

Head start

A new breed of designers is determined to make hats more wearable – and we’re falling in love with millinery all over again, says Harriet Quick

Milliner Stephen Jones throws a splendidly decadent dinner party. In the Banqueting Room at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, fictive guests including Mick Jagger, Lady Gaga, Kate Moss and the Duchess of Sussex are represented by the bespoke hats that Jones has made for them. There’s a pink Milady straw hat with a flurry of ostrich feathers, a red velvet fedora, a black gazar-brimmed hat named Trophy Wife, and Swing, modelled on a grand chandelier. The scene is set for mischief.

The room is one of a series of tableaux that Jones has conjured for an exhibition showcasing his designs in the Regency building, constructed as a seaside pleasure palace for King George IV more than 200 years ago. Its state rooms will display nearly 200 of the most extraordinary hats that have resulted from the Liverpool-born, Saint Martin’s School of Art-trained milliner’s 40-year career. “It’s the first time the Royal Pavilion has allowed an exhibition in the rooms,” explains Jones. “So it is a bit special.”

His designs have long encapsulated the dizzy pleasure of hat-wearing. “You put a hat on to have fun,” he says. “It’s an optimistic gesture to the world, not about how you feel, but about how you look. We ‘read’ hats, and clients always say how many compliments they receive – what has the

power to do that now?” Jones is one of the most prolific designers working across the worlds of film, celebrity, performance and runway, and has been creating hats for Dior since John Galliano’s debut in 1996 (some of his pieces are currently on display at the V&A’s retrospective *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams*), as well as for Matty Bovan and Marc Jacobs. He equips royalty and pop stars with bespoke designs that frame faces, amplify personalities and magnify a moment with surreal wit and astonishing beauty.

Jones’s exhibition could not be more prescient. Hats are enjoying a resurgence as a new generation of wearers take up the habit. The lexicon of styles is expansive, from Gucci’s beribboned fedoras to Marc Jacobs’s glossy black net-veiled boaters and Chanel’s big, raw-edged raffia sunhats. At Saint Laurent’s s/s ’19 show, there were Swarovski crystal-studded hats topping cocktail dresses; at Prada, outsize Alice bands; and at Jacquemus, giant, slouchy straws that rippled and rolled in the breeze. Last year’s two royal weddings also brought hats well and truly into the frame – at Princess Eugenie’s wedding to Jack Brooksbank, Cara Delevingne in her Chanel top hat and her sister Poppy in Victoria Grant’s feathered pillbox were a picture. “Society is, by nature, conservative, so steps forward are small,” observes Piers >



Left: Stephen Jones circa 1985. Below: Dior Couture, spring/summer '00



Below left: Kate Moss in Playboy, 2014. Below: Emily Blunt in Mary Poppins Returns



GUCCI



Left: Valentino spring/summer '19



Dior couture spring '04



Marc Jacobs spring/summer '19

Atkinson, whose hats are adored by Hollywood. “But many of the guests took a bolder approach.”

Headgear is so wildly varied – from Mary Poppins’s nifty tiffers decorated with birds and feathers, to Cardi B’s coolie hat that drips with beads and jewels, to Meghan Markle’s impressive armoury of fascinators and curvilinear sinamay saucers, to Prada’s neon nylon bucket hat. However, Jones believes there’s one essential element to get right. “People want simple, graceful and elegant designs,” he explains. “Christian Dior, who started out as a milliner, did not see the hat as separate – it was part and parcel of an outfit. The hat is also about telling stories, and there’s an element of playfulness, but it is now about being more ‘real’ than sensationalist.”

But how does “real” translate, when, for hat-wearing novices, millinery can be so intimidating? The good news is that a little practice and play makes all the difference. As the public’s taste for hat-wearing swells, feelings of self-consciousness will diminish in equal measure. “My generation was terrified of wearing hats,” says milliner Noel Stewart, who set up his business when the hat industry was on its knees. “But it’s one of those things that once tried, you get into it. Online, you cannot make a more dramatic, individualist image than by wearing a hat, and social media has had a huge effect.” Indeed, there are often contradictory impulses at play in this overly mediated era: an internal battle between wanting to stand out and a desire for privacy. Hats, conveniently, fulfil both. “People think sometimes that people who wear hats want to show off,” adds Philip Treacy, who has been making his striking architectural and feather designs since 1990, with patrons including the late Isabella Blow, Grace Jones and Dita von Teese. “A hat is a positive symbol; the ultimate glamour accessory. It thrills observers and makes the wearer feel a million dollars.”

Modern milliners are determined to make hats easy to wear. “Small hats are sometimes easier for people to wear and understand. You can have just as much drama as a large shape by adding veils and feathers,” says Treacy, who spends hours working on the forward “perch” of a hat that gives the wearer elegant angles. At Maison Michel, the Chanel-owned millinery atelier in Paris, creative director Priscilla Royer, who has been at the helm since 2015, has been rethinking the accessory for everyday. “If a hat is too stiff, then one is scared to wear it, and they can be so cumbersome,” she says. “Where do you put them? They need a chair or a shelf. It becomes an object rather than a fashion accessory. I started working on a supple straw with less coating. Last year, we launched Hat on the Go – a sunhat that you can roll and pack into a suitcase.”

Royer has also come up with a charming array for spring in a collection entitled Sunken Cities, inspired by the sub-aquatic world. There are straws boasting silver brims, turbans and veils in sheer, luminous textures. The star piece is a silver paillette bucket hat. “The bucket is more sophisticated than the baseball,” explains Royer, “and it has an elegance that you don’t have with a cap. It’s the new cloche – it suits so many faces.” Stewart, meanwhile, is championing the boater. “There are so many iterations, whether shallow and short-brimmed or soft and wide-brimmed – each has its own character,” he muses. “I love the simplicity. If a child drew a hat, it would be a boater. That dynamic circular shape is a halo around the head.”

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Philip Treacy

The current appetite for headwear has ushered in small, independent makers and specialists. Consider The Season by Paul Stafford, who specialises in origami paper hats that ingeniously fold into flatpaks. At Matchesfashion.com – which has increased its budget dedicated to hats by 35 per cent – womenswear buying director Natalie Kingham has been working with New York-based brand House of Lafayette on a line of leopard-print turbans and scrunchies, as well as picking up Eliurpi, a Barcelona-made line of cartwheel hats by Elisabet Uрпи and Nacho Umpiérrez. “You can wear them behind your neck with the ribbon tied up, fashioned after the Mediterranean style,” explains Kingham. Another independent brand making waves at the retailer is French label La Prestic Ouiston, offering twill canotiers in brilliant prints by designer Laurence Mahéo, who also works on her family’s oyster farm in Brittany.

One style can garner a cult-like following. Kiev-based Ruslan Baginskiy’s felted baker boy caps are spotted on everyone from Taylor Swift and Kaia Gerber to Joan Smalls and Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, and are sold in 130 stores. The 29-year-old began making hats while working as a stylist. “Hats were an essential part of the outfit in Lviv [Baginskiy’s hometown] in the 1960s and ’70s,” he explains. “There were a number of factories producing millions of hats for all of the former Soviet Republic states. Recently, I found pictures of my mother in a black cap and my grandparents in fedoras.” Baginskiy’s signature jaunty baker boy style is the ideal “starter”, affirms Ida Petersson, womenswear buying director at Browns. For spring, Petersson is also backing the bucket, as well as the beret that has emerged through the skate/street scene and on to the heads of Gigi Hadid and Rihanna.

Milliners will often go to extremes to further the craft. “If I had to choose just one of my creations, it would be the 17th-century galleon or Sailing Ship hat,” says Philip Treacy. “It was inspired by a chapter in Olivier Bernier’s book *Pleasure and Privilege*, which describes a British admiral losing a battle to the French fleet. In celebration, women in Paris wore ships in their hair to go to the opera. The piece is satin, with the sails made from paradise feathers and the rigging from the feather shafts.” According to Jones, Galliano’s Egyptian-inspired couture collection for Dior spring/summer 2004 remains a triumph, with Erin O’Connor opening the show in a towering metallic empress headdress. For Atkinson, outer space beckoned. “There was an incredible opportunity to create the first hat to go into orbit,” he explains. “A star was planning on performing in zero gravity wearing Piers Atkinson. It was very Nasa in my studio for a few days: tough but lightweight materials, shiny things, flashing lights, no bits that could fall off and clog up a circuit. Unfortunately, the Fashion in the Firmament has been postponed for now, but I haven’t given up hope,” he laughs.

As hat-o-philia grows the world over, many millinery fans are making pilgrimages to London’s renowned makers. Stewart recalls an Australian couture customer taking the bus to his studio in Ridley Road, Hackney, wearing a giant saucer-shaped straw. “There’s always a new hat, a new challenge,” he concludes. Hats off to that. ■



Simone Rocha spring/summer '19



Prada spring/summer '19



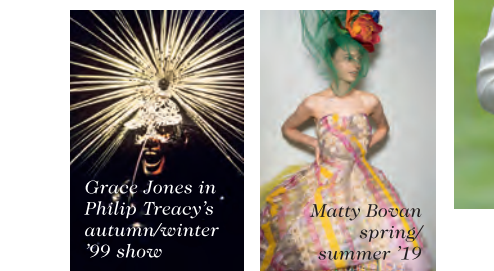
Marc Jacobs spring/summer '19



Poppy and Charles Delevingne at Princess Eugenie's wedding, 2018



Meghan Markle at Royal Ascot, 2018



Grace Jones in Philip Treacy's autumn/winter '99 show



Matty Bovan spring/summer '19



Below: Isabella Blow at Paris Fashion Week, March 1998

MERT ALAS AND MARCUS PREGOTT; BILL CUNNINGHAM/EVFNIVE; KEVIN DAVIES; GETTY; DORIS/AM; INDIGITAL; JASON LLOYD; EVANS; LONDON NORDMAN/TRUNK ARCHIVE; MITCHELL SAMS; SHUTTERSTOCK; KEVIN TICHMAN/TRUNK ARCHIVE