

HATS

with values

Desire Smith



A Schiffer Book



HATS

with values

Photography and Text by

Desire Smith



77 Lower Valley Road, Atglen, PA 19310

Dedicated to my husband, Bruce Smith



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On the cover: Marcie Behanna, photographed by Desire Smith, wears a silk Edwardian dress with a ca. 1900 gray silk velvet hat with an overlay of black lace, embroidered in silk, with a floral design, additionally detailed with gray glass beads, trimmed with a white ostrich plume, lined with white silk and tulle; labeled Geo. Allen, Incorporated, 1214 Chestnut St., Philadelphia.

Title page: Contemporary hat, see p.141. Burnt orange hat, see p.94. Helmet style cloche, c.1920, decorated with metallic cord, labelled Gimbel Brothers, Philadelphia, Paris.

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Preface

Hats is about millinery—that is, women’s hats, their design, history, and traditions. *Hats* is a picture book which explores the art of the hat. The hat is viewed as soft-sculpture, in an attempt to celebrate and delight in the craft of millinery, as well as to delineate styles, periods, and designers.

My purpose is to present a sampling of photographs which depict, by materials used and in chronological order, the best of the past in millinery and, in a final chapter, discuss the present and future for women’s hats.

This is not a dirge for a cultural past when wearing hats was traditional and appropriate, but rather an acknowledgment of a grand and evolving tradition.

With a few additions from private collections, universities, and museums, the hats in this book were collected by the author. This is my collection, my passion, my obsession! Share with me the excitement. These are the days of hat collecting!

a dashing spirited line of hats...

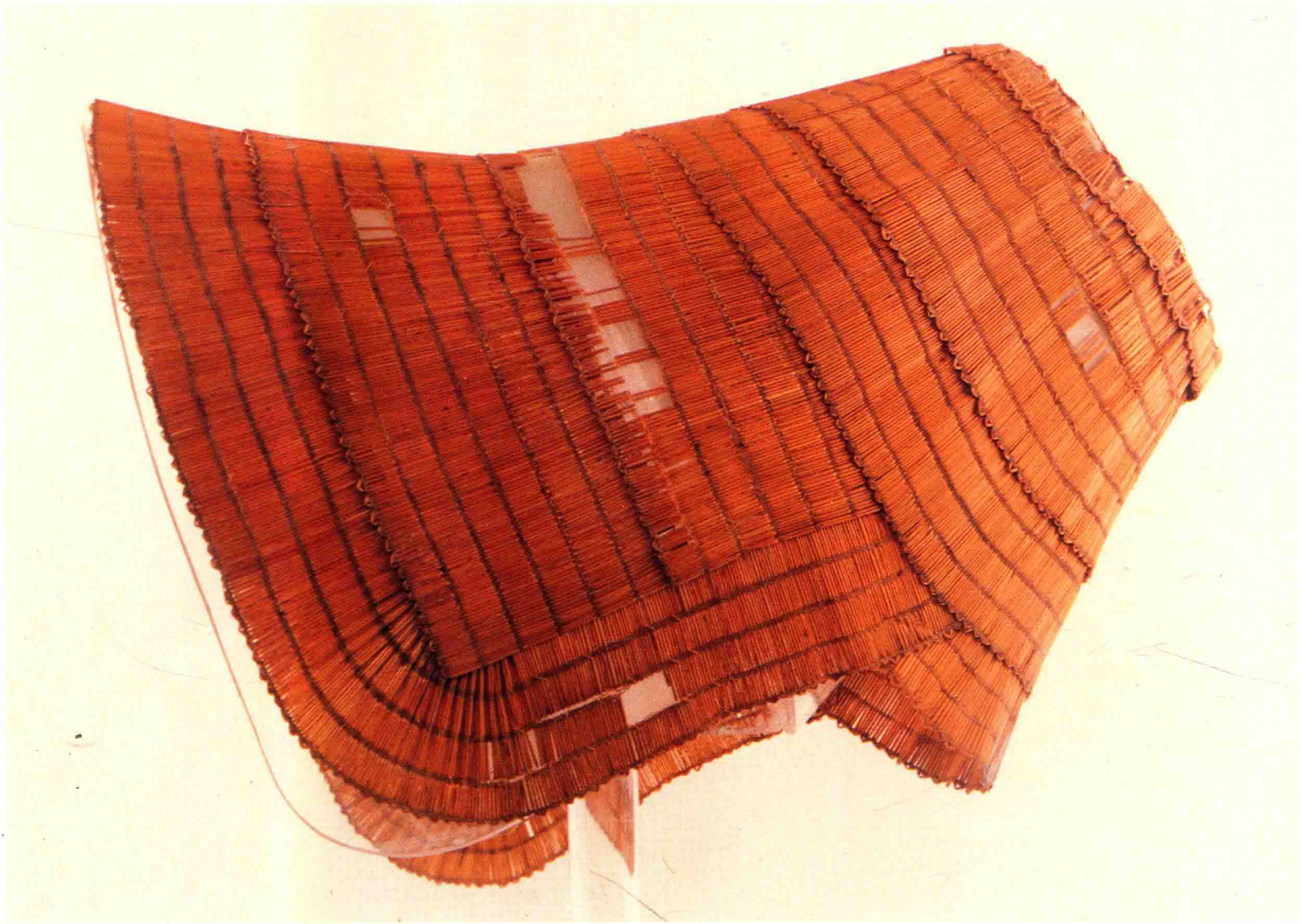
buckram frames, smart,
silk velvet with ostrich feathers
over foundations of pasted flowers,
a dashing, spirited line of hats.

jaunty, upturned brims,
wing draped crowns, chic narrow brims,
grosgrain ribbon, rosettes,
cording, sweeping from back to front,
a dashing, spirited line of hats.

pearl drops, coquettish poke lines,
mushroom brims, tricorneres,
taffeta, silk, peau de soie,
dull beads, cellophane wheels,
a dashing, spirited line of hats

fancy buckles, cotton duvetyne,
baronette satin, creased crowns,
bright feathers, brims that swoop
a dashing, spirited line of hats.

—Desire Smith



Metcalf bonnet. *Courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society.*

Straw

Natural straw used in millinery comes from dried stems of grains such as barley, oats, rye, and wheat. After the grain is pulled, it is laid on the ground and bleached. The outer layer of the stem is removed and the stem is bleached a second time. The straw is woven or plaited, either by hand or loom, then the braids are stitched together in a circular way to make a hat.

The highest quality straw used in making the early bonnets came from Leghorn, Italy, the English name for Livorno, Italy (Madeleine Ginsburg, *The Hat: Trends and Traditions*). When Americans began to fashion their own hats, they tried to find a straw as smooth and easy to work with as Leghorn.

Synthetic straw and the coating and treatment of natural straw to make it colorful and shiny was not commonplace until the 1950s. I do have several examples of 1930s and 1940s “cellophane” straw in my collection. Cellophane is a thin, transparent film made of acetate. Sometimes it is used over paper, but often it is used as ribbon-like strips to imitate straw.

The First Known American Straw Bonnet

Betsy Metcalf of Providence, Rhode Island, launched the American millinery industry on its way. At age twelve she made the first straw bonnet, described as Dunstable style, with a 5" brim of split straw, $\frac{1}{16}$ " in diameter, slightly rounded on top, and laid parallel and stitched together at $\frac{3}{8}$ " intervals, pleated at back, with center gather. The bonnet was given to the Rhode Island Historical Society in 1912 by Dr. Franklin C. Clark, Betsy's nephew.

Thanks to the efforts of Linda Eppich, Chief Curator at the Rhode Island Historical Society, the bonnet was photographed for publication here. This bonnet is an 1859 Betsy Metcalf Baker replica of her original, the first known American straw bonnet, which was made in 1798.



Ca. 1800 natural straw bonnet fragment, found in Philadelphia.



Ca. 1820 natural straw bonnet fragment.

Early American Bonnets

Early American bonnets have a special place in our history and culture that transcends fashion. These hats speak of a nation coming of age, discovering and using its native straw, fur, feathers, and wool. Recently independent, America was still looking to Europe for its inspiration in fashion!

The major cities supported an early and significant millinery trade, and as early as 1830 women of means had bonnets designed to match special outfits. The millinery trade steadily progressed until the Civil War. Certainly at that time, many clothing and hat makers turned

Ca. 1830 natural straw bonnet fragment, showing cotton lining.



their efforts to the military. The millinery trade in the North was not as severely affected as it was in the South, where make-do and recycling in fashion was more common, due to the blockade.

However, the society of the time was preoccupied with the war effort, and social occasions, balls, and parties were not as well attended.



Ca. 1850 elaborately woven natural straw bonnet, trimmed with burgundy silk velvet, lined with silk; labeled Julius Sichel, 107 & 109 North Eighth St., Philada; Birkenbine Estate.

Inside view of ca. 1850 Sichel bonnet.



Ca. 1850 elaborately woven open-work natural straw bonnet, lined with pale blue silk; labeled Geo. W. Miles, Importer, 928 Chestnut St., Philada; Birkenbine Estate.

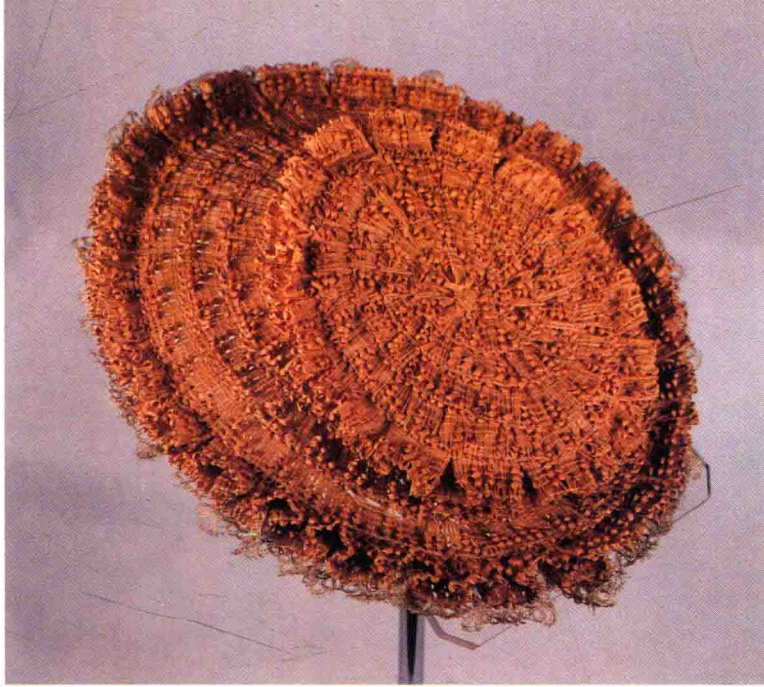




Ca. 1860 elaborately woven open-work, natural straw, lined with white silk.



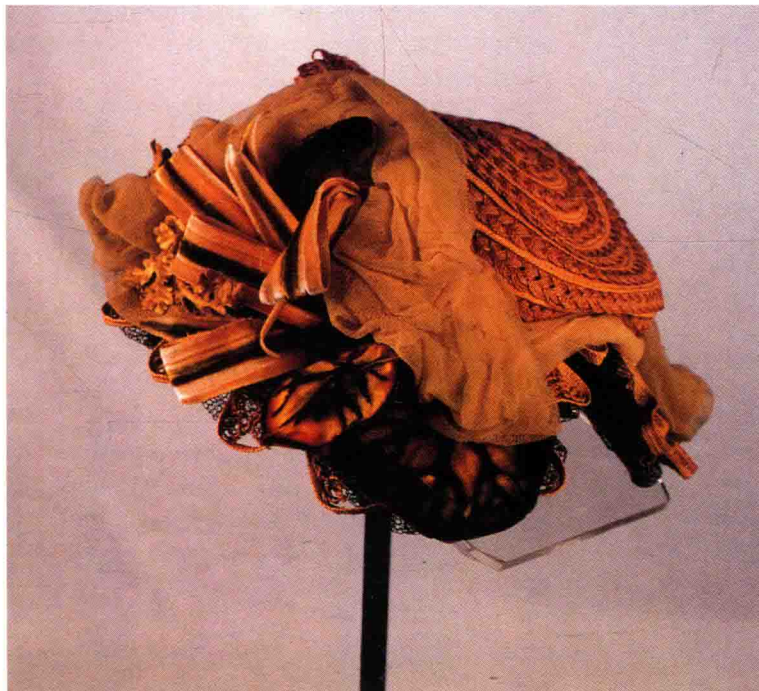
Ca. 1860 natural straw bonnet, trimmed with handmade lace, feathers, eggshell silk ribbon, and ruching; paper labeled showing three birds in flight. *Courtesy of Alison Bartholomew.*



Ca. 1860 elaborately woven open-work, natural straw, trimmed with silk velvet; labeled Geo. Allen, 930 Chestnut St., Philada; Birkenbine Estate.



Ca. 1870 loosely woven natural straw, decorated with three small silk poppies, underside of brim is made of tightly woven black straw, lined with silk.



Ca. 1880 plaited natural straw on an intricately constructed wire frame, decorated with silk velvet ribbon, net, flowers, and hand-painted leaves. This hat is very small, 7" in diameter, but weighs a pound!



Ca. 1880 fine white woven straw, decorated with black velvet and tiny cloth flowers on one side only, lined in white polished cotton; paper labeled Adele with a picture of an eagle above the name.



Ca. 1890 natural straw wide-brimmed bonnet, with open-work on brim, cloth roses, colorful striped ribbon on crown and beneath brim; paper labeled, Mrs. F. Herbst, 18 N. 9th St., Reading, PA. *Courtesy of Alison Bartholomew.*



Ca. 1880 finely woven natural straw, shallow crown with a 5" brim, lined with silk chiffon, decorated with a single pale pink silk rose with leaves made of feathers.



Ca. 1890 natural straw bonnet, trimmed with silk ribbon and velvet hand-painted leaves and flowers with chenille stems, underbrim of burgundy silk velvet; paper labeled for the Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1892.



1890s natural straw, flat crown boater style, 3" brim elaborately decorated with an ostrich feather wrap, metallic woven flowers, with silk overlays, and an intricate brass hatpin, cotton lined. *Courtesy of Alison Bartholomew.*



Ca. 1890 basket covered with red polished cotton, this is the original basket for the straw bonnet pictured above, Columbian Exposition.

In 1890, millinery decorations were called "confections." These confections included fluffy rosettes, pompons, fur, lace, velvet and "most airy flowers in a most indiscriminate fashion." (*The Imperial: A Journal For The Home*, Poughkeepsie, New York, August 14, 1894) In the 1890s, the intriguing thought of the day was that, in fact, "anything may be said to be in the prevailing style."