

How-To



A Fascination with Fascinators Rosemary Greene*

Victorian ladies reserved fascinators for special occasions, but fascinators took on a life of their own in the Belle Époque era. A professional milliner gives us some fascinating details.

From time immemorial, humans have spent much time and effort on decorating their hair in a vain -pardon the pun -attempt to look beautiful and attract the attention of others. Over the centuries, both men and women have twisted, knotted, braided, curled, crimped and even powdered their hair.

History does not report what the first decorative ornaments may have been – most likely whatever was hard to get and thus rare such as animal teeth and bird feathers, thus attracting a lot of attention. What is certain is that mankind –womankind included – has never lost the fascination for adorning their hair to attract and fascinate.



The Duchess Georgiana Spencer of Devonshire, renowned for setting fashion trends, wore enormous Ostrich plumes in her hair in the late 1700's.

There are many explanations for the origin of the term *fascinator* to describe a kind of hair ornament. I particularly like the one that says it comes from an Agatha Christie book in which Miss Marple is reported to be wearing one. The mental image of Miss Marple in black ostrich feathers and rhinestones boggles the mind!

Seriously then, what really is a fascinator? The generally accepted definition is that a fascinator is a hair adornment that accents the hair and lies somewhere between a hair accessory like a hair clip and a hat which covers most of the head. The base of a fascinator that attaches to the hair is usually quite small such as a hair comb, an elastic band, or a small round base and does not cover much of the hair. In general, fascinators are



French fashion plate showing plumed [aigrette](#) fascinator, 1897

elaborate concoctions of luxurious materials such as feathers, ribbons, veiling, beads and jewels. Fascinators reached their height of popularity and elaborateness in the 1800's.

There were rigid rules of dress during that era which everyone used to define a person's social position, such as class, breeding and even matrimonial status. All social classes abided by the rules and even up until World War II, no well-dressed woman would think of leaving the house without wearing a hat. I recall as a child in the 1950's that it was considered a social faux

pax to wear velvet before Thanksgiving or white shoes before Easter Sunday. Amazing how much those social conventions have changed since then!

But getting back to our history, when one considers how clothing and other adornments helped to define how one was perceived in society in past centuries, it's no surprise that at the height of their popularity, fascinators became so elaborate that miniature sailing ships or lavish garden flower scenes were worn atop the heads of socially conscious ladies.



Kentucky Derby Fascinator Race Winner, 2010. Photo by ChrisRachael Oseland, Louisville.com

However, this love affair with more and more lavish hair ornamentation did not last in the face of the austerity brought by two World Wars, the changing status of women that allowed them to work outside the home and the negativity associated with wearing feathers that resulted in the near extinction of several species of birds. Although fascinators are still made today with beautiful materials such as ribbons, veiling and feathers, current conservation rules have made the use of feathers from

threatened or extinct species not only unacceptable, but actually illegal.

Recently there has been a renewed interest in wearing fascinators. They are typically worn in the evening at more formal occasions like weddings, theater openings, or gala parties. They are also worn to popular horse races like the Kentucky Derby (left) and Ascot as an alternative to a hat. Fascinators are increasingly made of less elaborate materials and are worn as everyday wear.

Much of the resurgence of interest in wearing something on the head such as a hat or fascinator is attributed to popular stars and other socially recognizable people, such as the Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie, Madonna, Angelina Jolie, Paris Hilton, Rihanna, Sarah Jessica Parker (right), Brad Pitt, and Johnny Depp to name but a few. Popular or well-know figures are often looked to as ‘fashion leaders’, so fashion manufacturers – along with many consumers – tend to follow their lead.

However, my personal opinion is that a ‘new’ fashion trend often becomes popular just because it is new and therefore different. After an absence of more than 60 years, wearing a hat or fascinator definitely meets the criteria of both new and different!

So with all this discussion of how ‘new’ and ‘different’ it would be to wear a fabulous fascinator, how does one acquire said adornment? The good news is that because of their current popularity, there is a broad selection available in many locations

so one will not have to travel very far. There are numerous web stores selling fascinators, as well as several hat stores in the San Francisco Bay area (see resource section). Big box department stores such as Nordstrom's and Macy's typically have a selection of commercially made fascinators and small boutiques often have a selection of custom made fascinators.

Prices for commercial fascinators can range between \$15.00 to \$20.00 for a very simple one, and \$75.00 to \$100.00 for



Sarah Jessica Parker at London "Sex and the City" movie premier, 2008. Photo: Shopaholic.us.com.

something more elaborate. A custom-made fascinator created by hand by a skilled milliner (hat maker) can easily cost several hundred dollars depending on the materials used, degree of elaborateness and the name recognition of the designer (social consciousness is not entirely dead!)

If purchasing a commercially made or custom-made fascinator does not meet your requirements for either style, color, or price, you can always make your own to suit your outfit and occasion. They are surprisingly easy to make and will validate of your creativity and good taste. A brief search on the Web results in dozens of Web sites that show how to make fascinators, from the very simple to the elaborately ornate. I recommend that you visit one or more of the Web sites listed below. I especially liked the video – a cheeky but very informative demonstration of the basics.

I hope you will decide to take the plunge and wear a fascinator to your next social function or party, but be prepared – you will get noticed. It's not called a fascinator for nothing!

Resources

How to sites:

Video – fun and very instructive:

- [Twiggy's Frock Exchange, "Hats and Fascinators", by Mary Jane Baxter.](#)

Good step by step instructions:

- [eHow, "How to Make a Fasciator", by Gigi Starr.](#)



Elaborate feather fascinator made by the author. Black rooster feathers and vintage velvet flowers.



Simple Fascinator made by the author. Black rooster feathers and horsehair braid.

- [Meerkat Clippings, "How to make a fascinator", by Lady Meerkat.](#)
- [Free Projects, "How to Make a Feathered Headpiece", Simplicity.](#)

Hat/fascinator stores (Rosemary's hats are sold at Black Cat Hats and Hats on Post)

- Black Cat Hats, 59 N Santa Cruz, Los Gatos, CA 95030
- Hats on Post, 210 Post Street (6th floor, Shreve Bldg) San Francisco, CA 94108
- Fino Fino, 325 Sharon Park Drive, Menlo Park, CA 94025

Rosemary Greene's love of hats has its roots in her childhood, when every Easter her talented mother made her a new outfit and matching hat. Although her mother taught Rosemary to sew, she did not teach her millinery skills. Rosemary never lost her love of wearing hats, and wore one even when no one else did. Several years ago, she began studying costume design at a local college, took a millinery class, and found her true passion! She loves passing on her hat making skills. She teaches Millinery classes through the Los Gatos Saratoga Community Education, and also by arrangement in her home studio. Her hats are sold at Black Cat Hats in Los Gatos CA, Hats on Post in San Francisco CA, or by custom order. She holds a Ed.D from the University of Southern California. Contact her at rgreene@grdi.com or visit her web site [Top Hat Millinery](#) for more information.