



THE LAST STRAW

Nathalie Seiller-Dejean spin straws into gold



Nathalie Seiller-Dejean creates delicate hand-crafted hair ornaments and accessories that make you stand out from the crowd. She is a one-woman Rumpelstiltskin, weaving, knotting, plaiting, coiling straw into jewellery and high-fashion pieces. Her hats and headbands, worn at parties, weddings, and on the catwalk, have a dream-like, fairy-tale quality. Instead of pearls and diamante, she prefers to work with natural materials in her creations - straw, horse hair, even starfish.

Her latest 'English Garden' collection features carrot flower, sweet peas and daisies. One little hair cap in the shape of a hive has the caption: 'Save our bees!' Another, dressed with organza ribbon with gold accents, resembles a bee keeper's veil. Or there's a dainty straw cap dressed with a profusion of wild flowers made out of straw and burnt peacock feathers. Today her straw work is sold by the Cotswolds-based shop Cutter Brooks, founded by Amanda Brooks, former fashion director of Barneys NY. 'Amanda said to me why don't you make a collection inspired by an English Garden? I didn't want it to be too sweet or too theatrical and so straw seemed perfect.'

Seiller-Dejean's love affair with straw stems from the 18 years she spent living in Switzerland. She became fascinated by the tradition of Swiss straw work which developed in a region called the Freiamt (later the canton of Aargau), associated with the hat industry that developed there. 'During the long winter evenings, all the families would meet around the table and work by the light of the fire to turn straw into gold,' as

Seiller-Dejean explains poetically. The 'schnurli,' a two-ply straw thread, spun from narrow straw splints, was made into a variety of motifs, including beads, flowers, needle roses and rosettes. Seiller-Dejean began hunting down examples of straw work (which was wildly popular in Europe in the 19th century) in local markets. 'Some pieces still look so fresh, like they were made yesterday.' She met the few craftspeople who still practise the art and experimented with straw herself, creating her first Rumpelstiltskin tiaras.

We meet when she's on a visit to London. Tall, animated, she is dressed in midnight blue, but sports a pair of ballet flats in camouflage fabric. Seiller-Dejean was born in Paris and graduated from the prestigious Beaux Arts School with a degree in drawing. She became a press illustrator for newspaper, *Le Monde*, doing mostly political portraits. Later she left Paris for Geneva to help her then-husband in his antiques business and her art was put on hold. The family had a sailing boat and they would frequently take long trips. To stave off boredom, Nathalie started making presents for friends. A pair of shoes she painted for a friend led to a commission from the Delage luxury hand-made goods shop in the Palais Royal. She also began creating hand-made hair accessories and jewellery from found objects and vintage lace from flea markets. 'Anything I pick up has to have history and meaning. My goal is not to make fashion for fashion's sake.'

Her big break came with an order for Barneys New York, where she also designed a collection of

hand-painted scarves and belts for the high end Japanese luxury goods shop, Takashimaya, in New York. She remarried and moved back to Paris and fashion designer Christian Lacroix asked her to design accessories for his 2004 haute couture show. He would present her with different mood boards of the collection every three days, then let her inspiration have free reign.

In her work, she takes inspiration from everything from folk tales to art history. Frida Kahlo inspired her 'Frida' tiara - where tulle has been embroidered with very tiny cotton flowers - while the Wedgwood tiara is made from grey chantilly lace. 'The contrast reminds me of Wedgwood work.' An early piece, the Marie Stuart straw & silverthread headpiece, is a homage to the Scottish-French queen, while the TinkerBell tiara is fashioned with voluptuous straw 'bells'. On her Instagram, you'll see a stunning photo by Jamie Beck, recreating an Old Master-style Madonna and Child painting, with Jamie wearing her straw 'Pillywiggins' tiara and the young child wearing the 'Forget me not' tiara.

For private clients, she hand-paints Duchesse satin to create garments - she shows me a photo of an evening cloak adorned with thistles. Rather than asking a client to specify a particular colour or fabric, she prefers to work with a mood or a feeling. 'It's like the story of the Princess who demanded a dress "the colour of the weather"', in the fairy tales of Charles Perrault, ' she laughs.

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