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#100

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100 tips!

Chain stitch machine

Workroom: Multi-crown hat



Stock of sewing machines and spare parts



Jimmy's lathe

Configuration

In the hat industry, machines are typically configured for specific tasks, and Jimmy has specialised in adjusting and converting them to meet unique needs. "The 17 Guinea machine by Willcox & Gibbs is one of the most popular machines in the hat industry because their construction is very simple and they are therefore very easy to convert. For example, the straw stitch machine is basically a set-up machine. You can repurpose the straw machine to function as a sweatband machine as well by changing the foot. No need to purchase two separate machines; if you have the straw braid foot, you're good to go for both tasks.

"Other adjustments are very easy to make as well. You have probably seen the machines that can cut the felt and stitch at the same time. They weren't made that way but adjusted by simply adding a knife next to the foot. I teach these things to the people who work with the sewing machines in the factories and workrooms so they can adjust things themselves."

Beyond mechanical alterations, changes in thread composition can make a huge difference to a machine's performance as well. The transitioning from a traditional cotton wax thread to the contemporary use of nylon necessitates a recalibration of the sewing machine's timing to accommodate the altered thread behaviour.

Future of the business

To Jimmy's regret, younger generations show little interest in learning the trade, and the scarcity of mechanics raises concerns about the continuity of the business. "When I stop doing this, probably nobody is going to take over my workshop. It is a shame because I know from experience that a skilled person can make a very good living with the maintenance of machines."

More information

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Nicki Marquardt

One specialist in creating eye-catching braid headwear – whether it be a small refined crin headpiece or a 1.5 metre-wide straw hat – is German milliner Nicki Marquardt.

Nicki started her career in the millinery industry in the early 1990s. She was studying geography at the time but was not entirely satisfied with her choice. After visiting a hat store and discovering that the hats were made by the store's own studio, she became fascinated by the idea of making hats herself.

Beginnings

"During my studies, I wanted to treat myself to a nice hat," Nicki says. "After I saved enough money, I went out to buy one and found a wonderful parasol hat, but I didn't like the colour of the ribbon. To my surprise, the people in the hat shop told me that they could easily change that for me. I have always loved wearing something on my head since I was a child, but I had never been aware that you could make a hat yourself. When I came back to pick up my adjusted hat, I asked the owner of the shop if they offered apprenticeships. They said they did but that they didn't have a place available until next year. I decided to quit my studies and do some short-term apprenticeships in different shops until I could start working at the hat shop. I loved it from the first moment; it turned out to be the perfect job choice for me."

Setting up a business

Three months after she did her exam as an apprentice in 1996, Nicki went to Ludwig Beck, one of the most famous department stores in Munich located in the centre of the city, to show her work. They bought her first collection after which her hat brand took off. After having worked from home for several years, she opened her first hat shop in 1998 in Munich. Since 2006 her shop has been based at its current location in Türkenstrasse.

As her business grew, Nicki found success not only in creating one-of-a-kind hats but also in producing multiple-piece collections for resellers. By participating in trade shows in Berlin, Düsseldorf and Paris to showcase her unique designs, she managed to establish a worldwide clientele of hat shops.

Braid specialist

Nicki’s design style is characterised by her innovative and sculptural approach to hat making. She focuses on creating hats that are not only visually appealing but also functional, such as foldable hats for travellers. One of the other techniques that she has become a specialist in and well-known for is fine braid stitching. “I have always tried to push the boundaries of what you can do with a braid sewing machine. The machine gives you such a freedom of design as you are not restricted to any shape or size; as

long as you keep feeding the braid, you can make any design you want. I especially enjoy working with fine braid because its finer width gives you much more flexibility and therefore allows for more refined designs. I like working with straw as well as crin, although I have to admit that nothing is as elegant as a headpiece made from 5 mm-wide crin braid.”

Nicki became inspired to learn how to sew braid in the late 1990s when she visited a friend who was doing an apprenticeship at the Grevi hat factory in Italy. “When I entered the factory, there was a woman sewing braid hats in the middle of the hall. I was completely mesmerised by the process and immediately started looking for a similar machine when I was back home in Germany. My friend who had done the apprenticeship and I both bought a surplus braid machine from a manufacturing company and learned through trial and error how to use it, as there were no resources such as the internet or ‘how to’ books available at the time.

“I remember the first day when I was sitting in front of the machine and noticed that there was only one thread. My first thought was: ‘Oh no, they sold me an incomplete machine!’ I was really desperate, contacted my friend, and I don’t know how but somehow we figured out together how to thread the machine and sew with it. It was pure determination that kept me going during

the first few months of using it; I just kept trying again and again until I had finally worked out how the machine operated.

“The trickiest part of working with a chain stitch sewing machine is getting the tension right. And at my machine there was one part missing that is quite essential for having the tension work properly, so whatever I did, the thread never sat right on the hats after

I stitched them; it was always too loose. For about half a year I was continuously repairing all the braid hats I made until I compared my machine to my friend’s and realised that one tiny part was missing. Luckily the company that sold me the machine had the missing bit for me, after

which it all went much more smoothly. Nevertheless, it took me about five more years of practising until I finally felt completely comfortable about what I was doing with the machine and managed to create far more complex designs.”

As the machines are not being made anymore, it is not easy to find spare parts. Therefore, Nicki seized the opportunity when she met a company at a trade show in Düsseldorf years ago who had several chain stitch machines on display. “They had more – rusty – stock at their venue, so I bought as many as I could to have some backup in case my machine would need any replacements.

“The secret to mastering braid stitching is practise, practise, practise”

Shop drawer with crin and straw braid stock



Crin braid saucer from the Couture Summer 2023 collection





I now have two machines set up in my workroom, and some more in the back of the stockroom. Both workroom machines are used frequently by myself and by my team of in-house milliners, who also learn to sew with them the moment they start working on my retailer collections.

Tips

“The secret to mastering braid stitching is practise, practise, practise. By

doing so, you keep learning and getting better at it, even after twenty years of making braid hats. Some of my hats, such as the folded designs and the spirals, I couldn't have made five years earlier. What is nice about chain stitch machines is that they are very forgiving. If you're doing it wrong, you just unwrap the thread and start over again. That's how you keep pushing your designs.”

More information

www.nickimarquardt.com

Straw braid hat from the Couture Summer 2024 collection



The Panama Hat Company

The Panama Hat Company, a familial enterprise boasting more than 35 years' experience in the import and export of authentic Panama hats, operates from the heart of the UK's hat district in Luton.

Jenny Froehlich, owner and company director, hails from Ecuador, leveraging her deep understanding, experience and passion for her homeland's Panama hat industry. This commitment drives her to offer an extensive collection of high quality Panama hats in the UK while ensuring a fair wage for the skilled weavers in Ecuador who make the hoods. Since 2016, she has run the business together with her daughter Mavi Tzaig.

Collecting

Previously, Jenny arranged for the Panama hoods she imported from Ecuador to be manufactured into hats at external factories in the UK. However, in 2017 she made the decision to establish her own hat factory in Luton. The machinery needed to run her factory has been gathered over the years.

Being a lover of traditional machines and particularly old sewing machines, she would take over equipment from factories that were closing down in Luton and the London area.

“Approximately 25 years ago, the hat manufacturer I relied on ceased operations due to declining business,” says Jenny.

“Seizing the opportunity, I decided to purchase their sewing machines without any concrete plans, recognising their potential utility in the future. However, a logistical

challenge emerged as my living room wasn't spacious enough to accommodate all the acquired machines. Nevertheless, I bought them and stored them in a warehouse temporarily. As more factories in Luton shut down over the years, each time they offered, I found it hard to decline. Consequently, I ended up purchasing machines from four different factories, with the most recent acquisition coming from Olney.”

Jenny's collection of machines proved invaluable when hat brand Christys' opted to bring part of their production back in-house after previously having had it outsourced. “Jenny had a reciprocal

arrangement with Christys' for several years, where her hats were finished by them, and they in turn utilised her machines,” Mavi explains. “This arrangement thrived until a change in Christys' ownership and management led to delivery issues. To address the situation, Jenny decided to reclaim the machines and establish her own factory. The handover didn't all go smoothly and when she received them back, they were in a sorry state.”

Jenny says: “As it happened, at the same time, I received a phone call from Burgess Hats in Southend [Essex] who decided to end their business and wanted