

## Don't step on my blue suede shoes – or the red ponyskins either

Simon Schama walked into a little shop in Amsterdam 20 years ago. And fell madly in love...

Hester van Eeghen © Jorgen Caris

Simon Schama DECEMBER 21, 2018

Purple suede boots, who was going to resist that? Not me. I was in any case a purple people person: Hendrix's haze, Prince's rain, April Stevens breathily talking the lyrics of Deep Purple: "In the mist of a memory, *you* wander back to me." So into Hester van Eeghen's tiny shop on Amsterdam's Hartenstraat I went. This was (at least) 20 years ago.

Back then men's shoes and boots came in brown and black. Not at this place, though; keeping company with the purple suede number were raspberry coloured leather Chelsea boots; bottle green ditto. I bought them all — life was too short not to. Down the little street between the Herengracht and the Keizersgracht was van Eeghen's other place: briefcases, wallets and purses like no one else had ever thought of, much less made. Restrained on the outside, splashily brilliant on the inside, reversible to suit the mood: flaunt the flash or hide it.

Since those days in the 1990s, van Eeghen has become celebrated as a unique talent, and a [show of her work](#) and career is running at the Museum of Bags and Purses in Amsterdam until next spring. Every trip to Amsterdam now includes for me two obligatory pilgrimages: the Rijksmuseum and the van Eeghen shops. I go from peacock paintings (the Dutch weren't all dressed in black and white) to scooping up scarlet pony hair boots; pointy grey snakeskin shoes; belts in orange and olive. Once I went to Amsterdam for no other reason than to score another pair of something at the shop in Hartenstraat.

I've found coloured shoes in other towns: cobalt blue Oxfords at Heschung in Paris; canary yellow

shoes at Maledetti Toscani in Montepulciano (now trading as Officine Toscane). “If you buy those we’re heading for divorce,” warned my wife when I gave That Look to a pair of golden brogues. I heeded the warning, going with the silver chrome.



Simon Schama in his prize ponyskin shoes © Getty

None of them guarantee the stab of vain pleasure quite like Hester van Eeghen. But who is she? The name van Eeghen I knew from entirely other circumstances. Hester’s aunt Isabella had presided regally, with benign sternness, over the Amsterdam municipal archive where I spent a lot of time researching *The Embarrassment of Riches*. Hester, I met by chance, one afternoon, in the midst of yet another expedition to her store. In she came, blonde, merry blue eyes, with a smile so wide it takes up most of her face; a throwback to the glory days of liberated Amsterdam I’d helped myself to in the ‘60s and ‘70s. We became friends in about five minutes.

Her story is perfectly Dutch: ingenuity, perseverance, mischievous flair to the soundtrack of “why not?” When she was a student living in the red-light district, she broke her foot and resigned herself to some sort of craft that she could do sitting down. She hunted for leather strips; kept them in an old shoe box and pieced them together with zips, sheared from friends’ cast-offs. On the Dutch queen’s birthday holiday, when street vending is free to all, she sold out and the proceeds bought her a proper machine. Next year she did still better. Stores came asking for “lines”, though she had no idea what they were talking about. But in Italy in the early 1990s she discovered brilliant shoemakers who were unfazed by her demanding and startlingly original designs. The shops in Hartenstraat followed and all the leather, suede and nubuck have that buttery Italian give, without ever compromising on integrity of structure.

That instinct for engineering produces beautiful twists, the essence of a great van Eeghen design, driven by the love of morphing loops and mutations. Her imagination turns and turns again, spun by a passion for origami and the Möbius strip. It’s not every designer who will tell you (as she does in a little video about a reversible backpack called “The Drop”) that it was “inspired by a documentary on spermatozoa”.

There’s the Butterfly bag, which can spread its colourful wings or peg them back, and the Arabesque, which can change with two moves from an evening clutch to a perfect, small suitcase. All these unfurlings and transformations are magical; but so are the next lovely things she comes up with. If you go to the website you’ll see petrol blue boots and dark purple shoes for men. Look and be amazed; just don’t buy her last pair of size 43s or you’ll hear it from me.

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