

- For the Standard -

A big wedge of eye candy

SALVATORE Ferragamo, cobbler for the stars from Greta Garbo to the Princess Elizabeth, rejoiced that "Gloria Swanson's feet will never age. The face and figure may show the telltale signs of advancing years; the feet remain youthful and beautiful."

This is a thoughtful saying, and by far the most thought-provoking remark in *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers*. But the price feet pay for not growing old is that they never grow up. Because they rarely see the sun, they stay lily-white, smooth and comparatively hairless, like a pair of choirboys skulking at the end of your legs.

This eternal pre-teen appeal spills over from feet onto shoes and probably accounts for their popularity with fetishists who are often keen on a masquerade of childlikeness to surround their rituals — playing doctors and nurses in "naughty" corners.

Podophilia is the most common of the fetichisms, maybe because its whereabouts is handily available, so to speak; you normally have a foot within reach and don't need ingenious explanatory "cover" as you do for saddles or an aqualung in your wardrobe.

The fashionable shoe stands halfway between an item of clothing and a toy, people collect them

Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers
edited by Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil
(Berg, £29.99)

ERIC GRIFFITHS

like Dinky cars, and desire them with that "must have" longing which is more or less bound to end in tears before bedtime.

Shoes is a great big book for great big kids. It is lavishly, indeed slavishly illustrated, and the pages of text are colour-coordinated with the pics, as good accessories should be. *Cerise* from Ferragamo's red satin stiletos invades the matching paragraphs on *Shoes and Sin*; the pale, shoreline grey of a Prada shoe-shop installation washes over into tasteless spearmint on the facing page.

You wouldn't always find this vivid riot of design helpful, supposing you wanted to read closely the contributors' views on "the materiality of the shoe" or their attempts "to frame the high heel in cultural terms". Never mind.

This wedge of eye-candy, with its blow-up vistas of shoes as vast jellies or sprinkled with beads like fairy-cakes, is a party-favour for

consumerists, not a considered study of appetite. And the youthful cries of the authors are ritual drivel which it would be wrong to take seriously, though they present their banal discoveries with a toddler's solemnity — "shoes signalled the start of the leg"; "boots have also been associated with lesbianism".

One contributor insists that "shoe fashion's role cannot be underestimated". He probably means "overestimated", for only a zero cannot be underestimated. The word would figure more accurately in a sentence such as "the value of the cultural history in *Shoes* cannot be underestimated".

The writers recite drabs and drabs of *passé* cultural theory intently, as examples of "analysis", when they are no more (and no less) than the skipping-rhymes of an unselfconscious but self-important tribe.

They're not pulling the reader's leg when they spin shoeperstitious yarns about a sneaker that "takes up ... interwar utopian ideas" or shoes which "take control over the physical and human space in which we live".

They are themselves the prime dupes of their own mystifying catch-phrases. "The absence of footwear represented the condition of the entire population of Yorubaland before the fifteenth century" means just "nobody wore shoes there before 1400" but sounds somehow more impressive.

Shoes have "a long and complex history of meaning in relation to patriarchy". Well yes, but this is vacuously true of everything, even Toblerone.



Whoops a daisy: supermodel Naomi Campbell takes a tumble on the catwalk

