

The Australian

You're the tops

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This bunny-ear hat took a spin down the catwalk for Louis Vuitton, and is now a highly coveted item.

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THE thing that thrills me about Madonna in the new Louis Vuitton campaign is not the singer's eerily ageless countenance or how fine her cleavage looks in the corset-style frock two decades after she donned Jean Paul Gaultier's pointy-boobed version but her talking point headgear.

Madonna is dressed in fabulous fabric bunny ears attached, Playboy-style, to her tousled blonde locks. These ears point perkily skywards, wired to defy gravity and lending her look a marvellously magical air. But, before you dismiss this headgear as some crazy costume for the campaign, consider this: Louis Vuitton designer Marc Jacobs sent his rabbit-ear hats on to the catwalk, too, teamed with ruched, taffeta pencil-skirt suits and peach satin, ruffled mini dresses. And they looked just right. I want one, don't you?

Fashion is having a hat moment. In February, British milliner Stephen Jones launched *Hats: An Anthology* By Stephen Jones at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, with all his mad hatter mates in attendance. There was Italian Vogue's Anna Piaggi in orange straw and fur pompoms, fellow milliner Philip Treacy in a terrifically chic top hat, and models Erin Wasson in a cool black cowboy hat and Erin O'Connor in a miniature Jones creation decorated with a Union Jack.

The following month flamboyant headgear turned up repeatedly on the autumn-winter 2009-10 catwalks. Dior showed ikat print deerstalkers and fur cones (no, not fir cones, though they might as well be for all their practicality). Other designers took this strange trip still further, presenting surprising surrealist creations that even Isabella Blow (she of the crustacean-covered caps) would have struggled to pull off.

Dolce & Gabbana's turbans were made of gloves, their empty fingers framing the startled foreheads of the models.

Alexander McQueen turned hubcaps and what looked suspiciously like mummified Coke cans into headgear. More inspiring were Lanvin's little feather creations, worn close to the head for a Margot Fonteyn effect, Chanel's covetable horizontally stretched dark toppers and the leather squadron caps that took flight at Hermes.

So would all this make for some exciting looks in Australia this racing season? I certainly hope so. Our attitude to hats is

generally a disappointing one. Perhaps because of our climate and laid-back lifestyle the formality of the hat as fashion piece is not often celebrated. Or at least it hasn't been since the first half of the 20th century. Wear a hat to a party and people stare. Wear one to work and jaws hit the pavement.

My Sydney fashion haunt stocks exquisite hand-made hats by Sydney-based milliner Jenny Vidler. Her Confection by Lil Jen headpieces are worthy of staring at: the most flamboyant feature glittering galleons with tiny, shiny anchors, floating on a sea of flowers, or pink feathered flamingos complete with eyelashes (yes, you read right) and crystal necklaces and little lace waistcoats.

Vidler says: "Until the 1960s social conformity dictated that you always wore a hat in public. I think the pendulum has swung too far the other way. With the exception of the purely functional - beanies, sun hats, industry-related work hats - we have grown unaccustomed to seeing hats in daily life.

"I think Australia is quite conservative and not many of us wish to stand out for being fabulous. To wear a hat is to be literally in your face; it has a more intimate connection to the wearer and is far more arresting to the gaze of others as it is on your head. A hat these days seems to require an event context which is a shame, really."

Indeed, most Australian women require a good reason to perch anything bigger than a kirby grip on their barnet. Good reasons fall broadly into three camps: a wedding, a funeral or spring racing carnival.

"The majority of my customers will wear their hats to the races," Suzy O'Rourke says. She makes daring and sculptural hats for Brisbane's Jean Brown boutique, Sydney's Savoir Fare and as private commissions.

"The great thing about racing becoming so popular is that it eases people into the idea of wearing hats. Wear a really great one and it gives you a taste for it," she says.

For this season, O'Rourke's Bloom collection plays with texture, colour and form. Her wide-brimmed asymmetrical star hat features a feathered branch running from top to bottom, while her flower-strewn headbands are no less dramatic.

"You do need confidence to work a hat well, and the way to get it is to wear hats more," she says. "You get noticed wearing a hat, and once you get used to being unforgettable, well, that's a hard thing to give up. It is my dream that we will all have a selection of hats in our wardrobes as we do shoes or handbags, so we can choose one each day or night according to our mood."

Brisbane millinery fan Deborah Quinn has never met a mood she couldn't match with a hat. During the Brisbane Fashion Festival last month she turned heads with local designer Nicholas Wilsdon's black felt Valkyrie Wings cap. Quinn has scores of high fashion hats, many of which are the work of Jones.

"Stephen has the knack of pushing millinery to new horizons," she says. "My Stephen Jones hats are all very special as they express their individual point of view. I love them. (But) my collection is quite diverse, comprising vintage, new Australian and new overseas designer work.

"All my hats are seasonless and timeless. I never (buy) to a formula."

So where does she wear these miniature works of sartorial art? Everywhere, of course.

"I cannot imagine leaving home without a hat. It completes my look from toe-to-top, sets my mood for the day and is like an exclamation mark," Quinn says.

Jonathan Howard would be pleased. The Hatmaker milliner has seen his client base expand steadily since opening the doors of this delightful store in Double Bay in Sydney and no, they are not all ladies going to the races. Howard is another fan of drama and sculpture, adorning felt cloches with handmade flowers, attaching feathered eyelashes to hat-silk cat masks and even, last season, making a golden crown of briars spiced with diamantes.

"Interestingly, when I opened my doors three years ago, I thought that the main part of business would be made up of racewear and bridal, but not so," he says.

"I am making all types of hats for all types of people and reasons, especially men's hats and hats for collectors. I do believe that Australians are embracing the idea of the hat more and more.

"And in the context of wild and fab hats worn just out of frivolity, my customers who are collectors of handmade hats wear them because they love them and are not afraid to do so. I think a hat can do for the wearer what icing can do for an ordinary sponge cake."

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