



## *Designer's Sumptuous Hats Are Sought-After Accessories*

By Michelle Rauch | Photos by Kirk Schlea

**C**olorful, off the beaten path, and attention to detail. These are terms New York City hat designer Christine Moore uses to describe the 80 pieces in her spring line. While she chooses her words as carefully as she has chosen her material, they only begin to paint a picture of her artistry. If hat aficionados think they have come to know what to expect from this celebrated milliner, they should think again. "With this collection," Moore said, "I've cleared the slate for something new and different."

Before appreciating the direction the 46-year-old is taking her collection this season, it helps to know where she comes from. Moore's interest in millinery started in college, where she studied theater and costume design at Allentown College of Saint Francis de Sales in Pennsylvania. After four years there Moore spent a year at Kutztown University of Fine Arts.

She launched her professional career in the late 1980s in Philadelphia, where she was the assistant costume designer at the Walnut Street Theater. This gave her the experience she needed to take her

talent on the road. Moore traveled up and down the East Coast accepting millinery jobs in professional theaters. By 1990 she had caught the eye of the top milliner on Broadway, Rodney Gordon. She became his assistant, which set the stage for her role in making masterful creations for productions including *Phantom of the Opera*, *Crazy For You*, and *Will Rogers Follies*.

Four years later Moore was ready to branch out on her own. The timing was good. There was a revived interest in hats in the mid-1990s. New designers such as Moore were bursting onto the scene. Moore

was approached by New York's famous Henri Bendel department store about selling her hats there. This was the commercial exposure she needed to launch her own business. As word of mouth spread, Moore's hats began to reach customers worldwide.

In addition to the international clientele, customers in Kentucky have given Moore phenomenal success. Jolene Dawkins, manager of the Keeneland Gift Shop, introduced Moore to the horse-racing crowd. Tapping into those customers has been valuable.

"She makes every client feel so special in her hat. You feel like a million dollars. She has that gift," Dawkins said.

Inquiries for her show-stopping tailor-made hats for the Kentucky Derby have kept Moore busy. During the last six years, sales of Christine Moore hats in the Keeneland Gift



Attention to detail distinguishes Moore's hats. Above, right, Elizabeth Cruse, Djuan Trent, and Cara Drury (left to right) show off her creations.



Shop have grown exponentially. Moore's annual trunk show during the Toyota Blue Grass Stakes weekend in April has become a ritual for women who want something special. In addition to the one-of-a-kind hats she has in the trunk show, which are ready to take home and wear, Moore is also available to design custom hats.

Said Moore: "Working with Jolene and her wonderful staff and my time at the Keeneland Shop have taught me a lot about racing, the industry, and Kentucky itself."

Moore's devoted fans in Kentucky include Tracie Evans, wife of Churchill Downs Inc. president Bob Evans. Celebrities also turn heads in Moore's creations. J. Lo (Jennifer Lopez) graced a recent cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine sporting one. Katy Perry wore one for the cover of *In Style*. Halle Berry, Diane Keaton, Alicia Keyes, and Susan Lucci are fans too.

As with any other artist's work, Moore's builds on itself. Moore is looking away from the vintage appeal of her theater days and is pulling contemporary ideas off the fashion runways. However, a great deal of Moore's inspiration comes

directly from her customers. "I travel a lot and meet a lot of people. I listen to the customers and what they say. It's very helpful designing," she said.

The creative process starts with color. "My colors for spring are punchier than they have ever been," Moore said. Splashes of yellow and pink create a pearlized reflection that evokes citrus. "I went renegade from New York designers because

everything has to be subdued," Moore said. In New York, she says, women typically wear neutrals: black, grey, and brown.

Adding so much color into her latest collection for other people to wear is one thing, but as for wearing color herself, Moore said, "I'm working on it."

Once the colors of her collection capture your attention, the intricate details will keep you interested. It's the foundation of what she does. "What we're known for is high-quality work," Moore said.

The spring collection contains more intricate pieces than usual. While each hat is a story, the smaller details of each piece that make up the hat create stories within the bigger picture. That is what makes this collection off the beaten path.

"As a designer, we all have a look we fol-



Christine Moore makes sure Elizabeth Cruse's wide-brimmed hat is perfectly placed. "A hat is a smile," the designer says.



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## CHRISTINE A. MOORE

low. I have my look no one copies. On top of that, this season I've ratcheted it up with stories within the hat," she said. The "Carrie Ann" hat is just one example. Its details remind Moore of a dense wooded area through which light filters to the forest floor. She delights in the things that can be seen flying and buzzing in those spots of light. In the hat, Moore has tucked away unusual elements that, when caught in the right light, seem to appear magically, like a fairy napping on flower petals.

The "Misha" hat evokes a pond full of lily pads with its own surprises. "It is the intricacy that allows for imagination and causes wonder for the wearer," she said. The hats evoke a mood. "There's an artistry to it I don't see out there right now," Moore said.

Medium brims in a variety of shapes are trending now instead of the dramatic wide brims. Then there's the luxurious materials with exotic names such as synamay and fine parisisol as well as fine straw which, when fused together in three layers, becomes iridescent. There are more: silk organza, silk matte, and silk taffeta. Top it all off with a rich variety of feathers: coque, peacock, and pheasant. Each feather has a distinctive look and texture.

Moore's desire to keep people engaged is not limited to her customers. She is equally interested in keeping her small staff just as entertained, engaged, and challenged. "They are artists," she explained. She designs the hats, makes samples, and her staff takes the sketches and interprets them. "That's what makes the product so wonderful. It's collaboration," she said.

The collaboration comes with a lot of discussion inside her New York City shop. It's a challenge to keep the creative process fresh while always learning new things. "Happy people, passionate people, inspired people make it fun," Moore said.

Because people are the reason behind her creations, Moore's collections are named after the people she meets — people who inspire. It's not always a friend. Often it's a woman she meets in passing who, in some way, makes an impression worthy of Moore's naming a hat in her honor. "I only need one person to love my designs. That's the only audience I need. That's enough," Moore said.

A small audience may be enough; however, Moore is humbled by the growing number of fans. Last year's royal wedding has been good for the industry and for Moore. "Hats have become a valid fashion choice for everyone. It's normal now," Moore said.

What has surprised her about the royal wedding is American women's sudden fascination with fascinators, those little pieces of art perched atop well-coiffed heads. Moore has been making them for years, although she refers to them as cocktail hats.

She has always taken them to her trunk shows. "I had boxes and boxes of beautiful art," Moore said. But few people paid much attention to them, let alone bought one. Now, everyone seems to want one. "It is satisfying to finally see them on people," she said.

"This is a valid choice. I like that you can have a fun piece of art on your head without a brim."

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Moore says each of her hats contains a story.

She says when someone wears a fascinator, the first impression is priceless.

Whether it's a fascinator or a traditional brimmed hat, Moore believes either can pull an outfit together "People who wear hats all the time feel 'finished.' They feel great about themselves. It shows how put together they are. They feel pride," Moore said.

That's why Moore says she's in the business of smiles. "A hat is a smile. Everyone who tries on a hat, smiles," she said. When she spots someone wearing one of her hats, Moore is the one smiling. "I'm so proud."

It's these moments she wishes her staff could share with her. The random encounters, not so much the big events such as the Derby where she is the featured designer, take her breath away.

"Sometimes I just want to go up to people and say 'thank you.' You're the reason I do what I do," Moore said. 🐎

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