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Pumps and Circumstance

Katia Jean Paul ruminates on the trends and the elements of style within the culture at large.

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Let There Be Mules

by [Katia Jean Paul](#)
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As part of this season's '90s revival, a hybrid shoe from the past decade makes a return to the fashion landscape, garnering more scowls than approval in the process. Katia Jean Paul makes a case for the summer footwear with a bad rap: the mule.



Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie Bradshaw working those mules in Sex and the City (1998). Photo: [imdb.com](#)

We last left the mule in the late '90s, inside Carrie Bradshaw's walk-in closet, between her numerous, perfectly aligned pairs of Manolo Blahniks. Part slipper, part pump, the mule, an unusual-looking shoe, popped back into the sartorial landscape earlier this spring. The always backless and sometimes open-toed number takes after its predecessor the chopine, that towering platform shoe—some went as high as 20 inches—women of the Italian aristocracy would teeter in during the 15th to 17th centuries. Thankfully, mules weren't nearly as high, and thus a far more sensible choice come the 18th century. But considering its open back, which leaves the wearer to rely solely on the grip of their feet for stability, whether heeled or flat, the mule's propensity to slip off at any given moment is enough for some to dismiss it entirely. Add to that the clomping sound it makes as you walk, and the shoe becomes an inelegant choice of footwear, argues former French *Vogue* editor Carine Roitfeld. "Mules I'm sure I will never wear. I hate mules," Roitfeld told *the New York Times* in 2011. "I hate the noise when someone walks with mules. Clomp, clomp, clomp. I think it's very not chic." Despite its upper-class roots courtesy of the chopine, by the early 20th century, the mule had garnered a poor reputation, worn almost exclusively by prostitutes. But leave it to Marilyn Monroe, one of Old Hollywood's most memorable leading ladies, to bring the shoe back to its former glory, if only for a brief moment. While they were popular to a degree, on and off again between 1950 and 1980, the open-toed slip on would prove to be the rendition of mules virtually no woman could do without circa 1998. Virtually, because even then, the ever-backless shoe had its detractors.



18th century mules. Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

As with all past trends that have made a comeback this season, the mule is new and improved. From Altuzarra to Alexander Wang, designers have revamped the usually all-black shoe, adding colour, texture and architecture to mules, resulting in a fresh and feminine offering, far removed from the masculine and clunky Scandinavian clog that permeates the sartorial consciousness. Think snakeskin, spikes, clear straps, jewels and two-tone stiletto, chunky, and wedge heels; the mule is as sophisticated as can be. Given its many tasteful incarnations, it's difficult to imagine why the mule still gets a bad rap, save for the balancing act it requires. The solution is simple enough: opt for a snug-fitting mule which allows for a firm grip. Better yet, go for one with a subtle strap around the back of the ankle, like slingbacks. As for that clomping sound? Mules wouldn't be the first shoes to make their wearer's presence known, hence why all the fuss? However you may feel about mules, I wager you will likely find it difficult to resist the urge to clomp, or rather clack away, as with any old pair of heels, in these unusual shoes once you see the light and elegant mules on offer this season.



1. "Acaren" Mules, \$100 at [ALDO](#) stores, and online.
2. Shiny Leather High Heel Mules, \$99.90 at [Zara](#) stores, and online.
3. [Sophia Webster](#) Kimmy 5 Butterfly Patent Mules, \$545 at [Hudson's Bay](#) stores, and online.
4. [Vince Armon](#) Ankle Strap Mules, \$551.58 at [shopbop.com](#).
5. [Miu Miu](#) Leopard-Print Calf Hair Mules, \$790 at [net-a-porter.com](#).



Fashion, art, architecture, design, TV, and film: Katia Jean Paul is a Montreal-based writer who casts a critical eye on her many idées fixes, unearthing the aesthetic and cultural dimensions within each and every subject. / Follow Katia on Twitter: [@KatiaJeanPaul](#)

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