

The expertise, determination and sheer hard work of footwear museum curators in Germany and the Netherlands have made it possible for a shoe exhibition to cast new light on some aspects of the work of legendary twentieth-century shoe designer Roger Vivier.

Vivier treasures unearthed

An extensive exhibition celebrating the work of footwear designer Roger Vivier, which ran at the German Leather and Shoe Museum in Offenbach in 2014, opened at the Dutch Leather and Shoe Museum in Waalwijk at the end of February and will run until the end of June this year.

Born in Paris in 1903, Roger Vivier's life spanned almost the whole of the twentieth century; he died in Toulouse in 1998. Orphaned at a young age, he studied sculpture at the School of Fine Arts in the French capital, which commentators agree helped define the shoes he went on to design. He worked for a time in the costume departments of Parisian theatres and, shortly afterwards, when he took a job in a footwear factory run by a relative and began to devote his artistic talent to making shoes, chose to devote the first designs he completed on his own to theatre stars such as Josephine Baker and Mistinguett. From these beginnings, he went on to become one of the giants of twentieth-century shoe design, as the exhibition in Waalwijk makes clear.

Treasure trove

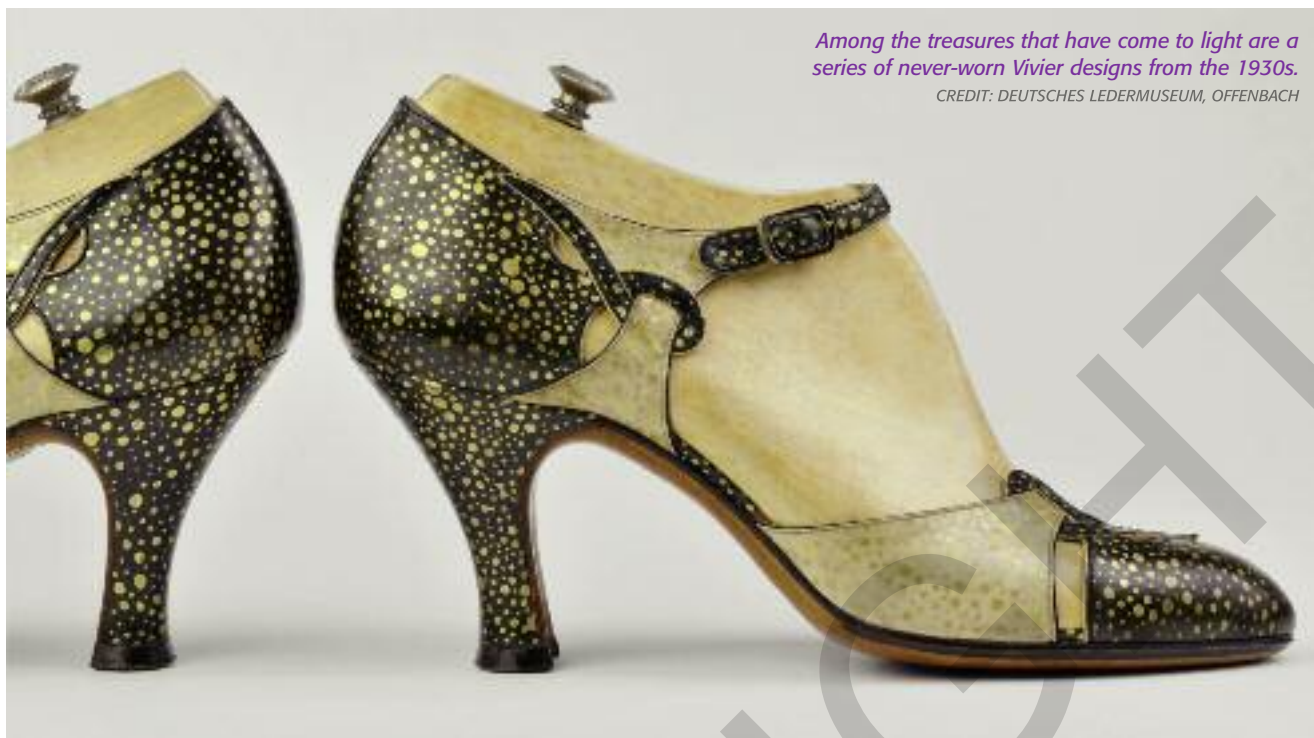
Divided into various sections, the event celebrates different periods of his life and work, including early work from the 1930s and shoes he made for film stars of the time. Another part of the exhibition, entitled 'Shoe Treasures - Roger Vivier', are designs he created for Christian Dior. Roger Vivier made shoes for Dior for a decade, between 1953 and 1963. Commentators say that the fact that, unusually, both names appeared on the shoes is proof of the esteem in which Christian Dior held the footwear designer. Other major names he worked with include Elsa Schiaparelli, Charles Jourdan (with whom he developed the modern-day stiletto heel), Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Balmain.

The material from the 1930s, when Roger Vivier caused a sensation in the North American footwear market as a designer of shoes sold in the US by New York-based label I. Miller by Delman, is perhaps the most revealing part of the overall content. These Vivier shoes went to I. Miller from a famous German footwear manufacturer, Worms-Liebenau-



One of the designs Vivier produced for Saks Fifth Avenue, in kid leather with metal buckle and rhinestones.

CREDIT: DEUTSCHES LEDERMUSEUM, OFFENBACH



Among the treasures that have come to light are a series of never-worn Vivier designs from the 1930s.

CREDIT: DEUTSCHES LEDERMUSEUM, OFFENBACH

based Heyl'sche Lederwerke, which had been tapping into France's design talent for a number of years, leading to its commissioning Roger Vivier.

It's a complicated story, which, fortunately, Dutch Leather and Shoe Museum curator, Inge Specht-den-Boer, is an expert at unravelling. "Heyl'sche Lederwerke had a very long history," she explains. "It was founded in 1834 and produced shoes until 1974, when the family that owned it decided to close the business. They didn't source shoes from France but set up a company there, Laboremus, to have French designers work for it, producing designs and prototypes, which it then incorporated into its collections, producing the shoes in Germany." The ties Roger Vivier built with important clients in the US during this period later became important in his life because he used his connections to spend much of World War II on the other side of the Atlantic. Further down the line, Saks Fifth Avenue became another prominent client.

Man of mystery

Interestingly, Ms Specht-den-Boer explains that in the early days of Laboremus, which had its headquarters right in the centre of Paris, in the Place Vendôme, close to the famous Paris Ritz, its most influential designer wasn't Vivier, but Gaston d'Almeida, a figure about whom painfully little information seems to have been preserved for the footwear industry of today. Inge Specht-den-Boer says she learned of his work from her counterpart in Offenbach, Rosita Nenno, who wants to find out more about Gaston d'Almeida and his place in the history of European shoe design. It's here that Heyl'sche Lederwerke comes back into the story because when the dynasty that owned the company, the Heyl family, decided to close it down, it handed over its archives to the city of Worms and shoes it had in its

own storage facilities to the museum in Offenbach. The archive material includes correspondence between Worms and Paris and in her examination of the first of these letters, Ms Nenno found that Gaston d'Almeida's name was prominent; it was clear that his role was of great importance in cementing relationships between Laboremus, Heyl'sche Lederwerke and its customers. But d'Almeida died in 1932 and, from this point on, the focus of the correspondence was his successor, Roger Vivier. Designs that he produced while working at Laboremus were part of the legacy Offenbach received from the Heyl family and Ms Nenno uncovered some of them, prototype kid-leather shoes, lasted but never worn, that form part of the exhibition that has now moved from Germany to the Netherlands. "They are really very interesting," Ms Specht-den-Boer says, "they are genuine treasures. They have very complicated stitching and the designs are so different from the work that Vivier went on to do in later decades."

Missing milestones

Not every item that was on display in Offenbach in 2014 is part of this year's exhibition in Waalwijk. The German Leather and Shoe Museum secured several exhibits on loan from the Roger Vivier brand, acquired in 2003 by Diego Della Valle because, the owner of the Tod's group has said, "the Roger Vivier style was so distinctive and inimitable". However, when the exhibition in Offenbach ended, the company said it preferred to take the shoes back into its care rather than allow them to be part of the event in the



A 1957 evening shoe with stiletto heel, one of the designs Vivier produced for Christian Dior.

CREDIT: DEUTSCHES LEDERMUSEUM, OFFENBACH



Royal mix-up. Vivier claimed to have made the shoes Queen Elizabeth II wore for her coronation in London in 1953, but many footwear historians believe this to be unlikely. The exhibition in Waalwijk includes this pair made in the Netherlands that same year from Vivier's sketch of his design.

CREDIT: DUTCH LEATHER AND SHOE MUSEUM, WAALWIJK

Netherlands. Also missing are the famous thigh-length boots that Brigitte Bardot wore while extolling in song the virtues of her Harley-Davidson motorcycle in 1967 or the shoes that Catherine Deneuve wore in the film *Belle de Jour* that same year part of the event. There is a picture of Ms Bardot and the boots at the exhibition and several shoes that are very like the ones Ms Deneuve wore.

Before Catherine Deneuve was born and while Brigitte Bardot was still a very young child, Roger Vivier made shoes for an earlier generation of film stars, most notably for Marlene Dietrich. Four pairs of shoes he made for the Berlin-born actress and singer are part of the Waalwijk event, as is an unusual exhibit that relates to another curious chapter in the Roger Vivier story.

Royal disappointment

It's often said in France that Roger Vivier made the shoes that the current queen of the United Kingdom, Elizabeth II, wore for her coronation in 1953. Specht-den-Boer says she has received assurances from footwear experts in the United Kingdom that this is unlikely to be true because the queen would have been inclined and encouraged to favour local design talent instead. She also thinks that, while Vivier clearly liked to talk about this connection to the coronation (obituaries of the man in several prominent French newspapers include the detail of his having made the queen's shoes as a statement of fact), it's possible he never actually produced the shoes in question. "What he did produce," she explains, "is a sketch of the design he hoped to turn into shoes for the coronation and we have that sketch. It's part of the exhibition, but so is a real pair of shoes made in 1953 in the Netherlands, reminiscent (if not an exact replica) of the ones Vivier wanted to make for the queen."

The designer who made those shoes was a well known figure in the Dutch footwear industry, Koos Bergmans. Based in Waalwijk, Mr Bergmans wanted to

make a special contribution to an exhibition that the city arranged that summer to mark the 650th anniversary of its foundation. The coronation was one of Europe's first widely televised events and the fashion world followed it avidly. Because the queen's gown was floor-length, however, the watching world barely got a glimpse of her shoes on the day. Somehow, however, Koos Bergmans got his hands on Vivier's design sketch and made a pair of the shoes himself, in gold kid leather with five fleur-de-lys loops on the vamp, studded with ornamental glass (Vivier's suggestion was a lavish quantity of real rubies). The Bergmans' shoes are also part of an exhibition that gives a fascinating insight into Roger Vivier's life and work. 

A shoe that shows the connections between Roger Vivier, German footwear firm Heyl'sche Lederwerke and its Paris-based design offshoot, Laboremus.

CREDIT: DEUTSCHES LEDERMUSEUM, OFFENBACH

