

Interview



Curating a World Shoe Exhibition **Nicole Mullen**

SFO Museum's exhibition "Stepping Out: Shoes in World Cultures" features 19th- and 20th-century shoes from a variety of countries and cultures. The curator talks about planning and curating the exhibition.

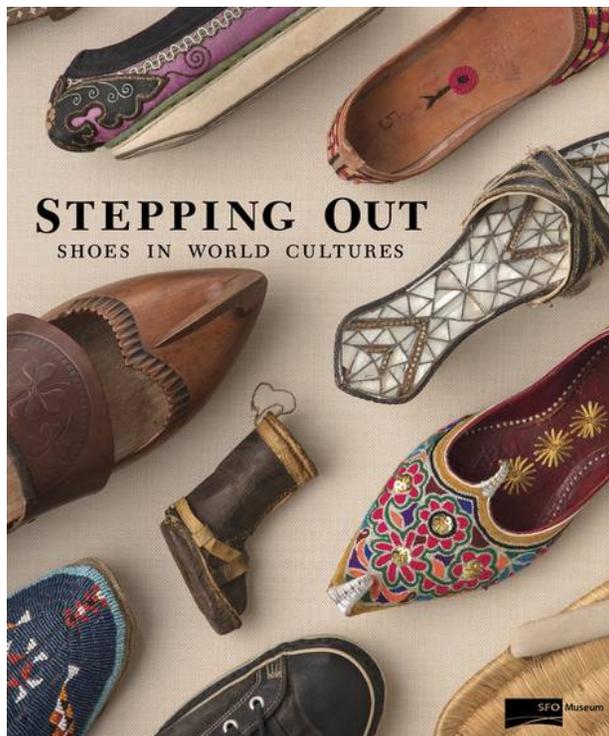
Tell us about the San Francisco International Airport's museum and its ongoing exhibits.

SFO Museum was created in 1980. It was the first cultural institution of its kind located in an international airport. The Museum has an ever-changing schedule of exhibitions on a diverse range of subjects that provides an educational and cultural experience for more than 53 million passengers who use the Airport annually.

SFO Museum has become an integral part of San Francisco International Airport, and its exhibitions are an established tradition enjoyed by frequent visitors from the San Francisco Bay Area and travelers from all over the world. In 1999, SFO Museum became the first museum in an airport to receive accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums.

What is your background and how did you become interested in planning and mounting exhibitions.

I have served as the Curator of Exhibitions at SFO Museum at the San Francisco International Airport for the past nine years. At SFO Museum, I have completed forty-four exhibitions. I explore a variety of topics, from folk and decorative arts, to popular culture and ethnography.



SFO Museum's *Stepping Out: Shoes in World Cultures* exhibit features 19th- and 20th-century shoes from a variety of countries and cultures. .

Prior to SFO Museum, I was employed at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, as the Education Specialist.

My undergraduate degree is in anthropology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and my master's degree is in historic preservation with a concentration in public history and southern folk art from Georgia State University. I was born and raised in Massachusetts. As a child and adolescent, I worked as a colonial interpreter at Plimoth Plantation with my mother who was employed there, so I got an early start working in museums.

How is planning an exhibition at an airport different to one at a museum? Are there special considerations that you need to take into account?

Unlike a traditional museum setting where visitors make a conscious choice to visit a museum and purchase a ticket to view an exhibition, we have a captive audience. But because we are located in a public space, within the airport terminals, we are able to reach a large, diverse traveling public and expose visitors to material that they might not see or learn about otherwise. We work on a broad range of subject matter and present unique exhibitions to the public that you may not find in a traditional museum

setting. We also excel at crafting exhibitions that connect people with nostalgia from the past—from vinyl records and record players to toys and even shoes. Who can't recall their favorite pair of shoes?

How did the idea for an exhibition about shoes come about?

I thought of the idea to do a shoe exhibition because, not too long ago, I had completed a vintage purse exhibition. Initially, I had thought to do an exhibition focused on western shoe styles, but once I began investigating the show further, I found that opening it up to a broader global perspective was far more interesting. In regard to textiles and fashion, we are limited by the size of the permanent, fixed cases so items such as purses and shoes are literally a perfect fit for our exhibition space in the International Terminal 20 cases.



SFO Museum's *Stepping Out: Shoes in World Cultures* exhibition at the San Francisco International Airport, International Terminal A.

How did you decide to focus on the 19th and 20th century as the period for the exhibition?

I focused on this period primarily because these are the shoes that I found most available.

Talk about the planning process that is involved in mounting an exhibition like this one. How long was it between the original idea and the exhibition opening?

Most exhibitions are planned one to three years in advance, and the object list is completed about one year to ten months prior to the exhibition opening. The bulk of the work is completed about six months prior to the exhibition opening.

What museums and other sources did you contact, and how did you work with them to select pieces for the exhibition?

We had eighteen different lenders for this exhibition! We drew from both private collectors and museums. The California Academy of Sciences Anthropology Department, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, and Mingei Museum all loaned to the exhibition. We work with these institutions regularly, and it is really wonderful to be able to draw from their collections. The selection process varies. For local lenders, such as Cal Academy, I was able to view all the shoes we were interested in borrowing in person. We also worked with an



Test layout while planning for SFO Museum's *Stepping Out: Shoes in World Cultures* exhibition.

international lender for this exhibition, the International Clog Museum (Klompemuseum) in the Netherlands, who lent some wonderful clogs from Holland and France. For remote lenders, I selected based on photographs of the objects. A lot of how the show develops is based on what is available and then what objects form cohesive, interesting groupings.

The exhibition is shown in a series of tall plexiglass cases on either side of an aisle that visitors can walk along.

How is the exhibition organized? Is there a path that you suggest that visitors follow from one case to the next?



Manchu platform shoes, late 19th–early 20th century, China. Courtesy of Sally Yu Leung.



Stilted sandals (*geta*), 19th–early 20th century, Japan. Courtesy of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

This is a bit tricky. Because we are in a public space, it is not really possible for us to expect people to travel in a set direction or even look at each and every case. Each of the twenty cases serve as their own mini exhibition as well as forming part of a holistic, larger exhibition. Ideally, however, they would begin at the introduction panel and then work their way up, either side-to-side or row-to-row.

The exhibition includes shoes from many cultures and for many purposes. How did you go about selecting the cultures and the types of shoes for each of them to represent in the collection?

Again, it was really based on what was available and what would form cohesive, interesting case groupings. Of course, there are always things on your wish list and sometimes you find them and sometimes you don't. I would liked to have included a case of Yoruba beaded shoes, but I could not locate enough of them to form a case.

One of the major themes of the exhibition is utility, and how shoes were crafted to serve a specific purpose. For example, the exhibition includes elevated shoes from several parts of the world. Tell us about this type of shoe and how their purposes in different parts of the world influenced their design.

For centuries, elevated shoes with platforms, stilts, or heels served to keep one's feet and clothing protected from dirt, water, and other unfavorable conditions. At the same time, elevated heel heights associated the wearer with wealth and prestige, while making them appear more seductive.

Japanese geisha wore finely made, lacquered wood, high-platform *geta*, which required slow, short steps. In Turkey, special bathing clogs, called *nalın*, were made with elevated heels similar to Japanese *geta* and were worn by women in *hammams*, or baths. Though *nalın* varied in height, the highest

ones did not provide better protection from wet floors; instead, they emphasized the wearer's elevated status.

Did height eventually become a mark of status in all the places they were worn?

I think they continued to serve both utilitarian purposes as well as serving as a mark of status.

Another type of shoe is the heavily insulated boot found in a number of Arctic cultures. What are the similarities and differences in the design and use of materials among them?

Because of the severe cold, the waterproof quality of sealskin made it preferable in wetter climates, while caribou skin was commonly used in colder, drier climates. There is a tremendous variety in boot styles, tools, materials, preparation, and construction techniques between cultures. Women were, and continue to be, the



Boots, mid-1900s, Iñupiat, Alaska. Collection of the California Academy of Sciences.

primary producers of clothing and footwear. The production of Inuit footwear is a lengthy and complex process that involves preparing skins, creating and cutting out pattern pieces, and sewing them together. Women traditionally used bone tools and animal sinew as thread. Fish oil was typically used to waterproof boots.

What was the purpose of the toe knob shoe, and how did this type of shoe develop in different cultures at the same time?

One of the oldest forms of footwear in India, the *paduka*, a toe-knob sandal with an elevated sole, is still worn today. For hundreds of centuries, this ancient design has kept the foot elevated above the hot earth while protecting feet from ground debris. Commonly made from solid wood, more elaborately designed examples were crafted from silver, brass, and ivory. Many fine wooden pairs made of teak, ebony, or sandalwood were intricately carved, some in the shape of fish, which symbolize fertility and abundance. Others were incised or inlaid with ivory, brass, silver, or gold.



Toe-knob sandals (*padukas*), 19th–20th century, India. Collection of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.



Zori with cloth thong, early 20th century, Japan. Collection of Laxis Museum of Lace and Textiles.

Although all classes wore *padukas*, finer materials and intricate adornment reflect the status of their wearers. Some *padukas* were only worn for special occasions, such as weddings. Religious teachers or holy men often wore *padukas*, and pilgrims on religious journeys occasionally wore wooden *padukas* with metal spikes.

In Japan, it is customary to remove shoes indoors. The *zori*, another type of sandal with a cloth thong, remains a practical shoe, easy to slip on and off. For centuries, *zori* have been fabricated from wood or lacquered wood and cloth. The *zori* inspired the beach shoe or flip-flop in the West. Similar to the *zori* but elevated in height, *geta* became fashionable in urban areas during the Edo period (1615–1868).

Decorative ornamentation is another theme, from common footwear to more ceremonial forms. What embellishments were used, and what are the similarities and differences in the materials employed?

Decorative ornamentation appears on even the most pragmatic footwear. Elaborate embroidery, appliqué, and beading are some of the many techniques employed. For instance, each of these embellishments accents a variety of Native American moccasins. Wood was a popular material for shoes—from European clogs to Japanese platform *geta*, Indian *padukas* or toe-knob sandals, and Turkish bathing clogs or *nalin*. Animals skins are frequently found among a variety of cultures from Native American moccasins to Western women’s early twentieth-century boots. Cloth appears frequently, as can be illustrated by a variety of embroidered shoes from China as well as boots from Tibet and Bhutan.



Moccasins, c. 1940, Gwich'in, Alaska; glass beads, suede, velvet, thread. Collection of the California Academy of Sciences.



Lower row: Snow shoes for a cow. Upper rows: Snow boots (*fukagutsu*) worn in mountainous regions. 20th century, Japan. Straw or palm fiber. Collections of Mingei International Museum and the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

Straw, the byproduct of rice and other plant life, served as one of the most plentiful materials for crafting items in Japan. As a result, the oldest style of shoes still worn in Japan consists of sandals made of straw twisted into ropes and plaited to form the sandal's sole, with the ropes acting as straps. Known as *waraji*, they were traditionally worn by peasants and probably introduced from China in the eighth century. In addition to sandals, straw boots are called *fukagutsu*. They are still worn today in snowy, mountainous regions of Japan.

On a different note, we have a case of shoes as art, which is very different from the other cases in the exhibition. Motivated by the lack of color, whimsy, and alternatives

to leather in footwear, artist Mickey McGowan taught himself to make shoes. In 1969, he moved from Los Angeles to Marin County, California. Inspired by the world around him and his dreams, he made eccentric, imaginative shoes in his Mill Valley studio throughout the 1970s. Dubbed the Apple Cobbler, he crafted many shoes both for utility and as works of art.

Attached to his studio, he housed his Unknown Museum, a repository of twentieth-century popular material culture—

displaying everything from stacks of television sets to rows of Mr. Potato Heads. McGowan's fervent interest in popular culture deeply influenced his footwear designs, which encompassed everything from rubber ducks to toy tanks, Campbell's soup cans, and Popeye cartoons.

Talk about some of the the symbolic and ceremonial roles of decorative shoe ornamentation in different cultures represented in the exhibition.

Some of the shoes were made and worn especially for wedding ceremonies. But I think the Chinese children's shoes are a great example. More than merely decorative, the symbols and motifs found on

Chinese clothing and personal adornment usually represent hidden meanings that convey wishes for good fortune. Some of the most frequently given gifts to children in China include handmade embroidered and appliquéd clothing. Quite often, children's hats and shoes are made in the shapes of pigs and dogs, which are thought to fool ghosts and protect children. Tigers, the most popular motif sewn onto children's items, are meant to frighten spirits and help children grow up to be strong and fearless.

Traditionally, when a boy is one month old, his mother or grandmother makes a hat, collar, and shoes for the child to serve as both shields and decorations. Historically, a child wore protective clothing items for several years, and the mother made larger items as the child grew. These ensembles may still be worn on special occasions such as Chinese New Year and the child's first birthday.



Combat Boot, 1974. Mickey McGowan (Apple Cobbler), Marin County, California. Courtesy of the Artist.

The late 19th century saw the evolution of specialized shoes for athletic activities in Europe and the United States. How do the shoes in the exhibition show that evolution? Tell us about a few of the more unusual examples in the exhibition.

The invention of vulcanization in the nineteenth century enabled the creation of durable, flexible rubber products including tires and shoes with rubber soles. By the 1870s, rubber-soled shoes were used in sports and leisure activities, such as tennis. They were called sneakers because the rubber soles made them so quiet that the wearer could easily “sneak up” on another person.

In 1891, basketball—associated with sneakers more than any other sport—was invented in Springfield, Massachusetts, by Canadian-American James Naismith. The U.S. Rubber Company began selling sneakers using the name Keds in 1917. The same year, the Converse Rubber Shoe Company, which initially made rubber galoshes, released the famous Converse All-Star basketball sneaker, a canvas high top with a patch on the ankle.

I think the early female Keds from the 1920s or '30s are certainly something you don't see everyday. And I think the sneakers on display show you that the Converse-style of sneaker we are familiar with has not changed much in the last century, although athletic sneakers certainly have evolved to a great degree.



Sneakers, c. 1910. Hood Rubber Co., Watertown, Massachusetts. Courtesy of The California Sneaker Museum.

How has footwear in this exhibition survived in such pristine condition? It seems like they would generally be worn until no longer serviceable and then discarded. Did people in earlier times have a different relationship with their footwear than we do today?

In terms of the condition of the shoes, you are correct, many are in excellent condition. A number of the museums and private collectors acquired the shoes for their collections so they may have never really been worn and some of the shoes that were worn were only used on special occasions. I did, however, do my best to only select shoes that were in very fine condition.

What did you learn about shoes and footwear from around the world as you planned and curated this exhibition?

I learned that throughout world cultures, an incredible diversity exists among footwear. And that fashion, even in footwear, often serves as a symbol of status.

I do really enjoy the juxtaposition of adult-sized and child-sized shoes in the exhibition. It is nice that we were able to include both throughout the show. I also learned that shoes are trickier to select, photograph, and design for the cases than I had realized since everything is in pairs. But we have an amazing designer and photographer on staff; they both did a wonderful job.

Where is the exhibition located in the International Terminal, and how long will the exhibit be on display? Is there a catalog or online version of the exhibition for those who are unable to visit in person?

The exhibition is located pre-security on level 3, ticketing and check-in, of the International Terminal A side until Sunday, November 12, 2017. The exhibition is free of charge and open to the general public. No ticket is needed, and the gallery is open twenty-four hours a day. You can also view the exhibition [online](#), and follow the SFO Museum on [Facebook](#).

Nicole Mullen is Curator of Exhibitions at SFO Museum at the San Francisco International Airport. She was previously at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley. She has a master's degree in Heritage Preservation / Public History / Folk Art from Georgia State University, and a bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Note: All photographs in this article are courtesy of SFO Museum.