

Man At His Best

PRACTICAL MATTERS *How to Buy a Hat*



PHOTOGRAPH-STEPHEN FRAILEY BORSALINO-COURTESY OF WORTH & WORTH

In the mid-1900s every man in town knew his bowlers from his Borsalinos. Felt hats were as much a part of proper dress as neckties. Today the businessman's felt may be only an accessory, but it's still a strong personal fashion statement—too strong for some. It takes a man with ego, they say, to perch such an icon of style atop his head for all to see. Not necessarily so. Almost any man will feel good in a hat that looks good—and all that it takes is the savvy to buy right.

For starters, the hat should complement your skin color and features as well as your overcoat. As a rule, olive complexions look sickly in blues. Fair faces disappear beneath beige brims. For more versatile wear, go with a neutral shade: a charcoal, taupe, loden green, medium brown, or tan. Let facial features be your guide to specific styles. A full face, for instance, needs a wider brim; a taller man often looks best in a lower crown, or one made to appear lower with a wider ribbon.

Sizes in felt hats are not only confusing, they're almost worthless. Europeans size their hats in centimeters, which divided by eight equal the American numbered sizes. An international size 58, for example, lines up with the domestic 7¼. A good hat salesman can often guess a head

size on sight, but even if the hat is theoretically the right size, the fit can still be all wrong. The problem is the basic form of the hat itself and the individuality of heads. Some manufacturers use long oval blocks to shape their hats, while others use wide ovals or no oval at all. None take into account the bump above one man's ear or another's thinning hair or high forehead. A good hat shop can usually size a hat up or down by adding fabric under the sweatband, stretching the body slightly, or reblocking. So shop for service as well as style.

IT'S ALL ON YOUR HEAD

True connoisseurs insist that the only felt hats worth buying are made of fur, not wool. Wools tend to be flimsy and lack the durability and soft suppleness of furs. Not that all fur felts are created equal. In a top-quality hat, the thickness of the felt should be consistent. When you slide the hat between your fingers, feeling along the brim and around the crown, no section should be noticeably thinner or thicker than another. A good felt, though soft, also needs a full body. When pinched, the crown shouldn't crease or wrinkle. Also look for evenness in the color of the felt: no mottling allowed.

The sweatband should be made of top-grade leather; it is, after all, the only part of the hat that touches the head.

Some men don't care for the added weight of leather, but imitations or cloths offer the felt body little protection from perspiration; they fall apart and crumble with too much moisture, while a leather band absorbs and actually molds to the shape of the head with wear. The texture of the hide also helps keep the hat in place on blustery days.

Better hats use silk linings, for insulation and a finished look. For a good indication of the care put into the hat as a whole, check how the lining is attached. Fold out the sweatband on the Italian Borsalino (probably the finest fur felt in the world), and you'll see that the lining is basted in by hand. Other manufacturers stick the cloth to the body with dots of glue, which is easily dissolved by heat and sweat.

Expect to pay between \$80 and \$200 for a first-rate fur felt hat, whether a traditional homburg with the rolled brim to top your Chesterfield or the trendier wide-brimmed Borsalino fedora à la *Raiders of the Lost Ark* for wear with a trench coat or leather jacket. The sporty Makins and trilby unlined felts can be dressed up or down and their crowns shaped to order. Also consider felts by Churchill, Christie's of London, and the Texas-based Cavanaugh, with its \$350 Touch of Mink fedora, now carried only by Worth & Worth in New York.

Once you've bought the right fur-felt hat, treat it well. Take it off by grasping the brim, not the crown. And after removing it, always snap the brim up and set the body down flat so as not to weaken the brim. Never brush a felt hat when it's wet; reshape it, and once it dries, dust it lightly with a natural-bristle paintbrush.

Given proper care, a felt hat may return in social recognition what it costs in cash. In 1797 when the first Londoner took to the streets in a beaver hat, he reportedly caused a riot and was arrested for disturbing the peace. Donning a felt today should arouse more welcome attentions.

—Christine McPartland