

LUTON – THE HISTORIC HOME OF THE BRITISH HAT INDUSTRY – TO STAGE MAJOR EXHIBITION OF HEADWEAR

*** FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ***

Hats Made Me

Private View: Thursday 20 April 2023
Exhibition dates: 22 April - 8 December 2023

Venue: Stockwood Discovery Centre, London
Road, Luton, LU1 4LX



Straw policeman's helmet, 1903



Sikh man wearing a traditional turban

The Culture Trust, Luton, is delighted to present *Hats Made Me*, a major exhibition that explores the significance of headwear. Comprised of more than two hundred exhibits drawn from the Trust's extensive collection, along with loans from contemporary milliners, it is the largest presentation of its type. Appropriately it is being staged in Luton, the Bedfordshire town that dominated the British hat industry from the 19th century to the post-war period.

Hats Made Me is divided into four curatorial strands: 'practical', 'symbolic', 'aesthetic' and 'transformative.' 'Practical' deals with hats used across the globe to protect the wearer from the elements. Exhibits on display include a traditional policeman's 'custodian' helmet. In use up until the 1930s, it is made from plaited straw as opposed to the traditional cork, offering extra breathing room and shade from the sun. Other items include a Sherlock Holmes-style deerstalker, a floral sun bonnet, and for extreme conditions, a 19th century Filipino salakot hat and an Italian raffia cycling helmet. Meanwhile, a more contemporary note is struck by celebrated milliner Jo Miller's red snug cap. Made in 2022 from recycled plastics, it has the appearance of bumpy skin and is held in place by an integrated strap fitting underneath the chin. Also on display is a Hövding's '3 Helmet', which utilises cutting-edge sensory and algorithmic technology to design a safer, more fashionable alternative to a cycling helmet. Dubbed by the manufacturers 'the safest helmet in the world,' it is worn like a collar around the neck, where in the event of an accident, an airbag inflates over the head and cushions the fall. The 'helmet' also has Bluetooth technology to notify emergency contacts in the case of a mishap.

'Symbolic' explores the socio-economic status hats confer on the wearer — intricately woven, beautifully crafted and made from expensive and



Pink 'pillbox' hat, popularized by Jackie Kennedy

luxurious materials, these were often made to convey gravitas and power. For example, one can see several carved tortoiseshell 19th century hair combs, which sit alongside a luxe purple velvet hat worn by the paramount chief Massapacki in Northern Province, Sierra Leone. The gold-braided hat is labelled inside with the words, 'High Class President Cap Bombay.'

Parts of the collection also represent Luton's own cultural history: the Miss Vauxhall Tiara worn by the winner of a beauty pageant sponsored by Vauxhall Motors unites the hat and motoring industries that were pivotal to its former economic prosperity, along with the migrant workers it attracted. This is underscored with various headpieces which signify cultural heritage: durags, Irish Catholic communion veils, silk Ghanaian headscarves, Muslim prayer caps and Sikh headdresses all feature in the exhibit.

The 'Aesthetic' section of the presentation celebrates less functional headwear. From milliner Paul Stafford's COVID-19 hat – constructed entirely from surgical face masks – to Piers Atkinson's iconic cherry headband – worn by singers such as Rihanna, Miley Cyrus and Doja Cat – the exhibition presents several examples of trendsetting headwear. Numerous designs in the collection replicate and imitate hats worn by Princess Diana, Jackie Kennedy, and other iconic figures. Other exhibits include a black bucket hat with an Andy Warhol-like print of Blondie's Debbie Harry's face, and Uptown Yardie's yellow and green felt recreation of a crown hat influenced by Jamaican activists Amy Ashwood and Marcus Garvey.



Reel Millinery hat worn by Kate Sharma in *Bridgerton*, 2022

The 'Transformative' strand of the exhibition focuses primarily on performance. Thanks to generous loans from the National Theatre and English National Opera, alongside contemporary theatrical milliners, the presentation exhibits a selection of headdresses that have featured on both stage and screen.

Highlights include a red visor design chosen by Beyoncé for *Vogue* magazine, an ornate tiara worn by Madonna in her *Dark Ballet* music video, a teal velvet hat donned by Kate Sharma in the Netflix hit show *Bridgerton*, and a Stephen Jones intricate headpiece worn by Cate Blanchett for her Oscar-nominated role playing the monarch in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. From *Star Wars* to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Batman* to *Doctor Who*, the exhibit displays several iconic headpieces that

transport the wearer into an instantly recognisable character.

Designed by Michael Marriott and put together by The Culture Trust's Curator, Yona Lesger, *Hats Made Me* will be supported by a programme of smaller events, including curated talks by contemporary milliners and costume designers, and smaller satellite exhibitions hosted in the Trust's other venues. One such example is the presentation developed by Claire Strickland, a successful theatrical milliner. This will focus on stage wear, taking eighteen – twenty hats that have been worn on stage and in film especially curated for the Trust.

Samuel Javid, Creative Director of The Culture Trust, Luton, says *'This is incredible opportunity to see a world-class collection of hats and headwear. This is one of the largest exhibitions of its kind, pulling together practical and purposeful headwear, with wonderful and whimsical costume from stage and screen. This is a rare chance to see hats that defined an era, headwear that made a scene, and some special bits of pop-culture – like Johnny Depp's pirate hat, and a space helmet worn by Matt Damon.'*

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Notes to Editors:

About The Culture Trust Luton

Established in 2008, the Culture Trust, Luton is a vibrant and progressive independent charity and our mission is 'to connect communities through culture'. It is comprised of The Hat Factory Arts Centre, Luton Library Theatre, Hat House creative workspace, Storefront Gallery, Wardown House Museum & Gallery and Stockwood Gardens & Museum. It presents a multicultural year-round programme of events, exhibitions, workshops and performances. Additionally, it supports creative talent and skills by providing opportunities, platforms and cultural career progression for young people.

The Trust is funded through an annual donation from London Luton Airport and as a National Portfolio, the Trust also receives regular funding from Arts Council England. The Trust also has a special partnership with Luton Borough Council which includes caring for and sharing the town's Museums, collections and heritage venues.

Stockwood Discovery Centre
London Road, Luton,
LU1 4LX



Wednesday – Sunday, 10am –
4pm

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