

MARCO SASSONE

HIS BOOTS AND OTHER WORKS

His boots were made for walking but now they are doing all the talking in a new series of paintings examining the “sole” of a life on the move. No joke. Marco Sassone’s fascination with footwear is rooted in a quest for self-awareness. Where he’s been and how got to where he is today — an internationally acclaimed painter knighted by his native Italy — are preoccupations expressed through the shoes, boots and paint-stained studio slippers depicted in an exhibition of 10 new paintings at Toronto’s Bata Shoe Museum. The series continues an exploration of footwear as an intimate extension of the self which Sassone had begun with the 1991 painting, *We Are Mannequins*, a work in his personal collection. Then as now, shoes combine iconography, psychology and personal mythology in a single object, serving as storehouses of memory and identity. Shoes absorb the wear and tear of daily life and spark desire; they are tools of a trade and instruments of self-expression; they raise high and carry low, protecting and projecting an individual out in the world. It is often said you can judge someone by the shoes they wear. And what about the shoes someone paints? How deep can you go? Sassone takes the plunge.

His paintings of footwear dance with meaning. They are the product of an artist wanting to understand his world by stepping into other people's shoes and deepen his understanding of self by painting what remains special to him. The boots in question are a prized possession. Sassone bought them nearly 50 years ago in Swinging London while taking his first steps outside his homeland as an artist seeking to create his own destiny. The snakeskin boots travelled with him from Europe (where he received his formal training) to North America (where he soon made his name). Over the years, Sassone modified their design, reducing the staggering height of their block heel as he grew from youth through middle age and beyond. He owns them still. *Journey*, a key painting in the new collection, depicts the boots lying on railway tracks in Toronto, the city he lives in now, visibly signaling their importance as a symbol of the artistic voyage. Sassone heightens their physical beauty with impasto and other tactile painting techniques that elevate the footwear to a status of fine art. “The presence of footwear in my work relates and incorporates well into the texture of my canvasses, Sassone says. “It is evident that I use shoes as a vehicle for my ongoing theme of departure and arrival.”

Born in 1942 in the small Tuscan town of Campi Bisenzio, located about 10-kilometers northwest of Florence, Sassone was 25 when he purchased the platform boots as a pick me up for having to flee his homeland. The flood of 1966 had devastated Florence, the city where he learned life drawing from Ugo Maturo and figurative painting from Silvio Loffredo, a former pupil of the Austrian expressionist Oskar Kokoschka. By necessity Sassone had to move if he were to have a shot at becoming a professional artist. Buying the boots represented this early urge to make his mark on the worlds of art and beauty. London beckoned; of course it did. At the time, London formed the epicentre of the “youthquake” then rocking popular culture. Art, fashion, theatre, literature and pop music in particular had become expressions of the new optimistic spirit of modernism making 1960s London the place to be. Sassone journeyed there with a fellow Italian, Bruno Galeotti, and the first thing they remarked on, after disembarking from the train, was how short the miniskirts were, and how fashionable the men. “We were Italians and we thought we knew how to dress,” Sassone recalls. “But we quickly realized that the English could teach us a thing or two.”

Hoping the miniskirts would return an admiring glance, Sassone followed his friend’s lead in dressing the part of the English peacock. Together, they went shopping at the new boutiques sprouting on the King’s Road, Granny Takes A Trip as their ultimate destination. Established in 1966 by vintage clothes collector Sheila Cohen with her graphic artist boyfriend, Nigel Weymouth, Granny Takes A Trip was internationally known as where The Beatles and The Rolling Stones bought their one-off groovy threads. The clothes designed by Mod tailor Nigel Pearse, a Savile Row dropout, helped push the boutique to the forefront of the new British style, helping to revive dandyism, a sort of cult of the self, nearly a century after Beau Brummel first made flamboyant dress an essential ingredient of English maleness. Sassone wanted part of the sartorial action. Arriving at Granny Takes A Trip, he brushed past the crunch of celebrities crowding the entranceway and the clouds of hashish wafting up from behind the cash before clapping eyes on an exquisite pair of snakeskin platform boots on which he immediately lavished all his money. Call it an investment in his future.

Afterward, Sassone was invited to an exclusive party in the English countryside where he sketched a vista on the back of a napkin, attracting the attention of an aristocrat who promptly paid him a pound for the impromptu art work. “A pound was a lot of money for me in those days,” Sassone marvels. “It allowed me to purchase a week’s worth of groceries in London, which was a big relief.” The boots became his lucky charm. A photograph from this time shows

Sassone wearing the boots with a suit and his hair falling long over his collar, as was the then English style. Appearances mattered; they did to everyone who lived through the style-conscious 'sixties. But for an artist trained in the opposing schools of impressionism and expressionism, one light and airy, the other dark and gestural, appearances were always more than skin deep. They were the outward image of hidden realities, the dressing on a serving of truth. An aesthete in his youth, Sassone followed the dictates of that earlier artist and fellow dandy, Oscar Wilde, whose belief in the supremacy of beauty compelled him to declare that "the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." And those boots were beautiful. Sassone would never part with them.

The boots accompanied him on the next stage of his life journey. Laguna Beach with its established artists' community was where Sassone landed first, followed by San Francisco in the late 1970s. California's sun-dappled climate and ocean views recalled the Mediterranean and so Sassone felt at home. Settling on the West Coast, he lived in America for close to 40 years, developing a reputation as an "impressively gifted" artist "skilled in rendering reflections and color in light," said the Los Angeles Times in 1975. Though ensconced in a new land, Sassone often painted scenes from his childhood, painting from memory. Some of his enormous canvasses from this time depict the luminous interior of the Florentine church, Santa Croce, and the vibrating energy of the palio, Siena's annual horse race. Sassone's visceral painting style, produced from layers of pigment applied in agitated daubs and thickened lines, lifts the imagery straight off the canvas and into the viewer's own consciousness.

In San Francisco, the visual imagery shifted. The city's homeless population tugged on Sassone's imagination and also his sense of right. In 1989, he began painting the denizens of the streets, highlighting their humanity through a masterful handling of figurative expressionism. At this point in his artistic development, decidedly out of fashion footwear started to appear in his paintings as a visual topic. The shoes of the homeless, if and when they had shoes to wear, looked battered and bruised, soiled and stuffed with newsprint. The footwear was not only worn but worn out, symbolizing the bedraggled lives of their wearers. Debased footwear has represented downtrodden humanity before. Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes*, dating to 1866, depicts tattered footwear as a symbol of the indigent life which the artist himself had experienced. His collapsing leathers memento mori, underscoring the fragility of life. Sassone's shoes, on the other hand, are worn by actual people who defy objectification by looming large -- and in colour -- on the painter's canvas. *Home on the Street*, as Sassone's exhibition of drawings and

paintings of the homeless was called, opened in San Francisco in 1994, travelling to Los Angeles in 1996 and Florence in 1997 to critical acclaim.

Sassone's interest in "trashed humanity" did not waver over the years or weaken with yet another change of scenery. In 2005, after relocating to Toronto, he embarked on a new series of socially aware paintings crisscrossed with railway lines running in a multitude of directions at once. Toronto's abandoned rail yards inspired the series of *Tracks*. But it is Sassone's own wanderings, his feeling of being a vagabond within his own skin, elevating the paintings to the status of an epic. *The Odyssey* transposed to the 21st century. *Tracks* doesn't advance a vision of the railway as a nation builder. These railroads, stretching into a distance without end, appear more as symbols of urban dislocation. The people are absent. Only their work survives. But if this sounds depressing, the paintings themselves uplift the viewer with energizing displays of technical virtuosity that raise the banal imagery to the heights of heroic painting. Sassone enlivens the canvas with aggressive brush strokes and heaped on pigment that makes the tracks hum. The locomotive drive of his artistic vision transforms the tracks into roads to freedom, escape routes into the unknown. A stranger in a new land, with these paintings Sassone looks back at where he has come from and forward into a future without definition.

Other themes from the past continue to inspire the work Sassone is doing today. The homeless paintings from the 1990's, for instance, are updated in a new canvas titled *Tim Bare Land*, a play on the name of a leading American shoe brand encompassing a subtle critique on the breadline existence of the homeless everywhere. In this work, a street person lies on the sidewalk, suffused in shadow, just below the bright lights of a storefront displaying all the latest goods for sale. Inexplicably he is wearing a pair of Timberlands, perhaps given him by a sympathetic passerby. The newness of his footwear contrasts sharply with the shoddiness of his form crumpled on the street like a tossed piece of garbage. You are what you wear, except in this case where the shoes are a consumerist fantasy, a distraction from the social crisis lying, literally, at our feet.

In *Mirella and Emilia* the shoes belong to a different class of people from a different walk of life. This delightful painting takes a close-up view of two women locked in conversation. You can't see their faces. But the nearness of their pretty shoes, dangling from legs crossed under fancy skirts, makes it clear that the interlocutors are friends, relaxed in each other's company. In actual fact, Emilia is Sassone's wife and Mirella her real-life confidante. Sassone saw them

sitting together in his wedding day and he stored away the image in memory, painting it later but from the perspective of their shoes. This is fashion footwear, so delectable you wish you had them in your own closet. While standing in for the women who wear them, the shoes have a life of their own as objects of desire. Covetable they may be, but the shoes here fulfill an emotional need. They form a bond between two friends. The women's shoes are alike in being slightly tapered at the toe, suggesting a compatibility that goes beyond words.

*Thong Sandals* tells a different story: The easy breezy summer shoe, also known as the flip flop, represents brazen individualism, a willingness to flout convention by adorning plastic that is flimsy, toe exposing, a rule breaker. Perfect for the beach and a swimming pool deck, of course, but increasingly seen in public as the perfect complement to society's current fixation with fast fashion. Accordingly, Sassone paints the thong sandal like a thing vibrating with the excitement of its own happening. There are several of them, pulsating with troweled on pigment which the artist has applied in quick, jabbing actions. His jittery brush appears visually to amplify the *thwap-thwap-thwap* of the thong sandal in motion, heightening its allure as a symbol of freedom under the sun.

The language of footwear is often more eloquent than that, telling deeper stories. For the canvas entitled *Self-Portrait*, Sassone has painted the shoes he wears in his Toronto studio. What better likeness is there of an artist whose identity is wrapped up in his work? Paint-splattered and worn, the soft leather bears the imprint of thousands of hours of artistic labour that started more than half a century ago in Italy and carries through to the present. The shoes have taken on the shape of the artist's foot, and you can almost feel the damp warmth of them, their intimate connection to interior and exterior worlds of their wearer. Void of decoration and streaked with the passage of time and the outpourings of a still vital imagination, Sassone's work shoes dominate the canvas, emerging as their own work of art. They mark a journey that has arrived.

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Deirdre Kelly is an award-winning arts critic and journalist on staff at Canada's Globe and Mail newspaper. Author of the critically acclaimed books, *Paris Times Eight* and *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, she has written for *Azure*, *Canadian Art*, *Dance Gazette*, *Dance Magazine*, *Interview*, *Marie Claire*, *NUVO* and *Toronto Life* among other publications. Her dance articles for [CriticsAtLarge.ca](http://CriticsAtLarge.ca) won the Nathan Cohen Award in 2014, Canada's top prize for critical writing. She lives in Toronto.