

Chapeau d'Amour - The worlds most expensive hat



THINKING OUTSIDE THE HAT BOX

Welcome to the fabulous world of Louis Mariette, one of the UK's most outlandish milliners, and designer of the world's most expensive hat

Words: Fiona Collins

There is a genuine warmth and enthusiasm in all that Louis Mariette says and does, and an almost childlike energy and excitement. Sometimes, fashion-types can seem haughty - self-important even - appearing to challenge those who try to step into their fabulous, flamboyant world. Louis Mariette could not be more different.

"My darling, how are you?" he cries on introduction, as if we have known each other for years (this is our first encounter). "It's all very exciting, but a bit manic at the moment, because we've got the Paris Fashion Week exhibition which we're prepping for; so we're drowning amongst boxes of hats!" This friendliness and energy, so I am told, is typical of the Malawian-born milliner, whose enthusiasm for our meeting might seem a little over-the-top, but whom I soon learn is equally dynamic about any subject you care to throw at him.

Perhaps most famous for creating the world's most expensive hat (the 'Chapeau D'amour' was valued at a cool one-and-a-half-million pounds), and for his stint as a judge on Britain's Next Top Model, Mariette is also quickly forging a place amongst Britain's fashion elite. Yet perhaps because of his unconventional upbringing, or maybe because of his chance break into fashion, or because it's just not in his nature to embrace

subjects at any less than one hundred per cent, from architecture to natural history, Mariette admits that while fashion and millinery might be his life, they are most certainly not his whole world ("life's a journey, it's a rollercoaster, it's exciting").

"My charity work is really important to me," Mariette says of his position as Vice-President of The Children's Trust, and of his patronage of St. Thomas' Lupus Trust. "You know, as a young child living in Africa, my parents were part of the Rotary and Round Table and I was always helping them out. I think when things are going well for you in life, that's the time you should really help others and think of others and not be drowned in your own bubble world of fashion, or your job."

Admitting he would do "anything I can" for causes close to his heart, Mariette's parents, and his exotic upbringing, have influenced more than just his charity work. His earliest memories of the colourful, vibrant and sometimes hostile landscapes of his childhood have gone on to become some of his most enduring inspirations. "My mother used to look at me and say 'Right, I don't want to see you until sunset' and I used to disappear into the wilderness. I didn't really relate too much to other kids playing football and all that, so I was just lost in my world of nature and flora

and fauna... Baobab trees, lizards, dragonflies... you can just imagine the creatures... Lilac-Breasted Roller Birds; I absolutely loved any plant life. And it's very interesting but when I do look at some of my designs you can see those elements that have been captured within that early stage of my life." Despite the breathtaking landscapes of his childhood (Mariette was born in Malawi, and grew up in Botswana and Swaziland), an undercurrent of discontent eventually led him to seek a life away from Africa's intoxicating charm.

"Africa - as adorable as it is - is actually quite narrow-minded for the person I am at the moment, and my beliefs. You know, it's a very different way of thinking, and - as much as the communities are lovely - everyone knows each other," says Mariette, more considered and serious than I've seen him.

"The one thing that always attracted me to the bright lights of the city - to London, this wonderful city - is you could be anyone, from any culture, and people really lived in harmony. Not only that, you could be anonymous, you could just do whatever you want, and explore, and you know you could just be yourself here.

"And then of course on the creative side it's just phenomenal; there's a lot of creative energy here.



“My mind is just constantly...it’s like a washing machine, and it’s spinning around constantly with ideas and designs and creations”

I've been able to meet and collaborate with the most amazing, talented people, from stylists, photographers, designers, you name it. And you know, although I've been here for so long, I've never tired of London.”

Mariette did not come to London with the dream of becoming a world-famous milliner though, but instead began life as a party planner. Hat-making for him was just a fun distraction. “As a side hobby [from the party planning] I was making these amazing floral headpieces for the hostesses of these parties I was organising. I'd say 'It's your party, let's make you look fabulous and amazing!' A friend of mine who was a creative director saw this and said 'Why don't you do a big fashion show for me and do the hats; it's in Milan?’

“I was so nervous. I put my heart and soul into the project but they used them all, and then, before you know it, Harrods was my first client knocking on my door. And it just snowballed. It was bizarre. It happened so fast.”

The unconventional beginnings, and a lack of formal training, have led Mariette to develop a design style which is entirely unorthodox. Not bound by any of the normal constraints of hat-making, each of Mariette's one-off couture 'creations' are daring and flamboyant; works of art almost more suited to a display cabinet than a head. Yet the man himself claims that he is not intentionally trying to be

different, and that his chief motivation remains, as it always has been, to make the wearers of his intricate handiwork, look and feel fabulous.

“I don't consciously want to shock, but I just think – being really honest – my mind is just constantly... it's like a washing machine, and it's spinning around constantly with ideas and designs and creations. “I think what really appeals to me is thinking a bit outside the box and doing something which is just a total break from normal millinery, because that for me really pushes my creative juices, and whether it's avant garde, theatrical, or something totally surreal or thought-provoking, for me that's what really excites me and stimulates me.

“But it's wonderful really because the ladies are my inspiration who are going to wear them, and you know when you meet them, and get to know their characters and their personalities, you want them to wear the hats and not vice versa.”

Taking a step away from the creative free reign afforded by the world of bespoke couture design, Mariette has also just launched his first ready-to-wear collection.

“It's quite funny because suddenly I'm thinking 'Oh! I'm now down-toning'. I'm thinking, right, what would someone really wear and what's practical, and that's a whole different flip-side of thinking. But the good



Top: Capturing the elemental, Mariette's Circle of Life;
 Bottom left: Forbidden Fruit - Embrace the temptation to look fabulous; Bottom right: Subtle or radical, great impact creates a buzz



thing is that you know people are going to be out there wearing them to their weddings and special events, and to me that's a great buzz factor just knowing that these ladies are out there feeling fabulous!"

Mariette has also just launched his latest Bejewelled collection; an assembly of glittering headpieces and accessories which are available to buy 'off the shelf' through Mariette's own website and in boutiques around the world. Still, it is Mariette's bespoke service which really fires his passion, allowing him to interact with his clients, and ensuring that the end product makes a star of the wearer.

"I can be there as a guider, but then again I'm ruthlessly honest. If I think something's not looking gorgeous, or someone's not making the most of themselves, I'll let

them know or I'll give advice or direction," Mariette says. "Sometimes it's good to have a refreshing view on yourself, because we get so set in our ways. Our mothers used to probably tell us as a child 'Oh never wear green darling, because it doesn't suit you.' But you throw in some green, and mix it with maybe a flash of lovely vibrant orange, and suddenly you think 'Ooh that does look actually great.' You don't always have to do something radical, it can be a quite subtle thing, but I think it's really important to get to know your style and what works."

Mariette was given a chance to share his wisdom, and exercise his eye for style, at London Olympia's recent Spirit of Christmas. Despite the often elitist nature of the fashion world, the designer loved the opportunity that the event gave him to interact with real women,

and encourage a bit more experimentation and bravery during the festive season.

"I gave tips on elegance, style, how to carry yourself, how to accessorise, what to do and not to do – really just giving the tips and advice that I deal with everyday, and sometimes take for granted. But you know, if you're from maybe a corporate world or a background in the city, you're not really familiar with all these things, and although it's not to be taken too seriously, it's great for the run-up to Christmas when we all like that little bit of 'dress up' for the season!"

It's time for me to let Mariette catch his flight to Paris, but before I do I have just one more question. Having adorned the heads of many of the world's fashion royalty, including Kate Moss, Jodie Kidd, Jerry Hall and Lady Gaga, I ask the milliner for the standout moment in his career thus far.

"I just loved designing the piece for Joan Collins," he says without hesitation. I sense this is not the first time he has been asked the question. "As a child she was one of the ladies that I sought escapism with. We'd just got our first colour TV [in Africa] and of course this programme called Dynasty appeared. For me it was just a different world – beyond anything I'd seen. She was a great inspiration for me...a great lady, great character, larger than life and she does everything in total OTT, but in style, and I love that in her."

Great character, larger than life, OTT but in perfect style...I sense a parallel. Before I can question Mariette further, he begins listing other idols with whom he would love to work; Kristin Scott Thomas and Queen Rainer of Jordan ("a great humanitarian with a stunning beauty about her") amongst others. As a parting shot Mariette sums up the passion and energy he feels for his 'art'. This, clearly, is a man for whom the glass is always very much half full.

"Although it's officially a job and my income, I don't see it [millinery] as that. It's still my hobby and my passion. When I jump out of bed in the morning and I'm buzzing with thoughts and creativity I think it's a huge reward. And for me, millinery is just one of the most exciting accessories. You know, when a lady walks into a room and everybody goes 'wow', that's got great impact, and to me that's just the biggest buzz factor."



Left: Lady Gaga sporting one of Mariette's stunning creations (Picture: Oliver Rauh)
Below: An artist at work - Louis Mariette by Philip Volkers