

Beauty is pain? Not in Denmark

Copenhagen-based footwear designer Helene Thomsen Steensby is beginning to reach out to the wider world, as her presence at the most recent editions of the GDS exhibition in Düsseldorf and the Moda Footwear event in Birmingham proves.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that her native Denmark has been her focus since she started out in 2005. The only language option on her website is Danish, and 20 of the 29 retail outlets where her stunning evening shoes and long leather boots are on sale are on home soil. Of the other nine, seven are in Greenland, which seems amazing (classy nightlife in Nuuk or Qaqortoq—who'd have thought?), which was part of Denmark until 30 years ago, with one each in Norway and Germany.

She explains that her brand is aimed at women of 30 and over, describing her designs as "fun, with lots of colour", but still comfortable to wear having heels of no more than six or eight centimetres. "You have to be comfortable all day to do your work and all night when you go out," she adds. "That's quite important when you reach a certain age, have children and have to be on your feet all day."

To help wearers of her shoes avoid pain, she has built plateaus onto many of her soles, which means a heel of only four centimetres gives an overall impression of much more height.

This, she says, is what she has become known for in Denmark: heels that are "not too high", shoes that are comfortable, but that still allow the woman wearing them to have fun. "You don't have to wear a shoe that's very wide," she continues. "You just have to balance it so that you can feel comfortable in it."



Danish footwear designer Helene Steensby at GDS showing boots and shoes from her collection for next autumn-winter.

CREDIT: RENE TILLMANN/MESSE DÜSSELDORF



For beauty, Ms Steensby uses lots of gold, in the leather she chooses, but also in the heels of her dress shoes. She also likes to use patent leather.

While she waits to make an impact on the international arena, her designs are becoming more prominent and more popular all the time in her home market.

Singer Lullu went down a storm by performing with a Gospel choir at the time of a show Ms Steensby organised herself last autumn to present her latest collection. A pair of long black boots she designed for Lullu for the occasion commanded at least as much attention as the music and other singers, actors and celebrities have come forward to buy a pair.

Perhaps her most prominent customer is the mayor of Copenhagen, Ritt Bjerregaard, who has taken to wearing a pair of metallic blue Steensby cowboy boots to many of her official meetings.

The GDS crowds were also taken with a pair of boots in red sealskin, designed and

made in keeping with Nordic traditions. "We're used to wearing sealskin here and I think it's a fabulous fabric," the designer comments. "It's naturally waterproof and warm enough to withstand the Scandinavian weather. It's a good winter boot and it's not too heavy. I've used traditional stitching at the front to give an ethnic look."

She explains that the material is "normal grey sealskin", which she has developed, making it longer and presenting it in red and black options in her most recent collection, autumn-winter 2008-2009. Next season she hopes to add a third colour.

The sealskin boots are shorter in length than the high-fashion ones that Lullu wore. Many of the boots in her collection are amazingly long and she says that the feedback she has had from her retail partners is that women these days want to squeeze their calves into longer, narrower boots. They seem to want to seal the calf in.

"That's what I'm hearing," she says. "Women are worried that their calves are too

Copenhagen mayor, Ritt Bjerregaard, has become Helene Steensby's most prominent customer, insisting on wearing a pair of the designer's metallic blue cowboy boots to some of her official meetings.

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big and they want to take every possible measure to make them look as slim and slender as possible. I'm not sure I agree with it, and I have boots myself that have a wing effect on the calf, which, of course, makes that part of the boot look even bigger."

Helene Steensby acknowledges that some of her clients have asked about beyond-the-knee boots for summer, a phenomenon we covered in *World Leather* last year (October 2007).

She has refused to yield, saying that she prefers to keep her design ideas for long boots for her winter collections. Of the fashionable women who have chosen to wear boots in the heat of summer, she says: "I think it's crazy, but that's fashion." 🌐