



THE LINK BETWEEN FASHION AND THE MELBOURNE CUP CARNIVAL IS AS STRONG AS EVER, AND WHEN IT COMES TO ELEGANT HEADWEAR, THERE IS NO GREATER TIME FOR MELBOURNE'S CREATIVE MILLINERS TO SHOW OFF THEIR DESIGNS.

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Making magic

On the lawns of Flemington on raceday, it's the bold and beautiful creations adorning the heads of stylish racegoers that truly build that festive, alluring carnival atmosphere. With blooming flowers, sculptural adornments, elegant netting, beading and lacework, these hats bring a touch of playful elegance that is both fashion-forward and a nod to tradition.

If you ask for the designer behind some of the most stylish hats on the field, chances are you'll hear the name Kim Fletcher. In the months leading up to the Melbourne Cup Carnival, Fletcher is stitching and gluing around the clock, working from the back of her Elsternwick shop, surrounded by hat blocks, spools of thread, boxes of emu feathers, and dozens of her latest creations. Here, she masterfully turns her creative visions into vibrant, sculptural hats that are destined to adorn many a stylish head at Flemington this spring.

"I'm very lucky to have a clientele that is adventurous with what they like to wear," Fletcher says.



"They're confident women and they like to push boundaries. Australian women are pretty independent, and I think that's fantastic."

Fletcher first fell in love with millinery back in 1993, after spotting an ad in the newspaper for a once-a-week hat-making course. From her first class, she never looked back, and is now one of Melbourne's most sought-after milliners, loved by celebrities and fashionistas for her creative and stylish designs, made with a signature blend of elegance and zest. "When you think about hats, they're adornments. Most of them aren't actually that practical – they're decorative items that make you feel good," she says.

Creating a hat that can truly finish off an outfit is a delicate art, and a great deal of work goes into bringing each piece to life. "Most of it is handwork," Fletcher explains. "The sewing machine is used to sew the wires in on the piece, and we use some glue in flower-making and things like that. With feathers I like to use a glue gun as well as stitching it because it anchors it better. But 99.9 per cent of everything done here is done by hand."

ABOVE: Kim Fletcher crafts a crimson leaf for one of her designs. OPPOSITE: Fletcher fits one of her creations for a customer.



Naturally, these processes can be incredibly time consuming. From the intricacies of weaving, beading and lacework, through to stiffening and drying processes, each hat demands a considerable investment of time and attention.

"You can't make a hat in a day," Fletcher says. On average each hat she makes takes about eight hours. For some more ambitious pieces, however, 40 hours or more of handwork alone can be necessary. She remembers one piece she created, inspired by a Chanel boater hat she saw in a magazine, which turned into a monumental project once she started. "Forty hours of handwork later it was still going!" she recalls. "It was a huge piece, with a great big brim and was quite sculptural. That was one of those projects that you start and think: 'What have I gotten into?' In the end, it took me about six weeks to finish."

Putting so much handwork into each individual piece also adds a touch of uniqueness, so that no two hats ever end up looking exactly the same. And the end result, of course, is worth it.

"The best part of my job is when clients come in and you put a hat on their head, and they look in the mirror and they're beaming," Fletcher says. "That's the best payment you can get, knowing that you've made someone feel good. You can't pay for that smile."

For Fletcher, part of creating that magical experience for her clients is thinking outside the box when it comes to materials and

techniques. "We don't necessarily use just traditional methods anymore," she says. Often, she will take vintage millinery materials such as feathers, straw cloths and hemp braid and play around with using them in new and interesting ways. It's not unusual for her to decide to use a big fruit bowl to create a 1960s Breton shape for a hat, or to stumble across a material with an intriguing texture at an industrial carpeting store and use it in a design.

Lately, she has been playing with silk abaca – a smooth blend of silk and banana palm fibres that is often used for free-shaping into soft, sculptural curves – and using it to make flowers, or blocking it for pillboxes and berets. By taking something soft and flowing and making it into something solid, she creates a fresh look that adds a touch of individuality to her designs.

Another current obsession for Fletcher is acetate, after happening across a supply of it in a haberdashery store in Dubai. Usually used for making sequins, acetate is definitely not a millinery material, but Fletcher is making it work. First heating the material with a hair dryer, she shapes it into flowers, creating unique sculptural elements to use in her creations.

All of these creative techniques are just part of making the art of millinery work with contemporary fashion – and racegoers love the beautiful, strange, and surprisingly elegant results that come from it.

"The biggest catwalk in the world is the lawns of Flemington," Fletcher says. "I've been to races all around the world and the women who go to the Melbourne Cup Carnival are pretty individual. They put together all sorts of different styles and looks. They've got confidence and they like to be seen. You don't find that sort of thing anywhere else." 🐾

