



HATS OFF TO FIELDEN

LEXINGTON MILLINER FASHIONS ONE-OF-A-KIND CREATIONS

By Debra Gibson Isaacs / Photos by Kirk Schlea

Insomnia gripped Fielden Willmott several years ago. No matter how she tried, the young woman simply couldn't sleep. In the depths of that Lexington night, she saw a hat lying around, and in a spontaneous act of curiosity she took it apart to see how it was constructed.



Willmott works on a headpiece made of a Marc Jacobs silk-covered base and bow and trimmed with curled Lady Amherst pheasant center tail feathers.

Intrigued, Willmott started researching milliners and drafted a few hat patterns of her own. Then she began writing milliners, including Rosie Boylan, the woman who created hats for the movie version of *The Great Gatsby*.

Several wrote back, including famed couture milliner Anya Caliendo, who had learned the craft from Stephen Jones and Rose Cory, two of the biggest names in the business. And Caliendo didn't just write back; she invited Willmott to join one of her classes to learn the traditional European couture technique.

Knowing no one and traveling alone, Willmott, then in her mid-20s, took off for New York City and spent the next six weeks learning how to block, hand-piece, and hand-stitch hats. She made her first hats under the watchful eye of Caliendo, who in her blog called Willmott "brilliant." On the weekends Willmott wandered through the garment district absorbed in fabric, trim, and lace.

Styling

Willmott was not just searching for materials or enjoying fabulous treasure

hunts as she calls her expeditions in the city; she was looking for what would become her signature style. The budding milliner studied the three major styles — European, American, and Australian — each with a distinctive look that reflects the culture from which it comes.

"It's like red wines," Willmott explained. "The European style is like a French red that is made to go with a fabulous meal. The United States style is like a California red — bolder, juicier, sassier. Think of the big-brimmed, highly decorated hats at the Derby. The



Australians like a pepperish rosé. Their hats have a really sculptured look and incredible architecture."

The traditional European method caught Willmott's fancy because of the clean lines and the hand-stitching. No glue allowed.

"I like the idea that anything I make can be worn now or 10 years later with the same beautiful effect," she said. "I don't want to be misled by fads."

Traditional daring

Perhaps Willmott was attracted to the traditional method because tradition has played such a big role in the 29-year-old's



"For me making a hat is an art form," says Willmott as she fashions another one-of-a-kind creation.

life. She attended The Lexington School from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, and then it was off to Chatham Hall, an all-girls boarding school in Chatham, Va., for high school. She returned to Kentucky to attend Centre College in Danville, earning a bachelor's degree in English in 2007. In 2010 Willmott earned a master of arts in teaching in secondary English educa-



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tion from Morehead State University.

However, her classic education was always interwoven with creative pursuits.

"I come from a line of inquisitive, crafty people," she said. Willmott's father, Webb Willmott, built airplanes, not the toy ones but the ones people fly in. Both her father and grandfather, Robert Willmott, craft wood furniture. Both her grandmothers are artists. One makes her own clothes; the other does needlepoint.

Before discovering millinery, Willmott began sewing as a hobby during college, ultimately making her own clothes. While in Danville, she also learned to quilt from Leslie Featherly and Tori Morris at the Wilderness Road Quilt Company. Millinery offered a similar creative outlet.

"I realized that hats offer an opportunity for sculptural creativity," she said.

Keeping secrets

There is yet another side of Willmott's personality that isn't readily obvious. She has a love of adventure that led her to parachute from a plane to overcome her fear of heights, hitchhike to Wyoming, live in France for a while, and kayak and ride bikes in the American West during summer breaks, taking only her golden retriever, Lady, with her.

This fun-loving side of Willmott is also reflected in her hats, but it is hidden within where only a few will discover it, much as Willmott's adventurous nature



Top, a custom Kentucky Oaks headpiece; above, a headpiece Willmott created while studying with Anya Caliendo

is hidden beneath a veneer of grace and sophistication.

Her hats also hold such secrets. Willmott's favorite creation — a deep red turban made of dupioni silk — is a good example. Willmott named the hat The Mystery of the Hidden Ruby, and tucked beneath the fold on the crown of the turban is a tear-shaped ruby you only see if you explore beneath the surface. Flip over any of her creations and you find a beautiful finishing touch underneath.

"It is important to me that the inside of a hat is as beautiful as the outside," Willmott says. "It is just like a person. The outside is a reflection of the beauty within."

The Mystery of the Hidden Ruby is

made from only the best materials — the one thing common to all her hats. In this case the dupioni silk is \$120 a yard. For this hat the silk is sewn in two pieces, each fold draped perfectly to make it look like seamless fabric. Each piece is hand stitched, the lining inserted last. The elegant hat took Willmott 20 hours to complete. She wore it to the Milliner's Guild's Bonnet Bash at the National Arts Club and won the Most Glamorous Hat Award.

"For me, making a hat is an art form," she said. "I strive for wearable art. It is an expression of my creativity. I don't want to look on a shelf and see 30 of the same kind of pieces. I have never made the same hat twice. You won't see yourself anywhere else in one of my hats."

It is impossible to say which hat is her best because each piece is unique. A rich black-felted rabbit hat, so smooth to the touch, is a classic that would find a home with any style. A headpiece (Willmott does not use the term fascinator) sports Lady Amherst pheasant tail feathers, arrow quills, and fabric from Marc Jacobs. Pieces from her "Great Gatsby" collection use the beaded trim off a dress from 1912.

And there is one more unexpected aspect to her millinery — practicality. Willmott pulls out a showstopper — a big-brimmed red-and-purple hat with a hand-wrapped, hand-sewn brim. Although bold and daring, the upturned



From left, from fur-lined Trilbys to custom Kentucky Derby hats and boaters, Willmott's hats are beautiful inside and out.

brim allows the wearer to hug friends without the hat getting in the way.

Guts vs. glamour

It is all ever so glamorous, but Willmott warned that beneath the facade of glamour lies a lot of plain old hard work.

"It has been hard," Willmott said. "I had two waitressing jobs at once in graduate school to be able to start my business."

Willmott approached starting her business — Fielden Willmott Millinery — with the same gusto she puts into each of her hats. She enrolled in a course for female entrepreneurs, where she wrote a full business plan and a marketing plan. She also created three-year financial projections for her business. When she presented her plans to investors, she won a \$10,000 small business loan from Bad Girl Ventures, a micro-lending organization in Cincinnati.

The young entrepreneur set up her first studio on West Sixth Street in what is known as The Bread Box, an incubator for start-ups. From there she expanded her studio and moved to West Third Street by Gratz Park. Her creativity unleashed, Willmott tried new forays such as men's hats. Her first Kentucky Derby, a kind of Christmas for milliners, passed in a flash of adrenaline and frenzy as she created numerous hats — so many she doesn't remember the exact number.

"On Derby Day, I usually get the last hat out the door and just collapse," Willmott said. "One Derby I sent all my creations out and then went to bed with pneumonia."

Willmott also did trunk shows. Within two years, the young milliner had more business than time. She refused to mass produce hats, so each creation required lots of creative energy and lots of time. Her 20s were speeding past, and Willmott realized her life had become unbalanced. Her success left little time for friends and fun during a time of life known for just that.

"When you own your own business and love it, it doesn't feel like work, so you start early and do it all day," she said, "but it is important to carve out space for dinner with a friend, walks in the neighborhood, and eight hours of sleep," she said.

Still, Willmott said starting a business taught her a lot.

One is the value of cooperation rather than competition.

"I want to form alliances with other milliners," she said. "I get far more pleasure from supporting others than competing with them. There are clients for everyone. If a client would be more satisfied with another milliner, I will make introductions and share all the information I have."

Now that she is established, Willmott sets limits on the number of hats she creates. For example, she creates seven hats for Derby, no more, although the demand is there. Each sells for \$750 to \$1,470. She has also moved her studio into her Chevy Chase apartment so she can work when inspiration hits.

Willmott also pursues other hobbies. "I love to cook, garden, and can," she said. "I like to get off the clock and be present in the rhythm of the day where there are no cell phones. It's invaluable sometimes to just be present."

And now during most of the year, Willmott has another primary pursuit. She has returned to The Lexington School as a seventh-grade English teacher. The enthusiasm she has about teaching can't be contained. Like her millinery, she said teaching brings her a deep satisfaction.

That satisfaction usually results in a sound sleep, but even then Willmott's love for hats isn't far away.

"I dream about a lot of my pieces," she said. "When I wake up, I have an idea for a hat." **KM**

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