

Displaying Shoes

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Abstract:

As a handbook for curators dealing with costume has been suggested, I thought it appropriate to update my previous talks on displaying museum shoes. Now I look at three aspects: What to show, How to show it and Visible Storage. Visitors want to see what was worn in your area. Use for example a Chinese shoe for bound foot to introduce Foot Health. Avoid other 'themes'. Display according to *Guidelines for Costume*, aiming for 45°, so both toe and heel visible; also inside, and interesting soles, in the condition last worn, leaving the shoe to tell its story. Cabinets are now available for visible storage, so make the whole collection with full catalogue available to the public.

Content: Deciding what to show / How to show it / Visible storage

Deciding what to show

First, deciding what to show will reveal gaps in most collections. Visitors expect to see what was worn locally, not the same story everywhere. But you will almost certainly find that you have many women's wedding shoes, a lot of infants' and small children's, but few men's; though probably also a Chinese shoe for bound foot and other foreign souvenirs. So you can then explain why these survive (the wedding changes a woman's life for ever, so she saves the wedding dress and shoes; she usually also saves the baby's first shoes and sometimes also the first walking shoes, that significant first step into the adult world), while men's rarely survive: they buy smart shoes for dress wear, take them for work as they become less smart, and finally wear them for dirty jobs and gardening, until they are fit for nothing but the bin (or concealing in a building for a range of reasons). In foreign lands, nothing seems to summarise their difference as much as the local style of shoe, and travellers have been taking them home for centuries.

You can use the Chinese to introduce the subject of foot health, for too much footwear worn in the rest of the world also needs a health warning: women's generally (and certainly the high heels of the new millennium), some men's and even children's are rarely ideal. Surely we have a duty to point out the dangers when we have the material for comparison with other, sometimes less extreme periods, and show how much what we wear reflects the spirit of our times. Otherwise 'themed' displays tend to be a disaster: your idea of exotic, symbolic, fetish, early, may not be anyone else's. But most of all, shoes look their best when adjacent to footwear or other garments of similar date (5-10 years; not, for example, early in a century shoes with a mid-century dress): the colours, textures, shapes were compatible at the time and inevitably look strange and even dull if next to objects of a different date.

How to show it

Secondly, how to show them. While we know the logical place is on the floor, detail is not visible there: we accept that shops put shoes in the window at a level where they can be inspected. Or, if you must show one peeping out from under a skirt, put its pair nearby where it can comfortably be seen. Shoes are small; so please not at the back of a deep case, nor in the shadow of other objects: there is no excuse with modern lighting. Remember always the ICOM Costume Committee's *Guidelines for Costume*: maximum 50 lux (and only lit when necessary), steady temperature of 18° C, 50% relative humidity, and no open displays.



Fig. 1: Slip-on shoe made by Skomakeri Framat, Stockholm 2009.
Photo: © June Swann.

Do not point the toe at the viewer: it makes the heel, or lack of it, invisible. Place the toe pointing towards the front, with the shoe at 45°, and check from where the viewer will stand that the heel end is visible (fig. 1). Do not stuff the shoe in such a way that the lining and sock are invisible: the maker's name, town, trade mark, size and all sorts of interesting inscriptions may be there. Also the sole of old shoes may be as intriguing as the upper: equally decorated and inscribed, or unbelievably repaired, which then tells more of poverty and the thrifty past than any words; so show it, especially if there is a pair. Or use a transparent shelf with suitable lighting. Do not try to make shoes look like new: they tell a much more interesting story as last worn. One day a lady from a local grand house asked what to do with a pair of shoes found in the house. They were good quality, black leather low-cut slip-ons, pointed toe, low heel of about 1800-1810, a common style (as fashionable again in 2010). But it was immediately obvious a lady wore them one day when heavy rain had left deep puddles, which filled one shoe with bright pink mud and splashed the other. The answer was, please leave them alone. The mud will do no more damage, but removing it might, and there are clean shoes like these in many museums. They prove that grand ladies in the past really did walk in shoes totally unsuitable for the conditions, just like today. Let them speak for themselves, with the label leaving scope for the imagination: visitors stay longer then.

Visible Storage

Finally, it is rare that there is space to put everything on show, and that will last but briefly. But now more companies are making units for visible storage, expensive, but cheaper than staff for ever spending all their time helping or supervising researchers. I still bless the museum where almost every shoe was on show, with the catalogue. I had made an appointment, the curator explained the system, and said, if you really need to handle a shoe, just ask. I worked for five days, and on the Friday afternoon knocked on her door and said, thank you very much: it was paradise; every museum should be like this.