

## Endangered fashion

### The crafts that are dying out

There is an epidemic of lace fever on the catwalk, the hat is the hot accessory for autumn and the Internet is awash in virtual crochet studios. But despite the growing interest in artisan crafts, they are seriously endangered. Sofi's Mode takes an in-depth look at some of the fashion world's most challenged crafts.

By: Anna Blom Photo: AP

When **Kate Middleton** said 'I will' to **Prince William** in 2011 clad in a lace creation signed by Alexander McQueen Creative Director **Sarah Burton**, the designer not only revived a material that long been relegated to the granny list, she gave it a new name: 'Kate's Lace.'

The lace on the ethereal dress and the 270 cm bridal train came from Sophie Hallette's lace factory in France – one of the oldest lacemakers in the world and the darling of the catwalk since the 1940s. The pattern, originally designed in 1958, depicted English roses, Scottish thistles, Welsh daffodils and Irish clover, all symbols of the United Kingdom. Before the wedding, the lace was called 'Pattern 953070,' but was given a new name in honour of the Duchess.

That the dress dusted off the attitude towards lace is obvious. The House of McQueen reaped enormous profits the year after the wedding and Hallette is being deluged with orders from the luxury fashion houses. Kate Middleton is one of the most beloved style icons of our time and her clothes are copied feverishly by the chains – but lace is now being hyped even in the most rarefied salons of fashion. This autumn, the joy of experimentation is flowing within the ultimate art of tailoring, haute couture: Atelier Versace is flaunting Hallette's sexy lace in an eel-skin sheath, Dior is presenting a modern and futuristic interpretation with a sheer, floaty skirt and Giambattista Valli is taking things one step beyond in a sophisticated, flame-red lace gown à la **Jessica Rabbit**.

Luxurious lace and quality-minded fashion are hot topics at the moment, which is a stroke of luck for Hallette. Production is time-consuming and time is money. It took five weeks and 23 artisans just to make the lace for Kate Middleton's dress. And the technique is ancient – this particular lace is woven (lace is usually knitted) on a loom built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

'It is like a highly complex Rolls Royce mechanism,' says **Maud Lescroart**, marketing director at Hallette. She and her brother **Romain** are the third generation to run the family-owned business founded in 1887.

It takes seven years of practice to learn to manoeuvre the mechanical loom, which weighs twelve tonnes. Three craftsmen have to work for two months just to set the loom with the 5,000 different threads required. Entire families often work in the factory and their unique knowledge is passed on from generation to generation – lacemaking runs in their blood.

These professional skills are a must. Standards are extremely high and the final result is exquisite. Which is not to say the lace is perfect – the tiny slubs and cosmetic flaws, the unique hand-made feel, are the essence of Hallette’s competitive edge.

‘When you are mass-producing lace, you simply push a button and do not have to intervene in production. With our looms, it is all about feel – you guide things with your senses. With your eyes, of course, but also your ears. You can hear from the noise of the machine that something is wrong; your entire body is involved. You don’t find that in modern machinery,’ says Lescroart.

Today, the greatest challenge is adapting old techniques to more modern ones. For example, Hallette decorates its lace with faux leather and various silicones. They are also working with the prestigious Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design in London, where students are competing to give lace a new face.

‘What I love about our history is that it is modern. We are creating modern lace, but we are rooted in and respect our past.’

Another threat, as for all luxury brands, is imitation. In today’s digital deluge with thousands of pictures circulating around the net, copying a lace pattern is easy – but it is that much harder to achieve the same quality as Hallette. In a fashion world that has made big business out of knocking off catwalk trends as fast as they can, the slow human hand cannot compete with high-speed clothing production.

Craftsmanship takes time, time is money and many artisans find it hard to compete with the low prices of the chains.

At the same time, the DIY trend is spreading and anyone can be a designer for a day. Printing out prototypes with 3D printers is the latest manifestation. Dutch designer **Iris van Herpen** for example, who has made clothes for **Lady Gaga** and **Björk**, showed a 3D dress on the Paris catwalk earlier this year.

Unique knowledge is in danger of being watered down in other ways as well. In the past, standards of expertise were high in the crafts professions and proof was required in the form of journeyman’s and master’s certificates: stamps of quality that show you are an expert at your craft. Unlike in many other European countries, they are no longer required in Sweden. Instead, the artisan must independently pursue a certificate. An average of 1,000-1,200 journeyman’s certificates per year have been issued over the last five years in Sweden – compared to 100,000 in Germany. It is thus perhaps no surprise that many traditional crafts are dying out. Last year, for example, certificates were awarded to two glovers in Sweden – the first in 47 years.

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The tiny slubs and cosmetic flaws, the unique hand-sewn feel, are Hallette’s primary competitive edge.

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THE HISTORY OF LACE

Lace can be made in various ways – by sewing, using the bobbin lace technique, or crocheting, explains **Andreas Manhag**, archaeologist with the Historical Museum in Lund, Sweden. Lace makes its first appearance in Italy in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Lacemaking is time-consuming and complicated, making it the perfect pastime for idle upper-class ladies. Lace was also made by nuns in abbeys and the unmarried daughters of the nobility went to the abbeys to learn to make bobbin. Post 19<sup>th</sup> century, the craft became more unusual and hand-made lace was replaced by cheaper, machine-made lace.

In the last 200 years, Manhag explains, lace has been used almost exclusively by women. This happened after male fashion underwent a change around 1800 when the new sartorial paradigm of masculine fashion became to dress as discreetly and simply as possible – in the dark suit, in other words.

Lace was used in women's clothing, on the other hand, both at court and among the common people. As late as the 1970s, ladies-in-waiting at the Swedish Court wore black velvet suits with white lace collars. The older – and the more yellowed – the lace, the more exclusive. Older lace was intricate and costly and thus more prestigious. In the upper-class setting, lace should preferably be hand-made in Brussels before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rather than machine-made. Brussels was the centre of lacemaking and lacemaking was considered the highest expression of the textile arts.

*Elsa Petersons Spetsaffär Efttr* in Vadstena is the oldest lace shop of its kind in Sweden. The shop was founded in 1920 by **Elsa Peterson** and is currently run by her daughter, **Gunnel Landtblom**. For 93 years, the shop has remained faithful to the old, traditional Vadstena patterns and has access to a treasure trove of patterns and laces that are constantly updated. Among the newer laces in the shop these days, for example, are the ginger cookie, blue anemone and Swedish coin patterns. Intriguing – yes?

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**'The authentic craft is lost to our memory'**

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The top hats made by Lisa Franzén and traditionally worn by new Swedish PhDs are built around a shellacked shell using the same techniques used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the beginning to the finished hat, the manufacturing process consists of about 90 different steps that require seven hours of effective working time all together – plus time for preparation and drying.

Hatter and milliner Lisa Franzén makes hats the old-fashioned way and is writing a book about the craft.

Hat for a dressage rider.

PhD hats.

The hatter's profession has survived in Sweden much due to the manufacturing of PhD hats. Here in Lisa Franzén's workshop in Gothenburg.

Logos and stamps designed by Gunnar Ehrbom Pehrson.

Hat masters

There are two hatters in Sweden today with journeyman's and master's certificates. Liza Franzén is one of them and **Mark Eriksson**, the master who trained her, is the other.

'A master is someone who has received a master's certificate after meeting all industry standards,' Lisa Franzén explains.

To be eligible to take the master's test, you must have documented professional knowledge by means of a journeyman's certificate, for example. You must also have at least six years' experience in the industry, approved business skills and a good reputation. The test rules are drafted by the industry and approved by the Swedish Crafts Council (*Sveriges Hantverksråd*). Master's certificates are regulated by law.

Milliner Malinda Damgaard

Photo: Lotte Fernvall

Malinda Damgaard made the hats for Dagmar's autumn collection.

Photo: Kristian Löveborg

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The hat is enjoying a strong renaissance in fashion this autumn. But hatters (who design and make men's hats) and milliners (who design and manufacture women's hats) are facing huge challenges. The most acclaimed milliner in Sweden right now is **Malinda Damgaard**, 32. Known for her innovative version of the beret, which she calls 'Jelly Belly,' she has already designed hats for **Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden** and the Swedish Royal Opera and has worked with milliner **Philip Treacy** in London. Earlier this year she won the coveted Elle Accessory Designer of the Year Award and is aiming to achieve her master's certificate this autumn – but even though the winds of change are blowing, she believes the milliner profession is dying out.

'We have been living in a throwaway society for a very long time now and the authentic craft is lost to our memory. But I believe that is changing. I've noticed that people are appreciating the hand-made and high-quality more all the time. Instead of buying new things that are worn out after a year or two, they are trying to repair old things or save up to buy something a bit more expensive that they know will last,' says Malinda Damgaard to Sofi's Mode.

Difficulty sourcing good materials is another threat to the profession.

'Manufacturers of good hat materials are also dying out due to all the mass production. If the big companies were to use higher-quality materials made in Europe instead of the cheap paper straw they often choose, it would be easier for us milliners to get hold of good materials,' she says.

In hatter and milliner **Lisa Franzén's** shop and workshop in central Gothenburg, they are working hard to preserve old traditions. Tools are being photographed, techniques documented and a history of the hatter's profession in Sweden is being written. Everything will be condensed into a book, intended partly as a textbook for apprentices, but also as the story of the hatter's profession in Sweden, yesterday and today.

'The profession has survived largely thanks to our manufacturing of PhD hats, along with the skill of making the shellacked shells. We will soon be one of the only companies in the world that understand the technique. The important thing is to take responsibility for the survival of your craft,' says Franzén, who believes the survival of the profession depends upon finding new apprentices.

'The apprentices will carry on the hatter's profession and its traditions into the future. When you as a customer buy a hat from a hatter who holds a journeyman's and master's certificate, you are also helping preserve this and making it possible for us to train new apprentices.'

Identification stamps have been recently introduced to make it easier for customers to find hats made by a trained hatter.

'As a community, we have to get better at showing that Sweden has many skilled artisans. Consumers do not have to look abroad to find hand-made, premium quality goods,' says Franzén.

For at the end of the day, we who shop bear the greatest responsibility. A Birkin bag may shout status, but true luxury is waiting for you around the corner.