

# Pop Culture Cats

## Part One - Feline All Stars

by Ramona D. Marek, MS Ed

Twelve thousand years ago in Mesopotamia, the cat self-domesticated and over the years cats and humans have cohabited and co-evolved in a mutually beneficial relationship. Since then felines, wild and domestic, have permeated world societies playing deeply significant roles in religions, art and literature. But cats have also entertained us and contributed to commerce as pop culture icons.

Popular culture, or “pop” culture, is cultural activities or commercial products enjoyed by the general population spread through mass media. Modes of dissemination of pop culture include oral tradition, written works, television, movies and the Internet. The cat’s status in pop culture dates back to the early days of domestication with those original hipsters, the ancient Egyptians.

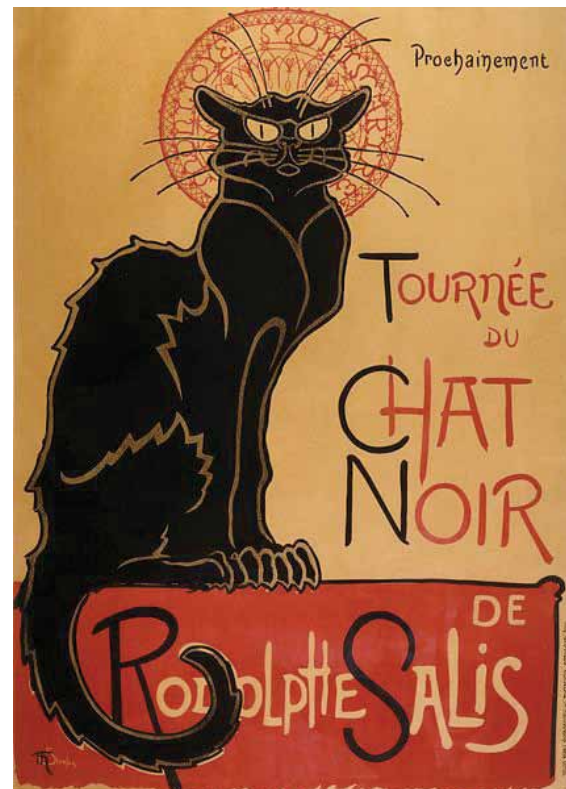


In ancient Egypt the most powerful divinity, **Ra**, the sun god, took the form of Atum-Ra (“the Great Tomcat”) traveling the underworld at night and killing his enemy, Apophis, the snake-demon, by cutting off his head with a knife. As graphic as it seems, it symbolizes the solar cycle, the power of the sun over night. This was a fierce, powerful divinity not to be mistaken for a lap cat.

Such a powerful personality was perfect for parody. Early papyrus paintings dating to 2,000 BC depict satirical scenes of “world upside down” with anthropomorphized animals – having human attributes – in scenes opposite of natural occurrences.

Examples include cats walking upright serving mice or herding geese. Drawings are also found on “ostraca,” limestone flakes and pottery shards used as “notebooks” for notes, lists, poetry, etc. Egyptologists believe the illustrated ostraca represent satirical comments about the Egyptian elite and popular fables. The concept is believed to be the origin of animated cartoons.

As time passed the cat’s status shifted from the deified to the demonized and settled in between as domestic pet. All along the way, they remained embedded in culture and pop culture alike. The nineteenth century gave us Lewis Carroll’s **Cheshire Cat**, Théophile Steinlen’s **Le Chat Noir** and the feline image was used in advertising from soap to luxury jewelry.





However, the twentieth century saw a meteoric increase in the number of pop culture cats that touched our hearts, taught us to read and tickled our funny bones. Some of the most popular cats include Morris the cat, Cat in the Hat and **Tom** of the Tom & Jerry cartoon duo, among others. A few pop culture cats have surpassed their littermates and risen to stardom withstanding the test of time as perennial favorites.

**CATS**, the musical, based on T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, holds two longevity records. Premiering on May 11, 1981 in the West End at the New London Theatre until its last performance on May 11 2002 with 8,949 performances over 21 years, **CATS** held London's record for longest running musical. *Les Misérables* currently holds the new longevity record.

The winner of the 1981 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Musical and 1983 Tony Award for Best Musical, **CATS**, debuted on Broadway on October 7, 1982 at the Winter Garden Theatre. **CATS** closed September 10, 2000 after 7,485 performances over 18 years making it Broadway's second



longest-running show superseded only by *Phantom of the Opera* in first place.

With worldwide performances in over 30 countries and translated into over 20 languages, the show remains an audience favorite.

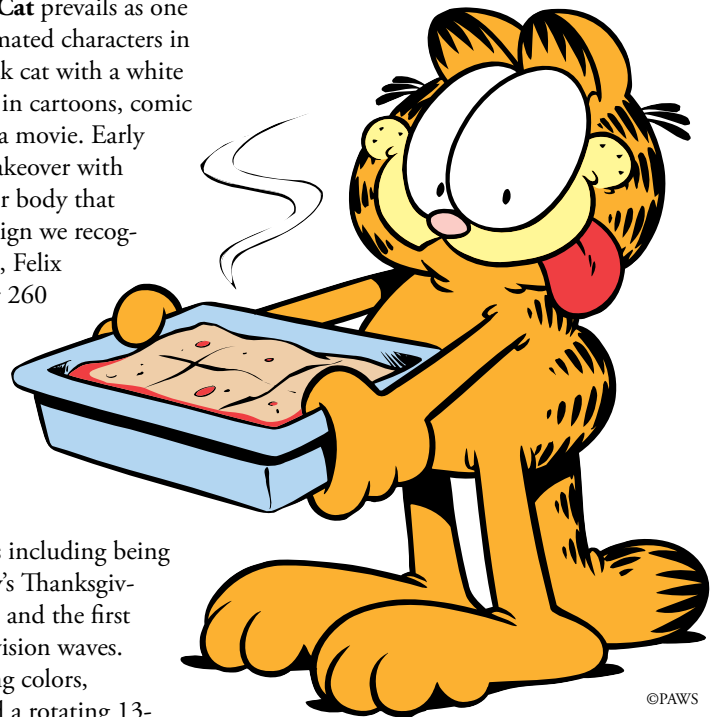
Making his debut in 1919 in silent film, *Feline Follies*, **Felix the Cat** prevails as one of the most familiar animated characters in film history. Felix, a black cat with a white face and wide grin, stars in cartoons, comic strips, comic books and a movie. Early in his career, he got a makeover with longer legs and a rounder body that closely resembles the design we recognize today. In the 1950's, Felix starred in a series of over 260 cartoons distributed by Trans-Lux TV that ran continuously for 20 years and are still shown somewhere in the world today.

Felix holds many honors including being the first balloon in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1927, and the first image broadcast on television waves. Because of his contrasting colors, RCA Research Labs used a rotating 13-inch papier-mâché Felix doll as a test for the first television transmission in 1928.

Gaining popularity in the 1920's, Felix's popularity endures today with strong merchandising as he partners with many companies including Wendy's, Hardees and Dairy Queen. His likeness is on ceramics, clothing and toys. Modern day pop culture gives a nod to Felix in movie cameos, TV shows, commercials and music.

The snarky, lasagna-eating **Garfield** weighs in with his own world record, a Guinness World Record as the most widely syndicated comic strip carried in over 2,600 newspapers and an estimated 263,000,000 daily readers in 2002. The corpulent orange tabby made his first comic strip appearance on June 19, 1978 in 41 newspapers with a little help from comic strip artist, Jim Davis. Since then Garfield has undergone his own evolutionary makeover—walking upright on his hind legs, open eyes and weight loss, but still plump.

Davis is quoted as saying he wanted to create "a good, marketable character." Well, Garfield is a merchandising powerhouse earning \$750 million to \$1 billion annually. In 1981, Davis created Paws, Inc. to oversee the massive Garfield merchandising. Garfield's endorsements include credit cards, clothing, toys, and Caribbean cruises. In media, there are Garfield movies, comic books, DVDs, video games, and television cartoons.



Garfield, Felix and **CATS** may all hold records and world renown but one kitty surpasses them with her global recognition and lucrative endorsements. The iconic phenomenon known as **Hello Kitty** debuted on a vinyl coin purse in Japan in 1974, and in the United States in 1976, and has grown into a global sensation reaping over \$5 billion annually for the Japanese company, Sanrio.



Hello Kitty, full name, Kitty White, a white Japanese Bobtail, comes with a bio, circle of family and friends and her own pet cat, Charmmy Kitty, a white Persian. Yuko Shimizu's simple design based on maneki neko, "beckoning cat," Hello Kitty, mouthless with a set of three whiskers and wearing a red bow over her left ear, was originally marketed towards the pre-teen demographic. With some remarketing, she successfully appeals to an adult audience as well.

Hello Kitty has a strong presence in Asia, particularly Japan, incorporating a sense of traditional Japanese culture with pop culture appealing to a group that fancies "kawaii." cute. The Hello Kitty brand has lucrative endorsements far beyond toys, school supplies and fashion accessories of

mass appeal but also high-end goods including Hanky Panky and Simmons Jewelry Co. by Kimora Lee Simmons. Hello Kitty licensing exceeds the usual credit cards, TV series, music and video games in abundance. There are themed restaurants, two Sanrio theme parks in Japan (Harmonyland and Sanrio Puroland) and a fully themed maternity ward in Yuanlin, Taiwan to lessen the stress of childbirth. Moreover, strictly adult libations include wine, introduced in 2010 in Asia, Europe and the United States, and a limited edition fruit flavored beer licensed in China in September 2013.

For those wishing to elevate their Hello Kitty experience, Taiwanese airline Eva Air, launched three days a week jumbo jet service from Taipei to Los Angeles in September 2013. Like-minded fans share a full Hello Kitty experience from check-in receiving Hello Kitty luggage tags and boarding passes to Hello Kitty seats, snacks, soap, cutlery, cups, toilet paper and airsick bags.

On the eve of her 40th birthday, Hello Kitty remains one of the world's most recognized, adored and lucrative cats in pop culture.

Since ancient civilizations, cats have played important roles in our lives blending elements of traditional culture with popular culture amusing us for thousands of years. Then came the millennium and Internet...

*Next issue:  
"Pop Culture Cats, part two:  
Top Cats in Cyberspace"*

## Sources

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