
Standing Tall: The Curious History of Men in Heels

Open until June 2016

Dutch, 16th century

This tall boot dates to the 16th century and reflects the style of footwear used by men just prior to the adoption of the heel in Western dress. The sole of the boot features layers of leather creating a low platform that would have augmented height but there is no evidence of a distinct heel. One of the intriguing questions about early heels in European dress is, how did shoemakers go about constructing heels for their eager customers when the heel suddenly came into fashion?

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Persian, 17th century

The heel was not a European invention, instead it originated in Western Asia centuries ago in relation to horseback riding and the invention of the stirrup. This pair of Persian riding shoes features shagreen-covered heels and is the type of footwear that may have inspired European men to wear heels.

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French or English, mid-17th century

This small shoe dates to the middle of the 17th century and was most likely made for a well-to-do boy. The fact that the wearer was male is suggested by the shape and type of heel. Stacked leather 'polony' heels were popular on men's footwear at this time. That the child was well off is indicated by the height of the heel, its marked impracticality helped to declare the wearer's privilege. The heel is also painted red in keeping with the fashion of the day.

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English, turn of the 18th century

As the 17th century wore on, the type of heels worn by men expressed two distinctly different forms of masculinity. Leather covered heels suggested refinement, while stacked leather connoted action and were commonly found on men's riding boots. This 'thigh' boot features a high stacked leather heel and was clearly designed to be worn in harsh riding conditions such as battle. The use of hard thick, 'jack' leather provided a great deal of protection while the stacked leather heel would have kept the rider's foot in the stirrup.

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Men's mules, English, c. 1690-1715

Men and women wore distinctly different heels by the end of the 17th century. Whether stacked or leather covered, men's heels were typically broad and sturdy. Women's heels, in contrast, were most often leather-covered and very narrow. This pair of men's mules features high flared heels in keeping with turn of the 18th century men's fashion and would have been worn at home as part of a gentleman's undress.

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Italian, first half of the 18th century

In addition to being associated with effeminacy, in the early years of the 18th century, the high heel was criticized as being an affront to God. Heels artificially increased height and therefore went against divine design. This pair of red silk shoes featuring appropriately low red heels is said to be papal.

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English, 1760-1780

Despite the loss of the high heel in men's fashion in the 18th century, low heeled shoes of brocaded silk ornamented with glittering buckles or secured with large bows continued to be acceptable for court dress. The occasional man's heel even continued to be highlighted by a flash of colour such as this shoe which features a pink leather-covered heel.

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Possibly Hungarian, early 19th century

Early 19th century pantaloons were designed to create a long lean line. This was achieved by a strap at the hem that could be wrapped under the foot if the pantaloons were to be worn inside a boot, or if worn full length then slipped under the sole of heeled footwear. The style was highly recommended to men of short stature as it allowed them to wear height augmenting heels without criticism. This Hessian boot with its little heel and extravagant embellishment would have been perfect for pantaloons.

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German, mid-19th century

Nineteenth century men's boots were divided between sleek and sturdy, privileged and practical. Men of means wore refined and polished boots linked to the long tradition of equestrianism while the boots worn by labourers were rough and utilitarian; designed for durability. This pair of German boots are very similar to those worn on the Canadian and American frontiers. Indeed many new immigrants headed West after arriving in North America bringing with them their well-made and hardworking boots.

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American, Justin and Tony Lama boots, 20th century

Packer boots, like the more iconic pull-on cowboy boots, originated on the frontier and were also worn for horseback riding. They evolved from 19th century lace-up boots and allow wearers to customize the fit. Like other cowboy boots, packer boots feature high heels and are commonly embellished with embroidery. This unembellished boot was made by Justin Boots, one of the oldest cowboy boot makers dating to the 1879. The embroidered example was made by Tony Lama established in 1911.

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French, turn of the 20th century

At the turn of the 20th century, slightly higher heels came back into fashion for men. At two inches, 'military heels' were considered high but their blocky shape and stacked leather construction identified them as masculine. Despite the use of the term 'military heel,' however, attempts to reinstate an elevating heel into men's fashion failed.

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American, mid-20th century

The heeled biker boot, or engineer’s boot, became popular with bikers after World War II. Groups of young veterans began to gather together drawn by their mutual love of motorcycles and by the late 1940s biker clubs were being established throughout North America. The biker offered an updated version of the cowboy and his sartorial codes, likewise, spoke to unfettered freedom.

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English, early 1960s. Worn by John Lennon.

When the Beatles became popular in the early 1960s, they stood at the forefront of the Peacock Revolution, a movement in men’s fashion to reclaim the privilege of extravagant dress. Their signature look included “mop-top” hair, tight fitting suits, and the now famous “Beatle boot.” These boots were typical Chelsea boots popular in men’s fashion since the 19th century with the exception that they featured a significantly higher heels borrowed from male flamenco dancers. This boot was worn by John Lennon.

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American, early 1970s

In the early 1970s, men’s fashion saw a return to traditional garments such as the three piece suit, albeit with slightly exaggerated features such as wider lapels and tight, form-fitting flared pants. Men were encouraged to use accessories, such as high heeled shoes, to express their individuality. The most popular form of footwear remained traditional lace-ups but like the three piece suit was updated by the addition of high heels, platform soles and a wide variety of non-traditional colours and patterns.

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Italian, Ferradini, 1972-1975. Worn by Elton John

1970s musicians like Elton John strutted on stage in outrageous outfits and glittering high heels. This stage-worn shoe features a heel reaching seven and a half inches in height. This was made possible by the addition of a five inch thick platform under the forepart of the foot. In the 1970s, men favoured footwear with distinct heels rather than shoes with solid platforms which in the history of Western fashion have always been feminine.

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Canadian, designed and made by Master John, 1973

The Toronto shoemaker Master John made these men's platform boots complete with five and a half inch heels, appliquéd stars, and veritable landscape in leather. In the 1970s, some men followed the lead of rock stars in adopting lavish personal adornment and elevating shoes cultivating a persona at once dandyish and hyper-masculine.

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American, Tony Lama, late 20th century

From dime novels and Wild West shows to Hollywood Westerns, the high-heeled cowboy symbolized unfettered freedoms and self-reliance in the 20th century. Although 19th century cowboys first splurged on ostentatious cowboy boots after reaching the railheads at the end of a long cattle drive, it took Hollywood and Dude Ranches for the cowboy boot with its pointy toe and low slung heel to finally take shape. This pair of Tony Lama boots reflects the fashion for finery from the use of lizard skin at the toe to the high stacked leather heel.

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American, 1950s and 2014

According to Western cultural ideals, men are 'supposed' to be naturally tall. Wearing heels only highlights perceived shortcomings, but lifts or inserts that can be hidden inside one's shoes, can be used covertly. In the 1950s height was linked to success in business as this pamphlet promoting elevator shoes suggests, This pair of lifts from today is customizable allowing the wearer to choose just how high he will go.

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American, 2014

Although men have worn heels over the last 400 years, none of these fashionable heels were inspired by women's fashion. For men attempting to dress femininely, however, the stiletto is ideal. This pair of size 16 heels is big enough to allow a man to step into a woman's shoes.

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