



Christie's South Kensington, Fine Costume, Needlework and Textiles. Tuesday 14th November 2000. A single red rocco clog, early 18thC. Estimate £500-£700.



Victorian wedding shoes on display at The Lace Shop, Honiton.

A collection of shoes

by Zita Thornton

Ever since man first covered his feet with leaves secured by vines, shoes have been essential items of clothing. They have given protection against the cold and wet, eased the rigours of walking and have been mirrors of fashion and technological advances. It was early man who first used the skins of animals for his shoes, and leather has continued to be a popular choice of material throughout every century although fabric has been just as popular. However, although the styles have changed, the basic method of production has remained the same. Shoemaking is still a craft industry and though most of our shoes now come from factories, every pair still requires a lot of hand labour.

Surviving Shoes from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, would have been of a high quality from people who could afford not to wear them out. Working class shoes were handed down through the family and worn until they fell apart. Any that have survived are very large, very small or very special. Women's shoes have survived more than the shoes of men or children, probably because they had more in their wardrobe. Indoor shoes or slippers were worn by men and women and were most likely to have been made from silk or brocade and were very decorative. Shoes were expensive and therefore looked after, particularly when walking the filthy streets of town or country. The desire to protect shoes led to the development of clogs, which would be slipped on over the shoe when venturing outside. Sometimes they matched the shoe, others served to raise the feet high above the road.

From medieval times, shoes started to have the upper stitched to the sole, rather than thonged as in Roman times and became decorative as well as functional items. What has changed most over the centuries has been the style of toe and heel. In the 1320s the length of toe was an indication of status, the longest being worn by the king and his courtiers. Later, during the reign of Henry VIII width was more important. A width of 6.5in was common. By the seventeenth century a

pointed toe was considered to be a feminine accretion so men wore square toed shoes but by the eighteenth century women preferred oval or square toes themselves.

Heels were made from wood, sometimes covered in leather or fabric. This limited their width and height to some extent and it was only in the 1950s that a steel rod was inserted in the heel and gave enough strength for there to be no limits to size. This quality was taken to extremes with the introduction of the stiletto from Italy. Meaning little dagger these thin, high heels caused havoc with lino and were banned from some public buildings. In contrast, between 1810 and 1820, women's shoes had no heel at all reflecting the move from hooped dresses to lightweight, narrow skirts, when a long but dainty, elegant foot shape became desired. Like toes, heels too were at times a status symbol with red heels being worn by the privileged classes in the 1600s to the early 1700s.

Some of the most beautiful shoes were made in the eighteenth century when brocades and velvets as well as leather were exquisitely embroidered and trimmed with braid, ribbons and buckles, reflecting the elaborate dress fashions of the time. The buckles themselves were not sold with the shoe but could be transferred from one pair to another. Towards the end of the century, the buckle disappeared and the court shoe with a narrower, lower heel introduced a fashionable shoe style which has remained popular right up to the present day. The nineteenth century saw foreign imports. Some of the most desirable shoes came from Paris. Embroidered silk mules from China were popular too. However, as skirts rose above the ankle, boots preserved a lady's modesty and were worn for outdoor use. These were initially laced or buttoned, but the development of elastic fibre in 1840 allowed an elastic gusset to be inserted into the side of the boot, making them more comfortable and easier to wear.

This was also the year that the Wellington boot was introduced for men. Named after the Duke of Wellington, they started life as a sturdy all weather style of footwear reaching to the knee, but rapidly became available in lightweight styles for formal or everyday wear. The end of the century saw the men's Derby shoe with its loose fold back facings, for informal wear, whilst the Oxford was worn on dress occasions. Today, the men's Oxford shoe, which has changed little since 1880 is still Church's most popular shoe.



Bonham's. 23.11.99. A pair of lady's shoes in fine condition dating from 1730s. Estimate £2,000-£3,000. Sold for £2,300.



Victorian black leather button boots. Photo courtesy of Antique Lace and Fashion.



1900s brocade bar shoe on display at The Lace Shop.

At this time the bar shoe for women, a style we now call Mary Janes first appeared and remained popular for more than fifty years. In the 1920s there was hardly a shoe that wasn't a bar shoe. They were made in all sorts of colours reflecting the bright motifs of the Jazz Age, with beading, which echoed that on their dresses.

During the war years, shoes came under the Utility scheme too. Heels were restricted to 2in but many women sought the glamour of expensive high heels for evening wear. Leather was being used for military shoes so other materials such as synthetics and animal skins such as crocodile and snake were used instead. Wood was known to be an alternative material for hardwearing soles. After the war radical new shapes and materials entered the shoemaking scene. An example of this was Ferragamo's invisible shoe in 1947 made entirely of Perspex with nylon threads.

The 1970s were significant for the fact that men's shoes became as colourful as women's and hardly a pair could be found without a platform, for men or women. It was also the last time that there was an overall fashion trend for shoes.

The Shoe Collection of the Central Museum, Northampton.

Since the Middle Ages, Northampton has been a centre for the shoe industry, so it is appropriate that the city should have the largest shoe and boot collection in the world, with 12,000 items in their collection. Many of these are on display, whilst others are available to be viewed for research purposes.

A visit to the museum shows clearly the different fashion in shoes throughout the centuries. In addition to the permanent displays there are two temporary, themed exhibitions each year, which allow further shoe samples to be seen. There is also a display of military shoes, for which Northampton has a reputation, national costume shoes from around the world, ballet shoes donated by famous ballet dancers and shoe making equipment. Shoes for royalty were made by Northampton shoemakers, who would make two pairs, keeping one for the archives. Those on display include the ATS shoes of our present Queen and Princess Anne's riding boots.

The museum also holds a register of concealed shoes, which, since the fifteenth century, were placed inside the walls of homes for luck, when renovations were made. These provide one of the few sources of working class shoes that we have. Some are on display in the museum.

The Central Museum is in Guildhall Road, Northampton, open Monday to Saturday from 10am-5pm, Sunday 2pm-5pm. Telephone 01604 238548.



1940s leather shoe manufactured by Selby Shoes, marked 'Flare-fit a feature of Style-Eez'. Photo courtesy of It's About Time.



Green velvet evening sandal with silver and gold Art Deco styling, 1920s. Photo courtesy of Antique Lace and Fashion.

Price Guide

Sales of pre-nineteenth century shoes are patchy and prices vary widely. Shoes in very good condition are rare and their price reflects this. Last year, Bonham's sold a fine pair of kid leather shoes from 1730, covered with brocade, embroidery and gold braid. They sold for £2,300 whereas a similar style of shoe from the same period, but very worn, sold at Christie's for £402. Black satin slippers made in 1785, damaged and repaired were £120.

Christie's sales of fine costume usually include a few shoes from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. A pair of heelless kid shoes of the style fashionable from 1810-1820 sold for £1,380. Black leather overshoes 1860-70 were £368. Elastic sided, leather boots in ivory leather with ivory rosettes from 1860 were only £80 but showed signs of wear.

From the twentieth century it is more usual for designer made shoes to come up for auction and often they are in lots including other clothes. Christie's street fashion sale in September included lots like this from Jean Muir, Vivienne Westwood, Manolo Blahnik and Biba, which sold for between £300-500.

Vintage clothes specialists generally stock a good range of shoes from every decade of the twentieth century for less than £50.