

**Fig 1.** Mink Fur Collar,  
ca. 1980s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC 2009.01.583.  
Author's photo.



# IS THERE A FUTURE FOR FUR?

**Exploring the association of fur with luxury in a Canadian context through the analysis of a 1980/1990s Mink fur collar.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

“Fur has come to mean much more than a mink coat, and, to that end, something to scrimp-and save for and to be worn only on the most special occasion”

– Sally Singer, *Vogue's fashion news and features director, 2004*

Selecting this object for my analysis came very intuitively as I was immediately drawn to the huge satin structured bow, diamante centerpiece and luxurious fur. Although in retrospect, choosing something with more available information would have been to my benefit, upon seeing the garment in person at the Fashion Research Collection, I realized that there is a lot to unpack. I started to question why I associated the piece with luxury and whether it would be appropriate to wear something like it in today's social climate.



**Fig. 2.** Mink fur collar,  
ca. 1980s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2009.01.583.  
Photograph by FRC team.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE OBJECT**

The garment itself is a late 1980s or early 1990s brown mink fur collar with a black acetate velvet lining and a structured silk-like satin bow with a crescent diamante closure (see fig.1 and 2). Toronto Metropolitan University's fur expert, Farley Chatto was able to identify the approximate price of this accessory at around \$250-300 CAD (around \$500 CAD in 2020 when adjusted for inflation using <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>).

The wearer can be assumed to be a middle aged, upper class woman who was looking for a relatively inexpensive addition to an already extensive wardrobe (Chatto). The collar could have been purchased to complete a fall/winter evening look such as a wedding or holiday event where identifying as part of the higher income class would have been favourable. Although not considered "top lot" quality mink fur (only the top 1-2% qualify), it is a very good grade of dark ranch male mink made using a full skin technique with a head to head construction (Chatto). The glossy fur is a rich chocolate brown colour with a reddish tint (see fig. 3) and is extremely light and soft despite being dense.

Chatto also mentioned that the two labels attached to the collar (see fig.1) would have been some sort of collaboration or wholesale buyout between Holt Renfrew and a well known milliner by the name of Don Anderson. It also specifies that it was made in the USA, probably New York given it was Anderson's main city of residence and work (Hats sail into Fashion). I assume that this collar is one size fits all given the type of garment and there is no size indication on the label. The collar is in very good condition, indicating that it was made with quality fabrics and that it was rarely worn (understandable considering it was a seasonal and special occasion accessory).



**Fig. 3.** Mink fur collar, ca. 1980s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2009.01.583. Author's own video.

### **HOLT RENFREW'S HISTORY OF FUR**

The importance of fur in the formation, development and continued success of Canada's international relations and economy cannot be diminished. The significance of the fur trade historically was its involvement in opening up trade networks for the Indigenous communities to European goods. Fur and fur garments were used as a commodity of exchange for necessities such as food and guns and were worn as a symbol of wealth and power by the British and French settlers (Emberley, 3). Fur trade began around the 1600s to satisfy the trend of fur felt hats for the European settlers as well as to be exported to European markets. French and English settlers fought amongst themselves and the Native American population to gain control of the fur trade which led to the French Iroquois wars in Montreal (Innis, 38). The war ended with England winning and the Hudson's Bay Company was granted monopoly over the North American fur trade in 1670 (Innis, 15).



**Fig.4.** Sir John A. MacDonalD in a G.R. Renfrew and Co fur coat by portrait photographer William James Topley in 1883. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holt\\_Renfrew#/media/File:John\\_Alexander\\_MacDonald\\_by\\_Topley.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holt_Renfrew#/media/File:John_Alexander_MacDonald_by_Topley.jpg)



**Fig. 5.** Cover of the 1890-91 catalogue of G.R. Renfrew & Co. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holt\\_Renfrew#/media/File:G.R.\\_Renfrew\\_&\\_Co\\_fur\\_catalogue\\_1890.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holt_Renfrew#/media/File:G.R._Renfrew_&_Co_fur_catalogue_1890.jpg)

Canada is a country with rich natural resources including high quality animal furs. Costume historian Ann Rudge who emigrated with her family to Canada in 1949 mentions in her article that while shopping with her family as a child, her mom would, “finish off the entire collection [with] a wild mink stole bought at Holt Renfrew in Toronto [because] furs were better in Canada” (Rudge, 2). Holt Renfrew is the second oldest incorporated fur selling company globally and was founded in 1837 by William S. Henderson in Quebec City (Foster, Eccles, 1). Although Holt Renfrew was originally founded solely for the purpose of merchandising fur, it is one of the most historically rich chain luxury department stores in Canada. The coats were popular amongst celebrities, the higher class, and politicians such as Canada’s first Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonalD (see fig. 4).

The popularity and reputation of their high quality furs was not only contained in North America but soon gained recognition in Western Europe. The company has also had a long relationship with the British Royal family, acting as the official furrier to multiple generations of royalty until 1921 and was even considered, “Furriers in Ordinary” to Queen Victoria (Innis, 17). Their connection with the Royal family was often used in marketing material referring “to the Queen” (see fig.5).



**Fig. 6.** Serena Vanderwood wearing a Moncler jacket in "Gossip Girl" *Pinterest*, [br.pinterest.com/pin/327073991661867974/A](https://br.pinterest.com/pin/327073991661867974/A)

### **FUR'S CONNECTION WITH LUXURY AND STATUS**

"...Mink fur which represents, the ultimate symbol of status, elegance, and femininity. No sophisticated, fashion-loving female's wardrobe was complete without one."

– Julia Ingall, *Investopedia* 2020

It is without a doubt that fur has been historically associated with power and wealth as only the higher class would be able to afford the steep prices. Fig. 6 shows Blake Lively as the character, Serena Van Der Woodsen from the 2007 show "Gossip Girl" which followed the lives of teenagers of high income families from the Upper East Side of New York City. The wardrobe of these characters is known to be luxurious and glamorous as a reflection of their privileged lifestyle. There is a clear similarity that can be drawn between Serena's Moncler coat (see fig.6) and the Holt Renfrew/Don Anderson mink collar with the fur and bow details (see fig.1). This highlights "fur's symbolic value [in the] joining of wealth and prestige with an explicitly feminine connotation" (Emberley, 3).

More and more brands are steering towards faux fur which not only lowers the cost, but is necessary in marketing for a generation that is increasingly sensitive about animal rights. Examples include luxury houses such as Chanel, Gucci, Burberry and Versace to name a few (<https://www.peta.org/features/fur-free-companies-brands-that-banned-fur/>)



**Fig. 7.** Phoebe's fashion dilemma, Season 5 Episode 1 [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=phoebe+fur+coat+](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=phoebe+fur+coat+)

The debate on fur can be very simply and loosely represented in the video of popular 1990s daytime television show, "Friends" (see fig 7). The character Phoebe, who is a vegetarian, feels discomfort in owning a mink fur coat due to its association with animal cruelty but cannot disassociate from the quality and aesthetics of the coat. Her conversation with Rachel who works in the fashion industry highlights the polarizing debate on fur in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

**Ethical concerns** are constantly being expressed by animal rights organizations such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) who deem the practice of using and profiting off of fur for fashion animal abuse (<https://www.peta.org/>). The increased availability of mass media has given animal rights organizations a platform to express their criticism against the fur industry to a large public audience and flood the media with images and footage of violence and animal abuse. With headlines such as, "Every fur coat means animals died a painful death by electrocution, drowning, or being gassed" (PETA), it is no wonder that the wearing of fur has developed such a negative connotation. The activism has had a huge and damaging impact on the fur industry by perpetuating social attitude norms, demonizing those who chose to incorporate fur into their wardrobe (Lee & Kapova, 1). Despite the importance of ethically and sustainably sourced furs, both the commercial and cultural value of selling and wearing fur do not seem to be acknowledged by these organizations.

**Sustainability:** Another growing concern regarding fur for fashion is its long term environmental impact. The consequences of over-hunting animals can lead to the endangerment of certain wildlife. It is a serious issue when hunting is not done legally and responsibly with consideration of the impact it has on the wildlife. This has led to the tightening of legislation in regards to commercializing mink fur in Canada (National Farm Animal Care Council, 2020). In terms of sustainability, it is also important to take into consideration the durability of the garment, mink fur is not only sought after for style but also as one of the warmest, lightest, and longest lasting furs. When examining our Holt Renfrew/Don Anderson mink fur collar, all evidence points to attention to detail in its construction, given the fact that it has been decades, the collar has no signs of deterioration. A contemporary example of the ecological impacts regarding fur and the farming of fur is the concern over the outbreaks of Covid-19 at several large mink fur farms including multiple in Denmark, the largest exporter of mink furs (Murray, 2020)

**Symbol of Power and Oppression:** The success of the fur exportation industry was built on the backs of the Indigenous population. When discussing the Canadian fur trade it is important to also consider the historical oppression and exploitation of the Indigenous population that occurred in order to perpetuate the success of the fur trade in Canada. (Emberley, 5).

### **CREATIVE COMPONENT**

While researching the impacts of fur in both historical and contemporary fashion culture, I realized a lack of knowledge surrounding the actual processing of the furs. For my creative engagement, I decided to create an infographic detailing the step by step process of creating garments from mink fur. While researching several different sources, it became apparent that the work put into farming and preparing these furs before they even get to the design stage requires a high level of expertise. I thought it would be worthwhile to simplify the information through an infographic so that the delicacy in craftsmanship can be appreciated. Although the information can be perceived as biased due to the nature of the commercial interests of the website, I wanted to acknowledge that there are ways to support sustainable and responsible fur businesses.

# THE MAKING OF MINK FUR GARMENTS



**MYTH:** animals are alive when being skinned, there are strict regulations regarding animal welfare, health and respect in Canada.

## FUR FARMS

The minks are selected and bred on farms in order to minimize the ecological impact and maintain sustainability.

When they are fully grown, they are humanely euthanized and the farmer will then proceed to skin them.

1

## AUCTIONS

The unprocessed pelts are sold to international buyers at market price (determined by supply and demand) at public auctions.

When the pelt is sold, the auction house will receive a small commission

2

## FUR PRODUCTION

This is a process that needs to be delicately and expertly done to protect the quality of the fur. There are several steps starting with dressing, cleaning, softening the raw pelts. The remaining flesh will be removed and the pelt is then stretched. The skin will then be tanned and many furs will be dyed.

3

## DESIGN

Since no two pelts are the exact same in terms of size, colour, thickness, and density, real fur can be tedious to work with. The designer of the garment needs to take these into consideration. The fur also needs to be let out which is the process of hand cutting the fur into diagonal strips and re-sewing them to make the pelt longer and softer.

4

## BUYING THROUGH RETAIL

Although there are furriers who will go through these processes themselves, it is more common for the final garments to be sold wholesale retailers and then sold to the consumers. Majority of the retail furriers have skills and resources that have been passed down through generations.

5



Information retrieved from

[HAUTEACORN.COM/HOW-A-MINK-COAT-IS-MADE](http://HAUTEACORN.COM/HOW-A-MINK-COAT-IS-MADE)



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