

---

# Introduction

---

Anna-Brigitte Schlittler and Katharina Tietze

Shoes are accessories. They add the finishing touches to an outfit, complete a look. Shoes offer up information about social identities, class, and gender roles. From clogs to sandals, high heels to brogues, sneakers to boots—shoes have become indispensable extensions of the body, shaping the way we stand and walk. With the appropriate footwear, walking can assume entirely different forms. We might go for a leisurely stroll, a “turn”, decide to walk to work, or go for a hike—and so shoes also symbolize our (historically contingent) understanding of public space and our changing relationship to the natural world. At the same time, shoes are also complex, technical products. More than 100 work stages are still required to manufacture classic men’s shoes, for example. Nor is the process entirely mechanical or automated. Even today, shoemaking involves skilled crafts(wo)manship. Leather, the most important basic material, should only be cut to shape under the exacting eye of an expert. The evolution of the shoe into a mass-produced consumer product took several decades.<sup>1</sup> Following the development of numerous specialist machines in the late 19th century, production underwent another fundamental change in the first third of the 20th century with the emergence of synthetics and glues. These innovations reduced the number of work stages, which in turn brought down total production costs.

The present work brings together the results of two research projects, both funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF), on the modern history of the shoe: “Diversity versus Scarcity: Design and Economic Challenges in the Swiss Shoe Industry, 1930–1950”,<sup>2</sup> and “Design—Material—Display: The Example of the Swiss Shoe Manufacturer Bally, 1930–1950”.<sup>3</sup> The two projects, undertaken in 2013–2014 and 2017–2018 respectively, were coordinated at the Institute for Cultural Studies of the ZHdK—Zürich University of the Arts.

Having served as the starting point for the project, *Bally’s* extensive corporate archives yielded an array of diverse historical sources. In addition to thousands of shoes, the archives

also contain advertising material, posters, and business documents—sources opened up to academic scrutiny for the first time. Our research focused on fashion design and economic history from the decades spanning 1930 to 1950. This period, which includes the epochal events of the Second World War, witnessed decisive and fundamental upheavals in economic, cultural, and political life. These transformations shaped *Bally's* own history, and shoe design more generally. From the perspective of fashion history, these years stand out for the products' varied design, quality craftsmanship, and technical inventiveness. Shortages during the Second World War precipitated experiments with materials and technical innovations, which reflected developments, both directly and indirectly, in cultural and contemporary history, as well as the unfolding economic situation.

Held in Zürich in 2014, the international conference "Shoes: Design Product, Everyday Item, Research Subject" marked the conclusion of the first project. Contributors' papers were subsequently published as an anthology: *Über Schuhe: Zur Ge-*



[1] The shoe display case at the exhibition entrance, inspired by the view of the design collection in the Bally company archives.

(Exhibition Bally—Swiss Shoes Since 1851 at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, 14 March to 11 August 2019, © ZHdK)

*schichte und Theorie der Fussbekleidung*. Many of the findings from the second project fed into the exhibition *Bally—Swiss Shoes Since 1851*,<sup>4</sup> which was held in 2019 at the Museum für Gestaltung in Zürich [FIGS. I, II] following a proposal outlined by the two editors of this volume.

The economic historian Roman Wild, who was part of the team for the first project, has since been awarded his doctorate. His dissertation was published in 2019 with the title *Auf Schritt und Tritt. Der schweizerische Schuhmarkt 1918–1948* (At Every Step: The Swiss Shoe Market, 1918–1948).

### Fashion Studies

In recent years, research on costume history in the field of “fashion studies” has undergone a significant increase in the scope and sophistication of both its content and methodology.<sup>5</sup> This has not been matched, however, by the numbers of specialized academic publications about shoes. The first decade of this millennium saw the publication of seminal publications on the theme, which served to provide important facts, theoretical in-



[II] Installation view of gallery on the company's history. In the foreground, Richard Kissling's bust of Carl Franz Bally.

(Exhibition *Bally—Swiss Shoes Since 1851* at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, 14 March to 11 August 2019, © ZHdK)

sights, and a selection of methodological approaches.<sup>6</sup> A striking feature of the past few years, however, is the way in which academic studies and exhibitions have developed in parallel to one another. Of course, specific areas of expertise mean that this relationship between museum collections and the development of object-centred theories within fashion studies is inevitable. However, the resultant dependency has fostered a rather one-sided perspective. After the turn of the millennium, museums held increasing numbers of stand-alone presentations of shoes. Yet these tended towards a near-exclusive emphasis on the *auteur* designer of decidedly unusual shoes, creators of the “shoe as fetish” rather than the everyday shoe of popular culture. Such museum shows have tended to focus on big-name, celebrity designers or else have showcased eccentric footwear that often drew on female gender stereotypes—echoed in exhibition names like *Shoe Obsession*,<sup>7</sup> *Killer Heels*,<sup>8</sup> or *Pleasure and Pain*.<sup>9</sup> Even shows with a more diverse range of exhibits, like the exhibition *Marche et démarche: Une histoire de la chaussure* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris,<sup>10</sup> largely neglected mass-produced shoes. Then came a significant step forward in the field with the publication in 2017 of *Shoes: The Meaning of Style* by Elizabeth Semmelhack, senior curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto. Using the example of four basic shoe forms—sandals, boots, high heels, and sneakers—Semmelhack relates the history of shoes with a particular focus on the 20th and 21st century. Offering a wealth of illustrations and factual information, Semmelhack unpicks the objects to reveal how the meanings connoted by shoes have changed over the years, particularly with regard to gender. Although the author’s primary focus is on North America and Europe, she frequently relates the subject matter to other cultures—referring, for example, to the Persian origins of the high heel.

Faced with a collection of some several thousand shoes, the interrelationship between fashion studies and material culture was of particular significance to us. As Peter McNeil has outlined, fashion studies seeks to appraise fashion-related phenomena from a transdisciplinary perspective—and so to bring together a variety of different strands, ranging from costume history (informed from a more art-historical/cultural-histori-

cal perspective), via questions relating to production aesthetics and economics, through to the critical analysis of symbolic processes and social practices.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, the dichotomy between costume history, which tends towards a more inductive approach, and the more deductive reasoning favoured by fashion studies, is itself an idiosyncratic feature of the research subject: while fashion is necessarily evoked through tangible objects, it is itself also an abstract concept. Fashion, then, invites a decidedly object-laden approach on the one hand and, on the other, a mode of analysis that (in extremis) foregoes objects entirely. Giorgio Riello synthesized these two approaches into the “material culture of fashion”. “Material culture” is thus understood as at a point “in-between” material evidence and theoretical concept, predicated on a constant process of exchange and confrontation between the two poles:

Material culture is not the object itself [...], but neither is it a theoretical form [...]. Material culture is instead about the modalities and dynamics through which objects take on meaning (and one of these is that of fashion) in human lives.<sup>12</sup>

### **Insights into *Bally's* History**

The company was founded by Carl Franz Bally in 1851. The manufacture of shoes was based on the division of labour from the very outset, although the factory originally operated without electricity or machines. The most crucial developments in the first few decades related to the company's efforts to supply the factory with electricity and specialized machinery (which was initially imported from the United States). First served by hydropower then steam power, the factory was eventually electrified towards the end of the 19th century. The company's first *Singer* shaft sewing machine entered service in 1854, followed in 1868 by the *McKay* stitcher—marking a milestone in increased productivity.<sup>13</sup>

After a difficult first few years, *Bally* eventually succeeded in establishing thriving sales offices—firstly in Latin America (Montevideo in 1870, Buenos Aires in 1873), then in Europe (Paris in 1879, and finally London in 1882). As the company grew, so too did the need to open new production facilities. A

decentralized approach was taken to setting up new factories, which were opened both in Schönenwerd's immediate vicinity and further afield. This made it possible for the company to employ members of rural communities, who could continue farming in parallel to their employment at *Bally*. Piecework by women working from home was also an important component of the production process. *Bally's* founder was a paternal capitalist typical of his day: in addition to providing health insurance and housing for his employees, he also created the *Bally* Park (an attraction that still warrants a visit today). On the other hand, he also vetoed such measures as the establishment of a trade union.<sup>14</sup>

*Bally* became a stock company in 1908, before being turned into a holding company in 1921. In the period covered by this study, it was the third generation—Iwan, Ernst, and Max Bally—who were at the company's helm.

The 1930s was a decade forged by the effects of the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the ensuing wave of economic protectionism. The outbreak of the Second World War led to problems in sourcing materials and production bottlenecks. Hostilities made it impossible (or certainly much more difficult) to import and export goods; entire markets effectively disappeared. *Bally's* fortunes were once again on an upward trajectory in the postwar period, and the company was able to celebrate its centenary in 1951 in suitably lavish style. Individual portraits of the entire workforce were commissioned for the occasion—an impressive testament not only to documentary photography, but also *Bally's* appreciation of its employees. In addition to the shoe factories in Switzerland, the *Bally* holding company was by this point the owner of production plants in France, South Africa, Great Britain, Austria, and the United States. This was in addition to a number of tanneries in South America, as well as a portfolio of real estate and sales companies. Particularly important roles were played by the retail organization Arola AG (founded in 1926) and the company's advertising department (branded Agor AG, founded in 1932). During this period, *Bally* employed around 15,000 factory workers and other employees in Switzerland and abroad, with the company manufacturing some 28,000 pairs of shoes every day.

*Bally* made considerable efforts to achieving self-sufficiency. In addition to operating its own rubber factory and manufacturing the wooden lasts used in shoe production, the company even grew its own vegetables for the staff canteen. Founded in 1911 as the chemical-technical department, and known from 1927 as the “Experimental Institute”, *Bally’s* research department worked to create synthetic fabrics and glues, as well as developing new products (including a range of shoe-care products). The research department also honed sophisticated product test procedures, creating machines for quality control purposes that themselves became highly sought-after across the globe.

However, the fourth generation of the *Bally* family were unable to agree on the company’s future direction. Like many other businesses, *Bally* struggled with the effects of globalization in the 1970s. The speculator Werner K. Rey became *Bally’s* majority shareholder in 1977, before selling the company just nine months later to the arms manufacturer Oerlikon Bührle. The new owners initially kept *Bally’s* business operations essentially unchanged. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War led to a decline in defence contracts and so the new owners fell into financial difficulties. The company’s response was to sell a number of significant real-estate holdings, including the flagship store Capitol on Bahnhofstrasse in Zürich and its exclusive shop on the rue de la Madeleine in Paris. *Bally* was eventually sold to the US investment company, Texas Pacific Group. With the exception of the *Bally* Museum and Historical Archives, the site at Schönenwerd was closed down completely in 2000. The company headquarters were relocated to Caslano (in the canton of Ticino). Shoes continued to be manufactured at the new factory, as well as at facilities in Italy and outside Europe. Most recently, *Bally* was sold in 2008 to the Vienna-based Labelux group.

## Contributions

From the perspective of economic history, Roman Wild unpacks the significance of the growth in sales of the fashion shoe and the controversies surrounding shoe fashion. Various parties—campaigners from the women’s movement, representatives of the shoe industry, hygienists, social scientists, and

politicians—had an equal role to play in the debate surrounding fashion in the interwar period. Wild's article illustrates how a very broad array of concerns, fears, and areas of expertise were invoked in contemporary discussions about fashion.

A number of the articles explore the “fashionization” of shoes, including associated discourses and the influence they brought to bear on design. Anna-Brigitte Schlittler firstly examines the increasing differentiation of shoe design during the Second World War, and the reaction of the Swiss press to these developments. One of the most striking forms to gain popularity in this period was the platform shoe, whose unusual design provoked something of a sensation. This was particularly evident in the pages of the satirical magazine *Nebelspalter*: in dozens of cartoons, the shoe functioned as a cypher for a fashion discourse in which the emergent signs of looming socio-political conflicts were first becoming apparent. In her second article, Schlittler also describes the shift from the (individual) *modelleur* to the (collective) design team. Drawing on numerous and highly diverse sources, the study sets forth a detailed picture of the industrial design process. One remarkable aspect of this period was the paradigm shift set in motion during the 1930s: *Bally* moved from a practical, technical design approach, centred around the *modelleur*—typically a trained shoemaker with creative flair—through to an organizational form that could be termed “fashion design”.

Meanwhile, in a study that compares 1930s evening shoes from the *Bally* archives with shoe fashions featured in contemporary issues of US *Vogue*, Katharina Tietze reveals parallels that underline the international importance of the Swiss shoe manufacturer. The article also looks at the diverse methods employed by fashion magazines to display shoes, and examines the ways in which shoe fashion changed—with footwear that exposed the foot, for example, or featured new kinds of heel. In the following article, Daniel Späti focuses on the evolution of the types of footwear classed as “utility shoes”. Besides the shoe reform propagated by doctors and hygienists, the increasing differentiation of design was driven primarily by the general transformation in shoe usage. Beyond providing protection for the foot, there was an increasing emphasis on fashion-related

functions—relating, for example, to shoes’ social, emotional, and symbolic facets—which in turn looped back and even influenced the design of utility shoes.

The period examined in this study not only witnessed a proliferation of innovative shoe forms, but also new materials. In her second essay “Real Gold?”, Tietze adopts a historical perspective to explore this theme via the example of gold leather. In the 1930s, gold-leather evening shoes were a must-have accessory for elegant women. These luxurious shoes numbered among the *Bally* company’s most exclusive products, both in terms of their design and production technology. Using X-ray microanalysis, it was possible to prove that during the period covered by this study, *Bally* had used leather indeed coated with real gold. The essay also examines the significance of gold as a colour in the fashions of a decade dominated by the fallout from the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

While *Bally* attached great importance to creating fashionable, high-quality footwear, the company also put considerable effort into developing a diverse range of methods for displaying their products and sophisticated techniques with which to market them. In “A Fairy-Tale Affair...!”, Katharina Tietze describes how *Bally* shoes were displayed at the Swiss National Exposition of 1939 in Zürich. Visitors to the Fashion Pavilion there could see *Bally* products displayed in the Exports Room. In a display inspired by jewellery showcases, *Bally* shoes were presented in indirectly illuminated glass cases, which were fitted onto the wall of a mirrored gallery. The adjoining “Fashion Theatre” staged live entertainment shows where the performers’ footwear was supplied exclusively by *Bally*. Moreover, each of the three vaudeville acts performed in the theatre featured a song with *Bally*-themed lyrics. Karl Egender, the architect of the building, was also responsible for every detail of the interior design. And in her article, Henriette-Friederike Herm explores the particular role assumed by the store display window, which came to function as a new arena of communication between salesperson and shopper. The *Bally* Historical Archives’ wealth of visual and photographic material provides an insight into the company’s extensive engagement with the medium of display window design, which was originally the remit of Arola

AG (the company's retail organization) and Agor AG (another subsidiary owned by the *Bally* holding company).

### **Production Matters**

For a systematic history of industrial fashion, it is important to examine the entire production cycle, from manufacture and distribution through to the point of consumption.<sup>15</sup> Angela McRobbie outlines six factors in this cycle: manufacture and production, design, retail and sales, training and education, fashion magazines and the media, and, lastly, consumer practices.<sup>16</sup> McRobbie is critical of the way studies of consumption can lose sight of production and the (often precarious) conditions in which it is undertaken. Our research projects were by their very nature unable to provide a comprehensive description of this cycle, but rather sought to gain a more profound understanding of some specific aspects. This is in part due to the nature of the sources. For example, while there are interesting sources relating to sales, the actual *point of sale*—consumption—is a theme that could be little more than merely touched upon in the study, since *Bally's* archives only contain prototype models (rather than shoes destined for sale). Furthermore, it is clear that there is more to be learned about the interrelationship between production and working conditions—not least with regard to the present day.

The story of Rosa Burri, as recorded in the minutes of one directors' meeting, offers some insight into these working conditions:

Burri Rosa, Sewing Department: Mr Trüb reports that the aforementioned drowned this morning in the River Aare. Mr Felber, a foreman in Plant B, Shafts, had had to reject [Burri's] work and instructed her to put the items right. The work was of terrible quality, as had been the case on a number of previous occasions. Otherwise, however, the girl was considered hardworking, although her work was of varying quality. About half an hour later, the girl left the premises. Her sister was then consulted, who immediately explained that [Burri] would be certain to have headed for the Aare. It seems that "going to the Aare" was frequently used as a threat at home. The family, which has 12 children, has fallen on hard times. One of the foremen, Mr Spiel-

mann of Obergösgen, learned from a neighbour of the family that the girl had spoken frequently in recent days of drowning herself in the Aare. Burri had made previous suicide attempts a long period of convalescence from a lung disease.

Decision: Mr Trüb and Felber will visit the parents, accompanied by the local priest and mayor, in order first to establish the family's circumstances and second to prevent the circulation of any false rumours. The board is satisfied that the foreman Felber bears no responsibility for the incident.<sup>17</sup>

Although it is impossible here to draw any conclusions about just how far working conditions at *Bally* were implicated in the young woman's suicide, her story does nevertheless illustrate how the production of high-value goods was linked to existential problems for female factory workers. Young girls employed as seamstresses were especially important to the company. *Bally* recruited workers through a strategy of decentralized factories, which made it possible to employ young women from surrounding villages. The women could thus go on living with their families, who were able to continue working in the agricultural sector. In 1901, 34.2 percent of *Bally's* workforce were under eighteen years of age. The young women usually remained in employment until marriage or the birth of their first child. Former employees would periodically take on piecework, which they could then work on at home.<sup>18</sup>

Fashion design continues to form an integral part of the general history and theory of design. For design lecturers such as ourselves, fashion history and design history are one and the same: just like other products, clothing—which has been designed, produced, and marketed as a mass product since the 19th century—forms part of the history of industrial design and industrialization. *Bally* is in a preeminent position to tell this story, since the company passed through every phase of industrialization in near-textbook fashion.

Our sincere thanks to *Bally*, particularly Rebekka Gerber and Ursula Gut, who are entrusted with the care of the historical artefacts in the company's Historical Archives and were always at hand to provide advice and practical assistance; to the Ballyana family foundation, which since its founding in 2000 has made

a significant contribution to researching the history of *Bally* shoes; to Sigrid Schade and Sigrid Adorf, heads of the ZHdK's Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts, for their support in the initial development of the research project; to Roman Wild for the interesting exchange of ideas; to Maja Siebrecht for her meticulous graphic design; to Marco Iori for his attentive proof-reading; to Lance Anderson and his team for their expert translation; and, last but certainly not least, to the Swiss National Science Foundation for making the entire project possible.

- 1 For the 18th-century beginnings of the division of labour in shoe manufacturing, see Riello 2006.
- 2 Anna-Brigitte Schlittler (project manager), Katharina Tietze (co-manager), Daniel Späti, Roman Wild.
- 3 Anna-Brigitte Schlittler (project manager), Katharina Tietze (co-manager), Henriette Friederike Herm.
- 4 *Bally—Swiss Shoes Since 1851* at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, 14 March to 11 August 2019; curator: Karin Gimmi, exhibition designer: Alain Rappaport.
- 5 See Black et al. 2013.
- 6 Benstock/Ferris 2001; Riello/McNeil 2005; Sudrow 2010; Riello/McNeil 2006; Semmelhack 2008; Semmelhack 2009; Nahshon, Edna: *Jews and Shoes*, Oxford 2008; Sudrow 2010.
- 7 Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, 8 February to 13 April 2013.
- 8 Brooklyn Museum, New York, 10 September 2014 to 1 March 2015.
- 9 Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 13 June 2015 to 31 January 2016.
- 10 Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 7 November 2019 to 22 March 2020.
- 11 McNeil 2010.
- 12 Riello, Giorgio: "The Object of Fashion: Methodological Approaches to the History of Fashion" in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 3, 2011. <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/rt/prinTerfriendly/8865/12789> (accessed 18 March 2016).
- 13 *Hundert Jahre Bally-Schuhe, 1951*, p. 28.
- 14 Heim 2000, pp. 61–81.
- 15 Gaugele 2016.
- 16 McRobbie 1999, p. 216.
- 17 Board Minutes, 21 July 1938.
- 18 Baumann Püntener 1996.