

Richard Braço's Verna suede thigh boot has detailed stitching in nubuck leather in moss green. It zips on the inner side half way down the boot and sits on a rubber sole.

PHOTO CREDIT: RICHARD BRAÇO



Footwear brands are worried that last winter's mild conditions will deter retailers from ordering high volumes of winter boots this year - but designers have other plans.

The long and short of it

Last winter's relatively mild conditions across the northern hemisphere benefited a number of industries, including retail. Many reaped the rewards as shoppers arrived at the high street to buy spring collections earlier than normal. Consumers were also said to be in a mood more conducive to spending, with no freezing fogs to dampen the spirits.

Manufacturers and retailers of winter clothing and shoes, however, were less thrilled with the thermostat, as collections of boots and heavy outdoor shoes languished on the shelves, and coats, cardigans and jumpers sold in vastly fewer quantities than in previous years. Sales of seasonal footwear were reported as being down and financial analyst Euromonitor noted that apparel retailers had to strongly discount stock at the end of 2011, which put pressure on them going into the new year.

For companies whose winter ranges are merely a part of the whole, the uplift in spring sales covered the losses to a large extent. But for others, such as Deckers, the main manufacturer of Ugg boots, the mild weather led to a slump. "We think the exceptionally mild weather created a tough selling environment, which dragged down sales and hurt pricing in the first quarter," the company stated.

This not only had an impact on profits, but was also said to have affected the price of sheepskins in Australia – and raises questions over how cautious buyers will be when ordering this time around.

The footwear industry is a global one, and unsold stock has a knock-on effect down the chain. When leather buyers noticed a lack of appetite for hides and skins at the beginning of the year, they suggested this could be linked to a less urgent need for winter footwear for winter 2012 than in previous years. In June, *WLBW*, an electronic market intelligence update for the leather supply chain, reported: "Talking to tanners today, they are feeling the pain of the warm winter (2011-2012) as hardly any are reporting reordering for the next winter season. No surprise, thinking of the unsold stocks from last winter."

Gracing the catwalks

So what does this mean for the humble boot – a return to autumn/winter 2011-2012 styles and a slumping order book? Well, not if many designers have their say. Long boots had a dominant presence in the recent autumn/winter catwalks – where dominant means strength, rather than ubiquity – but they are definitely on the radar this year.



Richard Braço's signature pearled spear pierces through a delicately folded wrap across the sides of each of these suede platform boots.

PHOTO CREDIT: RICHARD BRAÇO

London-based Richard Braço's boot designs are a case in point: strong, sleek and skyscraper high. The up-and-coming designer infuses his debut collection with an undeniable panache – and his talent has not gone unnoticed. He was the first recipient of the Cesare Paciotti Accessories Award for shoe design at Parsons School of Design in New York in 2009 and subsequently honed his craft working with artisans in the Le Marche shoe producing region in Italy. He went on to work with Paciotti on a collection that sold in New York to Saks and Barneys. "I learnt about balancing my designs with that of an existing brand, working with Italian shoemakers and the incredible amount of dedication and time that goes into bringing one's vision to light," he said of the experience.

His collection features four types of boots: three ankle length and a dramatically sculptured thigh high boot with a platform

Le Marche-based shoemaker Giorgio Piergentili displayed knee-high boots at March's MICAM shoe fair in Italy.

PHOTO CREDIT: MICAM



sole and five inch heel.

The thigh boot is a divisive creature. Worn incorrectly, with the wrong clothing at the wrong time, not much can cheapen in the same way. However, worn well, with the right look and attitude, it can stop shows like no other. It's certainly an opinion divider and there can be no sitting on-the-fence.

"I find that the appeal of a thigh high boot is really personal for the wearer," says Mr Braço. "I've had women say to me that although they like the look of a boot that length (like our Verna boot), they would never attempt to wear them in real life. Alternatively, there are women who are drawn to them immediately and have the lifestyles to carry them off."

Alexander Wang and Jimmy Choo feature the length in their autumn/winter collections 2012-2013; Proenza Schouler, Gucci, McQ by Alexander McQueen and Rodarte sent models striding down the catwalk in dramatic black and brown long boots, in patents and in suedes.

While not always applauded for her sartorial choices, Madonna's recently launched footwear collection Truth or Dare features four styles of thigh boot. The creative director, Arianne Phillips, who has long been her stylist, obviously agrees it's the right time for the look. Which of course may be aided by the clothing that complements the boot, which will filter down from the catwalk to the high street this autumn – the long-sleeved dresses, almost military-esque pencil skirts and the dark, heavy coats.

"It is really a matter of one's style, bravery and prowess," adds Mr Braço. "For me, it's interesting to see who dares to and dares not. I really believe a thigh high boot is a weapon to be reckoned with and I know some women who will concur."

Commercial demand

The thigh boot's shorter sister might not stop shows to the same extent, but made more than her fair share of appearances on the AW12-13 catwalks. As such, knee boots should begin to grace shelves as the retailers eye the sliding

thermometer and as autumn sets in.

But, as observers suggest, it might not be simply a question of bulk ordering, if last winter is still firmly lodged in buyers' memories. While designers promote trends and looks, it is more often the supply and demand on the high street, and at bulk level, that affects the footwear flow; the buyers have to monitor this when vast amounts of money are at stake.

"It was great not to be so concerned with producing an entirely commercial collection," says Mr Braço, whose collection will retail at the high end of the market; his shoes and boots ranging from the mid to high hundreds of pounds. "Whereas the same can be said about the manufacturers I work with in Le Marche, it is important that we can accommodate that urgency in commercial demand with a production process that lends itself to both timely deliveries and expert craftsmanship."

Timely deliveries and commercial demand are key tenets of buyers' thinking when ordering stock. Many big retailers work on the basis of 'open to buy', meaning they might buy 50,000 pairs of boots from suppliers with the option to buy extra if they sell, but are not under obligation. This alleviates the problem of where to keep unsold stock – boots and shoe boxes take up a lot of room in the warehouses and are costly to store. Unsold stock is sometimes sold off to companies who specialise in offloading it at discounts in other countries. Some smaller companies might use channels such as eBay to sell surplus. Small retailers, however, don't have the same clout with suppliers, and so may well have to put last winter's stock back on the shelves.

"Both Brian Atwood and Ricardo Tisci for Givenchy created some great boots for fall that I hope to see on women this winter," concludes Mr Braço. "But I can't say for sure whether or not you'll see thigh high boots on the streets this winter. It is really up to buyers to include them in their stock."

And that, it seems, is the long and short of it. 



Since working with Cesare Paciotti, Richard Braço's designs have been featured in US Vogue and have been worn by celebrities inducing singers Ciara and Rihanna.

PHOTO CREDIT: RICHARD BRAÇO