

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Well-heeled City

While Bienville was busy founding New Orleans in 1718, high-heels were popular back in the French court. The French heel, also known as the Pompadour, was named after Louis XV's mistress, Madame de Pompadour. The shoes' narrow, curved heels were extremely difficult to walk in, but were still very effective in the boudoir.



Madame de Pompadour with her heel peeking out, 1755

This style became all the rage and spread from Paris across Europe. A clever satirical verse from the eighteenth century told the tale:

"Mount on French heels,
When you go to the ball —
'Tis the fashion to totter
and show you can fall."

As the nineteenth century neared, revolution in America and France saw the rejection of all things royal, and the heel on women's footwear became lower and lower until it disappeared altogether. High-heeled shoes during the first part of the nineteenth century were an almost non-existent element of women's fashion. Popular styles included simple square-toed flat slippers with ribbon ties. Empress Josephine is said to have owned more than 300 pairs.

But by the 1850s, the heel began to make its comeback. It was a gradual creeping back up, 1/2 inch in 1851 and 2 1/2 inches by 1860.



Silk satin with rosette, 1855-1865, Victoria and Albert Museum

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* of October 25, 1855, related the arrival of high-heel shoes to the Crescent City in an article entitled "A Pretty Clatter":

"Of late Fashion has raised the ladies in their own and public estimation by the addition of heels to their shoes and petite booties. And oh! such a pretty and rhythmical little clatter they keep up as they trip along the sidewalks! There is a melody in their movements," the article goes on, "but now they mark by music the poetry of their motions, and keep time to their own angelic tunes. Silks and fine linens by these elevated understandings are kept slightly out of the mud, and the general effect is supposed to be advantageous."

One can envision those muddy thoroughfares of ante-bellum New Orleans, with their wooden *banquettes* on each side. But the problem for *les belle dames* back then was the sloppy mire in between, soiling the hems of their beautiful dresses.

A month later on November 10, 1855, the *Picayune* was hammering home that very point:

"For several days past moisture has prevailed in the skies above, and mud on the streets below, and, of course, 'sloshing about' has been the rule among all male perambulators. As a general thing the fairer portion of creation has kept within doors, but yesterday a few, a very few, ventured out. It was towards evening, on Chartres Street, that we saw two of them moving like perpetual joys, as things of beauty are said to be. They were decked out with costliest apparel, and, till we approached very near them, we almost supposed that they were supernal visitants. That near approach, however, undeceived us, for although beauty of feature and adornment triumphed from the crowns of their bonnets to their dainty gaiters, there was dirt enough on their bedraggled trails of silk to dim the charms of two divinities.

Byron once gave it as his opinion that man is a strange compound of 'deity and dirt,' but we never supposed that fine ladies could be embraced in the definition till fashionable trails in muddy weather left their disgusting mark of the affinity.

Surely it is not incumbent on our republican beauties to follow fashions which must of necessity end in filth, and which were only intended by their inventors to hide the deformed feet of some court dames. For our part we shall in future persist in thinking that all those ladies who wear their dresses so long as to have two or three inches of the trail bedraggled, are cursed with feet ill-fashioned. Either the new hoops with the patent elevators, must become the rage, or ladies' dresses must be shortened to the standard of decency. We never wish to behold the like of those two trails again."

Similarly, Egyptian butchers also wore heels, to help them walk above the blood of dead beasts (instead of above the mud). Ancient Egyptian murals show depictions of both upper-class males and females wearing heels, probably for ceremonial purposes.

In ancient Greece and Rome, platform sandals called *kothorni*, later known as *buskins* in the Renaissance, were popular particularly among actors. These shoes (of varying heights to indicate different social status or character importance) had soles of wood or cork. In Rome, female prostitutes were easily recognized by their use of high heels. And in Mongolia, men wore heeled boots for a proper grip on their stirrups.

During the Middle Ages, both men and women wore *pattens*, wooden-soled outer footwear that were clearly a precursor to the high heel. They were designed to attach to fragile or expensive shoes to protect them from mud and other street debris. In the 1400s, *chopines* (or Turkish platform shoes), were popular throughout Europe until the mid-1600s. They were high and required women to use canes or servants to help them walk. Chinese concubines and Turkish

odalisques wore high shoes, with some scholars speculating that it was in order to prevent women from escaping the harem.

High-heeled shoes soon caught on with the fashion-following men and women of the French court, and spread to the nobility of neighboring European countries. The Venetians made the *chopine* into a status symbol revealing wealth and social standing for women. The term "well-heeled" became synonymous with opulent wealth.



Venetian chopines

But the credit for modern high heels for women goes to the diminutive young wife of the Duke of Orléans. It was prompted by the 1533 betrothal of the then fourteen-year old Catherine de' Medici to the Duke of Orléans (who would become the next King of France, Henry II). The petite Catherine began to feel insecure in the face of being presented before the French Court. In desperation, she sought the help of a clever Florentine artisan who promised she would be dazzling at her first French Ball. Her fairy godfather turned out to be none other than her cobbler, whose creation cast a spell over all of France when he removed the cumbersome wooden soles from Catherine's shoes and replaced them with a slender four-inch heel. The shoemaker concocted a most powerful aphrodisiac: a device that not only endowed the wearer with an attractive allure to her walk, but also

the physical stature she may not have otherwise possessed. High heels made her frame appear more curvaceous with bosoms and buttocks protruding (up to twenty-five percent more), along with less accentuation on the waist. The heel also caused the arch of the foot to rise, creating the illusion of smaller feet. And throughout history, smaller feet were the symbol of ultimate beauty.

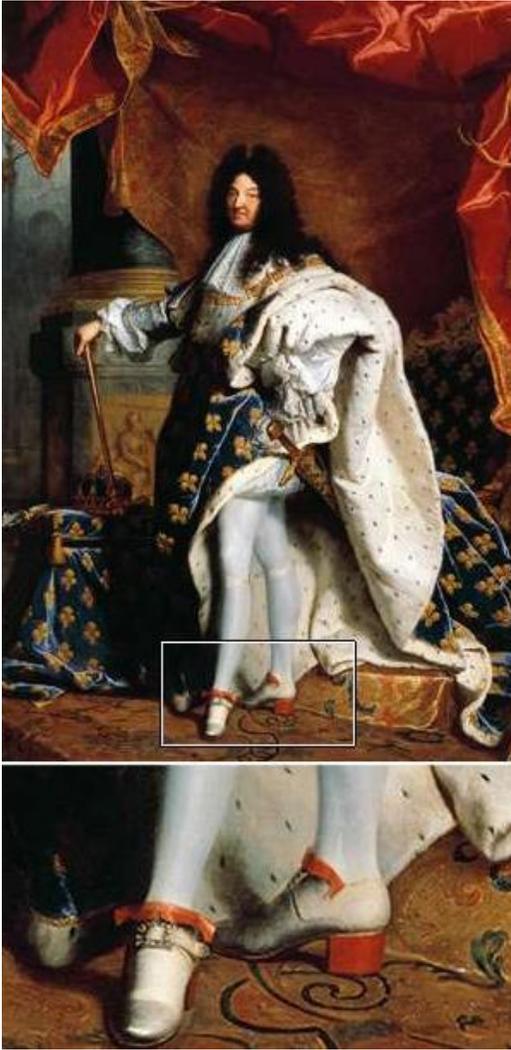
Betty Grable, whose glam gams graced many a World-War II pin-up photo, once reflected, "Without my high heels, my million-dollar legs would be lost in a crowd."



Betty Grable, pin-up girl

As necessity is the mother of invention, Catherine de' Medici (1519-1589) had the necessity and so became the mother of the modern high-heeled shoe.

And high-heels weren't just for women. Louis XIV of France, who stood only five foot four, augmented his diminutive stature by an additional four inches with heels, often exquisitely adorned with depictions of battle scenes. His heels and soles were always red, which reflected a martial aura. In the 1670s, the Sun King issued an edict that only he and members of his court were allowed to wear them.



Louis XIV and red high heels

For women, according to anthropologist Helen Fisher, "High heels thrust the chest forward and tip the buttocks up, making a woman's body more sexually attractive." And like Louis XIV, they "make you taller," she wrote. "History shows us that the most dominant 'animal' is the one highest up."

"I don't know who invented high heels," Marilyn Monroe once said, "but all women owe him a lot."

A local New Orleans attorney investigating an arson case was amazed at the number of women's shoes claimed in the fire ... until he checked his wife's closet back home. Most knowledgeable men should understand women and their high heels, perhaps after having observed the shoe addiction of Carrie Bradshaw in the hit HBO series, "Sex and the City." The series was broadcast from 1998 until 2004, followed by feature films in 2008 and 2010.

They should also know about the stiletto heel first pioneered in 1953 by Roger Vivier, who worked with Christian Dior. Meaning a "small

dagger”, the stiletto makes reference to the ultra-thin pencil-width heel upon which the shoe rests. Andre Perugia, who began designing shoes in 1906, did not invent the stiletto. But he is probably the first well-documented designer of the high, slim heel. And the Southern man should be aware of spectator pumps, two-toned high fashion dress heels. After their loss of national popularity in the early 1950s (when sling-backed and sandaled, thinner pumps became stylish), they returned to fashion in the early 1980s. They still remained perennial “favourites” in England, and Joan Collins often sported them on Dynasty. That’s pronounced Di-nə-stē in the UK.



The stiletto – Think Tina Turner

In North America, pumps are heeled shoes with low-cut fronts and usually no fastening, but can also be formal shoes for men or women. A woman's pump is similar in overall shape to the handles of old-fashioned manual well pumps, accounting for the name.

In New Orleans, “shoes” rhymes with “Muse”. In fact, the high heel serves as a signature for the Krewe of Muses. The all-female krewe throws all manner of spangled and wildly decorated trinkets, featuring high heels, boots, stilettos, sandals and other more comfortable footwear. After all, beauty does hurt after a while and the feet need a rest. For the Thursday before Mardi Gras 2010, Muses displayed huge “fiber optic high heel sculptures”, and their website once featured a “Muses Picture Gallery” with a multitude of photographs of wildly differing spectacular and colorful shoes.

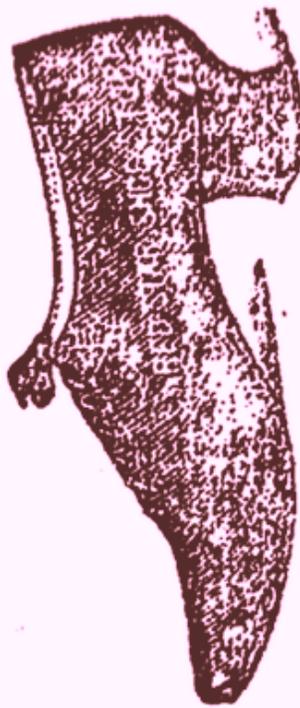


Krewe of Muses' answer to the high heel

The city has fallen "head over heels" for this lively krewe, one that loves the high heels first fashioned for a former Duchess of Orléans who became the Queen of France. As for King Henry, Catherine's high heels had lost their allure. At age fifteen (the year after his marriage), he took as his mistress thirty-five-year-old widow and courtly cougar, Diane de Poitiers. She became Henry's most trusted confidante and, for the next twenty-five years, wielded considerable influence behind the scenes, even signing royal documents. Extremely mature and intelligent, she left Catherine powerless to intervene. She did, however, insist that Henry visit Catherine's bed in order to produce heirs to the throne.

I guess you could say that Henry was a big heel. But in the early United States, the clergy blamed a certain kind of woman for being responsible for the sexual impropriety that was the result of wearing such "scandalous" shoes. In 1640, a Massachusetts law decreed that any woman who induced a man to marry her because of "high heel shoes, shall incur the penalty of the law now enforced against witchcraft, and the marriage shall be null and void."

Red Star Bazar,
CANAL STREET.
5000 Pairs Kid Ties, Cheap!



We have just laid our hands on the prettiest lot of Ladies' Fine Kid Ties that were ever put on this market. We invite ladies to examine them. They are made with low and high heels.

Fine kid leather shoes "with low and high heels" available at the Red Star Shoe Store, cor. Canal Street and Exchange Place, ad in the Picayune, August 3, 1889

Writing for the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* in 1986, Michelle Hancock explained that it was a New Orleans brothel owner named Madame Kathy who reintroduced high heels in the United States after one of her new prostitutes became "an overnight sensation with the upper-class gentry" after she "pranced through the brothel" in her high heels.

According to the article, "Madame Kathy placed a standing order for 20 pairs of high heels in different sizes and styles to be shipped to her every three months." This author has been unable to determine the veracity of this claim.

And don't forget Imelda Marcos, widow of Ferdinand Marcos, the 10th president of the Philippines. Besides enjoying the company of actor George Hamilton, she once owned a shoe collection of more than 2,700 pairs, now partly placed in the National Museum of the Philippines and partly in a shoe museum in Marikina, on the island of Luzon in the Philippines.

High heels have certainly been around in one form or another for centuries, and show no sign of diminishing in popularity.

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* printed a poem on January 31, 1869, entitled "My Lady" with these amorous lines:

"High heels that lift her lips to mine,
And eyelets with a silver shine —
Fall not malignant evening dews
Lest you should wet my lady's shoes."

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