

# Cross-Cultural Head Coverings

Historically, head coverings can be found in many cultures throughout the world, including the West. The first records we have of women who wore head coverings are from 13<sup>th</sup> century BC Assyria. These first instances of head coverings were markers of social standing. Women of nobility began wearing head coverings in order to differentiate themselves from the women of lower social status. Throughout history, head coverings have been worn for various reasons. These include being markers of class or religious beliefs, as well as for practical uses, as social practices, as fashion trends, and as traditional dress.



This is a picture of Eastern Orthodox nuns. In Eastern Orthodoxy and in the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, a head covering called an *epanokamelavkion* is used by both nuns and monks, in both cases the covering is a cylindrical hat worn by monks and nuns. Head coverings are often worn for religious reasons.



This painting depicts nuns wearing head coverings both formally and informally. A veil forms part of the headdress of some orders of nuns or religious sisters in the Roman Catholic Church.



In Judaism and Christianity, the concept of covering the head was associated with propriety and can be witnessed in depictions of Mary the mother of Christ. Head covering was a common practice with Church-going women until the 1960s. A number of very traditional churches retain the custom even to this day. In Mormonism, women wear a veil as part of ritual temple clothing. This veil, along with the entire temple ritual clothing, is worn only inside the temple.



A variety of headdresses are also worn by Muslim women in accordance with the Islamic principle of dressing modestly. Many of these garments cover the hair, ears and throat, but do not cover the face (see the picture on the right). The *niqab* and *burqa* are two kinds of veils that cover most of the face except for a slit or hole for the eyes. The Afghan burqa (pictured on the left) covers the entire body.



Amish women and girls wear a “prayer covering” most or all of the time, although for housework or other chores they may replace it with a kerchief in order not to damage the covering. Unmarried girls wear a black head covering to church from the time they are teenagers. Married women wear white head coverings in general.



The practice of head covering appears in many different cultures. *Mantillas* are still worn by many Spanish and Latina women during religious ceremonies, and many Christian women in India still cover their heads with a veil, scarf, shawl or the end of a sari during religious services. The lightweight ornamental mantilla (seen in the opposite picture) originated in the warmer regions of Spain as a religious head covering, but also influenced fashion trends in the court and high society. It is still worn today in special ceremonies, bullfights, and weddings.



A *sari* is the traditional garment worn by many women in the Indian subcontinent. The sari is a very long strip of unstitched cloth, which can be draped in various styles. Traditionally, married Hindu women cover their heads with the *pallu* (the end of the sari). Also for Hindu religious services, both men and women are required to cover their heads.



Head coverings have long been used by royalty from cultures all over the world to designate their prominence and social standing. The British

monarch, Queen Elizabeth II is never seen without a head covering. Like the mantilla, head coverings tend to influence fashion trends and have social meaning, as well. Empress Farah Pahlavi (Queen of Iran) and First Lady

Jackie Kennedy both don head coverings in the above picture.



For centuries, women have worn head coverings for various practical and social reasons. Sometimes a head covering (left picture) was worn by woman in mourning, especially at the funeral. Snoods (right picture), a close-fitting net-like material worn by women over their long hair, were often worn in the Middle Ages, as well as in Scotland



and parts of the North of England. Snoods were worn specifically by unmarried women as an indicator of their status until the 19th or early 20th century. The practice was again taken up in Europe during WWII. At that time, the British government had placed strict rations on the amount of material that could be used in clothing. Since headgear was not rationed, snoods were favored, along with turbans and headscarves, in order to show one's commitment to the war effort.



More practically, head coverings are also sometimes worn to protect the complexion from sun and wind damage or to keep dust out of a woman's face, especially during travel. Kerchiefs and bandanas fall into this category of head covering. Head coverings serve many practical purposes as swim caps, shower caps, helmets, and rain hats.

Head coverings even appear in folk traditions, as in the Brothers Grimm's "Little Red Riding Hood" pictured opposite.





Tradition also influences when women wear head coverings. Traditionally the western bride wears a bridal veil on her wedding day (see opposite). Many other cultures also have similar traditions.



The left picture shows a bride at a Shinto wedding in Japan, The right picture shows a traditional Japanese wedding.

# Famous Women Who Wear Head Coverings



**Mother Teresa – Christian**  
*Catholic Nun and Humanitarian*



**Benazir Bhutto – Muslim**  
*Prime Minister of Pakistan, 1988-90, 1993-96*



**Indira Gandhi – Hindu**  
*Prime Minister of India, 1966-74, 1980-84*



**Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis**  
– **Christian**  
*First Lady of the United States,*  
*1961-63*



**Diana Spencer**  
*Princess of Wales*



**Sonia Gandhi**  
Italian-born Indian politician, the President of  
the Indian National Congress and the widow of  
former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi.