



Top Hat History & Activity

At the Barnum Museum, we think top hats are very cool! P. T. Barnum wore top hats, and the Museum has one that he purchased when he was about 20 years old. Barnum had begun printing his own newspaper, and he had to travel to the State Capitol in Hartford, Connecticut, to get the latest news. Barnum needed a top hat to look like other gentlemen at the Capitol. Top hats cost a lot of money, so not every man could afford to buy one. Barnum was not rich when he was young but he knew that wearing a top hat was important to his career.



P.T. Barnum's first top hat, from about 1830

Top hats became popular around 1800 and remained popular until the end of the nineteenth century. Just like other clothing, top hat styles changed with fashion. Some, like Barnum's first top hat, were a light color because that was stylish when he bought it. His hat was made with a fashionable flat brim, but curved brims were more often in style in the 1800s. In the mid-1800s top hats were very, very tall and were nicknamed "stovepipe" hats.

Early top hats were made of felted fur and formed into the hat shape. Later on, shiny silk fabric with a smooth fur-like finish was used instead, with the fabric glued to a cardboard hat shape. Silk ribbon was added where the hat's crown and brim are joined. This decoration was called a hat band.

Look at the diagram below to learn the basic parts of a top hat. Then try the matching activity on the next page!





Match the Top Hats

Who wore which top hat? Read the description and look for the person or character wearing that hat. When you find the match, write the letter on the line next to the description.

1. The namesake of the Barnum Museum wore top hats throughout his long career. This one from the 1880s is silk and has a tall shiny crown, a curved brim, and narrow hat band. _____
2. This American President liked to wear a stovepipe hat – a tall black hat that looked like a piece of pipe from a wood stove. The crown was straight, the brim was flat, and the hat band was narrow. _____
3. This dancer, singer, and actor often wore a shiny black top hat in his films. The hat's crown was a medium height with a curved brim, and he wore it at a slight angle to look stylish. _____
4. This character represents the government of the United States. His patriotic outfit includes a white top hat with stars on a wide blue hat band. The brim is very curved at the sides, and the crown flares out toward the top. _____
5. Top hats are often used by magicians to do tricks. This magician's hat brought a chilly sculpture to life! The hat has a shorter crown, an up-turned brim all around, and a cheerful accent on the wide hat band. _____
6. This cartoon character wears a top hat to show everyone he is wealthy. The crown is medium tall, the hat band is narrow, and the brim is wide and curved. _____
7. This storybook character was a hat-maker and wears a top hat with the price on it. The hat's big, flared crown makes him look silly, but it was a real fashion worn by some men in the early 1800s. _____
8. Today we most often see top hats on the heads of royalty, like the Duke of Sussex. His hat is shiny, features a wide hat band, and has a gently curved brim. _____

