

Livingston Fur's 100th Anniversary

It's only natural that Livingston Furs would have a long business life — 100 years, to be exact — because the apparel they produce, sell, appraise, repair and store has staying power too.

Alan Livingston represents the fourth generation family member in the fur trade. His grandfather, Albert Livingston travelled out West in Canada in the early part 1900's 'collecting' furs from rural and native peoples. Back in Toronto, he would send the pelts to England, and became the largest shipper in the British Commonwealth at that time. Alan's Mother's father, was a fur manufacturer and designer, in Toronto from the '20 to the 50's. In 1948, when one of his retail clients, Warner W. Howell of Hamilton was retiring, he bought the business, and later sent in his son-in-law, Jordan Livingston, to run it.

After a few years, Jordan changed the name to Jordan Livingston Furs, and built up a reputation for quality and fashion throughout the Burlington and Hamilton region, and beyond. Alan took it over in the 90's, and he and his wife, Ya'el Greenberg-Livingston, moved the store to Burlington in '99.

So that is the story of how Livingston's is an ongoing business since 1910(, and how Alan comes by it 'honestly', from both sides of the family).

Alan has seen many a customer walk through his Brant Street boutique's doors with their grandmother's fur coat in hand, asking for his advice on what to do with it.

As an example, Ya-el points to a sizeable beaver fur throw blanket draped over a hanger. "That was a larger man's fur coat back in the 1980s," she said. But today it's been repurposed and will keep its owner cozy in another way.

"What other piece of clothing can last so long and be reinvented so many times," Livingston asks. Pillows, teddy bears, vests, capes and of course, a totally new style of coat or jacket, are some of the dozens of ways decades-old furs are being reused. Livingston's designers and craftspeople expertly take an old coat, shear its fur, shorten its length and give it a more up-to-date makeover.

"We turn what family members who inherit these coats thought were fashion liabilities into assets of wearable art," Livingston adds.

Practical to withstand the chilliest weather and stylish for a modern sensibility, the industry remains relevant on runways around the world.

Reversible coats are the latest update for this timeless apparel. With one side in sheared fur and the other in water-repellent taffeta microfiber, or other fine fabric, they are warm, water-repellent and best of all, lightweight multipurpose coats. Wear the microfiber side on a casual outing and turn it inside out when heading out to a swanky affair.

Lining the walls of this upscale shop in downtown Burlington is an array of outerwear including pure angora coats that boast a made in Canada label, dense and soft Rex rabbit furs that don't shed, and others made with leather, sheepskin, lustrous mink, silver fox, raccoon and beaver. Furs are much slimmer and lighter weight than they used to be.

In keeping with the waste nothing mantra of the industry, accessories such as fur scarves, purses, gloves, hats and vests are testament to this attitude.

Patterns that have been cut with lasers to look like the groove of corduroy or swirling waves of water, print work mimicking animal patterns and indelible dyes all point to the advances that continue to be made in this centuries-long craft.

When stored in Livingston's cold, humidity-controlled vaults in Hamilton — (which is where the business operated for more than 50 years in Alan's family, and) where its designers and craftspeople continue to work — and when cleaned by a professional, fur coats enjoy the long-life they were meant to live.

Alan suggests that we check out the new website: www.furisgreen.com out of Montreal. "It has great explanations, such as about how furs are actually better, from an environmental perspective, than the synthetics that we all wear which are derived from oil. Just think of the ecological tragedy of the Gulf oil spill", he says. "Furs are much more ecologically sound."

Recent fashion shows held at the 446 Brant St. store, to celebrate the centennial anniversary, enticed a whole new generation of customers in their 20's and 30's, as well as the seasoned regular clientele. It's proof that this natural, renewable and sustainable resource will likely enjoy a long life too, and Livingston Furs will continue to keep pace with the designs, looks and lifestyles of the times.