

When did the view of fur switch from status to stigma?

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Abstract

Clothing made from animal fur has historically served as a status symbol in several cultures all over the world. As early as the 11th century, fur was no longer being worn for warmth and began to make its transition over to become a symbol of capital and social status amongst the wealthy. Fast forward to recent years, the use of fur is now considered excessive. Many alternatives are being offered and the animal activism groups work around the clock to provide information to the public regarding the horrible processes in the fur trade. This research aims to discover the exact timeframe that affected the view of fur in a fashion setting. Using a critical review of the literature, this research sought to identify significant time periods in the changing use of fur in fashion. The results showed that both animal activism and production costs are what untimely led to the downfall of fur fashion as we know it today.

Background/Methods

Clothing made from animal fur has historically served as a status symbol in many cultures all over the world. As early as the 11th century, fur was no longer being worn for warmth and began to transition over to become a symbol of wealth and social status among the wealthy. Most notably, the European royalty would wear luxurious fur garments and accessories made from sable, mink, and even chinchilla fur. Fur accessories were fashionable for both men and women. Top hats could be decorated with expensive beaver pelts and coats would be trimmed with furs. Fast forward to the 21st century, fur is looked at as an unnecessary addition to clothing when there are faux options that are a more ethical option for buyers.

My goal throughout is to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between what fur once was and what it is today. The primary data collection process involved a strong historical review. I say simple because all the writing is there, I just must put the connections together. I am looking at cultural change over time and attempting to link the two together. I want to emphasize the importance of both historical sources regarding status and relevant literature such as PETA articles.

1800's

The 19th century was crucial when looking at the downfall of fur from an animal rights perspective. This is the era that the public began to become more aware of the treatment of animals as well as the time the Western view began to shift.

FUR TRADE

Although once a booming exchange in North America, popular fur textiles began to become more and more scarce. Because of this, many people were moving to cheaper materials. Examples include:

- Beaver
- Raccoon
- Squirrel
- Fox



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Within the 19th century, there were animal rights activists but they were few and far between. In 1800, the first anti-cruelty bill was introduced into British parliament. This was a huge achievement, because before this bill, nothing existed that put animals first. However, this bill was more so focused on the treatment of animals in an entertainment setting, such as zoos, circuses, and sometimes even pets. Although it was not directly aimed at the fur trade, it does not mean it was not helpful to switching the views. Bringing light to animal cruelty whether that be just strictly entertainment purposes or something greater, it allows the public to then create an opinion that makes its way into other areas as well.

Results

Fur was once seen a social status to flaunt amongst your rich colleagues. If you had the money, you could afford the finest fur pieces. In the 1920s, people believed that the fur you wore told the whole world what type of person you were and what type of life you lead. However, by the mid 1960s, the idea was changing once again. Fur became a stigma to many people. Wearing real fur was frowned upon by many, and the use of celebrities to spread this message made it reach a far greater audience than what was expected. This topic has become more of a political statement in the past 40-50 years.

1920s

"The fur you wear will reveal to everyone the kind of woman you are and the kind of life you lead."
1929 Vogue Magazine

Given the current state of the Great Depression, many people didn't have the extra income to spend on fur garments. Several companies began to produce faux fur at the beginning of the 20th century. They made these faux items out of a material comparable to something used to make corduroy or velvet. This craze was also thanks to taxes being put on real fur. Buying faux just made for sense for the normal Americans lifestyle. This also caused many fur manufacturers to shut down temporarily.

1960s

Following the increasing popularity of faux fur in the 1920's, companies were scrambling to find cheaper ways to include fur in their designs to avoid losing more of their customers. Their grand idea was to make lux coats with simple fur trimmings.

This created a very drastic difference in price.

Expensive mink coat - \$600

Simple wool coat with fur cuffs and lining made from red fox - \$100-\$200

It wasn't until the late 60's that the welfare of animals was brought into the conversation of real fur products. In 1968, members of the Audubon Society began to have picket signs outside of Saks Fifth Avenue, with posters of the cruel practices that take place when harvesting the fur. The faux-fur industry saw an opportunity. It was the first strike of a long war between animal-rights activists and fur wearers and companies that still use it in their designs. The most important thing is that they used celebrities as ammunition.

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1970s

By the 1970s, popular celebrities joined in the movement to remove the "luxury" from the way we viewed fur. These included popular names such as:

- Mary Tyler Moore
- Doris Day
- Angie Dickenson.

Using celebrities to spread the message of animal rights was genius. Many people idolized their favorite celebrities and using them to show that even when you have the money to afford them, nothing is luxurious about wearing the skin of an animal when there has been cheaper alternatives for years now.

"Killing an animal to make a coat is a sin. A woman gains status when she refuses to see anything killed to be put on her back. Then she's truly beautiful..." -Doris Day, *New York Times* (1971)



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