



THE TOP HAT OF E.J. LENNOX, ARCHITECT OF OLD CITY HALL

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The Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection owns five top hats - quite a few, I thought, for this type of accessory. **One top hat stood out among the rest** (FRC2014.07.091 A-J). This hat was housed in a luxurious hard-shell case of leather and canvas that had been stencilled with the initials *E.J.L.T.* Not only was this top hat in relatively pristine condition (considering its age), but the case also contained other items: three shirt collar stocks, two well-worn pairs of fine leather gloves, a silk tie and two velvet cushions.

Who would go to such lengths to label this item and what do the letters represent? Also, what is the significance of the additional contents of the box? These questions exemplify *individualization* of the hat itself.

Individualization of the item describes the “de-commodification” of a thing according to Igor Kopytoff’s seminal essay “The Cultural Biography of Things.” According to Kopytoff, in capitalist and non-capitalist societies alike, things may be endowed with value; and with value, objects become tradable. If an item’s ability to be traded is what commodifies it, its individualization - through purchase or trade, and hence, ownership - is what changes its status to that of a ‘non-commodity’. He writes: “Such singularization is sometimes extended to things that are normally commodities - in effect, commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere” (74). As such, **I was curious to uncover who owned this well-kept hat, and forgo its commodity biography in favour of studying its life as a singularized possession.**



Your Truly
E. J. Lennox

Portrait and signature of E.J. Lennox. Photograph from the Toronto Public Library.

While I analyzed the hat's physical attributes using Ingrid Mida's checklists from her book [The Dress Detective](#), Ingrid told me that **E.J.L.T. are initials of Edward James Lennox (1854-1933), an architect of notable Toronto landmarks, including Old City Hall and Casa Loma.**

E.J. Lennox courted clients that were elite members of society including Henry Pellatt, for whom he designed Casa Loma, and George Gooderham, for whom he revamped the King Edward Hotel. This information is relevant in discussing the particular biography of my object because, not only does it illuminate an enigmatic physical signifier, but also, ownership of an item gives it different meaning than it had as a homogenized commodity. Kopytoff writes: "In the homogenized world of commodities, an eventful biography of things becomes the story of various singularizations of it" (90). **Hence, had this hat been owned by another person, its biography would differ greatly. Perhaps Lennox even wore the top hat and accessories for one of the events related to the opening of these Toronto landmarks.** Suddenly, through Ingrid's revelation, my subject transcended its likely status as a dress artifact - useful for the study of material culture - and became a "precious Toronto relic," as Adjunct Professor Janna Eggebeen pointed out.



Top hat, ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2014.07.091B. E.J.L.T. canvas case. Photograph by Amanda Memme, 2017.

Aside from the initials stencilled on its carrying case, other notable physical attributes of Lennox's hat include its relatively good condition. Considering its age, the exterior shows minor deterioration, and mostly along the inside of the brim. **This fact, as well as the other formal items included in the box (the collar stocks, leather gloves and tie) suggest the hat was likely reserved for occasions of significance.** Folledore notes the emblematic significance of the top hat in formal occasions:

*The hat continued, of course, to be a simple, practical way of protecting the head against adverse weather conditions, but it was also used more and more as a way of expressing complex messages heavy with meaning. **The [top] hat, like a royal crown, definitely had an emblematic function, since it was a clear statement of virility, and a means of pleasing...respect...** (Folledore 25)*

The preservation of the hat suggests that it was carefully handled by subsequent owners (see curator's note below). I believe this reinforces the sentiment that the hat is a precious item with known historical and geographic importance. Adding to this rich significance is the hat's materiality.

The hat is tall, flat-topped, with an elegant up-turned brim and a flared cylindrical shape. It comprises rigid material covered with different silks - the black exterior, by Ingrid's assessment, is silk plush. The upturned brim is covered with smooth, black silk and altogether, the exterior is finished with a ribbon.



Top hat, ca.1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2014.07.091B. Inside
of hat. Photograph by
Amanda Memme, 2017.

The interior is covered in cream silk and contains a leather sweatband where the crown meets the interior brim. This is the part which would rest on the head when worn. The natural medium brown of the leather is stained darker by oils from a forehead - leaving a lasting imprint of the legendary wearer. The leather is branded on both sides with a maker's mark. **The overall choices in materials are luxurious, and the format non-utilitarian.** These two aspects of its materiality suggest the item is of a 'special' type - what Kopytoff would refer to as from "the sphere of prestige items" (71).

Further illuminating this symbol of power is another, singular detail: a third maker's mark, in the centre of the crown, printed on the cream silk lining. **The mark consists of the manufacturer's name - Henry Heath Limited - surrounded by the British emblem and text which reads "By Warrant to His Majesty the King."** This detail comprises what is known as a [Royal Warrant](#) - a distinction granted to tradespeople who supply the British Monarch and whose manufacturing upholds high standards. The warrant gives status to the maker and its products, and in turn to its owner.

At what upon first glance seemed an innocuous men's top hat, proved to be anything but. The material evidence suggests that it was owned by a wealthy individual of power, was worn for select occasions and subsequently taken care of. Upon deeper research, the signifiers which led to this assessment were illuminated by Ingrid's revelation of the name of its former owner. Its relative importance is also relevant in the context of Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Research Collection. Although another hat top from the collection is also stored in a very similar leather case, most others were stored in cardboard boxes, not necessarily original to the hat. As shown by the photo below, their conditions starkly contrast with that of the Lennox hat.



Top hat, ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2014.07.091B.
Photograph by Amanda
Memme, 2017.

What does this reveal? It reveals that, although these items once existed in the same “commodity sphere,” to quote Kopytoff, their post-commodity biographies are vastly different. The signifiers of the other hats say something about their histories, each unique from the others. The hats do share one thing in common, and that is their current biographies, since they have all become further singularized as artifacts belonging to the university.

In every society, there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized...This applies to much of what one thinks of as the symbolic inventory of a society: public lands, monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal residencies, chiefly insignia, ritual objects, and so on. Power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on the right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects (Kopytoff 73).

As such, E.J. Lennox’s top hat is totally de-commoditized because, for one thing, it is part of a research collection as an artifact. For another, its viability to return to the commodity sphere has long diminished, as Kopytoff would point out, because it is no longer a fashionable item. Though it will no longer impart status on a wearer, it will, as part of a collection, connote power of the university. As long as it exists, the hat and accessories will provide an educational opportunity and a glimpse of the past. **Of course, E.J. Lennox’s legacy of monumental buildings certainly far exceeds his top hat, but his top hat is significant because it humanizes him.**

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This top hat came into Toronto Metropolitan University's possession in 2014 via the donation of the Suddon-Cleaver Collection. Alan Suddon's records indicated that it was given to him by Mary Gooderham. This fact is interesting since Gooderham was a client of Lennox, but there is no further information on that aspect of its provenance.

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