



Black sinamay cartwheel hat with asymmetrical brim with draped black mesh. Miss Jones by Stephen Jones, ca. 1990s. Ryerson FRC2009.01.608. Gift of Kathleen Kubas.

OF HATS & HISTORY

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Hats are one of the most visible means to signal power, class, status, belonging and/or conformity to modes of dress. After all, for centuries kings and queens wore crowns to signal their power and dynastic position and their servants would be required to remove their hat in their presence to demonstrate their subservience. **Hats can also convey emotional states (mourning) or marital status (bridal veils).** Although hats, outside of ones worn as part of a uniform or religious affiliation, are now generally worn as optional accessories to convey personality or as a form of fashionable ornamentation, it was once considered unseemly for a refined gentleman or woman to appear in public without a hat. Like other dress artifacts, hats reflect the social and cultural attitudes of their period.

In terms of fashion history, Canadians often overlook the fact that the fashion for men's hats created out of beaver felts was an important part of the history and the settlement of this country. Felt was made out of animal hairs and the highest quality hats were made out of beaver pelts. Felt hats were once called "beavers" and signalled that the wearer was rich. The purchase of such a hat was a costly proposition because demand for beaver pelts greatly surpassed the supply. One of the oldest companies in the world, the [Hudson's Bay Company](#), was founded in 1670, exporting furs from Canada to meet European demand.

This quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes conveys the respect for the quality of Canadian furs: **"Wear a good hat, the secret of your looks/Lies with the beaver in Canadian brooks."**



Felted top hat with 3 cm black grosgrain hatband. Forest green silk brim lining and patent leather and cream silk crown lining. Label: Christy's London, ca. 1900s. Ryerson FRC1995.02.005. Gift of Beverley Benson.

The beaver hat was in high demand until the 19th century when the silk topper became the mark of status.

The Ryerson Fashion Research Collection has a Victorian top hat (FRC1995.02.005) with 3 cm black grosgrain hatband and made of a felted animal hair. It has a forest green silk brim lining and patent leather and cream silk lining and has a label from Christy's London. The crown is dented and the lining is coming apart inside the crown. The grosgrain is worn and browning, indicating that it was well-worn. It is likely from the late 19th century and made of rabbit fur. The hat interior crown has the signature of the owner in pencil on the interior "H. Fitzgerald".

Although the collection has very few men's hats, we have more than 500 women's hats, including many by milliner's like Philip Treacy, Stephen Jones, Eric Javits and others. Our hat room is an aspiring milliner's dream.

FURTHER READING

Folledore, Giulliano. *Men's Hats*. Modena: Zanft Editions, 1989.

Hopkins, Susie. *The Century of Hats*. London: Aurum Press, 1999.

Jones, Stephen. *Hats: An Anthology*. London: V&A Publications, 2009.

Langley, Susan. *Vintage Hats & Bonnets, 1770-1970*. Paducah: Collector Books, 1998.

McDowell, Colin. *Hats: Status, Style and Glamour*. New York: Rizzoli, 1992.