

How to turn a modern straw hat into a Natural Form Era daytime hat or bonnet

I truly have developed a passion for straw hats. I'm very lucky that straw hats have been popular for man and women for at least 3 centuries it gives me lots of reasons to experiment with techniques that I can pass along. During the Natural Form Era straw was popular as both hats and bonnets for either summer or winter.

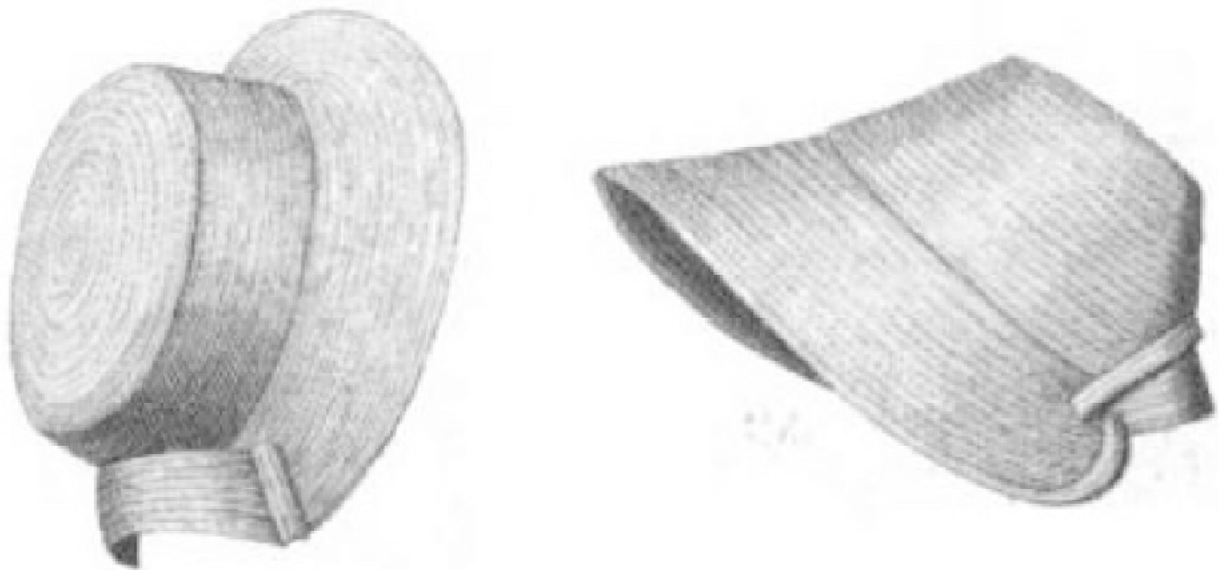
Altering a modern sun hat is even easier than making a wire frame or wired buckram hat and you do not need a special wooden hat block. In this article I will attempt to make three common shapes that were popular in the Fashion Magazines of that period.

My sources

Marion called my attention to two Fashion Magazines I had never seen before, Sylvia's Home Journal of 1879

https://books.google.com/books?id=GXIOAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_navlinks_s&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false and The London and Paris Ladies Magazine of Fashion, 1881 & 82

https://books.google.com/books?id=hyIGAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_navlinks_s#v=thumbnail&q&f=false. One of the real finds was a drawing of three undecorated straw hats; you don't usually see undecorated hats in Fashion Magazine. Straw hats of this period were often bought from a Millinery Shop plain and without any decoration then taken home to decorate or left for the Milliner to decorate it to order. These drawings can give real clues to the shape of the base hats.



From the London and Paris Magazine these two of the three shown I thought were doable, they appeared in June 1882.



A good number of the hats in both Fashion Magazine seem to have similar shaped bases some of them with ties and some without. It must have been a very popular shape. You need to look at not just the hat alone but also the hat on a head to get a feel for the scale of the hat. The hat on the right above is similar in shape to a bonnet from decades earlier if it had been larger. The shape in the back would have been a Bavolet or Curtain to hide the bare neck. In the early 1880's it seems to be filled with the ladies bun or fall perhaps a nice way to keep ones hairdo from being crushed.



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From Sylvia's I wanted to try this simpler hat shown on page 366 as part of a larger plate.



Materials

The three pictures below show the straw hats I began each hat with and the decorative materials I chose for each hat.



For the squared crowned hat like the first figure above, I chose black straw, gray trim, some black wheat, a black faux bird and maybe some black lace. The August 1881 L&P plate was the inspiration for the use of the trim.



For the tapered crowned hat in the second figure I chose natural straw, some periwinkle double-sided satin ribbon, some changeable copper to blue ribbon, a dark periwinkle ostrich plume and maybe a copper ostrich feather and some petersham.



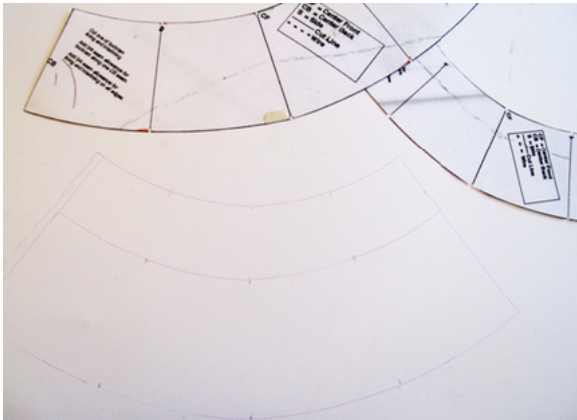
For the Sylvia's hat I chose a red hat that I was going to dye dark green to make dark brown. Also, some red silk, and a cotton Sateen check fabric and some white goose feathers to make a faux wing in place of the bird show on the hat.



Finding or making blocks

Often in hat making (most often felt hats) the crown and the brim are separated and blocked separately and then re-joined. This is covered by both the hatband and sweatband. This is also the easiest way to approach this kind of straw hat from straw hat project (you can see other period hats made this way on my site). What makes a good block for a straw crown? Most anything that you have around the house that is the right shape. Two things I found right away the tub container I will be using even though it is not empty and the clear plastic on the right is a 50 pack DVD cover.

I couldn't find anything the right shape and size for the natural straw hat so I used one of my patterns (the Elizabethan tall hat pattern) to trace onto heavy non-corrugated cardboard the shape I wanted. I cut them out and taped them together. If you have a paper pattern then you can follow the steps used in creating this cardboard crown block for both the crown and the brim.



You can use your paper pattern to cut the shapes you need then, tape them together to make the block without having to alter anything or find any plastic shapes. Two different size patterns were traced because one was too big on the bottom and the other was too small at the top.

I used a ceramic mold maker's trick to get the final height. If you hold a pen or pencil on a level surface of the right height and spin the cardboard then the pen will draw a level line on the cardboard. I did this at both top and bottom to mark lines to trim down the board.



I needed the crown tip to be a circle so after taping the cardboard sides together I marked a circle on to more cardboard. I cut this out and taped it in place.



All three crown block forms..



I covered the blocks with foil. Foil is a good choice as it keeps the cardboard dry and over plastic you can still steam iron the straw.

Blocking



If your hat has a sweatband or tags they should be removed. If your hat has a sweatband or tags they should be removed.



The straw can then be cut and the crown is free.



The chain stitch is pulled and the two halves separated.



The crowns are dipped in water and stretched over their blocks. In this case they are larger around than the blocks so I need to wrap them with bias tape to cinch them in to the size and shape of the block. If these were wood blocks then push pins would be used to hold them to the base of the block.



I use black bias on the black straw because it does bleed color and I reuse my bias.



The sloped block was the most difficult. I had to stretch the straw and use binder clips along with the bias.



All three crowns wrapped and set to dry.



If when the crowns are dry the tip is not flat enough you can place a pressing cloth over the straw and steam press it. **Warning: straw hats are treated with any number of nasty chemicals to discourage pest so you do not want to breath the steam.**



All the crowns are removed from their blocks and ready for the next step.

I removed some of the middle rows of straw from the brim of the sunhat and held it in place at the base of the crown. Holding it in this way and comparing it to the drawing you can trace to lines of the edge.

Brims etc. Natural





I cut the straw across the rows just off the center back.



Because this hat has a double edge of straw and I wanted to use them in the final hat I remove the stitches and freed those rows.



I cut away the extra straw a little at a time until I ended up with just what I wanted. I sewed the free ends of the outside rows along the edge on both sides.



I used clips to hold the brim in place while I sewed it to the crown by hand with a straw colored thread.



I cut a shape for the back section from the scraps of the old brim. And cut away a section of the crown in the center back. Then, I sewed it in place by hand and sewed a single strip of straw over the edge between crown and added piece. You can see a picture of it at the end of the article.

Black



I pulled the thread to free half a row of straw on the edge. I sewed this back on the edge grading it down to nothing.



I used a steam iron to flatten the crown. With the black it was possible it has a lot of stretch. Then with the new crown set in place I picked the place to separate the brim by cutting a thread and pulling a row of stitches.



The two halves of the brim can be seen here.



Time to check the proportions again.



To figure out just what shape and size to cut the back piece. I clipped and pinned it to the brim.



I then marked it and cut it.



By machine I sewed the edges over the cut edges of the brim.



The back piece from the inside.



By hand I sew a strip over the raw edge and around to the inside of the hat.



The strip from the inside.

I added millinery wire under the strip of straw so I could shape the curve. I also would suggest added wire along the edge of the entire bonnet. I think I will go back and do that I want more control over the shape of the brim.

Red



This brim did not steam flat so I had to pull the thread on several rows of straw and re-sew them by machine. Sewing straw my machine is possible. It does take a little practice and success sometimes the machine makes most of the difference. I have a Pfaff with a built in walking foot. It seems to handle it very well up to 4 thicknesses.



Finished crown and re-sewn brim with smaller head opening.



Best laid plans I did dye the red straw with dark green dye it came out mahogany not a bad color but unfortunately the thread did not dye at all and it look terrible.

I always use cotton thread when sewing my straw hats because I know I will eventually dye the hat but not so commercial hats. You just take a chance. I did not finish it as a straw hat but I think I might cover it with fabric. Even back in the Victorian Era straw hats were made just to be bases for fabric coverings. I picked out a couple examples from the Fashion magazines that look to have the same shape but are fabric covered in total or part. I did decide to pull the chain stitch and re-sew the red hat. It was fairly time consuming but easy to do. But because some of the sizing that was in the original hat washed out when it was in the dye vat I needed to re-size the hat.



Sizing

Straw hats can be sized two ways with Shellac or Gelatine. I like to use gelatine it is non-toxic easy to get at the grocery store fairly inexpensive. The original block is used but needs to be covered with plastic wrap and it should be set on something to raise it enough so that the hat does not hit the table.



For this size of a hat all you need is - a packet of gelatine and about 1/8 cup of water. I stick that in the microwave for from 30 sec. to 1 min. until it is dissolved in the water. Brush this on the inside of the hat. Two fairly thick coats are enough. Stick the hat on the block, pin it if necessary and stick it in the sun to dry.



When dry pull it off the block it should be fairly stiff. I would recommend sizing straw hats that way you really do not need to use wire. You do need something to block it on but that is not a problem because you just made the block. Gelatine can leave the straw a little shiner than it was before.



With just the steam from an iron you can soften the sizing and hold the straw to make minor changes to its shape. You only have to hold it long enough for the steam to cool.



Final touches

Here are the Black and Natural straw hats completed.

