

Mad Dog!
The vilification of the
white Pomeranian or
Spitz dog in 19th century
New York City

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"...the Spitz will be exterminated"

The old type white Pomeranian or Spitz dog fell from grace on May 24th 1876. An article appeared in the New York Times ominously titled 'A Whited Canine Sepulchre'. Having dealt an artful character assassination of the breed, the journalist concluded that as soon as the public are convinced 'he is internally full of rabies and all varieties of distemper' at that moment 'the Spitz will be exterminated'.

The purpose of 'exposing' this flawed impostor was ostensibly to alert the public to the Spitz dog's pre-disposition to rabies. However, the writer's impassioned case against the breed was at times excessive. He was keen to clarify that this was an unwelcome task, he was no fanatic, nor did he write this from revenge or malice. He apologised for inflicting pain on the breed's friends while comparing the unpleasant duty of revealing the dog's character to exposing a criminal. The white and spottess Spitz a 'hitherto respected beast' mingling with 'the best circles of society' was in the opinion of the journalist a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The journalist anthropomorphises the dog's character - on morality 'the Spitz is thoroughly and irredeemably corrupt' and 'he is a tireless and shameless thief'. He was credited with having perverted skills enabling him to steal the bones of 'honest and frugal dogs'. He was vulpine, with a cunning and treacherous face, and vain 'he ostentatiously wears throughout our hottest months the heavy fur of an Arctic animal' adding, no cat 'ever manifests so absurd a degree of vanity in regard to her tail as the Spitz habitually displays in regard to his own'. Cowardice – he ambushed, bit when his victims least expected (a back-biter) and took flight when challenged.

First of all it should be clarified that the Spitz and the Pomeranian were one and the same!

The breed classification system, of both the American and British Kennel Club, has made it difficult for the modern enthusiast to understand the early history of the Pomeranian or Spitz dog. In Germany they have always been known as Spitz, with a descriptive name to indicate the region of origin and eventually to reflect size. Thus the Pommer or Pommern Spitz became the Pomeranian Spitz in England. In Holland they are called Keeshond (regardless of colour) with a further description to indicate size. In France they were called the Loup Loup. The English and the Americans used the names Pomeranian and Spitz, the English also called them Fox Dogs, but more typically in 19th century America, they were called a Spitz dog. The size ranged from little and 'frisky' to large 'brutes' as evidenced in various articles in the New York Times. Not all were white of course, there are reports of black Spitz, but it was the white coloured Spitz that was singled out by the newspaper.



In 1878 the 2nd annual show of the Westminster Kennel Club used the standard of points for assessing exhibits as set out in The Dogs of the British Isles by J.H. Walsh (Stonehenge). In this book is a chapter titled The Pomeranian or Spitz Dog. In the American edition of this book titled 'The dogs of Great Britain, America and other countries' the same chapter appears. Walsh uses the same illustration in both books and that is Mrs Prosser's white dog Joe, who was a 1st prize winner at Islington in 1877. In the British edition he is called 'a Pomeranian' (*left image*) and in the American edition 'a Spitz' (*below right image*).

Vero Shaw (The Illustrated Book of the Dog 1881) in the Chapter on Pomeranians – 'This breed is fairly popular in America under the title of Spitz dog, and we have seen a very good specimen imported into this country by a lady who had visited the United States'.

The Pomeranian, although known to be in England by 1760, was popularised following the marriage of King George III to Queen Charlotte - a Princess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. The Queen had imported two fine specimens as a gift for Lord Harcourt. Artists such as Gainsborough, Zoffany and Wheatley featured the breed in artworks. A painting of William Young and his family, circa 1770, includes a fine example. This dog is considered to be both a cream Keeshond and a Pomeranian.

The Spitz was often cited as having a snappish disposition, however, temperament issues raised were only part of an overall picture; in general, canine historians balanced their reviews of the breed with positive comments and noted their popularity. Here are some of the adverse comments.

In 'Cynographia Britannica' published in 1800 by Sydenham Edwards is this description: 'He is of little value as a house-dog, being noisy, artful, and quarrelsome, cowardly, petulant, and deceitful, snappish, and dangerous to children, and in other respects without useful properties'

In the 'Sportsman's Cabinet' published in 1804:

'He bites most severely, and always with greater vehemence in proportion as he is less resisted; for he most sagaciously uses precautions with such animals as attempt to stand upon the defence, and is admitted to be instinctively a coward, as he never fights but when under necessity of satisfying his hunger or making good his retreat'.

Some earlier writer's thought the breed was a cross between a wolf-dog and an Arctic Fox. The journalist in 1876 used the Arctic Fox theory to great affect 'his origin is by no means honorable' and his face 'bears an unmistakable resemblance to the cunning and treacherous face of the fox'. In the 18th century this theory had been promoted but even then experiments demonstrated that foxes would not and could not breed with dogs. A common secondary name for the breed in