

Russia's Hermitage Museum Gives Away Its Black Cats

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Russia's State Hermitage gave away some of its black cats.

Russia's most famous museum, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, on Friday gave away for one day only some of its most coveted exhibits: black cats.

"Behemoth the Cat Day," during which visitors could take home the stars of the show, was staged at the Cat Republic, a cat cafe located not far from the museum.

The event took its name from the eponymous character in Mikhail Bulgakov's cult classic "The Master and Margarita" — a giant, demonic, talking black cat named Behemoth.

Twelve black cats were expected at the event, and another 33 presented in pictures were also available for adoption, news agency TASS reported, citing the organizers.

Some of the animals were from the Hermitage's feline army: The museum employs cats in its basements and other storerooms to guard its masterpieces from rats and other vermin.

But the rest came from regular animal shelters, with the event being an awareness-raising project to promote the adoption of stray cats, the organizers said.

A cat fashion show, cat therapy and cat art workshop were also on the agenda.

The Cat Republic is a branch of the Cat Museum in St. Petersburg suburb Vsevolozhsk. It is Russia's first cat cafe — an establishment offering the twin delights of beverages and cats, pioneered by Taiwan and Japan in the 2000s.

The Hermitage — the world's 15th most visited museum with 3 million artworks in its collection — has been employing cats since its establishment in 1764. The cat guard was institutionalized by Catherine the Great, who gave them the official rank of museum guards, complete with a corresponding allowance.

The only time that the Hermitage was deprived of its feline protection was during the Siege of Leningrad in 1941-44. The guard service was restored following the lifting of the siege, when a shipment of several train cars of cats revitalized the city's decimated feline population.

Since 1998, the museum has celebrated Hermitage Cat Day on April 6.

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