

Photographs **Barry J Holmes**

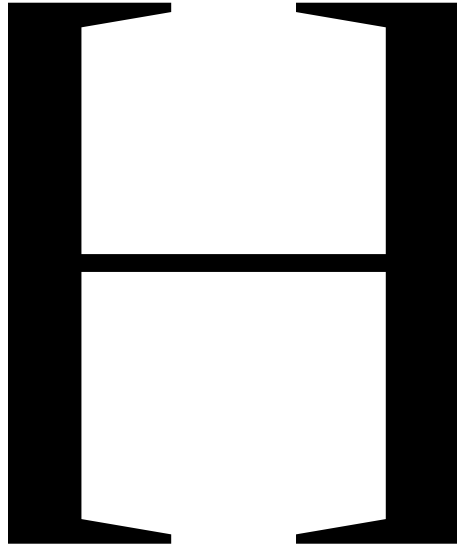


Hello, Kitty,

It's 40 years old and worth billions. But what is it that drives people so crazy for the little Japanese toy? Tamara Hinson goes inside the cult world of Hello Kitty

Cat scan: (right) two fans arrive at the Hello Kitty convention in Los Angeles. Above: some of the merchandise on show





Hello Kitty Con has arrived in Los Angeles, and a sea of pink has washed over Little Tokyo. The four-day event at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the first of its kind, is being held to mark Hello Kitty's 40th anniversary. The sell-out crowd can attend Hello Kitty seminars, workshops and lectures, eat Hello Kitty-themed food and shop until they drop.

Even if you don't think you know Hello Kitty you have probably seen the logo: a small, mouthless cat-like character, with a bow or a heart in her hair, stamped on everything from handbags to T-shirts to lunchboxes to videogames to jewellery to aeroplanes. There are more than 50,000 Hello Kitty product lines available in over 130 countries. Sanrio, Hello Kitty's parent company, is reluctant to talk figures, but its total global sales amount to around £5bn a year and it's thought Hello Kitty products account for most of this.

As the totemic Japanese brand enters its fifth decade, however, the character herself remains ageless. Despite her name and appearance (including whiskers), Hello Kitty is not a cat, but an English girl who never ages. She was born in London in November, has blood type A and is five apples tall. She began life in 1974, on a purse,



but quickly spread. In August this year the Japanese government blasted her into space.

Hello Kitty attracts a level of eccentric devotion that, say, Peppa Pig cannot match. You might expect her to be popular with young girls, but the convention proves that Hello Kitty fans are of every age and stripe, and with a limitless thirst for Hello Kitty-related activities. What's the appeal?

One of the first events I check out is a Spam musubi workshop (musubi is a popular dish in Hawaii, and comprises a slice of Spam on rice, wrapped with seaweed), where participants can make an edible Hello Kitty. Leading the workshop is Katie Chin, a television chef. When she asks the audience to sum up Hello Kitty in one word, "happy" features at least five times, as do "joy", "friendship" and "smiles". One woman pauses for a second before blurting out "shopping".

Ah yes, shopping. In Hello Kitty Con's Super Supermarket area, the most expensive items include a £250 Hello Kitty vintage telephone and a £1,132 Casio executive set containing a briefcase, camera and watch. There are Hello Kitty Ty toys, building blocks, comics and pyja-

mas. Dylan's Candy Bar, the sweet-shop chain owned by Ralph Lauren's daughter, has a stand piled high with limited-edition Hello Kitty chocolate. Visitors can get Hello Kitty nail art or Hello Kitty face-paint makeovers, and pick up a £75 Swarovski-studded, perfume-filled Hello Kitty ring. The Hello Kitty Beats by Dre headphones are selling like hotcakes. At the Major League Baseball stand, visitors can get temporary tattoos depicting Hello Kitty wearing the uniform of their favourite team.

Sarah Walsworth, a visual-brand manager for Sanrio, is after something more permanent. I catch up with her at the Hello Kitty tattoo parlour, where professional tattooists are on hand to give Hello Kitty fans free, permanent reminders of their visit. For Walsworth, who's getting a tattoo depicting Hello Kitty alongside a pair of scissors and the word "hello", her job is clearly more than a way to pay the rent.

"Hello Kitty is my boss and my ultimate muse in every sense of the word," Walsworth says. The queue for free inkings stretches around the building, but Walsworth sees her tattoo as a unique mark of her devotion, as well as displaying her membership of the



tribe. "Getting a Hello Kitty tattoo might have been a novelty five years ago, but now it's just a no-brainer if you're a fan," she adds.

Elsewhere, lectures explore the Hello Kitty universe and debunk certain myths. There's no Hello Kitty chainsaw, but there are Hello Kitty contact lenses. The infamous Hello Kitty vibrator is actually a shoulder "massager", I learn, although there seems no doubt about its real purpose. (Hello Kitty's obsessive focus on "cuteness" can be a thin veil for quite a lot of sexualisation – many of the costumes on display wouldn't look out of place at a fetish club.)

One of the most popular events is a discussion chaired by Hello Kitty's keenest male fans, entitled: "Guys Love Hello Kitty, Too". Although most of the attendees are women, Hello Kitty has no shortage of male admirers. One of them is Tommy Moreno, a 50-year-old make-up artist with a handlebar moustache, pink trousers, a lime-green Hello Kitty sweater and a pink Hello Kitty-shaped bag.

Feline groovy: (clockwise from top) official illustrator Yuko Yamaguchi; the first purse; inking in a Hello Kitty; queuing at the expo; and two fans show their devotion



“Getting a Hello Kitty tattoo was a novelty five years ago, but now it's just a no-brainer if you are a fan

scend generation and gender – people just love everything about Hello Kitty.”

Yuko isn't the only one under protection. On the other side of the hall, I enter a dimly lit room. At the centre, in a glass case, is the first Hello Kitty item ever made: a coin purse from 1974. A security guard has been standing by for seven hours, listening over and over again to the recorded information about the purse. He tells me that he can now recite Hello Kitty's life story by heart, and that his ears are starting to hurt.

I know what he means. It might be time to say goodbye, Kitty. In need of some air, I head over to the food court and wait in line for a bow-shaped bottle of water next to a woman whose Alsatian sports a pink Hello Kitty knitted cap. I can't help but think that despite the vast and bewildering empire on display here, Hello Kitty's success is founded on simplicity. Christine Yano, one of the lecturers and a professor at the university of Hawaii, agrees: "The world is getting complex and hi-tech. Something as simple and low-tech as Hello Kitty seems to speak to a nostalgic impulse to get back to simpler things, simpler times," she explains. "She becomes that cute, mute object that accepts you not matter what you do." ■

He's been an avid collector since 1978. "When I was 21, I used to carry a Hello Kitty bag around. People used to roll their eyes and say: 'Here comes Tommy with his Hello Kitty bag!' I'd say: 'Look, I'm not going to be 50 and walking around with my Hello Kitty bag.' But last weekend was my 50th birthday and I went out for drinks in LA with my friends – and my Hello Kitty bag!"

Later, I pass Yuko Yamaguchi, the third and current Hello Kitty illustrator. If Hello Kitty is a religion, she is its pope. Fans wait in line as Yuko, who's surrounded by a phalanx of minders, draws Hello Kitty silhouettes and signs them with a flourish. With her dyed orange hair, trademark buns and bright make-up, she looks like an 80s raver. Through a translator she tells me that London was chosen as Hello

Kitty's birthplace because in the 1970s many young Japanese girls romanticised the city.

"She creates friendship and makes people happy," says Yuko, when I ask her about the secret of Hello Kitty's success. "She's like a blank canvas, and her fans tran-

