

Turning heads

Armed with a glue-gun, attitude and an Aladdin's cave of accessories, a new hat is just an experiment away

BY GABY SOUTAR, PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN MACNICOL

OVER THE DECADES, IN PURSUIT OF practical fashions to suit our lifestyles, we've almost completely ditched unnecessary paraphernalia. This includes corsets, girdles, parasols and fans. Thank goodness, they were just weighing womankind down. However, there's one impractical item that shouldn't have become almost extinct – the hat. And I'm not talking about cosy beanies. We need to bring back coquettish, pill-box numbers with alluring netting, organza ribbons and silk flowers.

So when I heard that Glasgow-based haberdasher VV Rouleaux was running a millinery workshop I booked myself in for a preview faster than you can say Carmen Miranda.

These sessions are inspired by the amazingly popular hat-making classes that were held at the Oxford Street branch of Topshop during London Fashion Week in February. There, VV Rouleaux staff from the London store demonstrated their hat-making skills to around 200 enthusiastic women each day. The smaller, more civilised Scottish classes will take place at the Glasgow shop this month, with 28 spaces for those who want to learn the art, under the expert tutelage of shop manager Lucy Coles.

"We want to demonstrate a number of techniques to customers, so they can choose which they want to use themselves," says Coles.

"The headdresses that we're creating aren't tricky to make – you just have to be brave and use your imagination."

Resplendent in a hat made from a mother-of-pearl shell, lined in green silk and with sprouting peacock feathers, Coles is practised in the art of whipping up fanciful headdresses. Although Scottish customers tend to request simple fascinators to match their outfits, she's still had to deal with some unusual requests in her four years working at the shop.

"One customer wanted an exact replica of the hat that Camilla Parker Bowles wore when she married Prince Charles," she says.

"Another wanted a whole stuffed bird to be attached to a headpiece."



Thankfully, my millinery plans aren't quite as extreme, although, I do have a thing about the flouncy monochrome hat seen on Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* and the temple-cradling white feather number Dame Margot Fontaine wore when dancing in *Swan Lake*. As well as demonstrating how to make a flower out of organza ribbon and a wired feather mount which forms the basis of a fascinator (perfect if you've got any weddings to go to this summer), Coles also shows us how to cover a hairband in layered feathers and gems.

However, the best part of the day is learning how to make a hat out of the simple millinery discs that VV Rouleaux sells. You sew a hair comb to the underside of these which means they can be the foundation for a very simple but dramatic headpiece. After showing us all the techniques, Coles lets us choose what we want to make and I decide to create two hats using the discs.

My preliminary creation has a fuchsia base with yellow netting and a hot-pink butterfly pasted onto the crown. These faux insects are my favourite items out of all the haberdashery at VV Rouleaux, especially as I adore the butterfly-festooned hats that were part of Alexander McQueen's spring/summer 2008 show, a tribute to his friend, and hat-wearer extraordinaire, the late Isabella Blow. We suspect he got his

Lucy Coles wearing a shell and peacock feather hat, main; Ruth Ansell of VV Rouleaux models a straw hat with silk flowers, left; Gaby Soutar tries her hand at millinery, above



millinery supplies from one of the branches of this shop in London, although "his people" haven't confirmed anything.

"We're not 100 per cent sure if it was our haberdashery he used," says Annabel Lewis, owner and founder of VV Rouleaux.

"However, the materials look exactly the same as ours and he'll have definitely seen those items in our shop."

As I'm high on the fumes from the glue-gun, I'm beginning to think my creation is just as haute-couture as McQueen's catwalk pieces. "Well done, it's very nice," Coles enthuses, as I don the completed item and admire myself in the shop mirror.

I'm getting into my stride now. So, for my second creation I've decided to go for something in a 1940s style, with lots of feathers. This time I start with a black



tear-shaped base, and stick on numerous pheasant feather tips. Some are dappled with black and white spots and some have tan-yellow markings, and I layer them carefully as I go. "Mind your fingers on the glue-gun, it's really hot," says Coles. "Ouch, yes I've just realised that," I reply, my fingers slightly charred. It's a fiddly job and the fluffy feather down is going up my nose. Despite this, attaching the feathers is a very therapeutic and relaxing task.

The *pièce-de-résistance* of my hat is a piece of brown vintage net and a long pheasant quill, which I coil and then stitch firmly into place. It looks like an ostentatious hunting cap. Move over, Philip Treacy.

Now, I just have to find an occasion to wear my champagne. Luckily, Coles has a few suggestions.

"Most people ask us to make bespoke headdresses to wear to weddings and functions," she says.

"We've just created some headdresses for a new film starring Keira Knightley"

"However, there's also a new generation who're going to burlesque nights and clubs like Vegas, where a hat is a vital addition to their outfit."

It seems that I may get more chances to wear my new hats than I thought. A new film, out on 29 August, features more of VV Rouleaux's haberdashery delights, which might just push millinery further into the fashion spotlight.

"We've just created some headdresses for *The*

Duchess, starring Keira Knightley, which is set in the 18th century," says Lewis.

"It's about the Duchess of Devonshire and it's so exciting for us. She started the fashion for big, powdered hair that would have been covered in flowers, bows and birds."

Thanks to VV Rouleaux's workshops, if autumn fashions are influenced by *The Duchess*, I'm perfectly placed to create headwear to fit the trend. Just pass me those butterflies and a glue-gun. **SM**

■ *Two hat workshops will be held at VV Rouleaux, 94 Miller Street, Glasgow (tel: 0141-221 2277, www.vvrouleaux.com) on Tuesday 22 and Thursday 24 April, 9:30am-12:30pm or 2pm-5pm (seven places for each session). Tickets are £65, which includes the basic materials to make your own headpiece or revamp an old hat.*