

'Timeless and elegant' bridal shoes

CREDIT: LOVE ART WEAR ART



Heart and sole

Although fairly niche, the bridal shoe market is lucrative – while the volumes are smaller than other sectors the prices tend to be above average. Brides-to-be often seek a 'special' shoe; perhaps handmade, traditional, luxury or decorative. "The devil is in the detail," says Nicole Le Grange, founder of UK-based shoe brand Love Art Wear Art. "I love adding decorative elements and special, unexpected details to my shoes."

The average US wedding in 2012 cost more than \$28,000 with Manhattan couples spending \$68,000, according to theknot.com's annual survey of 18,000 brides. The budget for the dress and shoes was \$1,400, although there were significant regional variations: in Manhattan for higher-end weddings, brides spent \$2,900 while those on tighter budgets in Idaho spent \$880. The two need to be catered for no matter where in the world the bride.

Large retail chains such as DSW in the US and Debenhams in the UK offer bridal collections at relatively inexpensive prices, but at the top end costs can run into the thousands. Christian

The wedding shoe market might lack the volumes of other market segments, but those involved in the design and manufacture say there is something special about contributing to the big day.

Louboutin custom-made a pair at short notice after hearing the fiancé plucked up the courage to approach the bride after using her red soles as a conversation starter. His Daffodile 160-crystal-embellished suede pumps will set customers back £6,250. For those in an entirely different wealth bracket, Stuart Weismann has created diamond-encrusted pairs that cost more than \$1 million.

For most, the priority is finding shoes that are "perfect in their own right but at the same time complement the dress

and the bride" says Ms Le Grange, a graduate of Cordwainers footwear school in London. She was designing for another company when the manufacturer offered to make a pair to her own design for her upcoming wedding. "It was a lovely gesture and I remember how excited I was about wearing my own creations on my special day," she says. "That was where the idea of designing my own collection and starting my own label was born."

After launching a ready-to-wear-collection, a stockist questioned why there was no bridal range. "I thought about this and realised that the feminine and classic handwriting of the brand would lend itself to bridal shoes so I decided to put the first capsule collection in production."

A former colleague introduced Ms Le Grange to a small, family-run manufacturer in the shoemaking town of Elda, Spain, which she describes as "worth its weight in gold". "It's the most important relationship any designer can have. It's great to get to know the whole family and all the people involved in the process. I especially appreciate their attention to detail, the quality of production and their passion for beautiful shoes."

Love Art Wear Art shoes are leather lined and have an embossed leather outsole. Each pair is individually numbered with a tiny metal banner on the breast of the sole to highlight that they are limited edition. As well as leather, the company adds texture and shine through the use of satin, shimmering suedes, glitter and metallic.

"I get my inspiration from glamorous eras gone by," she says, travelling to vintage markets and antique stores and exploring retro fashion. "I like to delve into my imagination and come up with unique and pretty pieces that make people happy. I still get a thrill every time someone buys a pair of our shoes. It's a compliment and a nod to our shared taste and appreciation."

Around the world

Bridal shoes are an important part of tradition in many cultures. In Portugal, an ancient tradition of passing the shoe around and filling it with money is still maintained. Male guests might also put money in the bride's shoe for the privilege of a dance with her. In Sweden, the bride's parents present coins for her to place in each shoe – the mother a silver coin and the father a gold one – symbolising that she will never go without.

It is the colour and the embroidery work that are important in some parts of China: red cloth shoes might be made by the bride or another family member and symbolise happiness and the longevity of the marriage. In Armenia, the bride is presented with her shoes by the groom's family the night before the wedding, while in India it is the groom's shoes that play a part: the bride's sister and cousins 'steal' his before or during the ceremony, demanding a 'ransom' for their return.

Tradition is a key element of designs all over the world. "Bridal shoes are less fashion driven and more considered," says Ms Le Grange. "For ready-to-wear collections you have a lot of obvious seasonal trends and themes that get echoed through various designers and stores. In my opinion, bridal shoes needs to be elegant, timeless and beautiful. Sometimes understated, sometimes very decorative."

A trend for a classic satin shoe with a 'twist' was popular in 2012. "An oversized gem, jewelled brooch accent, ruffled

There is a trend away from traditional colours

CREDIT: SHOES OF PREY



fabric or large flower trim," she says. "Shoes with added interest such as texture, jewels & feathers. The all-over lace shoes has been very popular over the past few seasons, as well as vintage styled shoes."

There has been increased demand for glitter as a way of adding interest and in 2013, bolder designs began to be popular. "We see statement pieces such as contrast colour shoes, printed fabric uppers or heel detail, or for instance embossed & laser cut uppers."

Jodie Fox, co-founder of Australian brand Shoe of Prey, also notes the move towards more daring designs: "There is a real trend away from the traditional colours of white and ivory."

Shoes of Prey enables customers to create bespoke designs using an online 3D tool, which are translated into patterns and hand made in China. They choose from 12 core styles with varying heel heights, and can specify colour and accessories and from 170 materials.

"I could never find exactly what I wanted: either the heel was too low, there was a bow on it that I didn't like or it wasn't quite the right colour," said Ms Fox on the inspiration for setting up the brand. Since its launch in 2009, it has added sites in Japan and the UK to its Sydney base, employs 50 staff and hit the multi-million dollar revenue mark in under two years.

It has recently opened its first store in Sydney, where customers are able to look through the swatches – touch the leathers, try some of the shoes on and speak to advisers. "We were seeking to provide an answer to our most commonly asked question: What do the shoes look like in real life?" explains Ms Fox. "We have more than 196,000 trillion possible designs so we can't make them all, but we can help to hone the customer's vision for their design by providing them with all the components and advice in an offline environment."

Embellishments

Some of the more exotic materials such as python and fish skin are sourced from China, with others shipped from Spain, but brides tend to stick with the recommended material ranges: Italian silk, shiny calfskin leathers including pink, purple, silver and gold, as well as gold and silver sequins. Embellishments such as silk rosettes, diamantes and bows are also popular.

"It's really such a gorgeous feeling to be a part of someone's big day," says Ms Fox. "We especially love making all the special little touches happen – helping out with 'something blue' by lining the shoes in a powder-soft blue leather, or by embossing the date of the wedding and name inside the shoes."

The company has an unusual returns policy: the shoes can be sent back (unworn) within 365 days for a full refund, or the design can be altered and the shoes remade free of charge. The policy is partly driven by problems with sizing, particularly as the shoes are shipped globally; standards differ from country to country, as do feet dimensions. Ms Fox estimates they get it right 70% of the time: "In the same way that each clothing brand has a different fit model, each shoe company has a different foot fit model. The difference between half a size is 3mm and a full size is 6mm, so the margin for error is tricky."

This means the company advises brides to order 11 weeks in advance of the big day rather than the average four to five weeks, giving enough time for the shoes to be remade and reshipped in the event that they don't fit.

While brides and bridesmaids make up a significant proportion of customers, shoes can also play a part in more creative ways. "A man called Daniel wanted to propose to his shoe-loving girlfriend with a pair of shoes, so we embossed his proposal inside the shoe for him," says Ms Fox. "Of course... she said yes." 📍

Love Art Wear Art sources silk and satins from Italy.

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