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Buckles

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Keywords

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Abstract

Buckles were used to fasten shoes in the eighteenth century, as well as other articles of clothing such as breeches and hats. Because they were small, metallic and detachable, they offered opportunities for decoration and the ostentatious display of wealth. The finest buckles were adorned with diamonds, which glistened in the candlelight and made a big impression at sociable events such as balls, where they highlighted the movements of the dancing body. It was also possible to achieve this look on the cheap, however, so they became the focus of anxieties about the social order.

Buckles are highly characteristic objects of the eighteenth century. Shoe buckles were widely adopted from the 1690s and quickly went out of fashion in the 1790s, and epitomise many features of the intervening period. They were an essential part of fashionable dress for both men and women, but their significance for eighteenth-century sociability goes deeper than this. Their decorative nature, their satisfying intricacy and their monetary value – combined with their detachability and portability – made them a desirable consumer good, and one that could be loaded with personal meaning.

Buckles were used as fastenings on various items of clothing. Fastenings (including buttons) were often detachable in this period, rather than integral to the garment, so this provided an opportunity for customisation. Buckles could be used to attach neckstocks, breeches and hats, but their almost universal use was to fasten shoes. Suites of matching buckles could be purchased together, so as to provide a coordinated look. These were often sold in an attractive leather-bound case, which suggests that they could be given as a gift.

Shoe buckles suited the way that footwear was manufactured in the eighteenth century. Shoes were straight lasted – so were symmetrical and could be worn on either foot – and had two long straps that needed to be fastened together. Shoes did not come with fastenings, so the buckle had to be purchased separately. This enabled wearers to decorate their shoes. Elite footwear from the early century could be quite ornate, being manufactured from coloured leathers and ornate fabrics, but increasingly men's footwear was only to be seen in black and in fairly uniform styles. The buckle therefore offered a small but conspicuous opportunity for display.

The buckled shoe became central to the dress ensemble of the eighteenth century. Patrician men dressed in their uniform of jacket, waistcoat and breeches, with a stockinged leg terminating in a buckled leather shoe. The look was highly tailored and drew attention to the classical proportions of the body and the shapeliness of the leg, which was a particular sign of male beauty.¹ One gentleman was known for his 'handsome foot and ancle', which he displayed to the greatest advantage with 'the most brilliant and costly buckles':

'Don't you admire my buckles?' he cried.

'I was just admiring,' said my lively friend, 'not your *buckles*, but your *policy*, in making your heels the object of attraction rather than your head.'²

Women's buckles were less visible than men's, since they were generally smaller and could be concealed under long skirts, but this made the flash of a jewelled buckle all the more tantalising.

Early shoe buckles were fairly simple articles, with a prong that pivoted on a central bar. The first time you attached a buckle to a shoe, you would have to pierce the leather in just the

right place, to create a hole that you would use every subsequent time: this was a complex manual operation that you would learn with practice. As time went on, they became more elaborate. By the mid-century, one commentator noted that ‘they began to increase in size, their designs displayed a greater degree of taste, and their workmanship a greater degree of elegance’.³ The metal ring could be adorned with jewels and decorative motifs, or even symbols to denote the wearer’s political allegiance.

The 1770s and 80s marked the height of shoe buckles’ size and extravagance. The ‘Artois’ buckles were named after the Comte D’Artois, who was known for his lavish tastes. These huge buckles could be wider than the shoe they were fastening, so were heavy and impractical, but certainly made a striking visual impression. The finest buckles were set with diamonds and could cost thousands, so were a way for the elite to display their wealth and power. Commentators complained that fashionable families were ruining themselves by trying to keep up with the latest buckle fashions, which were constantly changing.⁴

If you could not afford diamonds, however, it was possible to achieve a similar look for a lot less money. Many buckles in the later eighteenth century were set with ‘pastes’, which were glass beads cut like jewels. These could come in many colours but clear pastes were by far the most popular, to emulate the look and glistening effect of diamonds. Semi-precious stones could also be set in buckles, or steel could be cut and buffed to shine like gems. Whereas expensive buckles were made from silver or gold, alternatives were commonly made from white metal or ‘pinchbeck’, a cheap metal compound with a golden colour.

It was of course sensible to wear cheaper buckles: since they were worn on the feet, they could easily be lost or broken, and because they were small and detachable they were vulnerable to theft. Owners of diamond buckles would therefore use cheaper copies for everyday wear, but humbler consumers could also copy the fashions of their social betters. Pastes were ‘much worn by fops and dandies’, including those of modest means.⁵ Francis Place describes how prostitutes wore ‘long quartered shoes and large buckles’.⁶

This highlighted the potential for falsity in the culture of politeness, which many social commentators found troubling. Given that one’s social credit could now be achieved through appearance and performance – rather than the traditional markers of personal value and standing – then the fake buckle became the focus of anxieties about the fluidity of the social order. Counterfeit stones were a metonym for the untrustworthiness of the wearer.⁷

Shoe buckles were particularly desirable for those who sought to participate in the culture of politeness, since they had important roles to play in social interactions. Buckled shoes were part of the formal ensemble that men would wear to dances: indeed, dress regulations at assembly rooms explicitly forbade boots, as they were for riding and were therefore rural outdoor wear. Many Georgian social events took place in the evening, and bejewelled buckles came into their own at candlelit occasions, since their facets reflected the light. Buckles dazzled during a dance, drawing attention to the motions of the feet. They had their disadvantages when dancing – they were prone to breaking, coming off, or catching on a partner’s clothing – but the visual effect was worth the risk.

More sombrely, buckles were also part of the culture of mourning. Buckles could be had japanned in black, to be worn as part of the mourning outfit. While ostensibly unshowy, they are still striking articles, with a shiny surface and even black jewels. In March 1788, Prince William wrote to his brother George asking for ‘two mourning frocks and three pair of mourning buckles’ so that he might be properly attired.⁸

The correspondence of the Prince of Wales shows that he often sent buckles as gifts. Because they were small, attractive and potentially expensive – and would fit almost any shoe – they made excellent presents. They could also be personalised with initials or inscriptions, so were meaningful objects with strong emotional associations. Buckles often appear in wills, a sign both of their expense and their value to family members.⁹ Their monetary value also meant that they were an asset to sell, which were particularly useful to groups with limited access to property, such as women and minors.

After their heyday in the 1780s, the decline of buckles was remarkably rapid. ‘From the era of the REVOLUTION in FRANCE, we have to lament the decline of the BUCKLE manufactory’, noted one British commentator, ‘and from the ultimate triumph of Jacobinism in that unhappy land, the almost total extinction of those elegant ornaments, Shoe Buckles, in this nation’ (Moser 426). They came to be associated with the excesses of the aristocracy, along with stockings-and-breeches legwear. Instead, men favoured the military fashion of pantaloons or trousers, paired with boots, or shoes tied with laces. The ostentation of buckles had little place in the more austere male fashions of the Napoleonic Wars or the Regency.

From this period, ‘these articles are now never worn unless with full dress’.¹⁰ They remained a requirement of court dress, and men would still wear buckled shoes with stockings to balls. Dress codes were strictly enforced on these occasions: the Duke of Wellington was turned away from Almack’s for wearing trousers. But they were no longer part of male general wear, and women’s shoe styles tended not to incorporate them either, although they enjoyed occasional revivals.

Buckles were therefore seen much less often in the nineteenth century, whereas they were characteristic of the eighteenth. Their significance for eighteenth-century sociability lies in their visibility at social occasions, where they served to project the wealth and taste of their wearer. The fact that the wearer might in fact be less wealthy than they appeared from their buckles only highlights the new ways that social standing was performed in the eighteenth century, and the cultural anxieties that resulted from this. In order to understand buckles, we should not view them in a display case, detached from the body whose shoes they fastened. Rather, we should consider them as worn objects, which moved and glistened, and whose meanings were established in social interactions.

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3. Joseph Moser, ‘The Revolution in Shoe Buckles’, *The European Magazine* (June 1807), p. 424.

4. Iris Brooke, *A History of English Footwear* (St Giles: London, 1945), p. 70.
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 6. Mary Thale, *The Autobiography of Francis Place* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972), p. 77.
 7. Alicia Kerfoot, 'Declining Buckles and Movable Shoes in Frances Burney's *Cecilia*', *The Burney Journal* (11, 2011), p. 55-79.
 8. Prince William to Prince George, 10 March 1778, in A. Aspinall (ed.), *The Correspondence of George Prince of Wales 1770-1812* (London: Cassell, 1968), vol. 1, p. 268.
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 10. *Literary Journal, or Universal Review of Literature* (7 April 1803), p. 412.
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Further Reading

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[Sir Gregory Gigg; or, the city beau \(c. 1780\)](#)