

How to Make a Hat From a Beaver

Beaver fur was used to make felt hats. Beavers do not hibernate, so their fur gets very thick in the winter to keep them warm. Most of the trapping for beaver was done in the winter. After it was killed, the beaver was skinned and its hide stretched on a willow frame. Pelts were collected all winter at the post. In the spring, the pelts were pressed, packed, and wrapped with canvas to protect them on their journey to Montreal, then across the Atlantic Ocean to London. There the hatmaking process began.



Stretched pelt
(60 pelts per pack)



Removing the Fur from the Hide

Beavers have two kinds of hair: a soft, short, thick woolly layer and a longer coarse layer. The coarse hairs, called guard hairs, were plucked from the pelt and discarded.



Next, the hatter brushed on a solution of nitrate of mercury. This raised the scales on the hair, which made it easier to make into felt.

The fur was then washed, dried, and shaved from the pelt.



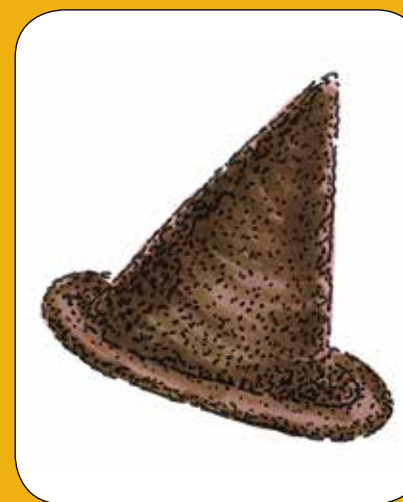
Starting to Look Like a Hat

The felt was shaped by wrapping it around a cone-shaped paper. A second cone was layered over the first one.



Shaping, Blocking, and Finishing

Shrunk and thickened hat body



Hat body shaped or blocked on a wooden form

A damp cloth was placed over the felt and pressed. The result was a thick, seamless hat body shaped like a wizard's cap.



Brushing up the nap



Trimming the nap



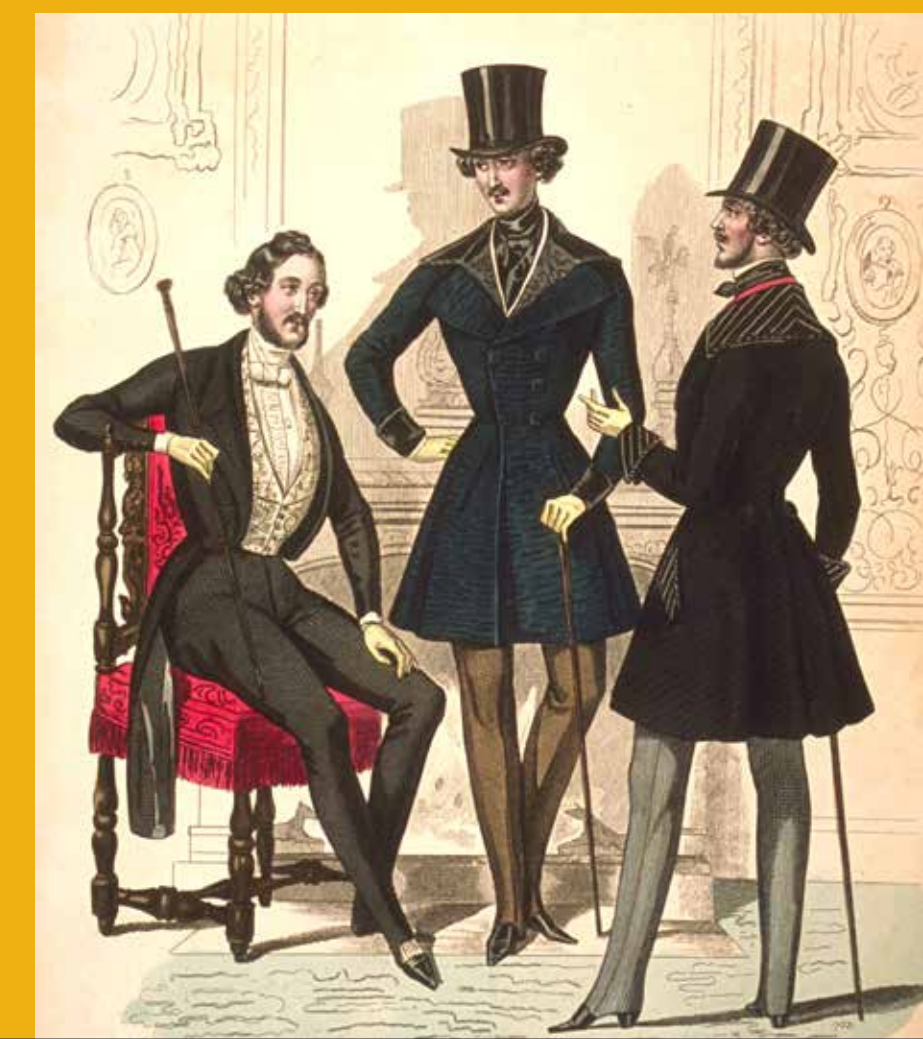
Ironing the nap to align it in one direction



The hatter folded the hat body and put it into a kettle of boiling water. The fabric was taken out occasionally and rolled with a wooden pin to keep it even. After five hours, the hat body had shrunk by half and was much thicker.



Voilà! The completed hat was finished with a ribbon. Feathers or beads were added at the hat shop to create trim.



Bowing the Fur to Start the Felting Process

The short-hair fiber is like a stack of cones, each with a barb on its end. When dampened and shaken, the barbs begin hooking together.

Bowing was a fluffing-and-cleaning process. The hatter's bow looked like an oversized violin bow. Working over a hurdle, the hatter plucked the bow over a pile of shaved fur, agitating, separating, and fluffing the fibers. Dust and other impurities fell between the slats of the hurdle. The cleaned fluffy mass of fur that remained was called a batt.

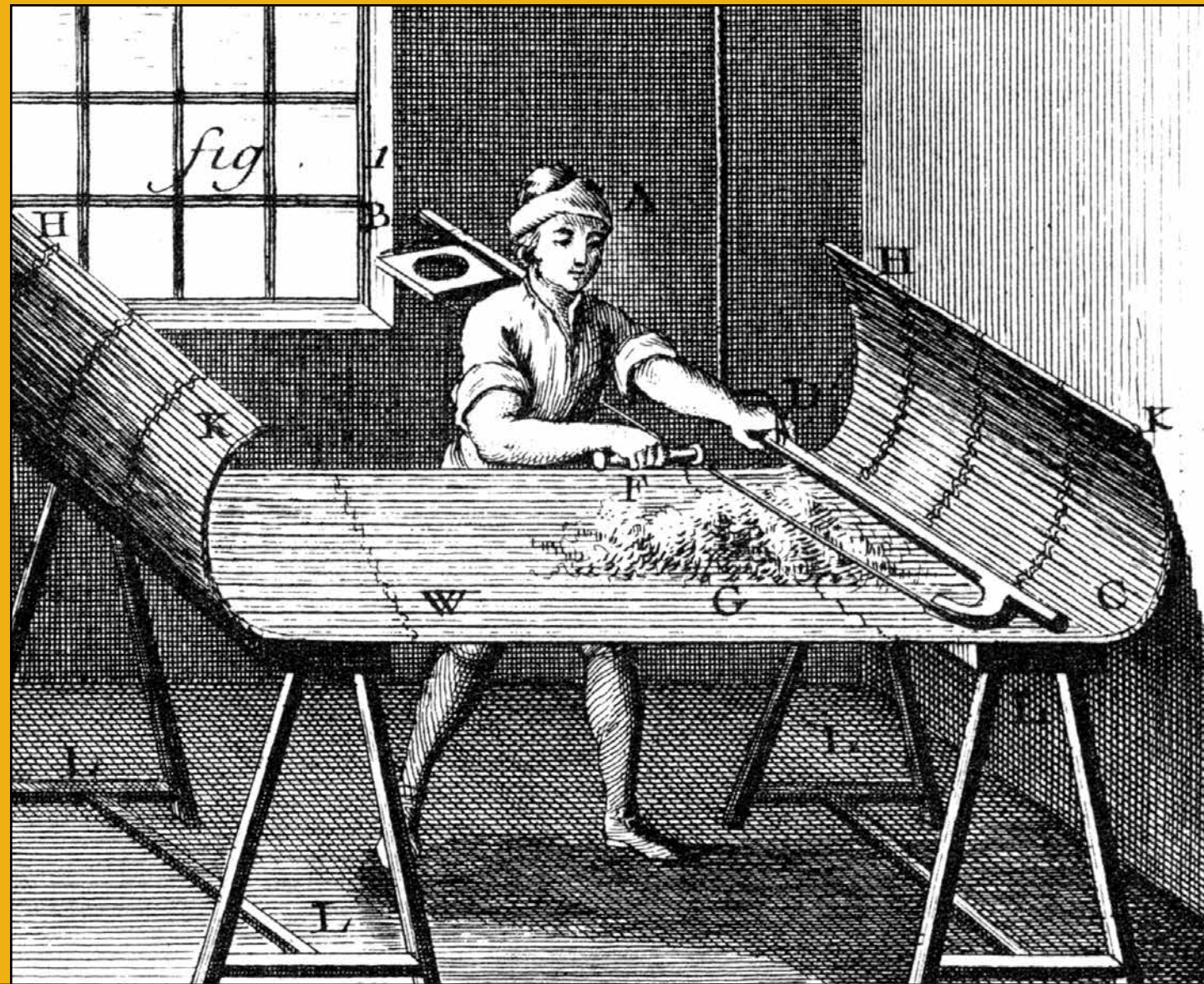
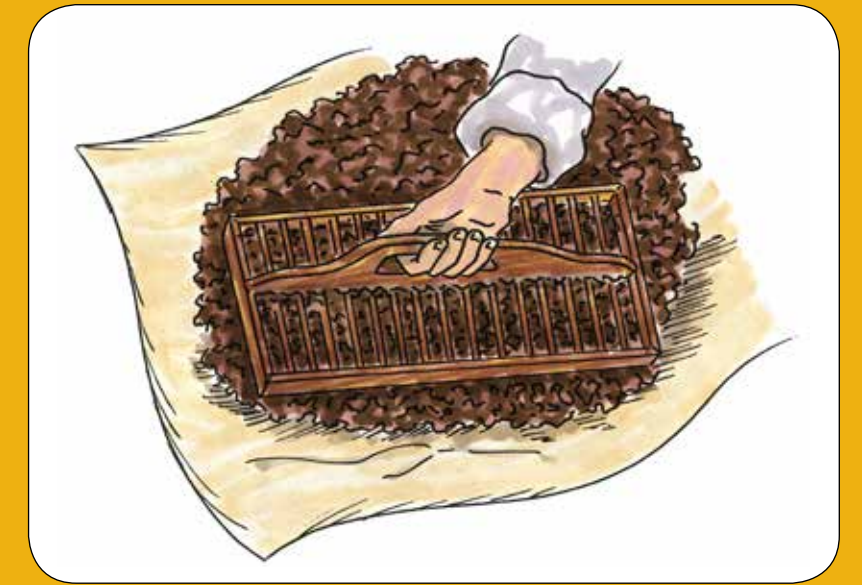


Illustration from Diderot's *Encyclopédie*

Making the Batt, the Fabric of a Hat

A basket, used like a scooper, aligned the batt fibers and gave them an even thickness.



A damp linen cloth was laid over the batt. A piece of leather called a hardening skin was placed over the linen. This was pressed and rubbed until the batt stuck to the linen.



All three layers were rolled up, and the batt was rolled and compressed in order to knit the hair fibers together—turning it into felt.