



Sheered otter muff, ca. 1870s.
Ryerson FRC1992.05.003.
Donated by Kim Diamond.

THE MUFF

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The muff - a roll of fabric or fur, lined in wool, satin, silk, linen or other fabric - typically used to keep one's hands warm is considered a feminine accessory. However, at one time the muff was used by both men and women.

One of the earliest muffs recorded was illustrated in the 16th century drawing by Gaspar Rutz from 1598 showing an English lady with a cloth muff hanging from her girdle (Morse Earle 1901: 448).

Fashionable men in the 17th century carried muffs as a mark of dignity. The wardrobe inventory of Prince Henry of England (1594-1612) in 1608 included: "Two *muffes*; one of cloth of silver embroidered with *purles* plates and Venice twists of silver and gold; the other of black satten embroidered with black silk and bugles" (Morse Earle 1901: 448).

A muff with a pocket could be used to contain or conceal objects and it was reported that in the 18th century the somewhat eccentric head of a college at Oxford University carried in his muff a pair of scissors with which he slyly clipped off the locks deemed "too long" of male students (Morse Earle 1901: 450). It is not clear when muffs became a strictly feminine accessory, but it seems likely that this followed the changes in men's attire in the early part of the 19th century.



Cabinet card with deckled edge by A.S. Green, 361 Talbot Street, St. Thomas, Ontario. Ryerson FRC2002.04.209

Now the muff is considered a strictly feminine accessory, and in the 19th century, muffs sometimes served as a type of handbag for carrying daily necessities such as a handkerchief or a bit of money. Sometimes muffs were worn suspended from the neck by a rich cord finished with tassels.

The **Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine** of December 1865 describes the fashions for muffs at the time as follows:

"We are happy to announce to the ladies a decided novelty in muffs. They are, however, the prettiest and most ravissante [sic] little affairs we have ever seen, and we commend them to the notice of the ladies. They are to be had in ermine tipped with swan's-down, seal-skin edged with sable and finished with a sable hood, mink richly trimmed, and grebe. As some of our readers may not be familiar with the grebe, we will state that it is the skin of a Russian duck, which is made up as fur into muffs, victorianes [sic], and collars." (page 549).

In this historic photo from 1885-1890 (FRC2002.04.209), a cabinet card of a woman with her daughter by photographer A.S. Green of St. Thomas, Ontario, both are dressed for winter, even though the photo was obviously taken inside the studio. The woman holds what looks to be a mink muff in her hand. **Carrying visible signs of wealth, such as a muff or fur scarf, was a way to signify class.**



Sable muff, ca. 1990s.
Ryerson FRC2009.01.531.
Donated by Kathleen
Kubas.

The Ryerson Fashion Research Collection has two muffs, one dates to approximately 1880-1890 and the other is a contemporary muff.

The older muff is made of black sheered velvet and has ruched brown silk sides (FRC1992.05.003). Stuffed with horsehair and lined with wool, it is dated to approximately 1880-1890. It does not have a pocket. The absence of a cord, tassels or other embellishment suggests that it likely did not belong to a rich woman.

This contemporary version of a muff (FRC2009.01.531) is brown sable and is lined in black satin with an interior corded loop and zipper. It has no label and is dated to post-1990. It was donated by Kathleen Kubas in 2009 and is one of many fur accessories that she owned.

References:

Fashions. Notice to Lady Subscribers. Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine. Philadelphia, December 1865 (p.485-650)..

Morse Earle, Alice.) 1901. *Two Centuries of Costume in America, Volume II.* New York: The MacMillan Company.