

The Great STILETTO SCHISM of 2020

How the clunky square-toe pump replaced the barely-there sandal as the shoe of the season. BY JESSICA IREDALE

For the past year or so my mother has been engaged in a housecleaning purge tinged with morbidity: “If I don’t do it, you’ll have to.” Every visit home includes the presentation of some artifact plucked from my youth—my high school cross-country team jacket, my eighth grade graduation dress—with the questions “Remember this?” and “Do you want it?”

During some holiday early last year a pair of black boots purchased during my freshman year of college (circa ’98) were fished out of my bedroom closet, triggering flashbacks to a footwear era that felt positively ghastly in hindsight. I recoiled at their garish shovel-shaped toe and chunky block heel.

Chuck ’em, Mom. Fashion may be cyclical,

but these square-toe clunkers were clearly labeled Do Not Resuscitate. Yet just one year later someone has made me rethink shoes befitting Ichabod Crane. His name is Daniel Lee, the creative director of **Bottega Veneta** who presented his first runway collection for the house a year ago.

From the get-go the 33-year-old British designer’s prospects had fashion rapt: an alumnus of Phoebe Philo’s Céline given the keys to an Italian heritage megahouse with megabucks behind it to do as he pleased. He spent them well on his first collections, zeroing in on Bottega’s leather prowess to create bags and shoes that upended traditional notions of the bourgeois Milanese lady with a dose of sophisticated wit, and garments

cut from ’90s cloth. In his first show, pre-fall 2019, Lee began retraining our eyes to new, delightfully ridiculous proportions seen in bulbous stub-toe pumps in cartoonishly quilted leather, stacked-sole moto boots on steroids, and kitten-heel horsebit loafers that have an elongated toe that tapers to a flat edge and look ideal for smooshing bugs in the kitchen.

Fashion loves a so-wrong-it’s-right moment, and influencers and editors immediately bought into New Bottega and @newbottega, the separate Instagram handle Lee created to promote his work. (Lee is maintaining a Garboesque silence rare in modern fashion.) By the time spring 2020 collections came around in September, front rows were lined with feet slipped into Lee’s more commercial woven intrecciato slides and mules with square soles that jut out from under their toes.

His peers were watching too. Square shapes quickly appeared at **Proenza Schouler**, **Gianvito Rossi**, **the Row**, **By Far**, and **Neous**, and retailers raved. “Daniel Lee’s incredible eye was so apparent at the Bottega show this season,” says Elizabeth von der Goltz, global buying director at Net-a-Porter. “We call the square-toe shoe this season’s update from last season’s ‘barely-there’ sandal.”

Aha, a clue to the root of this square! The naked sandal, characterized by one or two ultrathin straps attached to a kitten-heel sole, leaving the foot almost completely bare, was the shoe that swept summer 2019. The index case for the trend was a hyperminimal Céline sandal from the resort 2018 collection, designed when Lee was still ostensibly at the French house. He clearly learned well under Philo, the queen of *jolie laide* footwear that reverberated far from her runways. Her absence has left a void that her fans are willing Lee to fill.

So far he has impressed with his distinctive and influential grip on the ’90s fever that has enthralled his design generation. Their earliest fashion memories are steeped in minimalist stylings they were too young to participate in the first time around. That explains millennials’ compulsion to revisit the decade, whether by binge-watching *Friends* or reshaping square-toe clunkers for a new fashion moment. **T&C**

