



Her bag is Louis Vuitton, her knitwear is the finest cashmere, her grooming is impeccable and her lunch menu features medium-rare lamb and bottled mineral water. No, she isn't a model, socialite or Hollywood It girl. But you might find her barking orders at one. She is the pampered, pedigreed pooch of the modern era.

Once it was left to eccentric French octogenarians to feed their chihuahuas cake from their own plates, or pay as much for their poodle's dos as their own. And exotic Siamese and Persian cats were known mainly as the bejewelled playthings of wealthy widows or Bond film villains. How things change. Today, our animal companions are morphing into fully paid-up members of society, accompanying us to cafes, boutiques and even the workplace, and inspiring a craze for designer carry cases, adorable outfits and mildest accessories.

Our furry, feathered, fork-tongued and even farmyard friends never had it so good.

## CREATURE COMFORTS

A new breed of pampered pets is making its mark on the fashion set

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Pugs and Pomeranians, exotic parrots and pot-bellied pugs are being pampered like only children. So just why has the world been caught up in this pet-friendly frenzy?

Those in and around the ever-expanding pet care industry offer a range of reasons to explain this zoological Zeitgeist. Sociologists point to the changing face of the modern family unit and urban environment, while others suggest increased interest in animal psychology has led to this amplification of anthropomorphism, or the treatment of animals as quasi-humans.

Lisa Wolfenden is the owner of a boutique in the Sydney suburb of Double Bay. Its shelves are filled with pearl- and Swarovski crystal-encrusted necklaces, snakeskin and sable tote bags, not to mention tempting gourmet goods. This is not exactly a rarity on fashionable Transvaal Avenue – unless you consider that these items are not for humans, but for fashionistas of the canine persuasion.

Wolfenden opened Dogs and the City in September 2004, and her boutique is just one of the many signs that pampered pets look set to stay. But Wolfenden claims she is no money-hungry merchant attempting to cash in on society's fixation with what she has dubbed "doggie bling". Rather, as a dog trainer with an education in psychology, she hopes to help ensure that both pets and their owners live long and happy lives.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about animal behaviour and why it occurs," says Wolfenden. "It is important that people know that if their dog is chewing their shoes or the furniture, it isn't because the dog is wilfully being naughty – it is because its lifestyle isn't giving it the necessary stimulation." But, of course.

Wolfenden believes that an increased knowledge of the emotional life of animals is one of the factors that has led to our increasingly treating our pets as our equals. "I think it is because there is so much more education out there today. We have a lot more respect for dogs as intelligent animals," she says. "We don't think of

them as dumb little creatures we stick in the backyard, throw the odd bone to or take on a walk at whim. Now we think of them as more sentient beings."

British academic and social geographer Andrew Whittingham agrees. "There's been a real shift towards calling what were once dubbed pets

'companion animals,'" he explains. "This is significant, as it suggests a more equal relationship rather than a dominant one between master and owner."

Whittingham has researched extensively in the area of the anthropomorphism of animals, and theorises that this rise in pet popularity stems from the increasingly fragile and anxiety-ridden state of contemporary society.

"One of the big reasons for this is the fragmenting of social relations over the last 30 or 40 years. Families don't last as ▶

long as they once did, so people tend to use animals as a social relations substitute. People are looking for love and affection wherever they can get it.

"There are a lot of lonely people in the world," he continues. "Global society is becoming more and more insecure, and to help with their anxieties people often turn to the security of an animal presence."

While much of Whittingham's work revolves around dogs, he notes that other

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animals are becoming increasingly popular. "In the UK dog ownership appears to have peaked and is actually decreasing. Elderly people realise they can no longer look after a dog and there is an increase in single person households, where people who work all day may not have time to commit to a dog. This means that the cat population is increasing, and more people are looking to animals at the exotic end [of the spectrum], such as snakes."

Many of those concerned with animal welfare are alarmed at what they see as a style-driven motivation for pet ownership. Those who purchase well-bred puppies or rare felines with the same impulsiveness that they pick up the latest Chloé purse or Marc Jacobs pumps may soon tire of their cute new accessory – particularly when it starts chewing the modernist furniture or mauling on the hand-woven Tibetan rug. Unlike most fashion faux pas, animals can not be relegated to the back of the closet. Instead they wind up being dumped, and destroyed, at animal shelters.

"There's the issue of animal welfare when people purchase pets on a whim," says Whittingham. "Animals are more likely to be at risk when they are viewed as a consumable."

"There's a huge quantity of animals that are put down each year," Wolfenden concurs. "That's why I think it is important that people understand their pets and realise why they are doing certain things and what causes certain behavioural problems. I want people to look beyond the fashion thing. I just want people to be happy with their pets."

Wolfenden's boutique is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the retail bonanza that is the contemporary pet industry. According to a 2004 report by the Australian Institute, Australians spent

\$2.2 billion on their pets in 2003. This staggering figure made headlines when it was published back in July 2004, as it was significantly more than the \$1.5 billion Australians gave in aid to poorer countries.

According to the report, the amount spent climbed faster than the rate at which the pet population increased. The report, titled *Overconsumption of Pet Food in Australia*, suggested this was due to the fact that many pet owners spent more on

premium lines of pet food to compensate for the guilt they felt about not spending enough time with their animals.

Expensive menus aside, there's a vast array of avenues that allow the generous pet owner to spend money. Online stores such as [www.postmodernpets.com](http://www.postmodernpets.com) feature luxurious items for pet owners who want their darling's furnishings to blend in with their own. Designer beds, bowls and even scratching posts for cats are functional works of art, inspired by the classic work of modernist design luminaries such as Mies van der Rohe. Postmodern Pets' Philipp Plein dog beds, the canine equivalent of a Le Corbusier, start at US\$1,450.

Louis Vuitton stores also offer leather goods for elite pups. Their Sac Chien doggie carries are upwards of \$2,000, and there is no shortage of demand for these luxurious items. Paris Hilton might be the most obvious fan, but more serious players have also caught on – Leonardo DiCaprio bought one as a present for girlfriend Gisele Bündchen.

In Hollywood, where relationships with animals are the only long-term couplings that seem to survive, the ultimate in puppy pampering can be found at LA Dogworks. This doggie day spa offers aromatherapy massages, comfortable Zen Dens with banks and calming natural pheromones and a 2,300 square metre park that is cleaned and drained daily to keep it sweet-smelling for its canine clients.

Contemporary media has also jumped on the animal admiration bandwagon. Domestic animals are increasingly portrayed as intelligent beings capable of outwitting their owners. West Highland Terrier Imelda, the now nationally recognised My Dog premium dog food spokesmodel, has fabulous taste in shoes

and is often seen flying first class. Felines are also portrayed as sophisticated creatures, with the latest Dine cat food television commercials showing a thirtysomething owner learning lessons in grooming and human behaviour from her sleek cat companion.

According to Whittingham, pets may not provide a complete replacement for social relations with fellow homo sapiens, but let's face it, their love is unconditional – and in a society with rising divorce rates and little job security, that's a nice thing to come home to.

In fact, it is also becoming a nice thing to take to work. In the US, within the casual corporate environments of companies such as Google, it is not unusual to see dogs napping at their owners' feet.

This practice is one that is slowly being embraced in Australia. Nadia Noble is the founder and CEO of Sydney public relations firm Loud Mouth PR and Marketing. "When one of my consultants asked to bring her new pet baby poodle, Sascha, to work, I thought it would be motivating and energising for us all, particularly since many of the staff were not from Sydney and didn't have family here," Noble recalls.

"At first Sascha distracted all of us to some extent – he ate computer cords, wee-ed on the stairs and barked at the couriers! However these distractions were far outweighed by the wonderful harmony he introduced. A dog, with its simple wants and needs, reminds us all to keep the balance."

It has long been believed that domestic animals help reduce stress. A study by Melbourne's Baker Medical Research Institute revealed that pets helped to reduce heart rates and lower blood pressure, and showed that pet owners had significantly lower risk factors for cardiovascular disease than non-owners. But it is increasingly acknowledged that pets can relieve stress on a psychological as well as a physiological level.

Sharyn Rosart is a New York publisher and yoga devotee who came up with the idea for Jennifer Brilliant's book *Doga: Yoga For Dogs* (Chronicle Books, distributed by Hardie Grant, \$27.95). She is a firm believer that we can learn more from our canine companions than just how to perfect the downward dog pose.

"The best lesson you can learn from your dog is how to relax, be unselfconscious, and live in the moment, which all good yogis long to do," Rosart believes. "Dogs, after all, never worry that the person on the mat next to them has thinner thighs or a smaller butt." ■