

George Hendrik Breitner (1857-1923) was among the most successful Dutch painters of the nineteenth century. Well known for his paintings of city scenes, a series of young women dressed in kimonos, cavalymen and horses, Breitner also depicted cats in his sketches, paintings, and photographs. Breitner was a cat lover: cats were always roaming around in his house and in his studio. This book contains a selection of his sketches and photographs of cats.

### **George Hendrik Breitner**

Born in Rotterdam in 1857, George Hendrik Breitner began his studies at the Academy of Art, The Hague, in 1876. There he met painters of the Hague School who, influenced by the French Barbizon painters, preferred realism to romanticism. Soon known for his ability to paint horses, Breitner was hired by Hendrik Willem Mesdag in 1881 to paint the horses in his renowned panorama painting of Scheveningen, which can still be visited today in a specially built rotund gallery in The Hague. A year later Breitner befriended Vincent van Gogh, with whom he often went sketching in and around The Hague. Attracted by its vibrant artistic and cultural life spurred by a revival of economic growth, Breitner moved to Amsterdam in 1886. Here Breitner captured the city's street life in many of his paintings. Horses remained an important subject for the artist, but he soon replaced his cavalry horses with those pulling carts and trams. He often took his sketchbook on his walks through the town and, from around 1890, he would also take his Kodak camera out with him to capture scenes that would find their way into his paintings. He also used his camera in his studio, for example, to prepare his famous series of kimono-clad girls.

In Amsterdam, Breitner joined a group of progressive painters and writers called *de Tachtigers* – the Eighties Movement – which, from around 1880 championed naturalism against romanticism. Prominent members of this literary vanguard included Willem Kloos, Lodewijk van Deysse, Frederik van Eeden, Albert Verwey and Hélène Swarth. In 1885 they founded the journal, *De Nieuwe Gids*, as a platform for their ideas about art. Breitner's style of painting fit well with their conception of art which revolved around individualism and aestheticism, and with their belief that an artist should

not make art to strive towards some higher goal, but only for the sake of art itself: *l'art pour l'art*.

Breitner joined the Eighties Movement along with several well-known painters including Isaac Israëls, Willem Witsen and Jacques van Looy, who was also an editor of *De Nieuwe Gids*. Painting in a style that continued and succeeded that of the Hague School, these artists selected their subjects from modern city life rather than from the rural scenes of their predecessors. They came to be called the Amsterdam Impressionists, as they attempted to capture the various 'moods' of the city. Against this background Breitner developed his personal style.

### **Cats in the nineteenth century**

Earlier eras had valued cats primarily as mouse catchers; they otherwise considered cats as cruel beasts of prey who roved the streets, spreading diseases and keeping people awake with their chilling cries. In the distant past, cats had been associated with witchcraft and licentiousness. The seventeenth-century painter Jan Steen often depicted cats licking cream from a broken jug as symbol for disorderliness in his paintings of dissolute households. Cat beating had been a popular entertainment at village fairs and even in Breitner's time cats were still hunted for their fur. In times of scarcity cat meat was also sold for food.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the image of the cat changed from that of a nasty mouse catcher to a beloved household pet. In England and France, the bourgeoisie began adopting cats as pets. Indeed, a purring cat near a cosy fireplace became a symbol of homely bliss. Cat breeding became a popular hobby and a good pedigree became highly valued. In 1871 the first cat exhibition was held in London's Crystal Palace, an event which received much attention in the Dutch press. In 1890 the first cat exhibition in the Netherlands was held in Amsterdam. As people became increasingly attached to their cats, they started giving them fancy names, recorded in a growing number of advertisements placed in newspapers asking for any traces of their lost pets. By around 1900, cats had replaced dogs as men's favourite domesticated animal.

Meanwhile the artistic avant-garde was fascinated by cats for different

reasons. In Paris artists had started to appreciate cats, with their sphinx-like appearance, as self-willed, solitary and nocturnal animals, and in their work they became a metaphor for attractive but dangerous women. In his poem 'Le chat' in *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) Charles Baudelaire recognized his own lover in a cat not only for her supple elegance, but also because of the smell of danger. In his famous painting *Olympia* (1863) Eduard Manet depicts a black cat on the bed at the feet of the nude woman. Olympia's loose slippers confirm that she is an elegant prostitute while the cat suggests the female seductiveness. Breitner was so impressed by this painting when he visited Paris in 1884 that he pinned a reproduction of it on his studio wall. In the novel *En ménage* (1881), often cited by Amsterdam artists, Joris-Karl Huysmans describes a painter who declares to his cat that an official marriage among men and women, just as one among cats, is nonsense. After a time the French impressionists developed an eye for the softer side of the cat, with Manet and especially Pierre-Auguste Renoir painting cats as beloved family members.

### Cats and the Eighties Movement

In Dutch art the cat was also adopted as a subject. Although she had begun as a painter of dogs, Henriëtte Ronner-Knip specialized in cat paintings after 1870. Her cats were cuddly creatures playing in opulent bourgeois interiors. These sentimental, romantic paintings were highly popular in both the Netherlands and England. The painters of the Eighties Movement, however, identified with other aspects of the cat: not only as sweet companions but also as solitary night revellers. Profiles of the cat and of the Bohemian had many similarities: both were born for an unhappy life, homeless drifters in the streets. Many members of the Eighties Movement owned cats, including the writers Willem Kloos and Frederik van Eeden, who gave their pets strange sounding names like Hazebas and Malmijntje. Sometimes they had themselves painted with a cat on their lap, like the portrait of Arnold Alet-rino by painter Jan Veth (2). Willem Witsen photographed the cat-loving poetess Lucie Broedelet posing with her cat (3). Cats also figured in short stories, poems and letters, such as Aletrino's cat Pieteloet and Louis Coup-erus's cat Imperia.



*De Nieuwe Gids* published H el ene Swarth's poem 'Kitty's dream' in 1887. Her 'lovely white cat lays coiled up, warmed by the caressing flames of the fire'. While sleeping with her 'eyes closed, blissfully purring' her cat dreams of catching birds and mice, unaware of her own mortality. But while Swarth's cat would enter a 'heaven of cats', a short story published by painter and writer Jacques van Looy in the same journal had a much sadder ending. 'The death of my cat' is pure autobiography. Van Looy worries about his missing cat, 'the Boh emienne'. 'For three days already she had been gone. I had spent hours looking for her.' It is winter and Van Looy fears that she will freeze to death or will be killed by boys with catapults to sell her skin. When Van Looy finally finds his cat, he speaks to her: 'Are you cold? There is the hearth'. He lifts the cat from the ground: 'Softly I felt my hand stroking the fur of my little creature, and then silently a great sorrow swelled up to my eyes'. Van Looy nurses his cat with tender care but to no avail. After a

2. Jan Veth, Arnold Aletrino, 1885 (left)

3. Willem Witsen, Lucie Broedelet (right)

few days of silent suffering his cat dies: 'And sitting on my folding chair I sat opposite her, and I looked at her, a little subsided on the cushion, but not as small as before, she was laying there, looking at me with open eyes full of reproach'. The death scene of Van Looy's cat resembles the tragic ending of Henry Murger's popular novel *Scènes de la vie bohème*, in which the heroine dies of tuberculosis. Cats were often a theme in the work of Van Looy (6), as they were in the sketches of Jan Veth (5) and Willem Witsen (4). Van Looy painted the cat of his story in a work he titled 'Dead cat' (8).

### **Breitner's cats**

Breitner also depicted cats in his work. In his early painting 'Lady with cat' (1883), a black cat takes a central place, playing on the lap of a woman (7). Breitner may have been inspired by French writers like Baudelaire and Huysmans. Two years later Breitner painted a self-portrait with a sketch of a cat on the wall behind him (1). The painting suggests that cats were not only an important theme for him, but that he also identified with their unruly and unhappy life. Indeed, Breitner viewed himself as an unfortunate person, and was known by others as a bohemian who did not conform to the conventions of bourgeois society.

In addition to these paintings Breitner made numerous sketches and photos of cats. Many of these depict cats he encountered on his walks first in The Hague and then in Amsterdam: in his sketchbooks they are found on pages between street scenes. During his years in The Hague his cat sketches were created in soft lines. After his move to Amsterdam, he drew cats with a looser touch in simpler lines. From 1890 onwards, Breitner also took photographs of cats, including of his own pets. Sometimes they are seen only coincidentally on photos taken at his studio, such as the coiled-up tabby cat seen in a photo with his model Geesje Kwak laid out in a kimono on a couch (33, 34). At other times the cat is in the centre of the photo, for instance when Breitner's model and future wife Marie Jordan is posing with what may be the same tabby cat on her lap (35, 36).

The white cat living with Breitner after he moved into his studio on the Prinseneiland in 1898 received a special place amongst his works. The photographs of this cat are like portraits in which the cat looks directly into the



camera (38). In another photo Marie Jordan holds the same cat in her arms (42). Breitner also photographed this cat laying on a cushion on a chair in his studio. He took photographs from three different angles, as if he wanted to make sure that the image would be preserved, and adding a three-dimensional quality (39, 40, 41). The cat seems to be sleeping, but its stiffness suggests that the cat is in fact dead. Indeed Breitner's wife Marie Jordan wrote on the back of one of the photo's that this cat was born on 12 October 1898 and had died on 11 April 1904. The date of the painting on the wall in the background, 'Doorbraak voor Maison de la Bourse', confirms this date since it depicts a demolition that took place in 1903 to prepare a building site for the Maison de la Bourse.

These photos may be understood as a photographic counterpart to Van

4. Willem Witsen, *Lola*, c. 1884-1887 (left)
5. Jan Veth, *Lying cat*, undated (right)
6. Jac. van Looy, *Cat in open window*, c. 1895 (opposite page)



Looy's story about the death of his cat. Breitner's photos are also the earliest known examples of post-mortem photos of pet animals in the Netherlands. But, above all, these photographic memories confirm Breitner's love of cats.