

Fashion and supply chain



The fashion item I have decided to look at is the Bailey Classic Wool Felt Telescope Porkpie Hat. This item retails for \$49.99 and is produced by a men's hat company that has been in business since 1922. The hat has a telescoping 4 inch crown and a snap brim of 1 and 7/8 inches. The design is intended to meet the chic lifestyle of the contemporary urban dweller because of its throwback style to turn of the 20th century North America. A pork pie hat or porkpie hat is type of felt hat (although they have also been made of straw).

Originating in the mid 19th century, it is similar to a Fedora, but unlike those two styles, it has a flat top. The crown is short and has an indentation all the way around, instead of the pinch crown typically seen on Fedoras. It gets its name from its resemblance to a pork pie. Originally the term referred to a type of woman's hat. The hat tends to suggest a sense of a custom made culture. Because Bailey hats are not generally available at massive discount retailers like Wal-Mart or K-Mart, they are marketed to appeal to a more educated and discriminating customer base.

The design of the hat is intended primarily for fashion over function. This can be determined by the relatively thin felt material that does little to insulate the wearer's head during excessively cold weather. The Bailey ethic as it has evolved is able to retain a sense of being custom made largely due to the fact that most national and international orders are fulfilled by its website while design is still controlled by its home store in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Having a longstanding tradition in the American Midwest of producing premier men's hats, Bailey is able to maintain the appearance of a small

business with custom designing while having access to a mass market through the power of the Internet. What is interesting to consider is the way this kind of whimsical fashion is perceived within mainstream culture. The porkpie hat has long been associated with Jazz and other music subcultures. While it has been appropriated by middle class culture, its associations tend to suggest it is part of a night life scene, particularly specific to youth culture.

As such, the porkpie hat tends to be favored by men in their twenties and early thirties. The elegant yet playful design is the perfect embodiment for a single urban lifestyle, especially one that includes an active music scene. The porkpie became wildly popular by artists, musicians, and fashion forward gentlemen in the 1940's and 1950's. Although this hat remained a strong statement among artists throughout the years, it became popular during the 1990's with the release of Johnny Depp's "Benny and Joon" in 1993, along with several others.

The porkpie hat soon became the most important fashion hat of the 1990's. Today's bebop porkpie varies little from the original, yet many variations are being made in other styles. The original porkpie featured a telescope brim, with a very short 1 1/18" inch brim. Current brim lengths are as stingy as ever, but porkpies can now be found with diamond crowns, center dents, and teardrop crowns. The true popularity of the porkpie lies within the stinginess of the brim length. As long as the brim remains short, the porkpie will continue to evolve.

The porkpie hat's appeal tends to be limited to urban areas because of its low functionality. Compared to standard ball caps or other broad brimmed hats, the porkpie hat offers only minimal protection from the sun. Also, the anachronistic look is not likely to be popular in rural areas because the style will be perceived as “weird” or outdated. In general, the porkpie hat is a stable fashion item but one not likely to enjoy widespread popularity.

However, one massive market that has not been explored is the porkpie hat's possible appeal to a female consumer.

Because of its lighthearted appeal, the porkpie hat can be seamlessly integrated into a woman's wardrobe. Inverting the gender use of this apparel item would comment on the degree to which women have been excluded from the subcultures associated with the porkpie hat. By donning this fashion women would be assuming a hybridized identity, making their statement about culture. Such a fashion movement is not beyond the realm of possibility. Indeed, it may provide exactly the kind of punkish note to energize sales and promote a greater acceptance of what has become relegated to a marginal fashion movement.

The porkpie hat is part of a more general trend in terms of anachronistic dress which requires a certain desire to “costume.” This idea of costuming is essentially escapist fashion, providing the wearer with an opportunity to step outside of current fashion requirements. This is a very different appreciation of what fashion has become in terms of being current.

Essentially, being “current” is a result of lacking imagination as a wearer. By encouraging imagination and innovation on the part of the wearer, this

movement in consumer centered fashion changes several important fashion dynamics.

The emphasis is no longer on the design itself but the spirit of the fashion. This democratizes the fashion object and opens it up to modification. This is a consumer based customization and reflects a more general trend of modifying fashion objects to suit different social occasions. There is still a demand for hats among elderly men, who have never stopped wearing them. But the boom market is the 30 to 45 age range. Where older customers buy a hat once a year or every two years, younger ones buy up to seven a year.

The biggest seller is the stingy-brim hat worn by the jazz pianist Thelonius Monk in the 50s, a pork pie hat noted for its narrow brim. The mass distribution of the porkpie hat implies that the fashion is becoming exported largely due to the recent popularity with rappers and hip hop musicians. This appropriation suggests that a large scale interest in bringing “preppier” clothes into the world of hip-hop will have a deeply influential effect on the future of the music scene. The interest in men’s hats as a form of acceptable contemporary fashion is gaining steam all over North America.

In Canada, this is become more visible by the day. Historic Biltmore Hats is about to get its own museum as a busy year picks up steam for the man at the heart of the company’s revival. Eric Lynes, who bought the troubled hat company last year, said it’s important to remind people of the firm’s long history, with the hope this will help boost the manufacturing firm’s exposure. The free-admission miniature museum, to open around Easter, will be in a

room off the company's retail outlet store on Morris Street, off York Road in Guelph.

It will feature historic memorabilia, artifacts, photographs and plaques and other items and information relating to Biltmore Hats, a part of the Guelph business and cultural scene since 1919. Biltmore, which went through upheavals in recent years, was reputedly the source of the term 'hat trick' for awarding caps in the 1950s to National Hockey League players scoring three goals in a game. It once owned the Ontario Hockey League's Biltmore Mad Hatters, which was a New York Rangers farm team.

At a time in the 1950s when men typically wore hats, Biltmore employed as many as 450 workers in Guelph. Biltmore Hats today has roughly two dozen staff and half a dozen sales representatives. As the fashion for hats waned and offshore competition increased, the company's fortunes subsided, leading to receivership two years ago. A representative of bankruptcy trustees in Cambridge blamed cheaper, lower-quality imported products for the company's hard times. However, with the mass interest in men's hat fashion, that should no longer prove to be a problem.