

The Cat in Art

-Silvia Malaguzzi

Ovid narrates that when Typhoeus frightened the gods by unleashing himself from the depths of the earth, Diana, the hunter goddess, took on the appearance of a cat to escape his fury.

In the verses of the *Metamorphoses* (V, vv. 294-231) finds authoritative expression the association between the goddess and the animal united by the moon, the star sacred to Diana and the small feline whose nocturnal liveliness is known both to its fans and its detractors who consider this characteristic a demonstration of its ambiguous and hermetic personality.

In fact, what has always made the cat fascinating is its unpredictable duplicity: on the one hand it is the seraphic and domestic companion animal, lover of rest and effusions and on the other, it is the implacable and solitary nocturnal hunter.

We know that the Greeks and the Etruscans already appreciated and adopted the cat before the Romans; before to disinfect the house from small harmful animals and soon after as a pet. A mosaic fragment from the House of the Faun in Pompeii clearly celebrates the hunting skills of a tabby cat with a cruel expression with a partridge in its claws, almost a helpless prey. Often depicted in art is its historical enmity with the dog, which for modern psychology is the metaphor of the clash between the sexes where the cat, a nocturnal and feminine animal, represents the womanliness and its indecipherable and fascinating nature while the dog is the epitome of crystalline male psychology. In religious art the two animals are often opponents. In the Last Supper frescoed by Pietro Lorenzetti in the lower basilica of San Francesco in Assisi we glimpse a kitchen where next to the large fireplace an attendant pours the remains of the banquet onto the dog's plate. A cat watches it consume that food with the expression of someone who would have liked to share the meal; it has its ears back and the puffy fur of an angry feline but does not attack the voracious contender. On a symbolic level, the dog represents loyalty which, fueled by the remains of the evangelical dinner, triumphs while the cat, symbol of betrayal –due to its renowned unpredictability– remained fasting, held back by its own anger. In Renaissance painting the cat is often Judas' animal and yet biblical exegesis also celebrates it for its ingenuity. The striped cat crouching depicted by Antonello da Messina in *St Jerome in his study* seems to mimic, with its pose, that of the Saint sitting at the desk and intent on reading. Here the animal is the perfect companion of the intellectual because, just as the feline is able to see in the darkness, so the enlightened Saint is capable of deciphering the complex theological matter of the Holy Scriptures.

It is a tricolor cat - only female cats can have this characteristic - the one depicted by Federico Barocci curled up with her kittens on the Virgin's mantle in *The Madonna of the Cat*. The feline here is a symbolic vehicle of the most tender maternal feeling since a legend has it that just as Christ was born a cat gave birth to her kittens. Furthermore, it is well known that cats are loving mothers capable of affectionate and insistent maternal care.

The seventeenth century partly frees the cat from its ambivalent symbolic load. In fact, in the still life and especially in the Flemish one inspired by the most objective realism, the domestic feline finds itself playing the role of thief. In fact, its simple presence transforms a set of foods into succulent spoils. This is the case of the *Still Life of Fish and Cat* by Clara Peeters where a big cat has already sunk its claws into one of the dead fish depicted.

But just as the moon is a feminine star since it supervises the cycle of fertility the cat is a feminine creature, and so in the 18th century, the century that added eroticism and mischief to every painting, the small feline would acquire a privileged role due to its sinuous body, its seductive agility and its indecipherable expression.

A tricolor cat is depicted by Jean Baptiste Chardin in *The Ray*. The function is not very different from Clara Peeters's huntress but her walking on oysters, a food considered an aphrodisiac since Roman times, cannot be considered accidental.

Both the ray with an almost human expression and the fish lying on the table are potentially prey to be consumed. We don't know if Chardin's intention was to depict the dangerous and voracious female psychology here behind a feline metaphor, but the composition certainly seems to allow this level of reading too.

However, the most sensual of eighteenth-century cats is the one depicted by Jean Jacques Bachelier in the work situated at the Lambinet museum in Versailles. Painter of animals and flowers, Bachelier was the favorite artist of Louis XV and the Marquise of Pompadour and the nobility of his excellent protectors is perfectly reflected in the choice of an aristocratic angora cat to whom he dedicates a real portrait, while he absentmindedly chases a butterfly. Here everything is graceful and even the hunting instinct of the feline becomes mild, diluted in the elegance of the pose and the playful attitude of the animal.

In the 19th century, when domestic interiors were often the settings chosen by impressionist painters for their works, the cat became a frequent and positive presence. Pierre Auguste Renoir portrays a cat nestled in Julie Manet's arms in the very famous painting kept at the Musée d'Orsay. In this

artwork there is all the sweetness of both the little girl holding it in her lap and the almost smiling feline in a state of bliss.

Captions

1. Roman art second half of the 2nd century BC, *Mosaic from Pompeii (house of the Faun)*, Naples, National Archaeological Museum.
2. Pietro Lorenzetti, *The last Supper*, Assisi, Church of St Francis, 1310-1320.
3. Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome in his study*, London, National Gallery, 1474-75.
4. Federico Barocci, *Madonna of the cat*, Florence, Palatine Gallery, 1598 c.
5. Clara Peeters, *Still Life of Fish and Cat*, Washington D.C., National Museum of Women, 1620.
6. Jean Baptiste Chardin, *The ray*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1728.
7. Jean Jacques Bachelier, *White angora Cat chasing a butterfly*, Versailles, Musée Lambinet, 1761.
8. Pierre Auguste Renoir, *Julie Manet' portrait*, Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 1887.

Tavormina's New Photos

-Silvia Malaguzzi

It is above all in the painting by Jean Jacques Bechelier that we can see the ideal origin of the artistic intention that animates the images captured by Paulette Tavormina in her four new shots.

In the production of the New Yorker photographer, whose distinctive feature is to present in photographic form what anyone with a background in art would instantly recognise as a painting, the presence of the cat is an absolute novelty.

As usual in Tavormina's production, against the seventeenth-eighteenth century backgrounds illuminated with Caravaggesque light, objects chosen with philological taste stand out, reconstructing in reality the *trompe l'oeil* effect so sought after by Flemish painters. Contributes to this recreated reality the presence of the cat, an example of a modern breed, but endowed with the same elegance and lightness of the angora cat already depicted in the eighteenth century. The cat - as everyone knows - does not obey orders and it therefore represents proof of photographic virtuosity to have managed to immortalize it in a moment of perfect interaction with the environment that surrounds it. In *Cat and oysters* the set is full of objects artfully arranged according to the classic manner of seventeenth-century still life: from the stand with two different shapes of glasses often present in Claesz. Heda's work, to the bread crumbs, the lemon peeled and the knife with the handle symbolically offered to the viewer and yet, despite the crowded set of objects, the protagonist is clearly only interested in oysters.

The predatory intention is barely mentioned: the feline is about to act, will it? It will not? In that uncertainty there is the refined poetry of the shot. In *Goldfish and cat* the feline action is more defined by the paw already ready to strike, the objective of the hunt is there, easy to capture but the cat hesitates waiting to deliver the final blow with pinpoint precision. Here too, the suspension of the action is central to the work, as difficult to capture as it is fascinating once stopped in the photograph. The intention is now declared in *Fellini and the birds* where the cat is no longer just a cat but takes on its identity in the title of the work. Here, however, there is the cage which, by stopping the action of the predator, prevents the most tragic epilogue: in this photo the playful aspect of feline hunting is staged, perhaps the cruelest one which consists of torturing before the final blow. Here though, its intentions are frustrated by the cage which, by limiting the freedom of the birds, also limits that of the feline. Who knows...perhaps the artist intended to stage with this metaphor her vision of life where the rules of human society allow prey and predators to coexist,

limiting the most tragic outcomes of this difficult coexistence. Finally in *Pink Peonies* the cat, no longer a hunter but a sitter, poses among the flowers in the vase apparently distracted but in reality well aware of having captured the photographer's interest. Aware of its irresistible charm, he interacts with the public like a red carpet star, confirming the words of Leonardo da Vinci according to whom: «Even the smallest of felines, the cat, is a masterpiece.»















