

Catherinettes. A textile custom on the 25th of november.

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Figure 1: Catherinettes Postcard, 1973 ©Wikipedia Commons

Abstract:

The 25th of November is the saint's day of St Cathrine of Alexandria and it is a very special holiday among people working in the field of fashion in Paris: traditionally the workshops celebrate their *Catherinettes*. On this day an unmarried 25 year old woman working in the field of fashion, specifically as a seamstress or a milliner, automatically becomes a *Catherinette*. She receives an extraordinary hat made out of green and yellow materials. St Cathrine generally is a patron saint of librarians and scholars as well for all people who work with wheels: the spiked wheel of her martyrdom shattered when she touched it. How did it happen that Saint Catherine became the patron saint of seamstresses and milliners in Paris and some other places in France? The tradition of this custom reflects the women's role in society and it is well surprising how this custom reinvents itself by adapting to modern changes. This text tries to trace this tradition via old postcards, statues, hats and balls all celebrating the *Catherinette*.

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St. Cathrine of Alexandria

Saint Catherine of Alexandria is a popular figure in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox iconography. The legend tells that she was of noble origins, and dedicated herself as a Christian after having a vision of St. Mary. At the age of 18 she confronted the Roman Emperor Maximus (presumably this refers to Galerius Maximianus), debated his pagan philosophers, and succeeded in converting many of them to Christianity. Imprisoned by the emperor, she converted his empress and the leader of his armies. Maximus executed her converts and ordered that Catherine herself be put to death on a spiked wheel. The wheel reportedly shattered the moment Catherine touched it. Maximus then had her beheaded.



Figure 2: : CARAVAGGIO (Michelangelo Merisi), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1598 – 1599. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Saint Cathrine is shown with the broken wheel and the sword of martyrdom.

Angels carried her body to Sinai where it is buried in the St Catherine's monastery. In the church her hand is exposed as a relic. Later more legends were added, like the "mystic marriage" to baby Jesus in the 14th century. She became the patron saint of libraries and librarians, as well as teachers, archivists, all those associated with wisdom and teaching, all those whose livelihoods depended upon wheels and the patron of young unmarried women in general. She is one of the 14 "holy helpers" of the Catholic church. The year of her martyrdom was traditionally held to have been 305, (the year of a major persecution of Christians under Galerius), and her name day was celebrated on 25 November. In 1969 the Church, according to modern scholarship that the legend of Cathrine was probably based on the life and murder of the Greek philosopher Hypatia with reversed roles of Christians and pagans, removed her from the calendar of saints. Hypatia (350/370 - 415) was a Hellenistic Neoplatonic philosopher, astronomer and mathematician who lived in Alexandria. By 2002, while the majority of historians had not changed their minds, the Church had, and she was reinstated. Saint Catherine's qualities are supposed to be those of beauty, fearlessness, virginity, and intelligence. Her colours are white (virginity), yellow (scholarship), red (martyrdom) and green (hope).

Origin of the tradition « *coiffer Ste. Catherine* »

Since the Middle Ages, in Catholic France and Europe girls were under the protection of Saint Catherine, while Saint Nicolas cared for the boys on the 6th of December. In France girls participated in devotion groups to the saint and were responsible for the confection of a beautiful headdress to "cap" her statue each year on November 25th. The young women left the group when marrying, hence "capping Saint Catherine" or "*coiffer Ste. Catherine*" became synonymous to "still being single at/after 25". It implicated the "danger" of becoming an old undesired spinster, Saint Catherine should help finding a husband in time.



Figure 3: Decorating the Statue of Saint Catherine at the corner of the streets Cléry/Beauregard in the 9th Paris arrondissement on the 25th of November, 1950-1955, Photo taken by Willem van de Poll.

Saint Catherine and the Catherinettes in Paris

In the 19th century young women from the French provinces arriving at the metropolis of Paris and looking for work, mostly in the flourishing fashion business, "imported" this custom and made the Saint to their patron. While the Saint Catherine customs progressively died all over France following the changes of women's and marriage's status in society, the customs connected to Haute Couture in Paris continued in their own version and meaning. For many women this date also marked a decision: often, when married, they had to stop working. To stay without husband also meant a clear decision to continue working.

The 25th of November has been celebrated in the workshop since the beginning of 1900, slowly developing into a "fashion custom". The colleagues "crowned" their Catherinette with a special bonnet and after work accompanied her out to the streets where they met with other Catherinettes to walk to the corner of rue Cléry and rue Beauregard in the 9th arrondissement – the "Sentier" the centre of the Paris fashion business with its "sweatshops", then and still today. There, at the first floor at the angle of the building is a statue of Saint Catherine, presumably from an ancient convent dedicated to the Saint. After decorating the statue the young women were presenting themselves by marching happily and proudly in the streets-greeted by the people. Mostly the day ending with a dance at one of the big balls –the most famous ones taking place at Salle Wagram – organized for the Catherinettes and attracting

many future husbands. Thus, the custom always balanced between the traditional idea of marriage “in time” and also as a sign for the identification of the woman worker.



Figure 4: Green and Yellow hats of the défilé winners at the Theatre Champs Elysées, Paris 2013 ©Wikipedia Commons

Bonnet and hat for the Catherinettes

At around 1900 the significant attribute for a Catherinette was a bonnet, mostly in pastel colours. With the 1920s the shape began to change and became a real hat with very individual designs, the distinctive colours being yellow and green in association to the colours attributed to Saint Catherine as mentioned above. The hats are manufactured by the colleagues in the atelier as a surprise for the Catherinette. Some of the hats are made by the professional milliners. Sometimes Haute Couture hatters contribute an elaborate model. All kinds of materials were being used, from paper cut hats to more expensive models with eye catching decoration. There had been many waves of “hat fashion” since, often with a specific political message or a zeitgeist topic – these hats tell stories! The hats became more and more extravagant and since the 1930 hat competitions featured the “best” hats with prizes. Normally, the hats stay in the possession of the Catherinettes.



Figure 5: Invitation Atelier Jacques Griffe, 1949 © unknown

Catherinettes celebrating at work

On the 25th of November the Catherinette is the “queen” of the atelier. She is “crowned” with the hat her colleagues have been preparing for her without her knowledge. She is congratulated by the head of the atelier, maybe one of the famous couturiers. The atelier is decorated and a table prepared for a common meal. There are fotos showing the whole team of famous Paris fashion houses in costumes. There was dancing with music, sometimes little show performances.



Figure 6: Catherinettes marching in the streets of Paris, 1962 © Dorothea Nicolai (Foto taken from the CTHS article by Anne Mojarret at the Bibliothèque des Arts Appliqués, Paris)

Catherinettes in the streets

In the afternoon of the day the Catherinettes and her colleagues traditionally leave their workplace to present themselves in the street. With their yellow green hats on they are visible for everyone. As described above they gathered in front of the Saint Catherine statue in the 9th arrondissement, but before and after they were marching in the streets. At the beginning of the 20th century this was a strong statement for women to proudly present themselves in public without being accompanied by men. The marches made the women workers' pride a visible statement of female solidarity.

Religion and Balls

The traditional religious aspect has never been very strong in the version of the Catherinettes customs. In the late 1920s though, a catholic service was being celebrated for them in the church of *Notre-Dame-de-Bonne-Nouvelle* in the 9th arrondissement and it was maintained until the mid 1960s. The real treat were the big balls organized in the evening at the famous ball rooms like Moulin de la Galette, Salle Wagram, l'Olympia and many others. Cinemas and theatres opened for the Catherinettes. Often at the balls “hat competitions” took place – the best mean to get rid of the hat in the end! After a very quiet period between the 1980s and 2000 the custom is regaining energy and an official reception at the Paris City Hall is being held for the Catherinettes and thus acknowledging the respect to the couture tradition again.

Catherinettes today, changing attitudes

The custom of celebrating the Catherinette became especially strong during the 1950s and 1960s with the prime time of Haute Couture and the famous fashion houses like Dior, Balenciaga, and others. With the shrinking business of Haute Couture the custom almost vanished in the 1990s, also, because the “spinster aspect” was considered to be “old fashioned”. Today, since several years, the custom regains interest and strength to present the fashion tradition. The custom returned in a refreshed version: it stresses the professional fashion bondage, it is celebrated for young men and women together, the aspect of a “necessary marriage” vanished: it’s fun, it’s a party! The Paris municipality invites all Catherinettes to the City Hall for official festivities and the custom returned to a general consciousness. Extravagant hat designs have been elaborated by famous hatters like Philip Tracy and others. The 25th of November is a fashion holiday again!



Figure 7: Marble Statue of Celebrating Catherinettes at Square Montholon, Paris 9e, by Julien Lorieux, 1908, dedicated to the female workers in Paris ©Dorothea Nicolai

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