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Culture
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CULTURE CLUB

Pioneering Dalston-based shoemaker John Moore's 80s designs are revered by today's tastemakers. Andy Thomas finds out why



"The thing I never have a shortage of is ideas," cult shoe designer John Moore once said. "I've got piles of things hanging around that I can never get done. The real shortage I'm fighting is time. There is never enough of it." His words were sadly prophetic - Moore passed away shortly afterwards in 1989, aged just 34.

There were no obituaries to mark his passing and he has no Wikipedia entry today. While this overlooks the huge influence of one of England's true post-punk design renegades, it's fitting for a man who always inhabited a world well away from the mainstream. But to 80s London counterculture, he was one of the few designers who could truly be called iconic. Whether adding a commando sole to a pair of stilettos or designing a flared heel that was shaped like a 19th-century toilet seat, he masked



his genius with a playful eye for the absurd. His shoes may have been considered surreal, but he shunned the "avant-garde" label. "Everything I do is very elegant," he told Michael Gross of *The New York Times* in 1987. "It's not supposed to be quirky or weird. It's not supposed to be read too deeply. It's supposed to make you beautiful."

Moore's shoes, which designer Joe Casely-Hayford describes as feeling like "they belonged to a 20th-century Artful Dodger," were progressive yet rooted in the past, inspired by the bleak but creative streets of pre-regeneration Hackney. It was here that Moore set up his shop, The House of Beauty and Culture, with a group of fellow design radicals in 1984. Deeply tied to the gay counterculture of London and underground clubs like Taboo, Heaven and Circus, their work resonates loudly today.

Born in 1955, John Moore spent his early 20s in London and New York, becoming absorbed in the highly creative fallout of the late 70s. After working a variety of jobs on both sides of the Atlantic - meeting jewellery designer and stylist Judy Blame in the coat check at London's Heaven club and designer Katy K on the floor of Manhattan's Fiorucci store - Moore cut his teeth in the early 80s at the influential Cordwainers' Technical College, London's first school for footwear manufacturing. Shoe designer and fellow student Emma Hope remembers him well. "He was quite scornful of some of the college projects we were given. I hear his voice over my shoulder now when I'm doing some ballets or courts, saying about a project we were set by Rayne, a very elegant shoe factory, 'I'm not designing court shoes with earrings on.'"

Founded as the Leather Trades School in Bethnal Green in 1887, Cordwainers' moved to Mare Street, Hackney, in 1946. Moore became an avid student of its vast collection of historic designs. "He worked hard," recalls Hope. "He had a respect for the college and what it taught, and for the white-coated lecturers." Used as teaching aids, designs such as those created and collected by 19th-century shoemaker Joseph Box were pored

over by Moore, whose eager eyes studied the attention to detail - some of Box's designs boasted a remarkable 20 stitches to the centimetre. Moore would later reappropriate Box's flared heel as one of his own signature designs.

The mid-80s was a golden age for British shoe design, and Cordwainers' played a central role. "At that time Cordwainers'



was to shoemaking what Saint Martins was to clothes design," Casely-Hayford says. "And 1984 was one of those golden years, when one group makes a significant impact on the industry. In one year there was Patrick Cox, Emma Hope, Christine Ahrens, Elizabeth Stuart-Smith and, of course, John Moore." Casely-Hayford, whose own English

sartorialism also combines innovation and tradition, became aware of Moore soon after the latter's graduation. "I was excited by his designs because they had a very strong English look to them, a skewed Dickensian feel which combined history with modernity." In this, Moore was part of a great lineage in British fashion. "These designers share a creative relationship which constantly ricochets between subversion and a deep respect for history and tradition," Casely-Hayford says. "Westwood, Galliano and McQueen are also very much part of this school, true designers who were first attracted by the craft, and the design element followed."

Moore's beautiful yet often bizarre designs warranted an equally alternative platform. They found one in The House of Beauty and Culture. Judy Blame remembers how the shop was born: "We had all just been, like, foolish nightclub people, but John was very serious about it. To make shoes you need your own machines and your own lasts - and John just went for it. He found that building and managed to buy this old shoe-factory machinery. He set his studio up so he could make shoes upstairs... and there was this perfect opportunity for a shop downstairs."

The House of Beauty and Culture sat not in the hot spots of Soho or Kensington, but way out east. "During the mid-80s Dalston was a little rough around the edges, but it was the home of genuine 'life artists', people whose life is their art," declares Casely-Hayford. The design collective that set up on the Stamford Road was a central part of the scene. "Each of the contributors stood up in their own right. There was the great Judy Blame, who continues to produce original work today; Richard Torry, one of the most talented knitwear designers of his generation; and John Flett, who was hailed as the heir to Galliano's throne but died young and never realised his potential." Working outside of the fashion establishment created a sense of community and togetherness. "Everyone used to co-operate a lot more in those days," remembers Blame. "Visually the clothes had quite a lot in common. We used to wear them all the time so people would see us and then it would be, 'Oh, I love those boots Judy, where are they from?' It was quite organic, the way people were attracted to it." Although Moore was one of the more business-minded of the collective, he never lost sight of the family ethic.



“Wearing John’s shoes was like wearing jewellery, they were that regal in terms of style. But at the same time there was something industrial about them. It was a backlash to the establishment and a reflection of the times”

“As well as being my mentor/tutor we were also best mates,” says Ian Reid, who became a student of Moore’s during the mid-80s. “Our relationship was more like that of brothers. In fact, he was quite often more like my dad. Something he really enjoyed.”

For Moore, being on the rough fringes of London was perfect. “I like the area,” he told Gross. “It’s real London.” Inside the building, behind anonymous metal-grated windows, the shop’s Frick-and-Frack-designed interior was as roguish as the clothes on sale. Adorning the walls were paintings of smiling devils by Dave Baby, while embedded in the wooden floor were coins from around the world. It was the perfect setting for a group of designers whose rebellious approach to fashion was about to make a great impact internationally. “The House of Beauty and Culture was a focal point of the London underground,” explains Casely-Hayford. “It was the springboard for a variety of projects, which filtered through to clubland and magazines like *Blitz*. It became the perfect place to inspire legendary buyers like Suzanne Bartsch, whose influential store transported underground London culture to the Big Apple.”

Despite the individuality on display, there was a shared aesthetic between the designers. “It was the only combined outlet for what I called the ‘deconstructed movement’,” states photographer Mark Lebon, one of the main figures at Ray Petri’s Buffalo. “Today we call it recycling,” concurs Soul II Soul’s Jazzie B, who would often hang out in the shop taking inspiration for his own designs. “I’ve got jackets from (Christopher) Nemeth where half of the jacket is from Dunn & Co. So there was this whole cut-and-paste thing going on, which you can see in the way John started to mix in a commando sole in his designs.”

Moore’s design aesthetic was perhaps best illustrated in his much-revered toe-strap boot. “That one design encapsulates so many British cultural reference points that it will simply never date,” enthuses Casely-Hayford, who recently revived the boot with a 2011 twist. “It beautifully brings together elements from classic work boots fused with that distinctive, rebellious Seditionaries toe strap. The Northampton Goodyear welted sole stands for permanence and the rounded toe nods to skinheads’ steel toecaps. A masterful design.”

In his fusion of the elegance of new romanticism with the raw beauty of punk, John Moore was part of a recurring tradition of androgyny in British fashion. “On the one hand he favoured the very obvious masculine Northampton construction, often contrasted with his quirky take on romantic Dickensian influences,” explains Casely-Hayford. “Sometimes the two would meet in a single design; his commando-soled stilettos are a good example of this.”

The hard and soft edges of John Moore’s designs were made for London’s underground clubs. “John was a fantastic

dancer,” says Patrick Lilley, promoter of Queer Nation and High on Hope. “I met him in the same way as I had Lee McQueen or John Galliano. They were just noticeable boys out of the clubs. At that stage, nightclubbing was the greenhouse for London’s fashion talent. They spent as much time in the clubs at night unconsciously absorbing ideas and reflecting and making trends as they did pattern cutting during the day.”

London’s nightlife was also a breeding ground for the alternative arts, and Lebon’s “deconstructed movement” was creating a heady countercultural fusion. “I spent a lot of time with the Mutoid Waste Company, who were involved in some of our more hedonistic parties, and what was interesting was that it was all about recycling,” recalls Jazzie B. “And within that recycling you were looking at using different materials, taken and used in a completely new way.”

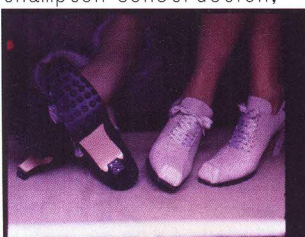
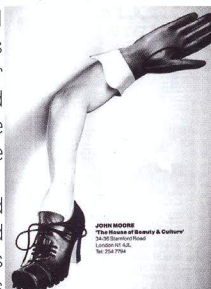
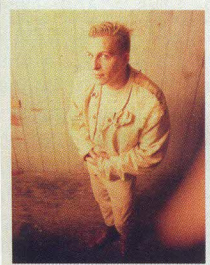
So for me John Moore’s shoes with all those different panels was a representation of this, a grimy but romantic mix, hard but quite cute.”

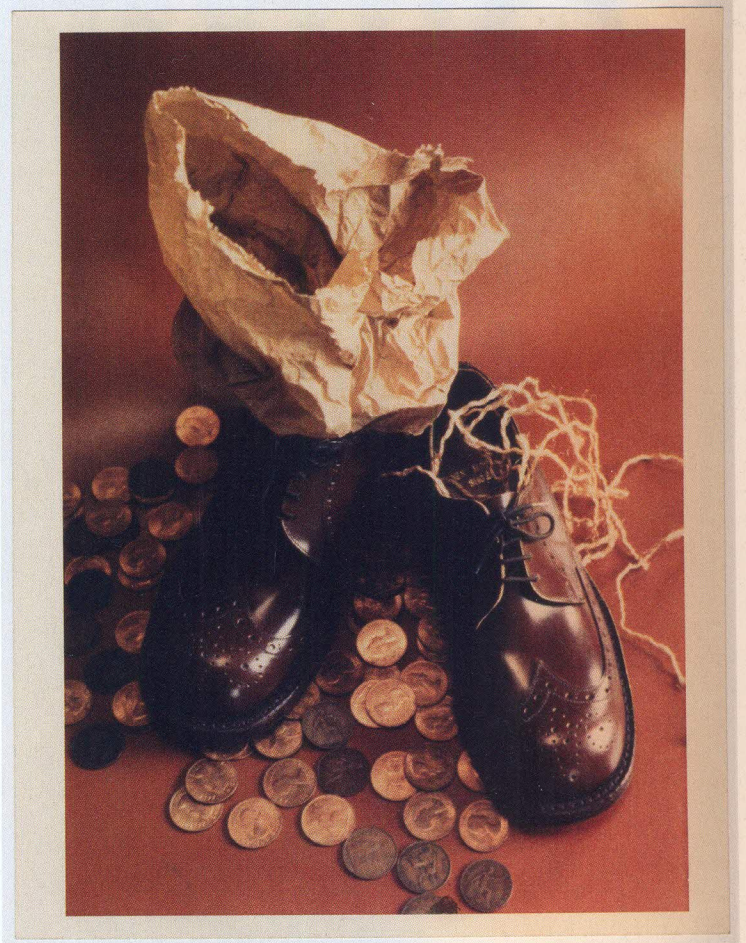
Similar methods of reconstruction were on display in the work of new-wave designers across Europe. “You had Martin Margiela and Jean Colonna, people challenging what you made clothes out of and what shape they were,” states Judy Blame. “Maybe I’m saying this because I was in the thick of it, but it was a very important period of 20th-century fashion.” Moore’s twist

on the hard-times look made him a cult designer for those searching for something other than Dr Martens. “In those days it was like digging for the perfect beat, and everyone wanted their own style or take on something,” remembers Jazzie B. “For us, wearing John’s shoes was like wearing jewellery. They were that regal in terms of style. But at the same time there was something very working-class, industrial about them. It was a backlash to the establishment and a reflection of the times.”

While Moore’s outwardly aggressive designs for men were countered by feminine touches, his designs for women were just as playful. “He was really good at making women’s shoes with a twist,” says Emma Hope. “He was edgy and liked blocky high-heels and slimmed down squared-off toes, with lots of corsetry-style thin cord lacing up the front but with a manly feel. It went with John Flett’s vision of women, and his ruched asymmetric Lycra pull-on dresses that made them look assertive as well as sexy.”

Take a look at the catwalk today, where angularity and androgyny are enjoying a renaissance with echoes of the 80s, and it’s not difficult to feel Moore’s influence. Sadly, his genius was cut short by an accidental overdose in 1989. His death hit all who knew him hard. “John was very dear to me and a week hasn’t passed since that awful day when I haven’t thought of him,” says Reid. “Whether people know it or not, his aesthetic was truly instrumental and has had a huge influence on shoe design. Yet hardly a mention.” And in these times of austerity, when cutting-edge fashion may yet take on a more political role, the gender-fusing, empowering designs of this cult designer are sorely missed.





Opening image: JOHN MOORE in The House of Beauty and Culture. All images courtesy of the John Moore personal archive