

My Life in Shoes

Men say that they don't particularly care about how they dress, and that it is little matter. I am bound to reply that I don't believe them and don't think that you do either.

Oscar Wilde on tour in North America

Shoes can amplify our social, emotional and physical capacities. That sounds very much like identity. But can we change identities like we change our shoes?

Since I published *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers* with Giorgio Riello in 2006 there has been a shoe-study renaissance. Works on high heels, on sneakers, on hip hop, on embodiment and wearing (all the marks that we leave on our shoes once worn), on producers and manufacturing: we have much more awareness of the psychological, sociological, anthropological and sexual connotations *attributed to* and *created by* footwear.

But what about me? How has COVID-19 disruption and the lockdown austerity of 2019-2021 – Australia had one of the longest and strictest lock-downs in the world - affected how I think about my wardrobe and my life in shoes? At times I wondered if we would ever wear formal clothes again? What do my range of shoes say about me?

Firstly I left the city for the country. Winter was coming and I needed some boots. I had a lovely Costume National pair but they were of burgundy glacé leather with very pointy toes; I had broken them in at cocktail parties but I remember how tight they were when new. A boot, rather like a woman's shoe, in extending the calf and encasing the lower leg in glistening leather, can be quite erotic, particularly if you have to do them up with a sharp, rear zipper. Even though well-worn and much loved, these slightly heeled boots were not suitable for walking around in

the garden. They looked rather like the military boots of the Napoleonic period, when tightly cut officer's boots made the man's foot look smaller (the Duke of Wellington's bootmaker George Hoby was acclaimed for such elegant boots). I also remembered a similar grey pointed pair from my New Romantic period of the mid 1980s: these had fold down suede tops that you could adjust for effect: they would have been useless, too. So I went to a country menswear shop and asked what working-man's boots I could buy. I ended up with 'Mongrel' boots, made in Australia not China (which is why I chose them), mongrel meaning a stray dog. They kept out the wet and became comfortable quite quickly. Their practical, elastic sides date back to a Victorian bootmaker, Joseph Sparkes Hall - even Queen Victoria had elastic sided walking boots! But the Australian working men's boots relate more to the military Blucher laced ankle boot worn by the rank and file in the nineteenth century: very old Australians still call low cut boots, 'blucher boots'. I never thought I would wear such boots, although in the early 1990s I had worn over-priced yellow, waxed Timberlands, a waterproof injection-moulded and leather boot invented in the early 1970s for the wet and snowy outdoor conditions in East Coast America. Their butch connotations made them later popular with gay men for urban walking and even club wear, but they were never worn tightly laced. With their laces loosely tied and their tongues flapping out, they provided 'more phallic symbolism' in gay men's dressing, as Richard Martin cleverly put it. ¹ Gays and lesbians also often wore Blundstone boots - a worker's boot made since the 1870s (Doctor Martens, I thought, were a protest step for me that that was going too far) with short shorts to indicate they were not working in the fields. I began to wonder about all my other shoes back in the city and what they were doing. But I didn't feel 'down at the heel'.

¹ Richard Martin, 'The Gay Factor in Fashion', *Esquire Gentleman*, 1993.



Why so many and where did I wear all these shoes?

Firstly there are the impossible shoes. By that, I mean shoes a bit like some women's shoes that are fun to wear but almost stop you from walking. Chief culprits here are a pair of Prada platforms that combine elements of the Derby brogue, the espadrille and the platform. These have

become collector's pieces and were a gift to me. They are in great condition as I have only wear them to give lectures (because that's all I can stand, about one hour). The exposed-ankle, open-laced Derby, with 3-5 shoelace tabs stitched on the top of the vamps (upper leathers), was once casual sporting dress in the mid nineteenth century, as the seam was higher up and allowed the foot to swell. By the early twentieth century these field-sports fashion shoes had become acceptable in urban life, although they retained a casual air and were never formal dress. Mine are also wing-tipped, with decorative brogueing or point work down to the toe. This makes them look rather Fred Astaire, who often danced in such shoes. The raffia is a lovely touch and once was practical and used for beach-side slippers or espadrilles in the 1920s - the Japanese also gave their horses raffia shoes - but my attention to detail means that the raffia can't get wet or stained! The platform is three coloured including one orange 'layer' and completely synthetic, so it contrasts with the emphatic naturalness of the leather and straw above. There is a lot going on in these shoes, and as so often with Prada, the syntax or language of conventional fashion is scrambled and a new hybrid emerges. People like the added height and the combination of a men's brogue with a pop art platform. I enjoy the allusions and the fun of the design. But I can barely drive and walk in them and the unyielding, glacé leather hurts like hell. I used to take another pair of shoes to drive home! They also weigh so much I rarely travel with them unless that 'shoe talk' I am often asked to give has been scheduled.

I've seen these shoes in museum displays so maybe I better keep them...



Then there were the evening shoes.

Now what to do with these during lock down I had no idea. They included a lovely pair of Bally patent leather with pointy toes that I bought at NK Stockholm for my Professor of Fashion Studies Inauguration at Stockholm University around 2008 (who would have thought academics receive a gala ball). Mine were laced Oxford style and therefore quite different from the low cut, black patent slippers that courtiers and men attending balls wore in the mid to late 19 century. Shoes such as mine appear in

Edwardian catalogues described as 'shoes for dancing'. Amongst my favourite special occasion shoes for their simplicity, they jazzed up my black tie, were a nice glossy punctuation point at my feet, easy to move in, and I have worn them with jeans to a few gallery openings. But as most openings are still suspended I'm not sure when they will leave their box and the leather is stiffening, as it does when shoes are unworn. I had better go check on them soon.

Then there were the evening shoes I bought at Lane Crawford, Hong Kong, just for the sake of it. Funny that, buying shoes on travels. The travels are still largely suspended and so are the shoes. I bought some pairs of evening shoes by Stubbs and Wootton thinking I might wear them to the opening of Reigning Men, a big exhibit of 250 years of menswear at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that I consulted and wrote for. I think I wore the black pair to a fashion fundraiser ball with an Issey Miyake outfit so I could avoid black tie, and the blue pair I wore to a house party, but they only came out once and they stay in their boxes now.



And so many indoor shoes. As historians of shoes always underline, such shoes were often made by another guild and were in some ways not really 'shoes' but were closer to slippers. They were more akin to a supported textile or soft sculpture. One is by Mr Hare, who no longer makes shoes, and this scarlet pair makes me feel like a profligate cardinal: the careful cutting, flattering profile and thin, leather soles announce this is a serious shoe, not a mere slipper. It reminds me of the soft velvet shoes worn by men in the Renaissance. They clatter around the house like the wooden 'pattens' once worn to protect textile uppers. Such shoes

transgress the masculine model that shoes should be sturdy, long wearing and practical. But there are not so many house parties post COVID, and I wonder when they will come out too.

What about suede? It used to be said you had to be careful of men who wore blue suede shoes: a writer for the Kinsey Institute in the 1940s said that suede shoes were 'practically a homosexual monopoly'. I have a powder blue pair by Gucci so I have a double transgression. I really wanted them for the miniature blonde bamboo tassel. They looked great eating in a restaurant in LA, where I bought them, but I've largely stopped eating out now. So lunch and dinner shoes, once again, what to do.



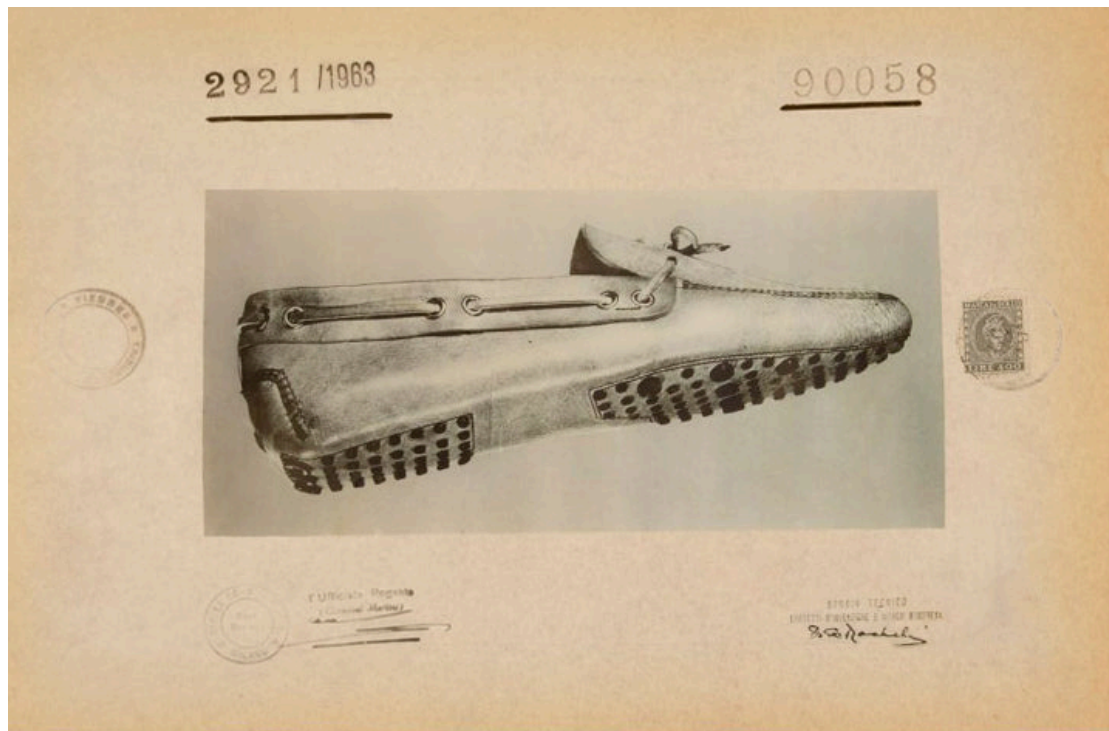
My Japanese shoes. Now these are going nowhere, as I like them so much. By Issey Miyake, they remind of the fashion excitement of Tokyo, where I bought them, and they are about the only comfortable and useful shoe I own. I like the way that the designer simulated crocodile, but only in one part, the suggestion of mesh sides and the hybrid design: Miyake has cleverly evoked the early modernist sneaker, but tweaked it in such a way

that suit wearing becomes acceptable. You have to wear such shoes with Miyake trousers or the proportions are all wrong. So more shoes for more requirements, visual and syntactical. They are well cushioned inside and feel really good at first, although after a few hours the sides squeeze. So they're not that comfortable, after all.

During lockdown I had to fly to a funeral, sadly for my father. I had no time to go back to this wardrobe of clothes so I had to go shoe shopping in another city where people were still moving around. I found a pair of overpriced but good looking leather shoes that are typical of the new hybrid sneaker worn by urban men around the world. The leather is so soft it's like butter and therefore I would never wear them wandering around a city all day (the pavements are too dirty), but they are discreet and sporty and they will stay in the wardrobe for a while. They are my new go-too 'respectable' but 'not too respectable' shoes by Santoni (funny that, more shoes made in Italy). It was very flat when we threw my 97 year old deceased father's shoes away. My sisters cried but I knew to expect and resist that, as it is standard in shoe narratives. He never sat in slippers in the day time, even though he was so unwell. You could tell that at the end he sat in a chair with well laced semi-formal black shoes, but hadn't the energy to walk anywhere, anymore. That was sad.



Then there are driving shoes. I distinguish the driving shoe from the deck shoe; the latter are made of firmer leather and I despised them when young, as they were worn by the homophobic jocks at college, pretending they were on their yacht (they still wear them today, I have noticed, even though they might have a boyfriend on the side these days). Driving shoes were introduced by the Italians in the 1960s to provide a lightweight, flexible shoe with a rubber 'pebble' or spotted sole and good grip suitable for the small cabins and accelerators of men's sports cars. Driving shoes were all the rage for travel and leisure and I have too many, and they really are only good for driving or people in cars who don't have to walk very far. Wearing such shoes on travels is also a very bad idea as they provide no support for the sole of the feet, but so be it, in the hot Australian summers you can kick them on and get going quickly.



L'Bardi, Italy.

I used not to like shoe laces, associating them with high school, and slip on Italian shoes suggested cosmopolitan ease instead of the rigours of school uniform in my youth. The Continental Europeans had pioneered the concept of fashion shoes for men in the 1930s: the Swiss firm Bally knew that Hollywood and the rise of the new male consumer saw shoes go from pure function to a new fashion component. I loved buying Italian shoes made of leather all the colours of the rainbow; I wish I had photos of them: a grape coloured leather, cream with brown trim, shiny black snakeskins and patents - every now and again I half dream about my youthful wardrobe and try to remember all those shoes and what I paid for them (about \$70-90 a pair in the early 1980s, which was the same as all my other living expenses for a week...). Now I am so shocked at how much shoes cost, because I think everything should cost the same as when I was young.

Sport-shoes. I had a pair of canvas high lace up sports shoes when I was 18 but of course mine were red, not white, and really annoyed people. I remember they were not at all comfortable to walk to class. Now sports-shoes or trainers really are the go. They always look so great in the box and suggest that you are fast and maybe even dynamic, but many don't provide great support and I wonder why they are for sport.



The Japanese collaborations with brands such as NIKE seem to come out the best. People like looking at the colours every now and again you don't resemble everyone else, and occasionally they are comfortable.

Unlike my other clothes, my shoes are special, as they keep their shape even when I'm not wearing them. Years ago I would clean their soles and I hate walking in the mud. They sit in their custom made sliding shelves in boxes or dust bags. I do everything I can to keep away the traces of my body marking my shoes - once that's happened I feel slightly disappointed. Yes, call me abject, I change clothes three times a day, too.

So shoes. Why do I like them. Well shoes are good for parties, and dancing, and parties and dancing used to be great. Government regulations and health advice just saw our big Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Summer party cancelled for a third year in a row - I was going to celebrate getting my mojo back - I hadn't decided on the shoes. Now everyone is still worried they'll catch a new form of COVID and business and the cultural sector has decided they have the perfect excuse to cut their entertaining budgets. Shoes are good for talks, as everyone looks at

your feet when you go on the stage, and there is nothing worse than really bad shoes. Shoes can also be entertaining, so when I do my Shoe Lecture I really have to please the audience. My favourite shoes, of course, are no longer with us. The ones I really love I wear out completely. They literally go to god. I often throw them in the hotel bin when leaving after a long overseas trip. It's goodbye to the trip and bye to the shoes. I can still see those shoes I walked around Paris in my 20s for two months, or New York, Los Angeles, Bangkok, Sweden, or Finland.

All is not lost. I was gifted another pair for my birthday (you can tell I only bought mine overseas). They are a sneaker collaboration between Comme des Garçons and ASICS. I love the Warholian colours, almost vulgar, and the feminine powder blue lining – these are not butch shoes. These need to be road tested and they replace a similar pair (soon to be discarded) that have almost worn right through the toe.

I am not sure why I have so many types of shoes. I think we all need different looks and moods. I am not so interested in the history of twentieth century men's shoes: I have always just liked the look, texture and new smell of them. Despite the well-known repertoire of their shapes and forms, shoes like other male fashions, date quite quickly: there is nothing worse than a really unfashionable, ragged or dirty shoe. Shoes types change the look and feel of your lower limbs, they can extend your body and make you feel great going forward. As my society goes back to normal I'll have to reopen all the shoes boxes, and like a twenty-first century male Cinderella, I'll ask myself - does the shoe still fit?

Peter McNeil

Suggested images

Armour with long toes, Bata Shoe Museum, Toronto P921.AB



FIGURE 2.13 (LEFT): ARMOR WITH LONG TOES, 1490. BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO

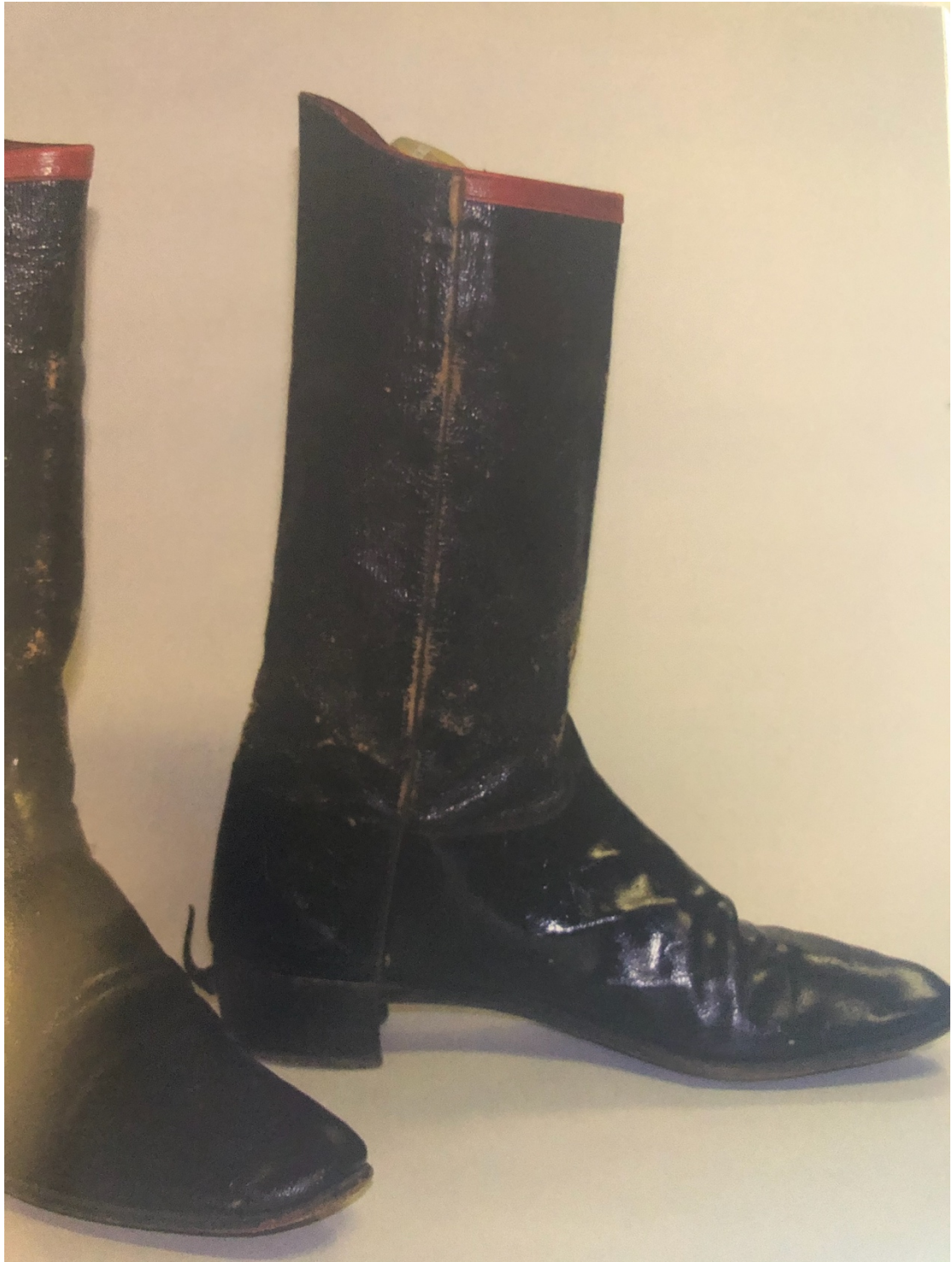
FIGURE 2.14 (RIGHT): ILLUMINATED STATUE

Jaune Serra, Saint Healing a Shoemaker – detail of the Tailor’s desk – second half c14 – Museu national d’art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Calvares/Merida/Sagrista

Black leather Hessian boot with square toe rounded off, 1 3/8 inch leather heel Bata American 1845-60 Bata P83-181



Patent leather Wellington boot with Red trim, England 1870 Bata S86.181



Ando Horoshige, Yotsuya, the new station at Naiito, 1857, Library of Congress Wash DC FP 2- JPD no 1517 (C size) – see for horses hooves clad in raffia



Bally Flexible, a brown and white perforated Derby shoe, Swizz 1933, Bata Shoe Museum L87.0020



10.3 (FACING PAGE): BROWN ELONGATED MEN'S BOOT WITH LEATHER INSERTS AND A COMBINATION OF LACE-UP AND HOOK FASTENINGS. VIENNA, MUSEUM, TORONTO, P87.0069. REPRODUCED COURTESY OF BATA SHOE MUSEUM.

10.4 (ABOVE): "BALLY FLEXIBLE." BROWN AND WHITE PERFORATED DERBY SHOE. SWITZERLAND, 1933. BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO, REPRODUCED COURTESY OF BATA SHOE MUSEUM.

Plus the shoes mentioned above, indicative photos only.