



Glamour Puss

Words: Gemma Lacey
Photography: Julia Kennedy



From felines to film noir, Charlotte Olympia's footwear and accessories draw on an eclectic set of influences. We sit down with her to learn about leopards, mini moccasins and the importance of naming shoes.

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Citing Cinderella as her childhood movie, it should be little surprise Charlotte Olympia Dellal found her calling designing shoes. Inspired by a love of form and function, this marriage of the practical and beautiful is at the heart of her work and key to her popularity. Dellal's time at London's renowned Cordwainers college cemented this for her, "It's important to know your craft, it helps with the design. I want to create beautiful objects that you can wear. That's how I see shoes, as wearable objects."

With this architectural appreciation, it may seem surprising she tells us her most treasured pair of shoes are some tiny vintage moccasins from her childhood and not the towering heels she's famous for. Yet dig deeper, and the threads of warm nostalgia are present in all her work as a narrative and love song to all her influences.

One place where this is most evident is in her iconic *Kitty Slipper*, initially from the fall 2011 collection, titled *To Die For*. As her first flat shoe, "It couldn't be any old flat, to introduce one after having shown several platforms four to five seasons prior, it had to be a special one that would stand out, but sit well with a collection of high heels." Inspired by the era of film noir and Agatha Christie novels, she remodelled a classic men's design, "I wanted to take a men's smoking slipper but make it more feminine, so instead of having the high-cut straight vamp I turned it into ears. It felt like the natural thing to do in the design process and instead of the monogram, I added a cat's face and that was it!".

Whilst Charlotte is a huge leopard fan, in this instance the kitty was chosen because, as she puts it, "People love cats, they're feminine and flirty, it was the right motif. It wasn't the first time I'd put animals on my designs, but it's definitely one which recurs now, along with leopards". She never dreamed it would become so iconic, yet the wearable glamour of the shoe celebrates the key facets of her brand, so it's easy to see its appeal.



The other feline love in Charlotte's life is leopard print, she confesses her friends will often buy her gifts with this design too, "It's my thing, people very much know that." When drawn on where this stems from her answer is immediate, "My mother". Even from a young age Charlotte had a leopard print bikini and she and her sister [Alice Dellal] had matching leopard coats, "It was a big thing in our household", to the extent that her coats are still some of her favourite leopard print possessions to this day and evidence of a Dellal style dynasty, "We love leopard print. It's always about the right kind, you know, like with anything, there's always the right shade of pink or the wrong one, and sometimes wrong is good. It depends how you're wearing it." It's not just Charlotte's wardrobe which reveals the extent of her obsession, from the carpet in her dressing room, "Copied from my mother", to her dog bed, as she says, "Leopard print for me is my black without being black. It makes me feel more glam, like red lipstick."





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It's inevitable this passion makes it into her collection, sometimes in obvious ways with models dressed head to toe in the print, but there's a special leopard in Charlotte's life who has a starring role in all aspects of her brand. Called Bruce, he's an art deco ceramic leopard who belonged to her husband's grandmother. Describing him as part of the family, it's clear Bruce is no ordinary mascot. As his mistress describes him, "He's a beautiful, handsome leopard", and this is evidenced by his appearances in photo shoots and shop window displays, with him having pride of place in her store. Although almost life sized, it's not just this which makes Bruce exotic as Charlotte tells us, "Art deco leopards are very hard to find, they're hand painted and most of the ones out there are 1970s designs which are too shiny or airbrushed." As her stores have grown, there's been a need to source Bruce some siblings, but she describes trawling Ebay and antiques stores to find them as 'missions' and naming them becomes even tougher, with variations such as Brucester being favoured, but eventually being shortened, "They all end up being called Bruce in the end." It's not just the stores where Bruce makes an appearance though, he pops up in miniature form as a hand painted enamel head motif to accessorise shoes and bags as part of the *Encore* collection, ensuring his place as brand mascot in every area.



Leopards and art deco are synonymous with glamour and it's unavoidable to keep using this term when referring to Charlotte or her work, so steeped in it is her choice of sumptuous fabrics, skyscraper designs and styling. Her history seems to indicate this is in her DNA and when she speaks of her style roots, her mother with her love of leopard print and her grandmother Zehava who looked "like a movie star", are notable influences. Zehava's signature style comprised of perfectly coiffed waves, red lipstick and leopard print, so it's easy to see her impact on Charlotte's style. "I wave my hair, wear red lipstick. I love to have a cardigan perched on my shoulders like she did. I'm very much inspired by her." It's not just the aesthetics of her grandmother which seem to have had an effect on Charlotte though, "She was the kind of grandmother that we always put our best on to go and see." For her it seems as much about the customs of that time, "It's an era I'm nostalgic for, I always say I love the glamour of the '40s and the playfulness of the '50s." The sense of etiquette around dress is a big draw for Dellal, "It was a time that was rich in that type of custom, everyone used to wear hats and gloves before they left the house, I love that. I guess before I even knew it, I loved accessories."

The modern day Charlotte is a huge collector of these, everything from cat eye sunglasses, "I've even got sunglasses with leopards perched on them", to a selection of hats so numerous they're starting to rival that of her shoes. "They're objects you can admire whether you're wearing them or not, they look beautiful. I even got married in a cat hat."



Bruce, courtesy of Charlotte Olympia

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This sense of mischief and strong personality is another clear facet of Charlotte's designs as she says, "I don't want people to laugh at my things, but I like them to smile at them. It's about the subtleties of it." From bedroom slippers with marabou pom poms hiding poodle heads, these knowing touches and secrets are a signature of her style and the kind of design which makes people look twice. The details of the collection are central to its charm, even down to the name of the shoe which she takes very seriously, "I think that rounds off the whole collection and the spirit of the shoe." Some names are more obvious, take the *Kitty* shoe for example, but she cites others like a Chinese inspired wedge called *The Great Wedge of China*, the *Shang High* and *Shang Low*, so called because of their differing heel heights. "I like a bit of irony as well. It definitely comes from me because I like a bit of a giggle sometimes."

There's a humour and sense of kitsch apparent in her designs, often most obvious is her collections inspired by foreign places. "My French collection was all pink poodles and croissants and perfume. Clearly, I know Paris is not all about that, but I enjoy the typical things associated with it." The celebration of those draws on a feeling of romance connected with travel, encompassing Dellal's love of the '40s and '50s and influences like Schiaparelli and Surrealism. "I don't want to make things kitsch, which may sound funny coming from me. I think there's a fine line, you can have something glamorous which still has humour if it's done with the right materials, in the right colours and is beautifully made."



These eclectic, but complementary influences create an interesting picture and show the scope of thought and consideration in Dellal's work. As a female designer, "I can't help but consider myself and create things I love", her style has clearly been informed by a range of strong women including those in her family, but Charlotte says she has no fixed muse.

"I tend to be inspired by women who may be pin-ups, or who have an affinity with accessories, who are artistic or decorative in their way. I love decorative people and I love glamour."

With felines so closely aligned with elegance and grace, it seemed only fitting to ask Charlotte what type of cat she'd be. The answer? "I like leopards, I'd say maybe a Bengal – Siamese cross, because I love the elegance of the Siamese, and the Bengal because I can't go anywhere without my leopard print." This kitty would also be well heeled of course, "Cats are super quiet, so I'd design them noisy shoes so you could hear them walk. There's nothing better than the sound of walking round in high heels making a nice clackety clack sound."

