

The ultimate catwalk

Cats Parade in Ypres takes family-friendly approach to gruesome medieval tradition



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Just when you thought you had experienced all the wackiness that Flanders could throw at you, along comes an event that raises the wacky bar a notch. It's the Kattenstoet, or Cats Parade, in West Flanders, and as far as parades go, it's truly one of a kind.

In spite of its innocuous name, the Kattenstoet, or Cats Parade, organised every three years in the West Flemish town of Ypres is no Crufts-style catwalk of feline's finest. Instead, it's a procession of local marching bands, carnival floats representing Ypres through the ages, singers, street theatre and dance troupes. Interspersed among them are those indispensable components of every Flemish parade: giants.

Weighing up to 225 kilograms and standing five, six or even seven metres high, these constructions are extremely colourful and highly imposing. The Kattenstoet giants include Kattenkoning Cieper (Cieper, King of the Cats); his wife Minneke Poes; soldier Godfried de Tempelier; the smoke-breathing Ypres devil Pietje Pek; and even a giant called ... Goliath.

Both onlookers and parade marchers also dress up as cats, from ad-hoc make-up and fuzzy ears to full-on cat costumes.

As if that isn't enough excitement for a Sunday afternoon, the parade culminates with the town jester hurling plush toy cats from the Ypres belfry tower into the crowd below and some ritual witch-burning for good measure.

Cat-throwing, really?

Yes, you read that correctly. Cuddly toy cats are thrown from the 70-metre-high belfry in the middle of Ypres. It's perhaps worth assuring younger children that they are toys before the whole thing starts. (You may also want to think about keeping their favourite cuddly toy chained to the buggy.) If you catch a plush cat, you are of course its rightful owner and can take it home. If throwing plush cats from a high tower seems a little politically incorrect, the origins of this custom are even more disturbing. The Kattenstoet replicates events during the middle ages when live cats were tortured and killed during Kattenfoors (Cat Fairs) in towns and cities throughout Europe.

For example, take the visit of the Prince of Orange and the Duke of Anjou to Bruges in the summer of 1582. They were greeted by the sight of a giant structure in the shape of a ship in the market square. Strapped to the mast were more than three dozen cats, along with cases of fireworks. This sounds bad, doesn't it?

Indeed, the ship was set alight, and the cats became, well, history.

According to a text from 1871, one onlooker reported: "The screams of the hapless creatures on the ignition of each firework produced further cheers and merriment among the happy throng."

What's wrong with cats?

Why should cats be singled out for such harsh treatment? The true reason might



© Photos courtesy City of Ypres

After the parade featuring cat giants, you can catch your own cuddly cat toy as the rain down from the city's belfry

never be known, but there are four theories that have been suggested.

The Too Many Cats in Ypres theory. Ypres owed its prosperity to the cloth industry. Wool was imported from England and stored in the local cloth halls. These were warm, dry homes for rats and mice, which bred profusely. To control them, a few cats were released into the cloth halls.

The plan worked fine, and rodent numbers decreased. Unfortunately, the cloth halls were now overrun by cats. How could these be controlled? Catch them and hurl them from the tower, of course.

The Cats Are the Devil's Minions theory. We have 13th-century Pope Gregory IX to thank for this one. He claimed that a sect in southern France had been caught worshipping the devil in the form of a black cat. Cats became the official symbol of heresy, and anyone showing affection for a cat came under the church's suspicion.

The Cats Are Witches' Pets theory. Older peasant women living alone often kept cats as pets for companions. Bad idea! If cats are incarnations of the devil, then this means that their owners must be ... witches. Suspected witches were frequently burnt at the stake along with their cats. (It's easy to imagine that any cat jumping from the flames could be caught and hurled from a high tower instead.) Incidentally, this theory is believed to account for the shortage of cats in 14th-century Europe, a corresponding plague of black rats and the resulting plague.

The If The Queen of England Can Do It, So Can We theory. Queen Elizabeth I had a cat burned alive during her coronation celebration in 1558 to symbolise the releasing of demons. Five years later, England's Witchcraft Act associated the keeping of cats with "wickedness", which led to the executions of many more cats and their owners.

In other words, the people and authorities of Ypres had plenty of reasons to participate in and enjoy the barbaric entertainment of cat throwing. Thankfully, the last live cat met its fate this way in 1817, and when the idea of the first Ypres Kattenstoet was proposed in 1938, real cats were replaced by the plush variety.

During the Second World War the fun stopped, but by the 1950s it had become a regular part of the town's spring festivities. Indeed, until the 1980s, Ypres was better known for its Kattenstoet than for its war tourism.

Festivities start on Saturday, with town criers, fire-eaters, witches, soldiers, archers, stilt-walkers, drummers, dancers and musicians streaming through the streets of Ypres announcing the 44th Kattenstoet. The parade itself takes place the following day at 15.00. It culminates with the cat throwing from the belfry tower in the Grote Markt at 18.00, followed by the burning of the witches at 19.00. Everything is free, unless you want a seat in the covered stands.

9-10 May

Across Ypres