



German shoe fair reinvents itself again

Once upon a time, the GDS shoe fair in Düsseldorf led the world. However, it gradually lost ground to the more fashion led Italian fairs and, more particularly, to the fashion and shoe combination fairs such as Bread and Butter, Berlin. The fashion areas of the GDS fair, with many Italian and French exhibitors had gradually got smaller, although the GDS has always been extremely strong in casual, comfort and kids shoes. The organisers added sourcing halls for country groups from China, India, Pakistan and the like, where buyers can check products and prices. Frankly, the floor area of the fair has gradually reduced, and the organisers have worked hard to make the fair more appealing to shoe buyers. After much discussion the fair is now a month earlier, in February instead of March. The accessories area has increased, with bags, gloves and small jewellery. The high-grade designer area has become less exclusive, with no need to have a special entry card restricted to approved buyers, so now the fair is more open and accessible. The halls again had been reorganised and moved round, making it a little confusing for even regular visitors.

New areas were launched at the latest fair, with fresh exciting designers from around the world showing shoes that were more works of art than day-to-day footwear. Finsk is a London-based company with both owner and designer from Finland, with shoes handmade in Brazil, each one a work of art. Curved, hand carved wooden heels, and wrap around uppers where the shoe looks very different medial from lateral, in mixed leather colours appeared to be inspired by cubism. The same designer has created a range of rubber boots for the Finnish company Nokian, too.

From Japan there was Sonomitsu, a small workshop with five artisans making shoes by hand in Tokyo with each pair taking a week to make. Every pair is designed by hand. The designer makes shoes for both men and women, using the best leathers and materials.

Chau Har Lee, based in east London, makes shoes that are inspirational pieces of art in sample size 4. They are not 3D printed as many others but are hand carved and sculpted from materials including wood and Perspex. Her artistic shoes have given her many freelance design



commissions for more mainstream companies too.

Men's shoes are also considered as works of art. The Italian hand welted men's shoes by Giorgio come in hand-painted and brushed versions, single colour or mixed. The shoes are made in natural unwaxed vegetable tanned leathers and then carefully painted, section by section sometimes in different colours. The artist who paints them was at the fair with his bottles of ink and paintbrush, carefully concentrating on his shoes.

There was also a small market-like area for funky street brands, selling direct to shops. Bali-Bali's Michael Dornseifer travels often to Indonesia sourcing shoes, and would holiday in Bali nearby. Now he sources all types of hand-beaded flip-flops, hand printed scarves and handmade jewellery using local natural pearls, all packed and wrapped in presentation boxes or displays ready for the shoe shops to put in their windows or by their cash tills.

The GDS fair has also worked hard to bring some new blood to the fair, and find fresh young exhibitors. A first timer was Lutta, from Romania, making handmade soft leather fashion shoes, long gloves and bags, all with embroidery detail from traditional Romanian white cotton shirts and wedding shirts. The embroidery is all symbolic, with patterns representing the North Star, or the Tree of Life, for example. Instead of the embroidery being all over, it is in panels or placement on toe or heel. The natural beige, off white leathers represent the birch trees of the forests and the red details the berries of late summer.

From Lithuania, My Felt Boots have won a German Red Dot design award. They are made in natural wool felt with

local leather using traditional cemented construction methods. There is a Lithuanian touch with the traditional snowflake or moose embroidery on the shafts.

Mercedes Arocena showed her Cushiz shoes for the first time in Europe at GDS. The collection is handmade in Uruguay from the best leathers and materials. Soles are leather or rubber and the heels often hand-built like cowboy heels. Inside there is a soft padding under the foot. Her shoes come in brighter shades like wine red with cream or white. But she found that many of the visitors to the fair were rather conservative German shoe shops who were mainly looking for black shoes at lower prices. GDS is actually mainly a shoe shop and chain fair; the funkier wilder shoe designers often find that fairs such as Premium in Berlin can be better because they attract fashion and shoe retailers, since clothes and accessories are all on show.

The busiest stand at the fair was Laura Vita, with multicolour patchwork shoes with embroidery and printing designs from silk screen scarves. These boots and shoes are handmade on leather soles with stack leather heels, and part of the appeal is the hand polished look of the leathers. Practical points are that the lace up boots have inside zips, so that they are easy to get on and off.

Natural fur is an ongoing theme for winter footwear, for both shoes and boots, inside and out. Sheepskin linings and UGG boots are a staple today. Longer fur that is more natural is making an appearance not just outside and inside boots, but also as decorative panels as on leather lace up loafers from French fashion brand Paraboot. Flip*Flop showed winter versions of espadrilles, in a traditional



stitched to the sole construction but with EVA sole and fake fur lining, to make them more winter suitable, or for use indoors as trendy slippers. Natural soling materials, too, such as crepe rubber, are more widely used in both fashion and street shoes, for men and women. Ca'Shott of Denmark reinvented an UGG-inspired boot by putting it on a natural crepe rubber outsole with a stitched welt.

Generally the shoes at GDS were functional and practical, with, of course, the usual large hall for comfort footwear for men and women with the big brands such as Ara, Tamaris and Högl doing good business. The comfort movement, and the fact that so many young women wear sneakers has not just encouraged hybrid sneaker footwear, but has led to lower heels. Flat man inspired footwear (laces and loafers) was a major theme for women's fashion at the fair, on both moderate toes and thicker soles, as well as thin almost summery soles and the newer pointed toes.

The GDS fair managed to overlap the ispo sports fair, so some had to fly from Düsseldorf to Munich to cover them both. Leguano barefoot shoes decided to show at GDS with their slipper-like soft unstructured shoes. The toes are natureform shaped and the soles are direct injected with a special compound called Lifolit so that they protect the bottom of the feet from stones and gravel, while also having gripping studs. Lifolit is so harmless that it meets the criteria for toy standard safety, DIN EN 71/N. The shoes are so soft they can be wrapped up into a ball. They are machine washable and meet all German environmental standards. The company maintains these standards by actually producing the footwear in Germany.

Porsche Design makes footwear that is a gradual progression on previous designs like the car shoe. The brand exhibited sporty inspired shoes and sneakers at the fair, in signature black or white all over. Discreet high grade details include all folded edges and a combination of laces and touch-and-close fastenings.

In addition to the usual shoes, new retail technology was also on show. LK-AG presented a tool for showing shoes in a box with a glass front where both text and background could be overlaid onto the shoes. Unique selling points can be highlighted with text, or raindrops could appear to be falling on the shoe from overhead. Other companies showed giant screens with Wii-type technology where the consumer can pull shoes out of a catalogue and rotate them, enlarge them or see the USPs, all without actually touching the screen.

The Forum Touch area was new for last season and organised by Lineapelle. Here you can see the new and experimental leathers and materials. There are large pieces, as indicated by the name, where visitors could touch and feel the leathers. There is a description of the designer too. For example, Sabina Brägger from Lucerne University showed Swiss made fish (sturgeon) leather reclaimed from the Swiss caviar production at Tropenhaus Frutigen. Sturgeons are bony fishes without scales. Instead, they are partially covered with bony plates/scutes which cause a specific central line on the skin. She created a totally natural look for the tanning by using mimosa.

July 29-31 2015 are the dates for the next GDS, more than a month earlier than usual. www.gds-online.com