

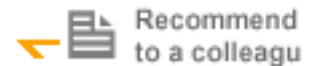


Editorial Articles:

It's

Millinery for a Modern Age

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ELECTRONIC BUSINESS

Karyn Gingras, one of the best hat makers in Canada, operates and owns a little hat boutique named Lilliput. Located in mid-town Toronto, its custom-designed hats draw clients from a broad range of backgrounds.

There are customers who love the touch of nostalgia in hat with velvet ribbons, chenille veiling and flowers. Then there are those forward thinkers who enjoy knowing where their clothing and food comes from, and enjoy watching the

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craftspeople as they work on their products.

In between, there are those who have the common sense to protect themselves from the harsh elements and the beauty sense to look for a hat-maker who caters to the likes of ac Whoopi Goldberg, Ontario Lieutenant-Governor Hillary Weston and singer Celine Dion.

HAT STORES ARE A RARE SIGHT

Most large department stores have a hat or millinery section and the price of mass-produced hats is well within reach of most people. However, a store that dedicates itself entirely to hats is a bit unusual. When customers walk into Lilliput, they are often taken by the desire to try everything on at once.

Gingras sees her hats as something between sculpture and fantasy. "Not everyone needs a custom made hat," she says. "But when you buy a hat that's hand-blocked and you choose the look, that's something really special."

HOBBY COURSE TURNED INTO BUSINESS

Gingras has had a love affair with hats since the age of 14. She had an interest in costume history and has accumulated a large collection of vintage hats.

Twelve years ago, finding herself in a transition mode, she took a hobby course in hat making at a community college. After learning the traditional way of stretching and steaming hats, she used her new skills to make a few for friends. She then sold some of her creations on consignment to a "hip" store on [Toronto's] Queen Street." She also had a chance to make hats for a bar mitzvah. In 1988 her hobby became a business, which really began to take off in 1990.

When she first started her business, Gingras didn't have the resources for expensive gadgets. She may well have been the first milliner to use a citrus juicer for shaping felt to create t

tricky little points in hats. She sculpted tin foil from the pan into tiny silver flowers.

WINNING OVER WINDOW SHOPPERS

When Lilliput moved into its present location at 462 College Street in Toronto, Gingras noticed an instant upswing in store visits. Prior to the move, she worked from her second-floor apartment/boutique in a nearby area with fewer window shoppers.

When people look into her store window, their faces often light up. The hats on display entice people, who are encouraged by the staff to try them on. "Hats are not made of porcelain," Gingras says. "They are fun things - they bring out the sense of play in people."

At the back of the store, hats are blocked and embellished. However there is no partition between the sales floor and workshop; no sign that says "Employees Only." Customers can walk into the workshop where they will find a welcoming ear to their ideas and feedback. "Men who come in with their spouses and friends love the work area. They like to be informed. And where else can you watch beautiful women work on hats that you've ordered?"

ANOTHER SALES CHANNEL

Half of Lilliput's business comes from wholesaling to upscale department stores such as Holt Renfrew. These clients give Gingras' business some needed stability. The hats sold through this channel are broader in appeal, more commercial and less "out-there." But even in this category, no more than three to four hats are made from one design.

Marie McLaughlin, a former buyer at Holt Renfrew for 30 years, is the woman who introduced the Lilliput line to the giant store. She feels Gingras has made a line of special and distinctive hats. "It's the dressy trimming and ribbons that

make her hats wonderful for parties and celebrations," McLaughlin says. "They match the occasions perfectly." With the exchange rates, it's not hard to decide in favour of Lilliput hats over comparable imports from the United States, Italy, and England.

A RESPECT FOR PRIVACY

Part of the magic of Lilliput is the utmost discretion for customers' privacy. A lot of clients who wear hats for religious reasons can feel confident about removing their wigs in the store without undue attention. Others may want to try on their wedding or bar mitzvah ensembles in a private setting. By paying attention to their needs, Lilliput has a dedicated and established clientele.

What drives Karyn's creativity is the special one-of-a-kind designs. She enjoys the consulting process, helping customers express themselves through different materials and embellishments. Her staff of six often comes up with special custom hats in an astonishingly short time. Film production companies, for example, often put in orders that need to be filled to a tight schedule.

GREAT REWARDS

"At the beginning, I didn't know if the business would take off. Some days all I want is a nine-to-five job, without having to worry about suppliers or whether my shop windows will be broken," says Karyn. "But the work is so full of surprises it's ever-changing. And there isn't a day that goes by without someone thanking me for a beautiful wedding hat, or sending photos of a baby wearing a tiny top hat that I've done for a christening."

"At the end of the day when I lock up, I always know that I've made a great choice. This is my thing."

HAT MAKING: A GREAT TRADITION

According to Dr. Alexandra Palmer, costume historian at the Royal Ontario Museum, hat making was traditionally done by women, for women. It has always been a respectable trade for women who work for a living, even when working was not considered a genteel thing to do at the time.

COMPLETION OF BODY SILHOUETTE

Hats, along with clothing, have always reflected the times. In the 20s and 30s, hats were designed to complement the popular bias-cut dresses. Bell-shaped hats ('cloche' in French) were the order of the day. Around this time it became acceptable for women to smoke and drink in public so hat makers did away with the veiling so women's faces were uncovered for the first time.

"When big hair was in, as in the '60s during the sexual revolution, it didn't mean that hats became superfluous. It's tied-in together, never in isolation. It's about the completion of the body silhouette," says Dr. Palmer. Design houses such as Pierre Cardin and Courreges came out with helmet-like hats to accommodate the beehive look.

HOW IT'S DONE

Gingras or her staff begin the hat-making process by taking a measurement of the client's head. They then use a wooden head-shaped block to shape a piece of material such as wool felt or fur felt.

The technique of blocking has, to a large extent, remained unchanged for hundreds of years. At Lilliput the collection blocks range from fairly new to antique. These blocks are almost works of art in themselves and are given a prominent place in the shop.

After much steaming, coaxing, stretching and pinning, the material is finally shaped to a perfect fit. Then it's dried, brushed and buffed before being given a sweatband, lining and a wire support around the edges.

HEAD SHAPES AND SIZES

A standard size head is 22.5 inches. However, a hat-shop such as Lilliput can stretch or reduce any hat to a customer's need. The measurement is taken across the forehead, above the ears and across the ridge at the back of the head. The goal is to give every customer an exact, comfortable fit.

HAT-BUYING ADVICE

First-time hat buyers are encouraged to stay with basic colours, such as chocolate brown, navy and black. With a beautifully-crafted basic hat, they are making a small fashion statement. It gives them room to move into something flashier when the time is right.

A textured, salmon coloured hat with a python trim, on the other hand, is not for the timid. It suits a tall woman who is comfortable in a man's suit.

In general, Gingras advises narrow brims for shorter women and both broad and narrow brims for tall women. People who wear glasses may want to roll the brim off the face, otherwise "it's all hat and glasses, and it impedes vision."

Flat-patterned or sewn hats which are not hand-blocked are priced at around \$60. A custom hand-blocked hat in velvet or Parisian straw starts at \$120. Gingras said that most machine-blocked hats sold in department stores are of good quality. However, they have a mass-produced feel to them and "don't have the molded, sexy look you'd get in custom hats."

About the Author: Evelyn Chau is a freelance writer who contributes profiles and articles on health, consumer issues travel and the environment to a variety of magazines and newspapers. She also specializes in providing content to several Internet service providers.

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