

Chapter One

The History of Pet Photography

- ☆ The Backstory on Pet Photography
- ☆ The True Value of Pet Photos
- ☆ The Pet Photography Industry
- ☆ Classes, Schools, and Workshops
- ☆ Forums



The Backstory on Pet Photography

Photos of pets have been taken since the inception of the camera. The oldest known photograph of a dog is a *daguerreotype* of a white poodle titled *Poodle with Bow, on Table*, taken by an unknown photographer in the 1850s. A daguerreotype is a direct positive that's made in the camera on a silvered copper plate. The process involves a long exposure time that makes our modern day shutter speeds of 1/1000 second and faster pale in comparison when it comes to time commitment. To take the shot surely must have required one very patient photographer or one heavily sedated dog—or both. This piece sold at Sotheby's for \$8,125 in 2009.



The first photo of a dog, created by an unknown photographer in the 1850s.

Since then, both technology and the relationship between humans and their animals have evolved dramatically. As domestic animals have continued to become more and more entrenched in our everyday lives, our cameras have spent more and more time focusing in their direction.

In the 1950s, Elliott Erwitt, a French-born American photographer, came onto the scene and captured photos of people with their pets on the streets of New York City, focusing much of his work on dogs. Perhaps the most iconic photo Erwitt created was a black-and-white image titled *New York City, 1974*. The photo is of a miniscule Chihuahua standing next to its high-heeled owner, flanked on the other side by the legs of a mountainous Great Dane. All the viewer can see are the legs from the knees down of the woman and the Great Dane, and the little sweater-clad Chihuahua on the right. It's a humorous look at the relationship between man and beast, and an ironic and unusual capture on the part of Erwitt.

Along with Erwitt, many other twentieth-century photographers aimed their lenses at domestic animals. William Wegman became known for his humorous portraits of Weimaraners in unlikely scenarios. Ilse Bing included dogs in her portraits, including the photo of a Terrier next to a shadow of the photographer in *Self Portrait with Stacatto, New York*. Robin Schwartz has photographed dogs as pets and strays; canines inform a large part of her work. Eadweard Muybridge's work, a photo series of race dogs in motion titled *Animal locomotion: an electro-photographic investigation of consecutive phases of animal movements, 1872–1885*, was groundbreaking for its time and became a study in its own right. And famed photographer Irving Penn was known to include dogs in his portraits of humans.

It wasn't until the 1990s that pet photography became a career unto itself. It was during this time that a small cadre of photographers decided to specialize in pets as a niche, photographing more for private clients and everyday pet owners rather than for gallery shows and artistic projects, as their predecessors did.

This “new” old-school breed of pet photographers became well known in the 1990s. Their ranks include Jim Dratfield, who became famous for his romantic, traditional sepia photos in New York City; Deborah Samuel, recognized for her moody, abstract black-and-white shots of dogs in her books *Dog and Pup*; Kim Levin for her emotive and candid work of both dogs and cats in books such as *Why We Love Dogs: A Bark and Smile Book and Cattitude*; Amanda Jones for her now iconic, highly influential, clean, modern studio shots on white backdrops; and Rachel McKenna (*nee* Hale) for her endearing commercial photography of kittens and puppies. Other notables from the 1990s include Joe and Healy Grisham, and Bruce Weber. Before I started my business in 2003, I looked up to and highly admired the aforementioned photographers; they were taking the time and care to capture my favorite creatures and publish books of their photos. Those books lined my bookshelves and provided me with inspiration when I made the move from hobbyist to professional.

Yet more modern-day pet photographers who started their businesses in the late 1990s and early 2000s while the industry was still young include Bev Sparks, a Seattle photographer whose black-and-white work was featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*; Sharon Montrose who became successful for her clean-lined commercial work of cats, dogs, and all manner of wild and exotic animals; Emily Rieman, whose photographs conjure up old Hollywood glamour; Kendra Luck, a San Francisco–based photographer who coined the term “Dogumentarian” and is known for her black-and-white documentary-style photos; and me, Jamie Pflughoeft (also known by my business name, “Cowbelly”). My specialty is colorful, candid, documentary-style photos of dogs and cats on location.

All of the early pioneers of pet photography have helped shape the look, style, feel, and trends in the modern pet photography industry as it exists today. They have helped to produce a movement of visual art that is filled with variety, creativity, uniqueness in both concept and execution, and styles that are as diverse as the photographers that create it. Now, it's not uncommon to find business names attached to the photographer's names that often contain a pet element as well as work that is as niche as it comes.

Today, influential modern pet photographers who specialize in domestic animals include (among many others) Illona Haus of Scruffy Dog Photography, Sarah Beth Photography, Tim Flach, J. Nichole Smith of dane + dane studios, Carli Davidson, Serenah Hodson, Grace Chon of Shine Pet Photos, Stephen Dodd of Fidojournalism, Margaret Bryant of Bryant Dog Photography, Jesse Freidin, and Paul Walker of Paws Pet Photography. These photographers all dedicate their businesses to capturing photos of their client's cats, dogs, horses, goats, and birds. They capture moments that will last a lifetime. From candid to studio, from abstract to photojournalistic, every style is represented. These photographers influence their colleagues and work hard to elevate the art form that is pet photography.

Along with the innovators who came before them, there are many wide-ranging factors that influence modern-day pet photographers. Many find inspiration in wedding and engagement photographers such as Jasmine Star and Jose Villa, pulling shot ideas from poses of couples under trees and in urban settings that might include alleyways and train yards. Others find inspiration in fashion and catalogs, perusing the pages of *Vogue* and Pottery Barn looking for ideas for color and design. Still others look to landscape photography to inform locations and settings. The greatest influence in my own work has been commercial photographer Stephanie Rausser, whose fresh, joyful, happy images can be seen in ad campaigns all over the world as well as several covers of *The Bark* magazine. Of course, the greatest influences on all pet photographers are their furry, feathered, and scaled subjects and the humans who care for them.

Inspired to create higher-quality, more unique, and more engaging photos of pets, modern pet photographers are also inspired to take on personal projects, the likes of which the photography industry has never seen before. A short list of pet photographers and their projects follows.

Brooke Mayo: the Underwater Dogs project; Diving Doggies

Mayo's project, *Underwater Dogs*, is captured in colorful, engaging, bright, sharp photos of dogs underwater in pools, diving down for balls and other toys in her book, *Diving Doggies*. The book was a trendsetter at the time, creating a wave (pardon the pun) of other photographers who followed the concept of shooting dogs while underwater.

www.brookemayodoggiefriends.com/

Carli Davidson: the Shake series

Davidson garnered a huge following on Facebook after her high-shutter-speed studio photos of pets shaking off were featured on the Animal Planet television network.

http://carlidavidson.photoshelter.com/gallery/G0000s_trsf9CDFI

Cowbelly Pet Photography: Graffiti Dogs project

A personal project, just for fun; I head out to the most urban of urban settings—under freeways and behind train yards—to capture dogs in front of colorful graffiti-covered walls.

www.cowbellyblog.com/category/graffiti-dogs-project/

Jesse Freidin: the Doggie Gaga project

Singer Lady Gaga's outlandish costumes and headpieces inspired photographer Freidin to dress his furry charges in similarly zany attire to create humorous studio shots filled with irony and fun.

<http://jessefreidin.com/album/the-doggie-gaga-project/>

The 52 Project

Inspired by a movement among portrait photographers to take on a new photography assignment every week of the year, and then post the photos in a “blog ring” with their colleagues, the 52 Project was created by photographer Dana Cubbage. It was soon joined by more than 40 members of the Beautiful Beasties Network, an online assemblage created for pet photographers. Weekly assignments range from noses, to motion, to textures, and tributes.

www.cowbellyblog.com/52-project/

Serenah Hodson: Rocco and Ralph series

Hodson's work with her late Mastiff, Rocco, and Daschund, Ralph, are cutting edge in their sometimes odd, frequently comical, always simple, vintage-looking photos of Ralph stuffed into a hot dog bun or Rocco with an Afro wig on his head.

<http://serenahphotography.com.au/>

Along with personal projects done for fun, pet photographers are working tirelessly on projects designed to give back to the animal community at large. Projects include those designed to help shelter or rescue animals or bring awareness to a cause. Examples of these philanthropic projects follow.

Claire Bow of Rouxby Photography: Portraits of Greatness

Bow's stunning photos of rescued Great Danes reflect the poignancy of this breed of gentle giants, sometimes wounded, always graceful, and always beautiful. Proceeds from the book go to Rocky Mountain Great Dane Rescue.

www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/709827

HeART's Speak

HeART's Speak is an organization of professional pet photographers dedicated to helping find homes for shelter animals throughout the United States by means of high-quality photography, education, and gear. The goal is to increase the numbers of adoptions of animals through the use of captivating visual art.

<http://heartsspeak.org/>

Smile for a Cure

Smile for a Cure is a fundraiser for the National Canine Cancer Foundation. Participating pet photographers donate a percentage of their session fees to the organization to help raise money toward the goal of ending canine cancer.

www.smileforacure.org/

Melissa McDaniel: Deaf Dogs, Rescued in America and Pit Bulls & Pit Bull Type Dogs

McDaniel's books, filled with portraits of deaf dogs and pit bulls, help raise awareness and money for the "underdogs" of the canine world: deaf dogs and Pit Bull Terriers.

www.thephotobooks.com/

Traer Scott: Shelter Dogs and Street Dogs

Scott's books highlight the plight of abandoned and abused dogs with heartwarming sepia and black-and-white images of man's best friend. Proceeds benefit the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA).

www.traerscott.com/books

Pet photography has come a long way since that first photo of a dog was taken in 1850, and the future of this growing industry is exciting and filled with possibility. As long as we have pets in our lives and in our homes, we will be capturing them with our cameras for all eternity.

The True Value of Pet Photos

As I mentioned in the previous section, the role that pets play in our lives has undergone drastic transformation over the past few decades, specifically the past 10 to 15 years. The percentage of households acquiring pets has risen exponentially. The nature of the relationship between man and beast has also changed. There are several reasons for this, including the following:

- ◆ Couples are choosing to wait to have children, so their pets become their surrogate children while they prepare for parenthood. Many choose not to have children at all and decide to share their homes with animals, instead.
- ◆ With human adoption being a lengthy and expensive process, more gay and lesbian couples adopt or buy animals to have as pets.
- ◆ Pets provide comfort and companionship during rocky times, which are not infrequent given the tumultuous nature of our modern culture.
- ◆ Specialized food, products, and pet services have expanded in numbers, increasing visibility of pet ownership in general.
- ◆ The pet industry has remained stable amidst an economic recession, with overall spending on the part of pet owners increasing exponentially.

Parallel to the change in people's reasons for acquiring pets, the rates of pet ownership in households in industrialized countries have increased significantly.

According to the American Pet Products Association (APPA) 2011–2012 National Pet Owners Survey, 62 percent of American households, or 72.9 million, have a pet. There are more than 78 million dogs, 86.4 million cats, 151.1 million freshwater fish, 8.61 million saltwater fish, 16.2 million birds, 16 million small animals, 13 million reptiles, and 7.9 million equines owned in the United States. Approximately four out of ten pet owning households in the United States are multiple-pet owners, and three quarters of households with pets own a dog or cat.

This is a huge number of domestic animals living in the average American home, and these animals are loved nearly as much as human children are.



According to the American Pet Products Association (APPA), owners cite reasons such as companionship, affection, relaxation, stress relief, and love as reasons for owning a pet. In 2011, \$73 million was spent on gifts for pets, “just because,” as part of a staggering \$50 BILLION in pet expenditures for that year. That figure is up from \$17 billion in 1994.

The statistics don't lie. People love their animals. REALLY love their animals.

This love, this deep, unconditional, unwavering, widespread love, is what imbues photographs of pets with their true value.

I was talking to a colleague recently who had attended a dinner party at which she told a fellow guest what she did for a living. “Ohhh, how cute,” was the response. My photographer friend and I both groaned when she told me this, knowing how great of an insult that was to her profession and how little the partygoer understood or respected the true value of the service my friend offers to her clients.

To the recipients of heartfelt, emotive, artistic photos of their furry loved ones with whom they share their homes and lives, these images are so much more than just cute. They represent a profound connection that the owners feel with their companion animals. These images embody an unconditional love so deep as to mimic that for a family member or spouse. Just as many families feel compelled to capture photos of their human group for all eternity, so too do many pet owners, who are painfully aware of the short lives their pets live. Call it a kind of attempt at creating immortality for their animals, there is one thing that is for sure: photos of pets help to keep them connected to their loved ones long after they are gone from the physical plane. When memories have faded, and the smells and sounds of our pets have dissipated, all we have left of them are their photos. Photos, if done well, can bring back to life these animals we love so much. Photos can remind us of their spirits, their personalities, their very essence, and can bring us right back to a time and place and make us feel like we are right there with them, once again.



I photographed my dog, Fergie, on the shady side of a large orange metal sculpture, smiling up at her mama. This is my all-time favorite photo of her.

20mm 2.8 lens @ 20mm, f/3.2, 1/200 second, ISO 1250, aperture priority, evaluative metering

Outstanding photos of pets can take their owner's breath away and make them cry. That is nothing short of profound, and as a photographer holding a camera aimed at a dog or cat or rabbit or horse, that is both a great responsibility and an incredible gift.

As a professional pet photographer for the past nine years, I have seen firsthand the true value of the images that I have created reflected in the eyes of my clients. I have received many an e-mail after pets have passed away, informing me how grateful otherwise empty-hearted owners are to have those prints or that canvas hanging on the wall as an eternal reminder of "Cooper" or "Lady." I feel grateful, even honored, to have the opportunity to provide this service to my clients and friends and family; to create lasting visual memories for them that help them remain close to their animal loved ones. The following is an example of just such a correspondence:

“Hi Jamie,

I’m sorry to tell you this, but Zeus passed away yesterday afternoon. I wish it was better news, but I thought you might like to know since you guys seemed to be great buddies right off the bat. I am so glad we were able to spend that morning with you, and get so many wonderful photographs to remember our beloved friend Zeus by. And I know that Zeus had a wonderful time, as well. I look forward to enjoying your work, and want to thank you so much for working with us.

Sincerely, Jessica”



Zeus and his owner, shortly before his death. Best buddies for life.

24–70mm 2.8 L lens @ 70mm, f/2.8, 1/1600 second, ISO 250, manual exposure, evaluative metering

I never really understood the meaning behind what I was doing with my business until one of my best dog friends passed away. He was a Black Lab named Knuckles—goofy as all get out. Knuckles and I spent many days over many years, exploring the neighborhood and the environs, checking out the sights, enjoying one another’s company, with me as his dog walker. At the age of eight, Knuckles had a serious stroke and became very sick, very fast. His health spiraled quickly downward; he was bleeding internally, and was unable to walk, eliminate, or eat. His owners, his veterinary caretakers, and I all believed it was the end for him. So I went to his bedside to say my goodbyes. He ended up surprising us all by coming back to life and living—no, thriving—for another nine months. Days later he was running down the street with me, his tongue wagging, with a huge smile on his face. That was one of my most memorable moments, and it taught me a lot about life and love and the unpredictable nature of it all.

The day his owners called to tell me my buddy had passed, I wasn’t surprised, but I still missed him terribly. And of course, I cried. I was sitting on my bed; I looked up, and through my tears, I noticed the triptych of black-and-white photos of Knuckles hanging on my wall that I had taken before he became sick. The photos were two profile shots of him and one straight on shot, and in each shot, Knuckles was beaming with his big, goofy, characteristic Lab smile. His eyes sparkled, and I recall the excitement he displayed over the tennis ball I was holding above the camera, which was his reward for working for me as a model.



Knuckles photographed in succession while moving the camera from one side of his face to the other.

7.8mm (macro) lens, f/2.8, 1/100 second, ISO 200, auto exposure, evaluative metering

Through my tears, I laughed. I realized at that moment that I would be forever connected to my canine buddy through those photos. It was then that I got it: I truly realized how profound and meaningful these images I was creating as a pet photographer were. My work became infused with a sense of meaning and importance that I hadn’t experienced before. And although my shoots were, and are, as fun as they come, underlying all of them is the sense of long-term meaning; the sense of connection that binds us with these magical creatures.

The story of Knuckles was just one of many like it. Numerous pets I have photographed have passed on. And then there are the pets I hear about that I never had the chance to photograph before it was too late. But there's still a way for me to capture their essence.

Along with doing pet photography I also create art called *Decopaw*. Decopaw is digital art created from pet photos that either I take or clients send to me. I have had more art clients than I remember contact me, saying that they had planned to have me photograph their dog/cat/bunny, but sadly, the pet died suddenly and I never had the chance. Instead, they ask me to make artwork of the few photos they do have of their departed companions. These e-mails are always filled with sadness, because in almost every case, the only photos these pet parents have are poorly lit, blurry shots that were taken in cluttered scenes, usually with a cheap old point-and-shoot camera or phone. In most cases, these are the only visual memories they have of their buddies. I sense the longing and overwhelming wish to go back in time and do it all over again. But unfortunately for us humans, we have yet to figure out a way to stop time on these precious short lives to keep our animal companions around forever.

The closest thing we have to a time machine is a photograph. And there is never a more poignant lesson about the brevity of a pet's life, or the meaningfulness of these photos, then when they die and we don't have any images by which to remember them. My ultimate dream in life is that every human being who shares his or her home and heart with an animal has just one decent photo of that animal. As the reader of this book, you have the power to help me make that dream come true. You have the power to create lasting visual memories of furry loved ones that can be cherished for all posterity. Whether they are of your own pets, your neighbor's, your client's, or your co-worker's, you have the power to create something incredibly meaningful just by using your camera and the knowledge available to you.

Along with the ultimate goal of capturing photos of a pet that can be cherished for decades to come, there is a smaller, yet no less important goal, which is to capture milestones and stages in the pet's life. All domestic animals go through at least four stages (some would argue five, as listed a bit later on). They start off as babies, become children, turn into young adults, mature to adults, and then finally, seniors. The look, features, details, and temperament can vary wildly in just one animal in these different stages. In an ideal world, we will capture them all in photos that will tell a complete story of the pet's life in much the same way as photos of ourselves, our family, and our friends convey a story of our own lives. As photographers, we have the power to capture a moment and place in time, preserving the memory forever. Maybe that moment is the first time a puppy steps foot in the water on a beach, or a kitten learns how to climb its cat tree, or a foal makes its first run on wobbly legs. Or, perhaps it's an adult dog, finally past its gangly teenage phase, exploring in a field with a little less clumsiness and curiosity than it did when it was young. Maybe it's an elderly cat who has outlived all expectations on the part of its owners, now old and frail but still ticking, still hissing, still harassing its feline roommates. For photographers seeking to create printed photobooks of a pet's life, photos from these different stages can be invaluable to the pet's owner. It is the ideal case: a collection of visual memories taking place over the lifespan of the animal. It is the ultimate tribute to a furry family member.



Seventeen-year-old Willow the kitty, relaxing in his owner's living room.

24–70mm 2.8 lens @ 32mm, f/2.8, 1/500 second, ISO 1600, aperture priority, partial metering

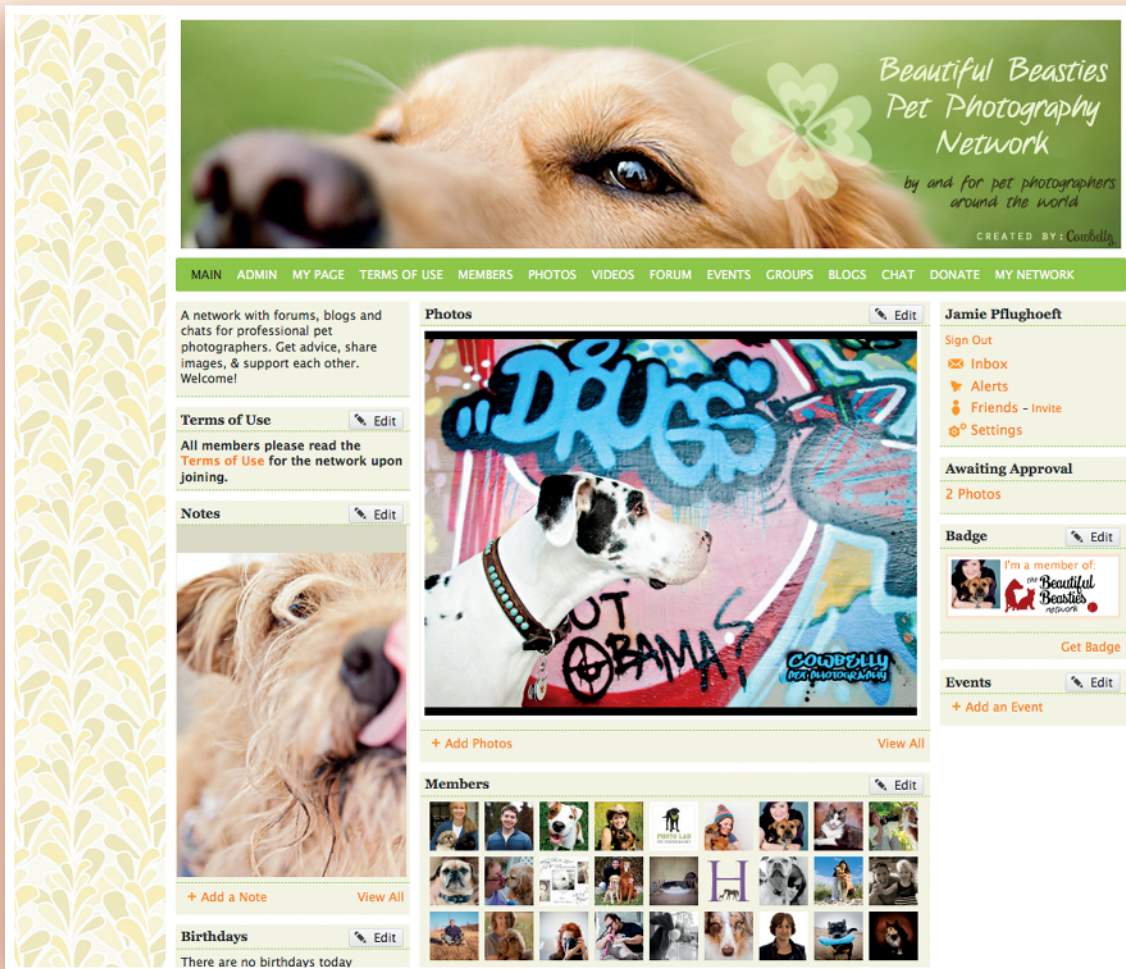
As an owner of an animal with whom you share your life, having just one incredible photograph of that animal is precious; it's worth more than any amount of money. Being able to give the gift of pet photography to a client, friend, or family member (or even yourself) is an incredible honor and joy, and one with a lasting impact. The true value of pet photos can only be measured by the amount of love we feel for these amazing animals.

The Pet Photography Industry

In the past five years, the pet photography industry has exploded, riding the tremendous rise in pet ownership. Part-time and full-time, amateur and professional pet photographers are springing up in every city, in every developed country in the world. Ten years ago, a Google search for the term “pet

photography” turned up a mere handful of pages linking to websites of professional pet photographers, how-to articles, and photo galleries. Now, that same search returns over two million results. Major metropolitan areas in the United States, such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle, have no fewer than 40 or more professional pet photographers, with the numbers growing by the day. To say it has become a wildly popular subject for photography would be an understatement.


On the Beautiful Beasties Network, an online forum that I created and run, we have no fewer than 350 professional pet-photographer members around the world, whose sole focus of their business is domestic animals. Twenty to thirty photographers are added every few months, and I expect the number to reach 500 by 2014.



The Beautiful Beasties Network home page.

But, for all of those pet photographers and those yet to get started, there are plenty of animals to go around.

I recall a time early on in my business when I panicked a little whenever a new competitor came on the scene. I was still new to pet photography and didn't understand my limits or have any knowledge about volume. I decided to take the time to determine, through statistics, how many pets lived in Seattle (where I live and work), what percentage of those pets might qualify as potential clients, and then figure out how many years it would take me to photograph all of them. I recall I came up with a figure somewhere around 10,000 animals. I very quickly realized that not only would it be impossible for me to photograph that many pets, I had no desire to even try. In other words, I realized that there were more than enough pets to go around—for a very long time.



2.1 million residents in Seattle \times .65%
owning pets = 500,000 \times .02% poten-
tial clients = 10,000 pets = wayyyyy
too many dogs and cats for one person
to photograph.

Today, no matter if a dog owner lives in Atlanta, or a cat owner lives in Tampa, or a ferret owner lives in Portland, for the most part, they can have their pick of photographers who specialize in pets. They can decide if they'd like studio shots, traditional, romantic shots taken indoors in their home, outdoor environmental documentary style work, or even abstract or fine art work. Often times, the hard part for pet owners seeking a photographer is deciding whose images resonate with them the most.

In each style or genre of pet photography, you have entire movements of photographers, banding together in their own groups, networking,

sharing knowledge and resources, as well as an affinity for the same style. You have modern studio photographers who shun the use of fake muslin backdrops and cheesy props in favor of clean lines and photos filled with emotion. There are documentary-style crews who love colorful, vivid photos of dogs, filled with energy and emotion and captured outside in natural light. You have the fine-art camp, whose members produce more traditional work. Adherents look to portrait and children's photographers for inspiration, using props such as couches, old suitcases, and clothing selectively, both in the studio and outside in nature. Lastly, there's the ultra-modern style group, which places as much importance on backgrounds as expressions, and frequently produces clean, simple, sharp, neutral-colored photos on location, where the emphasis is more on an overall beautiful aesthetic than emotion.

Apart from the common love of animals and photography, the one thing that all of these photographers share in common is a need for education. Because the industry is still so new, and because thus far there has been a lack of significant educational opportunities, these resourceful photographers have found knowledge and education anywhere they can.

Classes, Schools, and Workshops

Here's a brief list of various educational resources that you might want to try.

Professional Photographers of America webinar: The Fine Art of Pet Portraiture

www.ppa.com/education-events/webinars/fineart_petportraiture.php

Cowbelly Pet Photography Workshops

Four-day intensive workshops on business, photography, and processing

www.cowbellyworkshops.com

Passport

International destination pet photography workshops, co-instructed by Jamie Pflughoeft and

J. Nichole Smith

www.passportworkshops.com

Margaret Bryant

Webinars, Dog Posing Book, and Coaching

www.bryantdogphotography.com/classes-workshops-seminars-instruction.php

Paul Walker UK Workshops on photographing dogs on location

www.pawspetphotography.co.uk/pet-photography-training/uk-pet-photography-workshops/

The Perfect Picture School of Photography online class by Jill Flynn

www.ppsop.com/petp.aspx

Focus On Rescue

Webinars and tips for photographing shelter animals

<http://focusonrescue.wordpress.com/webinars/>

Forums

And finally, here are a few forums in which you might want to participate.

Beautiful Beasties Network

www.cowbellyblog.com/category/beautiful-beasties-online-network/

<http://beautifulbeastiesnetwork.ning.com/>

Nature Wildlife and Pet Photography Forum

www.nwpphotoforum.com/ubbthreads/

ProPhotogs Forum

www.prophotogs.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?140-PET-ANIMALS

Flickr Group for Pet Photographers

www.flickr.com/groups/professional_pet_photography/

Exercises

- 1.** List the pet photographers who are the most inspiring to you (do some online research first if you aren't familiar with the work of other pet photographers). List the qualities of the work from each photographer, and see if there are any parallels between them.
- 2.** Write a list of reasons why it's meaningful for you to create pet photos. This can help you to decide what's important to remember for each shoot you do.
- 3.** Take a look at several of the personal projects and/or fundraising projects listed in this chapter for inspiration.
- 4.** Sign up for a new forum if you aren't already a member of one.

