

The Skins Game: Canada's Fur Trade Revival

Jessica Barrett | Image: Paul Joseph | Published: December 01, 2010



Snowflake Trading Co.'s Rokie Bernstein, outside her new Vancouver store, says fur is hot once again – despite the concerted protest efforts of the "antis."

Canada’s fur trade – arguably the country’s oldest industry – has suffered through recessions, protests and changing consumer tastes. But after two decades of decline, things are finally looking up. Thank the Chinese.

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In the world of high-end fashion – and certainly in the wake of a recession – the presence of brash signage heralding fire-sale prices at a posh boutique is generally interpreted as a very bad sign.

And so it might have appeared to anyone walking down West Georgia Street in late September. There stood the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver’s lone independent Canadian tenant, a clothing store called Snowflake, its street-level windows blotted out with poster board displaying the kind of slogans you’d expect to see in a used-car sales lot, not a prim ladies shop specializing in Canadian-designed fur, leather and cashmere outerwear.

“Prices so low we’re practically giving it away! Come in and make us a deal!” the signs read.

It seemed the end was nigh for a store that had held its own in the hotel lobby, alongside neighbouring luxury boutiques Gucci, Louis Vuitton and St. John, for more than 16 years. And if it were Friday, between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., you might formulate a theory as to why. Anti-fur protesters, as they did most weeks at that time, would be handing out pamphlets outlining the cruelties of the fur industry. A glance around would reveal very few fur-clad people on the street, and you might conclude the Canadian public’s tendency to regard fur as politically incorrect and passé had, at last, conspired to put Snowflake out of business. Perhaps, you might also infer, the country’s iconic fur trade was not far behind.

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How Fur Coats Are Made: [Okay, so a few lynx, minks and beavers were harmed in the making of these videos](#)

You would be wrong.

“The bad news is, the traditional fur coat is dead. The good news is, fur is hot,” says Rokie Bernstein, the diminutive 63-year-old founder and CEO of Snowflake Trading Co. When we first meet on a muggy August afternoon at a Davie Street sushi bar, Bernstein is far from calling it quits. The

protesters may have succeeded in getting her out of the Fairmont – after years of enduring demonstrations, hate mail and harassed staff, hotel management announced her lease would not be renewed when it came up at the end of September – but Bernstein is undeterred. She's busy opening a new store just down the street, at the corner of Pender and Howe.

The Vancouver store is one of five Bernstein-owned boutiques located in popular tourist destinations across Western Canada, including one at Chateau Whistler and three in Banff, where she opened the first Snowflake in 1979. Intended as a high-end alternative to the many trinkety souvenir shops flooding the Alberta resort town, Snowflake quickly gained an international reputation for its Canadian-made or Canadian-designed fur-, leather- and skins-based garments, reaching its peak of seven locations by the mid-'90s. A decade later, that number was down to five: four under the Snowflake brand and the fifth a Banff-based cashmere boutique called Miriam Joy, named for Bernstein's late mother. Sensing fur was headed for a renaissance, Bernstein also launched three private labels during the past decade, Il Fait Froid, Gazelle and Honey Furs, designing them in-house using primarily Canadian furs, but manufacturing in China to save costs. Although Bernstein doesn't consider herself a furrier – by definition furriers store and repair fur, and Bernstein does neither – skins-based garments have always been Snowflake's bread and butter. While styles and sentiments have vacillated wildly over her 30 years in business, Bernstein says sales have not, though she declines to provide specifics.

The vitality of Canada's fur business

According to Bernstein, Snowflake's continued success is proof that Canada's fur business, though no longer the domain of rugged voyageurs, is still very much alive. But analyzing the fur trade's fortunes is an almost impossible task. Few stats are kept on industry sales, and top fur retailers are loath to attract attention for fear of protestors and disruptions to their business. Bernstein is one of the few who will speak publicly. However, department stores Holt Renfrew and the Bay, both of which declined comment for this article, continue to run fur salons at several locations (the Bay bowed to pressure in 1991 and stopped selling fur, only to start again in 1997 due to increasing demand), while genuine fur is easily found on garments in high-end downtown boutiques from Gucci to Danier. Jim Laursen, owner of Speiser Furs – a presence in Vancouver's South Granville neighbourhood for 64 years – is adamant that his sales have remained steady for the past two decades; the biggest threat to his business, he says, are rising rents in the area. And perhaps the best-known furrier in town, family-owned Pappas Furs, has been a major player in the western Canadian fur market for nearly a century. Third-generation owner Constantine Pappas categorically shuns media interest, but his company still operates a salon in its heavily secured building across from Victory Square in downtown Vancouver. And while Pappas sold its fur auction house – the only one in Western Canada – in 2008, it also expanded that same year, opening a second store in Richmond's Aberdeen Centre.

Internationally, sales of Canadian fur have sagged in the traditionally strong European market, mostly due to the seal-hunt controversy and Europe's economic woes, but Pappas, Bernstein and others have found a much larger, more lucrative customer base in Asia's emerging upper classes. That, combined with a renewed interest in recent years from international designers and a bold new marketing campaign aimed at recapturing a domestic market, has many in Canada's fur trade confident that the nation's oldest industry will survive for centuries to come.

The history of fur in Canada

Once used as currency between European settlers and their First Nations hosts, fur has been a fixture in what is now Canada for more than 500 years, and it has been a fixture of Canada's retail scene for almost as long, with the 340-year-old Hudson's Bay Co. making its name in the fur trade. But it wasn't until the country started to modernize that fur transitioned from necessity to luxury. The fashion industry first introduced the fur coat as we know it around 1880, and its popularity as a symbol of wealth and power continued to grow over the next century. The 1980s, an age of excess and conspicuous consumption, marked the apex of Canada's modern fur trade, with Pappas Furs even recruiting Sylvester Stallone to hawk its wares in glossy magazine ads.

By the end of the decade, however, fur was starting to fall out of favour among domestic consumers, so much so that by 1988 Statistics Canada stopped counting fur garments separately from other clothing in its domestic sales stats. The nadir for Canada's modern fur trade likely came in 1992, at



Years in Fur: (from top) trapper Daniel Wecahk in Hazelton, B.C., in 1914; a woman inspects a sea otter pelt, circa 1940; models display fur coats at the New York Fur CO. on West Georgia Street in 1935.

the depth of the early '90s recession and the height of an increasingly vocal animal-rights movement (with publicity stunts that involved dousing fur-wearing celebrities with red paint). That was also the year the Russian economy collapsed, taking with it the purchasing power of what had been Canada's top international fur market. Exports in 1992 sank to just over \$140 million, according to the industry association Fur Institute of Canada, down from a 1988 peak of \$340 million.



Modern Mode: (from left) 2010 fur designs by Anna Sui and Gucci; magazine ads from the fur industry's golden years of the 1980s, with Sylvester Stallone modelling for Vancouver's Pappas Furs.

But slowly things started to turn around. Russian buyers were replaced by buyers from Asia's emerging wealthy classes: initially Japanese, then Korean and Chinese. By 2006 exports had hit a new high of \$450 million, with B.C. mirroring the upward trend, achieving \$30 million in exports. While the recession has caused a slight dip in the intervening years, today annual exports are holding steady at about \$430 million, with B.C. hitting an all-time high of \$45 million in 2009. Meanwhile, industry representatives claim that domestic numbers have slowly climbed back, with the Fur Institute estimating about \$300 million in sales in 2006.

Snowflake's Bernstein isn't surprised to see fur back in fashion; if you ask her, it never left. ("If it had, I wouldn't be here," she reasons.) Originally from Winnipeg, Bernstein grew up in an environment where fur was valued as much for function as for fashion. One of two daughters born to a retail family, Bernstein, along with sister Megan Halprin (Snowflake's CFO), learned about the business side of fashion first-hand through her father, a children's-wear buyer. Meanwhile, Bernstein's stay-at-home mother inspired her daughters with her impeccable fashion sense and impressive collection of furs and cashmere sweaters. As a young adult, Bernstein dreamt of becoming the first editor of *Vogue Canada*, obtaining a degree in commerce from the University of Manitoba before moving to New York City to study fashion. When the magazine job failed to materialize, Bernstein dabbled in retail sales and teaching before she and husband Bob launched their first store in Banff in 1976. It sold tribal imports the two had collected on their many world travels, but it wasn't Bernstein's scene. She longed to offer something uniquely Canadian, and fur immediately came to mind.

"At Snowflake I wanted to show the best of what Canada had to offer in the high-fashion world: knits, leather, fur and combinations of those materials, because we're a northern country," she says. Snowflake uses exclusively Canadian fur, both from farmed animals, such as mink and fox, which are primarily raised in captivity for their pelts, and wild, such as beaver. Her one exception is rex rabbit, which is farm-raised in China for fur but, she says, is also used for its meat. Bernstein says she's taken care to inspect the supply chain of her producers, even going so far as to tour rabbit farms in China to ensure humane practices are used.

Though protests have affected her business, Bernstein is adamant sales haven't suffered. In fact, the "antis" have inspired only one lasting change in the industry: a shift away from the floor-grazing coats made famous by 1950s Hollywood starlets (which now account for just 25 per cent of Snowflake's sales) and toward accessories and garments made from a combination of materials. What's giving her and other fur retailers particular hope for the future is what's happening in the world's fashion capitals. This past spring, for the first time in nearly two decades, high-fashion runways in Paris, Milan and New York saw more designers than not (including Zac Posen, Louis Vuitton and Canadian-born Todd Lynn) prominently feature fur – the real stuff – in their fall collections. The trend was such a departure from the status quo that New York Times fashion writer Eric Wilson took note of it in a lengthy piece published in March.



A protest against Pappas Furs at Aberdeen Centre in Richmond.

As on the runways this year, Snowflake's focus is on contemporary fur pieces, which are subtle, lighter and considerably cheaper than the classic full-length coats priced upwards of \$10,000. These days, says Bernstein, consumers prefer less ostentatious fashion in which fur is more garnish than main ingredient. The store's bestseller is a knit sheared beaver shawl by Ontario designer Paula

Lishman, priced at around \$2,500. Other popular items include sheared beaver vests dyed chartreuse or ice blue that are sporty, fleece-like and barely recognizable as fur – part of an effort, Bernstein says, somewhat cryptically, to “honour British Columbia sensibilities.”

In the market for fur

Of course, the bulk of Snowflake’s customers, at least the high rollers, are not British Columbians. Indeed, only about one-third of customers are Canadian, including tourists from other parts of the country, while another third comes from the U.S., often cruise-ship passengers. The remaining customers are high-end international tourists, including a roster of dignitaries, monarchs and rock stars from all over the world. And today the biggest spenders come from one place above all others.

“Ten years ago, the person who walked through the door and spent money was Japanese. This year it’s the Chinese,” says Bernstein. “So anybody that’s paying attention would be very wise to notice that.”

The industry has more than noticed. Across the country, Canadian fur producers are concentrating on meeting the demand from Chinese wholesalers, distributors and brokers, who in turn sell to retailers and manufacturers looking to cash in on China’s sizable emerging upper-middle class, one with a considerable appetite for the classic symbol of western wealth. With concern for animal welfare nascent at best, China’s demand for fur, particularly mink, has taken off in the past decade. By one estimate, China purchases about 80 per cent of the global supply of raw furs. Some Chinese cities sport entire shopping malls that sell nothing but fur. According to Alan Herscovici, executive vice-president of the non-profit marketing group Fur Council of Canada, the opportunity is ripe for Canadian fur, whether wholesaled to Chinese factories for manufacturing and domestic sale or made-in-Canada pieces aimed at a more upscale consumer. “There are a lot of wealthy Chinese who want a genuine Canadian fur,” he tells me on the phone from his Montreal office. Despite cheaper domestically produced furs flooding the Chinese market, Herscovici says, Canadian fur carries a certain prestige extending from Canada’s reputation in China as an exotic northern locale long known for its quality furs. “We’re not going to compete on price, so we have to do it on innovation and quality,” he says.



A caged lynx at a fur farm (top); lynx coats sold at Pappas Furs.

The influence of Asian buyers is so strong that Canada’s remaining two auction houses, which sell to international and local wholesalers, brokers and distributors, have seen prices set by Chinese and Korean buyers for the past several years, Herscovici says. Both Toronto’s North American Fur Auctions (formerly owned by the Hudson’s Bay Co.) and the Fur Harvesters’ Auction in North Bay, Ontario, fetched record prices last spring for mink, a baseline indicator for the industry, Herscovici continues. Farmed mink hit record average prices of over \$60 a pelt last year, up from roughly \$25 in the early ’90s, and even higher than the \$50 reaped in the late ’80s. Results from Scandinavian auctions held this fall have forecasters predicting 2011 will see more records broken, which could mean a boon to B.C.’s mink producers, who last year sold \$8.3 million in pelts, up from \$5 million in 2008.

Despite the fact that fur is considered a luxury product, Herscovici says no one’s really getting rich off the trade. “There’s not a lot of room for excess profit because the industry is so competitive worldwide,” he says. Canadian auction houses are producer owned, with proceeds going directly to farmers and trappers, minus a small commission taken by professional associations to keep the operations running, he says. From there fur goes to the dressing plant, then often to China, where many Canadian and foreign designers take advantage of cheap labour to execute their designs, a process often requiring hours of handwork and specialized machinery. Garments are then shipped elsewhere, including back to Canada, for sale. Typical origin-to-consumer markup is often more than 500 per cent, but Herscovici justifies the increase, saying the amount of painstaking detail involved in producing each garment is costly for producers. “The reason a fur coat is relatively expensive is because there’s so much handwork done across the way,” he says. Though Canada maintains a fur-manufacturing cluster in and around Montreal, increasingly designers and independent retailers are going offshore to reduce costs and stay competitive with their European, American and now Asian competitors.

Fur is green?

While fur may be undergoing a global resurgence, sparking a Canadian revival has been a much bigger challenge. Intent on rebuilding a domestic consumer base, the Fur Council has launched a marketing campaign it hopes will attract a new generation of North American consumers by touting its products as not only chic but also green. In late 2008, the Fur Council launched the website Furisgreen.com along with billboard advertisements aimed at combating the messaging of the anti-fur camp and, hopefully, capturing the sentiments of increasingly eco-conscious Canadian consumers.

The green argument goes something like this: Most synthetic fibres used in outerwear are non-biodegradable fabrics derived from petrochemicals, while even cotton uses huge amounts of land, water and heavy pesticides. Fur, by contrast, is biodegradable, durable and – depending on its source – local, three components that, in theory, fit nicely into the mantra of environmentally conscious consumption sweeping Canadian cities.

Herscovici says the campaign is getting good reception: “It’s as if people have heard this anti-fur argument for years and now they’re interested in hearing something else.” The campaign also outlines the strides the industry has made in adopting humane and ethical standards in its supply chain, another positive vestige of the animal-rights movement. Fur trappers and farmers now comply with international standards on animal welfare, Herscovici says.

Of course, slapping a green label on the industry doesn’t necessarily make it so. Runoff from fur farms, which produce two-thirds of Canadian pelts, has been found to contaminate watersheds in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, two provinces with the highest concentration of farms. Recent history offers many examples of species brought to the brink of extinction due to overharvesting. And the amount of chemicals used to preserve fur, not to mention the petroleum used to ship it to China for manufacturing, then back to Canada for sale, can’t be discounted.

The ethics of fur

The big opposition to fur, however, isn’t based on its environmental impact or lack thereof. It’s one of ethics, informed by decades of vocal anti-fur activists who’ve been incredibly effective at raising the question of animal rights. If, as Bernstein and others claim, activists truly haven’t succeeded in changing the financial fate of the industry, they’ve undeniably changed how it is perceived in consumer culture.

Kai Chan is an associate professor at UBC’s Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability. Given his credentials – a PhD in ecology and evolutionary biology, post-doctoral research in conservation biology, a certificate in environmental policy and applied environmental ethics plus a stint researching under moral philosopher Peter Singer (whose 1975 book *Animal Liberation* essentially gave birth to the animal-rights movement) – it’s fair to say he’s no ally of the fur industry. Yet while he argues it’s not necessary for humans to wear fur, when it comes to what we accept as a society, Chan says the moral outcry over fur represents a crisis of consistency in North America.

“Really, think hard about it. What is the difference between clubbing a seal and bringing a sledgehammer to the head of a cow in a slaughterhouse? Is it really so different?” Chan asks. “If someone is completely undiscerning in their meat, then it strikes me as somewhat strange that they would be so concerned about fur.”

You don’t often see protesters stalking the deli counter at your local grocery store, he points out, yet we readily accept the factory farming of pigs, which Chan says are highly sentient, complex organisms comparable to the mink and weasel commonly farmed for fur. Even moral arguments against the most controversial fur sources, like the seal hunt, are tenuous at best, he adds, if we’re not collectively asking ourselves why it’s OK to kill animals for one purpose (food) and not another (clothing).

Compared to today’s consumer tendency to amass vast amounts of cheap clothes, then toss them after a year or two, investing in a long-lasting and valued piece, like a fur, could actually be the more responsible choice over the life of a wardrobe, Chan argues: “If it’s going to clothe and keep one person warm for years, then that seems like a pretty good use.”

And on the conservation front, he says, many small-scale trappers actually play a key role in keeping animal populations healthy. “It’s the people who are out there, who are using those resources, that are often the best conservationists,” he says. “They’re the ones who understand those systems best and the ones who are most concerned with keeping those systems functioning.”

Canada's fur trappers

That’s a perspective Jack Lay has been trying to get across nearly all his life. At 81, the Princeton-based Lay is only two years retired from trapping, a hobby he engaged in for 73 years. During that time, he says, the industry cleaned itself up, most significantly by adopting the first quick-kill traps, invented by British Columbian Frank Connibear, in the early 1960s. “When the Wright brothers invented the airplane, it changed the world. Well, when the Connibear trap came out, that changed the

world of trapping,” he says. The new traps meant animals struggled less, resulting in better pelts and higher prices.

Most of B.C.’s 6,000 trappers are seasonal employees, the majority working in mining or forestry for most of the year and trapping during the season, from November to about mid-February. In B.C.’s northern reaches, trappers can earn \$40,000 or \$50,000 in a season, depending on auction prices, animal populations and what’s in style. Lay argues that with a registered trap line there’s clear self-interest for trappers in taking conservation seriously: “If he overdoes it and takes too many animals, he’s not going to have so many the next year. But if he doesn’t take enough, he can run into problems with disease and cannibalism and that kind of thing.”

What B.C.’s increasingly urbanized public doesn’t understand, says Lay, is that the animal kingdom isn’t the egalitarian utopia portrayed in Disney cartoons. Cycles of disease and famine cause great suffering to animals, which, in times of scarcity, will turn on each other. “If the food supply is not there, look out; the bigger ones are going to eat,” he says, noting responsible trapping reduces the pressure. “Most people have no idea that this goes on, and they don’t even want to think about it.”

Undoubtedly, when the Fur Council’s Herscovici or Snowflake’s Bernstein talk about the all-Canadian, small-scale producer, they want you to think about people such as Lay.

But that kind of Canadian folk hero is more the exception than the rule, according to Adrian Nelson, director of communications for the anti-fur group Fur Bearer Defenders. Active in B.C. since 1944, the Defenders have been working to eliminate trapping and fur farming in the province. Nelson categorically rejects industry claims that fur is environmentally friendly and culturally relevant. “To say it reflects who we actually are I think is bogus,” he says. “It is where we came from, but we also didn’t allow women to vote. We also allowed slavery. Certain things go with the times, and fur is likely one of them.”

In Nelson’s opinion, the industry’s eco-campaign is nothing more than greenwashing and its concern for animal welfare a ruse. “The fur industry actually wrote something called the International Agreement on Humane Trapping Standards,” he points out. “And in it, they actually redefine what ‘humane’ means.”

Modern traps are no kinder than they’ve ever been, Nelson argues. To illustrate his point, he grabs a twisted metal hunk off the filing cabinet in his Burnaby office. It’s a Connibear trap about the size of a record cover meant for a smaller animal – say, a beaver. As Nelson struggles to pry the bars open, I get a bit nervous the thing is going to take one of us out. When he detonates the trap using a rolled-up piece of paper it snaps with such force that I practically jump out of my chair.

“This,” he says, “is what they call humane.”

Another 4½ years of fur, at least

Back in downtown Vancouver, Rokie Bernstein is supervising the move out of her Fairmont store, just a day or so before it’s due to close for good. The signs have paid off: the remaining racks are sparse and the store is full of people hunting for bargains. “There’s no free lunch,” Bernstein tells me, waxing a little philosophical, which as an ordained interfaith rabbi she’s wont to do.

Everybody pays a toll for standing up for his or her beliefs, she says, glancing around the store. But unlike other retailers who’ve dealt with the anti-fur movement by adopting a code of silence, Bernstein says the lease termination has only inspired her to speak louder in support of an industry she views as intrinsic to everything Canada stands for.

“You asked me why I’m still here. Well, I don’t like being bullied. And I don’t like the fact that Canada is being bullied without Canada knowing so. And if I’m this small, five-foot-tall blond at the edge of the universe that has to stand up and say, ‘Wait a minute here,’ I’ll stand up. For how long? I don’t know. But I got another 4½ years of leases at the least.”

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