

# Cats

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A virulent form of the vapors affects some people the first time they visit a cat show. After a turn or two around the hall, they sadly proclaim that Persians snuffle like bulldogs, Siamese look like strings, and show cats in general are distressingly "uncatlike." In consideration of the impact which current styles among show cats apparently have on vapor-prone individuals, I am obliged to issue the following disclaimer: The Sphynx cat, of whom we shall presently speak, is, indeed, a real cat. It eats real food, sleeps real long, runs real good, purrs real loud, and makes real use of its litterbox.

Judging any cat by its appearance, of course, is no more fair nor logical than judging a sofa by its cover or a person by the color of his skin. Yet many an otherwise logical soul who would readily admit that beauty is only skin deep acts as though ugly goes right down to the bone where Sphynx are concerned. Thus, one writer observes that "it would have been reasonable to study the Sphynx as a scientific curiosity rather than to select it as a breed"; while another contends that even among breeders—whose taste is said to lean toward the exotic—the Sphynx is regarded "as the negation of almost all they admire in a cat."

But millions of Kojak, Bull Shannon, and Yul Brynner fans can not be wrong—or wrong-headed, if you will. Consequently, this near-naked little feline jaybird that looks as if it was born old and feels just like a suede hot water bottle has gained its share of devotees among the cat-loving public. In fact, the Sphynx has become something of an overnight success in the media, thanks to major network appearances by a Sphynx named—what else?—E.T.

Like most overnight successes, the Sphynx has been around a long time. In a *Journal of Heredity* article for October 1939, Ida M. Mellen reported that hairless cats were exhibited in the United States in the early 1900s. According to Mellen, these cats were known as New Mexican Hairless because the people who owned them lived in New Mexico. Mellen believed that the immediate ancestor of the New Mexican Hairless "undoubtedly was a scant-haired cat of South America," described by the German naturalist Johann Rudolph Rengger in his *Natural History of the Mammals of Paraguay, 1830*. This scant-haired cat, said Rengger, was the descendant of house cats taken from Europe to Paraguay in the 1600s. The change in climate, he argued, had gradually effected a change in coat.

Mellen suggested in her article that the hairless cat "may be extinct." (No-hair today, gone tomorrow, one is tempted to observe.) Yet through the years other hairless cats—perhaps the work of more than one mutation—appeared in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1936; Paris, France, in the 1930s; and Ontario, Canada, in the early '60s and again in 1978. With one exception, the parents of hairless cats were domestic shorthairs of no particular particulars. The Paris cats, however, turned up from time to time in litters born to a certain pair of Siamese. When these French hairless cats or their parents were bred to other Siamese, the resulting kittens had normal coats. Hairless kittens were only produced from repeat breedings between the original Siamese parents or from breedings between two hairless cats. This indicates that the mutation

gene responsible for hairlessness is recessive—at least among cats with normal coats. But after crossing Sphynx with Devon Rex, modern-day breeders are beginning to suspect that the Sphynx gene may be dominant in Sphynx-Devon crosses.

The Sphynx—its name having evolved from the quaint New Mexican Hairless to something more regal sounding and Egyptian—was accepted for championship competition in 1971 by the CROWN association. The International Cat Association (TICA), founded in 1979, also included the Sphynx among its recognized breeds. Since CROWN no longer sponsors shows, TICA is currently the only association in the United States in which Sphynx compete in championship classes. The American Cat Fanciers' Association does register Sphynx—if both their parents are registered with another association—and allows Sphynx to compete in non-championship New Breed and Color classes.


The "scant-haired" descriptor which Ida Mellen used in reference to the South American ancestor of the New Mexican Hairless aptly describes the Sphynx in the United States today; for according to the TICA standard, the Sphynx is not truly hairless. A short, fine, nearly imperceptible down is permitted on the body; and short, tightly packed, soft hair is allowed on the muzzle, tail, and feet. (The French standard, by comparison, is more literal in its interpretation of hairlessness.)

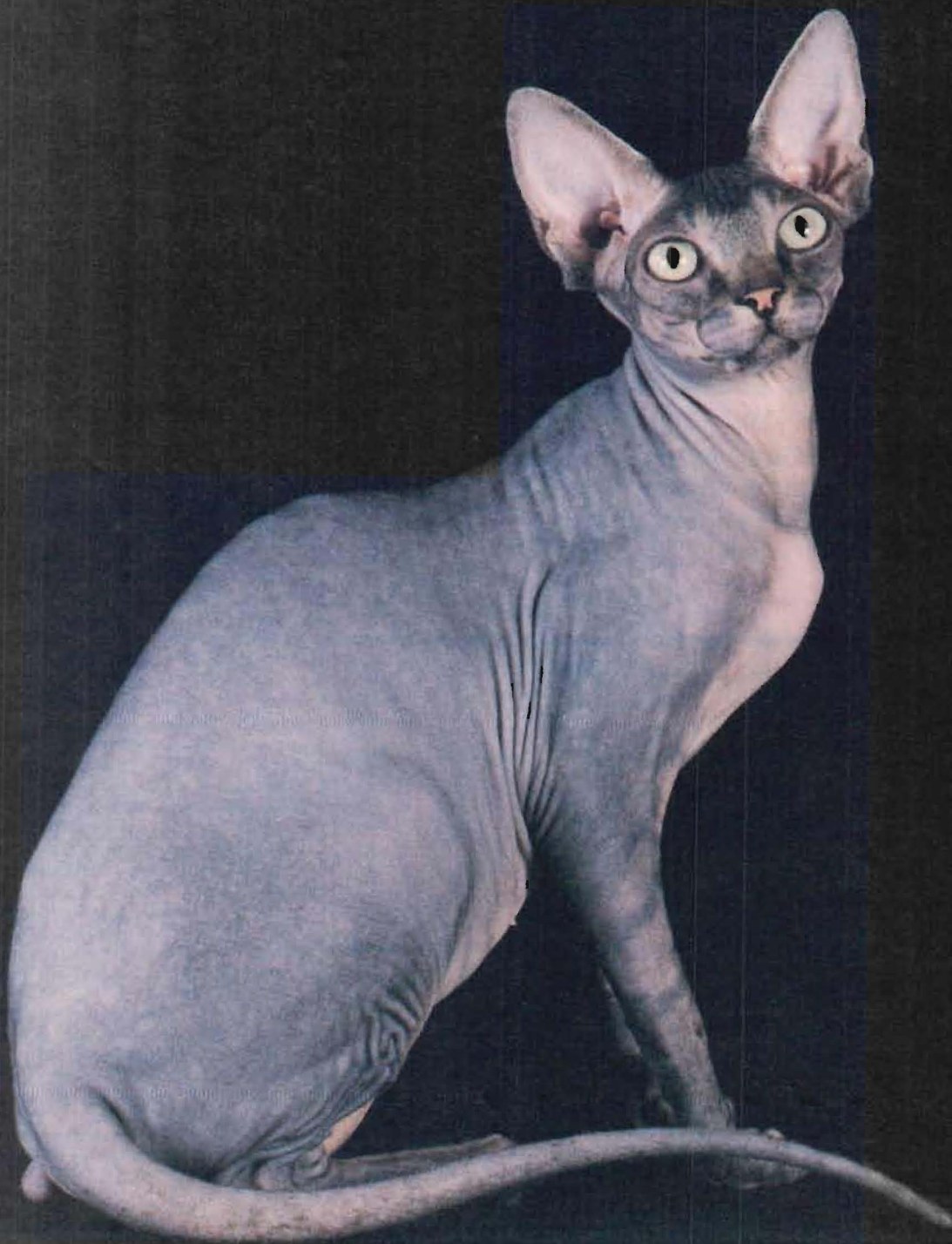
While lack of hair is the foremost credential of the Sphynx, accounting for 25 points in the standard, it is not the only criterion which a Sphynx must meet. Nor is every hairless cat automatically a show cat. Other important characteristics of the Sphynx are its eyes, which should be lemon-shaped, with the pointed end of the lemon slanting toward the outer edge of the ear; its abdomen, which should display a prosperous paunch, as though the Sphynx has recently consumed a satisfying meal; and its temperament, which the French standard describes as "part monkey, part dog, part child, and part cat."

As a rule, I have refrained from discussing breed personalities in this series because such treatises are usually fraught with overlapping and confusing generalities. There are close to 40 breeds of cats, and it would be splitting hairs to assert that each has a separate and distinct personality or that any particular breed has the market cornered on cute. What's more, when a person tells you what a breed is like, she's probably telling you what her own cats are like. But the Sphynx—across decades and continents—has been universally praised for its personality.

"They are the most intelligent and affectionate family pets I have ever met in the cat line," wrote one aficionado in 1903. "They are the quickest in action and the smartest cats I have ever seen."

"They're wonderful," says Lisa Bressler, who acquired a Sphynx after visiting a show where the aforementioned E.T. had appeared. "They're loyal; they follow you around; they use their little paws like hands. But you can't really appreciate what they're like until you've had one under the covers with you purring."

Now if that doesn't sound like a real cat, Popeye was a sissy. 



**Db Gr Ch**  
**Rinkurl Aloe Pecia**

**Breeder/Owner: Lisa Bressler**  
**Photo by Nicole Ledoux**