

## In their shoes



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By **Mariam Hamdy**

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Most people can't grasp the concept of design. It is commonly confused with art and sometimes altogether dismissed, but it takes a simple demonstration to explain the difference between the two.

"Walking Art, a collective exhibition focused on shoes, has succeeded in illustrating this distinction. The exhibition - currently hosted by the Italian Culture Institute - displays the evolution of shoes, from the prehistoric and early ancient Egyptian models to the present day.

What's exceptional about the exhibition is how it shows the historical development of this fashion item as well as the breakthrough designs that have aided its progression. Every single shoe, regardless of the era it hails from, was designed flawlessly with detail, so much so that all the historical ones look authentic.

Enrica Barbano, Italian costume designer and stylist, managed to make the walk from one display of shoes to the next quite exciting. One begins to ponder how shoes have gone from being more than an item of clothing to objects of desire and comfort as well as instruments of torture and abuse.

This is where the discussion of design versus art comes in and there is no better product to analyze in this light than shoes.

Shoes are a functional item, arguably more important than other pieces we wear. They protect, elevate and secure its proprietor - this is the science behind the product.

Despite the clarity of the function of shoes in the historical context of the exhibition, shoes have gradually turned into a separate entity, transcending their initial purpose. As the years roll to the 1700s, shoes became influenced by textiles, arts, hairdos and social status.

This is the artistic component in their creation; lacing the science and craftsmanship of shoemaking with the aesthetics of art is the process known as design.

And what better designers are there than the Italians? Italians have always been considered pioneers in shoemaking mainly because, as the curator of the show architect Luciano Calosso points out, they predominantly refuse to mass-produce their products. Italy is known for its "handmade emblem, and it is that which makes them the experts.

The exhibition is wonderful in presenting the evolution of materials: from thread, wood and leather to vinyl, plastic and glue. It is also an excellent showmanship of how creation and craftsmanship go hand in hand in order to advance in design, and the examples there are from the ancient to contemporaries Christian Lacroix and Marc Jacobs.

To counteract the museum quality of the show, vintage prints of adverts of shoe factories are plastered on the walls of the gallery along with a film poster of Vittorio De Sica's "Shoe-Shine (1946). There's also a drawing by director Federico Fellini, illustrating one of his characters' shoes for the movie "Ginger & Fred, among several other items.

The additional visual aid is a great technique to break the formality of the glass displays as well as add an air of nostalgia to the space.

Even though the show is an artistic success, it's a shame to report that barely anyone would be able to see it.

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The Italian cultural center's exhibition space is only open from 9 am to 4 pm and is closed on weekends, which makes it increasingly difficult for anyone with a job, college or school to attend, to visit the show. And should anyone determined to check it out decide to take a day off, they will be further disappointed.

Access to the space takes 15 minutes, as the room is firmly shut and the keys are yet to be found. Once inside, the viewer is haunted by the presence of a man with the keys to the room, looming around impatiently as you consequently hurry through the exhibition.

Ironically, the fact that the opening times have not been thought out and therefore affect the success of the show is none other than a design fault.

Needless to say, your visit will be brief and insufficient to view the otherwise perfect collection.

"Walking Art is currently showing at the Italian Cultural Institute, 3 Sheikh El Marsafi St., Zamalek, Cairo. Tel: (02) 2735 5423.



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