

Vintage clothing is more popular than ever, with high-class stores opening in cities all over the world selling second-hand goods that are high quality to stylish people with an eye for a bargain. The trend extends to shoes, but not to the same extent. Footwear designer and expert on anthropology Ellen Sampson has interesting views on why this is so.

Walk in someone else's shoes

Perhaps vintage clothing and shoes are popular because recent fashion trends have mirrored styles from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and enough of the genuine articles have survived in wardrobes and attics to fill the shelves of trendy second-hand stores the world over. Or perhaps it's the other way round and recent catwalk trends are redolent of decades gone by because stylish people, especially young people, in Shanghai, New York City, Vancouver, Melbourne, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Bangkok, Tokyo, Manchester, Marseilles and most places in between have flocked to vintage stores to pick up beautiful clothes by big-name designers at bargain prices.

These shops often stock shoes, but usually to nowhere near the same extent. Dresses, skirts, coats, trousers, jackets, ties, even nightshirts are very common. Why should it be that the knowledgeable shoppers who visit vintage stores enquire less about previously owned shoes? Ellen Sampson, a shoemaker and artist based in London, recently took a career-break to complete a Master's Degree at the famous Cordwainers College in London. She has developed an interest in this subject because, she explains, her first degree (and still one of her keenest interests) is in anthropology. She believes there is a stronger link for most

Shoe designer Ellen Sampson believes our shoes contain "a trace of memory" of the experiences we have while wearing them. CREDIT: JENN HULS / SHUTTERSTOCK



of us between our shoes, our memories and our bodies than with anything else we wear. Footwear is different, and this, she says, is the reason vintage store owners may find shoes hard to source. "The body imprints its form on a shoe, and vice-versa," she explains. "The shoe shapes the foot and the foot shapes the shoe. Our footwear becomes a holder of our body's memories and our shoes become incorporated into our body's schema and, as a result, old shoes resonate in a way that new ones do not."

In shoes that once belonged to someone else, this resonance will be of that person's body and that person's memories and what Ms Sampson calls "a trace of memory" resides in the shoe. She is fascinated by this. Other people may find it slightly creepy, but that is not to say it is untrue.

Superstition

Founder of Gadabout, a highly sought-after vintage store in Toronto, Victoria Dinnick, says that in her experience there is a practical reason why some customers buy fewer shoes than clothes: vintage footwear is often too narrow for many of today's consumers. "It seems that women these days, and men, have wider feet and therefore these shoes do not fit," she explains.

Gadabout does stock shoes (handsome Gatsby-esque spats are a specialty), but Ms Dinnick believes many customers tend to be "superstitious about wearing someone's old shoes". The shoes may have very little wear and will be beautifully presented, but she acknowledges there can be a reluctance for new owners to buy them and wear them and give them a home. "There is a very strong superstition that you can never wear anything other than new shoes," she explains.

This may have something to do with a suspicion that family members made the shoes available to Gadabout or any vintage retailer after the previous owner died or it may just be that consumers want to be the first to wear a pair of shoes so that it's their feet the shoes take the shape of. She is unsure exactly what, but insists something holds many of her customers back.

Switched on to recycling

She's on the other side of the world, but Mel Westwood, retail manager of Dear Gladys, a popular vintage shop in the Melbourne suburb of Northcote, has had a similar experience with regard to selling shoes, at least as far as the general shopping public is concerned. "After many years working in vintage, retail and wholesale, I would say that the reaction [to previously owned shoes] is very mixed at best," she says. Dear Gladys is for the discerning vintage enthusiast, though. In stock at the moment is, for example, a pair of elegant, pointed snakeskin heels from Saldaña, a manufacturer in the Philippines that has been specialising in reptile leather shoes since the 1950s. Ms Westwood says: "Most of our customers have no problem at all purchasing the quality, cleaned and refreshed second-hand vintage footwear we sell. But I think there is a reluctance among people who do not fully embrace the concept of recycling."



In stock at Dear Gladys in Melbourne, a pair of 1950s snakeskin heels. CREDIT: DEAR GLADYS

The appeal of relics

Cradle To Cradle guru Michael Braungart came up with an idea a few years ago that combines this idea of recycling shoes with something of the mystique Ellen Sampson finds so appealing. Dr Braungart suggested that sports shoe manufacturers should take used running shoes, football boots, golf shoes and so on back from their sponsored athletes at the end of each season, chop the old shoes into pieces and insert the pieces into the material mix for making new footwear for the public to buy.

Michael Braungart has described today's sports stars as modern-day saints and believes that shoes containing a little bit of a star's magic would be as popular as holy relics were in the Middle Ages. For example, young footballers would pay handsomely to wear footwear with a fragment of a boot once worn by Lionel Messi when they take the field themselves.

Ellen Sampson likes Dr Braungart's idea, but she still believes strongly that the impossibility, usually, of knowing anything about the previous owner whose feet shaped vintage shoes can actually serve to increase their enchantment. "We cannot untangle the experiences or unravel the memories contained in those shoes," she says, and she likes that. 