DEGAS IMPRESSIONISM AND THE PARIS MILLINERY TRADE

"[The hat is] the dress’s crowning glory, the final touch."
—Arsène Alexandre, art critic and fashion writer, 1902

The Paris millinery industry was at its financial and creative peak between the mid-1870s and 1914, the period between the Franco-Prussian War and the outbreak of World War I, decades that coincided with the era of French Impressionism. The women who made and sold hats—milliners, or modistes in French—as well as those who purchased them, fascinated Edgar Degas and other artists in his circle. In the works of art that they produced on this theme, the manufacture of hats is presented as a series of creative choices, similar to the artists’ own practice. Degas, Impressionism, and the Paris Millinery Trade is the first exhibition to concentrate on millinery images by Degas and his contemporaries. The artworks in the galleries that follow reveal much about changing gender roles and social structures, the birth of modern consumerism, and global impacts of mass production in the Impressionist era.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hats were a social obsession, subjects of acclaim and critique. Degas, Impressionism, and the Paris Millinery Trade includes hats by the greatest milliners of this era and emphasizes these makers’ sense of design, mastery of materials, and ability to transform a basic hat form into a sculptural masterpiece. The headwear in this exhibition has been selected to show the beauty and intricacy of hats as art objects in their own right.

Millinery shops adhered to a strict hierarchy, with the première—the chief designer and sometimes also the shop owner—at the top. Below, in ascending rank, were the former (formière), preparer (appréteuse), and trimmer (pommière), who, respectively, created the hat armature, covered it in thoughtfully selected fabrics, and tastefully decorated it. At the bottom were the errand girls (trotteurs), who delivered hats to clients around Paris. Girls typically entered the millinery trade in their teens.
CONSUMER CULTURE:
SHOPPING FOR HATS

"IF YOUR PURSE ALLOWS YOU TWO HATS, YOU WILL HAVE ONE
OF STRAW, WHICH CAN GO WITH EVERYTHING . . . AND THE
OTHER WILL GO WITH YOUR BEST OUTFIT."
—Le Journal des demoiselles, 1867

In the nineteenth century, Paris was at the center of a global fashion economy, whose growth was encouraged by the emergence of advertising and periodicals promoting French fashion. The Impressionists were fascinated with modernity in all its aspects, including commerce, display, and shopping. Degas and many of his contemporaries had studios that were in close proximity to small, independent shops that dominated the millinery trade, as well as to the city's newly established department stores. These artists frequently visited the shops on the rue de la Paix to view hats by such prominent milliners as Caroline Reboux and Maison Virot, whose creations are featured in this exhibition. They took special care in depicting the shops' displays in their works, recreating the sumptuous colors and textures of hats and their embellishments.
Degas was not only interested in capturing the spectacle of the millinery shop; he also produced a major body of work in which he focused on its female clientele. While such consumers were sometimes accused of being frivolous, or of placing personal satisfaction before family commitments, shopping increasingly came to be seen as “artistic” endeavor for a woman to express her independence and taste. Artists understood how the millinery customer could play a considerable role in the creation of the work, collaborating with a première to create a hat particularly suited to her. Degas’s compositions focus on both the workers and the customers with whom they interact. While the milliners are shown in absorbed poses that convey the difficulty, skill, and creativity of their work, the pictures of women wearing hats reflect the inventive aspect involved in the fashioning of one’s own self-image.

Despite the modernity of the times, the late nineteenth-century boom in consumer culture was accompanied by a healthy market for clothing and accessory styles rooted in the past. Many of Degas’s pastel millinery works also evoked historical precedents, in particular the eighteenth-century tradition of pastel portraits showing the elite in their most stylish fashions. As the works in this gallery demonstrate, Degas was particularly attentive to the nuances of changing fashion tastes.

Milliners faced a range of stereotypes about their character and morals. As working women, they were perceived as having some level of agency over their lives. Yet they were often subject to assumptions and depictions that eroticized their position. The scandalous reputation frequently assigned to milliners was not entirely without basis. Many workers’ wages were indeed so low that some were forced to resort to other means of income, even prostitution.
MEN’S HATS

“You must understand that the accessories are an integral part of the picture.”

—Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Impressionist artists were aware of the important role headwear played in shaping identity. Hat styles were often linked to class and gender, but those associations were constantly shifting. The top hat was originally worn by men of all classes, but became a key component of formal attire for the middle and upper classes. The bowler hat, originally a sturdy riding hat, was worn by the middle and working classes, but was also used for casual occasions by the elite. By the 1880s this style also conveyed Bohemian status for artists and intellectuals. Menswear-inspired styles were popular among women during the 1870s and 1880s, especially for athletic pursuits such as cycling or sailing. The straw boater was the rare example of a true unisex style, used by both men and women for a range of outdoor activities.
FLOWERED AND RIBBONED HATS

“This [artificial] bouquet is durable, whereas the bouquet from Nice is withered before it arrives.”

— La Grande revue on Maison Camille Marchais, 1888

Degas and his contemporaries were drawn to conveying the materiality of artificial flowers and ribbons in their works, depicting highly ornamented hats similar to those on view in this gallery. These millinery examples feature lifelike roses from designers Maison Virot and Caroline Reboux, as well as striking geraniums from Camille Marchais, a flower maker (fleuriste) who also specialized in hats. Artists reveled in conveying the colors and textures of the trimmings, whether a variety of colorful ribbons or a cluster of vibrant flowers. Women frequently purchased unadorned hats, which they could personally trim and decorate as a more affordable option than purchasing new hats each season.

Flowers were a staple motif for women’s fashion in the nineteenth century. Their popularity emphasized a longstanding ideological equation between women and the natural world. This was especially the case with flowers attached to a straw hat, or chapeau de paille, an indispensable accessory since the time of Marie-Antoinette, approximately a century earlier. The straw hat with flowers expressed an affinity with the beautiful simplicity of nature and defined a feminine ideal.

The artificial flower-making industry emerged in the seventeenth century and experienced an unprecedented expansion in the 1800s. By the twentieth century, an estimated 25,000 fleuristes (artificial flower makers)—including 25,000 women—worked in Paris. This secondary industry supported the status of hats as luxury items, with average prices of about one hundred francs each, at a time when the average daily wage for a female Parisian worker was just a few francs a day.
PLUMED HATS

“THERE FLEW BIRDS OF PARADISE FOR HATS, PURPLE TANGARAS WITH BLACK TAILS AND SEPTICOLOURS WITH SHIMMERING BREASTS, SHOT WITH ALL THE COLORS OF THE RAINBOW.”

—ÉMILE ZOLA, AU BONHEUR DES DAMES (THE LADIES’ PARADISE), 1883

The Parisian hat industry supported a massive international trade in exotic feathers, particularly those from France’s African colonies, as well as from South and Central America, and Asia. The more exotic the feathers on a hat, the more elevated the perception of its wearer’s social standing became. Plumage from domestic French birds, including seagulls and owls, was also used to decorate hats. In addition to feathers, whole stuffed birds or parts such as wings or heads were popular ornaments. Such specimens introduced an element of danger: nineteenth-century taxidermists used arsenic to stop decomposition, and milliners using such decorations would have been exposed to this toxic substance over very long periods.

Ostrich plumes came into prominent use in hats during the 1880s. These expensive and highly sought-after materials derived from African ostrich farms, eliminating the need to capture birds from the wild, and the large feathers could be safely removed from the bird without causing injury. However, by 1914, with the onset of World War I, more streamlined styles were coming into vogue, and the era of extravagant hat plumeage was coming to an end.

The plumage industry was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of millions of birds, raising alarm among conservationists, who responded by establishing societies for the preservation of birds in America and in England in 1899 and 1905, respectively. Opposition to the international plumage trade was slower to gather momentum in France, which dominated the industry, and it was not until 1912 that France established the League for the Protection of Birds.
DEGAS:
THE
LATE MILLINER WORKS

“[DEGAS] PROFESSIONED THE DEEPEST ADMIRATION FOR
THE VERY HUMAN QUALITY OF YOUNG SHOPGIRLS.”
—BERTHE MORISOT

In the late 1890s, Degas produced an important
group of paintings and pastels that focused on
modistes absorbed in artistic activity. Such works
associate the milliners’ craft with the artist’s own,
acknowledging the link between creativity and
labor. In addition to recognizing the milliners’
skills, Degas also seems to have been concerned
with depicting their fatiguing and difficult
working conditions. Moreover, the works in this
gallery reveal how Degas in his later years
increasingly explored innovative uses of color and
abstraction. His wealth and commercial success
allowed him the freedom to experiment and create
works that were not intended for the marketplace.
Indeed, all of his late millinery pastels were in his
studio when he died, in 1917.

In the 1910s the high demand for picture hats—
large, highly decorated hats with wide brims—was
met by designers such as Madame Géogette and
Guillard Soeurs. By the late decade, milliners
Caroline Reboux and Lucie Hamar were introducing
less extravagant hats, such as the small, fitted
cloche. The French millinery industry continued to
thrive in the 1920s and 1930s, but the styles were
more subdued.

Women in the millinery industry often worked long
hours in unhealthy conditions. In addition to the
risk of arsenic exposure presented by preserved
bird specimens, milliners also faced dangers from
mercury, which was used to soften hairs for the
felting of fur or animal hair, and other workplace
hazards. Support for improved wages and better
working hours for the women in French industry
began to increase in the 1890s.