

# ANNE SWOBODA

Photography by Ruth Ribeaucourt

Anne is a bespoke shoemaker who lives in the South of France. In the beginning she had a dream...to create shoes that would make the wearer feel they were walking across rainbows. Her connection with Provence awakened a more liberal, simple and light-handed approach to shoe making. Her pieces embody French luxury through simple but beautifully made accessories, made to measure and entirely handmade from beginning to end.







## “The shoe maketh the man”

—KEN BRUEN

I live in a house overlooking the valley of the Calavon River in Apt in the Vaucluse region of Provence. I have transformed one of the downstairs rooms in my home into my dedicated workshop. This allows me to more easily combine my parental responsibilities, such as making family meals and making sure that homework is done, without being constrained by normal working hours dictated when you own a more traditional brick and mortar shop/workshop outside the home. My atelier is also my refuge, much like the crucible is for an alchemist.

Born the daughter of an antiques dealer, I was born and raised in Paris. I grew up amidst 18th century furniture and all kinds of beautiful noble objects. I would regularly accompany my father to Drouot’s auction house, and I even worked with him for a few years, but I felt myself drawn towards drawing and enrolled myself in fine art classes at E.S.A.M. (Higher Education of Modern Art). My father and I are very close and we love to go horseback riding. When we’re out riding together I feel a powerful sense of freedom.

As a young child, drawing was my way to escape the dusty museum-like atmosphere of our Parisian family apartment. With my pencils I escaped into an imaginary world of color and fantastical forms. As a teenager, painting became my favorite means of expressing my latest obsessions and eventually the purchase of a sewing machine allowed me to transform my own clothes. I was always tinkering with objects as a way to materialize my colorful and graphic interior imaginative universe.

I started drawing when I was a very young girl. I remember that the neighbor living in the apartment above us was a poster designer. At the time, he would draw all of the type freehand and calibrated the text with his eye. He was a phenomenal artist and inspired me immensely. He helpfully corrected my portraits and taught me to draw, taught me how to truly look and to see. This incredible gift opened up a whole universe to me.





I vividly remember the moment which crystallized my passion for shoemaking. I was 12 years old and I watched the film *The Wizard of Oz*. That powerful moment when Judy Garland slipped on her ruby slippers and her world shifted from black and white to a world in Technicolor by Deluxe. This changed everything for me. The star symbol of Glinda, the Good Witch of the South's magic wand became my lucky charm and shoes became my life-long passion. Ever since, I have had an addiction to buying shoes, from the impractical and utterly unwearable to vintage shoes, from shockingly outrageous to wholly sensible. They 'sleep' at the foot of my bed, and every morning I wake with the intention to create magical shoes that make people happy.

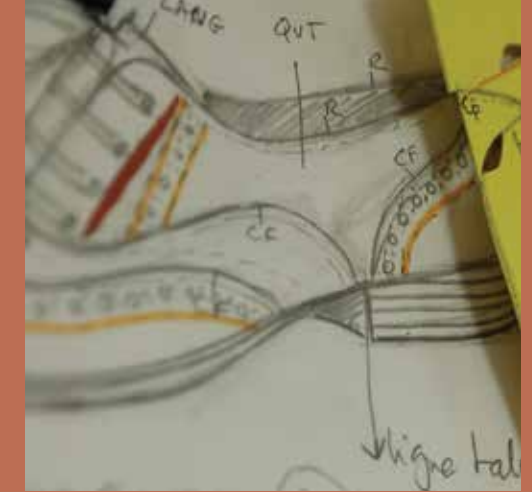
Once I knew I wanted to create shoes, I spent many months searching for a 'Maitre Bottier', a master boot maker who would undertake to teach me how to make shoes by hand. In my search, many of these master artisans kept their knowledge well hidden, telling me that the manufacture of shoes was a skill reserved solely for men. In their minds, women should stick to needlework and not shoe-making.

I did thankfully find one master artisan who agreed to pass on his knowledge to me, a wonderful man called Maurice Arnoult. Under his guidance, I made my first pair of bespoke shoes to my own personal measurements. It truly is not an easy skill to teach, even for a passionate artisan, but Maurice knew just the right words to explain both the gesture and the magic it takes to create a very special shoe. Thanks to him, I knew that my dreams were not in vain. For ten years, my mentor shared his immense experience and a certain art of living that serves me today in my job.

Parallel to his training, I started to take on freelance jobs as a shoe designer for several French brands. This work allowed me to travel extensively, where I experienced firsthand many different shoe-making factories and it became very obvious that working conditions varied dramatically from one country to another. It became imperative to me to work solely with the best tanneries that have only an impeccable record of respecting the environment and their labor forces.



Creativity and applying it to shoe-making allows me to express my personal vision of an accessory. It is a bubble in my life as a woman where there is no external judgment. When I look for new shapes, I always have an idea in mind but I do not know what these initial ideas will bring. I relish this early period of research. It's a lively discussion between colors, textures, leather and my sketching pencil. And when an idea works it's a wonderful sense of achievement.



When it comes to making shoes, the technique is by definition more restrictive and reality often catches up with fantasy. The shoe carries the body. It defines how we walk and can alter and triggers a certain attitude, the way we hold ourselves. My desire for creativity must always bend to the architecture of the very structure of the shoe.

This goes some way to explain why I love to make my slip-on shoes, my Babouches. They are so light and soft that it feels like you are walking barefoot.









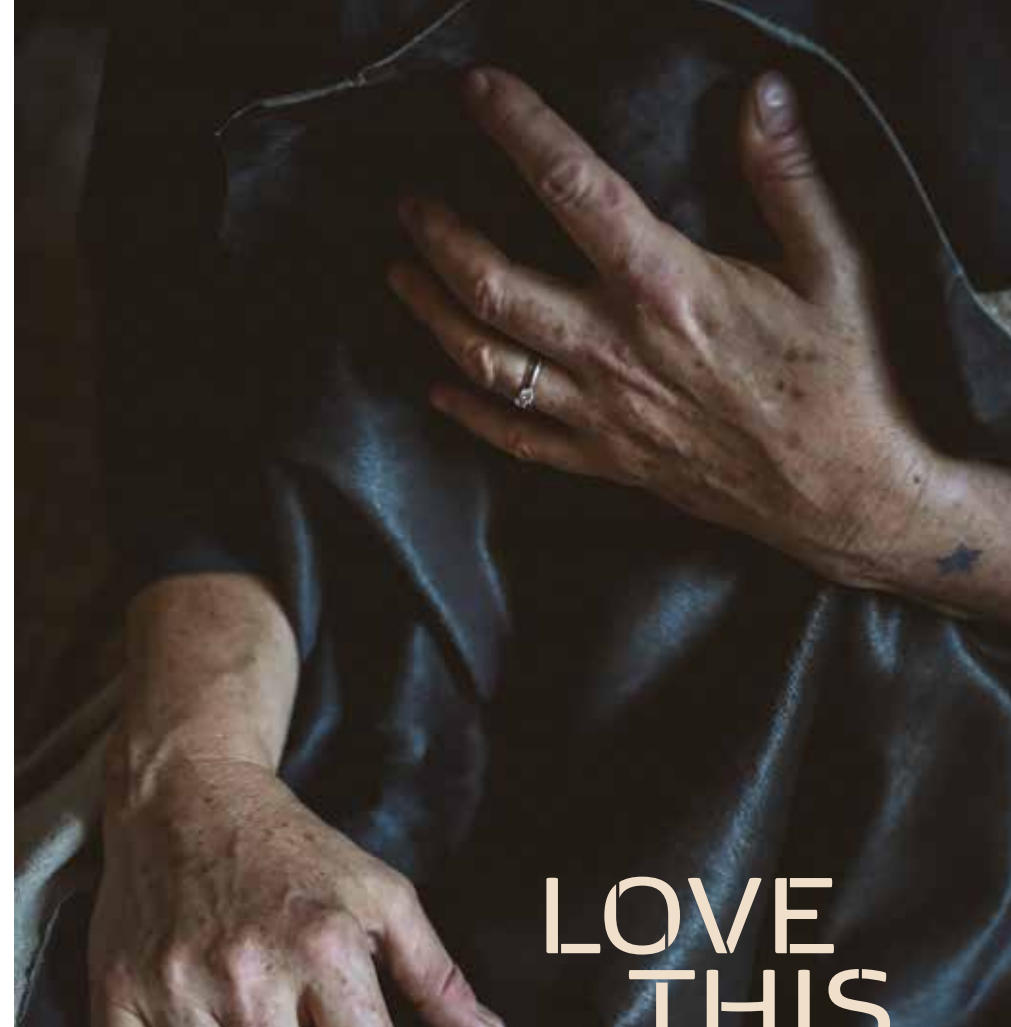
#### 4: CHOOSING THE LEATHER

The choice of tanneries that I work with is essential. Having visited many tanneries in the world where the workforce suffers greatly, it is very important for me to source only from tanneries that respect the human behind the labour. I choose to work only with leathers that come from the best of Italian, Spanish and French tanneries.

I work predominantly with veal, cow and goat-skins for the top, lining my shoes with lambskin. My choice of leather depends entirely on the type of shoe I want to create. Calf or cowhide is typically chosen for strength and flexibility. I opt to use cowhide when creating men's shoes such as derbies, brogues or boots. I would only use goat-hide for linings and reinforcing the wings. I like to use kid-leather when I'm looking for firmness and the work calls for an infinite variety of colours. We traditionally use kid-leather when making classic high heel shoes, 'mary janes', and 't-bar' sandals. It is leather mainly used for women's shoes because it is quite thin and fragile. Lambskin is exclusively reserved for details that require finesse and flexibility such as English edges (bound edge) and piping (slip beading).

I particularly like the aesthetic of 'English edges'. It was one technique that I got right from the very beginning of my apprenticeship. At first, I always used a solid black 'English edge', especially when I lived in Paris. When I moved to the countryside, first in Brittany and then to the South of France, it became more colorful. My creative style naturally evolved into a more colorful palette where I would highlight mute dark leathers with a contrasting leather edging. I owe a lot to creatives such as Kamila Regent and David Hockney, who showed me that two antinomic colors can communicate very well, it's all about nuance. In 2016, I visited the David Hockney exhibition in Arles. It was a shock and a revelation! In *The Arrival of Spring at Woldgate in 2011* I saw the perfect combinations of colors for my leathers and English brogues.

Leather is also the animal itself. When I choose skins, first I breathe it because each animal has an odour of its own. I crumple the skin to feel its softness and flexibility. Then I stretch a small part in my hands. I also look at small imperfections that range from a scratch from barbed wire, an insect bite, or the folds of gestation to eliminate the most damaged. Then I check that it has the right thickness for the most part and that the color is regular.



LOVE  
THIS

#### 5: CUTTING INTO THE LEATHER

I cut the leather with a thin blade X-Acto No. 11 that I have to change several times during the cut. I like to cut the leather, all the while carefully listening to the sound of the blade. To create my slip-on shoes, I cut one top and one English edge, since I do not traditionally line my slip-on Babouche designs. They are so light and supple that you get the impression that you are barefoot, and that's truly my goal.



I do cherish one particular material, a very beautiful animal skin. It's a sumptuous calf-skin with hair which changes from blue to gray depending on the way the light hits it. It's hard to explain in words but it is has an incomparable velvet texture and softness that reminds me of my beautiful horse. I cannot bring myself to cut into it and make something from it. So every so often I will unroll it and imagine everything I could create from it, but nothing is beautiful enough to justify cutting into it and so it remains a constant inspiration.







I attach the form with these fine nails, stretching the leather carefully. Then with a wide blade type that has been sharpened by stone, I cut the overhangs flush with the edge (this creates the 'last edge'). The stone I use is that of my master. He shaped it so that it was ogive-shaped and rounded. I always told myself that when this stone breaks, that I would stop working. But it's still in one piece!

Once the edges are trimmed, I pass talc on the entire form before laying the stem. Then I prepare the sole. It has been prepared in a process called 'roughing', that is to say it is scratched with thick sandpaper so that the adhesive adheres better in the fibers. For slip-on shoes it's 3.5mm buffalo crust, which is very resistant. It is used for creating the soles of tango shoes, for example.

I glue the parts that must be in contact; the bottom of the form and one side of the sole. Then the last 15 minutes I apply both sets. I cut my sole to the exact size it should have and the assembly requires a lot of precision.

## 6: SEWING

My first step of sewing is to choose a thread of the desired size and color and then adjust the length of the needle and then I'm ready to sew! I love my sewing machine, a flat industrial Pfaff, which I affectionately call 'Eglantine'. She makes a sweet purring noise and is very flexible, careful and never makes any sudden movements. The needle goes back and forth in a hypnotic dance, the sound of the engine and the pedal attached to a chain and the flow of the dots remind me of drawing. You have to count the number of dots per centimeter to be certain to fall right on the corner of a derby ear and to be able to do the breakdown (to vamp) correctly.

## 7: LASTING

There are several kinds of assemblage; the most traditional is sewing, and for sneakers one can use injection and neoprene glue welding. For my slip-on shoes I use a form of welding. First I place nails inside my mouth, and with my tongue I push the nails to rest just beside my molars (this doesn't make my dentist very happy). Old-school shoemakers place the nails here, as it's more convenient to take them out one at a time rather than rummaging through a plastic packet of nails.







## 8: FINISHING

The label of the slip-on shoes is oval and the underside is covered with a dense foam pad that dampens the shocks of walking. For some customers who do not like to walk flat, I can put a sports insole that pads the whole foot and lifts it about 1cm from the ground. My inner labels are branded with a brand name to print the leather on behalf of my brand, Anne Swoboda, with my favorite star and the size.

draw my inspiration from the beautiful landscapes of the Luberon in Provence where I live now. With each season comes an incredible palette of ever changing colors that I find echoed in the paintings of one of my favorite artists, Pierre Jaccoud. I am also very inspired by the architecture of the Bauhaus in Neimeyer via Le Corbusier; the furniture designs of Jean Prouvé or Jacobsen; automotive design and of course by nature and animals for their grace and the texture of their beautiful coats.

My biggest challenge and achievement is creating a pair of slip-on shoes for my father. He was always a very elegant man and liked to wear lambskin flat mules. But he would complain that they kept slipping off his foot and were lending him the air of someone who shuffles and drags his feet down the street—which was entirely unacceptable to him. So I undertook the challenge of creating a pair of shoes just for him. I started to sketch, then to elaborate a form of slipper with a closed back, which would be both chic and flexible. My father had a very sensitive foot and he had much difficulty slipping shoes off and on.

When I was finally happy with my work, I wrapped up his shoes in beautiful paper and gifted them to him for Christmas and he has never taken them off since!

From that moment I understood that my work could be both useful and aesthetic. My greatest satisfaction in my job is to hear my client tell me that they have never felt so good wearing shoes. If slipping on my shoes or carrying one of my bags can create a sense of true well being, I know that I have managed to do my job. I still like to dream and would really love to make a small custom capsule collection for overseas boutiques, ideally working with clients in the United States and Australia.

## ANNE

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