

Feature



Hat Blocks: Sculptural Form, Artistic Function *Wayne Wichern*

A San Francisco area professional milliner talks about his extensive collection of hat blocks and how he uses them to create hats for the 21st century.

A piece of felt, a cloud of steam and a wooden hat block are essential ingredients for making a blocked hat. Most of you reading this article are makers in one way or another, so you can easily relate to the importance of “tools of the trade.” There are familiar tools used for making gloves, shoes and flowers molds. Hat blocks are tools of the millinery trade.

Hat blocks are made by skilled woodcraft artisans known as *block shapers*, and while the hat block is for practical use in the studio, it is also an amazing artistic achievement. Though hat blocks are not required to make a simple or fantastical hat, they are much more efficient and facilitate a faster and more economical commercial production.

Over the 28 years of my hat making career I have compiled a unique and versatile hat block collection. The hundreds of hat blocks in my collection, dating from



A selection of wooden hat blocks. (above) Cast aluminum blocks, typically on a large press with positive and negative molds. (below)



the 1920's to the present, are of seemingly infinite variety and complexity. I have bought antique blocks, commissioned new ones, and revised, redesigned and re-carved many blocks which I deemed less than useful for a contemporary market.

My job as a contemporary millinery designer is to utilize these vintage and contemporary hat blocks in innovative ways, not just using the obvious shape but to combine the forms and tease out their hidden expression. I am constantly amazed by the skill that went into conceptualizing and carving of my hat blocks, and if I had time for another career I would turn my attention to creating hat blocks.

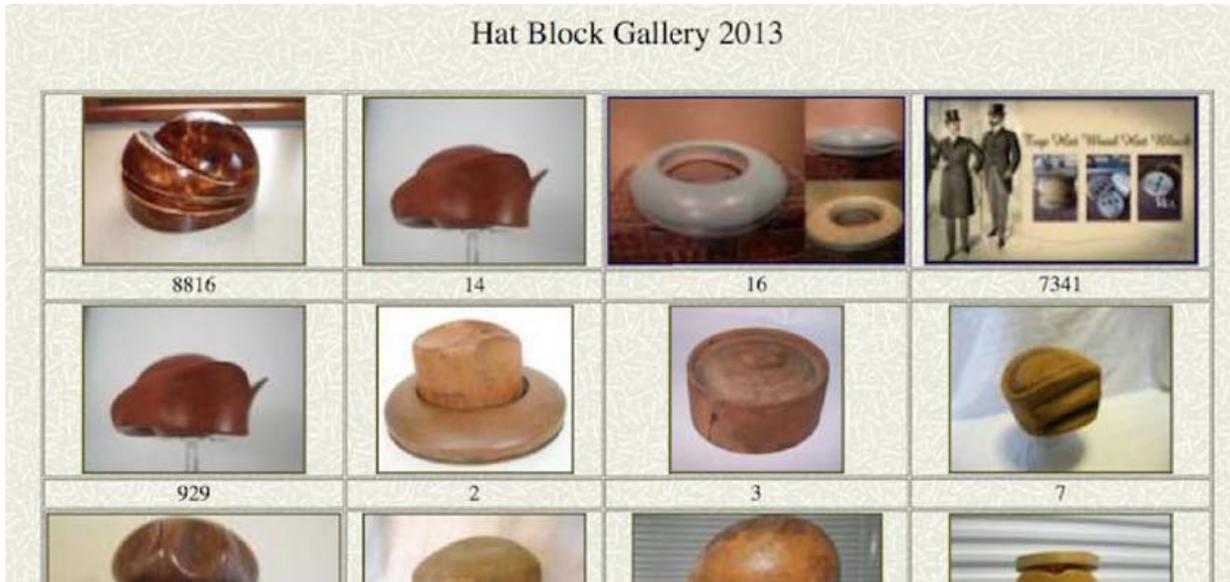
Background on Hat Blocks

Although the origin and history of hat blocks is difficult to identify, they appear to be a relatively recent development. Sources indicate that wooden hat blocks were only introduced in the late 1920s. They are either a single piece, or made of parts that can be assembled in different ways to create a variety of unique styles.

In the 1940s, aluminum hat blocks were introduced. These “hot blocks” were placed over an electric heating cone to shape the hat. They are typically used with a large press with positive and negative molds. (left) Ceramics and polymers are other material sometimes used for hat blocks.

Vintage hat blocks are desirable and sought after by enthusiasts. The beauty of the wooden hat block is that it can be re-carved into a new shape or modified, unlike aluminum or poly blocks. You can read about the transformation of several less than useful shapes in a [blog post](#) that I wrote several years ago.

photos of hat blocks that have been sold on eBay and other internet sites since 2006, along with the price of the sale and the date if available. The purpose of the galleries is to provide reference material to inspire professional and student hat makers to develop new designs or as a baseline guide to have a block copied.



Currently there are very few people in the United States who can make a complex hat block. I have listed sources of hat block makers on a special [Hat Block Galleries](#) webpage so you can see what is currently available in the market. eBay is the most useful resource for new and used blocks, and it has handily centralized a marketplace for hat blocks. This has had the effect of driving up the competition for them as well.

Also on this page is a photo reference database for hat blocks. (above) These are

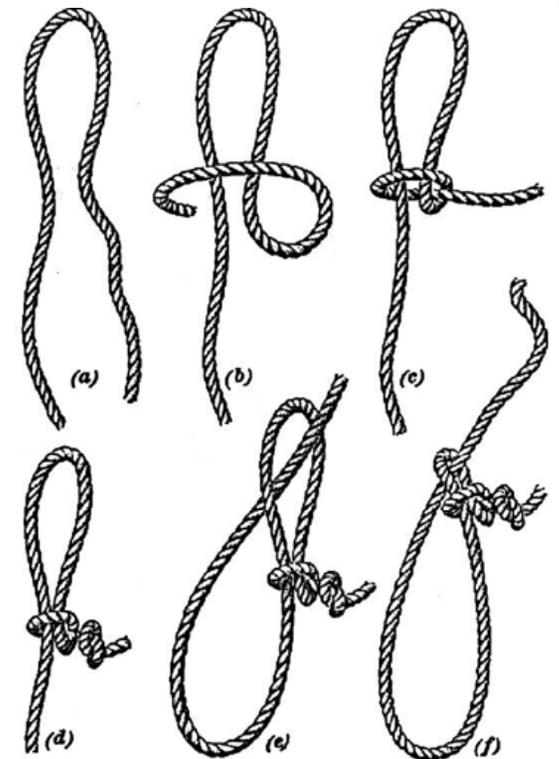
Creating a Blocked Hat

To create a blocked hat, you must first select a hat block with the shape you want, and the material for your hat. Millinery felt and straw are the materials most commonly used. Some milliners cover the wood hat block with tissue to prevent staining by the dyes in the material.

Forming the hat involves dampening the material with water and saturating it with steam to soften the material. Then you quickly block it by pulling, stretching, and

Tying a Milliner's Knot

This illustrates how to tie a milliner's knot to secure the material while blocking.



sculpting it over the block form. Once blocked to the desired shape and tied off on the block with cord using a *milliner's knot*, it is left to dry. When the hat is dry, it is removed from the block and the non-essential extra felt or straw is cut away. The brim edge is sewn by machine or hand, depending on the desired finish. A *headsized ribbon* is sewn into the crown. Then comes the design and application of the appropriate trim or embellishment. (following pages)

Blocking a Felt Hat



1. Hat block with tear drop crown on medium arched brim.



2. Dampen millinery felt with water prior to steaming.



3. Steaming felt blank softens the felt to stretch and form.



4. Quickly shape the hot felt over the block.



5. Rope into the crown and brim lines.



6. Stretching, tacking and roping the hat brim.



7. Pressing tear drop recessing tool into finished form.



8. Recessing tool pressed into form to shape the crown.



9. The finished blocked shape.



Cutting away excess material.



Binding the felt brim edge.



Stitching in the headsize ribbon.

An amazing and comprehensive [video](#) on YouTube from the Bollman Hat Company details the factory process of making a wool felt hat. Starting with the wool fiber and detailing the felting process and then the blocking of a hat.

Final Thoughts

The primary focus of my business is women's blocked fashion hats, and evening and cocktail hats. One of my special interests is theatrical Kentucky Derby style hats, which are lavish and frothy, with embellishments. It's fairly simple to create the frothy event hat. The harder work is to design a simpler hat that can be worn frequently - one that speaks with quiet elegance, not a shout. Whatever the hat, though, hat blocks play an important role in creating them.

Wayne Wichern pursued studies in classical ballet after graduating from high school, but found that he was much more interested in costume and fashion design than dance. He eventually began studying millinery with acclaimed Seattle milliner and teacher John Eaton, After returning to the San Francisco Bay Area, Wayne continued his design interests in custom clothing, millinery. He now offers his custom creations online, at shows, and through millinery shops. He also teaches millinery classes at his private studio in Burlingame, California. Visit his [website](#) to learn more.



Shelves full of hat blocks in the studio. (above) Reshaping brim block shape to a more sophisticated asymmetrical form, and the large bowl shape into a wide oval cloche brim. (below)

