

Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers.* Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, eds. Oxford: Berg, 2006. 658 pp.

Reviewed by Carrie Hertz

Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers is one of the most recent in a long, but sparse, timeline of thorough examinations dedicated exclusively to footwear—the first known work, *De Calceo Antiquo*, being written in Latin and dating back to 1667 (Balduinus 1667). Like many new academic books on dress, especially those coming out of the publishing powerhouse Berg, this work is both ambitious and beautiful, with enough museum-quality photographs to rival most high-production exhibit catalogues. Glossy and oversized, *Shoes* offers significant scholarship in a showy package.

Taken as a whole, this edited volume of multidisciplinary articles solidly illustrates the shoe as a commodity, a technology, a personal possession, a nonverbal sign defined in social spaces, a creatively and skillfully crafted material object, and an integral part of a larger sartorial system. Inspired by the collections-based work of museum researchers, editors Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil lament the lack of synergy between artifact analyses and social theory and offer *Shoes* as a step in the right direction. While many of the authors productively consider both matters of material and cultural specificity, the results slant in predictable ways: historical treatments suffer from a paucity of extant examples, while contemporary examinations over-emphasize the extraordinary cases of innovators and trailblazers. *Shoes*, however, benefits from its effort to incorporate a range of approaches and perspectives.

Composed of 19 chapters, *Shoes* is organized into four thematic sections—“A Foot in the Past,” “Encounters and Cultural Interactions,” “Shoes, Bodies and Identities,” and “Representation and Self-Representation.” The introductory section, “A Foot in the Past,” utilizes six chapters to track a handful of geographic and culturally-situated pinpoints in European history beginning in Classical Greece and ending with Europe’s waning fashion dominance in 19th century America. Opening the section, authors Sue Blundell, Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, and Andrea Vianello each contribute articles that speculate on the symbolic and indexical potential of women’s shoes within three different milieus—ancient Greece, medieval Italy, and Renaissance Venice, respectively—while stressing limitations (e.g., moral, legislative, economic, material) placed on individual choice. Relying mostly on artistic representations in literature and art, as well as primary documents, these authors are cautious about their conclusions. Too often, scholars of historical dress inadvertently promote a misconception that contemporaries of the period in question would have been able to interpret the coded messages communicated through clothing as easily as reading a sentence, when in fact ambiguity regularly characterized daily encounters on the street then, just as they do today. This shadowy zone of potential meaning is exactly why clothing, in most all places and times, proves such a valuable and pliable medium for personal manipulation.

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The second half of “A Foot in the Past” highlights formal and conceptual changes in footwear spurred on by the development of transnational fashion marketing, the modern city, and mechanized warfare. McNeil and Riello examine class, gender, and public display through the lens of national identity politics within Enlightenment Britain. Alison Matthews David offers a fascinating portrait of martial spectacle, sartorially systematized class disparities, and disappointing technological reforms within the context of increased provisioning demands and trench fighting during 19th century military imperialism and the later First World War. Finally, Nancy Rexford reveals a schizophrenic, 19th century American fashion scene pulled between the counter influences of France and England and a growing consumer demographic of women willing to flirt with the flood of style choices encouraged by market competition.

Unlike the tightly-focused snapshots of the previous section, “Encounters and Cultural Encounters,” presents broadly-conceived, historical sketches for three examples situated outside of Europe and the United States. Martha Chaiklin analyzes the dualistic principles of purity and pollution within traditional Japanese footwear, architecture, and thought. Paola Zamperini sketches several centuries of “shoe heritage” within mainland China focusing on the country’s recent ascendancy within global commercial markets, especially for inexpensive work shoes and designer forgeries. Tunde M. Akinwumi pieces together early dress practices—before and after European contact—in Yorubaland through archaeological findings and eyewitness accounts. He also raises an important issue of classification commonly absent within discussions of Western footwear: there are more diverse ways of “dressing the feet” (e.g., painting and staining) than just donning supplemental accessories.

This final point about classification suggests the discursive potential of an edited volume promising to be a “global history of shoes from ancient times to the present” (p. 2). Unfortunately, *Shoes* falls short in adequately representing what its editors revealingly label as “extra-European dress” (p. 25). Of course, perhaps we should question whether or not such a far-reaching project—the assembly of a satisfying “global history”—constitutes a worthy or even achievable endeavor in the first place.

“Shoes, Bodies and Identities” employs gender and sexuality as the organizing foci for the third section. Christopher Breward examines how European social critics in the first half of the 20th century rhetorically framed men’s shoes. Contemporaries like Le Corbusier pitted the perceived stability of men’s styles and the romanticized honorability of male-dominated bespoke shoemakers against what they characterized as the incessantly shifting ornament of women’s fashion and the rising, unskilled female workforce they associated with a corrupting modernity. Elizabeth Sammelhack’s look at the normalization of the high heel shoe as an unremarkable part of Western women’s modern wardrobes offers an interesting pairing to Breward. Once the sartorial delight of both genders, over time high heels became increasingly associated with femininity and consequently absorbed the rhetorical connotations of foolish and unhealthy female adornment previously discussed by Breward. Valerie Steele, Hilary Davidson, and Clare Lomas (et al.) explore persistent erotic associations of specific footwear and their self-conscious use in signifying subcultural sexual identities by insiders and outsiders alike. From the anxiety of some businesswomen who fret over exposing “toe cleavage” at work to the clandestine invitation of a gay man’s soft suede shoe in 1930s London, individuals understand that shoes are “clothing objects animated by actions, choices and performance, as well as part of cultural idiom” (p. 295).

Whether you want to exploit the semiotic ambiguity of dress for personal fulfillment or artistic impact, you must first comprehend dominant visual codes.

The last section of *Shoes*, “Representation and Self-Representation,” illustrates how these dominant visual codes are built through shrewd advertising, artistic conceptual depictions, and the veneration of designers and style leaders. Stefania Ricci looks at the contributions of designer Salvatore Ferragamo, with his high-end shoes and long list of celebrity clients, to the establishment of a nationalistic marketing campaign “Made in Italy” that promoted the country as a storehouse of iconic designers, quality, and aesthetic excellence to a war-weary West skeptical of products exported from a post-Fascist regime. Economic historian Giovanni Luigi Fontana takes a fresh and comprehensive approach in regards to modern shoe manufacture and promotion. Rather than solely privileging the “mental” creation of designers, Fontana explores the collaboration of a network of key players who ensure the successful realization and profitability of aesthetic concepts into tangible, economic products. Similarly, Alison Gill and Julia Pine demonstrate how symbolic meanings of shoes are cultivated or reinforced through the rhetorical persuasion of brand marketing and conceptual art.

Commendable in its intended breadth, *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers* convincingly intimates the material and conceptual complexity of shoes within the social world. The editors argue that attending to history and socio-cultural specificity provides the proper perspective for understanding the potential choices and constraints individuals recognize and contend with in their particular, daily lives. However, beyond the articulation of this philosophical target, ordinary individuals play a very minor role in this work. Absent from the social, economic, and design histories, the semiotic analyzes, and the modern media studies that comprise the four-hundred-plus pages, is a representative example of the on-the-ground density that can be potentially unraveled through ethnography—an orientation of fundamental interest to readers of this journal. *Shoes* is anything but a cursory look at an important topic, but neither is it exhaustive.

Reference Cited

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