

Thierry Mugler Pumps, ca. 1980s.  
Ryerson FRC1994.01.030AB. Gift  
of Karen Mulhallen. Photograph by  
Victoria Hopgood, 2019.



Ryerson University  
Fashion Research Collection

# MULHALLEN'S MUGGLERS: THE BIOGRAPHY OF A PAIR OF HAND-PAINTED PUMPS

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Amid the assemblage of shoes found within the Ryerson Research Collection is one unassuming white shoebox (FRC1994.01.030 A+B), pulled delicately from a shelf by the collection's coordinator, and author of *The Dress Detective*, Ingrid Mida. **The name "Thierry Mugler" is written in black sharpie along the box's edge. Taking the box in my hands, I wonder if the shoes will embody the aura of Mugler's 80's femme fatale, and if the former owner of the footwear might have some shared characteristics.** Thierry Mugler, or Manfred as he goes by now, is more often recognized in recent decades for his perfumes that include the likes of *Angel* and *Womanity*. But his early notoriety stemmed from his 80's power suits and skin hugging dresses as well as his 90's sci-fi-inspired metallics –looks seemingly predestined for a strong female character. Remaining faithful to his former female ideal, a similar style emerged almost 15 years later in his designs for Beyonce's 2009 I AM tour, aiming to present the 'duality of woman and warrior' (note 1).



Thierry Mugler Pumps,  
ca. 1980s. Ryerson  
FRC1994.01.030AB.  
Toe detail. Gift of Karen  
Mulhallen. Photograph by  
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As evidenced in Mugler's collections, fashion items are often accompanied by a pre-ordained persona, available for short-term adoption by the consumer. In *The Cultural Biography of Things*, Igor Kopytoff discusses how the commoditization of an object will always be usurped by the culture in which they find themselves and the owner of said object, "The counterforces [to commoditization] are culture and the individual, with their drive to discriminate, classify, compare and sacralize," (note 2). However, I would argue that even before an item becomes a commodity, when a design is merely a kernel in the mind's eye of a designer, the commodity has already been touched by the individual and by culture. **As an observer, I can only speculate from the shoes and their label that they were made in Europe in collaboration with a shoe designer; purchased, owned, and worn for a brief period by a single owner.** This would mean that the shoes had two very distinct biographies, or what Kopytoff would have further deemed "private singularisation" (note 3)- that of the design phase and that in which it becomes commodity by an owner.

**It is here that I wonder: does the pre-appointed biography or personality of a garment imposed by a designer ever intersect with the identity of the consumer?** Further, artifacts or items within a collection (such as the shoes I am observing) challenge the lifespan of what Kopytoff calls "terminal commodities" (note 4), raising their importance through the very act of preservation. Giving them public access further encourages identity-making in which to be interpreted and reinterpreted. I find myself at the latter stage, speculating and attempting to unravel a biography for a pair of shoes I have only just met.



Thierry Mugler Pumps,  
ca. 1980s. Ryerson  
FRC1994.01.030AB.  
Back detail. Gift of Karen  
Mulhallen. Photograph by  
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When I lifted the lid off of the box, two medium-heeled seafoam green shoes were lying inside, top and tail. Across the very soft green leather was a series of hand-painted vine flowers in a reddish-brown. **What struck me about the painted flowers was that they did not appear expertly or daintily applied. Instead, they were painted freehand: playful and not too self-conscious.** The lush green leather was gorgeous to the touch, with fine creases along the toe line and only slight wearing around the toe box.

**Contrary to the intact surface of the shoe, the sole showed signs of being well-loved.** The three-inch heel indicated that its wearer was a pronator. When I placed the heels side-by-side on the surface of the desk, the pronation became more evident on the right foot as the right heel dipped towards the left with a mind of its own.

The wearer, with her probable high arches, managed to avoid too much erosion on the inner label, a shiny blue rectangular weave with the name Thierry Mugler written in an 80's cursive type. The label also read, "Made in Italy" and to the right, "Paris". To the bottom is the name of the collaborator "Linea Lidia". The box indicated clearly that these shoes were from a time between the years 1980 and 1985. **There are many unknowns about these shoes- from the inspiration drawn between Mugler and his collaborator Linea Lidia, the number of shoes made, who the painter of the flowers was and whether any of them would have anticipated the fate of their work in Fashion Research Collection.**

Of all the decades to resurface, no one suspected a visit from the 80's, but its resurgence proved that the nostalgia was genuine and, in so doing, solidified the past as artifact. **Given that the shoes that I was fawning over were the 'real deal', the question was, who had the privilege of wearing these \*ahem totally bitchin' heels?**

I envisioned the owner. Perhaps she stood at a gallery or cocktail bar, in her hand a Sea Breeze, Singapore Sling or some 80's equivalent of exotically named drinks. From the knee down, the hem of her fitted skirt or dress grazing, in 80's fashion, just below the knee. Her left (and more level shoe) would carry most of her weight while her right leg would rest, casually bent at the knee, the painted flower vines more clearly exposed on the exterior right of the shoe. **At size 5 1/2 and narrow in shape, the owner of these shoes was light on her feet. I imagined her weaving through city crowds with stealth and a speedy clacking of the heels, her narrow calves transporting her through the busy streets of a city perhaps more outrageous than Toronto.**

As it happens, the donation came from [Karen Mulhallen](#), a prolific writer and former professor of English at Ryerson University. Her generous contributions went beyond footwear - too many garments to list here. With some investigation, I was able to determine that between teaching courses and writing more than 16 books of poetry, she also spent approximately 40 hours/week as the Editor in Chief of Descant Literary magazine. With this in mind, I'm left wondering if the Mugler heels only ever got to see the underside of a desk. Perhaps they were dusted off for the launch of an issue or book of poetry, a little celebration of the many hours spent toiling away? I have never met Karen Mulhallen, but suddenly the thought of a Toronto intellectual, working over 70 hours a week while simultaneously investing in beautiful footwear, to be worn on the eve of a job well done, carries with it a lot of charm. The love of a pair of designer shoes in sea foam green indicates a woman not entirely consumed by the cerebral, despite what her profession and workweek may say. **These heels speak to a person who is dazzled, or at least bemused, by aesthetic frivolities and will indulge in the joy of interesting objects.**

It's not everyone that would wear these heels. Like them? Probably. But wear them? In a city like Toronto, even in the brightly coloured, leathery 80's, the shoes carry with them a story of lightheartedness that not everyone wants exhibited on their person. Perhaps these shoes were bought during a trip in Paris, worn for a few wistful days in Paris, returned to their box in Paris and transported to Canada only to be sequestered in a Torontonion closet as silent accomplices to Mulhallen's literary work. **Now in the Fashion Research Collection, is the soft green leather, perhaps hungover from the tisanes and merlots or whatever earthly comforts our writer delighted in during the long hours of pen to paper.** Anaphoras and refrains etched the soles, the leather hardened by winter and softened by Toronto's overdue summers. On their tongues are surely the stories and anecdotes of the city's literary community.



Ryerson University  
Fashion Research Collection

Thierry Mugler Pumps,  
ca. 1980s. Ryerson  
FRC1994.01.030AB. Heel  
detail. Gift of Karen Mulhallen.  
Photograph by Victoria  
Hopgood, 2019.

Turning the shoes over in my hands, observing the slight wearing away of leather along the heels I wonder once more if Mugler's conceptual ideal of women and Mulhallen's personal identity ever intersected. And at what point is Mugler's vision conceptual creative practice and when is it just plain marketing?

Fashion journalists in the 80's would remember Mugler's love of theatrics on the runway. Women's Wear Daily deemed a runway collection from '88 as 'the battiest show in Paris' stipulating, "[Mugler] cannot resist theatrics when he gets his hands on a big runway". In many ways, Mugler is a performer and perhaps designed for women who had a performative edge. His ilk for showmanship started young. Mugler was a ballet dancer in the Rhine Opera as a young man. Later, as a designer, Mugler was very much in charge of every aspect of his runway shows, from the lighting to music to stage. It would seem that Mugler did not only create clothing with an archetypal woman or man in mind but their entire landscape, their atmosphere, their world. **Some critics in the 80's felt that his shows were so over the top to the extent that the fashion was secondary. "...Mugler laid himself open to the charge, from the press that had built him up, that he was substituting theatre for fashion"** (note 5 ). Others brandished Mugler as sexist. Whatever his motivation, the type of otherworldly, strong, urban woman he had flooding his catwalks and ad spaces, certainly embodied something unlike that of the mid-to-late 90's with its sway to heroin chic and turn to the submissive female. If I had to choose between the two depictions of women, it would likely not be the dead-eyed waif slumped in the corner of an abandoned warehouse.



Thierry Mugler Pumps,  
ca. 1980s. Ryerson  
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Label. Gift of Karen  
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I consider the woman Mugler envisioned for his collections, and then I consider Mulhallen and what little I know of her. The act of purchase indicates a mutual aesthetic understanding between maker and buyer, but would their steps be in rhyme or do their tastes exist in different orbits, only coming together in one supernovic ring of the cash register? At the point of purchase, does the consumer connect with the prodigious ideal that a designer created, aspiring to embody it and continue its narrative? Or does the consumer feel a piece of their personal story is written in the very stitching of an object, as though a page of their autobiography has stacked the shelf? **Having read a few of Mulhallen's works of poetry and dug up some interviews, I would have to say that, if nothing else, Muhallen shares Mugler's occasional departures to respective worlds whether imagined or remembered.** It is possible that Mulhallen and the seafoam shoes were like a relationship that was highly compatible in one way but ill-fated in twelve others - meant to happen, but ultimately destined to end. The shoes, with a biography of their own, have a chapter that intersects with that of Mulhallen. And while they continue their respective narratives apart, the importance of the footwear has been seasoned not just through the act of preservation, but by the romanticism that accompanies poet and poetry.

#### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

Annika Waddell is an MA Fashion student at Ryerson and her current research focusses on contemporary West African fashion, specifically in Ghana and Nigeria. Prior to this, she was a producer for one of Toronto's top food photographers and also has worked in the non-profit sector as a marketing director and project manager. She has lived in London, England as well as Montreal, Quebec, and currently calls Toronto home.

This post was read and approved by the donor of the shoes, Karen Mulhallen, and was edited and posted by Dr. Ingrid Mida.

## NOTES

1. Bridget Foley, "Mugler for Beyoncé: Woman Meets Warrior." *WWD*, 25 Mar. 2009. Accessed: 20 Feb. 2016.
2. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process." *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2013: 87.
3. Ibid 73.
4. Ibid 75.
5. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity & Deathliness*. Yale University Press, 2003: 69

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