



The On A Pedestal exhibition at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto ran from November 2009 until September 2010.

CREDIT: BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO, CANADA (PHOTO: RICHARD JOHNSON)

THERE IS NOTHING NEW IN HIGH-HEEL SHOES

The Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto has just concluded an exhibition that looked in the closest possible detail at the development of the high-heel shoe from its origins in the chopines that became all the rage among affluent women in Renaissance Italy and Spain to the moment when it became a footwear choice for women only.

The always fascinating Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto has just closed the doors on an exhibition called *On A Pedestal*, which took many months to prepare and cost senior curator, Elizabeth Semmelhack, countless hours of painstaking research.

The exhibition offered visitors to the museum the chance to see rare and ancient examples of footwear constructions designed to make the wearer appear taller, with most of the

focus on Italian and Spanish chopines, which undoubtedly derived from high wooden clogs used extensively in the ancient world and morphed into the earliest high-heeled shoes. Using samples of shoes and chopines, and paintings, writings and other artefacts to show how they were used and why, *On A Pedestal* provided proof of the importance of shoes in Renaissance Europe.

One of the writers quoted is Alfonso Martínez de Toledo who, already in the mid-1400s, was lamenting Spanish women's passion for the fashion of chopines, platform shoes with soles made from wood and lightweight cork and mule-style uppers made from velvet, silk or leather. He suggested that chopines were becoming so high—"high enough to reach the elbows"—that Spain would soon run out of cork.

Spanish chopines, early 1580-1620.

This pair is covered in green silk damask.

CREDIT: CV&A IMAGES/ VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON



SHOW-OFFS

Elizabeth Semmelhack is an art history expert who has been working at the museum for ten years. Her research on this subject has shown that chopines in Spain were something wearers wanted to show off. A result of this, or perhaps as the cause of the opulence, chopines in Spain came to be highly embellished, encrusted with jewels and precious metals, Ms Semmelhack says. She quotes Ruth Matilda Anderson, author of a seminal study on Spanish footwear fashion of the time, as saying that in the 1490s, Joan, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabel I and known affectionately as Joan the Mad, was the proud owner of 70 pairs of chopines. Ruth Anderson has catalogued that 37 of these pairs came from Valencia, where the chopine makers had formed a separate guild from other footwear manufacturers as early as the previous century. Records in the city show that the manufacture of highly gilded and expensive platforms to meet the fashion demands of the time quickly became a matter of civic pride. A document dated 1563 makes it clear that only metal-leafed goatskin should be used for the uppers, calling the practice of substituting this with gilded sheepskin “deceitful”. In other cities, such as Barcelona, Granada and Seville, chopine makers were bound only by the obligation to use cork to make the platforms, but the samples that have survived long enough to be included in *On A Pedestal* show that, even here, the shoes—or at least those made for women of privileged social standing—were made for showing off; evidence abounds of the chopines being ornately coloured and ornamented.

VENICE RESURRECTION

In Italy, things were different. There is ample evidence, Ms Semmelhack says, to show that chopines were chic as early as the thirteenth century in some areas of what is now Italy, although many of the pieces in the exhibition were from the sixteenth century, with Venice as the most important source. The Bata Shoe Museum senior curator thinks it possible that the chopine was resurrected in the Venice of the later period as part of a wider fashion at the time for reclaiming the republic’s classical past. However, a marked difference was noticeable between the chopines of the Venetian 1500s and those worn in Spain in the same period. If Spanish women wanted to show off their shoes, their Venetian contemporaries would no more dare to do this than they would put their underwear on public

display. Chopines, in fact, formed part of their underwear.

The evidence for this comes from a variety of sources, Ms Semmelhack points out. Chopines are “markedly absent” from the portraiture of Italy at that time but can be seen in pictures depicting women in a state of undress. An example she offers is a 1517 painting by Lorenzo Lotto of the Old Testament scene of Susanna and the Elders. Amongst the articles of clothing that Susanna has cast off to bathe in her garden is a pair of emerald green chopines. That this form of footwear usually remained hidden from view in Italy holds the key to understanding one of their primary functions, she says. Increasing a woman’s stature and elongating her silhouette made it easier for a family to demonstrate its wealth by clothing her in longer dresses containing greater quantities of expensive imported fabrics.

INTIMATE APPAREL

The association with underwear became important for another reason. The suggestions of intimacy and eroticism inherent in this led to chopines becoming required dress for women in Venice and elsewhere who were registered as prostitutes. According to Ms Semmelhack, the association between elevated footwear and licentiousness was long-lasting. A fifteenth century painting by Vittore Carpaccio, *Two Venetian Ladies*, was the subject of severe misinterpretation in the nineteenth century because of footwear; critics assumed the inclusion of chopines to mean the women were prostitutes. Elizabeth Semmelhack is among the twenty-first century art historians who believe the subjects are noble women patiently and chastely waiting for their husbands to return from a fishing trip on the Venice lagoon.

Whatever they said about the morals of the wearer, chopines became fashionable all over Europe. *On A Platform* included samples from collections in Sweden of Venetian-



Shoes, Swedish, 17th century, on loan from Skokloster Castle, Sweden. The shoe - maker made a sole by combining elements of a chopine with a high heel and an upper that combines a shoe and a mule.

CREDIT: COLLECTION OF SKOKLOSTER CASTLE, SWEDEN
(PHOTO: GÖRAN SCHMIDT).

made chopines, although the exhibition organiser suggests that these may also have constituted a souvenir of a trip to Italy that a traveller from the north wanted to take home. Nevertheless, Swedish footwear from the seventeenth century also made it into the exhibition because they show how shoemakers of that time in different parts of Europe had begun to take the idea of elevation in footwear and translate it into high heels. Records from England around the same time suggest that royal shoemakers Garrett and Peter Johnson may have been perplexed to receive a commission for what Queen Elizabeth I's household accounts of 1595 refer to as a pair of Spanish leather shoes with high heels and arches.

NOT MADE FOR WALKING

In explaining why the popularity of heeled shoes spread so widely in the Europe of this time, Ms Semmelhack points to the obvious. If your shoes were so impractical as to make walking difficult and working in them impossible, they became a sign that you did not need to labour for your bread and that you were, therefore, prosperous; she uses the phrase, 'privileged impracticality'.

For a time, impractical shoes, incorporating some of the elevation of the chopine, were particularly popular among men and the most fashionable shoes of the 1620s came to be known as 'slap-soles' because flat-soled mules were stitched onto high-heeled shoes. During that decade, it became popular for women to dress and wear their hair in a masculine way and this, according to the Bata Shoe Museum curator, helped spread these shoes' appeal. This cross-gender use of heels lasted until the second half of the seventeenth century when men's shoes, although still heeled, began to be less adorned and sturdier for practical use.

When Enlightenment thinking began to dominate western thought in the eighteenth century, however, attitudes towards the place in the world of men in particular began to change, and the men's high-heeled shoe industry was one of the victims. There was a



Debates about the use of high heels and platforms in women's shoes have been going on, not for decades, but for centuries.

CREDIT: RENE TILLMANN/MESSSE DÜSSELDORF / SHOES: AIMINER AND GABOR.

preoccupation with "defining manliness", according to Ms Semmelhack, and many aspects of men's dress came under scrutiny. "By the 1730s, the high heel had been abandoned by men," she continues, "as a demonstration of their rationality. The high heel would be left for women as a

Slap-sole shoes, probably Italian, mid-seventeenth century, from the collection of the Bata Shoe Museum, Toronto, Canada.

CREDIT: BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO, CANADA (PHOTO: HAL ROTH)



complex signifier of gender.”

Questions as to why, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, women still wear high heels (and most men—those in Lady GaGa videos aside—would regard the idea of doing likewise as an affront to their “rational masculinity”) still intrigue her.

COLLECTOR'S ITEMS

The Bata Shoe Museum, contrary to popular opinion, is the brainchild, not of the former head of the Bata Shoe Company, Thomas J. Bata, but of his widow, Sonja. Travelling the world with her husband, she began collecting shoes. Her initial notion was to show interesting models to the corporate design team back in Toronto, but the bug bit her and she became a genuine collector, with her interest in the footwear itself broadening into a keen enthusiasm for what shoes can tell us about the people who wear them. No matter where you are, people's feet are more or less the same, but what the locals choose to wear on those feet has been, traditionally, very different from place to place and reveal a great deal, in the opinion of Mrs Bata, about local traditions and the way society works in a particular part of the world at a particular point in history.

Her fascination for this subject appears to have rubbed off on Elizabeth Semmelhack, adding specialist shoe knowledge to the senior curator's background and main area of expertise in art history, resulting in events such as *On A Pedestal*.

SOCIAL QUESTIONS

The time of our visit coincides with the arrival of a FedEx package from a collector in the US. Elizabeth Semmelhack tears it open to find inside a shoe, hand-made in the nineteenth century by Iroquois women for a wealthy female customer of European origin. It's tiny. “I need to figure them out,” she says, entranced, on seeing and holding the shoes for the first time. “They were clearly for a person with a tiny foot, but although the shoe is so narrow, you can see that there is no wear on the outside.”

It's true. The sole of soft hide seems unused all the way along its perimeter, with foot pressure having been applied only to the inner area. Who wore such a tiny shoe and why the wear-pattern is so restricted is what interests Ms Semmelhack the most. She says commentaries from the period confirm instances of women fainting as a direct result of the tightness of their shoes, not just their bodices.

As the *On A Pedestal* exhibition showed, there is more to all this than fashion and beauty, today just as much as when the Iroquois shoe was made, when high heels first became a gender issue and when chopines provided the platform for the discussion. Elizabeth Semmelhack is very clear in her views on it. “Even with high-achieving women today, such as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the last word is always about how they look, about whether they are attractive or not,” she observes. “If that remains how we judge women, you can't be surprised if they are constantly pursuing beauty. It's a complex issue and it was extremely important in the



Italian chopine, c. 1590-1600, on loan from Museo Stefano Bardini, Florence. Italian chopines were typically hidden from view under women's skirts and were worn to elongate the body. This elongation also required that women wear longer skirts, an expense that helped proclaim the wearer's status.

CREDIT: FONDAZIONE MUSEI CIVICI DI VENEZIA

nineteenth century, just as it is today.”

Men's dress is simple, she insists. Men express their “masculine rationality” (her tone is heavy with irony) through dour dress, while the burden is on what women wear—shoes and clothes—to “proclaim family prosperity”. Michelle Obama's choice of outfit at the inauguration ceremony for the current US president in January 2009 was huge news; her husband's choice on the day went unnoticed.

Bringing this back to footwear, and the subject of the recent *On A Pedestal* exhibition, heels, she says heel height is linked to a range of issues, including sexuality. A little kitten heel is demure, but often still suggestive. A high heel is much sexier. “Imagine a 90-year-old woman or a flower girl wearing high heels,” she says. “We would react by saying it's not appropriate. But why not? Are we saying a woman can only wear heels during the period when she's sexually attractive? If so, why?”

If we are ever to find answers to these questions, it seems certain that Elizabeth Semmelhack's and the Bata Shoe Museum's input will be of crucial importance. 