

“PORTER LE CHAPEAU:” CELEBRATING FRENCH MILLINERS IN HILLWOOD’S COLLECTION: CAROLINE REBOUX

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“Hats from Paris, you are going everywhere, to the beaches, in the air, on the high seas, beautiful and beloved.” – Princess Marthe Bibesco, in French Vogue, July 1939



Hat

Caroline Reboux (French, 1873-1956)
Paris, 1895

Handmade lace, silk flowers, tulle, velvet, ostrich feathers, wire, buckram
(2012.9.27)

The forthcoming special exhibition, [Marjorie Merriweather Post's Paris](#) (opening February 17, 2024) features a hat from a women-led millinery firm in Paris. Originating from the late nineteenth century, this piece reflects fashion and artistic trends during the period and reveals a women-led luxury industry for an accessory seldom worn today beyond the function of sunshade and warmth. Although fashion devotees from the mid-twentieth century through today often emphasize the shoe and bag as the punctuation point of their ensembles, investing in and splurging on these statement or heirloom pieces, the hat was formerly the paramount accessory. The need for an everyday medium or large bag in previous centuries for women was diminished, in part due to transportation limitations and societal restrictions on movement and independence. While some emphasis on footwear was always a given, skirt lengths affected their visibility and prominence.



Photo of Caroline Reboux, about 1905

Via the Saint Louis Art Museum exhibition blog, "A Quintessentially Female Profession" by Abigail Yoder, March 16, 2017. <https://www.slam.org/blog/a-quintessentially-female-profession/>

During the mid to late 19th century, one forward-thinking milliner, Caroline Reboux (1839-1927), enjoyed unusual name recognition, financial success, and patronization by all the European royals and aristocrats. Reboux, referred to as "la reine des modistes" in French and American periodicals, remained prestigious for more than fifty years, even after her death. Her professional origin story might be romanticized, but it is repeated with enough frequency to suggest some elements of veracity. Reboux's attic millinery salon was originally located in the Rue de Choiseul when one legendary evening in 1865, two stylish women of the Second-Empire French court, Princess Pauline de Metternich (1836-1921) and Countess Mélanie de Pourtalès (1836-1914) "halted their carriage and made their way up the rickety staircase leading to the attic where an obscure little milliner lived and worked." After this discovery, Reboux was introduced via her new fashionable clients to Empress Eugénie (1826-1920), cementing her place as "the queen of the milliners."¹



Perhaps Princess de Metternich wears a boater hat created by Reboux in this fashionable seaside scene.

Princess Pauline de Metternich (1836-1921) on the beach, Eugène Boudin (French, 1824-1898), ca. 1865-67, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.288.1.

¹ Relayed in a 1939 promotional pamphlet (featuring an English translation) and French *Vogue* magazine article, both titled "La Tradition et La Mode" written by the Romanian Princess Marthe Bibesco (1886-1973); also repeated in *Degas, Impressionism, and the Paris Millinery Trade*, edited by Simon Kelly and Esther Bell (Prestel, 2017) p. 137, 271.

A progressive businessperson, Caroline Reboux maintained her maiden name professionally after her marriage to French journalist Charles Ernest Amillet (1829-1884)². She relocated her salon to 23 rue de la Paix during the 1870s. Reboux had a reputation for treating her employees fairly, ensuring that they received generous pay. By 1900, she employed more than 100 'petites mains' who were responsible for small but significant tasks in the workshop. The following year, her business produced almost 7,000 custom hats and made alterations or updates to more than 1,300 (a common, and sustainable practice!). Reboux developed the cloche around 1914, leaving it to her successor, Lucienne Rabaté (1885-1960) to perfect during the 1920s.³



Label within Hillwood's Caroline Reboux hat, 2012.9.27.

The hat in Hillwood's collection bears the Rue de la Paix address on its inner label. Flat and brimless, with an oval shape, its most distinctive feature are two wired lace ornaments at each end of the oval resembling ears. The hat is constructed on a traditional, shaped buckram base that is then covered with bobbin lace and festooned with tiny cotton and silk velvet hydrangea blossoms interspersed with green wax buds. Hydrangeas were a popular flower for ornamentation during the late 19th century as Eastern influences permeated design, although Charlotte de la Tour's *Language of*

² Amillet and Reboux's son, André Amillet (1877-1963) published under the nom de plume "Paul" with his mother's maiden name. His sister, Marguerite (1867-1957) was married to the playwright and artist Paul Bilhaud (1854-1933). All share a monument in Paris in the Passy Cemetery.

³ Rabaté also worked with Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel (1883-1971) during that designer's early period designing hats during the 1910s.

Flowers suggests a somewhat negative connotation--vanity!⁴ The unique silhouette of the hat suggests inspiration from the Spanish *toreador*, or bullfighter's cap, which came into fashion when talented French soprano Emma Calvé (1858-1942) starred in the revival of Bizet's *Carmen* in 1894.



Detail of lace "ear" on 2012.9.27.

This 1890s hat is a rare extant example of Rebox's work during her proprietorship of her eponymous firm. It probably belonged to Marjorie Merriweather Post's mother, Ella Letitia Merriweather Post (1852-1912), who often traveled in Asia where the hydrangea was prominent. She was also a devoted supporter of the performing arts. As mentioned earlier, the firm of Rebox persisted under the tutelage of the designer's successor, Madame Rabaté, until 1956. As hats faded from popularity, traditional milliners could not sustain their business.

⁴ For more on de la Tour's work and the art of floriography, visit <https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/exhibitions/painting-paradise/the-queens-gallery-buckingham-palace/the-language-of-flowers>