

Mary Janes: The Return of Innocence in a Postmodern Society
Dr. Mary J. Thompson, FL/HE Dept. BYU
Emily Munns, senior Family Life

Family Life and Home Economics Education
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT

Abstract:

Shoes can be a nonverbal way of signify to a viewer one's current involvement with fashion. An example of shoes are Mary Janes which have been a twentieth century standard for American children, particularly little girls, as well as adult females. They continue to be a fashion statement for this new century because of a retro appeal for times that had more well-defined values than today's postmodern society. A historical background on Mary Janes helps in better understanding its value to fashion.

Key Words: Mary Jane shoe, innocence, traditional values, fashion, postmodern society

Introduction

Courtney Love from her song "Doll Parts" states: "I am doll eyes, doll mouth, doll legs. I am doll arms, big veins, dog bait..." It is plain to see, considering this and other media that surrounds America, that dolls have more influence on the public than we might believe. Dolls in a symbolic way influence our culture in the way we as females dress, act, look, and measure our waistlines.

One of the most influential dolls ever sold in the United States was the Shirley Temple doll. She is still very popular today and can be bought, sold, and traded for high prices on the Internet. What is it about Shirley Temple that captivates our society so much? Could it be her towering innocence? Or is it her curly locks, her sweet smile, and those shoes? Shirley Temple wore Mary Janes in her very first film "Baby Burlesk" when

she was only three years old, and continued to wear them for the rest of her childhood film career.

Since Shirley Temple's time, Mary Jane shoes have continued in their popularity, leading to a few key questions about their beginnings and their importance within a post-modern society. To date, there are no journal articles written on the history or evolution of the Mary Jane shoe. This research for this paper focuses on the historical origins of the shoe in books published in the United States and Great Britain, and will discuss the following ideas: the definition and origin of the Mary Jane shoe and who wore the shoe. Discussion will also focus on if the shoe evokes a retro time of innocence, that in some measure is still desired by women, because it is reminiscent of a simpler time of sand boxes and sailor dresses, for the wearer.

Mary Janes have proven their popularity and staying power through the years and even centuries. What are Mary Janes? There are many definitions, especially since the shoes seem to reinvent themselves each fashion season by different designers. The original shoes generally pictured in our minds are the ones worn, and named after the child "Buster Brown" in the comic strip.

But the traditional criteria of Mary Janes are: a flat, single strap, blunt toed shoe that "signals a child's transition from baby to little girl or boy" (O'Keefe, 1996, p. 234). However, this definition is not all encompassing. Mary Janes have hundreds of variations from the traditional T-strap Mary Janes made of shiny black, red, white patent leather with basic variations to Calvin Klein's 1996 Mary Janes set on high, with a chunky heel and a thin strap (O'Keefe, 1996, p. 234) to slip-ons and mules with a T-strap. Mary Janes continue to reinvent themselves with each passing fashion season, never seeming to be out

of fashion, because they are able to adapt to the latest trend promoted by designers. Thus, this shoe has been around centuries to evolve into the shoe it is today.

History

Shoes have an extensive history. The oldest shoe on record is documented as early as 3500 B.C. (O'Keefe, 1996, p. 22). The Egyptians accomplished this by making "imprints of their feet in wet sand, molded braided papyrus into soles the same size and attached rawhide thongs to keep them on the foot" (O'Keefe, 1996, p. 22). From this time forward, every civilization has crafted their own designs to fit their individual needs.

This adaptation of a shoe for a specific culture and time is true of Mary Janes, which, although they were officially named in 1902 and became popular at that time, were merely a reintroduction of the shoe to a new generation.

The Romans in 34 A.D. had a very similar shoe that was made of thick black leather and heavily decorated with hole-punched patterns (Wilson, 1969, p. 36). The Normans also had a similar shoe that was worn by the commoners in 1066-1154 A. D. (Wilson, 1969, p. 64).

But the most striking resemblance to a Mary Jane is the shoe worn by the Tudors in 1485-1558 A.D. (Wilson, 1969, p. 108). This shoe is the exact replica of the current Mary Jane, and for this time period was known as the "bar shoe." The description of this shoe was: "bar shoes with very square toes fashionable for both men and women. Fastened with a button with high-cut or low vamps and a strong sole. Plain, black, worn by the peasant classes; slashed with colored satin puffs, worn with varying toe-widths by the upper classes" (Wilson 1969, p. 108). The Elizabethan Tudors also had their own variation of

this “bar shoe” worn by country people in 1558-1603 A.D. which included a rough form of a buckle fastening (Wilson, 1969, p. 118).

Bar shoes have been documented at much earlier times than most would have imagined. However, they did not start out as a fashion for children. According to the History of Clothing website (<http://histoclo.hispeed.com>, 2001), “The style itself has ancient origins and a shoe with an open front and crossbar was widely worn in the Middle Ages by both men and women, it was not at the time, however, considered a child’s style” (p. 3). An interesting point about these “bar shoes,” or “Mary Janes,” is that when they were worn by children, they seem to have been not only worn by little girls, but also little boys. These shoes seem to become a children’s fashion in the seventeenth century (Young, 1938, p. 23). At this time period, it was unimportant to differentiate between girl and boy babies until they were at least five years old.

In the nineteenth century it was recorded that, “Dress for small boys of this period was very feminine. The customary style was a plaited wool skirt topped with frilly, starched, white-cotton blouse and a velvet Eton. At five years old, boys graduated from the skirt into short trousers; however, the top of the costume remained the same” (Young, 1938, p. 36-37) Children were supposed to look like replicas of adults. “To judge by the portraits of infants, the little ones, even boys, were impeded with long full petticoats, cramped with stiff stomachers, and weighted down with brocade” (Young, 1938, p. 25).

In artistic depictions of the Renaissance, it was very popular to have little boys and infants wearing dresses accompanied by what would appear to be Mary Jane shoes. “The extreme type of costume continues to be the vogue for children so long as it was the

accepted fashion for adults. In the first few years of life, boys were dressed in the long skirts of their sisters and the same style of shoes” (Young, 1938, p. 22-23).

Since Mary Janes have had a long history for men and women, boys and girls, of all social classes, it is not very difficult to see these fashions being depicted and worn in almost every century. An easily recognized figure is the Morton Salt Girl (1848) who wears her Mary Janes with her dress in the rain and has adorned our salt containers for decades. In the original book by Lewis Carroll, (1865) “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” Alice is depicted in the drawings as wearing black Mary Janes. “Lewis Carroll, 1865, Alice in Wonderland, dressed Alice in flat, ankle-strap shoes with rather square toes” (Ewing, p. 97). One historical evidence of these shoes in the 1800s is Little Lord Fauntleroy, who wore these popular “bar shoes” with his suits who is believed by many to be the forerunner of the current Mary Jane wore by today’s children. Christopher Robin in A. A. Milne’s short books, written and drawn in 1925, was another very popular boy who wore these shoes (www.just-pooh/milne.html).

Reasons for Popularity of Shoes

Why are Mary Janes so successful? Perhaps it is because they have evolved so much. Mary Jane’s are not only worn by children in the twentieth century; but are now worn by just about everyone: children women, men, celebrities, and models. This could be attributed to the ability of Mary Janes to lend themselves to an individual style. A perfect example is this woman who prides herself in establishing the “kinder-whore” fashion. Courtney Love “used this kiddy-based fashion to send an entirely different message. By reusing these little-girl images, she and other celebrities have turned them into an ironic symbol of post-feminist empowerment” (O’Keefe, 1996, p. 237).

Perhaps it is this type of anti-fashion sub-culture promoted by Courtney Love that has taken Mary Janes into its reincarnated state. "Isolated worlds have always given their styles to mainstream fashion...The marginal groups—blacks, Puerto Ricans, gays—are barred from conventional culture, and so they develop their own unique look. At that point you can say it's progressive, it's authentic, it has an historical edge" (Davis, 1992, p. 176). It would seem that Mary Janes have continued to be successful because all people can fit them into their wardrobe. They have been popular for little girls and boys, punk rockers, alternative dressers, the high fashion elite, the average stay at home mothers; and, in the gay community. Perhaps these shoes are so popular because any culture can adapt this look to the image they are trying to achieve and still maintain some sort of storybook innocence.

It could definitely be said that Mary Janes hold innocence about them, even when they are tweaked to achieve a certain image. "Isaac Mizrahi remembers wearing Mary Jane's 'as an infant, with suspender shorts and a jacket and white knee socks.' They figured prominently in his first shoe collection, which included two high-heeled versions as well as a traditional flat. 'I adore that there's this incredible innocence about them,' he explains. 'There are so few innocent things around that suddenly it's a big surprise'" (Harpers Bazaar, 1994, p. 82).

In the 1960's British designer Mary Quant reinvented the style of Mary Janes when she flaunted "Twiggy in an art smock and black tap shoes" (O'Keefe, 1996, p. 235). This was concurrent with the second wave of women's rights movement. Perhaps women traded in their bras for a pair of Mary Janes. "Now, Mary Janes in every variation—brown sueded, triple-strapped, Doc Martens-soled—are turning up everywhere: at Prada, Gucci, John Fluevog, Na Na, Michael Perry, J. Crew. And they are becoming fast sellers"□

(Harpers Bazaar, 1994, p. 82). Another reason for the Mary Janes' staying power could also be that they are so versatile. Pair them with anything from a baby doll dress to jeans, or leggings and leotards to tutus.

One of the most quintessential reasons for Mary Janes popularity is because it represents a value associated with yester-years, a time not so harried and stressed, where ideas, beliefs and values were well-defined and not blurred or deconstructed as in the current post-modern society. The shoe represents innocence of old. The Mary Janes are refreshing and yet nostalgic. Thinking of the pouty-faced, dimple-cheeked Shirley Temple reminds us of the "good old days" when girls were submissive, meek, and never domineering. Perhaps that is why it has become so popular to pair these shoes with anything extreme. It is because women today want to escape the male dominated society, while still keeping their innocence and femininity.

Women empower themselves by being anti-fashion, but at the same time despise being compared to Barbie; and paradoxically, set the new fashion trend for all women. Perhaps this is the reason that Barbies and dolls of any conventional sort have become so controversial. It is because women do not want to be compared to, or have to live up to the nonverbal cues that are given off by such a doll.

When one looks at a doll and its implied American perfection in dimensions, dress, and looks, these were all characteristics of the turn of the century when women were never supposed to show their legs or if they did, very little. During the 1940s and the 1950s females were meant to vacuum in a perfectly ironed dress and pearls. Taken from a 1950s Home Economics book, "...take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has

just been with a lot of work weary people. Be a little gay and a little more interesting for him. His boring day may need a lift and it is one of your duties to provide it. Remember a good housewife always knows her place”

www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/amitheatre/housewife.html.

Maybe in the above quote you see the innocence of the sweet little girl Shirley Temple. Women today are contradicting those images by pairing today's styles with the innocence and simplicity of the Mary Janes. Therefore, they are sending the message that they are no longer being repressed by yesteryear's female implications.

Perhaps women like the way that Mary Janes allow them to feel like a little girl again. “Mary Janes are the quickest way to telegraph a feeling best understood by little women: ‘I enjoy being a girl’” (Bazaar, March 1994, p. 82). Possibly women that wear Mary Janes feel compelled to wear them, because they are trying to send a message to the world. “Could it be that adults in Mary Janes are all sending the same message? With an emphatic stamp of their Mary Janed feet, they seem to be saying: Life's my party, and I'll wear pretty shoes every day if I want to” (Bazaar, 1994, p. 82).

Maybe the popularity of Mary Janes could be attributed to their unique way of making a woman feel like a little girl and allowing little girls to feel like grown ups. “If childhood is a cultural construct, then children's clothes offer a base from which to examine the role of children and the meaning of childhood today. Childhood is structured by a set of ideas supported by dress. In the course of western history particular concepts of childhood have been reflected in the clothes that children have worn. Style reflects expectations for children's behavior” (Rubenstein, 2000, p. 4).

Mary Janes in a nonverbal way create attributes often associated with the young: children, childlike, innocent/innocence, religious, straight, gentle, carefree. These same nonverbal cues seem to have the same effect on the adult women who wear these shoes that are associated with children. Perhaps they want to be treated more like a child, and have less expected of them. However, this creates an interesting paradox when one considers the fact that more women are currently dressing their babies like miniature adults, while they themselves are wearing Mary Janes to feel like little girls again. "Sales for children's clothes are growing faster than all other apparel categories" (Berner, 1997, p. 289). Children are no longer being dressed in just sleepers anymore. It has become a status symbol to have children that are "dressed to the nines." Perhaps the mothers are wearing the hand-me-downs now, topping the outfit off with a pair of Mary Janes.

It could be that Mary Janes are so popular among all types of women because of their ability to adapt to specific needs. "The basic theme of avoiding sexy shoes, especially open toed sandals, on the part of working women in the management realm has been pervasive in the advice of wardrobe consultants. This advice has been supported by some research indicating that sandals are perceived to be sexually attractive...a close-toed shoe such as a pump is considered to be more appropriate for a woman striving to climb the corporate ladder (Kaiser, Schutz, Chandler, 1987, p. 17). Mary Janes seem to have a mystical power about them which allow them to be non-offensive to men and to the work force, while still allowing women to feel incredibly feminine and pretty. It was not always in fashion for women to show their shoes at all. "Prior to the twentieth century, the female foot was a forbidden delight to the male eye; it was hidden beneath layers of inner and

outer skirts...Once the foot and leg were fully exposed in the twentieth century, shoes began to provide sexual interest" (Kaiser, Schutz, Chandler, 1987, p. 15).

Conclusion

It is plain to see that there are many reasons for the popularity and staying power of Mary Janes through the centuries. It would appear that they do represent a form of innocence to the wearer and to others who perceive the storybook image. Mary Janes have a surprisingly long history as part of western dress, and have been worn by all people: male, female, young, old, rich, and poor. They are a universal symbol of innocence and youth in a post-modern society that appears to not be losing any momentum. Mary Janes will always be on the fashion scene in some form for all ages to enjoy with hidden meanings to be interpreted by one's society.

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