

In the Fifties we were a nation of hat wearers, so why not now, asks Kelly Rose Bradford

HAT TRICKS



practical elements have put a stop to large or decorative headwear – central heating in public buildings, and the advent of hairspray and hair dye, which has resulted in the hair becoming the focus, rather than the hat.

Despite this, on the catwalk, the hat has rarely gone away. 'Designers are aware of the drama of a hat,' continues Oriole. 'Look at Isabella Blow and Daphne Guinness. Entertainers realise it, too: Lady Gaga or Grace Jones know the power a hat wields.'

Strangely, it's a power that's shunned by the ordinary man or woman; unless you're at Ascot or a wedding, you hardly ever see a decorative hat these days. Judith Wilson, hat adviser at Peter Jones in Sloane Square, says it is down to fear. 'People are afraid of hats,' she says, 'They worry about being stared at, or laughed at, and women especially can find the process of buying a hat intimidating.'

Confidence, she says, is key, and that comes from wearing the right hat: 'Your stature is paramount. Your hat is supposed to look fabulous, not ridiculous, so if you are five foot tall and petite, you need to keep your hat in proportion to your build. Also, some women just don't know how to wear a hat. They come in, plonk something on their head, look in the mirror and say, no, I don't suit hats. But who *does* suit a hat worn back to front and sitting squarely on top of the head? A hat needs to be played with, moved around, adjusted to frame the face – and worn the right way round. Look inside it – the label should always be at the back.'

Judith is a stickler for hat care: 'Keep hats in hat boxes, well-stuffed and stored somewhere safe, where other things are not going to fall and crush them. And be aware that a hat can be an investment piece and, if chosen wisely, can be used across the seasons and down the years.' With that in mind, Judith advocates customising and updating hats that are favourites: 'You don't have to keep buying; sometimes a lady will come in with a wonderful hat she already owns, but which doesn't match her new outfit. I'll send her down to haberdashery to re-trim it with different feathers or fabric flowers.'

Under Judith's watchful gaze I try on dozens of hats and fascinators – my own love of headgear long having resulted in comment, laughter and general leg-pulling. My final choice is a huge feathered fascinator that, as I stand at five feet tall, flies in the face of her rules on proportion. But she told me her 'best' advice was not to be afraid. And I'm not: John Hetherington is my hero. Make him yours. ♦

PETER JONES Sloane Square, London SW1
(020-7730 3434; www.peterjones.co.uk).

WHEN MILLINER John Hetherington stepped out in a silk top hat in 1797, a near-riot ensued. He was accused of wearing a hat 'calculated to frighten timid people'. Subsequent reports claimed that several women fainted at the sight, while children screamed and dogs yelped. Hetherington was charged with breaching the peace.

Despite our hat-wearing history, world-renowned milliners and famous hat wearers (the Queen is arguably the most iconic hat wearer of our time, as was her mother before her), the wearing of headgear still courts attention; sometimes even derision and laughter. But why does a functional and aesthetically pleasing accessory provoke such divided opinion and emotion?

'People still find hat-wearing unusual, but the truth is, it has never gone away,' says Oriole Cullen, curator of fashion and textiles at the V&A. 'We think of ourselves as not being hat wearers any more, but you only have to look around a Tube carriage in winter to see this isn't the case, it's just that these days people don't regard certain types of headgear – like baseball caps, hoods and beanies – as hats, but they are and you routinely see them being worn.'

So why has our love affair with formal hats waned? Just two generations ago, neither men nor women would feel properly dressed without one; nowadays wearing hats requires effort, guts, and, more often than not, an invitation to a wedding, a garden party, or Royal Ascot.

'Things changed so much in the mid-20th century,' Oriole says. 'Take the motorcar – initially people drove in open-topped cars, but as they evolved and became smaller, you just couldn't get in with a hat on. In the USA there was outrage among milliners when JFK came to power – he was the first President not to wear a hat and it then became acceptable not to go out in a hat. Generally though,

THE HAT PARADE

♦ **Stephen Jones Millinery** 36 Great Queen Street, London WC2 (020-7242 0770; www.stephenjonesmillinery.com). Italian *Vogue* says he makes the most beautiful hats in the world.

♦ **James Lock & Co** 6 St James's Street, London, SW1 (020-7930 5849; www.lockhatters.co.uk). You don't get more knowledgeable than James Lock. Founded in 1676.

♦ **Philip Treacy** At Harrods, Fenwick, and Fortnum & Mason (020-7738 8080; www.philiptreacy.co.uk). The UK's best hat-maker. Clients include the Duchess of Cornwall.

♦ **Gina Foster Millinery** 5 Kensington Church Walk, London W8 (020-7937 7611; www.ginafoster.co.uk). From traditional wedding headgear to fascinators.

♦ **H'atelier** 10 Stevenson Square, Northern Quarter, Manchester M1 (0161-236 1643; www.hatelier.co.uk). Bespoke hatters, making unique pieces.

♦ **John Lewis** Stores nationwide (08456-049049; www.johnlewis.com).