectly suited the feline form.

During this time, Rodolphe Salis opened a cabaret, Chat Noir, in the Montmartre district of Paris. The district was home to bohemian, anti-establishment artists, writers and other creative types who were fiercely independent and defiant of all authority, setting tradition on its ear. The cabaret became their gathering spot for plays, performances and satire. Salis hired artist and ailurophile Théophile Steinlen to create a series of posters advertising the cabaret. Steinlen historically melded poster art and advertising.

His masterpiece lithographs depict a black cat sitting upright, wearing a mischievously wicked expression and a rose-window halo behind its head inscribed with “Montjoye Montmartre,” the district’s rallying cry. The iconic black cat came to symbolize the entire district, suggesting creative freedom, mystery and sensual pleasures.

So cats, light or dark, transcending time and culture, remain the artist’s muse.

*Ramona Marek, a former special education teacher, holds a master’s degree in education. She is a member of the Cat Writers’ Association and long-time supporter of the arts. She is inspired by her two feline muses, Tsarevich Ivan and Natasha Fatale.*