

The Evolution of Women's Footwear

I have a confession to make - when Al called me last spring with the news that I was to give a Quest Paper in 1926 and that my topic was “ The Evolution of Women's Footwear”, I was not thrilled. How frivolous and probably totally uninteresting to maybe half of the Quest Club - including me!

But then I took a deep breath, thought about it, did a bit of research, and to my utter joy, I realized one inescapable truth - that a woman's role in society is mirrored in the shoes she wears. So with a bit of poetic license - here is my Quest paper -”The Evolution of Women's Roles in Society and the Shoes They Wore.”

I bet if each woman here went through her footwear collection, she would often see her own story reflected in her footwear.

Throughout history, women's roles in society have evolved dramatically, shaped by economic systems, cultural expectations, political movements, and technological change. These shifts transformed not only women's rights and opportunities but also what they wore - especially their shoes. Footwear reflects mobility, labor demands, social

expectations, and ideals of beauty. From restrictive medieval footwear, shoes for work, high-fashion heels and modern athletic shoes, the evolution of women's footwear provides a revealing lens through which to examine broader social change - our shoes tell a surprisingly rich story.

In ancient societies, footwear was primarily functional, designed to protect feet from rough terrain and harsh climates. Crafted from natural elements, these early foot coverings were both utilitarian and crude, devoid of aesthetics.

In Greece and Rome, women's sandals and soft leather shoes signaled class and occasion, with decoration and color reserved for the elite. Footwear became a social ID card, the more straps and intricate the design, the higher your rank. At this time, there was no real difference between women's and men's shoes. Interestingly, heels were originally for men. Persian cavalry in the 10th century used them to lock their feet into stirrups. Heels were initially considered "peak masculinity" and a mark of a "man of action". Aren't you gentlemen happy that has changed!

Foot binding, also called 'lotus feet', began in 10th century China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). According to legend, it started when an emperor admired the tiny feet of a dancer who wrapped her feet to appear delicate. This

practice soon spread among the elite as a symbol of beauty and refinement.

Girls - often between ages 4 and 9 - had their feet tightly bound with cloth strips to break and fold the toes under the arch, forcing the foot to form a small, curved shape about 4 inches long. This process was extremely painful , resulted in a mincing gait, and caused lifelong disability. Mothers usually did it to their daughters, believing it would improve marriage prospects - sadly, some women developed gangrene or died from infections caused by the tight bindings. This practice largely didn't die out until the 20th century

During the Middle Ages, women's roles were defined by rigid hierarchy and gender. Most women worked in agriculture or domestic labor, while noble women managed estates and represented family honor and footwear became more enclosed and practical.

Peasant women wore simple leather shoes or boots designed for durability and protection. Their footwear reflected daily physical labor and long hours spent outdoors.

In contrast, noblewomen wore fashionable pointed shoes called poulaines. The length of the pointed toe indicated rank; some shoes were so long that they were stuffed and

fastened by gold and silver chains to bracelets below the knee.

In 14th century England and France, authorities attempted to regulate the length of poulaines through sumptuary laws because excessively long toes were seen as symbols of vanity and moral excess. These laws reveal how footwear became tied to both class identity and limited female mobility.

The Renaissance Era brought dramatic changes in fashion (including footwear.) Expanding trade networks and artistic expression reshaped ideals of beauty and refinement. It wasn't until the 15th century that the notion of a high heel being "feminine" began to take place.

In Venice and Spain, women often wore towering platform shoes known as chopines, heels sometimes exceeding 20 inches in height. These shoes protected gowns from muddy streets but also elevated the wearer physically and symbolically.

Venetian courtesans became famous for wearing extremely tall chopines (often as high as 24 inches) which signified both luxury and social prominence. Visitors to Venice wrote astonished descriptions of women needing servants to steady them while walking

Heels gained prominence in the 16th and 17th centuries, initially worn by both men and women - again to signify power and status. In England and France, the high heel was actually outlawed for a time, as it was the shoe favored by prostitutes! Around this time the high heel was ridiculed by members of high society, religious commentators, and even the great William Shakespeare. It wasn't until 1533 that the idea of a low sole with a high heel was seen as "ladylike" thanks to the royal wedding of Catherine de Medici, who married the Duke of Orleans whilst wearing "riding heels". Up until the 19th century, however, heels were still largely worn by only aristocratic men such as Louis XIV of France who favored them to make up for his short stature.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the first real technological shift in shoemaking:

- **The French Revolution shift: Before the revolution, heels were for the aristocracy (men and women). After 1789, they were seen as "frivolous" and "royalist". Everyone switched to flat, "democratic" slippers.**
- **Left vs Right: Believe it or not, until about 1850, there was no difference between left or right shoes! You just "broke them in" until they fit.**
- **The Industrial Revolution: Mass production made shoes affordable. The Victorian era introduced the lace-up "granny" boot, which was both modest and**

durable. The invention of the sewing machine made the manufacture of boots, a prominent style of this era, more efficient.

The early 20th century marked major shifts in women's rights. Suffrage movements, educational opportunities, and workforce participation expanded women's public roles.

World War I accelerated change as women filled industrial jobs. Footwear adapted to increased mobility. Practical lace-up shoes replaced restrictive boots, and lower heels became common.

This is one woman's true story:

In 1912, Emily Carter worked as a typist in London. Every morning she laced up her high-button corset boots - stiff leather, narrow toes, and twenty tiny buttons up the side. They looked proper, but they pinched with every step. Still - that's what respectable women wore.

That spring, Emily's friend invited her to a suffragette march. Emily had never joined a protest before - it was considered scandalous for women of her class. But she went. The streets were full of women shouting, singing, and waving banners that read "*Votes For Women*"

As the march began, the cobblestones made walking in those tight boots almost impossible. Her feet ached, and she fell behind. Then she noticed another woman, wearing sturdy lace-up boots, striding easily beside her.

“You can’t march for freedom, “ the woman said, “If you can’t even walk”

Emily stopped and unbuttoned her corset boots right there in the street. She took them off and carried them in her hands, walking barefoot the rest of the way. The newspapers later called it “unladylike”. Emily called it “liberating”.

From that day forward, she refused to wear shoes that hurt. She joined the suffragettes movement and her discarded boots - later displayed in a woman’s museum - became a symbol of both comfort and courage.

**Photographs of that day show women in white dresses and practical shoes marching for the vote - a visual message that women could be both graceful and politically involved
One woman later recounted in her diary that many women swapped their dainty shoes for low-heeled lace-up boots to keep up with the long procession, joking that we may look like ladies but we march like soldiers!**

In the early 20th century, film stars such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich popularized elegant heels and strappy sandals, linking glamour to women's footwear. Designers began creating shoes specifically for movie costumes, which later influenced everyday styles - helping to establish the stiletto as a symbol of sophistication.

Mary Janes and T-straps were popular in the 1920s and continued to be so throughout the following decades. They allow women to dance, walk, and move freely in public spaces. The Mary Jane with its Cuban heel and single strap design became the perfect middle-ground between comfort and style

During World War II leather and rubber were strictly rationed for military use, and with steel and high-grade leather unavailable, designers turned to non-rationed materials like cork and wood.

The iconic cork wedge was born out of necessity because it was lightweight and didn't require the steel supports used in traditional heels. Shoe uppers were often made from woven straw, hemp, or canvas rather than restricted animal hides.

With one-third of the leather supplied allocated to the army, any sort of perceived wastefulness was immediately forbidden. No decorative or embellishments were allowed and choice of colors was reduced. Heel heights were

shortened so as not to exceed 2⁵/₈ inches - leather boots couldn't be taller than 10 inches. This led to the popularity of the loafer and the oxford - styles borrowed directly from men's closets that offered durability for a woman on the move

World War II required women to enter factories and military support roles. Practical footwear, including work boots and sturdy shoes became essential.

Rosie the Riveter , the cultural icon representing women factory workers, is frequently depicted wearing durable work shoes designed for safety and long shifts.

After the war, cultural emphasis shifted toward domestic femininity and consumer culture. The 1950s introduced the stiletto heel, symbolizing elegance and glamour, and Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe helped popularize them. The name comes from the Italian *stiletto*, a dagger with a narrow, needle-like blade, reflecting the heel's sharp, piercing, and slender appearance.

To understand the modern stiletto, you have to stop thinking of it as a shoe and start thinking of it as a feat of structural engineering. Before the 1950s, high heels were made primarily of wood or plastic, which meant they had to be relatively thick to support a person's weight. The magic of

the stiletto lies in its ability to support roughly 60% to 70% of a person's weight.

At the heart of every high-quality stiletto is a steel-tempered shank. This is a thin strip of metal tucked between the insole and the outsole. It provides the structural integrity needed to bridge the gap between the heel and the ball of the foot. Without it, the shoe would simply buckle under the wearer's weight. A well-engineered stiletto is designed to align the wearer's center of gravity. If the heel is placed too far back, the wearer feels like they are tipping forward and the shoe feels unstable. Modern designers use computer aided design to ensure the pitch - the angle of the foot - is steep enough for aesthetics but balanced enough for a - somewhat - natural gait. Stilettos, while decidedly less extreme than Eastern lotus feet or Western chopines, contained echoes of those historical fashions for the way they asked women to prioritize style over mobility.

At the same time, thank goodness, casual shoes like loafers became popular for daily activities.

At the start of the 20th century, women's sports shoes were nearly nonexistent. Women participating in sports like tennis, croquet, or cycling often wore modified boots or heeled shoes. Around the 1910s - 1920s, simple canvas

sneakers with rubber soles became popular for women' s leisure or light sports.

In the 1930s and 40s, as women began playing sports more seriously (track, basketball, tennis), companies started designing lighter, more flexible shoes. But it wasn't until the 1970s that Nike and Adidas began producing running shoes designed specifically for a women's foot. I remember when I started running and then training for my first marathon, they did have women's running shoes, but they mostly came in baby blue, pink and purple which I couldn't stand, so I was forced to buy men's shoes in a smaller size - I could get them in tan or brown!

In the 1960s and 70s, pop icons like Twiggy and the Supremes popularized go-go boots and mod footwear, making bold, colorful shoes a fashion statement. The go-go boots were low-heeled, white vinyl and mid-calf in height and often worn with mini skirts. I confess that I had a pair - and am sorry that I didn't keep them although they weren't terribly comfortable. In 1966, the song "These Boots are Made for Walkin'" was released by a go-go boot wearing Nancy Sinatra, who is credited with further popularizing the boot. She sang, "These boots are made for walkin' and that's just what they'll do. One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you!"

In the 1980's, there was the aerobics explosion. Jane Fonda and fitness culture made sneakers a fashion statement. Brands like Reebok thrived with stylish, supportive shoes for gym workouts, aerobics, cross training and casual wear. Athletes and pop stars began influencing sneaker culture - Madonna, Michael Jackson, and later the Spice Girls all made athletic-inspired or platform shoes mainstream. The 1990s brought female athletes like Serena Williams and Mia Hamm to inspire a new generation and endorsements from women became more common. Sneakers began appearing with jeans and sportswear - women's models became more colorful and expressive. Women's running shoes now incorporated biomechanical research: narrower feet, heel-to-toe drop, arch support, and motion control specific to female runners. Memory foam, gel cushioning, lightweight mesh and shock absorption technologies became standard.

Later came eco-conscious designs and recycled materials. There were broader size ranges and designs that celebrate diversity and comfort.

Today in the 21st century, women participate fully in every sphere of society. Their footwear reflects diversity, practicality and personal identity.

Extreme stilettos, kitten heels and Ugg boots entered footwear fashion, along with global fashion influences and

celebrity culture with the rise of Manolo Blahnik and Louboutin. And we certainly can't forget Crocs. When I am up in Michigan for the summer, I live in Crocs - they are perfect for beach walks and kayaking.

Athletic shoes are engineered for performance, professional flats support long work days, and high heels are mostly worn by choice rather than obligation.

Modern footwear trends also reflect sustainability concerns, ergonomic design and cultural expression. Gender-fluid designs and sustainable material like vegan leather and recycled fibers are used.

Along the way, our average shoe size has grown. Over the past few decades, this average has increased from a size 7 or 7.5 to the current average of 8 or 9. Sizes 6 through 11 account for the vast majority of all shoes sold.

The average American woman owns approximately 17-19 pairs of shoes. Some surveys show that 50% of women own 10 pairs while 13% own more than 30 pairs.

The most expensive women's shoes in the world are bespoke creations featuring solid gold, rare diamonds and rubies and even meteorite fragments - like the Moonstar Shoes by Antonio Vietri for \$20 million. A pair of the ruby slippers

worn by Judy Garland in “The Wizard of Oz” movie sold at auction for over \$32 million dollars.

For luxury shoes available for purchase at retail, brands like Manolo Blahnik, Christian Louboutin, and Jimmy Choo offer premium options, with prices for specific, highly embellished or exotic leather models often ranging from \$1,000 to over \$10,000.00

In 2015, several major companies revised dress codes after women protested requirements to wear high heels at work. These policy changes reflected modern priorities of comfort, equality, and workplace safety.

Over the centuries, women have gained rights and mobility, prompting footwear to become more practical and versatile. Feminist movements and modern social change further expanded choice, emphasizing comfort, empowerment and self-expression. Today, women select footwear based on personal identity, professional demands, and lifestyle, rather than social obligation. From suffragists’ sturdy walking shoes to modern sneakers and professional flats, women’s footwear tell a powerful story of progress.

Throughout history, women’s shoes have reflected the changing roles and attitudes towards women. From simple sandals to highly decorated heels, women’s shoes have

evolved alongside women's fashion. We've reached the age of great variety - where shoes are as diverse as the women who wear them.

Ultimately, the history of women's shoes is more than fashion - it is the story of women stepping forward into new roles, new rights, and new possibilities. May it be so!

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