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On a Pedestal. From Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels

Bata Shoe Museum, Toronto, Nov 18, 2009–Sep 20, 2010

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The Bata Shoe Museum opened in Toronto in 1995 as the brainchild of Sonja Bata of the Bata Shoe Company. With a collection of 12,000 objects, this unique museum is dedicated exclusively to the history of the shoe and has a history of informative exhibitions on specialized topics, such as the one currently on display, "On A Pedestal: From Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels." Curated by Elizabeth Semmelhack, this exhibition showcases 50 shoes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all of which were designed to elevate the stature of the wearer [\[1\]](#). The chopine, most popular in Spain and Italy in the sixteenth century, is a kind of platform shoe made of wood or cork and covered in leather or textile. The heeled shoe, in which the heel is built up in height independently of the sole (unlike the blocky or columnar soles of the chopine) was worn by men and women and was most popular in Northern Europe in the seventeenth century. Bringing together this many examples of a select type of shoe in one place is no small achievement, as they had to be borrowed from institutions in Italy, Spain, Austria, Sweden, the United States, the UK, and Canada. The result is an extensive and diverse sample of this peculiar product of early modern fashion, providing more examples of elevating footwear than any source to date [\[2\]](#).

The exhibition includes reproductions of paintings, many of them well known, that depict shoes similar to the ones on display. The primary purpose of these reproductions is to help the visitor relate the shoes to their original spatial, temporal, and social contexts; but in some cases, the shoes are particularly illuminating for the painting. It is especially interesting, and important to remember, that the chopine was a luxurious item not meant to be seen. In Italy, modesty demanded that women's shoes be covered as best as possible by the skirt, which means that their footwear was only rarely represented in pictorial form and then usually shown only set aside as part of a domestic scene of general 'deshabille', or revealed beneath the skirt to betray a woman posing outside her class. Because the woman's shoe is generally concealed, knowing who wore chopines and under what circumstances they were worn, as well as recognizing their effects on bodily comportment have great implications for the interpretation of images of women and, indirectly, of men. These issues are particularly germane for students of portraiture, that genre in which costume is so vital to self-fashioning. Art historians can sometimes take fashion for granted as an unambiguous signifier of wealth, profession, or gender. Even though the

catalogue still accommodates such statements, its overall discussion reveals fashion to be a more complicated mode of discourse.

Semmelhack has curated a number of exhibitions on elevating footwear in other historical periods and her experience and knowledge come to bear on this one [3]. The exhibition revisits a number of current issues in the scholarship on the history of footwear. Semmelhack clearly addresses the debates on the development of Renaissance and Baroque elevated footwear, considering its trajectory from Antiquity, or its passage from the East (in Western imagery, elevating footwear could be the symbol of foreignness). Her argument that the heel was imported to the West from Persia is particularly convincing. The seemingly constant oscillation between the practical (protective overshoe from the dirt of the ground) and the impractical (artful altering of the body's stature) is also acknowledged. The reference to 'pedestal' in the exhibition's title alludes to display, which is the featured theme. More specifically, the aim of the exhibition is to locate elevating footwear in the socio-economic constructions of gender during the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

Presented separately in two galleries, the chopine and the heel present two distinct sets of objects intended for women and men, respectively, and therefore also different gendered discourses. But the chopine (commonly referred to as 'pianelle' in Italian), and especially the Venetian chopine, is clearly the star of the show, rightly receiving the bulk of Semmelhack's attention. These columnar shoes reached their most impractical height of up to 50 cm in Venice and drew the notice of foreign visitors and the scrutiny of sumptuary laws. The chopine was accordingly a lightning rod in the debates on femininity, and the museum has done a good job gathering and discussing textual and visual sources directly related to the chopine. Some readers may take issue with occasional generalizations about more complicated social dynamics, like the point that women had little if any voice in what they wore [4]; but these points are tangential to the general thrust of the catalogue's analysis.

If the visitor to the exhibition (or the reader of the catalogue) is hoping to find a coherent sense of femininity (or its construction) emerging from the shoes on display, they will rightly be left disappointed. Early modern fashion, like so many other dimensions of identity, is difficult to tie down. The chopine was criticized as a vanity of women and categorized as the foundation garment of courtesans and prostitutes; but at the same time it was a status symbol for virtuous women – virtually a signifier of the patrician bride in Venice. The multiple meanings of the chopine helps to explain, in part, the notorious misinterpretation of Carpaccio's "Two Ladies" – now believed to be a bride and her mother-in-law – as two courtesans [5]. What is more, Semmelhack compellingly explains the popularity of the chopine among patrician women and their status-seeking husbands who may have purchased them by relating it to the textile industry. Taller chopines require more dress to cover them, as was the expectation, and so demand for higher shoes was greatest in the states boasting vibrant trading and manufacturing in textiles. Patrician women, so it is argued, wore chopines to display family wealth through extravagant long skirts and, indirectly, civic wealth resulting from this industry. It will take more precise dating of the shoes to measure this theory against the fluctuations of the textile market, but the point is a good one and helps us to see portraits of women afresh.

Art historians will want to take note of the portrait of a Genoese noblewoman by Anthony Van Dyck (The Frick Collection, New York). The exhibition presents the painting as an example of a woman whose stature has been increased by chopines, although they are concealed beneath a

floor-length skirt. This revelation will further problematise the late works of Van Dyck. The elongated figures of Van Dyck's Genoese portraits have been regarded as formalist precursors to his second English period, which has been deemed repetitive and stylized in a throwback to mannerism. Van Dyck's change in style has been the subject of harsh criticism and slightly bemused inquiry, the more positive of which situate these late works in the intellectual and cultural climate of the English court [6]. Although the chopine was not popular in England, fashion and its ability to alter the body's shape and carriage should not be excluded from such cultural formulations. To pose the problem more specifically for art history: To what extent are these stylizations based on canons of proportion, on the re-shaping of the body in real life through fashion, or on a combination of the two?

The shoes themselves take centre stage in the exhibition, whereas the catalogue concentrates on the cultural setting, specifically the socio-economic context. The catalogue, which situates elevating shoes in the social discourse of the period, proceeds chronologically with large colour images distributed throughout. A useful section of the catalogue is a glossary of footwear terms, listing the words for elevating shoes across languages from antiquity to the seventeenth century and even taking into account various dialects. This list will be helpful for anyone dealing with inventories, account books, sumptuary laws, or other such documents across regions. Though not the aim of this exhibition, the richness of the material it presents calls attention to the need now for an object-based reference catalogue that could provide more details, such as dimensions, condition, method of dating, determinations of quality, or specific descriptions of facture [7]. By facilitating access to basic and technical information on each object, such a reference source could also help to further broaden the study of these shoes not only in the scholarship of material culture, but in other disciplines, such as anthropology and art history.

Endnotes:

[1] Catalogue: Elizabeth Semmelhack, *On A Pedestal: From Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels*, Toronto: Bata Shoe Museum, 2009, pp. 115, 978-0-921638-20-9, \$30.00 CAD.

[2] For a good survey of Renaissance footwear, see Grazietta Butazzi and Francesco Petegato, "Tipologie delle calzature rinascimentali," in: *Raccolta delle Stampe A. Bertarelli Raccolte di arte Applicata Museo degli Strumenti Musicali. Rassegna di Studi e di Notizie*, vol. XI-Anno X, Milan, 1983, pp. 119-157. With the recent attention paid to material culture in art history, the chopine is not unknown in Venetian art circles, being briefly displayed and discussed in exhibition catalogues like *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, edited by Andrea Bayer, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, cat. no. 117; and in books like Patricia Fortini Brown's, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture, and the Family*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 184-185, fig. 206.

[3] Elizabeth Semmelhack's curated shows include: *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Foot*, Bata Shoe Museum, 2008; and *The Charm of Rococo: Femininity and Footwear in the 18th Century*, Bata Shoe Museum, 2006-2008.

[4] For a full discussion of women and their purchasing power, see Evelyn Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400-1600*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 220-225.

[5] The identification of the two women in Carpaccio's painting as courtesans has an uncertain origin, but dates probably to the mid nineteenth century. The theory never sat comfortably with art historians, some interpreting the painting as a straightforward genre scene, others as a painting of Circe and witchcraft. Since the iconographic analyses put forward by Augusto Gentile and Flavia Polignano in various sources in 1993, there has been general agreement that the two ladies are a bride and her mother-in-law; see for example, Polignano, "Maliarde e cortigiane: titoli per una 'damnatio'. Le 'Dame' di Vittore Carpaccio," in: *Venezia Cinquecento*, vol. 2, 1993, pp. 5-23.

[6] Oliver Millar attributes the so-called decline in Van Dyck's work to fatigue from too many commissions and the reliance on a large workshop, "The Years in London: Problems and Reassessments," in: *Van Dyck 1599-1999: Conjectures and Refutations*, ed. by Hans Vlieghe, Turnhout: Brepols, 2001, pp. 129-138. Erik Larsen relates Van Dyck's English portraits to 'mannerist' poetry of the English court, "Van Dyck's English Period and Cavalier Poetry," in: *Art Journal*, vol. 31, no. 3, Spring 1972, pp. 252-260. Mark Roskill sees the appearances of the portraits as allegorical, "Van Dyck at the English Court: The Relations of Portraiture and Allegory," in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 1, Autumn 1987, pp. 173-199. Jeffrey Muller argues that from 1620 on Van Dyck consciously pursued a style (including elongated figures) that would suffuse his pictures with grace, "The Quality of Grace in the Art of Van Dyck," in: *Anthony Van Dyck*, ed. by Arthur Wheelock, Jr., New York, 1990, pp. 27-36.

[7] For a good description of the fabrication of shoes in the Renaissance, see Francesco Petegato, "Tecniche di lavorazione delle calzature rinascimentali," in: *Il costume nell'eta' del Rinascimento*, ed. by Dora Liscia Bemporad, Florence, 1989, pp. 347-354.

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