

# ***Kirsten Scott***

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## ***Straw Into Gold: A Role for Craft in Fashion and Development***

Straw plait was a key component of European hat production for over 600 years. At the peak of its popularity, in the 18th and 19th centuries, straw plaiting for the hat trade provided an invaluable income or a supplementary income for the rural poor. Produced largely by women, although in many cases whole families were involved, it offered them a route to some financial independence. Although repetitive in nature, this craft allowed women to work while watching their children or chatting with friends, even while walking from place to place. It was a craft that could be performed in the home and built around women's lives.

Today, there are only a few, small manufacturing bases for straw plait and no new designs are emerging. Other than that produced in China, a small amount of straw plait is still made in Eastern Europe, in countries such as Romania (Transylvania), Belarus and the Ukraine (Main, 20/8/07) but designs are the most basic and traditional.

Drawing on my professional experience in couture millinery, my aim is to develop an ecologically sound, contemporary-looking plaited medium with which western milliners may work, while setting up a project in rural Uganda that will provide a good and sustainable income for a community in need.

Building upon plaiting techniques already used in the region, and my research into traditional plaiting for the hat trade, my project aims to transport the ancient craft of straw plaiting (for millinery) to Africa, using readily available indigenous materials such as palm, grasses and banana fibre. Of particular concern is that the making process should be built around the lives of those producing the plait and it is hoped that this project may bring more than just financial benefits to them; the impact of this intervention on the community is being carefully monitored. How this new group of makers' aesthetic sense influences the development of the plait designs is also being recorded. The product is being modified for local markets as well as those in the developed world.

It is hoped that this project will breathe new life into a dying craft and encourage milliners- craft practitioners themselves- to think more about how the products they use are made and by whom. As a non-profit making venture, the project will pay the producers a 'more than fair' price for their work while still positioning the plait as a commercially viable material for use by designer-makers in the fashion industry of the developed world.