

First year report:

The craft of hat making, dyeing, and documenting present and historical materials

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Introduction

I have decided to use English as the main language for the project, although it is not my first language, this is to make the work more accessible. I wish to emphasise that my research and the work I am doing are from the perspective of a maker working in the specific conditions of hat makers and milliners in present-day Norway.

When I started, my ambition was to further specialize in some straw techniques. Although straw still is a part of my project, a more general mapping of materials is a necessary first step for me as a craftsperson. This has led me to focus on the history and use of historical and present-day materials. I also wish to gain a better understanding of the fibres and the dyeing of materials through my scholarship practice.

A couple of months into my scholarship, I was offered a permanent part-time position as an in-house milliner/ hat maker at the National Theatre in Oslo, and a collaboration with the theatre, throughout my scholarship period. Thus, adjusting my idea of the project became necessary. I now do my scholarship work from the same workshop where I produce the head pieces and hats for the theatre. This has made other perspectives of research possible and relevant for me as a maker.

In the craft of millinery, as in other crafts, some materials go out of production and new ones are introduced. Documenting the historical materials is a great way for me to understand the history of the craft, and to get information on techniques, fashion and on the working conditions of the milliners and hatters through the centuries.

In Norway, we have not been able to buy millinery materials locally for decades. This is a challenge for micro businesses working with short deadlines and limitations to how much materials we can have in stock. Being able to dye the varied materials used in our craft is especially useful, as this limits what we must keep in stock to neutral colours, plus some of what we know to be frequently requested, like black. Getting to experience and master these techniques and doing so with the resources and conditions available locally, is important. Many factors contribute to the result of the dyeing process. Simply relying on what others do in other countries is therefore not sufficient. The knowledge gained by experimenting locally, under the conditions and with the supplies we have is crucial to how I can implement dyeing in the way I work.

This past year, I have had Ellen Wang Thommessen as my mentor. I have also travelled to learn from masters in our craft, such as Ian Bennett and Bridget Baily in the UK. I have gathered information from resources like literature, online classes, workshops, and talks, in addition to attending lectures when possible.

Primary and Secondary Matter

Primary

- Is it possible to gain a deeper understanding of the craft of hat making by documenting the materials used historically?

Secondary

- A way forward for the craft. Can dyeing our materials locally make our craft more efficient and sustainable going forward?

My research of the history of hats and the craft has a 3-year timeline. I needed a strategy to narrow the scope of my research to what I feel is critical to the future of our craft. To collect material samples and gather information about them, will give valuable insight into each single piece, and it will also give added value collectively, as a body of work. I hope to gather information about which materials have dominated throughout the decades, and about the techniques used to give them the desired shape. Materials are a good starting point for conversations with masters and makers both in Norway and internationally. This will inform my practice as I learn and master new areas of my craft. Gathering an “Encyclopaedia” of millinery materials, will also hopefully be something to build upon and be useful to others in the future.

Early in my career, I realised that dyeing materials would be a game changer for the possibilities and the pace of what I can and need to create. This is the right time and situation for me to develop the skills and techniques, with the local conditions, to implement it in my practice.

I know the practice of dyeing in millinery workrooms is more common in the UK and other countries. I have not heard of Norwegian milliners doing this on a regular basis, although most do a little from time to time, for example when making silk flowers, or dyeing the odd feather. Dyeing myself would make it possible to make larger orders, from a supplier I know and trust on quality, rather than looking for who has the right colour, doing small orders, and wasting time on traveling to the post office, complicating accounting, and paying frequent custom and postage fees.

Methodology

Encyclopaedia of millinery materials

I have started making binders with the materials I have in stock, as well as the stock of the National Theatre. Between the two, there are quite a few treasures (materials no longer being produced). When I have a solid basis, my plan is to start a dialogue with other makers, retired makers, and suppliers. I hope that others have materials that are no longer in production, and that they are willing to donate samples to the Encyclopaedia, or that I can collect good photographs to analyse, and gain insight from. I have started looking into making this available online.

In my collaboration with the National Theatre, we have done quite a bit of making which touches upon both the historical aspects of hat making, old and new materials and experimenting on dyeing different kinds of fibres. I have been given time to go in depth and experiment on a much higher level than I could do producing at the pace needed for stage productions. An example of the experiments and learning processes I have been able to do, includes workshops with my mentor Ellen. Together we looked at braided straw ribbons for 1850's bonnets, and for another project making esparterie shapes. Esparterie is one of the materials that is no longer in production. Luckily, I have some in stock, and Ellen to teach me how to work with it. This is one for the materials I am glad I get to experience and document before it becomes too rare and "forgotten".



Workshop on straw braid and esparterie with mentor Ellen. March 2022

Dye work

When it comes to dyeing, I have attended some online classes, and some in-person workshops. The UK based milliner Ian Bennett has been especially generous with sharing his vast knowledge on dyeing feathers with me. My general experience dyeing textiles comes from my work with costumes. Most of my costume dyeing has been done with Dypro (formally known as Dylon, a uni-dye) as well as effect/ costume break down with fabric paint such as Hatosilk, with paint guns and various tools.

When I started looking into dyeing millinery materials, and having the opportunity to go in depth, I decided to experiment and do trials. Even when I know a fibre is not ideal for a certain type of dye (chemical composition and/or fixing agent), I try it anyway, to see if something unexpected might happen, or I might get a result that give me a deeper understanding of a fibre or a process.

In millinery as in the rest of the textile industry, we work with animal, plant, regenerated and petroleum-based fibres. However, our materials differ somewhat from classical materials used in clothing for the body. As world-renowned milliner Steven Jones talks about, making clothes (for example in dressmaking) you work with gravity. A milliner's job is to defy gravity; a hat or headpiece is meant to stay on someone's head for hours on end, without making life miserable for that person. Therefore, it must be as light as possible, and sometimes, like with sculptural and oversized theatre and film prices even almost lighter than possible.

I am focusing on the kind of materials used in hat making when I do my research into dyeing. Examples of these materials are feathers, fur felt, wool, various kinds of braided and woven "straw" (plant-based fibres) like sisal, sinamay (abaca), wheat, barley and raffia, silk and wool woven textiles and some petroleum-based products relevant for hat making. I have been working with swatches mostly, beside the dyeing I got to do for one of the collaborations with the theatre for "A midsummer night's dream" (Premiered 3rd of September).



The process

New studio

In dialog with The Norwegian Crafts Institute and the head of costume at the theatre, we concluded that the permanent in-house milliner position I was offered would only be possible if I could move my studio and the scholarship work into the studio the theatre was making available for me. We have also found that it would benefit both the theatre and my project if we could combine some of my research and practical work with the hats made for stage at the theatre. It is great to see the work being used; enjoyed by the actors and audience; and gaining information on how techniques I am developing and trying works during repeated heavy on-stage use.



Building a new workspace at the National Theatre, moving my studio, and settling in. March 2022.

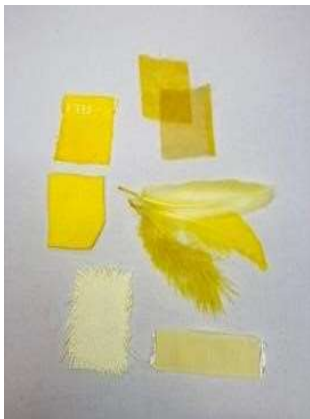
The first period of my scholarship work was affected by the move of my studio and settling into the new situation, as well as trying to find the balance where both the theatre and my research were getting the correct amount of attention. As I am settling in, I see that it is enriching to the project having this collaboration. The challenges have been to restrict and to focus because of the vast number of possibilities.

Collecting samples of materials

The strategy of collecting samples and approaching my understanding of the history of the craft has been developing for some time. From a Norwegian perspective it feels urgent to collect information before the makers minds that can talk on the use of these materials from the perspective of the craft, are no longer available. However, the strategy became clearer to me during a trip to London in August. Engaging with colleagues there was very inspiring. In England, the craft is much more stable, and my colleagues there do not have the same sense of the craft disappearing that some of us making hats in Norway have. I think gathering information both in Norway and England, where the craft is sustaining itself at a larger scale, will be interesting and useful.

Dyeing

The process thus far has been to establish a space for me to do safe experiments. Upgrade some of my equipment and source more of the pigments relevant to my studies. I have established a system for the samples and documentation of the trials I am doing. I have been able to implement dyeing into one of the collaborations with the theatre, "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Gaining information from publications and the manufacturers' product descriptions, attending online and in-person workshops, and talking with colleagues has been important, as well as the numbers of experiments I have done.



Collaboration with fellow scholarship candidate, basket weaver Hege Iren Aasdal

I traveled to Hardanger in April 2022 to look at the work of fellow scholarship candidate Hege Iren Aasdal and consider a collaboration for later. It was useful to spend some time with a scholarship colleague and talk about the processes we both are in. It was interesting to explore how our crafts are similar and if we can utilize this at some point. We did some experiments with bulrush, a material I would like to work with more.



Workshop with basket weaver Hege Iren Aasdal at her studio in Hardanger

Sancthansnatten

One of the collaborations with the theatre this past year was “Sancthansnatten”, Ibsen’s first play. This was played in the “HIP” method- historical informed performance. All aspects of the production are informed by how the style of making and performing theatre was at the time when the play was written. Costume was also informed by the fashion around 1850, with some freedom in artistic choices, and to make it possible within budgets and timeframe. Designer Anna Kjellsdotter has a profound understanding and in-depth knowledge of costume history and making of historical garments. It was a great process and opportunity to gain experience from her historic insight.



One of the bonnets I made for this production, character was a young woman. Photos from the making in my studio.

I started work for this production in February. I made four hats from scratch. The performance premiered on March 20th, 2022. The first hat was a bonnet made from vintage straw braid I bought of a seller in the UK. The braid is likely braided in Switzerland around 1900. The braid was a bit fragile, and as this was for stage. I decided to use a Fosshape base to give it the sturdiness and



longevity we needed. The hat was going on top of a wig. This is a calculation I need to consider, and information I need to have, before I start working on the actual hat or headpiece. Other crucial information needed to make my processes much easier, is for example measurements of the actor's head. A picture of the actor can be useful to consider proportions and lines. It is useful to have samples of the fabric used for the rest of the costume, to be able to calculate the concept of a character and be able to advise or make suggestions on matching hat décor and ribbons etc. The more information I have, including a good dialogue with the designer, actors, costume department, hair- and makeup department, the more precise and efficient I can work towards the common goal.



Photo by Øyvind Eide from the performance

The second hat for this performance was also a bonnet. It has a fosshape base, silk organdy, and various ribbons. These flowers have been used many times before. They may look a bit rough when you get close to them, but they work well on stage.



Photo by Øyvind Eide from the performance

The mushroom hat was made for a character resembling a Norwegian “nisse” or garden gnome. I made a block for this piece. The general hat is made from Fosshape that has been spraypainted and given a muddy patina with both paint gun and air brush. The underside is made with sinamay and wool for a moss look. Inside the crown is a fur felthood, with a natural linen lining. The combination of fosshape and sinamay made this hat light, yet durable, despite its volume.



Photo by Øyvind Eide from the performance



The final piece in this collaboration is a sewn home/night cap. This was for an older gentleman. The style of the hat is inspired by 18th century caps. This is also a way to show that someone is older by means of the costume. That the style of fashion is what the character would have been wearing when they were younger. We found a scrap of a machine embroidered cotton fabric; on stage this can pass as a hand embroidered material. The designer did not wish for me to use any modern ways of stiffening the fabric on this hat. The lining is a natural (unbleached) linen like the one used for the mushroom hat.

“En midsommernattsdrøm”



For “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” I had the opportunity to work with dyes and various materials. The designer on this production was someone I had worked with before, Katrin Nottrodt, and in my experience, she understood the possibilities of collaboration with the scholarship very well. This benefited my research, the theatre, and the production.



For the character of the queen, I created a sinamay hat based on some inspirational images together with designer Katrin Nottrodt. The inspiration was a black hat with a wide brim. Katrin suggested an ombre effect on the dye work, which was a lovely challenge for me to add to my study of various dyes. I used a uni-dye on the sinamay called Color All, and the reactive agent was salt. The décor on this hat was in part form stock, some reuse, and feathers which I cut and curled.



Among the hats and headpieces I made in this period, were two bride pillbox hats and a beret inspired hat.

The two pillboxes were for the two young brides. These hats were made with a Paris net base, and sisal hood as the main material. Both had reused flowers from stock and veiling. One of the veils had to be blocked.

The blue beret inspired hat was dyed by me. I started with a cream sisal capeline, which is a larger hat base material, then a hood. This choice was made to have enough material to make the décor (bow) on the hat. The character this was made for was a court lady/ nice looking staff or wedding planner for this modern interpretation of the play.



«The Bird hat»

For the bird hat I got to practice the old technique of making a shape from esparterie. I also used modern materials and techniques with thermoplastics, which save time and reduce the weight of the piece. When dyeing the feathers, I got to experiment extensively. I did not at this point have the desired shades of acid dye in stock and did not have the time to wait for an order, I tried different unidyes to gain insight on various levels of the process. I am content with how it turned out. In some respects, if this were an exhibition piece or for a private customer, I know I would be much better off using the acid dye. However, for stage, the result was effective. For the sake of the opportunity to experiment, this was a good process. The crystal work and being able to include some old treasured

“bird of paradise” - feathers was a bonus I appreciated.

It is such a privilege working with one of the greatest theatrical designers I know, and her openness to suggestions when it fit within her and the director’s vision of what they wanted to say.



Photo by Øyvind Eide from the performance 2022

London Hat Week, workshops, and meeting London based makers.



In August my first-year mentor Ellen Wang Thommessen and I had the great privilege of traveling to London to do workshops, meet with some of the masters of our craft and join London Hat Week. After Ellen sent an email to the heads of London Hat Week, we were invited to exhibit some of the millinery work from our own community in Norway.

It turns out we were the dream team for this kind of trip. The following is some of the highlights of our nine days traveling to London to learn and exchange knowledge.

Ian Bennett's workshops

Cotton organdy, Rit synthetic dye, dyeing- and shaping feathers (Jacquard's acid dye)

We did two one-day workshops with Ian during London Hat Week. We also had two whole days at his studio, just the three of us. This was a wonderful opportunity to go in-depth and exchange insight on how working in the craft differs in different countries and communities, as well as learning at the level we are. In classes with many participants, there are various levels of experience/ interest. Sometimes this is great but having the opportunity to work at a higher level with a maker that has spent a lot of time mastering some aspects of the craft, is very valuable. I hope to seek Ian's guidance again, as he is one of the most experienced milliners today, having done dye work throughout his career. To have him review my experiments and give guidance would be particularly useful for my project as I get further along.

Here are some snapshots from our days with Ian Bennett:



Bridget Bailey's workshop

Filigree straw work

We had one day at Bridget's studio, gaining insight into her techniques on doing filigree work with straw braid. Bridget is a great milliner, maker, and textile artist. Both Ellen and I know Bridget from workshops we have separately done with her years ago. I spent a week in France on a scholarship in 2017 attending a workshop that Bridget did on cold dyes and sculptural work with plant fibers like sisal and sinamay. As we both know Bridget from earlier, getting into the flow and talking about what we were curious about in her techniques and methods was easy. I really appreciate Bridget's approach to being a maker and artisan. Our philosophy and values are very relatable. I hope to invite Bridget to Oslo soon to do a workshop and have her look at the results from my research and give advice on my project in Oslo.

These are pictures from our day with Bridget Bailey:



A magical visit to Sean Barrett's

Studio, historic feathers, and straw

Ellen and I know Sean from his vast body of work for TV and film. We joined him in a workshop on top hats techniques in 2019. Sean, along with Jane Smith, has been one of the most important milliners/ hat makers for screen internationally for many decades. We struggled to make room for everything we wished to achieve on our trip in August, but seeing Sean again was especially important to me. He is one of the makers that has influenced my work the most. He is a significant role model, with his attitude towards our art and craft and his knowledge on the history of hats and the craft. Visiting Sean, seeing Sean's studio and talking with him is very inspiring.

We were also lucky that Jane Smith had the time to join us at Sean's studio. I met Jane for the first time at a workshop in 2017. She's an extraordinary talented hatter and historian. She is currently working on a book on bicorns, and I hope to have her visiting Norway soon, to look at our collections at the National Theatre and other big institutions /museums. If they wish to and have time, both Jane and Sean would be particularly dependable guides to advice the investigation of historic materials for my primary scholarship matter. Talking with them on this visit influenced the direction I wish to proceed, and what have become clearer to me is that I need to gain insight into, with the opportunities of the scholarship position.



Sean's studio



In Sean's studio, we looked at many examples of feathers, feather mounts, taxidermized birds, ribbons, and straw, from different eras. Among the kind of jobs Sean and Jane do, are productions that require an elevated level of historical accuracy.



Results, summary, and looking ahead:

I started the year gathering information and sourcing materials based upon my preliminary idea of my project. As I did this and was moving my studio to the theatre, it became gradually more clear to me that I needed to do some changes on the structure and focus of the project. I realized the great possibilities the scholarship position entailed, as well as new possibilities with the theatre studio space. What a game changer it would be to be able to research the dream I have been brewing for years, of dyeing materials myself. For years I have been on the lookout for a studio that would make it easier to implement dyeing on a regular basis. My new location is prime and practical to safely be able to do this.

Material research: On my material and historic research, I will get my binders organised with some preliminary information before I am ready to contact and meet with colleagues that can broaden and increase the insight to my gained knowledge and experience. I have specific sources locally, in the Nordic countries and internationally that I believe will be great contributors to this part of my project. Also, Sean Barrett has said yes to be my mentor the second scholarship year, for which I am incredibly grateful.

Dyeing: I'm well on my way with the dye work. However, as I move along, doing a cost analysis and broadening the spectre of dyes will be useful. I would like to consult with experienced dyers and do some workshops the coming year, to supplement the experiments and insight I am gaining from the work in my studio.



Treasured tools, in daily use at my studio

Thank you

I want to thank my manager at the National Theatre, Katarina Grasmo, for seeing the need for an inhouse milliner/ hatter in this great institution and respecting millinery/ hat making as a craft. For your openness to listen to lofty ideas, and willingness to give some of them a chance. Having both the position as a theatrical milliner under your leadership and collaborate with the scholarship at the Norwegian Crafts Institute, I strongly believe is benefiting all parties. I am impressed by how effectively we have made it all happen. Thank you!

Thank you to my first-year mentor Ellen Wang Thommessen, for all our interesting discussions about the craft, finding new ways to solve the challenges we are facing, being a brilliant travel companion. I appreciate our collegial relationship and friendship. I am grateful for your mentorship this year, that you wish to follow my work even after your mentor-period is over and share your expertise and knowledge in the time to come.



“The Flying nuns” from the National Theatre’s production of “Jane Eyre” 2022 Photo by Øyvind Eide

References

This is some of the books/ resources that has informed my work the past year, but not directly quoted in my report:

For "Sancthansnatten":

HATS – a Papin press design book, The Pepin Press 2000

Women's Hats, Headdresses and Hairstyles, Georgine de Courtais, Dover Publications, inc. 1973, 1986

A Dictionary of Costume and Fashion, Mary Brooks Picken, Dover books on fashion, 1999

Metmuseum.org, The Costume Institute Collections

Straw work:

Swiss Straw Work: Techniques of a Fashion Industry, Veronica Main, Main Collins Publishing, 2003

Workshop with Hege Irene Aasdal:

Basketmaking in Ireland, Joe Hogan, Wordwell Ltd, 2001

The Complete Book of Basketry Techniques, Sue Gabriel and Sally Goymer, David & Charles, 1999

Feather work and dying:

My world according to Me: A Technical Workbook, Ian Bennett, self-published 2018

Collaborations

Designer Anna Kjellsdotter for "Sancthansnatten" at Nationaltheatret AS and Norsk Folkemuseum 2022

Basketweave Hege Irene Aasdal, workshop looking at where basket making and hat making meet 2022

Designer Katrin Nottrodt for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Nationaltheatret AS