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.”
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**


History Of Hats: 18th Century. Source: Tumblr. From the dawn of the century, milliners took the idea of the hat as mere sun shade and turned it into an ever-evolving fashion accessory. Most commonly worn by military and naval officers, the classic tricorne (three-cornered) hat added function to form: the hat acted as an early umbrella via its brim-forming gutters that tilted rain away from the wearer’s face. Source: A Year in DC. Source: Olympe’s Diary. For women in the 18th century, the hat was an icon of wealth. Read more about history of wigs here. History of Men's and Women's Hats. Bowler hat was invented in 1849 as a hat for gamekeepers by Edward Coke, British soldier and politician. It was made to be strong and to fit well on the head so it can protect wearer from the low hanging branches and it won’t fall off when wind blows. It was made from hard felt, had narrow brim and a low crown. It was accepted very quickly in all economic classes (it even sold better than any other hat on the Wild West) and stayed popular until 1960s. Five key types of hats from the last two millennia and what they say about us. Show more. There have been so many, probably hundreds, different styles and types of hat in history that a question inevitably arises: why? Why did something that began as a simple protection against inclement weather take on such varied forms and social meanings? By focusing on just five distinct hat types, they sketch out a brief social history of headwear. History Of Hats For Women. Hats for men fell out of fashion by the time that John F. Kennedy went to his inauguration. Being First Lady, Jackie (reluctantly) wore her little pill box hats, so that they would be as small as possible. A sun-hat for the elegant lady from Tanagra, image from Fun Facts: History of Women’s Sun Hats. 1.3K views. View upvotes.