



## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Teachers' Pets

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | JANUARY 09, 2004 ✓ PREMIUM

When I attended a job interview at the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore, I was surprised to see a number of dogs -- indoors in the art studios as well as outdoors in the public areas. When I asked about this, I was told that MICA has a long tradition of allowing pets on the campus, and that students are even permitted to bring their dogs to class. In my experience, such a policy is rare, perhaps even unique, among institutions of higher education. Of course, there are strict rules about pet behavior at the institute. The official pet policy states: "Pets on campus must be kept on a leash and should be controlled by their owner so that they are not a problem for members of the MICA community. They may not roam freely through studios, classrooms, offices, or public spaces." Additionally, pets are not permitted anywhere on the campus where food is prepared or served.

The pet policy first struck me as rather imprudent. Allowing animals into the classroom sounded like a disaster. I imagined my lectures being disturbed by rambunctious dogs getting frisky, starting fights with each other, needing to be taken outside when nature calls. I also couldn't help thinking about the possible hazards of dogs in the studio -- knocking over pots of paint, trampling on works of art, sniffing nude models in embarrassing places. In practice, however, I have discovered that the policy works surprisingly well, mainly because the only dogs brought into class are extremely well behaved.

Most students don't bring their dogs to MICA. Dogs are not allowed in the dormitories, and student life in general, even for those living off campus, is usually too active and unpredictable to be conducive to dog care. In fact, the dogs seen most commonly on campus belong to members of the faculty. Jupiter, the associate dean's Jack Russell

terrier, is well known, as is Gelbert, a gentle Australian sheepdog belonging to Carole

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Poppleton, a fellow language-and-literature professor. Well behaved and discreet, Gelbert is a welcome visitor in all classes and offices on our floor, and students often drop by Carole's office just to spend some time with him. "He's especially well loved by students who miss their household pets," says Carole, who works mainly with second-language students -- many of them from China and South Korea -- who often feel lonely and depressed so far away from home. "Having Gelbert in the classroom helps students relax and open up," she says. "He helps break the ice and gives the more reserved students something to talk about." The sheepdog also provides comic relief during lectures, when his well-timed yawns or snores can remind Carole that the class is long overdue for a break.

According to MICA's vice president and dean of academic affairs, Ray Allen, there are far fewer dogs at the institute now than there were 30 years ago, when the area around the campus was more dangerous, and students often liked to have dogs for their protection, especially when walking home at night. Allen himself brought his Airedale into his office for 12 years. And the chief librarian at the time, he says, had a dog that virtually lived underneath his desk. Those were obviously well-behaved animals, accustomed to community life. But not all dogs are so obedient. One student last year was asked to stop entering campus buildings with his large, aggressive, unneutered pit bull, whose presence made a number of students and staff members very uncomfortable.

Dogs are by far the most visible pets on the campus, but not the only ones. One student sometimes brings his pet ferret on a leash; a hedgehog reportedly made an appearance on a couple of occasions; and I even observed a class in which a hamster, inside a ball, rolled happily around on the floor during a lecture. Since the peripatetic creature was presented in the guise of an artwork, though, perhaps it shouldn't really count as a classroom pet.

Pets have long been valued for their therapeutic capacities. Dentists and psychiatrists often have aquariums in their waiting rooms, as watching tropical fish is believed to have a calming effect on stressed-out patients. Prison inmates who are allowed to take care of birds and small animals have allegedly become less emotionally isolated, less prone to violence, and have exhibited higher morale. Also popular are more-generalized

forms of animal-assisted therapy, in which pets, usually dogs, are taken into

hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, and other facilities. Psychologists have suggested that the presence of a friendly pet can help people recover from physical illness and emotional trauma. A number of well-known studies have shown that petting a dog, or simply being in the same room with a dog, has a soothing effect upon people, reducing blood pressure and heart rate.

According to Alan Beck and Aaron Katcher, in their book *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship*, the proximity of a pet has an effect not unlike that of the presence of the silent but understanding therapist.

"The difficult art in therapy," they write, "is achieving a mutual feeling of intimacy without touching." With an animal, that is not a problem. In the relationship between humans and animals, unlike so many other forms of interaction today, touching is never taboo.

Pets also play an important therapeutic role in the lives of creative artists. Many writers have had close relationships with their pets, which have provided them with inspiration and material, or, at the least, have given them comfort when their work was not going as well as it might. Among pet-loving writers, it appears that the animal of choice is not the dog, which is too dependent and demanding, but the cat, which is more composed and detached. In fact, judging from literary biography, cats have presided over the crafting of many classics.

Charles Dickens's cat, it is said, kept him company in his study as he wrote, and when she wanted his attention, she would snuff out his reading candle with her paw. Edgar Allan Poe's cat, Catarina, the inspiration for his macabre tale "The Black Cat" and the essay "Instinct vs. Reason -- A Black Cat," used to enjoy sitting on his shoulder as he wrote. During the winter of 1846, when Poe was destitute and his wife, Virginia, was fatally ill with tuberculosis, Catarina would curl up on the bed, providing the dying woman with warmth. Harriet Beecher Stowe took in a stray Maltese cat, Calvin, which arrived on her doorstep one day demanding food. This grateful creature, another shoulder-sitter, repaid Stowe for her kindness by radiating calm "during hours of frenzied writing," as Stowe put it. An often overlooked advantage of the word processor

is the many comfortable places it provides for companionable cats to perch -- more comfy than a shoulder, at any rate.



Ernest Hemingway kept a brood of Maine coon cats with extra toes and a problem with premature tooth decay. Geoffrey, the cat of the 18th-century poet Christopher Smart, kept Smart company when he was going insane, and was in part the inspiration for his best-known work, the "Jubilate Agno." The best-known lines of this long poem begin, "For I will consider my cat Geoffrey," and proceed with a litany of fulsome praise of the cat's activities: "For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary. / ... For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life."

Other authors who testified to the importance of cats in their lives and work include Colette, Théophile Gautier, Thomas Hardy, Edward Lear, Pierre Loti, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Horace Walpole, whose cat, Selina, accidentally drowned in a goldfish bowl -- a sad occasion commemorated in an epitaph by the poet Thomas Gray. The moral of Selina's tragic end is told in the last verse:

*From hence, ye beauties, undeceived,  
Know, one false step is ne'er retrieved  
And be with caution bold.  
Not all that tempts your wand'ring eyes  
And heedless hearts is lawful prize.  
Nor all that glitters, gold.*

One of the most famous of the literary felines was Hodge, who kept Samuel Johnson company as he labored at his dictionary. Johnson's biographer, Boswell, was surprised at the indulgence with which Hodge was treated by the doctor, who made special trips into town to purchase oysters for his pet. Boswell also recalled seeing Hodge "scrambling up Dr. Johnson's breast, apparently with much satisfaction," while the Doctor rubbed the cat's back and gently tugged his tail. Boswell famously reported his own remark that Hodge was a fine cat, to which Johnson replied, "Why, yes, sir, but I have had cats whom I liked better than this." Then, evidently observing that Hodge looked a little put out, he

added, "But he is a very fine cat, a very fine cat indeed."  
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It seems odd that despite their association with creativity, pets are rarely tolerated in institutions of higher learning. Accordingly, some scholars have rebelled at the prohibition. When Lord Byron moved into Trinity College, Cambridge, and was informed that undergraduates were not allowed to keep dogs in their rooms, he exchanged his dog for another animal. On October 26, 1807, he announced in a letter to Elizabeth Pigot, "I have got a new friend, the finest in the world, a tame Bear." Since there was no mention of bears in the Trinity statutes, the authorities had no legal basis on which to complain. Byron was allowed to keep his new pet, which caused quite a sensation when he walked it around on a chain. The Cambridge dons were less than amused, however. "When I brought him here," wrote Byron, "they asked me what I meant to do with him, and my reply was 'he should sit for a Fellowship.' ... This answer delighted them not."

One can well imagine. Even the dons at MICA would doubtless draw the line at a bear -- unless, of course, it was part of an artwork.

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