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Sixty years of the Gucci loafer

With its distinctive snaffle-bit detail, butter-soft leather and almond-shaped toe, the Gucci loafer inspires more devotion than any other man's shoe. As it celebrates its 60th anniversary, Alfred Tong talks to some of its most loyal fans



Handmade in Florence: putting the finishing touches to a 1953 Gucci loafer

By Alfred Tong

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Never has a shoe had so many stories to tell, so many secrets to whisper. The Gucci loafer, with its distinctive snaffle bit detail, is that shoe. The story begins with the Gatsby-esque romance of young Guccio Gucci working at The Savoy just after WW1. While observing the comings and goings of the English aristocracy, he noted how important horses, racing and polo were to this glamorous set. When he launched his own leather goods business he made sure to incorporate equestrian iconography into the Gucci brand.

When his son, Aldo, launched the Gucci loafer in 1953, it soon become synonymous with the 'Jet Set', a group of privileged and wealthy Europeans, and also with Hollywood royalty. On the year of its 60th anniversary it remains the only shoe in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, an honour that it's held since 1985.

The originals were based on a North American moccasin style and were handmade to be as soft, lightweight and pliable as possible. In spite of this, they were surprisingly hardy. Their comfort and practicality arrived at a time when casual American and Italian style were challenging traditional notions of British formality. They came to embody a louche, easy-going and sporty sexiness.

Over the years the design and fortunes of the shoe has undergone many changes. The distinctive almond shaped toe has sometimes been square instead of round. Heel heights have gone up and down (they were almost as high as women's shoes in the '70s). Not all changes have been without regret. Some lament the dawning of the Tom Ford era, when bright colours were completely eliminated. And thick rubber soles in the '90s created the unfortunate effect of "SUV Guccis".

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A

selection of Gucci's 60th anniversary loafers

To celebrate the 60th anniversary, creative director, Frida Giannini has launched the 1953 collection in a range of exotic skins and bright colours. The shape of the original seems to have been retained with the almond shaped toe looking as chic as ever. And it is still largely a handmade shoe (produced in a non-descript factory just outside Florence).

Today, the Gucci loafer is beyond parody and beyond reproach. As design critic and Gucci loafer fan Stephen Bayley notes, "They are beautifully made, superlatively comfortable and provide just a whiff of the ironic flash which I find very reassuring."

Whether in Hollywood, Florence, Tokyo (where they're popular with businessmen who have to slip their shoes on and off all the time) or London, they have come to embody a nostalgic, playboy glamour. Here, a select few fans tell us their stories of loafer love.



Leonardo Di Caprio (Wolf of Wall Street), Shia LaBeouf (Wall Street 2) and Matt Damon (The Talented Mr Ripley) in Gucci loafers

GEEZER GUCCI - Simon Lewis, model booker and agent, Cast and Elect

"Essex is all about the birds and how can you set yourself apart to get birds. There's three ways. Number one: car. You need a car to pick the bird up in. Two: a lovely kettle [watch]. Could be a Rolex, a nice little **Tag**, **Cartier**, but your kettle has got to be saying something. Three: your shoes. When you're young, you might not be able to get a nice car or watch, but you can get the Gucci. It's a slender shoe, made out of butter-soft leather, with the little heel. Once you've got them on you know you're top boy – you're having it.

"I was 15 when I got my first pair and they were black leather with the silver buckle and round toe. They cost £185. Previously, me and my mates wore Patrick Cox Wannabes. In my last year at school the whole clique was all in Gucci. We know that Gucci don't design for us, but you know what? Their company bank balance would be missing a couple of zeros if it wasn't for Essex.

"We used to wear them with really tapered trousers, almost like how skinny jeans are now. Everything was very flamboyant. That whole era in the early '90s was all about expressing yourself. In Essex, once we get hold of something, we go mental for it. Everywhere you went, all you saw was Gucci, Gucci, Gucci. We used to go properly crazy to jungle, house, garage and r'n'b and even had a Gucci shoe dance - it was like a shuffle where you kick your heel out a bit.

"I'm 32 and grown out of all that now. I live in East London and people don't really dress up here. I'm mostly in Converse and Vans. But when the occasion calls for it, I would not hesitate to roll up in a pair of Gucci loafers."