

TRADITIONAL SIAMESE HISTORY

Anyone in the market for a Siamese kitten will often have a similar experience. You want a Siamese just like the lovely one you had as a child, or who just passed away at a ripe old age. You go to local breeders, you look in magazines, you attend cats shows, but what you most often find is a cat that looks quite different from the large robust cat you remember. By comparison to the cat you remember, the modern version of the Siamese is emaciated, with large "bat-like ears," an elongated head and pencil thin legs. You might ask yourself, "Is this really a Siamese?"

The short answer is 'yes', but this is certainly not the same type as you remember. Chances are what you recall is a large robust cat with a round head, normal looking ears, and lovely blue eyes. What you remember is now called a "Traditional Siamese", or "applehead" Siamese, while the one that dominates the show ring now is known as the "Modern Siamese".

If you wonder out loud about what happened, different breeders may give you very different explanations, but the truth is clearly available in any history book.

Russia, Late 1700s:

The first cat of record with Siamese markings appeared on an old engraving discovered by a Mr. Pallas on his journey into Southern Russia between 1793 and 1794. Another is in the 'Cat-Book Poems' where drawings of cats of various colors and patterns (including Siamese, tabby, blue, etc) appeared.

Late 1800s:

In spite of these patterns, there is no clear record of Siamese cats as a breed until the 1800s. It is clearly recorded that, in 1884 the departing British Consul-General Gould was given a Siamese cat by the Siamese king as a farewell gift, and considered it as a great honor since the cat came from those bred in the palace by the royal family. Indeed, many stories exist (including the story explaining the characteristic kink in the tail of the early imported Siamese) indicating an intimate relationship between the royal family members and their cats.

The progeny of this cat given to Consul-General Gould was exhibited by his sister, Mrs. Lilian (Gould) Velvey at the 17th Crystal Palace Show in October 1885. These cats were 'Duen Ngai', born March 1885 and 'Kalohom' and 'Khromata', born July 1885. Photographs of these cats are pictured in publications of that time and show them to be round-headed, solid and muscular, without exception. These cats were so extraordinary that they captured immediate attention. A well-known quote from that time describes them as an "unnatural nightmare of a cat". However, whatever the initial reaction or impression, the dog-like intelligence and loyalty, mischievous sense of humor and special charm of these cats, made them a favorite of British cat fanciers. And in 1902 England founded its first Siamese cat fancier's club. The first champion, 'Champion Wankee,' was born in Hong Kong in 1895 and was owned and shown by Mrs. Robinson in 1898, to much acclaim. Again, a large and robust 'appleheaded' cat, 'Champion Wankee' makes it clear again that the traditional cat looked nothing like the modern version shown today.

Early to Mid 1900s:

The precise time of arrival in the United States is uncertain. However, in April 1909, The Siamese Cat Society of America was founded and the first standard for the Siamese Cat was approved. During the 1950s and 1960s the breed's popularity reached its peak and Siamese cats appeared in movies or animations such as 'Bell, Book and Candle', 'That Darn Cat', 'Incredible Journey', and 'Lady and the Tramp', making the Siamese breed ever more famous.

At the same time in Siam, now Thailand, breeding had dwindled to only a few breeders. A statement written by Mrs. Stephen Dobrenchuk to a diplomat in Thailand in the 1950s reports that purebred Siamese cats were bred only by a few wealthy matrons, and the cats were known for their physical toughness and dog-like intelligence.

Mrs. Dobrenchuk purchased three kittens from a Laotian Princess married to a Thai diplomat. These cats were large round-headed robust animals of wonderful intelligence and disposition. She writes that the cats regularly cleared their back yard in Thailand of cobras, the only difficulty being that they often dragged their 'trophies' indoors and sometimes they were not quite dead. Upon returning to the states in the late 1950s, Mrs. Dobrenchuk bought 3 more kittens, this time registered with C.F.A. She describes them as still being the same general body type as those being bred in Thailand.

1960 to 1985:

It is after this, in the early 60s, that the heavy traditional Siamese began to lose favor as various breeders and judges began to favor a longer, thinner body conformation and began to encourage the breed away from the original robust Siamese, down to its small, thin, modern body type so common today.

Reasons for this change vary. Some say that the Siamese had become so popular that kitten prices had dropped and many breeders were interested in making them more distinct and felt that a longer more exotic look would make the breed more popular and more valuable. Others say it was simply a widely held opinion in the fancy that smaller and more refined cats were more beautiful. Also, the development of various vaccinations for many of the diseases that had been the common cause of death among cats (distemper, for example) also allowed for the breeding of less robust individuals who, without these medical advantages, would not have survived to reproduce in earlier days.

It was probably a combination of all of these factors; but suffice it to say that the breed standard was rewritten to reflect changing tastes. Indeed, the original breed standard has regularly been rewritten and reinterpreted to support the constant shift of the breed to smaller, thinner and more elongated bodies, even though these cats typically live shorter and less healthy lives than their traditional ancestors.

Dismayed with the trend, many breeders with cats that had more robust, yet less popular conformation, were left with the choice of dropping out of the show ring or selecting their cats for these often more problematic traits that the judges now preferred. Some breeders simply decided to walk away from the show ring, choosing to retain the larger, more robust Siamese and continuing to quietly breed for the companion-cat market.

1986 to Present:

By 1986 there were no traditional or "applehead" Siamese being shown and the modern Siamese was so entrenched that many modern breeders were actually unaware of the breed's history and held the opinion that the Siamese had always looked like the modern version, and that traditional Siamese were cats of inherently inferior quality.

Because the Traditional Siamese breeders could not win in the show ring, many had stopped breeding, switched to a different breed, or had stopped registering or keeping records on the Siamese they had been breeding. It was this situation that prompted the formation of the Traditional Cat Association. Originally named the Traditional Siamese Association and dedicated to bringing back from near extinction the Traditional Siamese, it was later opened up to include other traditional breeds suffering from a similar fate to the Siamese such as the Burmese, Persian, Balinese, Bengal and Himalayan.

The T.C.A. also sponsors its own shows where traditional breeds compete for prizes just as in the shows that recognize only the modern version of the same breeds.

Today, a growing number of organizations recognize the traditional Siamese, and other traditional breeds, as a new appreciation develops for the health and longevity of the original bloodlines. Recent publications such as *Your Purebred Kitten* by Michelle Lowell (Henry Holt) have similarly recognized the true origin of the Siamese cat. The public in general is also beginning to recognize the need to avoid breeding for an extreme 'look' that, while attractive to some, has a negative impact on the animal's health. Already, most of Europe has again recognized the traditional cat and openly encourages its development, while criticizing the American practice of breeding to extremes.

The Future:

In the future, while there is still a powerful and vocal opposition, it is likely that American breeders will at some point follow suit, and both modern and traditional types will be recognized and shown. Though it may take time, the traditional Siamese will once again find its place again in the main show ring because, as many know, it has never lost its place in the hearts of millions who remember the charm and intelligence of the traditional Siamese.

Siamese Legends

While the Siamese 'Kinked Tail' has become a 'fault' it should be noted that in the early shows it was mandatory for a Siamese to have a kink in its tail to be considered a true Siamese. Over time this trait fell from favor and was bred out of the breed as much as possible. However it is so imbedded in the genetics that it still appears occasionally in some lines more than others. Since it does not affect the cat's health in any way, many breeders have become tolerant of this trait as long as the kink cannot be seen and can only be felt by running the fingers down the length of the tail. Whether desirable or not, the kinked tail is part of the history of the Siamese as indicated by the following legends:

It is said that there was once a Siamese Princess who was frightened of losing her rings while she bathed in a stream. Looking around for somewhere convenient to place her jewellery, she noticed that her favourite cat had crooked his tail for her benefit. Ever since that time all Siamese cats have been born with a tiny kink at the end of their tails to hold the Princess' rings.

A young cat took his mate into the jungle to search for a royal goblet that was missing from one of the Siamese temples. Upon finding the treasure, they decided that the female should remain in the

jungle to guard it while the male went back to the city to inform the priest of their discovery. So the little cat took up her position among the leaves and tangled foliage, her tail twisted around the stem of the goblet to make quite sure that no one would try to take it away. Four nights later her husband returned to find he was the father of five sweet little kittens. But, in spite of her new responsibility, the loyal mother cat had not forgotten her earlier trust. Indeed, so conscientious had she been in her protection of the goblet that a permanent kink had developed in the end of her tail. What was more, all five kittens had a similar kink in their tails!