



Origins of Trimming the Poodle

By
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Poodle with corded coat reproduced from Les Races De Chiens by Henri De Bylant, 1904.

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An entertaining letter arrived recently from a group of Poodle fanciers who also groom dogs professionally. They asked for some historical information on grooming, specifically when Poodles were first trimmed and the origins of the lion-clip. They were curious about grooming salons and when the practice of trimming pets was first established, and also asked if the custom of selling fancy accessories for dogs was fairly recent.

To answer their questions, I should begin by saying that the art of trimming is an ancient practice. Dogs with large lion-like manes and closely trimmed hindquarters appear on ancient Greek and Roman coins, and in the time of the Emperor Augustus, around 30 A.D., little trimmed Poodles were carved on monuments and tombs, resembling their modern day counterparts in a primitive way.

In 1960, Gerald Massey, the eminent expert of dogs in art and literature, wrote a chapter about Poodles which was published in Philippe Howard Price's book, *The Miniature Poodle*. He commented that while it was not his province to pass opinion as to the country of the Poodle's origin, nor from which branch of the *Canis familiaris* they deviated, it was important that one realized they were first known in England as "Rough Water Dogs" before the word "Poodle" came generally into use in English literature.

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The Lion-Clip

Massey cited the many examples of lion-clipped Poodles in early engravings and paintings by Pinturicchio (1454-1513), Albrecht Durer (1471-1528), Gerard Ter Borch (1617-1681), Jan Steen (1626-1679), and Jan Weenix (1640-1719). He said that Steen's *The Dancing Dog*, painted around 1660, was probably the best-known painting of a miniature Poodle of the 17th century. The dog, dancing to a tune played by a boy on a flute, has clipped hindquarters, with tufts of hair on the thighs, a ringlet of hair, and pompon on his tail.

The earliest printed reference to the lion-clip appeared in *Joannis Caii Britanni de Canibus Britannicis*, published in London in 1570. In it Dr. Caius compiled a list of dogs to be found in Britian for the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gesner. According to Caius (and this is Massey's modern day translation from Caius's original Latin):

"...Those that hunt by water, by instinct, or perhaps after a little training, are larger in size, with a natural coat of rough shaggy hair. I, however, my dear Gesner, have painted him for you shorn from shoulder to hindquarters and of tail, for it is our habit to shear them so that they may be quicker when without hair and not checked in swimming...."

Another early printed reference to trimming is found in *Hunger's Prevention or The Arte of Fowling by Water and Lande*, by Gervaise Markham, London, 1621, a book describing the use and training of Water Dogges. Markham explained the reasons for shaving the hindquarters:

"Now for cutting and shaving him from the Navill downward, or backward it is two ways well to be allowed of, that is, for Sommer hunting or for the water; because these Water Dogges naturally are ever most laden with haire on the hinder

parts, nature as it were laboring to defend that part which is continually to be employed in the most extremity, and because the hinder parts are even deeper in the water than the fore parts, therefore nature has given them the greatest armor of hair to defend the wette and coldness..."

Many English sporting books of the 17th and 18th century mention the Rough Water Dog, and the long-practiced custom of clipping him for utility purposes. The shaving the hindquarters undoubtedly evolved because the coat was somewhat of a hinderance in the water. Thus the area behind the ribs was trimmed smooth to help the dog swim more efficiently. On the shaved hindquarters, small tufts of hair were left to cover the joints and keep them warm. The long hair over the neck, shoulders, ribs and chest protected the heart and added buoyancy while swimming. When the dog emerged from the water with his quarry, the long and thick mane coat provided warmth. The fashion of tying up topknots was also first associated with retrieving. A dog could see its quarry better when its forelocks were fastened above the head, instead of falling into the eyes; therefore, owners began to use pieces of brightly colored ribbon to tie back the long hair. This custom also permitted an owner to locate or follow a particular dog as it worked in the water.

Pet Clips

Naturally, Poodles were first groomed because of hygienic and occupational reasons, but we can thank the French for first trimming them into outlandish pet clips. During the reigns of Louis XV (1715-74) and Louis XVI (1774-92), Poodles were *the* fashionable dogs. They were seen in the salons of all the fashionable and great French families. Canine barbers practiced their trade in the streets of Paris and along the banks of the Seine. No clip was too outrageous or difficult for them to perfect. They cut out coats of arms, lovers' knots, monograms, and fleurs-de-lis in the hair and ornamented Poodles with rakish moustaches and imperiales (small pointed beards on the underjaw), or with high pompadours similar to those worn by the ladies of the royal court.

Poodles were once divided into two coat types - curly and corded. Corded Poodles made their debut in the British show ring in 1876 and occupied a commanding position at dog shows in England as well as on the continent (there was a great obsession for this coat type in France, Germany, and Switzerland) until the beginning of the World War I. The cords hung in long, coarse ringlets from the body, the ears, and the tail. Often more than 18 inches long, they covered the front legs like a skirt when they hung naturally to the ground. To keep them from dragging along and attracting dirt, the cords were often tied up in bundles with leather straps or ribbons over the dog's back, or they were encased in linen bags. A great deal of time was devoted to maintaining the cords. They had to be oiled frequently to keep the ends from becoming brittle and snapping off. The unpleasant and lengthy job of bathing a corded Poodle was seldom engaged in. Writers of the day describe them as "offending the nostrils", and mention how difficult it was to make pets of them or to keep them in the house.

Accessories for Canines

By Victorian times, the grooming of various breeds was a full-time occupation for many. Although fancy accessories may seem like a recent innovation, the selling of these items may have reached a peak in 19th century England and France.

Then, money was literally no object where aristocratic dogs were concerned. In researching *The Pampered Pets Show* for the Museum of America, I came across an 1894 issue of the *Strand Magazine* in London which devoted 14 pages to describing some of the services and accessories that were available for dogs. For instance, the aristocratic dog wore collars and bracelets made of gold or silver, some studded with precious stones. Some of these, including a collar made of 18-carat gold fastened with a diamond brooch which cost 60 pounds at the time, were photographed for the article at Barrett's of Piccadilly, a posh London establishment that specialized in selling high-priced items for dogs. Gold and silver muzzles, golden couples for promenading pairs of dogs, gold bracelets with semi-precious stones that locked onto the dogs' ankles, long chains of gold - they were all pictured.

Grooming Salons

The article described a Madame Leboule, who ran a sumptuous grooming establishment in Paris. She also made little outfits for dogs and various breeds were pictured wearing her sable and ermine coats, dressing gowns, *chemise de nuits*, theatre dresses, bathing costumes, traveling coats and other fripperies!

The writer visited the Bond Street Toilet Club, an elegant grooming salon of the time. "Everything about this club is of the daintiest; the very prospectus is in blue and gold, with a delicate bow of green ribbon at one corner. The reception room is quite a sumptuous apartment; and the ordinary man on entering it may stumble over a costly occasional table, or occasional dog, as the case may be. For many ladies leave their pets here while shopping; others bring the little creatures to be shampooed, brushed, combed, clipped, and attended to by a professional chiropodist." A photograph showed a man shampooing a toy dog in a tiny tub by means of a warm water spray. A larger bath, seen in the background, was for more unwieldy animals. Yolks of eggs were used to shampoo dogs instead of soap, which was thought to irritate the skin.

The combs and brushes used on the dogs were specially designed so that the hair could be combed to stand at a certain angle, thus facilitating the treatment of tangled coats. The brushes were used first, and then the combs which were made of silver, buffalo-horn and tortoiseshell.

"Dentistry", the article continued, "forms an important item in canine toilet clubs, both in London and Paris. Many a pet dog is to be seen in the Bois whose teeth are as false as its complexion - or rather color, for fashionable dogs in the gay capital are frequently dyed to meet the exigencies of a passing mode. And there was a special assistant retained for cleaning dogs' teeth; it was done with an ordinary toothbrush and table salt, although a perfumed dentrifice was used on dogs that did not like salt."

Absurd as it may seem, there were more outrageous canine items shown, namely little rubber dog galoshes with studs or buttons and soft brown Russian leather boots with silk laces to match. The set of four, made to measure, were to be worn by rheumatic dogs, or to combat the foot problems caused by the metallic grit on the London streets.

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