



THE END OF AN ERA

by Lu Ann Trotebas

Finding a way forward for the USA's National Hat Museum

How It All Began

The USA's National Hat Museum was Alyce Selby's dream-to-reality project, as well as her passion. A long-time hat wearer with a deep interest in hat history, Alyce (right) began collecting hats in earnest when she retired from her career as a motivational speaker, learning as much as she could about their creation and their origins.

She was unconventional and lived life to the fullest, travelling the world and expanding her collection. She even purchased a hat that she spied while on camelback in Petra. She negotiated her purchase while perched atop the camel and still managed to stay with her tour. Apparently, nothing could stand in the way of acquiring a great hat!

Alyce opened the museum doors in 2005 with a collection totalling 600 hats and she grew her collection to roughly 1,900 hats before passing away in 2017. It was a pleasure to have assisted her in the creation of the country's only National Hat Museum. Over the years that we worked together, we had the privilege of adding our own expertise and knowledge to articles, documentaries and exhibits. Two projects that come to mind are our contributions to Air and Space Magazine and the New York Historical Society. Not only did we assist organizations, but we also helped families and other collectors with their historical inquiries.

After her passing, my long-time friend handed the proverbial reins of the museum to me. We had bonded as fellow collectors and hat enthusiasts with a drive to learn and preserve the history of hats, and I endeavoured to honour my friend and her love of hats by continuing to grow the collection and by providing museum tours.



Lu Ann and Alyce on a hat shopping expedition.



A Victim of Covid

The museum, located in Portland, Oregon, was the largest (and only) hat museum in the United States. Housed in a 1910 Victorian home in the well-known historic Ladds Addition, the museum and its personally-guided tour was a unique experience. The tour lasted 90 minutes and was filled with tidbits of information regarding the history of hats and how they were made. Unlike regular museums, whose displays are safeguarded behind barriers, the vast majority of the hats were available for visitors to closely inspect as there were few hats encased behind glass. Unfortunately, the museum was one of many victims of Covid and had to shut its doors.

At the time of the museum's closure, the collection had increased in size, and there were nearly 2,300 hats on display, dating from the 1820s to the present day. Men's and women's hats were part of the collection, as well as many well-known designers such as Lily Daché, Schiaparelli, John Frederics, Christian Dior, Mr. John, Frederick Fox, Philip Somerville and Claude Saint-Cyr, just to name a few. There were hats from small shops, some whose history has been lost to time, and others, dated prior to the 1930s, without labels, that are exquisite examples of that era's craftsmanship. With so many hats on display and the limitations of the museum's venue, social distancing during the pandemic became problematic. Many of the museum's guests travelled great distances by plane, and the halting of air travel had a devastating effect on the number of people who visited the museum. This was another factor that led to the closure.





According to a survey by ICOM, the International Council of Museums, and museum professionals about the effects of Covid-19 on the museum industry, "Museums are struggling to adapt their business models to this emergency situation, and they need aid to develop the necessary skills to do so."

As the museum's owner and director, I can attest to the validity of their survey results. Privately-owned museums operate on a very tight budget and rely on volunteers. As there is no safety net for museums, they were hard-hit by the changes brought about by the pandemic.

Many museums in the Pacific Northwest grappled with decisions for the future. There were even classes offered by the industry that taught the process for the deaccession of a museum.

As a private museum, we were afforded the opportunity to act swiftly, and after researching some of the potential outcomes that a pandemic could have on an economy and its long-lasting effects, my board members decided the best thing to do to save the collection was to store it. Mind you, the packaging of this assemblage was no small feat. The venue itself was just under

6,000 square feet, and filled to the "brim" (pun intended) with hats and historical information.

At the onset of the pandemic, no one really understood how Covid was contracted or spread, and as our volunteers were in their retirement years, I did not want to expose them to this contagion. Thus, I alone began the monumental task of packing up the exhibits - a one-woman show. It was a two-and-a-half-month, heartbreaking experience. But this was not the only heartbreak of my scenario. The historic Victorian home that had been the setting for the museum had to be sold.

Currently, the entire museum collection is in storage, awaiting an opportunity for a new life. I always had a vision of someday moving the museum to a better location. While lovely and unique, the Victorian home posed many accessibility issues for museum visitors.

I envisioned a future museum with

a self-guided tour, as opposed to a personal docent being the only option. Relocating the museum had been a future plan, one that Covid changed. Upon reflection, my takeaway from the pandemic is that museums need to be designed in such a way that, in the future, they could adapt to issues such as Covid and survive.

Future Plans

My plan is to reopen the museum. If one has been forced into a situation that causes great change, one might as well dream BIG! It is no secret that funding the operation of a museum is a constant battle. My background in the hospitality industry and experience in restructuring and opening hotels leads me to believe that there is an opportunity to place the museum in a unique venue where it can be appreciated and enjoyed on more levels - not just as a museum.

I have been a firm believer in the idea of a museum boutique hotel for years. Recently, I ran across an article from Museum Next. In the article, Rebecca Carlsson states, as "the pressure increases on institutions to drive footfall, museums are finding new and innovative ways to get visitors staying longer and visiting more often. This means guests can spend a night, a weekend, or even longer, immersing themselves in their favourite collections or exhibitions. This signals the birth of a new phenomenon: the museum hotel."

Just a handful of the millinery treasures from the National Hat Museum's stores. Pictured clockwise from the top left, hats by Lilly Daché, Hattie Carnegie, Frederick Fox and Elsa Schiaparelli



I not only see it as a museum and a hotel, but also as a place where hat-making seminars could be held. Perhaps, even a tearoom would be appropriate. With an event venue attached to the hotel there's no end to the hat inspired events that the hotel could sponsor. For example, Kentucky Derby Day, Easter Tea, Designer Hat Debuts, Antique Car Show, as well as having a monthly themed tea.

While this is a wonderful idea, the rising price of real estate and cost of building materials makes it challenging to think of the future for the hat museum.

I believe in putting ideas out into the world to help you find solutions. Perhaps there is a community out there that would relish the opportunity to add this unique museum to their town. Is there a building that is going unused and needs a refurbishment? Is there a piece of property just waiting for a fresh idea? Perhaps the hat museum could be a part of a larger project, such as a historic downtown renovation project.

At this point, all options are on the proverbial table. It would be a shame to see it all disappear into the mists of time.

How can you help support the museum during its transition? We are still accepting gift donations of hats. We believe that when you donate your hats to the museum, they have found a good home. Hats donated to the National Hat Museum will either be used to upgrade the collection, used in outreach programs, sold to help support the collection or used in the repair of other hats.



Lu Ann Trotebas is the Director of the US National Hat Museum. She is a passionate hat collector and an expert at authenticating, valuing, analyzing and dating historical headwear. Despite the museum's current closure, Lu Ann continues to inspire with hats on social media. You can follow [@thenationalhatmuseum](https://www.instagram.com/thenationalhatmuseum) on Instagram to find out more.