

Feature



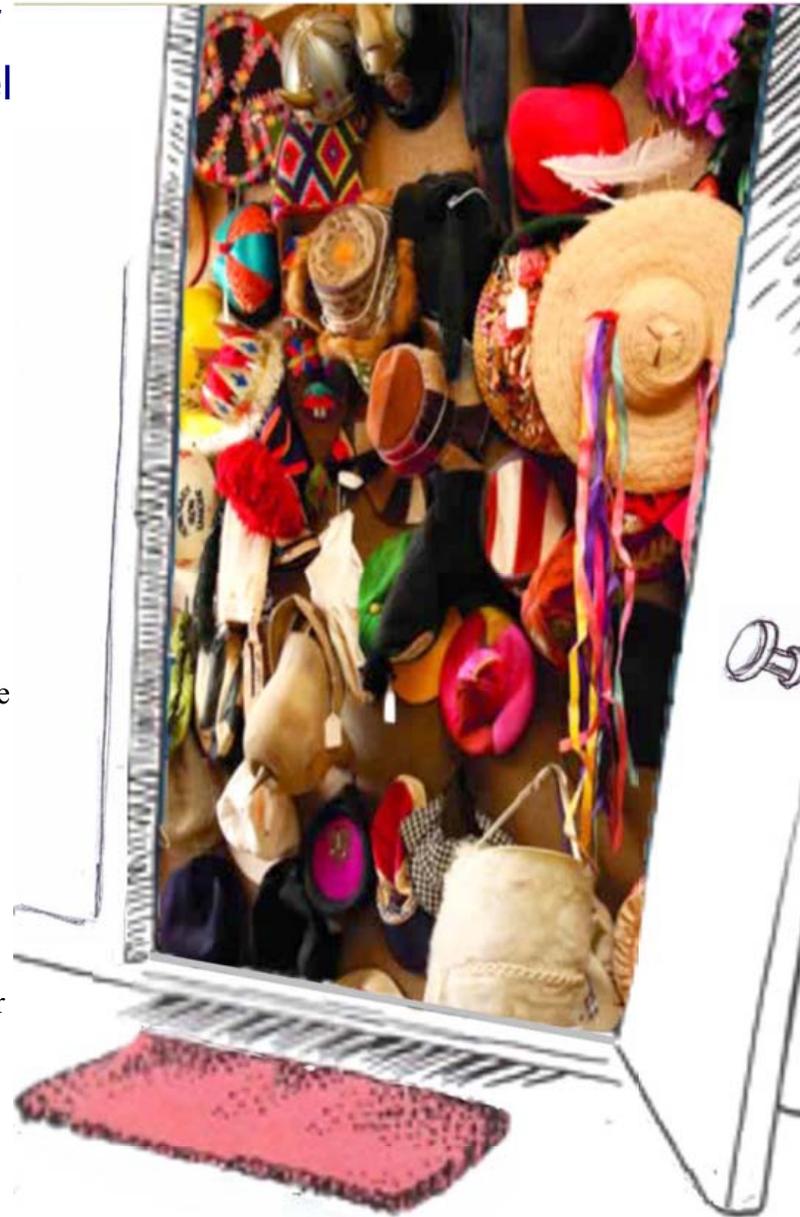
The 157 Hats of Theodore Geisel *Kathie Gust**

*The man who wrote books
On Loraxes and Cats
Had a place in his house
Where he kept all his hats*

*They hung in a closet
from pegs on the wall
And they came out to play
When his friends came to call*

What do a San Diego State University band shako, a fluffy pink feather cloche and a Henry Higgins style tweed fedora have in common? All of them belonged to one of the Golden State's best known and well-loved authors who was also a secret costumer!

Dr. Seuss (Theodor "Ted" Geisel) was born in 1904 at a time when men took wearing hats quite seriously as part of their standard wardrobe. He began his career in the 1920's as an editorial cartoonist, but is best remembered as an author and illustrator of children's books. He won Academy Awards for his WWII documentary (1947), as well as his animated short film, Gerald McBoing Boing (1951).



During his lifetime, Dr. Seuss wrote 44 children's books, produced over 400 WW II era political cartoons, and hundreds of advertisements. Today his paintings hang in fine art galleries.

Since childhood, Geisel had always seen hats as transformational. They were the accent—the exclamation point—on a person's behavior. He began collecting them in earnest during his travels around the world sometime in the 1920s or 1930s.

His sister Marnie, who visited him in New York in 1937 wrote, “Ted has another peculiar hobby—that of collecting hats of every description. Why, he must have several hundred and he is using them as the foundation of his next book. I have seen him put on an impromptu show for guests, using the hats as costumes. He has kept a whole party in stitches just by making up a play.” That book, his second, was, *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*,

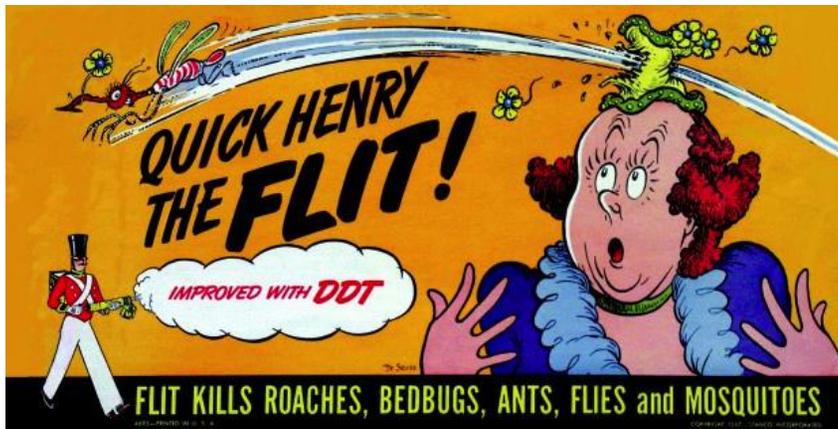
In the library of the home near San Diego that he shared with his wife Audrey, there are three sections of bookshelves, and one section opens up to reveal a hidden door behind that wall.

A glimpse inside Dr. Seuss' hat closet. Image courtesy of the Dr. Seuss Estate. Drawing (and poem!) by Philip Gust

There his hat collection hangs on both sides of the closet. It includes military hats, hats with plumes, and hats covered with ribbons and curls.

In honor of the book's 75th anniversary, Audrey Geisel has opened up his secret closet for a year-long peek at his private collection. The traveling exhibit, "Hats off to Dr. Seuss," is visiting sixteen cities between March 2013 and February 2014. I attended the opening of the exhibit when it came to [Petri's Fine Arts](#) in Sausalito, California on August 30th.

Anyone who has read "The Doctor" knows how much he loved hats. All over Geisel's children's books, the characters sport zany colorful headwear — unless they just happen to have it sprouting naturally from their heads. Hats are not just reserved for the famous Cat or Bartholomew either: Sam-I-Am also wears a hat, and the fat fish from *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* has a tiny yellow one.



Early advertising artwork for Flit insecticide shows Geisel's use of hats.

Robert Chase, co-founder and president of Chase Art Companies said hats showed up early in both the advertising work (below) and editorial cartoons of Geisel, who died in 1991, at the age of 87. "By putting a hat on a character" Geisel "realized he could give that character a lot of personality," Mr. Chase said. "In some cases the hat became a punch line."

What Seuss fans may not know is that Geisel also used hats as both inspiration and entertainment. When Geisel was penning his Beginner Books for Random

House in the 1960s, he'd invite his editor in chief, Michael Frith, to his house, where they'd work until late at night. According to Judith and Neil Morgan in their book, [Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel](#), Geisel and Frith would go to the closet and pick a different hat, perhaps a fez, or a sombrero, or maybe an authentic Baroque



Geisel in his drum major hat with wife Audrey at a dinner party. (above) Toy viking helmet. (below) Photos courtesy of the Dr. Seuss estate.



Czech helmet or a plastic toy viking helmet with horns. Then they'd sit on the floor and stare at each other. There they would be, Mr. Frith remembered, "two grown men in stupid hats trying to come up with the right word for a book that had only 50 words in it at most."

Dinner parties at his house might end with a Seussian play-lette, or begin with guests being handed a random hat at the door - your persona of the evening. Audrey Geisel said in an interview for a 1999 educational video called *Notes Alive! Dr. Seuss's My Many-colored Days*, "Believe me, when you get a dozen people seated at a fairly formal dinner party, and they've all got on perfectly ridiculous chapeaus, the evening takes care of itself."

Jeff Schuffman, curator for the "Hats Off to Dr. Seuss" exhibit, attended the opening reception at Petri's Fine Arts and told us a bit more about some of the hats.

One of Jeff's favorite hats, and mine as well, is the Admiral's hat from the Seuss Navy. The Seuss Navy was an advertising scheme Geisel developed for Standard Oil's Esso Marine brand. It flourished from 1936 to 1941 officially, but some of the artwork was still in use up to 1958.

Applicants would show up at the booth at the National Motorboat show and be inducted as admirals with a certificate (right) and photo of themselves with Seuss characters. They were then eligible for the annual banquet of "the biggest navy in the world".

This seems to have been one of the rare times when full costuming was associated

Admiral in the Seuss Navy hat (above) courtesy of the Dr. Seuss estate. "Onboard Admiral of the Seuss Navy" certificate, 1946. (right)



with any of the hats. Apparently the "Seuss Navy" was noted for annual banquets at the Biltmore Hotel in Manhattan. Since everyone in the navy was an admiral, Geisel wore an "excessively braided dress uniform" and a hat like Horatio Nelson to these events.

The banquet was a big draw and got lots of newspaper coverage, which meant there was no need for any



A hat from Geisel's collection and his book *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary. Image courtesy of the Dr. Seuss estate.

additional ad campaign according to Ted. They got quite a lot of national publicity for free!

While some of the 157 hats in Mr. Geisel's personal collection clearly make appearances in his paintings, it is harder to draw a connection from the hat collection to his children's books. There are some examples of where the connection is clear. Among the twenty-six hats in the exhibit are a red Robin Hood-like cap with feather that is very similar to the one that kept reappearing on Bartholomew Cubbins's head, and there is the famous striped, red-and-white stovepipe.

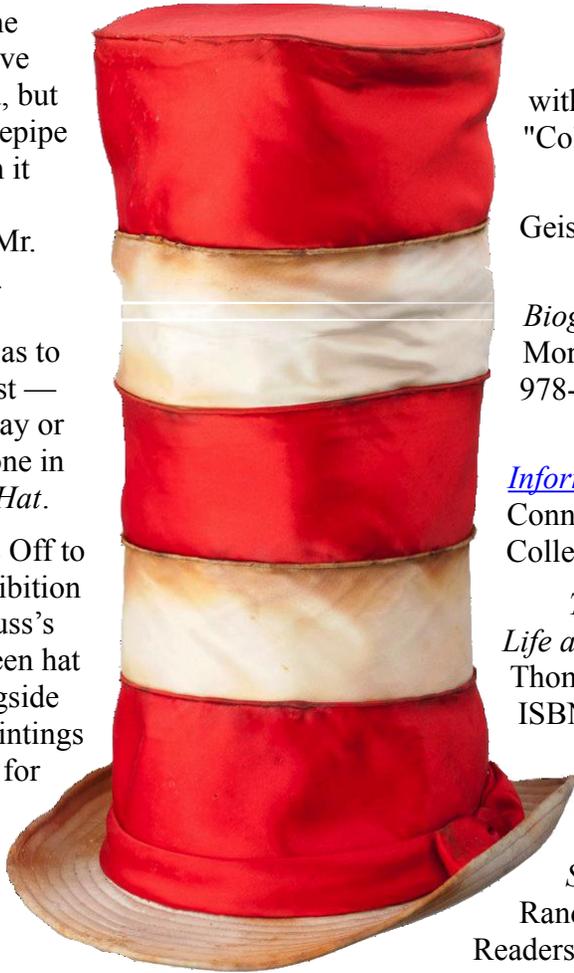
There are also hats that relate to time the artist spent overseas during World War II, and there are hats from Japan, Mexico, Southeast Asia, and from across Europe.



Most of the hats seem to have been purchased, but the striped stovepipe looks as though it may have been custom-made. Mr. Chase and Mrs. Geisel have no documentation as to which came first — the hat on display or the illustrated one in *The Cat in the Hat*.

The “Hats Off to Dr. Seuss” Exhibition features Dr. Seuss’s never-before-seen hat collection alongside little-known paintings done by Geisel for his own enjoyment that include some of the hats. Included are examples of some early advertising work that he did in the 1930s all the way through his final book that he did in 1990, and paintings and sculptures, everywhere in between.

For more information about the traveling exhibit, including scheduled stops, visit the [exhibit website](#). For more information about Theodore Geisel and his books, visit the official [Dr. Seuss website](#).



Further Reading

There is an extensive [interview](#) with exhibit curator, Robert Chase, in "Collector's Weekly"

Books about Theodore Seuss Geisel include:

Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel: A Biography by Judith Morgan and Neil Morgan. Da Capo Press, 1996. ISBN: 978-0306807367.

The Beginnings of Dr. Seuss: An Informal Reminiscence, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Dartmouth Digital Collections, 2004.

The Man Who Was Dr. Seuss: The Life and Work of Theodor Geisel by Thomas Fensch. Sharon's Books, 2001. ISBN: 978-0930751128.

The Seuss, the Whole Seuss, and Nothing But the Seuss: A Visual Biography of Theodor Seuss Geisel by Charles D. Cohen. Random House Books for Young Readers, 2004. ISBN: 978-0375822483.

Theodore SEUSS Geisel by Donald E. Pease. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0195323023

Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genres. Visit her [website](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.



Dr. Seuss in his "Raising Money" hat. (above and below) Stovepipe hat. (left) Photos courtesy of the Dr. Seuss estate.

