



BY

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**THE HARRISON WEIR
COLLECTION**

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THE CHARMING CAT ART OF *William Luker Jnr*

**A LONDON BASED 20TH CENTURY
PAINTER & ILLUSTRATOR**

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**PET ART,
INTERIORS AND STREET SCENES**

Few people will really understand the significance of the name William Luker Jnr, unless they are art history followers, and even then, his name would seem obscure to most. Then secondarily his name may be remotely familiar to cat fanciers who have delved into feline or cat fancy history to any degree, and will recognise him as the artist who provided 8 of the 12 colour plate illustrations from paintings, for the publishers Cassell's, for Frances Simpson's epic 'The Book of The Cat' which was released in 1903.

It is perhaps fitting that the first illustration on the page opposite, from that same publication, includes an image of a Silver Classic Tabby English (now British) Shorthair, which has been the main theme behind this month's issue of Felis Historica. In point of fact, our cover page image, is taken from a previously unknown and unpublished original painting of the silver classic tabby long-haired cat 'Don Pedro of Thorpe' painted by W. Luker Jnr, held in a private collection and unidentified until the author chanced upon it and another work by Luker in the same collection.

One of those paintings had been incorrectly identified by another name belonging to a cat from a later period, but I was fortunate to recognise that cat almost immediately - as I had in my possession, a copy of 'Our Cats' magazine, which showed the same painting in a black and white photograph published on the cover of the said magazine. From that first positive identification, it did not take much investigation to realise that both paintings had been commissioned by the same person, who incidentally had owned both cats at the same time. Fortunately, both paintings had remained together, or identification of the second painting, which was of 'Don Pedro' would have been made far more difficult.

Mrs. Slingsby was listed as the owner of the cat in the first painting, which had been featured in the magazine, and although there was no photo of the painting of 'Don Pedro', in that magazine or any subsequent issue, there was nevertheless, a published record of Mrs. Slingsby having taken 'Don Pedro' to Mr. Luker's studio, while she was in London at the time! Hence the mystery was solved, and the current owner of both paintings was duly delighted to have resolved the formerly unknown identities of the subjects of both pieces in her private collection!

Discovering lost history and realising that it has been newly preserved, even if only by accident; is a pleasure that the writer has experienced on many occasions – and I imagine that it is akin to how a detective would feel when finally solving a crime mystery. Simply Exhilarating!

In the next image at left, we find a Brown Classic Tabby whose image is uncannily like that found in a photo of the famous cat 'Xenophon' by Landor, while the Red Classic Tabby is reminiscent of



A RARE TORTOISESHELL TOM CAT AND A SILVER CLASSIC TABBY ENGLISH (BRITISH) SHORTHAIRES
Tortie Tom probably based on one of several rare examples owned by Lord Alexander of Ballochmyle.



BROWN CLASSIC TABBY AND RED CLASSIC TABBY ENGLISH (BRITISH) SHORTHAIRES
Probably based upon images of 'FULMER XENOPHON' and 'BALLOCHMYLE PERFECTION'
Both images from book plates in 'The Book of The Cat' (1903) by Frances Simpson, painted by William Luker, Jr.



GOLD-EYED SOLID BLUE, & BLUE-EYED WHITE, ENGLISH (BRITISH) SHORTHAIRES.

Book Plate image from 'The Book of The Cat' (1903) by Frances Simpson, painted by William Luker Jnr.

a well-known cat representative of this colour from this period known as 'Ballochmyle Perfection'. Below is pictured the most famous of many images of 'Xenophon' that appeared on postcards and in popular magazines of the era.

But I have digressed – let us return to the artist himself.

William Luker Jnr was born in Kensington, London, in 1867; the eldest of six surviving children born to William Luker Snr (1828-1905) and Ada Augusta (Margetts) Luker, both of whom were artists. His father, William Luker Snr, was born in Italy but practiced in London and Faringdon. He was considered a fine painter of landscapes and animals, enjoying considerable success during his

lifetime. His landscapes were beautifully executed with great attention to detail, known to portray not only the idyllic green pastures but also capturing the rugged mountainsides and desolate moorlands.

His balanced compositions and attention to detail, including his special attention to the quality of the light, usually producing an exceptionally peaceful landscape. He exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy between 1851 and 1889,



A photograph of 'Xenophon' by renown photographer, Landor



TORTOISESHELL, AND TORTOISESHELL & WHITE (PERSIAN) LONGHAIRS.

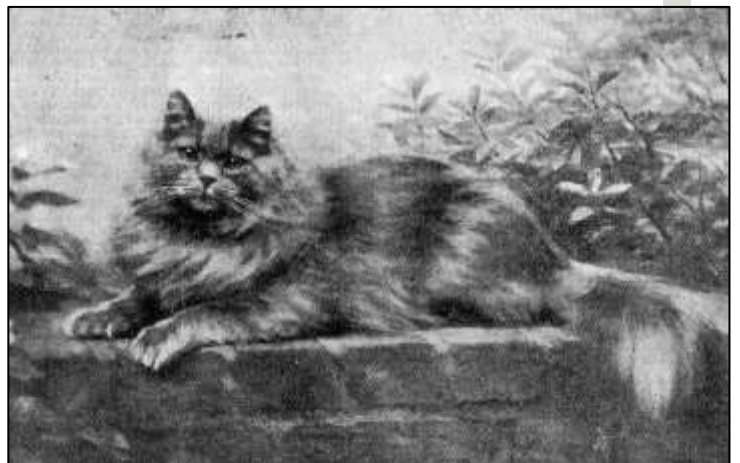
Book Plate image from 'The Book of The Cat' (1903) by Frances Simpson, painted by William Luker Jnr.

as well as at the British Institution, and at Suffolk Street. The younger William was identified alternatively as William Luker Jnr, and sometimes as William Luker II, although within his family and amongst his friends, he was simply known as "Willie". His father, recognising early on that his son was possessed of an extraordinarily natural artistic ability, imparted his knowledge of painting; including his passion for pastoral scenes that included cows, Scottish highland cattle, horses, and sheep.

But in the late Victorian period, the general public's appetite for serene pastoral scenes duly waned, in favour of other genres and more modern works. A consequence of this gradual shift in Public taste, was that William Luker Snr found himself experiencing financial difficulties and began to suffer from depression.

William Jnr, however, proved to be more resilient to this trend, adapting the subject matter of his paintings to meet the needs of the current market.

In 1888, at the age of 21, he married Margaret Stadowicka, a polish immigrant and domestic servant who was eight years his senior. Now that he needed to provide for his own family, he adapted his specialty away from painting



Ch. Orange Blossom of Thorpe, Oil on canvas by W. Luker Jnr.



BLACK MANX SHORTHAIR AND SEAL-POINT ROYAL SIAMESE

Book Plate image from 'The Book of The Cat' (1903) by Frances Simpson, painted by William Luker Jnr.

pastoral scenes to painting animals that were the object of their owner's affections. These now included portraits of specific pets, including champion dogs, racehorses, champion cats and other similar animals, depicting them with their own specific personality and charm.

In 1897, he was commissioned to paint Florizel II, a prized bay racehorse owned by Edward, Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII).

His preferred medium appears to have been oil on canvas, but he is also known to have painted in oils on wood, and for producing watercolours on ivory and executing many fine works in pen and ink, a great many of which were used as illustrations on books and/or magazines of the era.



Ch. Fulmer Zaida. Oil on canvas by W. Luker Jnr.

Among these latter works, were illustrations for a prolific writer of books about London, by William John Loftie. For these, Luker produced numerous outdoor scenes, some in pen and wash, as well as numerous interiors from the great houses within the city and in some cases depicting his contemporary artists at work in their own studios.

He is known to have exhibited extensively at the Royal Society of British Artists (of which he was a member) between 1895 and 1945, and with the Royal Academy of Arts from between 1915-1919.



BLACK SMOKE AND ORANGE (RED) (PERSIAN) LONGHAIRS

Book Plate image from 'The Book of The Cat' (1903) by Frances Simpson, painted by William Luker Jnr.

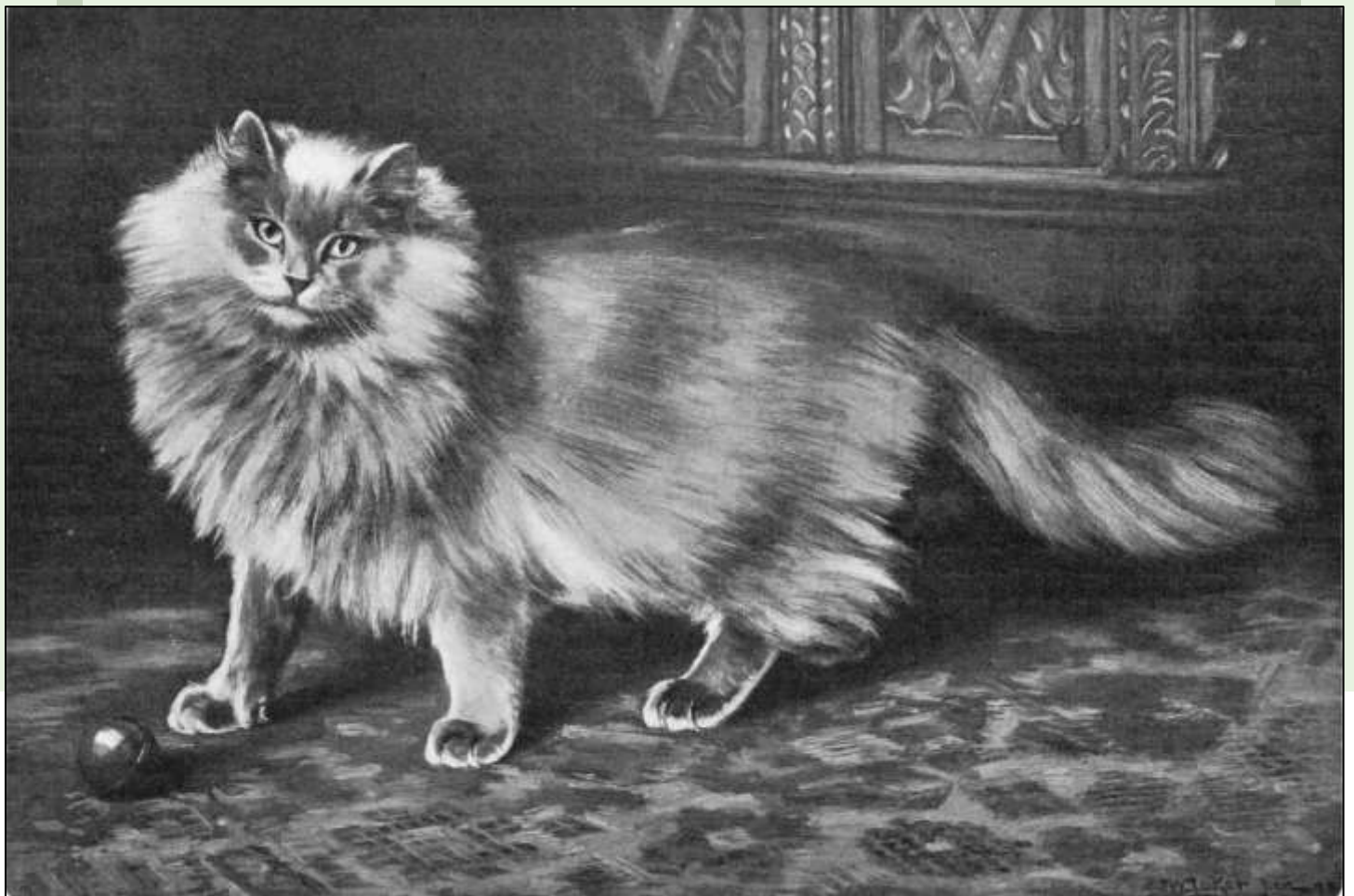
But it is his images of cats, which are of interest to cat fanciers, and apart from this paintings which were commissioned by Cassell's for Miss Frances Simpson's 'The Book of The Cat' published in 1903, we know of several other private commissions undertaken for cat fanciers.

Among these, was a painting of Miss Simpson's own chinchilla male 'Cambyses' who was painted standing atop a brick garden wall, backed by green foliage, a theme which would be repeated in other works, such as in the portrait of the blue Persian male Champion Orange Blossom of Thorpe, owned by Mrs Helen Slingsby, who is portrayed laying on the same wall, again surrounded with green foliage. In other pieces, we find cats featured indoors, often on rugs or carpet with an antique wooden chest in the background. The carpet was often a mix of red and blue hues, such as that which we find in the piece he executed for Lady Gertrude Decies, featuring her blue Persian male, Fulmer Prince of Thanet; and then later, for another piece painted for Mrs. Helen Slingsby, featuring 'Ch. Don Pedro of Thorpe' on the same carpet.

Other known commissions for Lady Decies included her epic Brown Tabby English Shorthair, Fulmer Xenophon, and the equally famous Chinchilla female female, Ch. Zaida, both of which Lady Decies proudly displayed in her summer residence at Birchington-On-Sea; the latter which



Miss Simpson's 'Cambyses'. Oil on canvas by W. Luker



CHALLENGING A GAME – A PORTRAIT OF LADY DECIES FULMER PRINCE OF THANET

From the painting by William Luker Jnr, in the Royal Society of British Artists.

is featured as the frontispiece in Frank Townend Barton's book 'The Cat – Its Points and Management in Health and Disease', published in 1908.

There are no doubt numerous other cat paintings yet to come to light. Those featuring 'Don Pedro of Thorpe' and 'Ch. Orange Blossom of Thorpe' only surfacing during my own trip to Britain in 2017 and finally identified by matching them to published images and data already more than 110 years old. In 2018, two photographs from an album in the possession of John Pett, were generously shared by him with the Harrison Weir Collection, and in these can be clearly identified the known work by Luker of 'Ch. Zaida' and a previously unknown painting of 'Ch. Xenophon'.

Chances are, that the this second painting of 'Xenophon' still exists in a private collection, and there may easily be more.

It is not unusual to find references to lost works. Lady Dorothy Nevill for instance mentions some drawings in pen and ink done for her by Harrison Weir, featuring her beloved Siamese! If these could be found, they would in fact be depictions of some of the very earliest Siamese cats to enter the United Kingdom!

Such paintings, and early photographs, are an important historic record and an essential part of the early period of cat fancying history. So, it is to artists such as Weir, Ronner, Wain, Bebb, Luker and others that we owe a huge debt of gratitude for helping to preserve that history.

Today, original works by William Luker Jnr, may be found in diverse private collections from around the world, including some works held in the collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (the Royal Collection Trust), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the University of California Libraries, and the Auckland Art Gallery (Toi o Tamaki) in New Zealand.