

# Feature



## Exploring the Mysteries of the Chopine

**Marianne Pease**

*A platform shoe called a chopine was popular among the upper-class of the 15th-17th-century Europe. The author explores this intriguing form of footwear.*

In the spring of 2017, while we were in Toronto for Costume Con 35, I had the pleasure of visiting the Bata Shoe Museum with a few friends. The Bata houses one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of shoes from around the world and through history with exhibits from ancient Egypt to modern times. Going to visit the museum was a highlight of my trip to Toronto but with all the dozens and dozens of beautiful shoes we saw, the 16th-century Venetian chopines were the star of the museum.

As popular as platform heels are today, elevated shoes are nothing new. Looking back to ancient Greece you can find sculptures of Aphrodite wearing platform shoes. Various forms of stilted footwear can be found all across southeast Asia and the Middle East as well, and thick-soled patten overshoes designed to protect women from the mud and muck of the streets can be

found in many cultures and times. The chopine itself was inspired by styles coming out of Moorish Spain and by the time it reached Venice it had become a pillar of fashion.

### **From Spain to Venice**

Spanish chopines were an upper class style made from cork- a wood native to the area. They provided a wide, stable base for ladies to stand, and were often richly decorated with tooled leather, velvets, and even precious gems. The Spanish treated these shoes as extravagant fashion accessories that were on display as their skirts came just to the top of their shoes. At



Spanish women in Spanish style chopines, which preceded the Venetian chopine. Watercolor, 1540. Image: Museo Stibbert, Florence.



Twenty-inch Chopines, 16th century. Image: Venetian Museo Correr dei Veneziani.

the time, Spanish women also wore long black scarves and cloaks when out in public and displaying the fashionable chopines was a way of visibly expressing their wealth.

As the Venetians adopted the chopine, they were adapted to Venetian sensibilities and the available materials. Instead of Spanish cork, hardwood was used to create the platforms. This single change allowed the Venetian chopine to become narrower and taller. A pair in the Museo Correr in Venice (above) is twenty inches tall though extant chopines of four to nine inches tall are far more common.

Elizabeth Semmelhack, the Senior Curator at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, Canada, also proposed that the Venetian chopines were worn more like undergarments than accessories. Venetian skirts were cut long enough to hide their chopines - yet another way to display wealth, as silk and textile industries were so vitally important to the local economy at the time, and many formal portraits of the time frequently feature extremely long skirts that hint at chopines being worn. Paintings of more informal and private settings show chopines being set by a lady's chair (below) or displayed as a skirt is being drawn back.



Venetian woman bleaching her hair on a balcony near a pair of chopines likely worn around the house. Cesare Vecellio etching, circa 1598.

## ***Wearing the Chopine***

Upper class Venetian women lived sheltered and restricted lives during the 16th century. They were expected to be devout and chaste, embodying traits such as silence, modesty, and obedience. Pamphlets of the day even advised parents to prevent their daughters from participating in any forms of recreation such as reading that could threaten a “proper moral upbringing.” These women were not allowed out into the streets on their own, or even very often at all. When they did leave their homes they would wear chopines and were expected to be accompanied by one or two attendants - both as chaperones and to keep them steady on their feet.

Today, women who have worn 12” tall reconstructions of Venetian chopines report that on reasonably flat surfaces they’re not too much trouble but on grass or unlevel ground they can be very difficult to walk in. Undoubtedly the more common four to nine inch heights would be easier to manage and gives credit to claims from the Italian dancing master Fabritio Caroso that ladies who were used to wearing chopines could gracefully manage to dance with all of the flourishes and galliard variations.

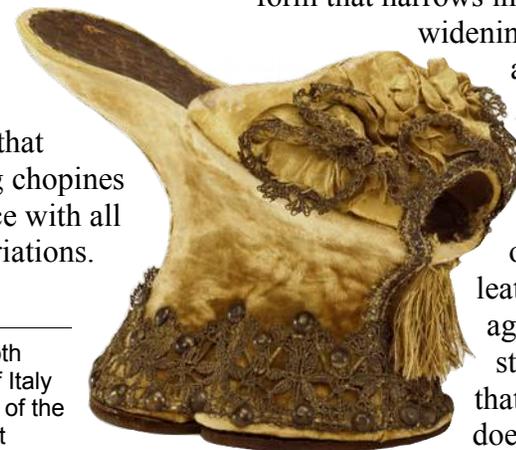
This chopine shares similarities with both Italian and Spanish styles. From part of Italy ruled by Spain. 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Collection of the Bata Shoe Museum. Image: Philip Gust

“Lady, your Ladyship is nearer to heaven than when I saw you last, by the altitude of a chopine!”  
(*Hamlet Act 2, Scene 2*)

Accounts of the period suggest that a chopine’s height was associated with wealth. However, while sumptuary laws prohibited courtesans from wearing silk dresses and jewelry, the law did not address chopines except to limit their height to three inches - a restriction that was blatantly ignored. Visitors from the rest of Europe would often see the courtesans in their chopines. With upper class ladies kept sequestered, the myth that it was primarily courtesans who wore them was born.

## ***Deconstructing the Chopine***

As mentioned, most of the extant Venetian chopines were constructed from wood instead of cork but quite a bit went into the construction. The shape of the wooden base varies from shoe to shoe but often the heel is raised and most of the support is at the front of the chopine beneath the ball of the foot and takes an hourglass form that narrows in the center before



widening at the base to provide a stable platform to stand on. The bottom of the shoe is carved into a concave shape with a nail in the base of the shoe to keep the leather outsole bowed up, again with an eye towards stability when walking that a regular flat sole doesn’t have.

One particularly interesting technique used in extant chopines is that the insole and outsole are stitched through the edge of the wood itself. The insoles are often stamped or scored into decorative patterns, and the base of the shoes are covered in velvet, brocade, or leather. The shoes are elaborately trimmed with metallic and silk bobbin lace, braids, tassels, gilded bands of metal, and gilded nails that serve double duty to attach any lace trimming that isn't sewn down.

As a costumer there is always the pesky itch of "I want that!" whenever I come across something beautiful and unique. Chopines have been on my personal wish list for several years and though I



Elevation and x-ray images of a chopine from *Seventeenth-Century Women's Dress Patterns: Book 2*, published by the Victoria & Albert Museum, 2013.

haven't followed through on it yet, Francis Classe of the SCA has done an impressive amount of research and work in recreating many different styles of shoes including Venetian chopines and pantoufles, the chopine's shorter, more casual cousin.

Recreating shoes is uncharted territory for me but I'm eager to give it a shot and if anyone else is interested in giving that a try, or simply just following along in the process when it happens, I'm happy to find others to geek out with about my shoe obsession.



Xray attributed to the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. Shoemaker apparently used two different blocks of wood and nailed them together. There is another nail at the bottom. Base of shoe is carved out and leather sole is nailed up to follow the contour, giving the shoe more stability than a perfectly flat bottom would.

## Further Reading

More information can be found at:

[The Chopine](#), Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

[Chopine](#). Wikipedia.

[The Chopine and Other Raised and High Heel Construction](#). Francis Classe is a member of the SCA who has done a great deal of research into historical shoes and has studied several pairs of extant chopines with an eye towards recreating them that other modern researchers may not consider as important to share.

[East Meets West: The Rise of the Chopine](#). BATA Shoe Museum.

"[On a Pedestal](#)" with Senior Curator Elizabeth Semmelhack of the BATA Shoe Museum. (YouTube video)

[Rare chopine from late 16th to early 17th centuries](#). All About Shoes. This is a 3D view of a pair of chopine shoes. (Requires Adobe Flash player)

*Marianne Pease started cosplaying in college when she coerced her roommate to sew a "Witch Hunter Robin" dress for her. She went on to sell blood plasma twice a week so she could afford her first sewing machine. By that time, International Costumers' Guild co-founder Marty Gear swept her up in her first Balticon masquerade, and she has been an enthusiastic costumer ever since, with interests in cosplay, historical, and many other kinds of costuming.*