

# So Cute!

## The Art of Happiness

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Why and how do artworks make us feel so good? With more than 300 masterpieces – paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, objects, films, books and installations – the exhibition 'So Cute! The Art of Happiness' takes us on a journey through the history of art, from ancient times until today, in search of our feelings. From the emotional power of animals to the history of the colour pink, from glitter in art to contemporary ideas of *kawaii* and *mignon* ("cute" in French), it examines the profound impact of artworks and their ability to bring us joy and comfort. By exploring our relationship with this aesthetic of adorableness – in both its origins and how it has developed – the exhibition sheds light on the ability of tenderness to still the clamour of the world.

When asked in 2014 what had most surprised him in the development of the internet, inventor of the World Wide Web Tim Berners-Lee replied: the success of cat videos. Internet cat celebrities, ads starring chubby babies, the collecting of figurines, cuddly cartoon characters with extra-large eyes, a love of pink or rainbow colours... Was there ever a time when cuteness was as present as it is today, slipping as it does into all aspects of our daily life and visual culture? And this is not just anecdotal. Cuteness has become a subject of research at the intersection between cultural studies, art history, psychology and neuroscience.

Through a sensitive and immersive visit, 'So Cute! The Art of Happiness' explores the multiple facets of cuteness in art: the symbolism of animals throughout the millennia, the merriment of *putti*, the history of the creation of pink in the 18th century, cuteness as a value in Korean society, soft toys as objects of comfort and care, the worldwide success of Japanese *kawaii* and even the contemporary fascination for glitter and colourful worlds. Interactive experiences encourage visitors of all ages to feel the emotions created by the artworks.

From Egyptian cats to ancient statues of babies, from delicate portraits by Théodore Géricault and Auguste Renoir to the smooth, colourful creatures of Jeff Koons, Philippe Katerine and Will Cotton, from Nicolas Poussin's cupids to the moving tributes paid by Rosa Bonheur, Agnès Varda or William Wegman to their four-legged friends, from Cindy Sherman's pink make-up as Madame de Pompadour to the portrait of the florist by Pierre et Gilles, not to mention Annette Messager's disturbing toys, the bitter-sweetness of sugar painted by Chardon and Mireille Blanc, and war reporters focussing on animals, this exhibition draws the artworks into a conversation on forms of cuteness, from Antiquity to today, in a world that is at once seductive and ambivalent.

Behind its apparent innocence, the aesthetics of cuteness can also become a tool for consumerism or propaganda. Sweet, childlike shapes can reveal a critical or political aspect, especially in contemporary artworks subverting the codes of cuteness to question social violence, gender identities or the fragilities of today's world. Confronted with darkness, and by combining tenderness and rebellion, artists are suggesting we re-enchant our lives, as well as art and museums.

Designed as a voyage through emotions and imaginary worlds, 'So Cute! The Art of Happiness' demonstrates that the pleasure we experience when faced with artworks can enrich our way of understanding and seeing them.