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Sole Cycle

The homely Birkenstock gets a fashion makeover.

By Rebecca Mead



The company’s shearling-lined sandals are like a Teddy bear that cuddles back. They are witty, provocative, and slightly silly. Credit Photograph by Pari Dukovic

In 1936, Meret Oppenheim, the Swiss Surrealist artist, had tea with Pablo Picasso at the Café de Flore, in Paris. Oppenheim was wearing a bracelet, of her own design, that was clad in ocelot fur. Picasso admired it, noting that one could cover anything with fur. Soon afterward, Oppenheim produced her most famous work: a teacup, saucer, and spoon covered with the creamy-tan fur of a Chinese gazelle. The piece is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, and is celebrated for its suggestive conjunction of the domestic and the erotic. Oppenheim’s teacup came to mind last fall, while I was browsing in a shoe store and noticed that Birkenstock had created a peculiar version of its Arizona sandal—the classic, two-strap style long favored by hippies and German tourists. The sandal had the familiar chunky cork base and thick, buckled straps in dull brown-gray suède, but the insole and the straps were lined with fluffy white shearling. The shoe looked alluringly comfortable, like a Teddy bear that cuddled back. It also looked perplexingly impractical: if it’s cold enough for fur, it’s too cold—and likely too wet—for open-toed shoes. The sandal was witty, provocative, and slightly silly. Like an iPad, or an eight-dollar bottle of cold-pressed juice, it seemed the covetable answer to a need that hadn’t existed before it came along.

In recent years, the homely Birkenstock has become a curiously fashionable object. The company’s classic sandals have been omnipresent in my Brooklyn neighborhood. It seems to be the rare woman who doesn’t own a pair or two of sturdy Birkenstock thongs, called Gizehs, particularly if she spends a lot of time pushing a stroller or doing the elementary-school run. Women like me who, in our twenties and early thirties, blithely shifted between the ease of flip-flops and the constraint of high heels, were relieved to find some kindly support for our increasingly middle-aged feet. Women are so accustomed to the expectation that shoes will be uncomfortable—they will chafe our heels, or squash our toes, or make our insteps ache—that slipping on Birkenstocks felt revelatory.

Some of my peers found Birkenstocks irredeemably ugly, or too vivid a reminder of their shambolic college days; or they disliked the way that Birkenstocks can look alarmingly boatlike on larger feet. But others, like me, loved the fact that they supplied comfort without completely capitulating on style. Recently, the sandals had become available not just in mud brown or mud beige but also in contemporary hues like silver and patent white. Even if Birkenstocks were best kept out of the playground sprinkler, the worst thing about them was that, come colder weather, you had to take them off.

The furry Birkenstock got its start on a Paris runway. In 2012, Phoebe Philo, the creative director of Céline, presented her latest collection on models wearing Arizona-style sandals lined with mink. Céline’s homage to Birkenstocks, which fashion magazines began calling Furkenstocks, became a hot item: Miley Cyrus was photographed wearing a bejewelled pair with harem pants and a bra top. That season, Giambattista Valli, the Italian designer, offered a metallic version of Birkenstocks, edged with studs. And then Givenchy produced its own twist on Birkenstocks: sandals made of soft black leather printed with a delicate pattern of pink roses. Even Manolo Blahnik, the designer of very high-heeled shoes, declared himself a Birkenstock aficionado—when it came to his own feet, at least. Not long ago, Vogue posted a story on its Web site titled “Pretty Ugly: Why Vogue Girls Have Fallen for Birkenstock.” Emma Morrison, a fashion assistant, was quoted saying, “There’s nothing better than a really pretty dress with an ugly shoe.”

The Birkenstock company traces its roots to 1774. Church records in Langen-Bergheim, a town outside Frankfurt, indicate that one Johann Adam Birkenstock was registered there as a shoemaker. In the late nineteenth century, a descendant named Konrad Birkenstock opened two shops in Frankfurt. He made shoes, not sandals. At the time, the insoles of shoes were typically flat; Konrad’s innovation was to make shoes with insoles that were contoured to fit and support the foot.

In the early twentieth century, as shoe production became increasingly industrialized, Konrad developed flexible rubber insoles that could be inserted into commercially made shoes to create a comfortable Fussbett, or “foot bed.” (Early Birkenstock shoeboxes featured an illustration of a giant’s foot on a bed.) He became an orthopedic authority, as did his son, Carl Birkenstock, who joined the family business in the teens. Carl eventually wrote several books and pamphlets about foot health; they were filled with cross-sectional drawings of feet misshapen by inappropriate shoes. Carl Birkenstock’s son Karl joined the business, and in the sixties the company began producing sandals. According to company lore, Karl experimented in his family kitchen, baking a blend of cork and latex to produce a material that was light, resilient, and supportive.

The company’s first sandal, called the Madrid, had a contoured cork foot bed and a buckled strap that crossed in a band at the toes. It was an exercise sandal rather than a fashion item: the shoe was supposed to feel as if it would fall off unless the wearer constantly gripped the contoured toe bar, toning the calf muscle in the process. The Germans, unsurprisingly, have a word for this phenomenon: Angstreflex, or “fear reflex.”

Birkenstock was not the only German company devoted to creating shoes that strengthened the foot. Orthopedic footwear is to Germany what furniture design is to Sweden: Worishofer sandals also feature a cork sole and a contoured foot bed, and Berkemann makes sandals with soles of lightweight poplar wood. Germans have long extolled the virtues of walking. The spa culture of the nineteenth century, which drew tourists from all over Europe, cultivated the habit of therapeutic walking after bathing or drinking the waters. The desirability of a strong foot as the foundation of a healthy body influenced the theories of such nineteenth-century figures as Sebastian Kneipp, a Bavarian Catholic priest who advocated walking barefoot in wet grass, on wet stones, and through snow. (A line of bath and beauty products is still manufactured under his name.) German podiatric concerns also had a darker expression: Sander Gilman, a historian of medicine, has noted that, in anti-Semitic German-language literature of the fin de siècle, a flat, malformed foot was no less a caricature of the Jew than was a hooked nose.

In December, I visited Neustadt, a town near Bonn, which is home to Birkenstock’s headquarters: a glass-and-blond-wood building set in forested hills. The campus—as it is known, in the manner of tech companies—is self-consciously modern, befitting a company that now focusses less upon illness as a problem and more upon wellness as an aesthetic. As I waited in a reception area that was outfitted with stools fabricated from blocks of cork, a monitor by the reception desk showed images from a forthcoming children’s collection: a beguiling loop of ethnically diverse preschoolers, pouting or grinning at the camera, pigeon-toed in patterned Mary Jane clogs or teeny Arizona sandals.

My visit fell on a cold, rainy day, and I was wearing hardy La Canadienne boots. But when I was escorted to the office of Oliver Reichert, one of the company’s two top executives, I found him wearing beige fur-lined Arizonas, sockless, paired with jeans and a cashmere sweater. Reichert, an imposing forty-four-year-old with thick golden hair and a scruff of beard, amiably dismissed my concerns about the warmth of his feet. He’d be wearing the fur sandals, he said, until the temperature outside dropped to below freezing: “It is quite comfortable, and it is very warm and fresh, so it’s really good.”

Last year, nearly twenty million pairs of Birkenstocks were sold. The Furkenstocks fashion moment was unsought, Reichert told me, and something of a distraction. “We are not calculating what the next fashion trend is,” he said. “To be honest, it will be better to be not so much in fashion right now.” It had been hard to keep up with demand for certain styles, like the Arizona in white leather with a white sole. It was preferable to satisfy gently rising demand. Reichert said, “We are O.K. with having our critical mass out there, and working with them, and not having millions on top just rush in and rush out one day, because for the company it is heavy to handle this.”

The brand’s resurgence was no mere trend, he argued: a larger cultural shift was under way. Women were recognizing that most footwear was unhealthy. (What is the point of having a Fitbit on your wrist if your shoes make it punishing to walk?) Reichert said, “You cannot walk all day like this”—he shifted his weight onto his toes, then minced forward for a few steps, as if he were wearing heels. “Talk to your friends, and ask them to show you their feet. You will see a lot of crooked feet, and you will say, ‘This is torture.’ ” The popularity of Birkenstocks, he argued, indicated a desire for a return to a more natural state, at least where footwear was concerned. “People say, ‘People will be completely ugly that way’—you don’t do any pedicure at all, you are not washing your hair, you are not taking showers because it is bad for nature, you are not using soap,” he said. “I am not talking about this! I am saying, Accept that the human being is built like this.”

Consumers, Reichert noted, have become increasingly concerned about the provenance of what they wear, and about the environmental and social impact of their clothing choices. Birkenstock is proud that its sandals are still made in Germany, rather than in China, and the company honors a promise to repair worn-out sandals, no matter how decrepit. “Ask your mother and she will say this is normal—yes, you buy shoes at the shoe store, and you bring the shoes back and they repair them,” he said. “In former days, a pair of shoes was an expensive thing. Now you can buy a pair of trousers for under ten euros at Primark”—a low-cost European chain—“but this will be a brief trend, and then it will be gone. Because even the youngest kids will understand that, in Bangladesh, someone had to suffer for their ten-euro trousers, and it is not a fair deal at all.”

Reichert assumed his leadership role at Birkenstock in 2013, with the task of restructuring a company that had become unwieldy in its organization and unreliable in its production. As Karl Birkenstock withdrew from company operations, in the aughts, management and ownership of the company passed to his three sons: Christian, Stephan, and Alex Birkenstock. It was not a successful arrangement. There were dozens of subsidiaries and lines, each headed by a different brother, and often competing against one another. “It was like a huge nightmare—everybody with his teams,” Reichert says. Two years ago, Stephan left the business. (“I was the heavyweight boxer, and I convinced him to leave,” Reichert told me, convincingly.) Ownership is now divided between Christian and Alex, but they are no longer actively involved. “The mistake was done by Karl Birkenstock,” Reichert told me. “A very European mistake. You should choose one. Like in the monarchy. You can’t say, ‘I was king, I have three sons, so I divide the kingdom in three pieces.’ ”

Reichert has sought to explore new markets. He expects to start offering Birkenstock leather bags, and wants to expand into other products that emphasize comfort, including mattresses and desk chairs. These plans may not all pay off—it’s hard to imagine Birkenstock displacing Vitra in the corporate boardroom—but Reichert is undaunted. “It is a sleeping giant,” he said of the company. “If you try to awake a sleeping giant, you should do it slowly and very smoothly, because if he moves too fast he will destroy a lot of things. So we are kissing, touching, very slowly trying to wake him up.”

Reichert has been introducing other Birkenstocks for cold weather. For years, the company has made a mule called the Boston, which in Germany is typically worn as an indoor shoe. Last fall, a shearling-lined Boston, in slate-blue suède, appeared in stores. I own a pair, and they are the best argument I know of for working from home. No matter how odd a new Birkenstock may appear at first, Reichert told me, wearing is believing. “This is the magic about the product—you don’t have to talk about it, you simply show the product, give it to the people to try on,” Reichert said. “You try to survive your first visual influence. It is love on the second sight.”

One of Birkenstock’s main factories is outside Görlitz, which is sixty miles east of Dresden, in Saxony. Görlitz was spared the aerial bombing that gutted Dresden’s architectural heart during the Second World War, and it is sometimes called the most beautiful town in Germany. Gorgeously painted medieval, Baroque, and rococo buildings cluster on hilly cobblestone streets that lead to picturesque market squares. A magnificent Art Nouveau department store, now shuttered but scheduled to reopen as a shopping center, doubled as the interior of the Grand Budapest Hotel in the Wes Anderson film.

Birkenstock employs some nine hundred people in Görlitz. When I visited the factory, it smelled as pungent as a bakery, redolent with the scent of cooking latex and cork. In the area where soles are made, liquid ethylene-vinyl acetate—a flexible, lightweight polymer known as E.V.A.—was being poured into footprint-shaped molds on a carrousel. Nearby were dozens of bales of jute, two layers of which are required for each foot bed. Across the factory were several enormous tanks filled with liquid latex. In a hangar-size room, sacks containing ground-up cork, imported from Portugal, were massed in rows. One sack was open, and I reached in for a handful of cork. It was startlingly light to the touch, and felt as if I were running my fingers through beach sand on a planet with a lesser gravitational pull than Earth’s.

To form the signature Birkenstock foot bed, the latex and the cork are blended in a proprietary formula, creating a brownish granulated paste that, in its prebaked state, bears an unfortunate visual resemblance to cat vomit. In the vulcanization area, which was pleasantly warm, I watched as measured quantities of this paste were spewed mechanically into dozens of stainless-steel, foot-shaped molds. A young man in shorts and a T-shirt worked swiftly along the line: he pressed a layer of jute onto each pile of cork-and-latex mixture, then topped it with a thin suède liner, like a dried tobacco leaf, before shunting it into an oven.

Upstairs, the production line continued: young women trimmed the excess jute and leather from the vulcanized product of the oven, brown ribbons of material piling around their feet, like the waste left over by a fishmonger. Other women, sitting under bright dressmakers’ lights, marked small pieces of leather with tailors’ chalk, indicating the point where the foot bed would be attached. A team of five was operating a machine that produced black Milano sandals—an Arizona with a heel strap—in size 37. One readied the pieces of leather, now equipped with buckles, to be glued to the foot bed; another supplied the soles. Hilmar Knoll, the factory’s production manager, who conducted me around the factory, did a rapid calculation: among cutters, packers, machine operators, and control checkers, each Birkenstock sandal is touched by the hands of nineteen people in its manufacture.

Birkenstocks aren’t cheap—in Germany, the basic Arizona costs forty-nine euros. (A pair costs a hundred dollars here.) Recently, the company launched an effort to reach customers who need a less expensive shoe, by producing sandals made from ethylene-vinyl acetate. At the factory, liquid E.V.A., in black, white, red, and blue, was being poured into molds cast from Birkenstock’s core styles: the Arizona, the Madrid, the Gizeh. These models, which retail for about twenty-five euros, are intended to penetrate markets where Birkenstock has had little impact, such as South America and parts of Southeast Asia. This summer, the shoes will also be available in some U.S. locations. Finally, there are Birkenstocks that can be worn in the playground sprinkler.

In 2013, Birkenstock hired its first director of product and design, Rudy Haslbeck, who was charged with gently modernizing the brand. When I met him, in the showroom of the Birkenstock campus, he was wearing jeans, a plaid shirt, a Schott leather jacket, an Hermès scarf, and Birkenstock’s version of a high-end sandal, the Milano Exquisite, whose foot bed is entirely covered with the same black leather from which the straps are made. Haslbeck told me that he’d never worn Birkenstocks before taking the job, and had initially showed up to work in sneakers, to his boss’s dismay: “Oliver asked me, ‘Why aren’t you wearing Birkenstocks?’ And I said, ‘There are three style guidelines for men. One, do not wear short trousers off the beach. Two, don’t wear short-sleeved shirts. And, three, don’t wear sandals.’ And he was like, ‘Forget number three.’ ”

Haslbeck pointed at the showroom shelves. “All the products in this room are united by one single thing,” he told me. “You must not change the foot bed. So design-wise this is really challenging.” Some tweaks were very subtle. A man’s sandal called the Zurich—which was introduced nearly fifty years ago, and consists of a single wide strap covering much of the mid-foot—had been updated with thicker leather, chunky gold buckles, and the kind of crêpe sole found on a Clarks desert boot. “It is very heavy, very masculine,” Haslbeck said. “You only buy this once in your life, because it will last forever.”

Other designs were more adventurous. There was a Boston mule made from textured velvet in crimson or gold, inspired by a Persian-lamb coat that Haslbeck had discovered in a flea market. An Arizona sandal had a rose-gold leather foot bed and an upper made from pinkish-peach tweed threaded with iridescent silver. It looked as if it had been cut from the sleeve of a Chanel jacket. Another Arizona sandal, in black leather, had been lined in sapphire-blue shearling. “The first year, I did white,” he explained. “This season, I thought, Now I can add color.” There were even a few sandals with stacked heels that were about an inch high. “It’s the most comfortable height,” Haslbeck said. “Waitresses at restaurants, they usually have a heel like that.”

This fall, the company plans to introduce a range of closed-toe shoes and boots that look like ordinary footwear but feel on the inside like Birkenstocks. To create a shoe with a more streamlined profile, Haslbeck explained, he had trimmed the saucer-like rim of the Birkenstock foot bed—which, in a sandal, protects the foot, but which also makes a large foot look even larger. He showed me a whimsical pair of mauve high-top boots with a white sneaker bottom. They were reminiscent of Campers: offering comfort while also being youthful and energetic. Next was a black ankle boot for men. It was impossible to tell that it was a Birkenstock, unless you felt inside.

Haslbeck then presented a women’s lace-up boot in burnished brown leather and lined with shearling. Its toe box had the same shape as a Birkenstock clog—roomy around the big toe, and tapering to the pinkie—but the family resemblance was that of distant cousins, not siblings. The boot, he noted, could be worn without socks all winter—like an Ugg, the Australian sheepskin bootie that was originally designed for surfers emerging from chilly water. Haslbeck suggested that I try on the lace-up boot, and I slipped my bare foot into it. With the warmth and softness of the fur, and the cradling comfort of the foot bed, it felt wonderful. I think I may have gasped.

“That is what I expected,” Haslbeck said.

Haslbeck was wearing thick black socks with his Milanos. “My granny knitted them,” he said. He preferred them to the barefoot style adopted by his boss. “Oliver is the tough guy,” he said. “I am suffering from cold feet, especially in the morning.” In the fall, the company plans to introduce a line of socks, manufactured by a partner in Germany, alongside a marketing campaign promoting “socks and ’Stocks” as a stylish choice for Americans. This effort may not succeed, but the socks are charming. After I examined a prototype of knee-high socks in a textured oatmeal yarn, I was shown a tube of four-ply cream-colored cashmere, like a luxurious cable sweater for an indulged dachshund. It had a shaped foot with a split toe, like a Japanese tabi sock. Long enough to reach its wearer’s thigh, it came with a cashmere garter attached. It was the most unusual sock I had ever seen, and though it was hard to imagine it being worn by anyone other than a bride in Lapland, Meret Oppenheim surely would have approved.

The transformation of Birkenstock from a niche German health item into a global fashion brand might not have happened without the involvement of a woman named Margot Fraser. Born in 1929 and raised in Berlin, Fraser became a successful dressmaker in Bremen. But she felt stifled in Germany, and by the early sixties she was married to an American and living in Northern California.

Fraser suffered from foot pain, and, in 1966, on a trip back to Germany, she bought a pair of Madrid sandals. “All the exercises the doctor told me to do, like standing on a phone book and grabbing it with my toes (which made me feel like a hero if I did it for three minutes), I did automatically with these sandals,” she writes in a 2009 book, “Dealing with the Tough Stuff.” Upon returning to the U.S., she contacted Karl Birkenstock and proposed importing his sandals. At the time, she writes, “all women’s shoes were narrow and had pointed toes. Even the so-called healthy shoes still had heels. Because millions of women in the United States had painful feet, I thought it would be easy to get them into this marvelous footwear.”

When shoe-store managers told her that the sandals would never sell, a friend suggested that she put up a booth at a health-food convention in San Francisco. Her earliest customers were the owners of health-food stores, who spent all day on their feet; they started stocking Birkenstocks on their shelves alongside granola and vitamins. Fraser, who is eighty-five, told me recently that the shoe-store managers who had rejected her began begging her for sandals. “They came to me saying, ‘Look, there is a health-food store on my street, and people are walking out with shoeboxes—they should be walking out of my store with shoeboxes.’ ” Like the Earth shoe, which emerged from Scandinavia in the early seventies, and had a supposedly health-giving shape in which the heel cup was lower than the toe, Birkenstocks became associated with the counterculture.

Since then, Birkenstocks have been cyclically fashionable. In 1990, Kate Moss appeared in an enormously influential spread in the magazine The Face; she was pictured holding a half-smoked cigarette and wearing a baggy sweater, a bikini bottom, and a pair of Birkenstock sandals. Moss’s look prefigured the brand’s wider embrace in the early nineties, when Birkenstocks were paired with plaid shirts and granny dresses. Before Phoebe Philo’s surrealist reinvention, Birkenstock’s previous runway apotheosis came in 1992, when Marc Jacobs used them in his notorious grunge collection, for Perry Ellis.

The bold tastes of the American consumer influenced the production in Germany, Fraser told me, though sometimes her ideas met with resistance: “When I started to ask for color, the man who had to distribute the sandals in Switzerland said, ‘This woman is going to ruin us. We are orthopedic—we don’t need color.’ But we brought color into the United States, and it helped sales everywhere.”

In Germany, it is widely believed that a firm insole promotes a healthier foot—a conviction often shared by American podiatrists when prescribing orthotics. American consumers, however, have been conditioned by sneaker design to associate comfort with cushioning. In 2000, Birkenstock introduced to America sandals with a foot bed that incorporated an extra layer of cushioning: a pillow-top mattress for the feet.

Twice a year, the footwear buyers of America travel to the Las Vegas Convention Center to attend FN Platform, a three-day trade show that bills itself as “The Global Showcase for Branded Footwear.” Sixteen hundred shoe brands exhibited at a show in February, among them Birkenstock. At the company’s booth, I met David Kahan, who, since 2013, has run Birkenstock’s American division. Kahan, a trim, athletic man of fifty-four, with a salesman’s confident and friendly manner, was previously the head of Rockport Shoes. Margot Fraser had been retired for eight years when Kahan took over; her departure was followed by a period of turmoil, with a rapid turnover of leadership, and frustration on the part of retailers. “There was no inventory, it was very hard to replenish, and very hard to get product,” Robert Goldberg, the president of Harry’s Shoes, on the Upper West Side, told me. Under Kahan, Birkenstock USA is now “a well-oiled machine,” Goldberg says.

In Las Vegas, Kahan had paired a handsome navy suit with black leather Birkenstock desert boots. “Rockport didn’t make a bad shoe, but these blow away anything they had,” Kahan told me. He had just finished a meeting with a buyer from Nordstrom, one of the company’s most important clients, and had been delighted to see that the buyer was wearing black Arizona Exquisites. “Anyone can have a hot item—boat shoes are hot, canvas sneakers are hot,” he said. “But this is about being a brand that is on a different level.” He looked down the aisle at his neighboring venders. “They are all selling shoes, and one person’s shoes are basically the same as another person’s shoes. The only shoe where you can tell what it is from fifteen feet away is a pair of Birkenstock sandals,” he said. He nodded toward a woman passing by in a pair of wedge sandals. “What kind of shoe is she wearing? Who the hell knows?”

Kahan explained that the boots and shoes arriving in stores this fall would still be recognizable as Birkenstocks but would capitalize on other trends in the marketplace. “I use ‘Birkenstock’ as a verb,” he said. “We did a sneaker bottom for spring—sneakers are a hot trend in the market, so we Birkenstocked it. We Birkenstocked Doc Martens; we Birkenstocked a motorcycle boot.” There was even a Birkenstocked Ugg: a fur-lined bootie with a ridged sneaker bottom and two sandal-like leather straps across the foot. Kahan told me, “You go to Bergdorf’s and get in the elevator, somebody is going to look down and go, ‘Where did you get them?’ That is a statement item.”

Inside the booth, sandals and shoes were arranged on shelves that were accessorized with vases of wheatgrass. A slender model in black leggings and a loose black shirt was on call, and she slipped a sandal onto her perfectly pedicured foot at the request of a member of the sales staff, who were attending to the visiting buyers at half a dozen small tables. A store owner from the Midwest was being urged to try on a Boston mule in a nontraditional color—zinfandel and tourmaline were the company’s newest offerings—while visitors from New York were being shown the latest styles in black. Among them was Zacky Joseph, who owns Zacky’s, on lower Broadway. Joseph told me that the black Gizeh and the white Arizona were the best-selling Birkenstocks in his store; the sales representative working with him urged him to consider also stocking the Florida, a three-strap sandal that fashion editors had been showing an interest in this season. Joseph liked a Doc Martens-style boot, but he was understandably skeptical about the Birkenstocked Ugg. “It’s window dressing,” he said. “We’ll get two pairs.”

At another table sat Jonathan Skow, the designer of Mr. Turk, a menswear line based in California. He was choosing footwear to complement the brightly colored clothes—striped twill jackets, floral-patterned pants—for sale at the company’s boutique in Palm Springs. Arrayed before him were several sandals, including a black-on-black fur Arizona, and a brown leather Zurich with a crêpe sole. The closed-toe shoes and boots were not of particular interest to him, he told me: “Our guy is more social—going to bars, going to clubs, going to dinner parties, going to brunch. He doesn’t really go into the office. And he doesn’t go into the woods.”

Skow was wearing jeans and some clothes of his own design: a vivid patterned shirt and a Black Watch plaid blazer. On his feet were black Arizona sandals. “I am a superfan,” he said. “I was in Morocco this summer, and the chicest look was the white Birkenstock and the djellabah and Versace glasses. It was amazing. The guys looked great.” In his opinion, Birkenstocks were both comfortable and good-looking. “What more can you ask for?” he said. “They give a little pizzazz to any outfit.”

In one corner of the booth, a few pairs of Birkenstock-branded socks were on display, though not the cashmere fantasia I’d seen in Neustadt. Skow said that he approved of sandals with socks, though he acknowledged that it was not to everyone’s taste. “I am fifty-two, and I have been a kooky, kooky dresser since the eighties, and I don’t think I’ve ever had more people stare at me than walking through Paris in Birkenstocks in socks,” he said. Birkenstocks always generated strong emotions. After posting about them on his Facebook page, he had received lengthy denunciations in response. “But that is what fashion is about,” he said. “That’s what makes things interesting—when you look at something, and you aren’t sure if you like it or not.” ♦