

THE KORAT - Just Another Blue Cat?



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THE KORAT: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE PURRFECT

LEGENDS AND REALITY

As one of the earliest known breeds in the world, the Korat (pronounced Koh-raht) is also probably the purest. Even today this silver-blue short haired cat with luminous green eyes is very similar to its native ancestors which were known to have lived wild in the jungles of the Malay Peninsula. The Korat name originated when King Rama V of Siam was presented with the cat. He asked what kind of cat it was and was told it came from Korat, a high plateau in north east Thailand.

The Korat was first recorded in the *Tamra Maew* – “*Treatises on Cats*” dating from the Siamese Ayudhya kingdom (1350–1767). In this book, presently located in the Bangkok’s National Library, the Korat is presented as one of the seventeen “good luck” cats of Thailand. Known to the Thais as the Si-Sawat cat (pronounced see-sa-what) because of its colouring, bound in Thai cat lore to be silver from birth until death a cat of any other colour is not nor can ever be a Korat.

Extolling its beauty and virtue the Korat is described as:

The cat *Maleht* has a body colour like *Dork Lao*

The Hairs are smooth, with roots like clouds and tips like silver

The eyes shine like dewdrops on a lotus leaf

Translation: *Dok* means flower and *lao* is a herb, like lemongrass, with silver tipped flowers.

Martin Clutterbuck, in his recent book: *Siamese Cats Legends and Reality* states that

“Taking the breed definition first, there is no doubt that the *Tamra Maew* specify physical types, although the eye and coat colour are the most important. With numerous reference in these poems to “breed” or “line” and the Thais’ extensive experience with animal husbandry for many other species, there seems no doubt that whatever their origins, the Thai cats were selectively bred, in pre modern times at least, to some extent.”

It could be said that the standards set by the *Tamra Maew*, are possibly the oldest breed standards for cats in the world.

Thai folklore and legend has it that the silver-tipped coat signifies wealth to the tradesman and merchant, rain clouds to the farm dweller and a happy marriage and home to the bride.

PRESERVATION OF THE KORAT IN THE WEST

The breed was first seen in the West in the late 1800s and the Korat's modern bloodlines date from as recently as 1959, when an American breeder obtained a pair. Throughout the 1960's the growing circle of Korat fanciers in the US acquired more cats from Thailand. Daphne Negus, an important pioneer in the breed, journeyed to Thailand to import 9 Korats, as this number is believed by the Thai people to bring good luck. In 1965 the American Korat Cat Fanciers Association (KCFA) was established to protect and develop the breed, as well as to preserve its heritage. Martin Clutterbuck says that the defining word on body and eye colour of the Korat should go to Khunying Ruen and Chompoo Arthajinda, (Thai breeders) whose letter to Daphne Negus in 1966 remains a foundation document of the KCFA.

“We sincerely hope that you will retain the physical features of the Siamese cat and be firm in stressing the fact that the Korat or Si - Sawat is born silver blue and is this colour from birth to old age. If the body is not entirely silver blue, it is not a Korat. The eyes of the kittens are greyish blue when young, changing to amber green – the greener the better when full grown – not yellow or golden and certainly not blue”.

A standard was written based on the appearance of the original native cats, and in March 1966 the Cat Fanciers Association (CFA) accepted registration of Korats and approved them for championship status in September.

Korat breeders outside of Thailand are anxious to maintain their breed's links with Thailand. All Korats by definition are based on lines that terminate at an import from Thailand, as the breed is young in the West and no outcrossing to other breeds is allowed. There is resistance in the Korat fancy, as exemplified by the USA's main Korat club the KCFA, to outcrossing and new colours ie. "a cat of any other is not and cannot be a Korat". Body Shape is regulated as moderate. This conservation of the Korat reflects respect for Thai cats and breeders, and for Thailand itself.

KORATS IN AUSTRALIA (*Elaine Vincent, Ratchasima (Aust) Cattery*)

The Beginning

Pauline Armitt & Evelyn Clarke of South Australia imported the first Korats into Australia from America in 1969. They were a male, Jalnas Krah Ma Nee & a female, Sailaway Star. They arrived in Perth on the last voyage to Australia of HMS Queen Elizabeth. While in Bicton Quarantine station W.A, Star gave birth to her first litter but sadly all the kittens died after catching "flu". Star was also very ill & were it not for the dedication of Mrs Helen Moffat & her vet she would probably have died also.

In 1970 Star had another litter & the only female, Valiant Austra was sold to Mrs Moffat whose prefix was Nah Trang. Later in 1970 Star died which left only two breeding Korats in Australia again, Father & Daughter !

After Star died Jalna Krah Ma Nee became very lonely so Mrs Armitt gave him to Mrs Moffat as a mate for Austra in exchange for a kitten from this mating. (This kitten later died from a twisted bowel) So, for some years to come "Jalna" was the Sire of all Korats in Australia.

Dr Walter von Habsburg of Sydney had become interested in Korats while on a visit to Thailand in 1954. He later purchased two Nah Trang females from the second litter of Jalna & Austra & later imported a total of eight Korats from the USA at great expense. Around Christmas 1973, Mrs Moffat passed on a letter to Dr von Habsburg from a Mr Russ Ritchie who, along with his Korats was living in Hawaii. Dr von Habsburg began negotiating with Mr Ritchie for the purchase of two males who were to become the second lot of Korat imports to this country.

It took 15 months for these boys to finally get to Dr von Habsburg. They had to travel across the US where they were held up by snow before the flight to the UK where they spent six months in quarantine to fulfil UK requirements & another six months in an approved boarding cattery to fulfil Australian quarantine requirements. On arrival in Australia they had to undergo another 90 days in quarantine!

In 1976 Dr von Habsburg imported his second two Korats from the USA, Ch Tru Lu's Toyota of Yowie & Tru Lu's Sunetra of Yowie. Then in 1977 Solna's Mattis of Yowie & Solna's Illka of Yowie arrived from California.

Then in February 1977, the last of Dr von Habsburg's imports from the US, Ch. Tru Lu's Gad-A-Bout of Yowie & Ch. Tru Lu's Nah Rak arrived. Dr von Habsburg who bred under the prefix of "Yowie" was a very dedicated breeder & greatly captivated by the breed which no doubt contributed to the survival & continuation of the Korat breed in this country.

Another person who imported a Korat was Mrs Raynor Booker of Darwin in the NT. Her female Kheilan Firousi came from the UK in the mid Seventies & was a welcome addition to her Yowie stock. She bred many beautiful Korats under her "Donrenor" Prefix. A daughter of Firousi went to Mrs Betty Newton of Perth WA who later acquired Tru Lu's Gad-A-Bout & Yowie Tukata. From Donrenor Choa Fa Ying, Tukata & Gad-A-Bout, Mrs Newton bred several litters under her "Elrond" prefix during the early Eighties. The three breeding cats were later sent to Qld, most likely to Mrs Del McMillan who bred under the prefix "Eprapah" who, to the best of my knowledge was the only Qld breeder of Korats at that time. Between 1977 & 1990 there were no further Korats imported into Australia.

Undoubtedly the cat to have made the most impact on Korat breeding in this country

would have had to be Jalna's Krah Ma Nee. Born in the USA in April 1968 he was to live only nine years succumbing to throat Cancer on the 15th June 1976.

Some other breeders who bred with descendants of these early cats were:-

Mrs Rose Preston.....	Istana	SA
Mr Bill Bryant.....	Favont	NSW
Mrs Shirley Grant.....	Scamanda	VIC
Mrs Beryl Girvan.....	Murndi	SA
M & R Phillips.....	Miralea	SA
Mrs R Serong.....	Aberavon	NZ
Mrs R Ollington.....	Laetare	Tasmania
Jennie Hetherington.....	Sommerglenn	NSW
Mrs J Raw.....	Rursai	NSW
Lesley & Rex Perkins.....	Korye	VIC
Mrs Jill Martyn.....	Starok	NSW

Presently there are four Korat breeders in Australia and the Australian Korats that you are seeing on the bench now come predominantly from UK and US lines.

KORATS IN THAILAND

The Thai people have known and appreciated cats since the Ayatthayan times so it can be assumed that there has always been an unbroken line of cat fanciers in Thailand. However, cat fancying has always been something of a minority hobby. In *Legends and Reality* Martin Clutterbuck states that :

“Despite sporadic exports from Thailand to the West through the 1920's and 30's, there are no records to be found of any regular breeding establishments or catteries in Thailand before the 1940's. A pioneer of those times, Khunying Reun Abhibal Rajamaitri, can be fairly said to have introduced the Korat cat to the West.”

The four Thai cat breeds recognised by Thai breeders today are:

1. “Wiechien-maat” - or Siamese
2. ‘Dork-lao” - or Korat
3. “Suphalak” – more commonly known as “Thong Daeng” or Copper; and
4. “Khaomane” – or White Gem

In the 1980’s, serious breeding of Thai cats including Korats, was almost the monopoly of Ed and Malee Rose, owners of Chiangmai CFA registered cattery in the country’s principal northern city Chaing Mai. More recently a new group of Thai cat breeders have entered the scene with the aim of conserving the major Thai breeds in general. There is a newly formed central registering body to keep objective independent registration records, the Cat fanciers Club of Thailand (CFCT) corresponding to the CFA in the US and the GCCF in the UK.

However, the concept of genotype pedigrees is still a relatively new idea in Thailand and although most breeders today are obliged to keep their own pedigrees, many fail to do so in practice. Preferring instead to follow in the age old tradition of breeding for phenotype – for a certain appearance in their cats – without necessarily caring about the genotype of their cats.

The small band of Thai Korat breeders are an exception in that a few, most notably Kuhn Chuchai Wisetjindawat of Phimai and Khun Triwitt Threelerdratana of Bangkok, have recently had their catteries registered with the CFA.

Phimai is a small town which is about 50 km out of Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) proper, and home of the famous pink sandstone Khmer temple, one of the most prominent Angkor-period monuments in Thailand. In 1996, local-born Chuchai Wistenjindawat, after consultation with the governor of Nakhon Ratchasima, founded the Korat-Cat Pimai Club. The club was formed with the express aim of conserving the local Korat population. Chuchai runs his small cattery from his home near the bus station and his breeding stock was built up mostly from Korats that were the pets of local people.

Chuchai naturally identifies the Korat with the cat in the *Tamra Maew* know as the *Dork Lao* or *Maleht*. *Dork lao* - known in English as pampass grass - is locally used in Phimai to make brooms. Chuchai, faithful to the Tamra Maew, is aiming for this colour in his Korats with the objective of preserving the 100% Korat breed in Thailand.

Despite explicit attempts by Western breeders to change it as little as possible, the Korat, has nonetheless been altered subtly. Most noticeably Western bred Korats more closely resemble each other, while in Thailand the males appear bigger and chunkier. On a visit to Phimai (Thailand) in 2001 Eva Krynda and Jose Escoriza, NSWCFCA breeders of Korats made the following observation:

“In general the Phimai Korats appeared larger, taller and more svelte than cobby. The females were smaller than the males but the appearance was of a strong and muscular cat. The heart shape was evident but the heads were more elongated rather than round. Noses were generally longer and the lion-like downward curve just above the leather was not as obvious. Chuchai’s Korats had very short & silky coats, almost chamois like and the silvering was very pronounced. The silvering on the four week old kittens made them look as though they were sprinkled with star dust and the effect was quite breathtaking”

Phimai Video segment

THE KORAT TODAY

Eva and Elaine have spoken to you about the lengthy and I think quite unique and fascinating history of the precursors of today's Korats. In looking at the standards of the various controls around the world, it is interesting to note that, despite the antiquity of the breed and perhaps unusually for breed standards today, there is almost no difference – save a slight variation in points weighting – in any of the standards around the world, including that written by the *Siam Cat Club* in the 1990's.

I have reproduced, throughout the body of the notes, excerpts from the *TICA standard* because I find it a descriptive and particularly helpful standard.

I am going to look at the Korat today, with special reference to features of the breed which I believe collectively contribute to the essence of what is “Korat” – that which removes it from the “*just another blue cat*” category. Before looking at those specific aspects of the standard, I would like to mention some of the factors that I think contribute to the difficulty of judging this breed: some are unique to the breed, some are not.

1. The first is an obvious one and one which is, to a greater or lesser extent, a common phenomenon: rarity. Regardless of the breed, the greater your exposure to it, the better you are able to appreciate its subtleties.
2. The Korat is a slow maturing breed and there are a number of attributes of the Korat that can take quite some time to reach their full potential: eye colour is perhaps the most obvious of these. Others are the distinctive heart shape of the face and head and the weight/muscularity of the cat.
3. There are a number of features of the Korat which are quite unique: for example, the heart shape face and the coat structure – including the inclination of the coat to break over the spine as the cat moves.

4. The categorization of the Korat as both a “*foreign*” type cat, and a “*semi-cobby*” cat. This raises two issues: firstly, it immediately creates a confusing mental image of what we are looking for – the long, lanky and svelte form that we associate with “*foreign*”, or, something between Siamese/Oriental type on the one hand and the cobby British type on the other? In fact what we are looking for is a cat that has some attributes of both – the elegance and refinement of “*foreign*” without the same length and angularity and some of the strength and compactness of the British, without its short stocky roundness – present in a quite unique body which resembles neither. It is a cat of gentle curves. Secondly, there is no doubt that it is easier to understand and assess a breed that is indisputedly at one or other end of the spectrum and more so when it is a breed that we see relatively rarely.

5. Perhaps to some extent overlapping with the last, the Korat is essentially a “*medium*” cat (as per the standard – “*medium-sized*”, “*medium bone structure*”, “*medium length tail*”, *legs being “medium strong boned”*). Just as it is easier to appreciate type that is either cobby or foreign rather than something in between, so it is easier to appreciate extreme than moderate. And at a time when the trend in most breeds is increasingly towards extremes, it may be that more subtle breeds like the Korat are inadvertently penalized precisely because their type is not so “obvious”.

Eye Colour and Shape

**Oversized for the face. Fully rounded when open with an Asian slant when partially or fully closed, with breadth between and across the eyes. Alert. Expressive. Luminous green colour preferred, amber caste acceptable.
(TICA)**

This is undoubtedly the easiest feature of the Korat to see and one that, as new judges, we perhaps tend to focus on and for that reason. The main purpose of mentioning this attribute, is because it demonstrates, perhaps better than any other, the “*slow maturing*” nature of the breed.

The ideal eye colour which, when present, undoubtedly makes the Korat face more “arresting”, is described as “*luminous brilliant green*” – reminiscent of the “*dewdrop on a lotus leaf*” as described in Thai cat lore. It should always be remembered however, that the standard:

- a. Says “*amber caste acceptable*”;
- b. Specifically states that kittens and adolescents “*have yellow or amber-green eyes and that full eye colour is not achieved until the cat is mature*”- a time given variously in the standards as anything between 2-4 years; and
- c. The point allocation for eye-colour is a fairly minor “5” as opposed to “15” for eye shape. (Compare this to other breeds).

Head – Heart shaped

The face is heart-shaped with smooth curved lines. The brow ridges form the upper part of the facial heart. The forehead is large and flat. An indentation or crease, predominantly in males, accentuates the heart shape, giving the ideal head the appearance of a double heart, or a heart within a heart. (TICA)

This feature of the breed is probably the one with which the Korat is most strongly identified, but also one which, I believe, can be one of the most difficult to “see”.

Apart from the obvious individual type differences which exist in every breed, there are a number of factors that influence the “visibility” of this feature. Some of these are:

- a. *Age*: an essential ingredient of the heart shape is some degree of breadth of skull (referred to in the standard) and this attribute is something that develops with age. In addition, many breeders and no doubt judges have made the observation that having a litter is a developmental milestone for the female, following which there will be a broadening of the skull and a corresponding emphasis of the heart shape.

- b. *Length of face*: In line with the above, a longer face, which usually goes hand in hand with a narrower one, will tend to detract from the heart shape. It also of course affects the whole “look” as the necessary width between the eyes will also be absent.

- c. *Sex*: On the one hand males have an advantage over females because of their tendency to broader skulls and the *indentation/crease* in the middle of the forehead which is more prominent in males. On the other hand, the maturation factor can militate against them: as they “jowl up” the bottom part of the head looks rounder and it is harder to identify the lower part of the heart shape without pulling back the jowls and feeling the underlying bone structure.

The TICA standard gives a good description of how to “find” the facial heart where it states that “*the brow ridges form the upper ridges of the facial heart*” – *accentuated predominantly in males by an “indentation or crease”, giving the ideal head the appearance of a “double heart or a heart within a heart”.*

If you follow the forehead or brow line with a finger from left to right, you should be able to feel it.

Other aspects of the Korat head that contribute to the heart shape are:

- a) *Muzzle* – to properly complete the heart shape, the muzzle should be neither overly squared nor sharply pointed; and

- b) *Ear set*:: the standard required ears that are “*large and set high on the head*”. This contributes to the “*alert*” expression, but the ears should not be so high (they are not Russian ears) that they disturb the contours of the heart – ie “*with the outer ear flare in line with the outer contour of the head*. And *Ear shape* – “*rounded tips*” – a pointed ear would again detract from the gently rounded contours of the heart shape.

Coat Colour and Structure

This is perhaps the most unique aspect of the breed – *“the hair is smooth with roots like clouds and tips like silver”* – and perhaps also one of the most difficult and misunderstood

Blue, silver-tipped all over; each hair is lighter at the roots, shading to darker with a silver tip, giving a frosty or silver sheen or halo effect over the entire cat, intensified where the hair is shortest (TICA)

Colour: In relation to colour, the standard calls for a coat that is, *“blue all over, tipped with silver, the more silver the better...where the coat is shortest, the sheen of the silver is intensified”*.

What the standard doesn't mention – and it is a feature which is quite unique to the breed and in fact the opposite of the norm and what is desirable in other blue cats – is that the hair shaft is actually divided into 3 shades of colours: light at the roots, darker in the middle and silver at the tips (*“roots like clouds and tips like silver”*). The silver tipping is due to the absence of melanin at the end of the hair shaft.

Our standard further makes no mention of the desirable intensity of blue, although I would suggest that the reference to silver tipping inevitable creates the impression that the preferable shade is light blue. Logically however, the silver tipping should be more evident when the cat is a medium to dark tone of blue, because of the contrast factor. On a very light cat, the tipping won't be as evident and the halo effect will be missing even where the tipping is there.

Structure/Texture:

In relation to texture the standard calls for a *“single coat...short to medium in length, glossy and fine, lying close to the body”*.

Coat texture in the Korat, as with other breeds, is affected by a number of factors: some hereditary and some external/environmental – such as the weather: in colder climates the Korats will tend to develop more undercoat and the opposite applies in warmer climates.

The absence of the undercoat determines a further unique feature of the Korat – and that is that *“the coat over the spine is inclined to break as the cat moves”*.

Breed Comparisons

It is instructive at this point, to identify some of the differences that you look for as a judge, when assessing a Korat as opposed to some of the other blue cats.

Coat texture:

Korat – the coat is single, glossy and lying close to the body: when you feel a Korat coat, you should feel a short close-lying coat which should also allow you more easily to feel that important muscularity required by the standard. Your hand stays “superficial”.

Russian – the coat is double, dense and standing up like plush: when you feel a Russian coat, you feel a double dense coat and your hand can go under the coat.

Brittish – the coat is dense with good undercoat and is crisp to touch: when you put your hand on a Brittish coat, you should feel a resistant crisp coat and your hand should disappear into the coat.

Coat Colour:

Korat – you are looking for a medium blue coat with silver tipping, rather than too pale or dark a blue with silver tipping. The coat should show the three colour shades.

Russian – although the standard calls for a light to medium blue, light is arguably considered more desirable and the coat should have a distinct silvery “sheen” as opposed to “tipping”. Colour should be sound to the roots.

British – the standard again calls for a light to medium blue. Silver tipping is a fault. Colour should be sound to the roots.

The Korat – *Not* Just Another Blue Cat

What is it then, when you see a Korat in a line up of blue cats such as those we have discussed, that identifies it as a Korat?

As with all breeds, the Korat is a combination of different features none of which, singly, encapsulates the essence of that breed. In the Korat you are looking for a semi-cobby but still refined and elegant cat, with a unique silver tipped blue coat and a heart shaped face. Clearly, what any individual finds distinctive about any breed is at least partly subjective. The TICA standard calls for an “*alert and expressive*” face, and that, in concert with the large, wide open and luminous green eyes set in the ideal heart shaped face, certainly contributes to the “look” which is not seen in *any other* blue cat.

Siam Cat Club’s Original Korat Standard

Body colour: silver –grey, pewter-grey, green-grey, with the Dork Lao colour ie.,at the tips of the hairs, a white colour similar to Dork Lao.

Hairs short to medium in length.

Sufficiently long tail; for length of tail vs length of body, it should reach the shoulders.

Eyes coloured green, yellow-amber or as “an ear of paddy” (dull yellow-brown)

5.Face in the shape of a heart.

Points awarded for the Korat

Coat and coat colour = 30 points total

1st: silver-grey with Dork Lao

2nd: pewter-grey with Dork Lao

3rd: green-grey with Dork Lao

Eye colour = 5 points total

1st: green

2nd: yellow-amber

3rd: “an ear of paddy” (dull yellow-brown)

Head, face = 10 points total

The face must be heart-shaped

Siam Cat Club, Vichit Samantrakul and Kasidet Patraworanand, Matrathan Phan Maew Thai—Breed Standard of the Thai Cats—undated leaflet, late 1990’s