

The Old Soft Shoe

Suede is showing up on more and more well-beeled feet.

By Paul Keers

In her memoirs, Loelia, the late Duchess of Westminster, recalled that her father considered suede shoes the sign of a cad and a bounder. In the 1920s, one commentator deemed them "a mark of great effeminacy." And the English writer Auberon Waugh, son of the satirist Evelyn and editor of the *Literary Review*, is even more blunt: "Only a shit would wear them." Harsh words, indeed, for such a soft shoe. Nonetheless, suede has made a significant comeback in the last year or so. As the aggressive Eighties give way to the mellower Nineties, men are looking for ways to soften the tone of the power suit without losing its executive style. The sure-footed among them have found that the suede shoe—classic and formal in design, yet made from a soft, comfortable material—is the ideal way of expressing the relaxed mood of the times.

It was the Duke of Windsor who first made it acceptable to wear suede shoes on semiformal occasions. On his world tours of the 1920s and 1930s, he upended convention by wearing cocoa suede lace-ups with his chalk-striped suit. Eyebrows were raised initially, but the Duke's reputation for savoir-faire made the idea of wearing suede shoes acceptable. "It would be wrong if it were a mistake," said one commentator at the time. "But the Duke *knows better*—so it's alright."

Today, fashion designer Bruce Oldfield wears black suede brogues by Alan McAfee with his Armani suits. Hollywood mogul David Geffen sports brown suede lace-ups, Gianni Agnelli, head of the Fiat empire and power broker, now wears sturdy brown suede shoes with thick crepe soles, and Karl Lagerfeld has his tan suede Oxfords made by John Lobb in London, regarded by many as the greatest bespoke shoemaker in the world.



Shoe in: The Princeton, made by Bally, is a classic wing tip lace-up suede shoe (\$280).

Even Washington is undergoing a soft-shoe shuffle. It's been said that George Bush's cardinal rule of style is "wear what is comfortable." And sure enough, when the President entertained Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl at Camp David last spring, he was shod in suede—brown Hush Puppies.

Perhaps Alan Flusser, the New York and Washington designer and tailor, best expresses the strong appeal of the suede shoe in his book *Clothes and the Man*. "It remains the most elegant accompaniment to the business suit," he writes. "Needless to say, it is probably not the shoe to wear in a stuffy bank atmosphere, or in a drenching spring downpour. But with these exceptions, there is probably no other shoe that can play so many roles in a man's wardrobe."

At stylish Manhattan shoemaker Susan Bennis Warren Edwards, where black suede "Slush Puppies" made a big splash this past winter, partner Warren Edwards says practicality, comfort, and fashionableness are the qualities that attract his customers, many of whom work in the movie and music businesses, to suede. "It's more appropriate with today's softer clothing," he says. "And it acquires more personality as you wear it. It gets older gracefully."

The best suede shoes use the same fine calf leather from which good shoes have long been made, only it's turned inside out. Hence the correct technical term for top-quality shoe suede: *reversed calf*. The word *suede* itself derives from the French word for Sweden, where reversed-leather gloves—*gants de Suède*, or "gloves from Sweden"—became fashionable in the 19th century. *Suede* then gradually came to be used to refer to reversed, buffed leathers of any variety.

This means that a pair of good suede shoes can be just as durable as its counterpart in unreversed leather. In practice many

of the more casual styles are executed in lighter split suede, which is only half the thickness of regular leather and makes a shoe that is more comfortable, but can lose

its shape more rapidly. Nonetheless, properly cared for and always kept on shoe trees, suede shoes can last as long as any other type of fine leather footwear.

All of the world's great shoemakers now make models in suede. In London, the firm of John Lobb still makes only bespoke shoes, but on the Continent, where Lobb is owned by Hermès, it sells ready-to-wear footwear, including both lace-ups (wing tip and plain) and loafers in suede—fine shoes that French businessmen, with their sharp sense of style, snap up. (In the United States, Lobb shoes are sold at Bergdorf Goodman.)

Wildsmith & Co., of St. James's, designed and cut the patterns in 1945 for the first British slip-on shoe, which contemporary advertising copy called the "Country

House Shoe, for around the house and over the way"; now that elegant, low-cut slip-on, along with five other styles, is available in several shades of suede.

Gucci, of course, invented the snaffle loafer for men. The company says that suede has been selling "like crazy" this year, and Gucci has increased the range of colors to nine. Italian shoes have always been lighter than those made in northern Europe and the United States, simply because of Italy's warmer climate. They became Anglo-American status symbols partly because, in New York or London, an Italian shoe suggests that the wearer doesn't do much more walking than it takes to go from his office to his limousine. The Gucci suede loafer (and its elegant adaptation by Bally of Switzerland, the "Taylor," which retails for about 20 percent less than the Gucci) has become *the* status footwear of the international man.

Suede shoes are three-season items; no matter what people tell you about the efficacy of waterproofing sprays, don't wear suede in the rain, and never in the snow (which will leave indelible salt marks on the shoe). Use a bristle nail brush to keep the shoes clean and maintain the nap, not a wire brush, which can wear away the surface of the suede. And a useful accessory is an artist's gum eraser, which will remove grease spots and help reduce crease marks.

Of course there are times when suede



The Duke of Windsor suede-shod, 1924.

A Rock Classic

Although the song was a hit for Carl Perkins in 1956, it took Elvis Presley's recording of "Blue Suede Shoes" the following year to immortalize the colorful footwear. When Elvis told the world, "You can do anything, but lay off of my Blue Suede Shoes," the declaration prepared the way for later obsessions with jeans, leather jackets and, eventually, sneakers.

Why blue suede shoes? Well, they were an "ungentlemanly" combination: suede (a socially unacceptable material), dyed electric blue (a socially unacceptable color), on top of thick crepe soles (which allowed the wearer to move around silently and therefore suspiciously). Rock'n'rollers gave them a name which suggested an equally ungentlemanly activity: "brothel creepers." What could be more rebellious than loud shoes on quiet soles? Go, man, go.





Stepping out: clockwise from bottom left, the Slush Puppy by Susan Bennis Warren Edwards (\$495), a favorite of executives in New York's music and motion-picture industries; Cole-Haan's Profeta (\$285); the Taylor from Bally (\$205); Cole-Haan's Columbia, done in snuff, a fine suede with a dense nap (\$185), and Gucci's snaffle loafer, named for the metal buckle on the front.

shoes are simply not appropriate—with evening dress, for example. Unless you're Woody Allen, sneakers are not acceptable with a tuxedo, and neither are suede shoes. The rules of formal dress are, as it were, rigid, and although we have gotten away from starched shirts and stiff collars, formal occasions like weddings, funerals, and the Academy Awards still require inflexibility when it comes to footwear.

For several reasons, it's best to choose models that have leather, rather than crepe, soles. First, leather soles are easier and cheaper to replace. Second, leather keeps your feet cooler, because it "breathes" better than crepe or rubber. Finally, leather soles make for a more formal shoe. The ideal is a classic business model—Oxford, wing tip, semi-brogue or loafer—interpreted in suede.

Even today not everyone appreciates suede shoes. Outspoken newspaper colum-

nist Sir John Junor, the self-appointed sage of Auchtermuchty, Scotland, still insists that "there's something suspicious about the kind of fellow who wears suede shoes." And when Sig Rogich, a stylish advertising and PR man from Las Vegas, was brought in to Washington to polish President Bush's image, his brown suede Cole-Haan loafers immediately attracted attention. "I'm fighting for freedom around the world," said Secretary of State James Baker with mock scorn, "so you can wear shoes like that?"

Would Secretary Baker pose the same question, even in jest, to fellow freedom fighter General Norman Schwartzkopf? It seems the general set out for the Gulf in military-issue leather boots but had suede ones made when he arrived. (The suede Desert Boot is, of course, a classic in its own right, created by Clarks and based on the rough crepe-soled shoes that officers in the

British Eighth Army had made for themselves in the Cairo bazaar during World War II.) And Sir Geoffrey Howe, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Great Britain, was often mocked for his suede shoes, which seemed to epitomize his sleepy, laid-back image; yet it was his savage resignation speech earlier this year that led to the downfall of Margaret Thatcher.

The message, gentlemen, is clear: Tough guys *can* wear soft shoes. So go ahead, then, try on a pair. Who knows? You could easily be suede.

Where the Shoe Fits

Below is a selective list of makers of fine suede shoes in the United States and Europe. Prices vary by location.

Bally of Switzerland, 1 Bally Place, New Rochelle, NY 10801; telephone 800-825-5030; in New York, 914-632-4444. The "Taylor" is about \$205.

Cole-Haan, 42 Elm Street, Yarmouth, ME 04096; 207-846-3721. The classic loafers range from \$145 to \$185.

Gucci, 685 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10022; 800-221-2590; and Via Tornabuoni 73, Florence; 39-55-26 40 11. The original suede snaffle loafer is about \$230 in Florence, \$260 in New York.

John Lobb, 9 St. James's Street, London SW1; 44-71-930 3664. Custom-made suede shoes from \$1,578. 49-51 Rue François ler, Paris 8e; 33-1-45.61.02.55; or Hermès, 24 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris 8e; 33-1-40.17.41.17. Lace-ups and loafers are \$405. In New York, John Lobb shoes are available at Bergdorf Goodman, 754 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10022; 212-753-7300. Custom-made shoes begin at \$2,000.

Susan Bennis Warren Edwards, 27 W. 57th Street, New York, NY 10019; 212-755-4197. The black suede "Slush Puppy" (currently available only by order) is \$495.

Wildsmith & Co., 15 Princes Arcade, Jermyn St., London SW1; 44-71-437 4289. Wildsmith offers the venerable "Country House" slip-on loafer, along with five other styles in black or brown suede; prices range from \$467 to \$595.

Salvatore Ferragamo, 730 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10022; 212-246-6211. The "Salvatore" lace-up costs \$335. □
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