
TRICKS OF THE EYE



Heel-less or cantilever shoes

Several years ago, when collecting shoes was starting to obtain the traits of a conscious devotion, driven by new knowledge of fashion history, I have for the first time met a pair of the so-called heel-less shoes on e-bay. They were made by Francois Pinet in the late 1950s. I had a yen for these shoes for my collection and was fighting fiercely. The stakes were high and finally I gave in, thinking my time has not come yet.

A few years later I have acquired a similar pair at an auction in the UK for the estimate price and eventually my collection of heel-less shoes counts for more than ten pairs from various manufacturers.

Future footwear - heelless shoes

Here is the shoe of the future for the female - the shoe you'll never need to have heeled - because there are no heels. If you're worried about walking in court shoes without heels, then don't be, because they are held up by a strong metal support (which also gives balance to the shoe) that juts out from the sole to the instep. These heel-less court shoes were the sensation of the Italian fashion shows. Now a London firm has acquired the exclusive rights to bring them to Britain, and although they are somewhat expensive at the moment, they are on sale in London.

February 6, 1959

This was when I became interested in the history of the style of footwear called “heel-less”, “cantilever”, “shoes with cantilever heels” or “invisible heels”. English-language texts sometimes use the term “gravity shoes” (rather gravity-defying), French describe these heels using the expression “trompe l’oeil” - optical illusion or tricks of the eye.

To better apprehend the phenomenon of this type of footwear we will have to refer to the more established term - high heel shoes. Having no desire to reproduce all the arguments of the advocates and adversaries of the high heels, I shall only note that all the cons list mostly medical indications, while pros are of aesthetic or even erotic nature.

What effectively is a heel? The most essential definition describes the heel as the vertical support raising the back above the level of the toe. The aim of this shoe part is to provide elevation that is usually called pitch. The higher the heels - the bigger the pitch. The pitch is in particular what provides all the cons, which are adamantly supported by women and marvelled by most of the men.

To a wide extent of this term “heel-less” footwear endeavours to achieve the same effect without the heel. Technically I would divide this style of footwear into two types: proper “heel-less” and “cantilever”. The former is essentially a wedge with a tapered heel part slightly extending backward under the foot arch. The balance is gained by high instep, but leads to the smaller footprint.

The construction like this changes the gait of the wearer, forcing her/him to shift the weight forward to keep the balance while walking. Most likely, this is not very convenient, but possible to master. Circumstantially this is proved by a large number of instructional clips on the net.

Cantilever construction, on the contrary, does not require to learn wolfing anew, because in spite of the apparent absence of the customary vertical support, meaning heel, the shoe has a cantilever, which absorbs the body weight, just about the same way as the heel. With all the designer diversity of the cantilever, it nevertheless provides the balance essential for locomotion.

Who is first?

In the history of fashion this question often remains unanswered, especially because it does not seem possible to name a single creator or pinpoint an exact time of fashion innovation.

The origin of the heel itself is a complicated matter and there is no single opinion among fashion historians. Some refer to the Ancient Egypt, some point to the possible military provenance as a pre-requisite for equitation. Some way or another, it is known in certain that expansion of heels in civilian fashion in Europe started with Catherine de Medici in the middle of the 16th century. From the late 16th to the end of the 18th century heeled shoes were equally favoured by women and men.

It should be noted that up to 1870s the shoes were manufactured without strong metal shanks and high heel was a technological challenge. In England, for instance, this problem was compensated by the thickness of the heel, which might have reached one third of the length of the sole, so that the beast of the “sensible” heel would provide support to the arch of the foot.

When a slimmer heel was used (like in France) it was often shifted closer to the foot arch. Similar examples could be found in traditional footwear, as for example, in Finland, where the heel is placed not under the back of the foot, but rather under its arch. Exactly this principle of shifting the balance to the foot arch has laid the foundation of the footwear with cantilever shoes in modern fashion and the advent of new materials have significantly broadened diversity of the designer's ideas.

So who, after all, is the first?

As is customary in science, even if it is a science of fashion, authenticity of information is best proved with documents. The earliest evidence of use of cantilevered heels in our archive dates back to the press photo of 1936. French footwear designer Andre Perugia is pictured in Saks Fifth Avenue in Chicago trying his new styles on Mary Palermo.

1936



Lady's shoes of tomorrow

Andre Perugia, Paris designer, is shown above placing a newly designed all steel evening slipper that has a moorish vamp and fish heel on foot of Mary Palermo, model at Saks Fifth Avenue of Chicago, while Miss Palermo wears a slipper fashioned in gilt metal with split heel and a clamp at rear of foot. These shoes are designed on the theory that the wearer should take the weight from the arch and distribute it to the heel and ball of foot, and are made of metal.

October 3, 1936

1937

Another widely known shoe model, created by Perugia in 1937, is called Angelique sandals. The picture of this shoe illustrated the article on Perugia in Wikipedia. Organisers of the exhibition “Footwear. French passion” (La Chaussure, une passion française, 2012, Paris) note that this model was inspired by one of the sculptures of Pablo Picasso.

1939

British Pathe site features an archive clip made in 1939 and titled “EVE, AD 2000!”, in which American designers “predicts what women and one unfortunate man will be wearing in the year 2000”
Among the shoe styles shown in the reel is a cantilever shoe very similar to the 1940s Delman shoe now in the Bata Shoe Museum collection.



"EVE, AD 2000!"

British Pathe, 1939

1941

USA patent № 129,616 was granted to Donelson Glassie on September 23 1941. Despite of the fact that description in the patent does not bear any special references to the heel construction, it claims “a new, original and ornamental Design for a Shoe, of which the following is the specification, reference being had to the accompanying drawing forming a part thereof.”

As you can see the drawing shows a cantilever heel.



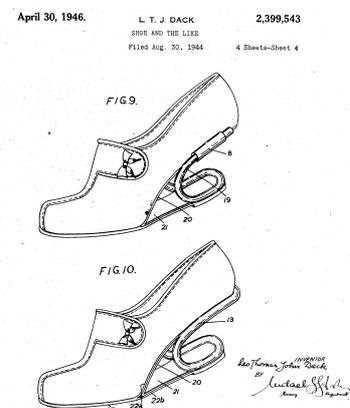
USA Patent № 129,616

September 23, 1941

1946

On April 30, 1946 Englishman Leo Thomas John Dack was granted a US patent № 2,399,543. Application in Great Britain registered in 1943.

At least one of the drawings accompanying the patent shows a variant of the cantilever heel made of metal rods.



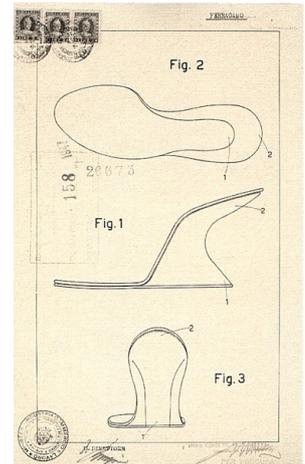
USA Patent № 2,399,543

April 30, 1946

1947

On May 10, 1947 “a shoemaker of stars” Salvatore Ferragamo obtained an Italian patent № 26655 - “Support shape for shoe sole, with central spur and support for the heel.”

The same year Ferragamo was awarded with Neiman Marcus prize for the “Invisible shoe” and model with upper made of transparent nylon threads. The basis of this shoe was a so-called F-type wedge, which is essentially a cantilever construction.



Патент № 26655

10 мая 1947 года



Salvatore Ferragamo, famous Italian designer, arrives in New York aboard the Queen Elizabeth, September 1. He is en route to Dallas, Texas, where he will be receive an award for his service to the fashion field

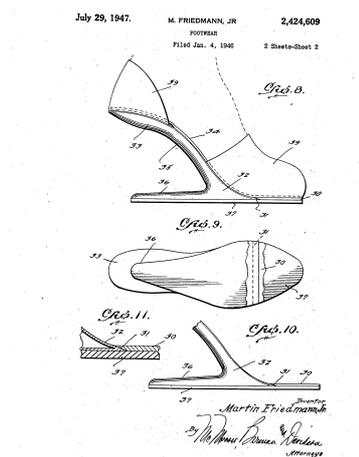
September 1, 1947

1947

US patent № 2,424,609 granted to Martin Friedmann, Jr. on June 29 1947, is probably the closest in terms of technical solution to the actually manufactured cantilever shoes.

Here is an excerpt from the patent:

”A still further object of the invention is the provision of such a shoe characterised by the omission of the conventional heel portion and the consequent wear incident thereto.”



US patent № 2,424,609

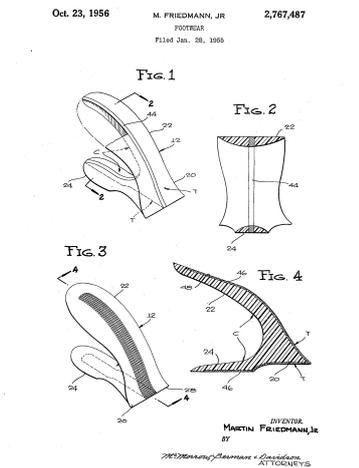
June 29, 1947

1956

The same Martin Friedmann has received another patent № 2,767,487 on October 23, 1956

What the patent claims is:

“In a shoe for women, the combination of a flat shoe sole, with an arch and heel support unit comprising a shank, a heel supporting portion conformably shaped to fit the instep and heel of a wearer and extending upwardly and outwardly from said shank, a lower projecting member carried by and extending outwardly from said shank in space relation beneath said portion...”



US patent № 2,399,543

April 30, 1946

1950s

Another clip from the British Pathe archives presents a 1950s German fashion show with some shoes styled nearly identical to the modern heelless shoes that boggle the imagination today’s fashion victims.

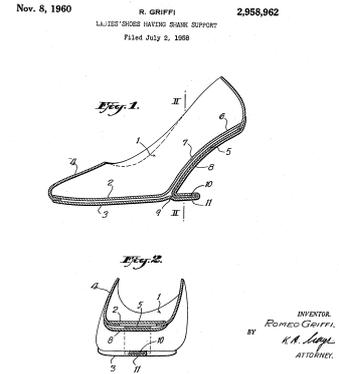


Ladies Shoe Fashions

British Pathe, 1950-1959

1958

Our collection of cantilever shoes contains three pairs manufactured, as printed on the label, under the licence from Griffi. As I found out later, Romeo Griffi was granted a UK patent for cantilever design on June 10, 1958. US patent US2958962 (A) was issued in 1961.



UK patent № 875,788

June 10, 1958

Heelless cantilever shoes under the license of Griffi were produced in Italy by companies like Salvatore Ferragamo (under Florentina’s label) and Natale Ferrario. Some were made expressly for Kempners - a well-known shoe store in Little Rock, Arcansas. Shoes made for Francois Pinet brand do not mention any licence or patent, but they bear the name of another Italian producer - Sebastian. In his book “The Seductive Shoes: Four Centuries of Fashion Footwear” fashion historian Jonathan Walford, mentions that this was a “short-lived fad” that did not really catch on and died away in the early 1960s.



Another pair of heelless shoes in gold leather by Salvatore Ferragamo

Florentina’s, 1958, Italy

"Floating" shoes with no heels with red suede upper and gilded leaf shaped decoration on the vamp.

Griffi.
Handcrafted in Italy
expressly for Kempners
Italy, 1958-1959



Can the investigation be completed?

No way! Anyone, who is at least somewhat familiar with the history of fashion, knows that designers like to be inspired by the past, "citing" the ambience of the times gone, reviving the forgotten in new colours and materials.

The heel as the most significant and expressive part of the shoes, just could not have escaped the eye of the shoe artists.

During the 60s and 70s footwear designers keep on experimenting with cantilever heels and from time to time heat the imagination of unsophisticated consumers, tempting them with springy metal frames or shaped wooden wedges, or plastic geometry.



1970s, USA



1958-1960, Natale Ferrario, Italy



1975-1979, Can Can, USA



2010, Jan Jansen, Netherlands



1970s, Europe



1958-1959, Francois Pinet, France



The so-called heelless shoes are displayed at the National Shoe Fair in Chicago.

October 24, 1960

**21 century.
Inspirit,
cite,
copy?**

It was only in the beginning of the 21st century when the heelless shoes retrieve shocking attractiveness and develops into a wide variety of forms and prices. You get the impression that designers are mostly competing to invite the attention of the stars, and not of the common customer. And the more outrageous, the more controversial the star is — the better for the brand.

A talented Japanese self-taught shoemaker Noritaka Tatehana (noritakatatehana.com) creates stunning heelless shoes for celebrities like Lady Gaga and Daphne Guinness. Designer relates that the idea of 23 cm high shoe monsters was inspired by "Kan Pokkuri" - clogs that Japanese children made using empty cans, running a rope through the holes and fastening them on the feet.

Olivier Theyskens is one of the designers who left his mark on footwear haute-couture stage with Nina Ricci Fall 2009 collection presenting a strange combination of high platforms and stilettos, if only they did not reach the catwalk floor.

New York Magazine wrote: “From what we can tell, not one model fell, which proves the theory that heel-less shoes are easy to walk in. Now that’s the power of platforms. And gravity.”

Quite a few designers tried their hand at heelless footwear including, Giuseppe Zanotti, Mark Jacobs, Kei Kagami, Jeffrey Campbell, Jan Jansen, Jean Paul , Manolo Blahnik, Natasha Morro, Kobi Levi and Antonio Berardi. Victoria Beckham made appearance in New York in 2008 at the presentation of her new fragrance in Macy’s.

In my opinion, one of the most original and futuristic creations in the style of heelless footwear resulted from a collaboration of world renown architect Zaha Hadid and United Nude shoe company.

Obviously, the success of this partnership is determined by the fact that, creative director of the company is Rem D. Koolhaas, who acquired an education in architecture and happens to be a niece of another Remment Lucas "Rem" Koolhaas - a famous Dutch architect, theorist of deconstructivism.

Noritaka Tatehana
Olivier Theyskens
Giuseppe Zanotti
Mark Jacobs
Kei Kagami
Jeffrey Campbell
Jan Jansen
Jean Paul Gaultier
Manolo Blahnik
Natasha Morro
Kobi Levi
Antonio Berardi



Company press-release states that NOVA is an “innovative cantilevered system that allows the staggering 16 cm (6.25 in) heel to appear completely unsupported”

The upper of the shoe combines metallic chromed vinyl rubber and is lined with the highest quality Italian kid nappa leathers. The hidden platform and heel are composed of fibreglass and the outsole is made of rubber.

NOVA. Shoes with cantilever heels, made of vinyl, rubber, leather and fibreglass.

Zaha Hadid for United Nude

2013

NOVA - is a real innovation in footwear from the designer and technological perspective. To create it a method of rotation molding was used, allowed for such a smooth and seamless result.

To become part of fashion history, one must study it first.

Definitely, I do not claim to call my short story to be a historic research on such an interesting idea as heelless footwear. It is merely a collector's narrative.

To defy gravity has always been the dearest dream of humanity. Some relied on the wings, some on "gravity-gadget", while shoe designers make their contribution trying to raise the better part of humanity above the sinful earth.

I reckon the shoe manufacturers have almost outright understood slim market potential of this style of footwear, but the PR possibilities are endless and designers will most probably over and over again wander to this cul-de-sac, striving to bless us with yet another revolution in shoe fashion.

As a collector, I do not mind! Send a pair to the museum, when you create something new. But just in case, it will not hurt to study history, fashion history, I mean.

June 15, 2014
Moscow