



Well heeled. French actress and director Sophie Marceau at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival.

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

Beauty is still a pain

Outrage on social media was the result when a number of women reported they had been challenged by security staff at screenings and other plush events at the Cannes Film Festival for wearing flat shoes. Some even said they had been refused entry, with those guarding access telling them they should have worn heels.

The director of the Cannes Film Festival, Thierry Frémaux, denied the event has a policy of refusing entry to women wearing flat shoes. In an exchange on Twitter in the days that followed, Mr Frémaux insisted there were no grounds for rumours that the festival had made high-heeled shoes part of the dress-code for women. On seeing some of the reports in international media about women being refused admittance to events, film producer Marc Missionier asked the festival director if the rumours were true. Mr Frémaux responded: "Absolutely not. And suggestions that the festival is making it obligatory for women to wear high heels are without foundation."

Some journalists and commentators failed to take Mr Frémaux's word for it and the story stayed in the news for weeks. Much of the commentary was condemnatory of the alleged Cannes policy, saying it was old-fashioned and sexist to demand that women wear heeled shoes, no matter how much pain they have to endure as a result.

London-based fashion designer Zandra Rhodes took a

Social media went wild when guests at the Cannes Film Festival claimed they had been turned away for wearing flat shoes, coinciding with an exhibition at London's V&A examining 'ever higher heels and dramatic shapes'. These events have brought the perennial debate about why women wear high-heeled shoes back into vogue.

different view, telling the BBC: "I love high-heeled shoes; they look gorgeous. I think most women feel much better if they are in high heels. They feel elegant. If you are going to a special occasion, you feel good in heels. And at the moment there are so many exotic heels, and if someone wants to prove they are successful and wealthy, they can have all the right shoes to show off."

She acknowledged that walking in heels can become increasingly difficult for some women as they grow older and said flat shoes can also work "if they are covered in gems".



Shoes: Pleasure and Pain includes (bottom left) chopines made from punched kid leather over carved pine, Venice, Italy (c1600s) and (below) wedding toe-knob paduka, silver and gold over wood, India (c1800s).

CREDITS: VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON



Cultural significance

The concept is the subject of a new exhibition at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain*, which will be on at the venue until the end of January 2016. It looks at the cultural significance of shoes throughout the ages, tapping into a passion for footwear that has been revived in recent years. "Shoes have become so much more important in the last decade – they are the fashion story of last 10 years," designer Rupert Sanderson tells us. "The explosion of interest in shoe design has been phenomenal."

Curator Helen Persson has sourced shoes that represent "transformation, status, seduction, creation and obsession" throughout the ages – from sandals from ancient Egypt dating to around 500BC to modern-day Cinderella shoes, football boots and celebrities' famous cast-offs. The older styles offer a glimpse into history, a window to what life was like for the wearer and the society they lived in. Many offered a way to "prove the wearer is successful and wealthy", as Ms Rhodes points out: Indian modari and paduka wedding sandals are embellished with gold leaf, silver bells and gilded copper; sequinned slippers from King Erik XIV of Sweden while Roger Vivier's 'Faberge of shoes' feature beaded silks and leathers.

With a collection of 3,000 pairs in the V&A, it took years to source and select the final 250. "It's almost an impossible task to curate something down to just that selection of shoes with such a bewildering spectrum of styles, designs, eras," says Mr Sanderson, who was invited to select one of his designs for display.

Although they span 2,000 years, some of the 'status' shoes look strikingly similar with the same type of embellishments, and the quest for height seemingly transcending fashion. Raised chopines of 1580 elevated Spanish ladies above the dirty streets, Indian brides stood on platforms to make them literally stand out from the crowd and Turkish clogs with a 28cm platform protected feet from the heated floor of the Hamman.

But pain is a constant bedfellow, with many designs eschewing the anatomy of the foot, creating shoes that are

pointed, curled or too small. This is not more apparent than in the 7.6cm silk shoes for bound feet, dating from 18th century China. Young children had their toes broken and feet wrapped tightly so they could not grow properly, causing deformed insteps, in-growing toenails and infection. The pain made them walk gingerly which, alongside the diminutive foot, was considered ladylike in the upper classes until it was outlawed in the early 20th century.

Shoe anatomy

On the upper floor of the exhibition, in a contrasting bright space to reflect the opposites of pleasure and pain, the shoes' anatomy is revealed - heels and uppers, counters and lasts. "It's the thing that makes us as shoe designers different," explains Mr Sanderson. "We are lone explorers but you need to be able to work with these often difficult-to-find specialists. We're like directors in a film: only as good as the cast and crew." Nearby, some of the most prominent 'directors' – Manolo Blahnik, Sandra Choi of Jimmy Choo, Caroline Groves, Marc Hare and Christian Louboutin – discuss inspirations on a screen amid a wall of shoe boxes.

Housed in a boudoir-esque velvet curtained area are the items that represent an alternate side to pleasure: sensuality. Leather riding boots, platform 'stripper' shoes and patent stilettos are paired with Christian Louboutin's 'unwearable' collection featuring almost vertical shanks.

In this area also resides the curator's favourite pair: Marilyn Monroe's white leather Salvatore Ferragamo pumps. Contrary to urban myth, both heels are the same height, debunking the idea that she wore one heel slightly higher than the other to accentuate her 'wiggle'.

The way heels affect movement is central to the exhibition, as well as to the idea of elegance. By 1890, higher heels were becoming fashionable for 'ladies about town', and they saw a resurgence in the 1950s with the stiletto as women favoured a more pronounced gait in reaction to the restrictions imposed

JIMMY CHOO PRESENTS FOOTWEAR STUDENT OF THE YEAR AWARDS

The winners of the prestigious UK-based Footwear Student of the Year awards were presented with their certificates by Jimmy Choo at the V&A, held to coincide with museum's Pleasure & Pain exhibition and attended by some of the top players in the British shoe industry.

Three UK universities specialising in footwear – University of Northampton, De Montfort and London College of Fashion (LCF) – submitted work from their top five students to be judged by a panel made up of Pentland Brands' creative director Katie Greenyer, Guy West from Jeffery-West and designer Atalanta Weller.

The process "totally inspired" the judges, said Ms Greenyer. "It's a credit to the universities that they drive the students to become the best crop of footwear students globally. It's also healthy to understand competition, because when you get out in the real world, that's all it's about."

The winner was announced as Ganna Domnich from LCF, whose collection was "inspired by artists and so commercially viable", according to Ms Greenyer. Second and third prizes were also awarded to LCF students, Jack McMamara and Lauren Aileen Betourney. Commendations were awarded to Sam Walker and Bethany Roberts from de Montfort.

Mr Choo, who had flown over from Malaysia for the event, was joined by fellow ex-Cordwainer Rupert Sanderson, who won a comparative award in his year. "Winning the award allowed me to visit Italy for the first time," he said. "I spent a month visiting factories and tanneries, the trip turned my head and I didn't really come back."

Mr Sanderson found work in Bologna with Sergio Rossi and Bruno Magli, as well as a factory prepared to work with him on his first



Rupert Sanderson joins Jimmy Choo to celebrate new talent.

CREDIT: MARK WITTER PHOTOGRAPHY

collection, launched in 2001 – a factory he now owns. "When you leave college and win an award, you go out into the wilderness and you tend to forget where you started, you're so consumed with making it work," he told *World Footwear*. "I suppose coming back is an elaborate way to say thank you."

This was the second student awards organised by the Worshipful Company of Cordwainers, following on from an event at the livery company's London base last May. As the biggest supplier of bursaries and scholarships to footwear students in Britain, Cordwainers was invited to support Pleasure & Pain. "They wanted us to support the exhibition because we represent heritage," explained the Cordwainers Clerk, John Miller. "Britain leads the world in footwear education and design, it's in our psyche, and the V&A is the world's leading museum for art and design, so it was logical to hold the footwear awards here, too."

during the Second World War. Twenty-first century Cinderella shoes by Jimmy Choo and his counterparts - feathered Manolo Blahniks and red-soled Louboutins made famous in the TV series *Sex and the City* - are all based on towering platforms.

In *World Footwear March/April 2013* we looked at a study from researchers at the UK's University of Portsmouth that concluded high-heeled shoes help a woman look attractive because of the effect they have on her body movement – which potentially feeds into the idea that women are more dressed up when wearing heels, harboured by the aforementioned security staff at Cannes. Trying to clear up the confusion, the film festival offered the statement: "Regarding the dress code for the red carpet screenings, rules have not changed throughout the years

and there is no specific mention about the height of the women's heels, or men's. Thus, in order to make sure that this rule is respected, the festival's hosts and hostesses have been reminded of it"

Now that even Barbie has been designed with rotating ankles to enable her to wear 'flat shoes', the Cannes team will have to concede elegance is not exclusive to the heel. The argument in France wasn't really about height, but about choice, and about the freedom for women to decide what they felt most comfortable in. However, if *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain* tells us anything, it is that our obsession with high heels – platform, floating or skyscraper – has been ingrained for hundreds of years, and shows little sign of abating. ♻️