

Men's Hats

Types of Hats over the Years

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Abstract

The fashion history of hats has seen cultural and social many changes. Although there are a vast variety of types, some are much more influential than others and have thus lasted longer. Today's hats are not the same as they used to be, evolving into a more comfortable accessory. In the past, hats were usually more about fashion than function and discomfort was almost always a given. These uncomfortable styles were worn to show status and to gain respect. Although the social customs related to hat wearing are not around today, hats can still tell a lot about the wearer. However, today the hat is not so much about status but more about individual personality.

Hat Etiquette

There are certain etiquettes associated with hat wearing. The cheer "hip, hip, hooray!" was completed with men throwing their hats in the air. This was a way to raise spirits and was therefore largely accepted, especially by politicians (McDowell 1992). It used to be that men of lower ranking had to bare their heads to men of higher ranking. It was also established that men were to tip their hats to all females. However, the concept of removing one's hat while conversing did not catch on everywhere at the same time. For example, in 1100, Milan had taken up the custom while the Genoese were still reluctant to remove their headpieces, even when presented before someone of very high authority such as the Pope (Folledore 7). Eventually the gesture became quite common and was an accepted way of showing respect.

In 1889, Comte de Larmandie observed that hat wearers were well aware of their gestures. He noticed that men removed their hats in an obvious sweeping manner before quickly replacing them on their heads. He compared this gesture to that of a knight pulling out his sword then swiftly replacing it. It was more common than not to see a man perform the gesture of courteously removing his hat to show his respect to someone (McDowell 100).

Hat Status

Hats today do not represent status the way that they used to. Hats were a way to impose power and kings wore elaborate headpieces in order to symbolize their role in society. As

McDowell suggests, “Royalty has always needed imposing trappings in order to hide as effectively as possible the fact that kings are only men” (25).

Wearing a hat for its natural purpose (protection of the head) was reserved for laborers and those of the lower working class. Everyone else wore them to show off their status. Each social group had their own type of hat. Scholars wore flat bonnets, physicians wore high bonnets, townsmen wore black caps, and members of families with high status wore jeweled caps. Peasants were not allowed to wear hats until the end of the 17th century, when they were allowed only to wear hoods and protective hats. Nothing elaborate, just intended strictly for function (McDowell 10).

Types of Hats

There are multiple styles of hats, but some are more popular and influential than others. These include the top hat, bowler hat, military hats, and sports hats. These are the better known hats that have been the most adopted by the public. They are the classics in the category of hats and while some of their primes may be up, they will never go completely away.

Top Hat

The top hat was first made in China and became popular around the 1800s (Folledore 14). This was when middle class men started wearing them to show their serious personalities and to gain respect. It was a practical hat that could be worn for riding or hunting and offered protection. The top hat was also commonly worn by politicians, professionals, and any male who wanted to appear as a gentleman. When paired with a nice suit, the top hat gave the wearer an even more successful stature. It was popular for performers to wear the hat while on stage because it allowed them to look good and be taken seriously (McDowell 30-31).

The top hat is a great example of how men also succumb to fashion, just as many women are often accused of. The hat was worn more for the image it portrayed than for the hat itself. It was not a comfortable item to wear, but it was still highly popular among men. They felt that the discomfort was worth it because people were viewing them as successful gentlemen when they wore it. Even though the top hat eventually stopped being worn as everyday wear, it never really died out. Its status and meaning is still carried with it today (McDowell 112).

Bowler Hat

The bowler hat was designed in 1850 by James and George Lock and it was intended to be both fashionable and functional for men of the middle class. The bowler hat was a part of men’s “power dressing”. It was not a hat intended to be worn with formal attire as was

the top hat. Initially, it was made of metal and was worn for riding. The hard metal was to protect the wearer from objects falling from trees while the round shape was also practical for riding and therefore more preferred to top hats. It became popular for use in sports like cricket and football and gained more wearers, including servants and farmers (Robinson 18). The bowler hat was later made more comfortable and lightweight. It usually came in black (worn by the city men) or brown, (worn by the bookies). (McDowell 15) At the time that bowler hats were becoming popular, people were starting to move to the cities due to a reduction in available land and both bowler and top hats were seen on the city streets. They were both symbolic of a “gentlemen”. In about 1913 the bowler hat took precedence over the top hat as men started to prefer comfort over style (Robinson 23).

Hats were important props in movies and the bowler hat was the most favorable one. It symbolized a character the audience could relate to. Charlie Chaplin often wore a cocked bowler hat with a ragged suit; giving him an irresistible quality to the audience (McDowell 76). In more modern films such as *A Clockwork Orange*, the bowler hat took on a more threatening appeal (McDowell 199).

Military Hats

Military uniforms need to be not only efficient, but also distinguishable. In order to engage in battle, soldiers were equipped with protective helmets. When not in battle, berets were preferred. It was also not uncommon to have extravagant hats, simply for ceremonial purposes. George Washington is credited for the feathers worn in officers’ hats as a way of showing rank. Eventually the need for a practical battle hat brought about the Hungarian shako which offered protection but very little comfort. The kepi was then introduced, basically derived from the shako but with a flat, lower top. Both the shako and the kepi were later inspirations for officers’ service caps (McDowell 32).

Sports Hats

Sports hats are an example of hats that are more about function than fashion. Wearing a hat in sports makes it possible to play in rainy or sunny weather because the visor is protecting the player. Hats were not originally part of sports uniforms but, since they were already being worn voluntarily, they were adopted into the uniforms. The sports that most needed and therefore adopted the use of hats were cricket, golf, horse racing, and baseball. The golf and cricket hats were needed more for warmth and protection from the wind while the jockeys needed hats essentially for safety (McDowell 78-79).

For baseball, a hat was necessary to keep the sun out of the players’ eyes. It then became popular for spectators to wear baseball hats to show their support for a certain team, a tradition that became popular in the 1920s. The baseball hat then became the typical work hat for gas station attendees, truck drivers, and bus boys. In the 1960s the baseball hat

was popular with white college guys, urban blacks, and Hispanics. In the 1980s, the hip hop and rap cultures started wearing baseball hats and made them “the hat of new music”. The baseball hat is therefore the most popular hat in modern day (McDowell 80).



Figure 3. Picture of American college students wearing baseball caps.
Picture courtesy of Amanda Lambert taken on June 16, 2007.

Other Modern Hats

Other popular hat styles, aside from the sports hat, are the beanie and the bucket hat. The bucket hat is commonly linked with Gilligan from “Gilligan’s Island” and also with hip hop artist LL Cool J. This style hat has a loose, wide brim and falls lower around the head to provide a visor around the whole head. The bucket hat was more popular in the nineties but is still around today. It is popular with beach goers and fishermen because it does a good job of yielding the sun from the wearer’s eyes.

Beanies are mainly intended for winter wear but have become popular enough to wear almost year round. Teenage males are the ones who usually wear beanies which are commonly associated with the “skater” style. The beanie has become more fashionable and popular as it has developed. There are now many different designs and patterns on them and some even include visors.



Figure 4. Picture of an American college student wearing a beanie. Picture courtesy of Amanda Lambert taken on November 25, 2006.

Conclusion

Hats used to be an important part of a man's outfit as it said something about them and their status in society. Today, hats are worn either as fashionable accessories, as a means to keep the head warm in the winter, or to cover up "bed head". There is no longer a status associated with different style hats. If men are to wear a hat it is usually to show their personality or lifestyle or simply to match an outfit. Someone wearing a baseball cap is announcing that they have an interest in sports whereas someone who wears a beanie might give off the impression that they have a skater style. There is more freedom associated with hats as anyone can wear any style they want, no matter their social status. This would seem reason enough for men to wear hats more today than they did back in the 1800s and early 1900s, but apparently it is not. Maybe with no need prove themselves, men don't find hats as important anymore. The top hat would give men a respectable look and add elegance to their appearance, but that association with class no longer stands as the norm today. Aside from winter beanies or sports fans, it is not as common to see men in hats as it used to be.

Works Cited

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