

# Shoes and Society: Stepping into History at the Bata Shoe Museum

## Zapatos y sociedad: caminando por la historia en el Bata Shoe Museum

ELIZABETH SEMMELHACK

Senior Curator of the Bata Shoe Museum

The Bata Shoe Museum 327, Bloor Street West Toronto (ON), Canadá M5S 1W7

elizabeth.semmelhack@batashoemuseum.ca

*Recepción del artículo 19-07-2010. Aceptación de su publicación 17-08-2010*

**RESUMEN.** El Bata Shoe Museum de Toronto (Canadá) es el museo de zapatos más grande de Norteamérica y alberga una colección de casi trece mil objetos que abarcan cuatro mil quinientos años de historia. Es, además, un centro internacional de investigación cuyo objetivo es el estudio, la exposición y la publicación de trabajos académicos y científicos sobre el significado cultural, histórico y sociológico del calzado. El museo abrió sus puertas al público el 6 de mayo de 1995 y fue fundado por Sonja Bata como una institución independiente y sin ánimo de lucro cuya función primordial era albergar y mostrar al público su célebre colección personal sobre calzado histórico y etnográfico. En el 2009, el museo recibió más de 110.000 visitantes.

El éxito del museo estriba en la capacidad del calzado como soporte y punto de partida para acceder a conceptos culturales complejos a través del atractivo que suscita en el público. Los zapatos son tangibles, incluso conmovedores testimonios de nuestros predecesores. El calzado puede también acercarnos a la intimidad de otros pueblos y otras culturas. Simples preguntas sobre quién llevó un determinado zapato o por quién fue hecho pueden abrir las puertas a cuestiones mucho más complejas que van desde las políticas de género y la construcción de la identidad social hasta temáticas referentes a las condiciones ambientales y la disponibilidad de recursos. Estos interrogantes más profundos son, precisamente, los que el museo se esfuerza por comunicar a través de sus exposiciones, publicaciones y programas públicos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** zapatos, nativos norteamericanos, circumpolar, género, chapines.

**ABSTRACT.** The Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, Canada is the largest shoe museum in North America and houses a collection of nearly 13,000 artifacts spanning 4,500 years of history. It is a centre for international academic research with a mandate to study, exhibit, and publish on the cultural, historical and sociological significance of footwear. The museum opened its doors to the public on May 6, 1995 and was established by Mrs. Sonja Bata as an independent, non-profit institution to house and exhibit her renowned personal collection of historic and ethnographic footwear. In 2009, the museum welcomed over 110,000 visitors.

The success of the museum rests on the capacity of footwear to serve as an accessible entry point into larger cultural concepts by engaging people on very personal levels. Shoes are tangible, even poignant reminders of the people from the past. Footwear can also bring us into startlingly intimate proximity to peoples of other cultures. Simple questions concerning who wore a certain shoe or by whom it was made can open avenues of inquiry leading to more complex questions ranging from gender politics and the construction of social identity to issues concerning environmental conditions and resource availability. These deeper levels of inquiry are precisely the ones that the museum strives to address through its exhibitions, publications and public programs.

**KEYWORDS:** shoes, Native North American, circumpolar, gender, chopines.

## Origins of the Collection

The visionary force behind the Bata Shoe Museum is the museum's Founding Chairman, Sonja Bata. Mrs. Bata was born and educated in Switzerland and as a young woman studied architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. In 1946, her marriage to Thomas J. Bata, head of the Bata Shoe Organization, brought her to Canada and turned her attention to footwear. The nationalization of the Czechoslovakian Bata holdings under Communist occupation at the end of the war focused the newly married couple's attention on rebuilding the organization outside of Czechoslovakia. As part of this undertaking Mrs. Bata frequently traveled on business to various places around the world. It was during these travels that she became fascinated with the footwear worn by other peoples and began to seek out examples of indigenous footwear. At first her collecting was motivated by the idea that indigenous footwear could inspire Bata designers as well as by concern that Western-style shoes were displacing traditional footwear. However, as her collection grew, so did her interest and before long she began to collect ethnographic and historical footwear in earnest.

By 1979, the collection had grown substantially. In response, the Bata Shoe Museum Foundation was created to professionally manage the ever-increasing collection and to sponsor and publish research on the role footwear has played in human history. The first study supported by the Foundation was Aliko Weber's research on Native North American footwear construction patterns. Her pioneering work resulted in the publication of the first typology of Native North American footwear, *North American Indian and Eskimo footwear: A Typology and Glossary*. The Foundation also funded circumpolar field research and collecting by Drs. Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe. Between 1983 and 1999, Drs. Oakes and Riewe conducted extensive field studies among numerous circumpolar culture groups including the Canadian Inuit, Greenland Inuit, Alaskan Eskimoan peoples, Saami and the peoples of Siberia. They also did research on Southwestern American indigenous footwear. Their research resulted in four major exhibitions and publications.

Drs. Oakes and Riewe were charged with gathering information about traditional boot-making directly from individual makers as well as collecting examples of traditional circumpolar footwear.



**Fig. 1. The Bata Shoe Museum was designed by Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama and opened in 1995. IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO (© RICHARD JOHNSON, <WWW.RICHARDJOHNSON.CA>)**

This focus on the makers reflected a marked break with traditional ethnographic collecting and established the collecting direction of the museum. The omission of the maker in traditional Western collecting practices perpetuates the fiction that indigenous material culture is created through an isolated continuity of traditions rigidly passed down generation to generation without individual self-awareness or stylistic innovation. However, by striving to record the voice of the maker, the spark of individual expression and intellectual exploration in addition to design innovation can be documented and the concepts that certain cultures are «timeless» and isolated from either internal forces of fashion or the external forces of cross-cultural influence can be challenged. This collecting approach has been central to all Bata Shoe Museum sponsored field trip research including research on footwear worn and made in India, Tibet and Mongolia.

With the encouragement of Alika Weber, Mrs. Bata decided to make her collection accessible to the public. Mrs. Bata engaged the acclaimed Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama to create a «gem of a museum» and in 1994 a suitable location in downtown Toronto was secured. Inspired by the shape of a shoebox, Mr. Moriyama created a 12,200 square metre, five-story structure combining state-of-the-art artifact storage and exhibit space.

Throughout the museum, Mr. Moriyama incorporated subtle reminders of shoemaking materials as well as architectural details that call attention to one's feet. The building is clad in a warm, fine-textured limestone chosen because of its reference to the look of leather while the impressive «floating» staircase, the architectural centrepiece of the museum, features holes cut into the risers of each stair allowing visitors to see the shoes of other people using the stairs. Mr. Moriyama also provided the museum with four exhibition spaces including a large permanent gallery that spans two floors, two large temporary galleries and one small temporary gallery.

### The Collection: Acquisitions, Conservation and Storage

The Bata Shoe Museum is constantly seeking out new artifacts. The majority of the museum's new acquisitions come from field research, renowned auction houses and dealers, and individual donors. With the exception of artifacts collected during field research, donations stand out as perhaps the most personal way that the museum acquires new artifacts. Direct contact with original owners allows the museum to gather important provenance information and to record the stories that the shoes have to tell.

All artifacts collected by the museum pass through conservation before being placed in storage. The museum with its limited full-time staff of twelve is privileged to have a conservator and it is the practice of the Bata Shoe Museum to conserve rather than restore artifacts. Worn footwear has significant cultural meaning; signs of wear can be as historically important as the shoes themselves. Therefore, conservation stabilizes artifacts but does not restore them. The conservation lab is



Fig. 2. View of a corridor of one of the Bata Shoe Museum's two large artifact storage rooms.

IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO (© MATTHEW PLEXMAN, <WWW.PLEXMAN.COM>)



**Fig. 3. Man's boot by Canadian shoemaker Master John, 1973.**

IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO  
(© RON WOOD)

visible to the public and visitors are encouraged to watch conservation in practice when they visit the museum.

Artifacts in the Bata Shoe Museum collection are stored on-site in two storage rooms. The first room houses the museum's circumpolar collection and its extensive collection of indigenous Native North American footwear; one of the largest collections of its kind in the world. The second room houses the rest of the museum's holdings and includes storage for footwear, shoemaking

tools, textiles, accessories, works on paper, paintings and sculpture. The majority of artifacts are stored on open shelving and are arranged by culture group and organized chronologically within these groupings.

In addition to its Native North American and Circumpolar holdings, the strengths of the collection include significant holdings of 18<sup>th</sup> century European footwear, late Qing dynasty Chinese footwear, West African footwear and footwear from the Indian sub-continent.



**Fig. 4. Chestnut crushing clog, 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO (© DAVID STEVENSON AND EVA TKACZUK)

### Exhibiting Footwear

In contrast to fine art which is often created to endure, shoes are created to be consumed by individuals situated within a particular society at a particular moment in time. This acute temporal positioning of footwear allows it to serve as a cultural signifier useful in identifying specific cultural moments. Just a quick glance at the shoe illustrated in figure 3 immediately brings to mind a very specific historical moment. However, the rich cultural nuances that dress has the power to communicate during the period when it is worn can also be quickly lost once fashions change or an item is removed from its cultural context. Herein lies both the opportunity and the challenge of exhibiting footwear.

### **All About Shoes: an Introduction to the Collection**

The Bata Shoe Museum's dedication to collecting footwear and footwear-related artifacts seems narrowly focused yet the diversity and depth of the collection permit a wide variety of topics to be researched and exhibited. Artifacts in the collection range in date from antiquity to contemporary times and represent many of the world's cultures. The

museum's semi-permanent exhibition *All About Shoes: Footwear through the Ages* is designed to offer visitors an introduction to the breadth of the collection and to the idea of looking at footwear as a cultural signifier. The exhibition is divided into thematic sections such as *Footwear of the Ancients*, *Shoes and Status* and *Shoes and Religion*. One of the most popular sections is *What's my Line?* where visitors are challenged to consider the purpose for which each shoe was made. The French chestnut crusher is a favourite artifact from this section because it looks like a medieval shoe designed for some nefarious purpose but instead is a 19<sup>th</sup> century French work shoe designed for the humble task of crushing chestnuts and acorns for pig fodder. There is also a section called *Fashion Afoot* dedicated to an overview of 20<sup>th</sup> century fashionable women's footwear, a section for children called *Small Soles and Tall Tales* which looks at footwear in relation to children's shoe-related fairytales, a section on traditional shoemaking and finally, a section exhibiting the footwear of eminent people.





**Fig. 5. All About Shoes gallery of the Bata Shoe Museum.** IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO  
(© RICHARD JOHNSON, <WWW.RICHARDJOHNSON.CA>)

Like the rest of the architecture of the museum, this permanent exhibition space features subtle details that draw the eye to shoe level; from the intricate parquet floor inspired by the fantastical designs of the graphic artist M. C. Escher to the mirrored facing that runs along the base of the casework. The architectural features, casework and thematic sections of this gallery are fixed but the artifacts are regularly rotated to conserve them and to provide repeat visitors with new artifacts from the collection to view.

### Changing Exhibitions

The other three galleries in the museum host temporary exhibitions and it is in these galleries that the footwear of specific cultures and time periods or footwear related to specific themes is explored in-depth. These exhibitions are typically curated in-house but the museum has also worked with guest curators such as Dr. Dorothy Ko of Columbia University for *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes in the Lives of Chinese Women from Late Imperial China* (2000). Temporary exhibitions draw extensively

on the museum collection but they also often involve loans of rare and unique examples of footwear from other museum collections worldwide.

The Bata Shoe Museum's temporary exhibitions can be divided into two main approaches; historic and/or culturally specific exhibitions and thematic exhibitions. The temporary exhibition galleries are «blank boxes» that are re-imagined for each exhibition through extensive design and construction to augment the content of each specific exhibition. Temporary exhibitions are designed to be engaging spaces that contextualize the artifacts for the visitors and help to advance the curatorial narrative. For exhibitions that seek to consider footwear from different time periods or cultures, the museum generally seeks to create exhibition environments that are evocative of the period or culture to be considered. Thematic exhibitions, which often look at types of footwear across cultures and time, typically incorporate creative floor plans and case design as organizational devices that sustain the didactic structure of the exhibition and create a coherent space in which to exhibit diverse cultural materials. The following are examples of each of these two distinctive curatorial approaches.

### An Historical Exhibition

In 2009, the Bata Shoe Museum opened *On a Pedestal: From Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels*. This ground-breaking exhibition was the first to consider the history of the chopine, one of the most unusual forms of footwear ever worn in Western dress.

The challenge was to introduce and contextualize an unusual form of elevating footwear not well known beyond a few historical specialists. The exhibition also charted the replacement of the chopine by heeled footwear, which was introduced into Western dress from the Near East at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Although chopines were worn in Spain and Italy for centuries, very few extant examples have survived. The Bata Shoe Museum worked with eleven international museums to secure loans including: the Victoria and Albert Museum, United Kingdom; Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Germany; Museo Bardini, Castello Sforzesco, Museo Palazzo Mocenigo and Museo Correr, Italy; Livrustkammaren and Skoklosters Slott, Sweden; Ambras Castle, Austria; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, United States; Museu Diocesà i Comarcal de Solsona, Catalonia, Spain; and the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada. Artifacts from the Bata Shoe Museum's own collection were included as well.

The exhibition sought to contextualize the chopine and explore its links to the socio-economic and political implications of the trade and consumption of textiles as well as its relationship to gender with a special focus on the role of the chopine in Venice. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, the European appetite for imported textiles drove global exploration and economic hegemonies were intimately linked to control over textile production and trade. Textiles, when fashioned into clothing, played a crucial role in investing individuals with status and civic identity. Dress also provided potent signifiers of gender which in turn powered patterns of consumption and display. It was in direct relation to the value of textiles that the chopine reached its ascendancy in Venice at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as they were integral to displays of wealth and status through the dressing of women.

The conceptual content and pedagogical program of this exhibition was challenging and required an exhibition design that was more informative than a simple display of strange and rare footwear. The exhibition design had to bring to life the complex and changing milieu that both innovated these shoes and was, in part, shaped by



**Fig. 6. Late 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian chopine.**  
Collection of Museo Bardini.

PHOTOGRAPH © FOTOTECA DEI MUSEI CIVICI FIORENTINI

them. Michael Plamondon, senior designer and president of Origin Studios of Ottawa, Canada was hired to design the exhibition. He and his associate Emily Young were charged with creating an exhibition environment that would suggest an Italian Renaissance palazzo with both public and private spaces to allow for a discussion of both the sequestering and public presentations of women in Venice. They were also asked to create an introductory area where footwear from antiquity and *chopins* from 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain could be exhibited and discussed. The final room of the exhibition needed to signal a shift from the Renaissance to the Baroque era and to represent the rise of Northern Europe in Western fashion. The thoughtful design arrived at by Origin Studios was sympathetic to each of these concerns. The Renaissance section featured two colonnades where reproductions of Renaissance paintings were paired with corresponding footwear. The symmetry created by the arches suggested the rhythm of Renaissance architecture and created the intimation of a private domain. The richly patterned red wall paper used in this section also suggested the opulence of expensively dyed textiles. The public realm was represented by the courtyard area, where the use of patterned flooring and the simulation of natural light passing through trees enhanced the feeling of being out-of-doors. The strong verticality of the columns echoed the columnar structure of the chopines on view.

The second room in the gallery shifted to 17<sup>th</sup> century shoes and explored the adoption of the Near Eastern heel into Western dress; the colour palette shifted from red to brown and again artwork was

paired with artifacts to help convey the story. Even the lighting effect shifted to simulate light coming through a Dutch Baroque leaded window. As is standard for all Bata Shoe Museum exhibitions, extensive introductory, secondary and tertiary labels were provided throughout the display providing detailed information. Origin Studios also designed the publication written to complement the exhibition.

Other exhibitions devoted to specific time periods or cultures at the Bata Shoe Museum include: *The Charm of Rococo: Femininity and Footwear in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (2006); *Watched by Heaven, Tied to Earth: Summoning Animal Protection for Chinese Children* (2006); *Appeasing the Spirits: Alaskan Coastal Cultures* (2004); *Paths Across the Plains: Traditional Footwear from the Great Plains* (2003); *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes in the Lives of Chinese Women from Late Imperial China* (2000); and *Feet and Footwear in Indian Culture* (1999).

### A Thematic Exhibition

*The Perfect Pair: Wedding Shoe Stories* exhibition of 2002, in contrast to *On a Pedestal: Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels*, was thematic and looked at wedding shoe traditions in many different cultures. Around the world, the joining of individuals and families through marriage is marked with joyful celebrations, elaborate rituals, extravagant displays of wealth, and time-honoured traditions. Traditional wedding costumes have been integral to the celebration of marriage. Shoes, in particular, have a rich history of being the focus of many auspicious marriage traditions.

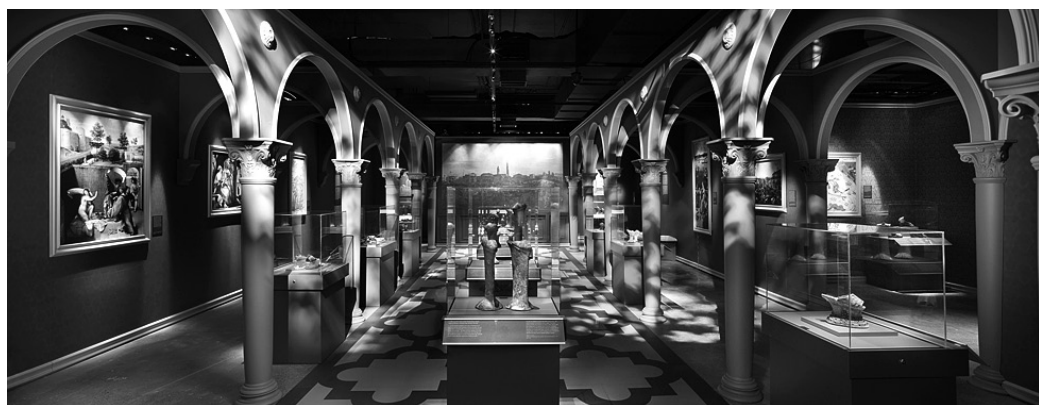


Fig 7. View of Renaissance room in the *On a Pedestal: from Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels* exhibition. IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO (© RICHARD JOHNSON, <WWW.RICHARDJOHNSON.CA>)





**Fig. 8. View of Baroque room in the *On a Pedestal: From Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels* exhibition.** IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO  
( RICHARD JOHNSON, <WWW.RICHARDJOHNSON.CA>)

In India, for example, Hindu brides are prepared for their new lives with an abundance of gifts. From household items such as furniture and utensils to new clothes and shoes, the dowry and the gifts a bride receives can be quite extravagant. Of the many and varied gifts that she might receive, ornately worked silver shoes are the epitome of luxury.

An important part of the groom's wedding attire is his beautifully embroidered wedding footwear which he leaves aside when he enters the tented area where the wedding will take place. In some parts of India, the sisters of the bride take this opportunity to «steal» his shoes and only return the shoes when their ransom demands are met. Although it is a playful game, it serves to highlight the sense of loss that accompanies the joyous occasion of a marriage.

These Indian stories reflect only two of the myriad wedding stories explored in the gallery.

Western white-wedding shoes and related traditions constituted the largest single section of the exhibition. In addition there were six other cultures including, Indonesian, Japanese, Berber, Macedonian, Czech and Korean, whose shoe-related wedding traditions and traditional costumes were exhibited.

Laurent Carrier, principal of Toboggan Design, along with graphic artists Suzanne Côté and Jocelyn Laplante of Atelier du Presse-Citron in Montréal were charged with designing the exhibition. Carrier's clever solution was to centre the gallery on a large circular showcase designed to look like a Western wedding cake.

In this showcase a wide selection of white-wedding shoes were displayed and the story of the evolution of the white wedding was told on the surrounding walls. The white wedding section was demarcated by a wedding-veil-inspired semi-circular banner behind which seven discrete

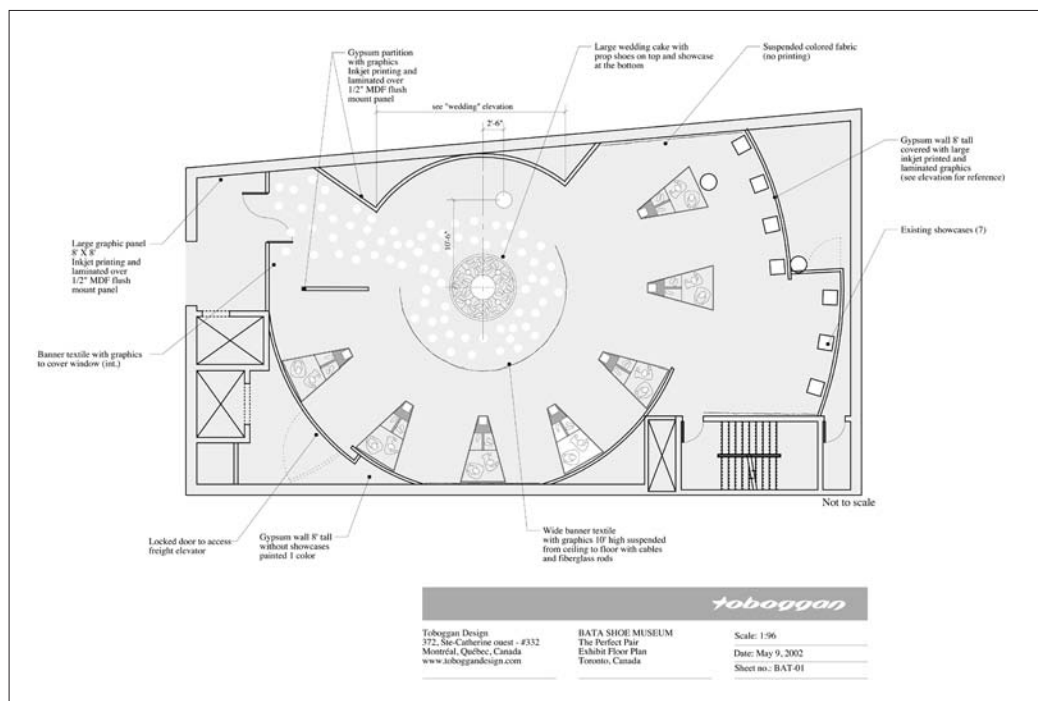


**Fig. 9.** View of the white wedding section of *The Perfect Pair: Wedding Shoe Stories* exhibition.

IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO (© RICHARD JOHNSON, <WWW.RICHARDJOHNSON.CA>)

**Fig. 10.** Floor plan showing «cake slice» showcases for *The Perfect Pair: Wedding Shoe Stories* exhibition.

IMAGE © 2010 BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO



exhibition cases designed in the shape of cake slices were situated.

These cases allowed for full bridal costume to be exhibited and allowed the bride's story to be told on one side of the showcase and the groom's on the other. The radial design of this exhibition permitted a non-hierarchical, non-linear staging

of the artifacts from diverse cultures in an intelligible and sympathetic space. Other thematic exhibitions presented at the Bata Shoe Museum include: *Socks: Between You and Your Shoes* (2010); *Beads Buckles and Bows: 400 Hundred Years of Embellished Footwear* (2006); and *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Foot* (2001).

## Engaging the Visitor

In addition to providing one permanent exhibition and three changing exhibitions, the Bata Shoe Museum supports a wide range of outreach and multi-media resources from online exhibitions and publications to lecture series and children's programming. Educational initiatives include hands-on projects and tours of the exhibitions led by docents and education staff-members for elementary to high school students. Teachers can prepare for their visits to the museum by downloading lesson plans designed to enhance their students' museum experience. Because of Canada's strong multiculturalism, *English as a Second Language* (ESL) lesson plans for teachers of adult students are also available on-line.

Other online resources include the Bata Shoe Museum's main websites <www.batashoemuseum.ca> and <www.allaboutshoes.ca>, where many of the museum's past exhibitions are available for viewing as virtual exhibitions. Some of these online exhibitions feature photography that allows visitors to examine the artifacts from all angles. Podcasts by the curatorial department are also uploaded monthly onto the museum webpage.

Programs for visitors to the museum can include guided tours, periodic shoe-designing workshops, children's activities such as try-on footwear and storytelling. Exhibition design is specifically intended to create contemplative spaces that permit visitors to absorb the text and stories that relate the curatorial research underpinning the exhibition. Additionally, audio-guide stops are available for visitors to the galleries.

Museum programming strives to engage a wide variety of different communities. To this end, the museum partners with many different community-based groups such as Planet IndigenUs and Asian Heritage to curate small exhibitions and to plan programming celebrating Toronto's diverse communities. The museum's popular 'till 10 events for which the museum is open late on Friday nights are designed to engage a younger demographic. Social media has also emerged as an important focus for the museum. Through sites such as Facebook and Twitter the museum is building and successfully cultivating social networking relationships.

## Conclusion

The Bata Shoe Museum's emphasis on placing its collection within cultural contexts as well as its dedication to the study of footwear as a means to better understand the realities of diverse cultures and eras has been the key to its achievements. In the past 15 years, the museum has emerged as an important centre of study and the novelty of being a shoe museum has been replaced by recognition of its significant contributions to the study of the history of dress. The museum has demonstrated success in bringing academic subjects to a popular audience through ground-breaking research, a pedagogical curatorial approach, thoughtful exhibition design and interesting public programming. This effort makes plain that the public retains a strong desire for learning-based museum experiences grounded in solid academic scholarship and presented in engaging ways.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- JAIN-NEUBAUER, Jutta: *Feet and Footwear in Indian Culture*, Toronto/Ahmedabad: The Bata Shoe Museum/Mapin Publishing, 2000.
- KO, Dorothy: *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet*, Toronto/Berkeley: The Bata Shoe Museum/University of California Press, 2001.
- OAKES, Jill, and Rick RIEWE: *Our Boots: An Inuit Women's Art*, Toronto/Vancouver: The Bata Shoe Museum/Douglas and MacIntyre, 1995.
- *Spirit of Siberia: Traditional Native Life, Clothing and Footwear*, Toronto/Vancouver: The Bata Shoe Museum/ Douglas and MacIntyre, 1998.
- *Alaska Eskimo Footwear*, Toronto/Fairbanks: The Bata Shoe Museum/University of Alaska Press, 2007.
- SEMMEHACK, Elizabeth: *On a Pedestal: From Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels*, Toronto: The Bata Shoe Museum, 2009.
- *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe*, introductory essay by Linda Nochlin, New York: Peri-scope Publishing, 2008.
- *Icons of Elegance: The Most Influential Shoe Designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Toronto: The Bata Shoe Museum, 2005.
- *Beads, Buckles & Bows: 400 Years of Embellished Footwear*, Toronto: The Bata Shoe Museum, 2004.
- WEBER, Alika Podolinsky: *North American Indian and Eskimo Footwear: A Typology and Glossary*, Toronto: The Bata Shoe Museum, 1989.