

Cat People

The History of Pups, Kitties & Other Household Pets Is Examined in Playful & Poignant 'Petropolis'

"I like dogs a lot — it isn't that I don't like dogs," renowned cat therapist Carole Wilbourn told me. "I'm not trying to be prejudiced. A cat person is willing to put up with whatever their cat might choose to do. Cats need to be in control."

Wilbourn, who has written such books as *The New York Cat Owner's Guide* and *The Total Cat*, was one of the special guests at the July 15 opening of "Petropolis: A Social History of Urban Animal Companions" at the New-York Historical Society. With her was her beloved cat, Diana-Moon-Dust.

"Usually, a dog person likes to exert a particular amount of control over the dog," added the Freud of Felines. "A dog likes to be led. A dog needs a master. It's very hard to be in charge of a cat. The cat might be in charge of you. A cat will live with you, but you can't own a cat."

The fun and informative exhibit traces the relationship between owners and owned, pets and people over the centuries. The display includes photographs, posters, medallions, oil paintings, sculptures, toys, clothing, canes, and much more, focusing on not only dogs and cats but also birds, horses, pigs, rabbits, monkeys, and fish.

Among the most charming pieces are Morris H. Jaffe's gelatin silver print "Window Washer and Cat," in which a kitty reaches out against the glass, trying to grab a worker's squeegee. John Costanza's ceramic sculpture "The Incredible Dog Walker" was based on a woman he saw walking 17 dogs on Madison and 46th. "For a rat this is a four star restaurant," proclaims a Health Department poster of an over-filled garbage can.

"There's a lot more going on in this world than just human society," said Bryan Kortis, cofounder and executive director of Neighborhood Cats, a non-profit organization that cares for homeless cats and preaches the mantra "Trap – Neuter – Return."

"There's an enormous street-cat population," he continued. "It's the number one reason why there's so much euthanasia in the city's shelters."

Behind Kortis was "The Dog Killer," an 1870 oil painting by William P. Chappel of a municipal worker on the hunt to put stray dogs to sleep.

"That wasn't so long ago," Kortis explained. "Human beings are not the only species that exist. If you live with an animal long enough, you really get to know them and you realize that intelligence is



a very subjective thing. We're intelligent one way, a cat or a dog is intelligent in another."

"There are cat fanciers, and there are definitely the bark people, and the two are divided," said Roberta J.M. Olson, associate curator of drawings at the historical society. "I've had both, and I love both. If I did not live in the city, I would have both together. Being in the city, I've restricted myself to cats," she said as I noticed a fish earring dangling from her right ear and a hungry cat swaying from her left.

We were standing in front of Charles Burton's 1826 watercolor of Erasmus Hall Academy in Flatbush. Some 130 years later, my father graduated from the expanded Erasmus Hall High School, which was designated a city landmark last month. When I was growing up, my father was allergic to our cat. After seven years, I was told that it was either Slippers or my dad. I eventually donated my tuxedo kitty to the North Shore Animal League. It was the hardest thing I'd ever done up to that point in my life.

Today my wife and I have two cats in our Midtown apartment. While we still might not be able to name every person on our floor, we do know all the people with cats, because most of us take care of each other's pets during long weekends and vacations.

"Animals create social structure," Olson said. "I do think that cats get bad names, though. Some people think they're standoffish. They're particular, they're discriminating, but I find they are very affectionate. Maybe I choose cats that are more like dogs."

We turned our attention back to the exhibit.

"It's really a kind of microcosm of our whole culture in New York," Olson said. "I think our animal companions have always taught us things about nature and our environment, how to live better. I think that they have many lessons to teach us." ■

"Petropolis" will be at the New-York Historical Society (2 W. 77th St., 212-873-3400, nyhistory.org) through Nov. 9. For more information on Neighborhood Cats, visit neighborhoodcats.org or call 212-662-5761. You can also learn more about Wilbourn on the Web at thecattherapist.com.