

Umbrella Encyclopedia Article

Umbrella

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Umbrella

A collapsible device that forms a canopy to protect the bearer from the sun or rain has been in use for more than 3,000 years. In many countries it has been used as a ceremonial item and to show high rank. The word comes from the Italian word *ombrella*, which means "little shade."

The umbrella is known to have first appeared in China in the eleventh century B.C., and was reportedly invented by a woman. Members of the royal family and other aristocrats were allowed to use one and it was usually carried by a servant who trailed several steps behind. It is also known to have existed in ancient Egypt, sometimes even used in battle and to this day is favored by tribal societies in Africa. In ancient Greece and Rome, it was carried only by women.

The umbrella was introduced to Europe by the Greeks, probably about 2,000 years ago. During the twelfth century it became ceremonial garb for the Roman Catholic Church, and in the sixteenth century the Pope determined it to be a symbol of honor and was seen under one whenever he appeared in public. By the middle of the 1700s Englishmen began to use them daily as protection from frequent rain showers, although its first English enthusiast, Jonas Hanway, was teased mercilessly. In fact, cabbies who saw the umbrella as a threat to their business, would purposely spray mud and insults in Hanway's direction.

By the nineteenth century Americans were also in the swing, and the parasol, first cousin to the umbrella, was seen in Paris and London, too. Elegant ladies carried parasols decorated with fringe, lace and beads to protect them from the slightest hint of sun. Umbrellas replaced swords as an emblem of aristocracy among gentlemen.

The first umbrellas were heavy and clumsy, usually made of wood. Whalebone became the next material of choice, and by 1850 steel was used. Covers ranged from silk and linen to alpaca. The devices were finally mass produced by the English by the middle 1800s. Modern umbrellas use a lightweight metal or plastic frame with a nylon or polyester cover. Some of them fold into such a small bundle that they can be tucked into a purse or pocket.