

Fun Furs

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Published in May this year this article is a telling exposé of the sort of pressures that conservationists trying to save rare or diminishing species such as the spotted cats are up against. As one fur dealer commented tersely, "Leopards don't die in bed".

IN the early nineteen-hundreds, the gracefully curving white plumes of the egret frequently ornamented ladies' hats. Then, after a tense struggle, conservationists won a now famous victory, and the practice was outlawed just in time to save egrets from extermination. At the same time, it seemed that a principle had been established, making it unlikely that a future fashion would extinguish a species of creature because of its ill luck in being beautiful. We were unhappy to learn the other day that the principle appears void and that the process of extermination in the interests of fashion is being repeated, this time not with just one species but with a whole gamut of related animals – the spotted cats. The spotted cats are, of course, the wild members of the cat family, or Felidae, whose smartly marked fur is currently being worn by women everywhere. As a trade term, "spotted cat" includes the tiger and about 14 other species ranging in size from the leopard and the jaguar down to the little wildcats of South America, which are not much bigger than domestic tabbies. News that all these cats are endangered by the fur trade was brought to us by an official of the National Audubon Society, who told us that the vogue has been noted, with more or less helpless concern, by scientists all over the world. A resolution passed in 1963 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources – which is something like a United Nations of conservation – called on all governments to halt the trade, but the call has had no discernible effect. The problem is complicated by the fact that the cats live in more than a dozen countries in South America, Africa, and Asia. The most effective remedy proposed by conservationists is a complete ban on the importation of rare furs into the United States or Europe, just as there has been a ban on the plumes of several species of wildfowl threatened by extinction, but no one sees any hope that this will come about immediately.

Curious as to why fashion has selected cats for such fatal popularity at this particular time, we consulted various people in the local fur business. Our first stop was at the office of the Fur Information and Fashion Council, a trade-promotion organisation. There we found a spokesman named Jess Chernak, who told us that the cats are only a small part of a much larger vogue for something called "fun furs". Ten years ago, he explained, the fur business took stock of itself and decided it was in bad shape. A motivational-research man, hired to diagnose its ills, discovered that three-quarters of the business was in mink, that young women thought their mothers' fur coats were "square", and few of them desired fur coats anyway. The remedy was to persuade sportswear designers whose clothes were principally worn by the young to use mink and various diverse and exotic furs in their designs, thus expanding the market to include youthful consumers.

The new furs were labelled "fun furs", and after five or six years of assiduous promotion they caught on in an important way. Most fun furs are fairly cheap and come from mass-produced animals, such as rabbit and lamb, but on the fringes of the fun-fur vogue are such wild creatures as wolf, skunk, raccoon, lynx, and the more expensive and beautiful spotted cats. Thus the onslaught on the Felidae began.

We moved on to talks with fur brokers, dealers, and manufacturers, who all confirmed that each year the spotted furs grow scarcer and the prices higher. At Independent Fur Brokers, Inc., Mr. Hans Classen, a tall, lean old man who has been an international fur broker for forty years, told us that he had dropped Somali leopards, the most desirable of all the spotted furs, because the price had become "fantastic". He showed us a storeroom in which 1,000 skins of Bolivian ocelot were stocked in heaps. These handsome black-and-gold cats are most plentiful in Brazil but they are also found in Mexico and South American countries. Today, Mr. Classen sells the skins for 50 dollars, but 20 years ago the price was 15 dollars or less. He showed us the skin of a smaller cat, with paler colouring, and identified it as an Argentine wildcat – the cheapest and most plentiful of the cat furs – and remarked that in the old days, 30 years ago, he handled such skins in unbelievable quantities. Every fortnight, a steamer arrived with a shipment of 5,000 skins, but he added, he had seen nothing like that in a long time.

At the Mechutan Fur Corporation, which is a leading dealer in spotted furs, we asked Mr. Jay Mechutan about Somali leopards. Last year, he told us his firm had pulled off a gratifying coup when it bought 464 leopard skins from the Somali government for a quarter of a million dollars. In addition, he handled about 1,000 less choice leopards from other parts of Africa and Asia. Surveying the market, he guessed that, in all, the skins of 7,000 leopards reached New York last year, at a cost of some two-and-a-half million dollars. This year, he predicted, there will be fewer leopards and higher prices.

At Ben Ritter, Inc., specialists in exotic furs, Robert Ritter, the son of the founder, showed us a snow leopard from the Himalayas worth 250 dollars as a rug. Its deep, creamy fur, we found, is irresistible to the touch. Near it, a tiger skin dangled from a hook. Tigers, Mr. Ritter said, have more than doubled in price in the last two years. Three years ago, he bought two dozen skins at 135 dollars each. This year, he has been able to get only 16 skins at 325 dollars each. With the supply of tigers drying up, he is attempting to promote puma from Brazil and Mexico. He sold about 200 of them this past year.

A customer entered and told Mr. Ritter that he was interested in leopards. "Good leopards start at 500 dollars," Mr. Ritter replied, displaying a skin plucked from a bundle on the counter.

"Five-hundred dollars with holes?" the customer inquired, pointing at bullet holes in the neck region of the skin.

"Yes, 500 dollars with holes," Mr. Ritter said firmly, "Leopards don't die in bed."

At Schwartz & Klein, Mr. Sam Schwartz, a small, spare old man wearing

a cutter's smock over his shirt-sleeves, told us that his primary business is making coats out of the smaller spotted cats. He uses jaguars and leopards, too, but high prices make it impossible to produce them in quantity. It takes as many as eight Somali leopards to make a coat. As many as 25 of the smaller cats go into a coat. Last year, he paid 250,000 dollars for spotted-cat skins, which he made into 900 coats. "They must be killing these animals off very, very fast," he said sadly, "I wouldn't be surprised if they disappear entirely. They are so beautiful, it's a crime to kill them just for this!" He pointed to a rack that held a dozen spotted coats, "I handle the skins of animals that were in the jungle three days before. they are flown in here with the blood still on the fur. To look at these beautiful things makes me want to cry. I would get out of the business if it would change things, but someone would take my place."

Mr. Graf, a spokesman for Ben Kahn, a well-known furrier, was equally candid, though less emotional. "Last year, we had a good supply of skins, but I'm told the Somali leopard won't last 10 years unless the government can control the killing," he said. "The demand is unlimited. Even price doesn't matter. The finest skin is worth 2,400 dollars. At that rate, a coat could cost 20,000 dollars. Last year, we sold 10 leopard coats at 16,000 dollars each. I expect the price to be higher this year. The demand has risen ever since we sold a leopard coat to Mrs. John F. Kennedy in 1962. We have created our own Frankenstein's monster – a demand that destroys raw material. We compete with Europe for skins. Paris wants leopards and jaguars. Dior and Revillon have customers who will pay any price. There are still very rich people in this world. The Italians, Swiss, and Scandinavians are all mad for spotted cats. Next to leopard in desirability is jaguar and cheetah. Cheetah doesn't wear as well, but we sold 75 cheetah coats last season. Cheetah is a rare animal, but it is not hard to get at the moment. We consider it more sporty than leopard. Tiger is an interesting fur. Five years ago, we were the first to make it into a coat. It is rare, but not as expensive as leopard. We sold six tigers last year at about 6,000 dollars each. Tiger is hard to wear. It makes a certain kind of woman – skinny, tall and feline. We also make mountain-lion coats, but strictly for sport. The finest mountain lions come from Mexico, and a coat retails at 1,500 dollars. They are attractive, but mountain lion is a hard colour for most women. The reddish brown is difficult. The creamy-yellow beige of the leopard is more becoming."

For a final call, we stopped at the American Museum of Natural History, where we saw Dr. Richard G. Van Gelder, associate curator of mammals. "When I was in the Amazon two years ago, the price of a jaguar was 75 dollars," he said. "That was three months' pay for a hunter, and made it well worth his while. We assume that there are jaguars in un-explored regions of Brazil, but no one really knows. No one really knows much about any of these cats, of which there are at least seven species. Nobody knows how long they can stand this kind of hunting pressure, but we fear it is depleting the animals badly. Some forms of tiger are almost gone. A recent estimate indicates that there are possibly 4,000 left in all India. In Africa, leopards are pressed by the loss of game and territory

as well as by poaching for the fur trade. Four years ago, the Fauna Preservation Society of London estimated that 50,000 leopards were killed annually in East Africa. Speaking of leopards, the museum received a curious letter from a woman whose husband had shot six leopards. She had the skins made into a coat, but she prudently kept all the scraps. Now she was tired of the coat and wanted to know if we could transform it back into a leopard again. Stuffed, I presume. It was hard to be polite as I wrote back that the answer was "No!" Needless to say, her question haunts me. Someday we may want to transform the last zoo leopard back into a wild leopard and find we can't."

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

This extract from Wilfrid Blunt's poem "Satan Absolved", from the speech of the Angel of Pity, is reprinted by kind permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt died in 1922.

From the deep Central Seas
 To the white Poles, Man ruleth pitiless Lord of these,
 And daily he destroyeth. The great whales he driveth
 Beneath the northern ice, and quarter none he giveth,
 Who perish there of wounds in their huge agony.
 He presseth the white bear on the white frozen sea
 And slaughtereth for his pastime. The wise amorous seal
 He flayeth big with young; the walrus cubs that kneel
 But cannot turn his rage, alive he mangleth them,
 Leaveth in breathing heaps, outrooted branch and stem.
 In every land he slayeth. He hath new engines made
 Which no life may withstand, nor in the forest shade
 Nor in the sunlit plain, which wound all from afar,
 The timorous with the valiant, waging false war,
 Coward, himself unseen. In pity, Lord, look down
 On the blank widowed plains which he hath made his own
 By right of solitude. Where, Lord God, are they now,
 Thy glorious bison herds, Thy ariels white as snow,
 Thy antelopes in troops, the zebras of Thy plain?
 Behold their whitened bones on the dull track of men.
 Thy elephants, Lord, where? For ages Thou didst build
 Their frames' capacity, the hide which was their shield
 No thorn might pierce, no sting, no violent tooth assail,
 The tusks which were their levers, the lithe trunk their flail.
 Thou strengthenedst their deep brain. Thou madest them wise to know
 And wiser to ignore, advised, deliberate, slow,
 Conscious of power supreme in right. The manifest token
 Of Thy high will on earth, Thy natural peace unbroken,
 Unbreakable by fear. For ages did they move
 Thus, kings of Thy deep forest swayed by only love.
 Where are they now, Lord God?