

THE FUNCTION AND SEMIOTICS OF CATS IN URBAN SPACE AND IN CULTURAL MEMORY (BY EXAMPLE OF YEREVAN AND GABROVO)

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The work was supported by the Science Committee of Republic of Armenia,
in the frames of the research project no. 24SSAH-6B014

The article analyses the function and semiotics of cats in urban space and cultural memory, using the example of Yerevan (Armenia) and Gabrovo (Bulgaria). Analyzing Armenian and Bulgarian phraseological units, the study's authors show that cats are "active" in the linguistic memory of the two peoples. They describe the visualization of cats in urban space and their multimodal manifestations in statues, restaurant names, cafe names, design interpretations, cultural artifacts, etc. The article highlights the phenomenon of the Van cat as a symbol of Armenian identity. An analysis of the empirical material of the two cities showed that Fernando Botero's "Cat" became the catalyst for the appearance of the Black Cat Gastropub restaurant (2021–2023), the appearance of an "Armenian" twin. Yerevan sculptures with cats refer to the "high" Armenian literature, cultural memory, and historical past. The Bulgarian example showed that the Gabrovo cat and related practices (festivals) point to a "grassroots" carnival culture. The Gabrovo cat is a transnational symbol and expresses a philosophical concept: humor as a weapon against aggression and laughter as a means of transnational survival.

Keywords: cats of Yerevan, Fernando Botero, Van cat / Turkish van cat, cats Daredevils of Sassoun, Gabrovo cat, Gabrovo carnival

Acknowledgments: The authors sincerely thank the Cafesjian Museum Foundation, The House of Humour and Satire in Gabrovo, and designers Daniel Grigoryan and Narinoush for generously granting permission to use visual materials in this publication.

ФУНКЦИЯ И СЕМИОТИКА КОШЕК В ГОРОДСКОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ И В КУЛЬТУРНОЙ ПАМЯТИ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ ЕРЕВАНА И ГАБРОВО)

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Исследование выполнено при финансовой поддержке
Комитета по науке Республики Армения
в рамках научного проекта № 24SSAH-6B014

Статья посвящена анализу функции и семиотики кошек в городском пространстве и культурной памяти на примере Еревана (Армения) и Габрово (Болгария). Анализируя армянские и болгарские фразеологизмы, авторы исследования показывают, что кошки «активны» в языковой памяти двух народов. Описываются визуализация кошек в городском пространстве и их мультимодальные проявления в статуях, названиях кафе и ресторанов, дизайнерских интерпретациях, культурных артефактах и т.д. Освещается феномен ванской кошки как символа армянской идентичности. Анализ эмпирического материала двух городов показал, что «Кот» Фернандо Ботеро стал катализатором для появления ресторана Black Cat Gastropub (2021–2023), появления «армянского» двойника. Ереванские скульптуры с кошками отсылают к «высокой» армянской литературе, культурной памяти и историческому прошлому. Болгарский пример показал, что габровский кот и связанные с ним практики (фестивали) указывают на «низовую» карнавальную культуру. Габровский кот является транснациональным символом и выражает философскую концепцию: юмор как оружие против агрессии, смех как средство транснационального выживания.

Ключевые слова: кошки Еревана, Фернандо Ботеро, ванская кошка / турецкая ванская кошка, сасунская кошка, габровский кот, габровский карнавал

Благодарности: авторы благодарят Музейный фонд Гафесцяна, Дом юмора и сатиры в Габрово, а также дизайнеров Даниела Григоряна и Наринуш за любезно предоставленное разрешение на использование визуальных материалов в данной публикации.

DOI 10.23951/2312-7899-2025-2-133-158

Introduction

This article is dedicated to exploring the cultural significance and semiotics of cats in urban spaces and in cultural memory. It builds upon the ongoing discourse of analyzing the urban space of Yerevan [Margaryan 2021; Simyan 2022; Vermishyan, Barseghyan 2023; Abrahamian 2023; Petrs-Bartsumian 2024; Abgaryan et al. 2024]. Like other commonplace phenomena of the urban landscape, they express a unique cultural meaning and may be perceived as a sign. In this context, cats are not just animals but cultural artifacts that we will delve into. Our exploration will begin with cats in linguistic memory, as reflected in phraseological units of the Armenian and Bulgarian languages. We will gradually ascend the semiotic taxonomy from denotative signs to connotative ones. The latter manifest multimodally, including statues, restoratives, design, cultural artifacts, texts, and literary allusions. The semantics and semiotics of cats in the Armenian-language humanitarian scientific discourse have not been extensively researched. The article aims to trace and show the multi-modality of cats in urban space, culture, and advertising. In English-language and Russian-language scientific literature, one can find studies on cats in urban space [Warner, Genheimer 2008; Özbek et al. 2024], media space [Tikhonova 2024], literature [Egorova 2008].

Cats have increasingly become regarded as a significant part of Yerevan and Armenian culture. This is evidenced by the growing interest in the analysis of cats as a cultural phenomenon in the Armenian scholarly discourse, with two notable articles on cats [Hakobyan 2019; Dalalyan 2024]. The first article, by Tork Dalalyan, presents a historical-comparative approach to etymological aspects of the ancient Armenian language variant of the *qnlq* ([kouz], cat). The author's analysis reveals that the cat signifier *kouz* may be considered an ancient Armenian-Alan isogloss, with the lexical semantic varieties of this root preserved in Armenian dialects [Dalalyan 2024, 5–14].

Armenian linguistic material shows that in ancient Armenian, the signifier for the concept of a cat was “*կուզ*” (*kouz*, first appearing in the Armenian translation of the Bible), and the signifier “*կաւուն*” (*cat*) already appears in Middle Armenian from the XII–XIII centuries. It was used as a signifier of a domestic cat, while the ancient Armenian version indicated both a wild and a domestic cat [Dalalyan 2024, 8–9]. The second article by Armenian researcher Inga Hakobyan is devoted to phraseological units referencing cats and dogs [Hakobyan 2019]. The following phraseological units may be roughly divided into two categories. The first group is generated on the basis of observation, while the second is semiotically loaded, referring to cultural connotative codes.

Phraseological units based on observation are:

- “Գող կատվի պես” (lit. “like a cat thief”) – stealthily come/approach,
- “Վայրի կատու” (“wild cat”) – unbridled, unrestrained,
- “Կատու դառնալ/կտրել, լինել” (“turn into a cat”) – become humble,
- “Թըջված կատու”, “խանձված կատու” (“wet cat,” “scorched cat”) – helpless, exhausted,
- “Շուն տեսած կատու” (“the cat who saw the dog”) – terrified,
- “Կատու ճղել” (“to tear a cat apart”) – to instill fear,
- “Մուկն ու կատու խաղալ” (literally “playing cat and mouse”) – having fun with someone, dominating, abusing.

It may be concluded that Armenian people’s observation of domesticated cats underlies all the examples of Armenian phraseological units listed above. Based on this cognitive process, culturally unrelated connotative meanings have emerged; in other words, they are connotative products of “primary modeling systems” (for details on the concept see [Lotman 1965]).

Now, let us move on to semiotic examples of phraseological units.

Semiotically (culturally) conditioned phraseological units are “Շուն ու կատու լինել” (դառնալ), “շուն ու կատվի պես” (to live “like a cat and a dog”) [Hakobyan 2019, 163], indicating the quality of interpersonal relationships and partly based on observation; “սրսնքով սև կատու է անցել” (“a black cat passed between them”), that is, there was an estrangement, a disagreement occurred, which turned into a quarrel [Hakobyan 2019, 165]. It is notable that the latter expression, indicating an antagonistic relationship, incorporates the attribute of a cat’s color.

From a semiotic point of view, the black cat’s significance is interesting, indicating failure. This idea can be seen in different cultures. For example, this signified is played out in opposition to misfortune vs. the product of stereotypical thinking in the short story *The Black Cat* (1843) by Edgar Allan Poe. The mystical perception of a cat can be encapsulated in another phraseological unit, “կատվի հոգի ունի” (literally “has the soul of a cat”), which connotes durability and tenaciousness. The negative attitude towards black cats and their connection with the other world, preserved in the Armenian linguistic memory, refers to the prejudices of the Middle Ages. See [Nikolajeva 2009].

Cats in urban space by example of Yerevan

In front of the Cascade in the center of Yerevan, the first “guest” of the Cafesjian Museum Foundation in the early 2000s was a fat cat statue by the Colombian artist and sculptor Fernando Botero (1932–2023).

This statue has become one of the most critical artistic attractions of the sculpture garden (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Fernando Botero, *Cat*. Yerevan, 1999.
The Gerard L. Cafesjian Collection. Photo: Rita Willaert, 2008.

The Cafesjian Museum Foundation becomes a “propagandist” and animator of postmodern art. From a semiotic point of view, Botero’s work constantly updates the stylistic figure of “hyperbole,” which is the primary technique of Yerevan sculpture. Botero was a Colombian sculptor who worked in the figurative style, which allowed him to encode different meanings on quite realistically perceived objects. His paintings and sculptures have become iconic for their coding technique, particularly, the hyperbolization of bodies through a characteristic thickness of torso. If we pay attention to the pose, facial expression (closed eyes, slightly protruding tongue), and corpulence of the figure, Botero’s work “Gatto/Cat” (1999) conveys self-confidence, arrogance, self-sufficiency, self-absorption, complacency, and playfulness. The latter property connects the “Armenian” cat with the “Calaton” one, who lives on La Rambla del Raval Street. These fat but pragmatically optimistic cats express curiosity (head condition), interest (face), and interest (eyes) (Figure 2). Through their posture and form Botero cats express different states of the “soul.” Thus, the animals are humanized through non-verbal signs (posture, body shapes, facial expressions) and become objects of reflection for the recipients.



Figure 2. Fernando Botero, Cat. Barcelona, 1987.
Photo: Al Sanin, 2013

Reading the city from the “reverse perspective” [Florensky 1999; Rauschenbach 1980, 94–139], cats form a link between Yerevan and Barcelona. Through their common property of Botero’s works, these cities have become carriers of cosmopolitan culture, which refers to global thinking, diversity, inclusivity, innovation, etc. Thus, the Cafesjian Museum Foundation in Yerevan becomes a cultural “oasis” that creates and transmits new ideas and values¹.

Thus, from the point of view of semiotic syntactic, these two cities form a standard architectural and artistic text if we perceive these cats as “distant” neighbors. Let us turn our attention to the nearest feline “neighbor” of the Yerevan cat sculpture “The Smoker Woman,” which has been in syntagmatic and visual proximity to the Botero cat in Yerevan since 2012 (Figure 3).

As we can see, a completely naked smoking woman lying on a towel refers to carelessness, inner freedom (smoking woman, nudity), femininity (combed hair, beautiful flower clip), and self-sufficiency (closed

¹ Below, we will discuss the debate over new values and the perception of a new cultural language using Armenian artifacts as an example.

eyes) despite her hyperbolic size. She is a self-confident (head position), inviting, flirtatious woman (raised leg, open palm of her right hand). On a pragmatic level, the recipient of this sculpture by Botero creates ambivalence for the recipient if we pay attention to body size: pronounced female body parts (breasts, buttocks) vs. small foot size and small ears. This play with shapes creates an ambivalent perception of a woman: from the front, a woman is perceived as an adult, mature (breasts, cigarette), from the behind a plump girl/ young woman².



Figure 3. Fernando Botero, *The Smoker Woman*. Yerevan, 1987.
The Gerard L. Cafesjian Collection. Photo: Tigran Simyan, 2025

However, the psychological message of these Yerevan sculptures is essential. Botero's insouciant figures convey a message of fidelity to inner Self, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, self-acceptance, self-love, and disregard for the opinions of strangers ("*Cat*," "*The Smoker Woman*").

a) Botero's "*Cat*" as a multimodal catalyst

As mentioned above, Botero's "*Cat*," the first "resident" of the Cafesjian Museum Foundation, also became a visual marker of the souvenir shop, which is replicated on handles, cups, bags, and chocolates.

Returning to the sculpture "*The Cat*" by Botero in Yerevan, we note that this sculpture became a catalyst for the creation of a new "Ar-

² According to the same poetics, the sculpture "*Roman Warrior*" (1985–1986) was created by Botero and is located further from the sculpture "*The Smoker Woman*" in Yerevan: athletic body vs. childish foot size, sexual organ.

menized” image of the cat, or an object of rebranding, which became the hero of the book *LET’S GO TO THE MUSEUM!*, published in honor of the 20th anniversary of the museum’s founding (Figure 4).

The fat black cat functions in the book about the Cafesjian Museum Foundation as a “narrator” and an interactive character on a non-verbal level, providing visual contact with the book’s audience/reader. Children decorated the colorful cat sitting next to it on June 1, 2024. It should be noted that the prototype of the black “Armenian” cat was a character from the cartoon “Meeting of Mice” (“Մկների ժողովը,” 1978) Kostan, brought in by the house owners brought in to destroy the mice (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Shop of Cafesjian Museum Foundation, 1 Floor. Yerevan, 2024.
Photo: Tigran Simyan, 2024

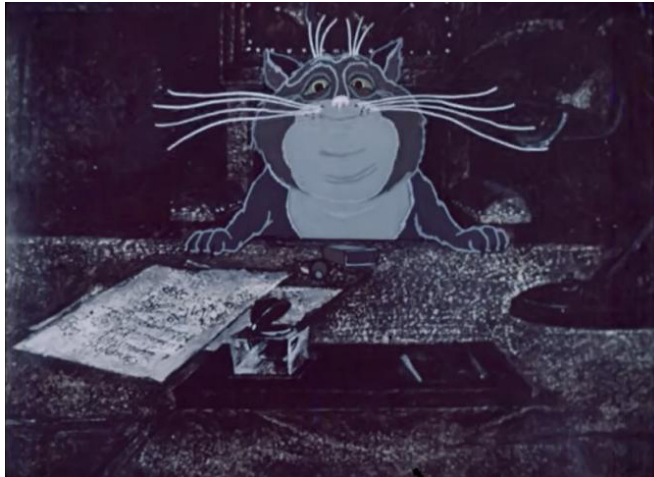


Figure 5. Meeting of the Mice. Director L. Sahakyanc. 1978, 8:21 min.
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2TltOl6xTQ>

Botero's "Cat" became a catalyst for local business. In 2021, the Black Cat Gastropub restaurant was opened in the summer directly opposite Botero's "Cat" under the building but closed in December 2023³ (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Exterior and interior Black Cat Gastropub. Yerevan, 2023
Source: <https://clck.ru/3G4mJL>

The entire Cascade of Yerevan, by extension, has become associated with cats. On a designer T-shirt from the company Gatto.am, one can see the original interpretation of the Cascade, which a city resident perceives as a utopian space inhabited by cats (Figure 7, left). Figure 7 in the center is also constructed according to the same logic: colorful, naughty cats in "tactile" contact with the sculpture of Mother Armenia⁴.



Figure 7. Brand "Gatto.am". Designed by Daniel Grigoryan. Yerevan, 2025.
Photo: Tigran Simyan, 2025

The illustrations are made in a warm light scheme; the sun shines, and the blue sky and the "yellow" air refer to a positive space. In Figure 7 on the right, cats skate from one of the symbols of Soviet modernism, the roof of the former Rossiya cinema, mischievously disregarding the

³ Another establishment, Paulaner Beerhouse, currently operates.

⁴ See the analysis of this sculpture [Stepanyan, Simyan 2012, 10–13].

monumental edifice's intended purpose. Naughty cats become additional iconic signs. Hooked as visual "viruses," cats give the picture a humorous touch, emotionality, and empathy.

Thus, the company designer Gatto.am windows the urban space. A recognizable space is modeled through favorite symbols and architectural structures. The new design interpretation of urban space on the company's T-shirts can catalyze buyers and viewers to visit the one-of-a-kind Gatto Cat Café⁵, which was based on stories of "love, compassion, and countless purrs" (Gatto.am).

The café's name, from a semiotic point of view, is "overloaded" with two synonyms – "Gatto Cat Café"⁶. From a marketing point of view, however, it is justified. Through two keywords, many Romano- and English-speaking tourists in the Google search engine, Google Maps, looking for Botero's "Cat" will be naturally directed to this Yerevan café, which, in addition to its primary business, has another mission – to organize the adoption process of stray cats or cats left without owners. It should be noted that this example is becoming indicative of Yerevan in terms of the appearance of people who love companion animals.

b) The sculpture "Gevorg Emin" (2010)

Another visual example of urban space can be seen in Lovers' Park in Yerevan⁷.



Figure 8. Ashot Aramyan, Gevorg Emin. Lovers' Park, Yerevan, 2010.

Photo: Tigran Simyan, 2025

⁵ It is the only place to buy these designer T-shirts.

⁶ <https://gatto.am/our-story>

⁷ The placement of cat sculptures in urban spaces, referring to the lives of cultural figures or biographies of poets and writers, has an extended character. One can recall the sculpture of a "talking" cat in Vilnius ("Katinas/Cat," 2009, by sculptor Ksenija Jaroševaitė), reminiscent of the writer and traveler Jurga Ivanauskaitė (1961–2007).

The sculpture depicts the Armenian poet Gevorg Emin (1919–1998), playing with his Siamese cat Masho⁸. This communication between the poet/man and the Siamese cat emphasizes nonverbal communication as an act of deictic expression⁹ on a visual level and the static (fixity) of a dynamic situation: the poet, emerging from the water, reflects on the future strategy of playing with the cat¹⁰.

There is a reason why the sculpture was placed in Lovers' Park (formerly Pushkin Park): the poet loved to walk with his cat in the park. According to a legend, Emin's Siamese cat¹¹ could peel sunflower seeds and liked to sit on the poet's shoulder. According to the testimony of the poet's grandson, Masho liked to sit on the poet's shoulder, although this behavior is uncommon for this breed. The cracking of sunflower seeds is also biologically improbable for cats, whose teeth structure are designed by nature to tear meat, not to husk seeds.

The statue was stolen from Lovers' Park in 2021 despite existing security measures¹². The theft of the bronze cat was likely motivated by the sale of scrap metal¹³. While the statue of the cat Masho has been replaced, the brush of Aivazovsky's statue in Yerevan has not yet been restored [Charkhchyan 2011].

“Armenian cat”: վանական (Vanakatu), Turkish Van/Van Kedesi

In Armenian culture, one of the crucial components of symbolic capital (Pierre Bourdieu) is the symbol of the Van cat (վանական, Vanakatu), which has lived in these territories since ancient times and was

⁸ The author found out from Gevorg Emin's grandson and son that the poet's son, Artashes Emin, gave this cat to his parents when he went to Harvard with his family for a year, and they were bored.

⁹ See details about this metalanguage based on cat-produced deixis in [Cornips et al. 2023].

¹⁰ According to the memoirs of the mother of one of the authors, cats were drowned and dogs were beaten in Soviet times in Yerevan if they disturbed their sleep at night (barking, meowing). The situation in Armenia has completely changed in recent years, especially after the amendment and additions to the law on wildlife (2022). <https://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=155166> (Accessed: 14.02.2025).

¹¹ In Armenian “high” art, Siamese and Persian cats were institutionalized from purebred cats. These are the sculptures of Hakop Gyurjian (1881–1948), “The Siamese Cat” (1929), and “The Persian Cat” (1929). It is also worth remembering that the Persian cats in one frame are represented in Hakop Kojoyan's painting “Cats” (1935), which is kept in the National Gallery of Armenia.

¹² Vandalism Statue of Gevorg Emin's cat stolen. Yerevan Magazin, 15.01.2021. <https://evnmag.com/articles/goxcel-en-gevorg-emini-ardzani-katvin.html> (Accessed: 16.01.2025).

¹³ Vandals often target bronze sculptures. In 2016, a bronze sculpture of a small fat Tombil cat was stolen in Istanbul, Kadıköy district [Özbek et al. 2024, 21–22].

domesticated during the era of the state of Urartu, or the Van Kingdom (IX–VI BCE), for rodent control in granaries and barns¹⁴. The visualization of the Van cat can be seen on the Urartu bronze belt depicted in Figure 9.

The depiction of the Van cat on a bronze harness indicates its prevalence and functional value in the Urartian or Ararat kingdom. We find a direct reference to the Van cat in the fourth part of the Armenian epic *David of Sasun*¹⁵ when the Younger Mher destroys the enemy (Arab) city of Hlat¹⁶ (near Sasun and Van), thereby avenging the murder of his father, David: “He went and found the city destroyed, // Except for one cat // That had perched on the spire of a minaret // And was looking around. // Mher pulled up a plane tree and // Knocked the cat off the spire. // Then he climbed to the summit of [Mount] Nemruth; // Looking around, he saw smoke rising. // He came back, went to the city // And found an old witch huddled in a corner Among the ruins, kindling a fire” [David of Sasun 1964, 352].



Figure 9. Fragment of archaeological bronze belt from Urartu with a relief in the form of a cat M. Reniger's private collection, Chicago, Illinois.

Source: <https://www.armmuseum.ru/news-blog/vanskitye-koski-armyanskoe-sokrovishe-tyrtsii>

¹⁴ For the domestication of cats in ancient times, see [Krajcarza et al. 2020; Marshall 2020].

¹⁵ About converting an epic poem into a media text, see [Simyan, Makaryan 2023; Menemshyan et al. 2024].

¹⁶ The modern name of the city in Turkish is Ahlat (Turkey), located on the northwestern shore of Lake Van.

Unfortunately, it is not evident from the quote which breed of cat remained alive in the enemy city after the Younger Mher destroys its Arab-Muslims population. The sole surviving cat indicates the total extermination of the inhabitants. The final destruction of the cat constitutes the end of all living things. However, on a connotative level, this passage can also be read in a different way, which the epic is silent about since the genre is not “verbose” like a novel in which details can be analyzed down to the smallest one (remember novels of Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, etc.).

The Younger Mher’s blow to the cat is, in fact, also a blow to the minaret, a religious symbol of Islam. The minaret is a beacon of the Islamic faith, from where they call for prayer. The younger Mher strikes/destroys the visual symbol of Muslims, indicating the presence and dominance of religion in the visual “top” in the urban landscape (Hlat). Having destroyed everything alive and symbolic from the point of view of the “bottom” of the city, he also takes a look from above, from Mount Nemruth (“Then he climbed to the summit of [Mount] Nemruth”). The phrase “smoke rising” indicates the presence of something alive “from above.”

The Younger Mher, seeing the “old witch,” punishes her: “Mher seized the witch, [bent down two trees,] // Tied one of her feet to the top of one tree // And the other foot to the top of the other tree // And then let both trees go”) [David of Sasun 1964, 352–353]. The reason for the punishment was that the “old witch” had deliberately lit it so that they could not say: “We destroyed Khlat so completely that // No smoke could rise from any chimney” [David of Sasun 1964, 352]. Here, we are talking about the traditional perception that fire indicates a house or something alive.

If we pay attention, the quote points to another religious (medieval) “atavism.” In the end, there were representatives of all evil. While an old woman is negatively labeled at the linguistic level (“old witch”), then the cat is not described as the personification of evil. However, her evil spirit manifests itself at the level of behavior. In the text, the evil cat is drawn to another visual, religious evil – the minaret, where the cat receives a fatal blow. From what has been said, it can be concluded that the dislike of cats is not encoded in the Armenian epic. They are punished because they are the personification of the Chthonic principle. The epic hero, the Younger Mher, takes revenge on his enemies (the Arabs, the cat, the old witch), while also destroying the spiritual symbol of the identity of Muslims.

While the “Armenian/Van cat” is implicit in Armenian cultural texts, the “Armenian cat” became known to the Western world explicitly in

real life in 1955, when British journalist Laura Lashington, accompanied by photographer Sonya Halliday, met Van cats in Turkey while preparing a historical report on the Ottoman Empire. In 1969, the British Council of Cat Lovers GCCF recognized a new “Turkish cat” breed. However, this caused confusion between the Van and Turkish Angors. In 1971, FIFE gave the breed a new official name – “Turkish Van cat”¹⁷. Currently, export of this breed from the country is banned¹⁸. These cats are interesting because they can swim and dive to catch fish and can be immersed in water for hours. Quite a few of them have heterochromia or contrasting eyes (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Van Armenia cat. Armenian art decoration.
Designed and sold by Narinoush.
Source: <https://clck.ru/3GChkv>

The design interpretation of the Van cat with heterochromia refers to all the symbols of the Armenian identity. The cat functions as a frame in which all Armenian symbols are collected: Lake Van (one of the symbols of historical Armenia), a stone cross, an angel, a church, an Armenian woman in a traditional Van outfit, “Armenian” fruits (apricots, peaches, pomegranates), mythical birds “Hazaran bulbul” (հազարան բլբուլ, der goldene Vogel), which refers to Armenian folk tales [Hazaran bulbul 1977]. If, in Narinoush’s interpretation, the Van cat is represented as

¹⁷ Turkish Van / Turkish Vankedisi – GCCF. Top Cat. International cats Ranking System. <https://en.top-cat.org/breeds-articles/322> (Accessed: 21.02.2025).

¹⁸ For the phenomenon of cats’ function as “tourist magnets” in Turkey, see [Özbek et al. 2024].

a queen cat, referring to the historical past, then in Mkrtich Chanchanyan's interpretation (December 26, 2016), it is inscribed on a postage stamp as a small cartoon cat along with other "Armenian" animals: the Armenian Moulon, the Van cat and the Armenian gull¹⁹.

Bulgarian example: The Gabrovo cat

If only one cultural section of Yerevan (the Cafesjian Museum Foundation) is branded with a black cat, Bulgaria can boast an entire city. The black cat is one of the most important signs for the Bulgarian city of Gabrovo. According to legend/tradition, this cat has a severed ("edited") tail because thrifty (stingy) Gabrovians trim the tails of cats [Fyrtunov, Prodanov 1988, 10]²⁰ so that the cat passes through the door faster in winter, thereby keeping the heat in the room. The black cat is essential to the Gabrovo Museum of Humor and the Gabrovo Carnival.

Carnival spirit and laughter are conveyed through humorous figures and statues in Gabrovo. In the urban space, not far from the Museum of Humor and Satire, we can find a sculpture of Nasreddin Hodja, a folklore character of the Muslim East, a hero of jokes, humorous and satirical miniatures, combining a sage and a simpleton. In the same space, we can see the European heroes of laughter and carnival thinking – the inseparable Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Judging by the sculptures, it can be concluded that humor has no borders; there is no border between the West (Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Chaplin) and the East (Khoja Nasreddin). Carnival without borders is also represented on Pepa Markova's postage stamp, where in one multi-colored space, everything is inside out and in a circle: "top" and "bottom" are relative. The stamp features carnival masks, outfits, musical instruments (a drum), figures like the Gabrovo black cat, clowns/Pierrot, Chaplin, and others²¹. The Gabrovo cat is an important figure in the exterior and interior space of the Museum of Humor and Satire in Gabrovo ("Домът на хумора и сатирата в Габрово"), popularly known as The Louvre of Laughter. The figures of the Gabrovo cats can be seen on the roof of the museum (exterior space)²² and right inside the museum

¹⁹ The Van cat (2016, December 26). Haypost, Children's Philately. <https://www.haypost.am/en/Philatelia/Stamps-by-years/2016> (Accessed: 20.02.2025).

²⁰ Numerous special features of Bulgarian culture were published in the yearbook *Bulgarica* [Henzelmann 2021]. We may add that these cultural specificities can persist across borders and have led to Bulgarian dialects in different countries being able to preserve these specificities [Henzelmann, Mitrinov 2020].

²¹ <https://www.stamps-bg.com/2020/2020-5476.htm> (Accessed: 01.02.2025).

²² Compare with the history of cats on buildings in the center of Riga.

(Figure 11a). The entrance to the museum is also semiotically charged since the visitor must enter only through the tactile contact of the door handles, which have laughing, smiling and ironic faces (Figure 11b).



Figure 11a. The Gabrovo Cat. Museum of Humor and Satire, Gabrovo.

Source: <https://bulgariatravel.org/house-of-humour-and-satire-gabrovo>

11b. Door handles of the Museum of Humor and Satire, Gabrovo, 2023.

Photo: Velizar Gerginov. Source: <https://clck.ru/3GRPh>



Figure 12. The Gabrovo Cat. The sculptor:

Adrian Novakov, 2013. Mytishchi, Moscow region.

Source: <https://cr2.livejournal.com/921054.html>

The Gabrovo cat greets us on a beer barrel in an aggressive pose inside the museum. The beer barrel refers to the carnival. On a pragmatic level, this sculpture provokes an ambivalent state in the recipient: the aggressive pose of the cat vs. the laughing masks on its legs. Thus, it can be interpreted that the entrance to the city, like to the museum, is possible only through laughter/smiles. Otherwise, the cat protecting the city is ready to defend itself and even pounce on the recipient. The cat's aggressive pose is duplicated on the badges. However, because of the size, the details of the sculpture (masks on legs, the city under the city) on the badge are not transmitted. Thereby, the tiny space of the badge "edited" the Gabrovo Cat sculpture: the image of the cat on the badge is visually a shortened, reduced version of the statue. A monument to the Gabrovo cat was erected in Mytishchi (Figure 12) since Mytishchi and Gabrovo are twin cities.

In 2013, on the 10th anniversary of friendship and cooperation, the Bulgarians presented Mytishchi with a Gabrovo cat, a symbol of their city. A monument to the cat was erected in the Mytischinsky Park of Culture and Recreation on the banks of the Yauza River, which flows into the center of Moscow [Kulikov 2021]. If we interpret the details of the Mytishchi sculpture vertically from top to bottom, the tailless cat sits on the primary "punishing" tool – scissors. The latter is emphasized the most. A cat with a suitcase is indexing on a traveler "carrying a piece of humor to all corners as a souvenir" [Kulikov 2021].

On the pedestal of the Gabrovo cat in Mytishchi, in the Moscow region, a sign says: "The world survived because it laughed." This is also the credo of the Museum of Humor and Satire in Gabrovo, the Bulgarian capital of humor. The phrase written on the pedestal also has a psycho-therapeutic meaning, referring to the insurmountable seriousness of the World without laughter. Laughter prevents conflict, neutralizes aggression, and makes it possible to look at things from the outside through a different consciousness. On a pragmatic level, the phrase highlights that without laughter, the World would be a whole of sadness/despair and, on an interpersonal and international level, conflict.

The Mytishchi black cat carries humor to all sides of the World (cat masks with the English letters S, W, N, E). The symbol on the briefcase indicates a synthesized symbol of a cat and a globe, thereby indicating that the Gabrovo cat "from above" and "from below" captured the World (the cat's ears protruded from the globe). The globe theme continues. As Alexey Kulikov notes, the globe points to the "understandable fact" that Gabrovo, according to residents, is the "world capital of humor" [Kulikov 2021]. By the same analogy, we can say that Gabrovo

shares this distinction as the center of the humor world with Gyumri, Odessa, and Yerevan [Schiff 1969]. Here are two jokes:

Gabrovo ²³	Gyumri ²⁴
A gambler goes to the dentist: – How much will it cost me to have a tooth removed? – 80 leva. – 80 leva for 20 seconds? – If you want, I'll pull it out very slowly...	If yesterday was the birthday of the capital city of Armenia, today is the birthday of the capital city of all over the World. Happy birthday, our beloved Gyumri...

During the carnival in Gabrovo, we can see the enormous figures of the Gabrovo cat. Let us pay attention to the inscriptions in Figures 13a and 13b. The playful Gabrovo black cat holds the inscription in his hands: “Да изкукуригаме от смях” // “Let’s get crazy with laughter”²⁵ (Figure 13a) [Popkonstantinov 2017].



Figure 13a (on the left). The Gabrovo Cat. Carnival 2017, Gabrovo, Bulgaria.

Source: <https://travelbulgaria.news/carnival-gabrovo/>

Figure 13b (on the right). The Gabrovo Cat. Carnival 2020, Gabrovo, Bulgaria.

Source: <https://www.desant.net/show-news/53065>

It should be noted that during the annual carnival procession, “Ole-leinya” is a national holiday that spread in Bulgaria at the beginning of the 20th century. The Gabrovo cat wears different slogans²⁶. “Табровец и котка по гръб не падат” // “Gabrovets and cats do not fall on their backs” (Figure 13b) became the slogan of 2020 in the year of the pan-

²³ «Габровец отива при зъболекар: – Колко ще ми струва ваденето на зъба? – 80 лева. – 80 лева за 20 секунди? – Ако искате, ще го извадя мнооого бавно...».

²⁴ «Թե երեկ Հայաստանի մայրաքաղաքի ծնունդն էր, եսօր պամ աշխարհի մայրաքաղաքի ծնունդն է... Տոնը շնորհավոր, մեր սիրելի Գյումրի».

²⁵ The best English equivalents are “Let’s laugh our heads off!”, “Let’s go nuts with laughter!”, “Let’s crack up like crazy!”.

²⁶ It should be noted that the article’s authors do not aim to diachronically refer to all the slogans of the Gabrovo cat by year to identify the politics of the carnival.

demic (but it was also the slogan in 2015). In the context of the pandemic, the slogan plays a life-affirming role.

Cats are known to land on their paws, and, similarly, the Gabrovians with a sense of humor, who are quick-witted, innovative, and resourceful, should stay on their feet, no matter what is on the street in 2020. Globally, this phrase conveyed a message to all the planet's inhabitants that, regardless of the circumstances, people can overcome all the difficulties of the pandemic. As we can see, the Gabrovo black cat is imbued with humanism. While confirming what was said, the slogan of the Gabrovo cat of 2024 became a universal message: "Make Carnival, not War!" i.e., the Gabrovo cat refers to the World and is not the embodiment of Satan²⁷. The Gabrovo cat becomes a media "virus" in May²⁸, an important marker of children's memory, as children are photographed with the key symbol of the carnival.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, it may be concluded that cats are "present" in the Armenian (also in Bulgarian) language at the level of phraseological units. The feline substrate of many popular idioms indicates that cats were domesticated since times immemorial and were very close to humans. Empirical observations of cats' behavior were encoded in the linguistic memory of the Armenian and Bulgarian nations, mainly based on the principle of similarity (metaphor). Since 1999, Botero's black, fat cat has been living in Yerevan and became the "face" of the Yerevan cultural space (Cafesjian Museum Foundation) and was retransmitted on various souvenir items like pens, cups, bags, chocolates, etc. Botero's cat statue became the catalyst, and the Black Cat Gastropub restaurant opened opposite it (2021–2023). The empirical analysis has also shown that in recent years, Botero's black cat underwent a rebranding, and its "Armenian" double appeared, the prototype of which was the image of Kostan, the cat from the animated film "Meeting of Mice" (1978). Cats have also appeared virtually in design interpretations when cats live and play on iconic figures and places in Yerevan (Cascade, for-

²⁷ See the Hippopotamus cat from the immortal novel by the great Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (1928–1940). The empirical material of urban space shows that black cats do not refer to the incarnation of Satan either in Armenia, Bulgaria, Turkey, or Russia, since at the modern stage, the codes of the Middle Ages (the black cat is the embodiment of evil spirits) are not active. For a positive example of "behemette," or "behemina," (small female of the behemoth) in the urban space of St. Petersburg, see [Boyarkina, Simyan 2022, 119].

²⁸ As an example, the function of media in modeling an imaginary city see [Speshilova 2023, 42–49].

mer Rossiya cinema, Mother Armenia statue). These designs implicitly become advertisements for the Gatto Cat Cafe, the only cafe in Yerevan where cats live and “receive” visitors for a fee. In Armenian culture, the cat, represented by the Turkish Van Cat, manifests itself in one design work containing all the essential archetypal symbols of Armenian identity (crosses, church, angel, Lake Van). From the point of view of historical retrospection, it becomes evident that (Van) cats are visualized on the artifacts of Urartu, or the Van kingdom. Cats’ presence is also confirmed by the example of the Armenian epic material, *David of Sasun*. The Armenian urban space material has shown that cats are simultaneously “exported” (Botero’s “Cat”) and “imported,” with references to “high” Armenian literature and cultural memory (sculpture “Gevorg Emin”). The Bulgarian example shows that the Gabrovo cat and its associated practices (festivals) point to a “grassroots” carnival culture. The analysis showed that the Gabrovo cat “lives” in the interior and exterior spaces of the city, and, like the Yerevan Botero cat, it is visually replicated at the level of badges and postage stamps. The Gabrovo cat has become a transnational symbol, as it can also be seen in the city of Mytishchi (Russia). A typological and semiotic analysis shows that the statues of Gabrovo cats in Gabrovo and Mytishchi express a philosophical concept: humor as a weapon against aggression and laughter as a means of transnational survival.

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* 09.07.2021 деятельность Meta Platforms Inc. по реализации продуктов – социальных сетей Facebook и Instagram на территории РФ запрещена по основаниям осуществления экстремистской деятельности.

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Материал поступил в редакцию 25.02.2025