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A beret is a round, flat, visorless cap that became very popular in the 17th century largely associated with France and Spain. Military and police officers were among the first to embrace this unusual fashion staple. At this given time, Berets displayed immediate military authority for anyone who wore the uniform. For my research paper, I chose this fashion piece for my topic of discussion considering that berets still hold the same value if not more. Furthermore, I will discuss the influence and the evolution of the beret over the course of the centuries.

One of the key factors about berets at this point in history is how they were made. Dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries, berets were known for their felt material and were only worn by low-income families that were commonly farmers and artists (Strickland). Indication that berets, black berets specifically, were primarily worn for identity and not for fashion purposes. The beret is a flat, floppy hat, berets were made of felt since it made it cheaper and easier to make the items without any need for industrial mechanisms involved (Lubitz). This made the cap functional even in bad weather and easily accessible to this social class. Some cases of berets are found within Italy and Denmark's historical contexts as portrayed in paintings and sculptures (Lubitz). It is also not uncommon that berets are wool knitted, crocheted and or sewn. In contrast to what many people have always associated berets with, we have a different meaning from what they are known for today.

The cap adopted its name from the French, documented in 1835, with the name beret tracing its origins from the Latin word "birretum," meaning a hooded cloak (Lubitz). The first case occurred in the late 1800s when Tomas Zumalacarregui, leader of the Carlists in Spain, wore red berets. This progression started a long-lasting line of revolutionaries who regarded wearing a beret as part of their militarized attire (Lubitz). As Strickland highlighted, berets were mainly a symbol of unity and wholeness within groups, making it an additional piece of uniform that symbolizes strong alliance. Therefore, this marked the rise and significance of berets as social and political attire. Clothing, accessories specifically have always played a tremendous role in cultural identification or even social success. It indicates that an item's success rate, if not all particularly pertaining to fashion, only has significance if given by society. The concept of berets as we know today have always been in existence for centuries, and according to historians, this fashion piece is traceable back to the bronze age (Lubitz). Just like every other item, beret value varies to different cultures depending on the time and location. The color of a beret was very vital and popular during war time, it signified resistance and quickly identified someone politically.

As mentioned before, the first individual to have worn a beret as a political statement was Tomas Zumalacarregui, leader of the Carlists. The colors of the berets have always held symbolic meanings when it came to their usage, so it is difficult to discuss the beret's history and how different groups used them without considering the colors identified by the affiliations. Zumalacarregui's choice of beret was red, this ideology of red berets being used by their militaries is a practice that still prevails to date.

In the 1800s, the color choice of berets holding political power started to progress only this time the color was blue. The blue berets in France were worn to symbolize the mountain

warfare among the French Chasseurs Alpains, signifying their elite status as the members of the French Army (Lubitz). As time advanced, the blue berets gained a different meaning and became largely associated with the peacekeeping force as used by the UN armies and the US Air Force (Lohr, and Yaroch). Still, within the 1800s, the black beret remained a symbol of peasant status in a significant part of Europe (Lubitz). This focal point expresses how berets have not only been used for their style but for the color to show affiliations to particular groups. Therefore, the first evolution of berets were the different colors that slowly developed to hold meanings in various cultural groups, particularly in Europe.

When you think of Paris, you think of great Italian food, the Eiffel tower and berets. It's very fitting for someone rebellious like a mime to wear a black beret with a particular outfit, it completes the look. A white shirt with black horizontal-stripes, dark pants, red suspenders, a red scarf, white gloves, black leather shoes, and a black beret. Berets may not be modern attire for someone outside of France or Spain but others wear berets simply for fashion and looking good. This cap is commonly worn by both genders. Not many people have paid attention to its historical context, as many only consider it from a cultural and social context.

Berets came to the fashion industry in the 1900s, with most artists and celebrities adorning them as a fashionable hat, mainly in the United States. At this point of the journey, berets began to lose their previous identities and become a popular cultural item mostly worn by women. As the colors go, the black beret that previously symbolized poverty became a fashion item among women in the 1900s before becoming widely accepted among men, mostly in France, as a metropolitan attire (Lubitz). At this turn of the century, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Piaf, and Lauren Bacall, among most famous individuals, would always be seen wearing berets, symbolizing an attachment to bohemian chicness (Lubitz). Suddenly, berets were being worn in

public and even in private institutions. The position of the beret and how it is worn is crucial.

The beret is worn with the headband straight across the forehead, away from the eyebrow. The extra material is draped over to the right ear, extending to at least the top of the ear.

Berets made their way out of Europe and into the US becoming very commonly used by activists and militia groups. One of the main activist groups to have made berets popular was the Black Panther Party. Black Panther members considered black berets mandatory to wear in their attire to show their affiliation regardless of whether one was of African descent or not. The Black Panther Party wore the black berets because it symbolized people struggling in the third world, and it was a sign of revolutionism (Lopez). The use of the berets, among other clothes such as leather jackets, gave the Black Panther Party members an iconic look, setting them apart from other groups, but later made the cap a common revolutionary symbol.

Other influential political revolutionaries like Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, leader of Cuba, would be seen wearing black berets when giving speeches and during public rallies to overthrow Batista's government (Lubitz). Other revolutionary groups that also wore the berets included the Brown Berets, who wore brown berets, the Young Lords Party with red berets, and the Guardian Angels with red berets (Lubitz). By the 2000s, berets had become a fashion attire worn by models on runways (Strickland). It's important to remember that berets hold a deeper social, cultural, and historical significance to different cultures around the world. The beret was used to communicate different meanings to different people, now worn by everyone, which means more than a simple sense of fashion.

Something as simple as an accessory started as something only worn by low-income farmers and artists but gained value and global appreciation when armies and revolutionary groups in Europe began using it to show their affiliation. Berets gained a global audience and

became a fashion statement in the United States before militia and civil rights groups like the Black Panther Party started using it as a mandatory part of their dressing code. Finally as berets continue to gain relevance, it is important that people pay attention to its cultural, social, and historical significance, particularly attached to the colors of the cap.

Citation:

Lopez, A. (2017, April 20). The Uniform of The Black Panther Party. Retrieved November 11, 2020, from <http://blackpower.web.unc.edu/2017/04/the-uniform-of-the-black-panther-party/>

Lubitz, R. (2016, June 21). The History of the Beret: How a Peasant's Hat Turned into a Political Statement. Retrieved November 12, 2020, from <https://www.mic.com/articles/146546/the-history-of-the-beret-how-a-peasant-s-hat-turned-into-a-political-statement>

Strickland, S. (2019, April 04). The Surprising Secret History of Berets. Retrieved November 12, 2020, from <https://fashionmagazine.com/style/history-of-berets/>

Primary Source: The people in the photograph are a group called the Black Panther Party also known as the (BPP). The beret was one of the most important and the most influential pieces that the BPP wore. In the article, a BPP member stated “Because they were used by just about every struggle in the third world. They’re sort of an international hat for the

revolutionary.

