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Connoisseur's Guide

## The Best Men's Shoes

Neal Santelmann

Thanks to the HBO hit *Sex and the City*, there are probably few women out there now who have never heard the words "Manolo Blahnik." Among the many joys of New York life the show celebrated, few were as admired or envied as the lead character's collection of 100, give or take, of the Spanish designer's expensive, elaborate shoes. Over the show's six years the shoes became fetishized, and sales of Manolo Blahniks skyrocketed.

It is, however, extremely unlikely that the same kind of publicity would ever work for men's shoes. For one thing, most men don't sit around fantasizing about shoes all day. For another, most men's shoes are rather prosaic, not to mention strongly similar in design and function.

While shoe shopping may not mean the same for a man as for a woman, it would behoove many men to spend a little more time weighing their options the next time they need to stock up on footwear. Contrary to what many people might think, there is a considerable difference between makes and styles, even if it is not always apparent to the untutored eye. The result, too often, is that men end up buying cheap, uncomfortable or overly trendy shoes when, with a little bit of extra thought, they could have spent their money on a shoe that would have lasted them happily for years. In other words, a wingtip is not a wingtip is not a wingtip.

"Men let themselves down on their shoes," says **Lynne Marks**, an Atlanta-based image consultant and president of the London Image Institute, whose corporate clientele includes executives at **Coca-Cola** (nyse: [KO](#) - [news](#) - [people](#) ), **American Express** (nyse: [AXP](#) - [news](#) - [people](#) ), **AT&T** (nyse: [T](#) - [news](#) - [people](#) ) and the Weather Channel. "They either don't think that shoes are important, or they seem to think that shoes can't be seen. Either way, it's a big mistake."

Believe it or not, at different periods in history men's shoes were more Carrie Bradshaw than Cary Grant. While before the French Revolution most of the world's population was lucky to have shoes at all, European aristocrats used to flaunt their status through such ostentatious touches as floral clothing, embroidery, makeup and high heels for both men and women.

After the revolution, "social mores emphasized equality, and businessmen veered dramatically away from anything that might be considered frivolous toward a more somber, serious and almost puritanical style of dress, including their shoes," says **Elizabeth Semmelhack**, curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto. Heels gave way to flat soles, shiny buckles to sensible eyelets, and pretty soon men's dress shoes had all the flare of fuel-efficient subcompacts. The now ubiquitous, Oxford-style men's dress shoe, notes Semmelhack, has been around since about 1910, when businessmen finally



### THE BEST MEN'S SHOES

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abandoned the ankle boot styles of the late 19th century.

While historical social upheaval certainly had a huge role in shaping what today's gentlemen wear on their feet, the current lack of distinctive dress shoe product can also be traced to the fact that, unlike women, men actually give a damn about fit. "Comfort is an enormous factor for men," says **Michael Atmore**, editorial director of *Footwear News*. "The traditional wingtip left a lot of room and was very forgiving in terms of fit. But men's feet tend to go up in size as they age. As such, most manufacturers don't put a lot of effort into extreme designs for fear of limiting their customer base over fit issues."

The question, of course, is why a man should choose to wear anything other than Rockports or sneakers. For one thing, a well-made shoe can, and should be, extremely comfortable. For another, a well-made shoe sends the rest of the world a signal about the wearer. More than any other article of clothing, shoes can influence how others view us, not to mention how we view ourselves. There's a reason, after all, why mothers traditionally advise their daughters to first look at a man's shoes.

But shoes can also make you look sharper too. "If men paid attention to shoes, it would be easier for them to put their outfits together more successfully," says **Lauren Solomon**, a New York-based image consultant who spent four years as the in-house image specialist at Chase Manhattan, now **J.P. Morgan Chase** (nyse: [JPM](#) - [news](#) - [people](#) ). "Men should look at shoes the way women do: as a great way to take what's in their closet and spice it up." Indeed, as ties become less and less requisite in the workplace, Solomon posits, the tag team of sharp shoes and matching belts could become the most distinctive element of the male regalia.

For the most part, men's dress shoe styles run Italian, British or American. The former tend to be on the sleeker side; the second distinctly traditional; and the latter almost clunkily conservative. Of course, like so much else these days, shoes are a global product, and it's getting harder and harder to differentiate geographical styles as well as manufacturers. For instance, Crockett & Jones, based in Northampton, Britain's shoemaking capital, not only markets shoes under its own label but also makes them for **Polo Ralph Lauren** (nyse: [RL](#) - [news](#) - [people](#) ) and Brooks Brothers.

Whatever the origin, a good pair of high-end men's dress shoes usually starts around \$350. As with comparing a pricey bespoke suit to an inexpensive off-the-rack number, high-end and low-end shoes are worlds apart, despite the basic similarities. Fit is the most basic difference. A well-made suit fits the wearer perfectly. The quality of the material is equally important, and if you don't think so, hold a Savile Row suit next to something from Men's Wearhouse sometime and you'll see it immediately. Last is durability. With proper care, a good suit, and a good pair of shoes, can last for years, if not generations, making it the more cost-effective buy over time.

There is also more variation to men's shoes than many people might think. Sure, there are the basic black Oxfords and penny loafers, but there is also a wide range of other styles, colors and hides that can suit any professional or social situation. Image consultant Solomon, for instance, recommends a lace-up cap toe with a few embellishments for the office; a "fabulous" slip-on with a clean front for the same; a monk-strap that's slightly more casual for Fridays or at the yacht club on the weekend; and another equally casual cap toe for the same.

As for color, it's two blacks for the office, a burgundy or ox-blood for one of the semi-casuals, and a honey or cognac for the other one. "Stay away from brown, which is just not versatile," adds Solomon, echoing **Frank Zappa's** classic admonishment: brown shoes don't make it. "Otherwise, if you have great belts to go with your shoes in all these colors, you've increased your wardrobe multifold."

To start you down the path of sartorial shoe splendor, we've selected nine shoemakers that will help you put your best foot forward. They range in price from \$360 to \$1,000-plus; in manufacturing from custom-made to factory produced; and in style from edgy contemporary to classically traditional. And they're all ready for stepping out.

[Click here for slide shoe, er, show.](#)

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