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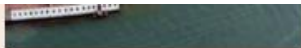
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Feared, worshipped and even roasted. An exhibition in Verona explores the many facets of the man-cat relationship

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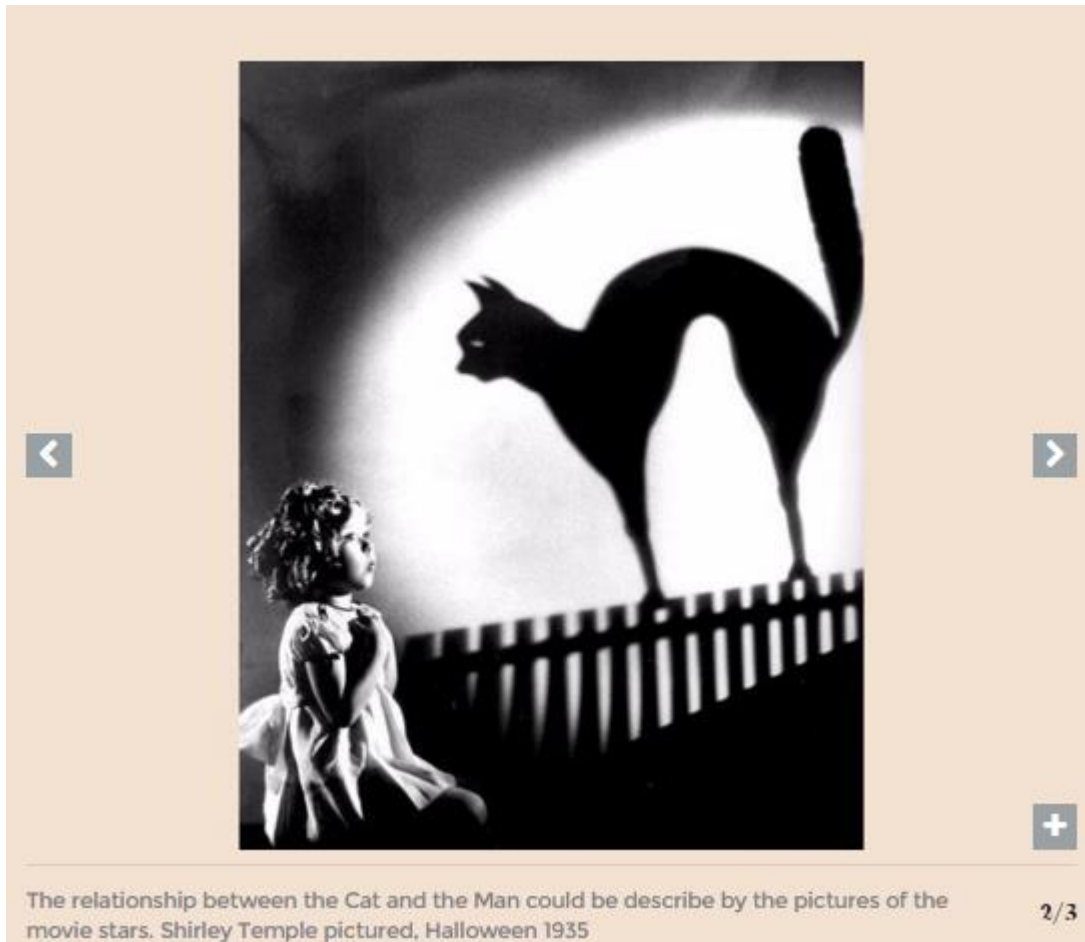
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by *Lorenzo Zanini*



In Ancient Egypt the goddess of femininity, of motherhood and of domestic hearth, Bastet, was a cat

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The relationship between the Cat and the Man could be describe by the pictures of the movie stars. Shirley Temple pictured, Halloween 1935



Did you know that in Ancient Egypt the goddess of femininity, of motherhood and of the domestic hearth, Bastet, was a cat?

And that in the Middle Ages this domestic animal was considered the very embodiment of evil and of the Devil, a protagonist in witchcraft get together?

And few people probably are aware that these domesticated animals were even featured in recipes like the "Gato Asado" (roasted cat) in cookbooks written by Ruperto de Nola for the Viceroy of Naples in 1491.

The exhibition, "Il Gatto e l'Uomo" ("The Cat and the Man," Ed's note), until November 29 in Verona at the Palazzo della Gran Guardia, explores the role this feline has had in past civilizations.

On display are paintings, photographs, antique prints, and vintage pieces also from the Cats Museum in Kotor (Montenegro), from private collections, and from the Museo Correr and IRE in Venice.

The exhibition cannot leave out the "dreaded" (but at the same time fascinating) black cat: it didn't always signal bad luck. Black cats were adored on Roman ships, which welcomed them aboard to play up to the goddess Diana so that she would watch over them on the route during the night, and used them as a instrument of blackmail on the field in the Battle of Pelusium in 525 BC. The Persians led by King Cambyses II defeated the Egyptians conducted by Pharaoh Psamtik III who refused to fight after having seen cats tied to the enemy shields.

The cat has become a sure presence even in fairy tales, such as "Puss in Boots" (few know that originally it was about a female cat ...).

And it is the 17th-century version of the fairy tale that originates the Italian expression "fare la gatta morta" ("playing dumb," Ed's note), when the protagonist fails to recognize his feline female friend, who, pretending to be dead, tests his loyalty.

In Aesop's fable "The cat and the mice," a hungry cat pretends to be dead in front of the mice.

Even famous historical characters cannot resist the ambivalent charm of the cat: sweet and cruel, attractive and dangerous all at once. The Byzantine empress Theodora, for example, ordered a bowl of gold studded with gems where she served food to her cat. The poet Francesco Petrarca so loved his feline companion that she is "second only to Laura," as is stated in a marble inscription dedicated to her.

Rounding out the exhibition are photographs of movie stars: Shirley Temple, Ruth Weyher, Sophia Loren, Claudia Cardinale with their feline friends.

Science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein had no doubts: "Women and cats," he said, "will do what they want, and men and dogs should relax and get used to the idea."

But then if the woman "plays dumb," the situation gets complicated, we add.

(Il Gatto e l'Uomo dalla preistoria ai nostri giorni, Palazzo della Gran Guardia, Verona, until November 29)