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Art of the Boot

Celebrating the 65th anniversary of its legendary Desert Boot, Clarks asks 14 British artists and designers to add their own touches to the footwear staple.

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The prevalence of the high-sided, laced, sand suede desert boot, with its crepe sole, can be traced back to one British brand: Clarks. And to one man at that brand: shoemaker Nathan Clark, who introduced the versatile footwear in 1950. And to the Middle East, specifically a Cairo bazaar, where British soldiers stationed in Egypt picked up locally made shoes, which then inspired Clark to bring a similar model to market.

These days, the Clarks Desert Boot is a fashion staple. Knockoffs abound. Pharrell Williams has been seen wearing its not-so-distant cousin, the Wallabee. Pop stars Liam Gallagher, Johnny Marr, and Florence Welch have been spotted sporting them, too. Perhaps most notably, Steve McQueen wore them in the 1963 film *The Great Escape*.

To celebrate its 65th anniversary this year, Clarks deconstructed the boot: its sole, suede sides, and tongue that laces up with a dangling tag. The company, based in Somerset, England, then sent the pieces in an “inspiration box”—along with the 2013 book *Made to Last: The Story of Britain’s Best-Known Shoe Firm*—to 14 British-based artists and designers. They then made limited-edition boots inspired by the provided materials.

Clarks has produced the resulting pieces in runs of 250 each, to be sold for \$300 a pair. The interpretations of the shoe will be shown in a traveling exhibition, “Clarks Rebooted,” which opens this month at the Shanghai Design Fair in China; moves to Milan during Salone del Mobile in April; continues to New York during the Frieze art fair in May; and then goes to London in September and October, to coincide with London Fashion Week, the London Design Festival, and Frieze London. They will auction the original artworks in October, with

the proceeds going to the Halo Trust, a British land-mine removal organization.

“Make Art Not War” is the message artist Bob and Roberta Smith wrapped around his shiny yellow and blue patent version. (Bob and Roberta Smith is actually the moniker of one man, Patrick Brill, whose original “Make Art Not War” (1997), a square painting on two plywood panels, is in the Tate’s permanent collection.) “Punchy words,” says Filippo Tattoni-Marcozzi, an independent curator who organized the exhibition, of the Smith slogan. He adds that the shoes are reflective of the artist, “who engages in politics as a form of art infused by slogans, always in bright colors.”

Previously, Tattoni-Marcozzi helped George Michael and Kenny Goss create the nonprofit Goss Michael Foundation in Dallas, where he was its director for five years. While there, he curated exhibitions with works by many from the Young British Artist movement, including Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and Michael Craig-Martin. With Clarks, his scope of work is somewhat similar: to celebrate the creativity of a British brand, and the culture of its home country.

The range of the Desert Boot designs is surprising, especially for a shoe and brand that have become so ubiquitous around the world. (Clarks is a behemoth, with 14,000 employees worldwide and operations in more than 100 countries.) Among the anniversary editions are an orange-soled, pale blue pair by artist Tom Price with an X-ray image of feet digitally printed on the top layer; pastel boots by Marc Quinn that feature his thumbprint set into the sole; and a laser-cut version by Adam Ball that references nature by sandwiching together two pieces of leather—a hard leather inside, and a soft suede outside—so that as

the wearer walks, patterns and colors on the boots change.

Other contributions from artists include a take by Gordon Cheung that uses images of crunched up *Financial Times* stock market pages; a pair by René Gonzalez—the youngest of the group—who pasted on his right boot an image of 1980s hip-hop legends the Wu-Tang Clan, and on the left boot, their fans waving, thumbs linked to form a W; and an edition by abstract painter Frank Bowling—the oldest to work on the project—who lent the boots a pale, almost translucent palette.

Accustomed to shaping products rather than sculptures or paintings on canvas, the contributing designers made perhaps the most dramatic changes to the form of the shoe. Lee Broom turned his pair into a black high-ankle Chelsea-esque boot with buckles; backgammon board designer Alexandra Llewellyn used lilac bolts to encircle the ankle on a blue boot; and designer Faye Toogood interpreted the desert boot as a Roman sandal with a sock in it. Of all of the creations, Toogood’s—which Tattoni-Marcozzi says is “reminiscent of a simple past projected toward a sophisticated future”—caught the eye of Clarks CEO Melissa Potter. “I’d wear her design with chiffon skirts and a jumper,” she says, adding, “There’s such variety and creativity in each of the designs. Your choice depends on your personal style.”

Tattoni-Marcozzi continues, “The artists and designers I chose are from many different disciplines, which makes the collection fun—as well as functional. I avoided picking any one school of art. The thing they all have in common is that they’re all British. Not British-born in every case, but they all work in Britain and their work reflects that quintessential Britishness, just like Clarks.”

(OPPOSITE) Clarks CEO Melissa Potter with curator Filippo Tattoni-Marcozzi at the shoe brand’s headquarters in Somerset, England. (FOLLOWING SPREAD) Limited-edition takes on the Clarks Desert Boot by (clockwise from upper left) Adam Ball, Bob and Roberta Smith, Gordon Cheung, Richard Caldicott, René Gonzalez, and Kacper Hamilton.

