

COVER STORY | FOX, FLUEVOG AND FRIENDS

# Forty years of fancy footwork

Museum of Vancouver exhibition features gorgeously eccentric shoe designs, sketches and

BY JOANNE SASVARI

John Fluevog has plenty of reasons to kick up his heels these days.

"I am kind of excited and thankful and tickled," says Vancouver's most famous footwear designer, looking dapper in tweed, denim and brown-leather city hikers. "I'm having a better time now than I've ever had."

This year, Fluevog is celebrating 40 years in a business that he never planned to enter in the first place, and he's doing it with a fabulous new shoe, a rollicking museum exhibit and, of course, a party or two.

"I didn't expect to go into shoes," he says, and cautions, with a laugh: "You'd better be careful what you start working at. I started working in a shoe store."

That store was the traditional downtown men's shop Sheppard's, which is where he met fellow footwear aficionado Peter Fox.

It was the late 1960s and the mood in Vancouver was one of freewheeling creativity

and endless possibility. Yet here they were, two cool young guys selling conservative businessmen's brogues.

Then, fortuitously, a warehouse full of vintage shoes became available at an irresistibly low price. Fox and Fluevog jumped at the opportunity and in 1970 opened their first store at 2 Powell St. in Gastown.

"The business found me. I didn't find it," Fluevog says today. "Peter was the force behind the business at first, then I bought him out in 1980."

Fox moved to New York, where he became famous for creating beautiful, ultrafeminine vintage-influenced shoes mainly for brides. Their third partner, master shoemaker Ken Rice, who was best known for his chic clogs and joined them for a short time in the 1970s, also went off to open his own studio.

Meanwhile, Fluevog was getting bored — "Just retailing shoes didn't seem like so much fun," he says — so he picked up a pencil and started designing his own shoes.

And what designs they were: dramatic, eccentric, colourful, witty and completely unlike anything else on the market.

"I didn't even realize that I was an artist, but I look back at what I did in the mid-'90s and think, 'Wow, I did that,'" he says.

Since then, Fluevog has gone on to international fame, with stores across North America, an apartment in New York and a host of celebrity clients who have included Madonna, director Robert Altman, Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon and Perry Farrell of Jane's



LES BAZSO/PNG

John Fluevog is celebrating his 40th anniversary in the business by launching a new shoe, the Porter.

Addiction.

"It's a mystery to me, but I've got some fanatics," he says. "I have customers who've been with me since the '70s."

It's not easy for a designer to achieve international stature from a place as off-the-beaten-track as Vancouver was in the 1970s and '80s. As Fluevog, who has lived here his whole life, notes, "Vancouver, when I grew up, was completely disconnected from North America."

But it's that very isolation from the world's fashion capitals that has allowed Fluevog to indulge his unique vision.

"If you look at my shoes, they're different, and they're different because they're part of me. I'm not the kind of guy who's going to buy a new black BMW because everyone else is doing it," says the man who drives a distinctively customized two-toned vintage Jaguar.

"It's important to me that what I do is genuine. I can't say I'm completely oblivious to trends ... but I don't have the pressure on me to fit in."

Now Vancouverites can take a look back at what he, Fox and Rice came up with all those years ago. The retrospective exhibit *Fox, Fluevog*

& *Friends* runs at the Museum of Vancouver from Friday to Sept. 26, kicking off with a party tonight, all of it coinciding with International Fluevog Day, Saturday, which just happens to be John Fluevog's 62nd birthday.

"It had been in the back of my mind for quite a while that this was a great Vancouver story of entrepreneurship," says Joan Seidl, the museum's director of collections and exhibitions. "It was a happy coincidence that we hit on one of their anniversaries."

What makes this story so interesting to her is not just the shoes, but



Classic Fluevog through the years: The Porter shoe (above) was created to mark the designer's 40th anniversary in business. More designs at right, from left: Hi Choice Vanny, Munster, Mary Jane, #2 Powell, Mantaro sandal and the Truth Pilgrim.



photographs from the archives of Vancouver's most colourful cobblers

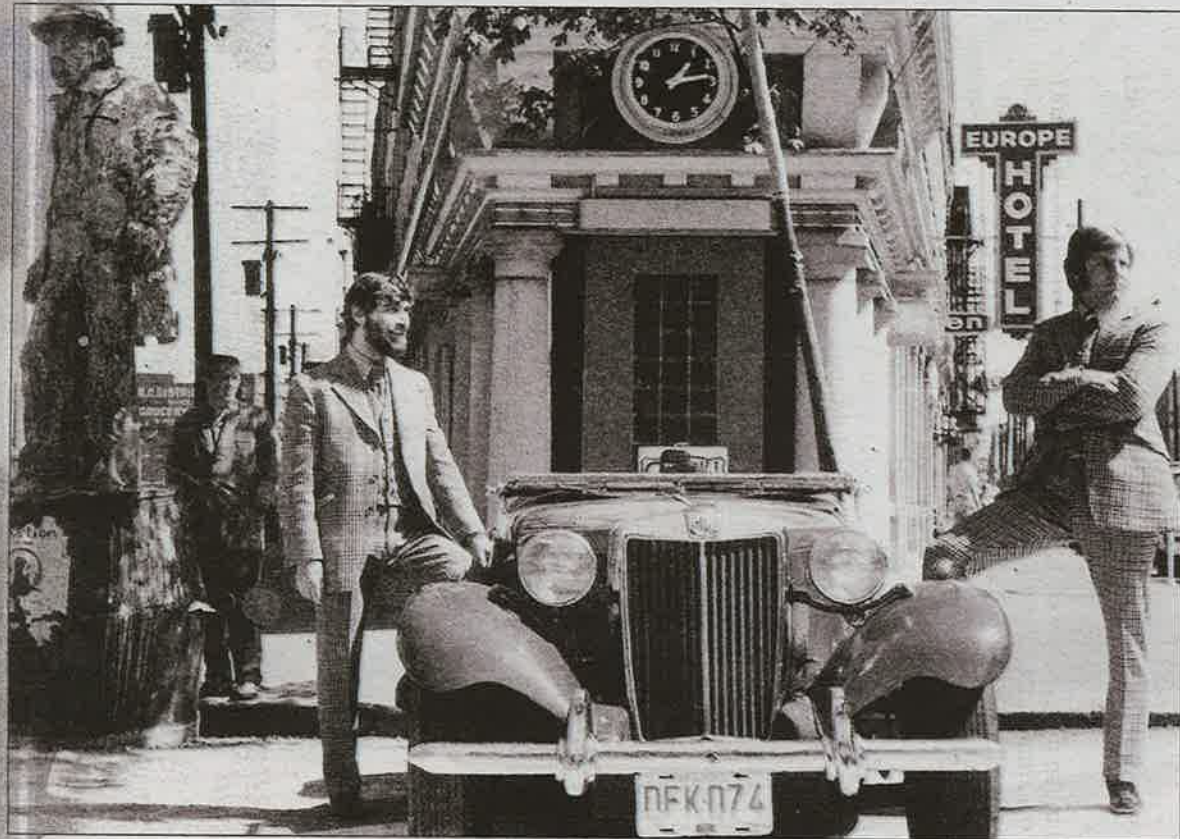


PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN FLUEVOG

Peter Fox (left) and John Fluevog in Gastown, circa 1971.

the way they were sold from a plush Gastown shop designed as a Victorian stage set. "Not only were these shoes astonishing, but also the way they were selling them," Seidl says. "You got to play Victorian while you shopped for shoes. It was a kind of experiential marketing that now has a name and fans, and these guys were just finding it out by feel in Gastown."

The exhibit features some 150 shoes as well as ads, sketches, articles and other memorabilia. Finding the items to showcase, though, was no easy task. Each of the three designers had kept a few things

from all those decades, but not everything. So eventually the museum had to put out a call to the public as well.

"We have had people coming forward with their beautiful treasured shoes," Seidl says, adding, "I hope we honour the shoes with an equally beautiful exhibit."

One shoe that will not appear in the exhibit, however, is Fluevog's latest, the Opus Hotel Porter Shoe, which he designed for staff at the boutique hotel, based in Vancouver and Montreal, where he likes to stay when he's in the Quebec.

It is a sleekly elegant but fairly

straightforward black lace-up — straightforward, that is, except for the vivid pink saddle.

"Who says boys can't wear pink?" Fluevog says with a mischievous grin, noting that the porters' trousers actually cover up most of the pink. "It's a snappy shoe."

The Porter aside, the retrospective will include several of his other popular designs over the years, right up to 2000. Best of all for fans who'd like to buy and wear these vintage looks, Fluevog has also re-issued four of his famous designs, his favourite from each decade, for a limited time.

From the 1970s, there's the men's #2 Powell, commemorating his first store; from 1980, there's the Truth Pilgrim, the first woman's shoe he designed, with its curled toe and buckle; from the 1990s, the Munster, with its oversized Louis heel, which Madonna made

Own a pair of wearable art pieces

For those who want not just to look at shoes, but to buy and wear them, here's where to find the designers' work:

• **John Fluevog** has many stores across North America, and also offers his collection for sale online at [www.fluevog.com](http://www.fluevog.com). His Vancouver stores are located at 837 Granville St. (604-688-2828) and 65 Water St. (604-688-6228). His new Opus Hotel Porter Shoe is available for a limited time at select Fluevog stores and at the Opus Hotels in Vancouver and Montreal, [www.opushotel.com](http://www.opushotel.com).

• **Peter Fox** is famous for his feminine, vintage-looking bridal shoes and boots. He recently closed his New York store and now operates completely online. Check out his wares at [www.peterfox.com](http://www.peterfox.com).

• **Ken Rice** is a master shoemaker who joined forces with Peter Fox and John Fluevog in the 1970s. He still hand crafts uniquely beautiful footwear, including custom fits and designs, in his Delta studio. It's located at 10923 Lyon Rd., Delta, 604-590-0131. For more info, visit [www.kenriceshoestudio.com](http://www.kenriceshoestudio.com).

famous in the movie *Truth or Dare*; and from 2000, the sexy but sweetly practical Hi Choice Vanny.

One thing that makes these shoes so remarkable is not just the unusual design, but the craftsmanship that goes into each pair. Over the years, Fluevog has built close relationships with the factories he uses, most of them small, family-run operations in Peru, Portugal, Mexico and China, where the workers use good-quality, environmentally responsible materials and traditional techniques. "I do like hanging out in the factories," he says. "Shoes are really tactile."

And even though he has two of his three children working with him now, as well as an extensive team he can rely on, he still creates his own designs and is proud that it's still his business, with no partners or shareholders to answer to.

"I can do what I like," says the perpetually rebellious designer. "I can say what I like. I don't even have to be politically correct."

Forty years after two guys broke the rules by starting a vintage shoe shop in Gastown, Fluevog is still doing things his own way. And his customers love it. Young and old, male and female, they love the way a Fluevog shoe conveys a sense of individuality, uniqueness, and self-worth — what he describes as being very "I'm OK to do this. I don't mind having a statement on my feet."

Fluevog's story is a uniquely Vancouver one and so it comes as no surprise, really, that he's chosen to stay in his hometown.

"I like Vancouver. I like the smell in the air. I like going for walks, and rollerblading, and riding my bike. I

like New York, but I like leaving it, too," he says.

He also likes how his shoes sidestep fashion. "In the fashion world, Fluevog has its own identity. And there's power in that," he says. "I hope that you can take my shoes out of the closet in five years or 10 years and they'll still look stylish."

And for someone who's spent the last four decades happily breaking all the rules, he's pretty happy with where he is right now.

"I'm just doing the same thing I've done for the last 40 years, going to work every day," he says. "When I started doing this, it never occurred to me that I'd have influence across the country and North America. For the artist part of me, that's fun."

Special to The Sun

At a glance

**FOX, FLUEVOG & FRIENDS**

**When:** Friday through Sept. 26

**Where:** Museum of Vancouver, 1100 Chestnut St.

**Info:** 604-736-4431 or [museumofvancouver.ca](http://museumofvancouver.ca)

This fashion retrospective looks back at 40 years of footwear courtesy of Vancouver designers John Fluevog, Peter Fox and Ken Rice. It features about 150 shoes dating from 1968 to 2000, as well as photographs, catalogues, newspaper articles, sketches and customer comments.



SEE A VIDEO CONVERSATION WITH JOHN FLUEVOG AT VANCOUVERSUN.COM

