In the Netherlands, a boom in shoes

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One-of-a-kind footwear emerges as designers bridge art and function

BY CHRISTOPHER F. SCHUETZE

Deniz Terli is a Dutch shoe designer who has piled up awards and attention for her vertiginous, one-of-a-kind footwear, which she insists is wearable.

Soon, movie audiences will be able to inspect her handiwork in the next, and final, “Hunger Games” film: The costume designers Kurt and Bart saw one of her designs on a blog and asked Ms. Terli to custom-make a creation for the actress Elizabeth Banks, who plays Effie Trinket, a character known for her bold fashion statements.

“The people pin it, they share it, it goes all around,” Ms. Terli said of her designs. “They are tapping into the Netherlands’ strong roots in traditional shoemaking, coupled with a strong interest in new technology and design.”

“The trend is driven by a small group of Dutch designers, curators and educators who are modernizing an ancient craft and collecting objects that bridge the gap between high art and function. They are tapping into the Netherlands’ strong roots in traditional shoemaking, coupled with a strong interest in new technology and design.”

“The Netherlands are already popular because of their thinking outside the box,” said Liesel Swart, a shoe designer and lecturer at the Dutch Shoe Academy in Utrecht and the ArtEZ Institute of the Arts in Arnhem.

Ms. Swart said she had seen a push-back in recent years against the globalization of the shoe industry to lower-cost countries, a trend that claimed many smaller shoemakers here in the 1970s.

“There’s a move back to Europe, back to small production, instead of these mass productions — local production is popular again,” said Ms. Swart, whose own designs include an apple-core shoe and shoes made of meat and cheese.

Liza Snoek, whose Virtual Shoe Museum has made her a tastemaker and a talent scout in the world of shoe design, notes that many of the roughly 5,000 shoes on her website are made by traditional shoemakers or fashion creators but by visual artists, architects and modern designers.

“The shoe is like a small architecture model,” she said.

Ms. Snoek started her website a decade ago as a hobby and to show off her own private shoe collection. Three years ago, she started curating shoe exhibitions.

Starting with a show at the Museum of Applied Arts in Leipzig, Germany, Ms. Snoek has assembled more than a dozen exhibitions in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Slovakia, China and the United Arab Emirates.

She is co-curator of “History Under Your Feet,” 2000 Years of Shoes” at the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel, in Basel, Switzerland, through April 6.

Her next exhibition, at the Stadtgalerie Klangfurt, Austria, is scheduled from June 25 to Oct. 11. The show is divided among six sutors: the regular five, plus a room that deals with ESP, death and the future. The “touch” room will feature shoes by the artist Peter Swan that appear to be made of human skin but are made of silicone with implanted strands of hair. Shoes made of edible material are to be in the “taste” room.

“I don’t care if it is wearable — if it is size 36 or 60 — some shoes are impossible to walk on, but for a photo shoot or in a museum it makes no difference,” said Ms. Snoek, who borrows two-thirds of the shoes she needs for exhibitions from designers or collectors.

The Kunsthall, the museum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, put on a major shoe exhibition last year based in part on popular demand. In a pilot project called “MaatMe” (literally “Make Me”) which the museum rendered as “Co-Creatin”, the museum gave its audience a choice of three topics: dinosaurs, shoes or the French-Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely. Of the roughly 5,000 members who voted online, 51 percent wanted the Kunsthall to show shoes.

Jannet de Goege, the show’s curator, said she was surprised that the subject would be so popular. More than 140,000 people visited the Kunsthall during the exhibition.

Ms. Terli, who is 30, dreams of finding a way to set up limited production of her creations. She hand-makes each shoe herself in a process that takes roughly 80 hours. She favors bold-print geometry and feminine contours, the combination of which she said was her attempt to dissociate submissiveness from femininity. “I always make sure that the designs that I make are wearable,” she said. “The question of wearability divides the shoe world between what is purely shoe design and what is shoe art, said Inge Specht, who runs the Dutch Leather and Shoe Museum in Waalwijk, a small town in the center of the country that was once the heart of Dutch shoemaking.

Unlike the Virtual Shoe Museum, which has a strong focus on design and the future of shoes, the brick-and-mortar museum is focused more on the history of shoes and shoemaking as a craft. An exhibition on Roger Vivier, the inventor of the stiletto heel, runs until June 28.

“The market for those very special shoes is very limited,” said René van den Berg, a well-known Dutch shoe designer. “But the interest in the design bit of that is very, very big.”

Geometric Designs by Deniz Terli, who hand-makes each shoe. She favors bold-print geometry and feminine contours, the combination of which she said was her attempt to dissociate submissiveness from femininity. "I always make sure that the designs that I make are wearable," she said. Her handwork will be featured in the final "Hunger Games" film.