

Soul to SOLE

Bella Pollen recounts how an extraordinary collection of shoes took her on an equally unusual journey, from Monaco to Kabul

Imagine you were the kind of woman in whose wardrobe hung only couture; suits by Schiaparelli and Molyneux, swing coats by Dior, a rack of slithering bias-cut gowns stitched by Vionnet's tireless seamstresses. Imagine, too, that you were in possession of a pair of shoes to match every one of these outfits – and by match I'm not suggesting "go reasonably well with", I mean match: the same colour, cut from the same bolt of material. And lastly, imagine those shoes have been moulded to every contour of your feet by one of the twentieth century's most legendary shoe designers, Roger Vivier.

Such was Lot 107. Shoes. Sixty pairs, belonging to Mona Bismarck, the five-times married, thrice-widowed heiress and one of the world's best-dressed women. The auction was being held at Sotheby's in Monte Carlo and, as I stumbled through the door, the bidding had just opened at \$1,000.

Even from the back of the saleroom, the shoes dazzled. All the same shape, constructed from the same last, the differences lay in the colours and details. A lemon chiffon pair was decorated with a hillock of tiny pearls, another in burnt orange had glittering rhinestone teardrops pinned between two tucks of grosgrain. And on it went along the row: shoes in violet, tangerine, candy-stripe



ABOVE: THE AUTHOR, WITH HER COLLECTION OF ROGER VIVIER'S. PHOTOGRAPH: VENETIA DEARDEN. SITTINGS EDITOR: FIONA GOLDFAR. INSET: AGED EIGHT, ON RIGHT, WITH HER SISTER, ON THE SHIP FROM NEW YORK TO SOUTHAMPTON

dupion, each an exquisitely constructed work of art.

Not that I gave a damn, mind you.

I'd come to Monte Carlo with my then husband, who was attempting to sell an Old Master drawing to a client. I should have known better. Giacomo was first and foremost a gambler, and I'd barely tasted the salt on the air before he announced an intention to hit the roulette table. In those days, fighting was our MO for the pettiest of disputes. Even on our honeymoon, after a disagreement about the rules of backgammon, Giacomo had packed his bag and left for the airport, the flower

I'd given him still incongruously tucked behind one ear.

Now it was my turn to storm out of our hotel. I'd wandered the streets, alternately tiger-eyed with fury and weepy from self-pity, before eventually finding myself outside the handsome stucco entrance of Sotheby's.

As the child of an auctioneer, and a Sotheby's auctioneer at that, I was weaned on the drama and excitement of the saleroom. I was only too familiar with the obsessive desire to acquire something precious, and, better still, to snatch it from under the nose of another. But I didn't want those shoes. At least, I didn't think I did. They weren't my size, let alone my style. If you must know, they were the style of shoe that accessorised the shape of leg rising to a slender hip generally placed underneath a certain weight of breast owned by the sort of woman, I had come to realise, I was not.

So quite how they were knocked down to me remains something of a mystery. Retrospectively, the best I could come up >

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with was this: for a suspended moment, those shoes represented the woman I wished I was, one who would stand by her man at the roulette table, in towering heels and a dress slit to the thigh. A woman who'd blow on his dice and whisper in his ear. I wasn't that woman, at least not that afternoon. I was a 24-year-old nag in flip-flops, with a small baby back in London – and those roulette chips clinking in Giacomo's pocket had looked a lot like the down payment on our first flat.

You want spontaneous recklessness, I remember thinking, well, here it is. And as the bidding rose, my hand shot into the air and stubbornly remained there until even Karl Lagerfeld, with a look of bemusement in my direction, lowered his own. And thus it came to be: Lot 107. Shoes. Sixty pairs were mine, along with a terrifyingly large invoice.

"Always buy something you can't afford," was my father's sole advice for collectors, but this was not quite the same as "Bid without a dollar in your pocket." Nevertheless, if not I then fate must have been blowing on the dice that night, because Giacomo won at the tables and he won big. In a gesture utterly typical of him, he used the money to pay for my shoes and, what's more, he did it laughing.

Since then, my Roger Vivier collection has lived in my bedroom, in a mahogany dresser that used to house my grandfather's leather brogues. Over the years, the colours have faded. Sunlight has hardened the cloth bows to snapping point. The tiny pearl mountains have unravelled and scattered. Nevertheless, I love them all. Every time I look at them I think how very critical the relationship is between a woman and her shoes, and how very prettily they represent her almost fathomless needs and emotional changes. The first time I remember choosing what to put on my feet was the year I traded urban life in Manhattan for boarding school in England. This was not a swap I was happy with, and I waited, sullen and miserable, in John Lewis's shoe department, clutching my numbered ticket and staring at the floor.

"See anything you like?" my mother asked. Until then, I was familiar with only three types of footwear: the functional gumboot, the beloved sneaker and the hated Mary Jane, which squeaked when I walked.

But there, on the shelf in front of me, was the shoe of my dreams.

Made of soft brown leather, with tiny heart-shaped perforations dotted across the front, it had a crepe sole and a neat side buckle. "A popular choice, indeed," the salesman assured us, squeezing my foot, "and plenty of room for growth."

I wiggled my toes. I was a runner, a tumbler. I could hang from the trees in shoes like these.

"Well," my mother said, "if you're absolutely sure."



BELLA POLLEN
IN LONDON,
AGED 23

I looked down at my beautiful shoes and felt a flush of shame

Showing new girls round the school was a duty tasked to the sixth-formers – blasé English girls who drifted through the corridors like stoned nymphs from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But it wasn't their smudged eyes or even the cigarettes hidden in their bras that made them appear so exotic, it was their shoes. Cowboy boots embedded with jewels, red leather clogs with yellow platforms, elasticated slippers made from coloured snakeskin.

One of them glanced down at my feet with a bored smile.

"Hey, you know there's no uniform here, right?"

I nodded.

"Then why are you wearing those hideous Clarks sandals?"

I looked down at my beautiful shoes and felt a flush of shame. For the first time in my life I did not belong. I was already in the wrong country, with the wrong accent, but it was the wrong shoes that had clinched it.

"That's all you got, girl," Erin Brockovich might have reserved the line for me, "two wrong feet in fuckin' ugly shoes."

"My mother made me," I said.

The salesman was right. My Clarks had plenty of room for growth. I wouldn't be getting a new pair any time soon. Unfortunately, I come from a long line of late developers. Well into my teens, I remained a shortarse, with the body of a 10-year-old, flat ground out of which curves and hills had yet to rise.

One by one, my contemporaries shot up past me, acquiring new and interesting body parts along the way. I remained unformed, a dull lump of clay, waiting to be sculpted into something more interesting.

In what shape or size breasts and hips were allocated appeared to be something of a cosmic lottery. If my chest formed a single sandbank like Matron's, was I doomed to a future of navy flats and surgical stockings? Had slutty Kate's plump freckled booty decreed that she'd end up shagging the preternaturally cute Latin teacher? Out of the confusion of puberty, the question that eclipsed all others was – what kind of woman would I be?

For two years I remained Alice, straining to reach the door to Wonderland. Then finally, a small crumb of the cake that said "Eat me" rolled my way. But it was not my legs, breasts or hips that grew first. It was my feet. Fast, relentlessly, woefully out of proportion with the rest of my body. And that was only the beginning of the problem. Life permits you only so many torn ligaments, twisted ankles and car crashes before big feet turn to bad feet, and just wait until DNA comes knocking with its hereditary gift of fallen arches and mystery bone spurs! My feet, beneficiaries of all of the above, never stood a chance.

There followed the ugly-sister years, humiliating scenes in shops like Manolo Blahnik, where I tried to winch my boats into the daintiest heels imaginable, >

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where I wept for the shoes I could never wear and the woman I would never become. The girl in high heels is a powerful image, the embodiment of sex appeal. Men buy into it, and I did, too. If I couldn't nail that look, then what else was there?

It took me the longest time to figure out that women are made up of a thousand looks. The girl in high heels represents only one out of a portfolio of different identities that we keep wrapped up in our body, irrespective of shape. Women are brilliantly adaptable creatures, able to segue from lover to parent to corporate kick-boxer on an eternal loop. OK, so in this equal-opportunity world, men are, too, it's just that women are expected to do it with more style. In the absence of wizardry, we need shoes. They are our ambassadors. They announce to the world who we are – or at least who we'd like to be in that particular moment. Great shoes give us the confidence to stand tall, to step forward and be counted. Great shoes ground us and give us winged feet at the same time.

While back, I was sitting in a restaurant on the Mexican border when a man strutted in, flanked by a couple of meaty bodyguards. The three of them sat down on the table next to where a friend and I were sharing a steak. The Mexican was cartel royalty. All clinking gold and stingray *cuadra* boots. He ordered food, lit a Montecristo, his eyes roving lazily around the room until they came full circle to me. A smile glimmered on his face – the sort of smile that glimmers on the face of a cheetah when it spots that one gazelle lagging behind the pack. He blew out a cloud of smoke, then without dropping his gaze, reached slowly under the table and seized my bare leg.

My friend tensed, but I already knew how the situation was going to pan out. As the Mexican's enormous paw attempted to close around my ankle, a look of shock and disappointment crossed his face. *Calves like pistons! Bail bondsman boots!* He let go as though he'd been injected with venom and, deeply subdued, went back to his plate of grilled peppers.

I'm sorry, I wanted to tell him. If only you'd asked, I could have warned you. *I'm not that sort of a woman.*

Occasionally, I eye up my Viviers and wonder – what would life have looked like had I walked in different shoes? Would I have fallen for different men?

Adopted different values? Developed different interests? And then I think, who I am kidding? I got it right all those years ago with my Clarks sandals.

The truth is I'm still a runner. Restless, domestically fidgety, I'm happiest on the road. There are so many places I have yet to go and I just can't get there fast enough in high heels...

I began this article on a plane. Later, walking along the corridor of my Dubai hotel, I notice that my desert boots are expelling small puffs of dust on the Park Hyatt's cream carpet. Dubai is a sweltering

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90 degrees and my feet are sweating. A muster of girls in strappy sandals stream past me like colourful storks. Once again, I'm in the wrong place in the wrong shoes, but it's OK...

I'm en route to Afghanistan and travelling light. There is room in my bag for one surplus item only, and that's a single shoe cosseted by bubble wrap. It's my favourite Vivier from the collection – red satin with a small peephole studded with diamanté – and I'm taking it to a girls' school in Kabul for a spot of show-and-tell.

Earlier this year, on discovering I was hoarding Mona Bismarck's collection, Roger Vivier asked if I would host a lunch for them – an opportunity for their customers to try on the new while admiring the old. This was hardly a chore, but nevertheless, in return, they offered to make a donation to a project of my choice. And so I have found myself travelling to Marefat School in Dasht-e-Barchi, the Hazara district of western Kabul.

Marefat began as an ideal, the tenets of democracy taught in a bombed-out mud hut to 30 students, but it quickly became a reality, constructed brick by brick by the local, predominately illiterate Hazara community who, one by one, were talked into educating daughters alongside sons. Surrounded by the marbled peaks of the Hindu Kush and all the savage romance those mountains embody, the school is a low, three-sided building flanking a courtyard playground. The faded pastels of the outside walls are redolent of the colourful glory days of Kabul in the

Sixties and Seventies. Poignantly, the girls have painted the inside of their classrooms with their favourite heroines, Cinderella and Snow White, Western culture's very own subjugated women, whose combination of purpose and feistiness ultimately conquers all. And feisty these girls will have to be. Marefat has been subjected to mob attack, the building itself is constructed on a fault line, allied military withdrawal is imminent. There's nothing stable about any of this, and yet, yet... Barely a decade after it began, Marefat is groaning under the weight of 3,000 students. Graduates are snatching up scholarships in America, in India – the students are being hired across every sector, from education to politics, economics and medicine.

These girls are being taught humanism, feminism and equal rights; their generation's fight will be how to reconcile those equal rights with cultural and religious pressure to be a good Muslim. *What kind of woman should I be?* is the question they ask us over and over again... They listen carefully as I unwrap my red shoe and explain. They look bemused. The story makes no sense, of course. The connections are too random, the significance too personal. Why, one of them tentatively asks, am I standing here in *dasht-e* boots, when I could be elsewhere in satin heels? I'm not sure how to answer. *Because I'm lucky enough to have a choice? Because ultimately all women walk the same path?* Am I central to their journey, I wonder with sudden guilt, or are they merely a fleeting moment in mine? Sughra, an astute 16-year-old, has been watching my face closely. She lays her hand on my arm. "Don't forget us, miss," she says urgently, "please, don't forget us."

I won't forget. I can't.

I glance at that red satin shoe perched over a rickety metal desk at the back of the classroom. I look down at the shoes of the girls. They're black and dusty, caked with dirt and the pale, dried mud of Kabul's broken streets. They're cheaply made and heavily used, with frayed straps and worn-down soles, yet they must still travel a long road, one filled with the potholes of prejudice, poverty and immutable social barriers. They're practical shoes, ugly shoes, with no aesthetic value whatsoever, and yet, as I go on looking at them, buckled to the feet of these exceptional young women, I think how beautiful they are. ■