

Louis Wain

Louis Wain (5 August 1860 – July 4, 1939) was an English artist best known for his drawings, which consistently featured anthropomorphised large-eyed cats and kittens. In his later years he suffered from schizophrenia, which, according to some psychologists, can be seen in his works.



Life and work

- **Louis William Wain** was born on August 5, 1860 in Clerkenwell in London. His father was a textile trader and embroiderer; his mother was French. He was the first of six children, and the only male child. None of his five sisters ever married. At the age of thirty, his youngest sister was certified as insane, and admitted to an asylum. The remaining sisters lived with their mother for the duration of their lifetimes, as did Louis for the majority of his life.

Louis studied at the West London School of Art and eventually became a teacher there for a short period. At the age of 20, Wain was left to support his mother and sisters after his father's death.



Wain soon quit his teaching position to become a freelance artist, and in this role he achieved substantial success. He specialized in drawing animals and country scenes, and worked for several journals including the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, where he stayed for four years



At the age of 23, Wain married his sisters' governess, Emily Richardson, who was ten years his senior (which was considered quite scandalous at the time), and moved with her to Hampstead in north London. Emily soon began to suffer from cancer, and died only three years after their marriage. It was during this period that Wain discovered the subject that would define his career. During her illness, Emily was comforted by their pet cat Peter, and Wain taught him tricks such as wearing spectacles and pretending to read in order to amuse his wife. He began to draw extensive sketches of the large black and white cat. He later wrote of Peter, "To him properly belongs the foundation of my career, the developments of my initial efforts, and the establishing of my work." Peter can be recognized in

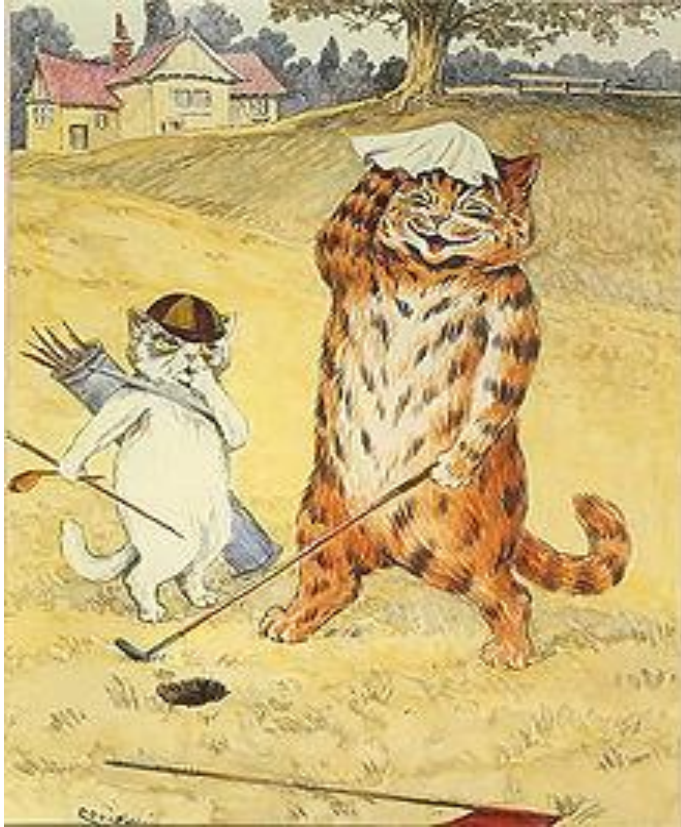
In 1886, Wain's first drawing of anthropomorphised cats was published in the Christmas issue of the Illustrated London News, titled A Kittens' Christmas Party. The illustration depicted 150 cats, many of which resemble Peter, sending invitations, holding a ball, playing games, and making speeches over eleven panels. Still, the cats remain on all fours, unclothed, and without the variety of human-like expression that would characterize Wain's work. Under the pseudonym George Henri Thompson, he illustrated numerous books for children by Clifton Bingham published by Ernest Nister.

If we fell in this pan we
should certainly drown,
So to save our young lives
we must drink it all
down.

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In subsequent years, Wain's cats began to walk upright, smile broadly and use other exaggerated facial expressions, and wear sophisticated contemporary clothing. Wain's illustrations showed cats playing musical instruments, serving tea, playing cards, fishing, smoking, and enjoying a night at the opera. Such anthropomorphic portrayals of animals were very popular in Victorian England, and were often found in prints, on greeting cards and in satirical illustrations



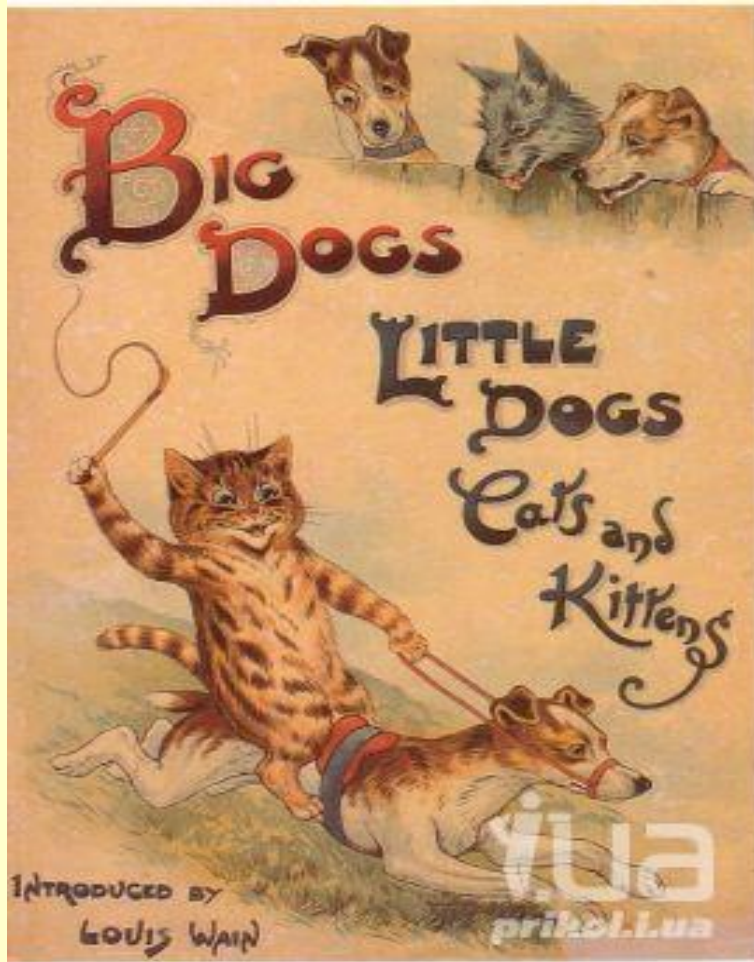






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Wain was a prolific artist over the next thirty years, sometimes producing as many as several hundred drawings a year. He illustrated about one hundred children's books, and his work appeared in papers, journals, and magazines. His work was also regularly reproduced on picture postcards



Wain's illustrations often parody human behavior, satirizing fads and fashions of the day. He wrote, "I take a sketch-book to a restaurant, or other public place, and draw the people in their different positions as cats, getting as near to their human characteristics as possible. This gives me doubly nature, and these studies I think [to be] my best humorous work."

- Despite his popularity, Wain suffered financial difficulty throughout his life. He remained responsible for supporting his mother and sisters, and had little business sense. Wain was modest and easily exploited, ill-equipped for bargaining in the world of publishing. He often sold his drawings outright, retaining no rights over their reproduction. He was easily misled, and occasionally found himself duped by the promise of a new invention or other money-making scheme.
- He travelled to New York in 1907, where he drew some comic strips, such as *Cats About Town* and *Grimalkin*, for Hearst newspapers. His work was widely admired, although his critical attitude toward the city made him the subject of sniping in the press. He returned home with even less money than before due to imprudent investment in a new type of oil lamp.





From this point, Wain's popularity began to decline. He returned from New York broke, and his mother had died of Spanish influenza while he was abroad. His mental instability also began around this time, and increased gradually over the years. He had always been considered quite charming but odd, and often had difficulty in distinguishing between fact and fantasy. Others frequently found him incomprehensible, due to his way of speaking tangentially. His behavior and personality changed, and he began to suffer from delusions, with the onset of schizophrenia. Whereas he had been a mild-mannered and trusting man, he became hostile and suspicious, particularly towards his sisters. He claimed that the flickering of the cinema screen had robbed the electricity from their brains. He began wandering the streets at night, rearranging furniture within the house, and spent long periods locked in his room writing incoherently.



When his sisters could no longer cope with his erratic and occasionally violent behavior, he was finally committed in 1924 to a pauper ward of Springfield Mental Hospital in Tooting. Wain was transferred to the Bethlem Royal Hospital in Southwark. This hospital was relatively pleasant, with a garden and colony of cats, and he spent his final 15 years there in peace. While he became increasingly deluded, his erratic mood swings subsided, and he continued drawing for pleasure. His work from this period is marked by bright colors, flowers, and intricate and abstract patterns, though his primary subject remained the same.

