

Shoes from Pinet to the Present

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For those unfamiliar with the shoe world, Pinet (1817-1897) was a contemporary of Worth, the great Parisian couturier. So I look at the glamour shoes and the world of haute couture, and indeed the development of the named designer. That is a concept we are all familiar with now. So it is not easy to comprehend the lack of names for the exquisite work before 1850. Straightway I have to say that the number of noted shoe designers is far fewer than famous dress designers, but I will introduce you to some of them, against the background of contemporary shoe fashions.

François Pinet was born in the provinces (probably Touraine) in 1817, two years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. His father, an ex-soldier, settled to shoemaking, a comparatively clean and quiet trade. It had a tradition of literacy, interest in politics, and was known as the gentle craft, which attracted intelligent people. We should presume father would be helped by the family. It was usual for a child to begin by the age of 5-6, tying knots, sweeping up, running errands and gradually learning the job. His mother died 1827, and father 1830 when he was 13, and at the time when exports of French shoes were flooding world markets. He went to live with a master shoemaker, was not well treated, and three years later set out on the tour-de-France. He worked with masters in Tours and Nantes, where he was received as Compagnon Cordonnier Bottier du Devoir as Tourangeau-la rose d'Amour (a name to prove most appropriate). He went on to Bordeaux, where at 19 he became president of the local branch. In 1841 he went to Paris, and in 1848, revolution year, as delegate for his corporation, he managed to persuade them not to go on strike. By now the shoemakers either ran or worked for huge warehouses, and boots had replaced shoes as the main fashion.

In 1855 Pinet at the age of 38 set up his own factory, as the first machines (for sewing just the uppers) were appearing. In 1863 he moved to new ateliers and shop at Rue Paradis-Poissonière 44, employing 120 people on the premises and 700 outworkers. The *English Womans Domestic Magazine* in 1867 records changes in the boots: the soles are now wider, so that it is no longer necessary to walk on the uppers. There is interest in eastern Europe, the Polonaise boots with rosette of cord and tassels and Bottines Hongroises with two rows of buttons, much ornamented. It comments on short dresses, and recommends that the chaussure should correspond to the rest of the toilet. This could already be seen in Pinet's boots: tassels and superb flower embroidery on the higher bootleg, which he showed in the Paris Exposition that year. I think his more slender and elegant Pinet heel was also patented then or 1868. I found little evidence for colour-matching: an English fashion plate of 1860 shows emerald green boots with a violet-coloured dress.

Although we associate Worth with the Empress Eugénie, the end of the Empire in 1870 impeded neither him nor Pinet. In fact Pinet reached his peak in the 70s, winning a prize at the 1873 exhibition in Wien. As well as embroidery, he was famous for painting flowers directly onto the silk. Though Paris had been the fashion leader since 1660, the latest impetus was the 1874 Impressionist Exhibition. So the outmoded traditional painter could perhaps move to paint Pinet boots. His 1875 advertisement in *Le Figaro* reveals him exporting all over Europe, to Moscow, Egypt, north and south America and the Far East. Some shoes were now becoming fashionable again; and Pinet expanded into the next door premises in 1881.

In 1885 there is the major change in toe-shape, to a point, coinciding with the growth of American influence. The USA had become a powerful nation with advanced mechanisation, and was sending its boot and shoe exports all over the world. Most called it the American Invasion. The Naughty 90s produced some outrageous footwear, perhaps the most extreme in 1897, the year that Pinet died. The most superb art nouveau boots and shoes were made in Philadelphia, Paris, Wien and Italy. The new century saw Picasso beginning his cubist paintings, and some startling Wiener Werkstatt designs by 1912, soon to be subdued by the terrible slaughter of the First World War. By 1920 with the realisation of the full horror of the war, aggressive boots went out of fashion, apart from a brief flirtation with so-called Russian boots (to the knee) in the mid 20s all things Russian being of interest after their 1917 Revolution.

But there was a new couturier for shoes in Paris, Yantorny, who rejected the innovations in design and concentrated on making the lightest and most elegant shoes for ladies. Though basically traditional, his shoes are instantly recognisable, like Pinet, pure sculpture. He was reputed to use old materials: Genoese velvets and Byzantine silks, and violins for the shoe trees, though I have seen only 17th century lace. The popular style of the 20s was the bar shoe, and factories now were employing designers, usually women, to make variations on a theme. In England Rayne was making smart and desirable shoes, long before he became shoemaker to the ladies of the royal family from the 1940s. The Pinet company made some T-strap shoes, beautifully embroidered, though lacking the excitement of the 1870s. But it was Perugia who set the fashion lead in Paris with jazzy styles for the Roaring 20s.

The 1929 slump brought more sober colours, followed by the rise of Hitler and talk of the next war. The great innovation is the sandal, baring the foot which had not been seen since the 4th century. That was begun in Hollywood in the early 20s by Ferragamo, who made footwear for the early epic films and for the stars personally, and sandals were encouraged by the new craze for sunbathing. From 1935 onwards the shoes are higher cut and more clumpy, and as wartime shortages restricted materials available, Ferragamo made the most exciting shoes from what were basically substitutes. He modified designs with the peep-toe, sling-back and wedge heel, to use less material and scraps.

In 1947 he made the shoes to accompany Christian Dior's New Look, using almost invisible nylon straps and a refined wedge heel; so the new synthetics were accepted. In 1952 he began to

use *tavernelle* (Swiss lace), and the next year is the first mention of the stiletto heel. Gradually the toe became more pointed and the heel thinner. In 1954 Pinet (and Worth) was taken over by Paquin, and sunk without trace. By the late 50s Roger Vivier replaced Ferragamo at Dior, using the *comma* and *choc* heels, pure engineering combined with beautiful materials. He has continued to make elegant early 60s style shoes for loyal customers.

But the last shoes to be made by Ferragamo (died 1960) already showed the thicker heel. That began in Britain in 1964, the year the Beatles turned to drugs, and we elected a labour government. The toe changed to square: Courrèges in Paris appeared to chop off the winklepicker toe and stiletto heel, to produce the instantly desirable white boot for a new era. By now the war years baby boomers were creating their own street fashion, setting up to make the clothes they wanted, though they found shoemaking more difficult. My country seemed to divide between traditional and the glorification of the working man, producing clumpy styles and the platform soles of 1972-76, when punk reared its ugly head. The latter chose the Doc Martens work boot, a perverse choice when so many of them had no job; it soon became a fashion item for the disaffected young. Nonetheless in 1979 we elected Mrs. Thatcher and the conservative government, after the return in the previous year of the pointed toe and thinner heel.

Since then there has been an infinite range of variations on these two aspects of our society, as each dresses to please himself or his particular mood. A whole network of young people, Manolo Blahnik, Jimmy Choo, Emma Hope, has grown up supplying trendy shops, but being more expensive, those who survive make the more impractical styles. The Doc Martens is still there, though now with many variations, and the factories are also copying the wildly impractical as well. It almost looks like desperation, as well it may be. For our manufacturing has almost ceased to exist, as we import 90% of the shoes in our shops. 51.4% of the world's shoes are made in China, with a total of 74% from Asia. Our designers and dealers still send designs to Asia, but for ten years we have inevitably seen a growing oriental influence on the shoes. It will be interesting to see if globalisation of feelings and desires can coincide with globalisation of trade, and whether you can continue to provide what we really want to wear.