

Lifestyle | Features

French doctor leaves legacy to Russia's Hermitage cats

A French doctor has bequeathed 3,000 euros to celebrated cats that live in the basement of the Hermitage museum, a world-renowned art gallery in Russia's second city Saint Petersburg. "We received information (about the inheritance) this summer. At the moment the process of completing all the legal formalities is in the final stage," the museum press service told AFP on Tuesday. The money was left by French doctor Christophe Batard, who died at the age of 51. "Our French friend has done a remarkable thing... it is such a

beautiful gesture," Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky said on Monday.

He proposed the amount left to the cats be put towards improving the basement where they live. The history of the Hermitage cats dates back to the 18th century when the museum, then called the Winter Palace, was an imperial residence in Russia's former capital. Empress Elizabeth I-daughter of Saint Petersburg founder Emperor Peter the Great in 1745 ordered cats to be brought to the palace to deal with a rat infestation. Now the Hermitage is home to nearly 70

cats that officially hunt for rodents beneath Russia's largest museum.

Over the past decade, the cats have become "as popular as the museum's collection", the Hermitage staff said. The Hermitage hosts an annual party for the cats and has a website where locals can adopt one of the rat hunters. —AFP

This file photo shows a cat in front of the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. — AFP



Long-lost Flemish masterpiece discovered in Brussels district hall

A painting that hung for decades in a municipal building in Brussels has been authenticated as the work of Flemish master Jacob Jordaens, Belgian conservators said Tuesday. After analysis including dendrochronology-dating works from the wood panels they are painted on-experts determined that it is the oldest known version of "The Holy Family" by Jordaens, painted in the early 17th century. The "incredible discovery" was made by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage with the help of international experts as part of an inventory of cultural property in the Brussels district of Saint-Gilles.

The painting had hung high in an office in the Saint-Gilles municipal hall since the 1960s. Jordaens, a leading Flemish Baroque painter along with Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, created the work in 1617 or 1618 when he was just 25, the institute said in a statement. The analysis found that the wood

used in the panel depicting the baby Jesus with Joseph, Mary and her mother Saint Anne came from the same tree as one used by Van Dyck. Art historian Constantin Pion said Van Dyck and Jordaens "very likely" worked in Rubens' studio at the same time. Jordaens used the same composition, with variations, in three other "Holy Family" paintings held by the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg and Munich's Alte Pinakothek, the statement said.

The discovery provides "something of a matrix of what he would do later," Saint-Gilles cultural heritage expert Pierre Dejemepe told AFP. "It will give us a better understanding of later versions" of the subject. After its restoration, the work will be shown at the end of next year at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels.— AFP

'Sabre-toothed tiger' skeleton sells for more than \$84,000

A nearly 40-million-year-old skeleton belonging to what is popularly called a sabre-toothed tiger has sold for \$84,350, a year after its discovery on a US ranch. The skeleton, about 120 centimeters (nearly four feet) long, was snapped up by a private collector in just one minute at an auction in Geneva on Tuesday. The original bones are those of a Hoplophoneus-not technically cats, they are an extinct genus of the Nimravidae family and once stalked the plains of North America. Such extinct predatory mammals are commonly known as sabre-toothed tigers.

Also on sale was a Tyrannosaurus



Director of "Piguet Hotel des Ventes" auction house Bernard Piguet poses with a rare sabre-toothed cat's skeleton during a preview of the sale in Geneva. — AFP photos

Rex tooth which fetched just over \$6,000, while a 85-cm long fin from a mosasaur—a marine reptile that in the Cretaceous period was at the top of the submarine food chain—was bought for almost \$8,000. A 75-million-year-old ammonite—an opal-like organic gemstone in shades of red and orange-measuring 40 cm long by 36 cm wide remained unsold because the reserve price was not met. Debate rages as to the right balance between the scientific value of such items and their worth on the open market. Some palaeontologists insist animal or plant fossils are not decorative objects for collectors, but witness to the evolution of life on Earth and there-

fore scientific articles that ought to be studied and then shared with the public in museums.

Before the sale, Swiss collector Yann Cuenin told AFP: "If we're talking about the sabre-toothed tiger, for example, it's not a skeleton which is of major scientific interest, in the sense that it's something which is already known to science. "I am all for museums, but I am also in favor of objects living among us; for there to be collectors, for pieces to be bought and sold—that's what brings culture to life." — AFP



A rare sabre-toothed cat's skeleton is displayed at "Piguet Hotel des Ventes" auction house during a sale preview in Geneva.

Saving the Amazon's orphan monkeys

Far from the rifle cracks that occasionally rip through the rainforest as local tribesmen hunt mature primates for their meat and soft pelts, a sanctuary in a corner of the Colombian Amazon is offering new life to the orphaned monkeys left behind. The refuge run by a local leader, Jhon Jairo Vasquez, is giving them a second chance-while gradually changing attitudes in the area-in the indigenous settlement of Mocagua on the banks of the Amazon. Vasquez has proved to be a father figure for one of the orphans, a three-month-old female woolly monkey, or Lagothrix, he's named Maruja. The pair have become inseparable on his hikes through the rainforest, carrying the little primate in a sack on his back. "I have become the father, and she's become the daughter," said Vasquez, 38. "An indigenous family ate the mother."

Prized and Vulnerable

Long prized by indigenous hunters for their meat and furry pelts, the woolly monkey is now classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as Vulnerable, appearing on the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species. Given their thick brown coat and grey appendages, young woolly monkeys like Maruja are often hunted for the pet trade, with their mothers sometimes killed in the process. Fourteen years ago, Vasquez helped



Aerial view of the indigenous community of Mocagua, near Leticia, Colombia, where the Maikuchiga foundation is located.

found the Maikuchiga animal refuge located in the middle of the 700-strong Tikuna indigenous community in Mocagua. Since 2006, he has been trying to convince locals of the damage caused by "over-hunting," as well as a flourishing illegal wildlife market. "It's hard," he says. Reluctant at first, the Tikunas have developed a taste for ecotourism. "Rehabilitated" hunters have become guides who now "protect their wildlife," says Vasquez. But traumatized

orphans continue to arrive in Maikuchiga from other parts of the Amazon. Since its creation, the refuge has rehabilitated about 800 monkeys, according to Vasquez.

The community is located at a spot in the Amazon called the Triple Frontier, where Peru, Colombia and Brazil meet. There is a long history of monkeys being hunted here for meat or for ritual purposes. They are still shot from trees, mother and baby entwined as they fall,

says Vasquez. "The mother does not let go of her baby. And the little one falls attached to its mother. Sometimes, the pellets can injure or even kill it." The adult's flesh is roasted on a wood fire, as the meat is prized. The small survivors are sold as pets or exhibited to tourists visiting the indigenous communities of the Triple Frontier region.

The lucky ones are rescued by Corpoamazonia, the Colombian government agency in charge of environmental protection, based in nearby Leticia. Luis Fernandez Cuevas, its director, said 22 young primates have been recovered since 2018. Sometimes these are the result of "voluntary surrenders" by people who claim to have found them by chance, in order to avoid an investigation for trafficking or illegal possession of the animal. In Colombia and neighboring Brazil, it's illegal to remove any animal from the wild to keep as a pet.

Monkey business

Vasquez looks after five other primates here: the woolly monkeys Helena and Abril, an owl monkey (Aotus) called Papinanci, and two squirrel monkeys (Saimiri Sciureus), Mochis and Po. "Here, they are given a new opportunity in life, the opportunity to become monkeys again," he says. But Maikuchiga is financed by tourism, and the coronavirus pandemic has hit the region hard, choking off tourist dollars for the locals



A Woolly monkey (Lagothrix lagotricha) is touched by the director of the Maikuchiga foundation, Jhon Jairo Vasquez.

and resources for the refuge. At dawn, Vasquez prepares a breakfast of oat porridge and vitamins for his charges.

"When they are psychologically traumatized, it can take them a long time to adjust. They can't see a child, a man...They tremble," he said. They will also have to slowly adapt to the wild, to know how to recognize "the sounds of danger" from the jungle and the habits of predators. Rehabilitation for these monkeys comes to an end when they leave the 4,000 protected hectares of Mocagua. Little by little, they find their way through the trees and move in packs, learning what their mothers could not teach them. "We realize that they have completed their rehabilitation when they disappear," says Vasquez. — AFP



Night monkeys are seen next to a sign reading "Primate rehabilitation area."



An infant Woolly monkey (Lagothrix lagotricha) climbs over the head of the director of the Maikuchiga foundation, Jhon Jairo Vasquez.



An infant Woolly monkey (Lagothrix lagotricha) touches a journalist during its rehabilitation at the Maikuchiga foundation.



Woolly monkeys (Lagothrix lagotricha) surround the director of the Maikuchiga foundation, Jhon Jairo Vasquez, in the indigenous community of Mocagua, near Leticia, Colombia.