

ALL CREDITS: NORTHAMPTON FOOTWEAR MUSEUM



Louis heels

Although ladies shoes with Louis heels are still being produced, particularly at the top end of the market, they are no longer what one could call a 'true' Louis either in shape or construction. What has remained the same, however, even after some 300 years, is that whereas a normal heel is attached directly on top of the sole, with a Louis, it is attached directly to the seat of the shoe and the sole is extended through the waist and up the front of the heel as far as the top piece. The title image shows a typical example of an original covered Louis heel with a leather sole and top piece all stitched together.

The name originated in the seventeenth century with King Louis XIV. He was only five foot three inches tall, so he had his shoes made with high heels in order to increase his stature. No one else was permitted to have heels higher than his own as this would have defeated the object,

namely to disguise his small stature. They soon became popular with ladies, in particular his mistress Madame Pompadour who was what we would now refer to as a fashion icon. This did not create a difficulty for Louis—it was taller men that were his problem. In the late 1700s, Napoleon banned them as an extravagance in an age of equality; even so, Marie Antoinette contrived to go to the guillotine in two inch Louis heels.

The term 'Louis' originally referred to heels with a concave curve and outward taper at the bottom or base of the heel as again shown in the photograph. They are not only extremely elegant but also ergonomic, as the top piece falls directly beneath the natural heel of the foot. This assists natural balance and an even distribution of weight which helps to keep the back and legs aligned. Furthermore, a Louis heel is also good from a strength point of view. The fact that the sole extends up the front of the

heel helps to prevent the latter from being wrenched off in wear. In the days before buttress nails, styrene heels and modern attaching machines, high heels were attached using a combination of stitching, pins and animal glue, so the extra strength that the Louis provided was most welcome.

MECHANISATION

They were, however, extremely labour intensive which made them expensive to produce and therefore restricted their market to women of wealth and high social standing. Nothing changed in this respect until the mechanisation of footwear manufacture at the end of the 19th century and, even then, their manufacture remained a complex procedure involving numerous extra operations besides all those normally required at a time when all soles were still attached by stitching.

For instance, the waist and seat of the sole had to be reduced in substance

to allow it to follow the curved shape of the front of the heel. It was then split to divide it at the seat to allow the grain side to go up the front of the heel and the other flesh part cut to form a small thin tongue to fit under the front of the heel. It has been said that the character of a well-made Louis heeled shoe lies in the relation of the heel to the back of the shoe, a perfectly fitting flap and an accurate blending of the heel to the sole; small details which, if correct, produce beauty of line but if incorrect spoil the shoe completely.

It is for this reason that positioning and attaching the heel, and gluing the flap to the front of it had to be perfect. The small tongue previously referred to helped to prevent any gap where the waist of the sole met the front of the heel as it was effectively wedged as well as glued in place. Once the sole and heel were attached, no less than 10 separate sole and heel finishing operations were traditionally required before the shoe was completed. As can be imagined, blending the heel flap into the waist part of the sole was the most difficult part and required great skill on the part of the people performing the various trimming operations involved.

PRE-FINISHING

The 1960s saw everything change with the introduction of pre-finished soles. This was made possible because lasting machines became far more consistent and backpart moulding



made heel seats far more accurate and uniform. This made it possible to pre-shape and finish a sole so that after roughing and cementing both surfaces, it could be bonded directly to the shoe bottom. At a stroke, a large number of factory operations were removed and a huge cost saving made. This equally

This boot from 1910 demonstrates how a Louis heel was shaped to flow with the curves of the back and waist of the shoe.

applied to Louis heels through the introduction of injection moulded styrene heels which could be made with the finest of edges so that, with the heel attached, the heel flap could now be bonded at the same time as the sole itself.

The old problem of blending the heel flap into the waist was removed as a pre-finished sole could be trimmed to shape before the waist and flap were reduced in substance. Using resin rubber soling materials, Louis heels at last became a practical option for mass market ladies fashion shoes. Although everyday fashion has changed a great deal since then, they are still very much with us as, although modern heel shapes are very different from those of the past, they have a timeless elegance due to the flow of the sole through the waist and up the front of the heel in a single continuous line. Because of this, the Louis heel that has been with us for more than 300 years is likely to remain so for many more.



In the 1960s, Louis heels became far cheaper to produce, at last bringing their elegant lines to a mass market.