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TORONTO, Ont.---Here's a museum with pep in its step.

Downtown Toronto's Bata Shoe Museum is home to the world's largest collection of shoes. There are more than 13,000 shoe-related artifacts in the three-story museum built in the shape of a shoebox with a rooftop "lid."

You can follow the yellow brick road with Elton John's monogrammed silver platform boots, which resemble the blue platforms with the Union Jack applique worn by Geri Halliwell, aka Ginger Spice.

For people who enjoy stomping on chestnuts, there are French chestnut-crushing boots.

And who hasn't wondered about Japanese footwear made from human hair?

Besides shoes, the museum features socks, shoe etchings and shoe-related tools. It's named after Toronto shoe aficionado Sonja Bata.

She was born in Switzerland and married the son of a popular Czechoslovakian shoemaker who emigrated to Canada during World War II. Bata (pronounced battah) became one of the world's largest manufacturers of affordable shoes, although none are in the museum.

Sonja Bata has much in common with every American woman I have known. They all love shoes. Just about any woman's closet looks like the dressing room to "42nd Street." I've asked many women about this. My friend Chris offers the best explanation: shoe size is the one thing that never changes with a woman.

The museum opened in 1995. It attracts more than 100,000 visitors a year. That's a lot of foot traffic. The collection appears in rotation, with roughly 1,000 items displayed at a time.

At a recent auction, the museum acquired a pair of boots from Soul Brother No. 1, James Brown. It also lays claim to the elegant suede shoes worn by Canadian jazz pianist Oscar Peterson, who died late last year.

"My favorite shoe is the last one we bought," Bata said, sounding just like any woman at a shoe sale. "There's more to that shoe than meets the eye. We become like a detective. Everybody has two different feet. By examining shoes you can tell something about a person's height, weight, the date of their birth. Every shoe has a story behind them."

Through its Web site, [www.batashoemuseum.ca](http://www.batashoemuseum.ca), museum staff answer a wide

range of shoe-related questions from police investigating crimes to people unearthing rare finds in their attics.

At the museum, I checked out my ancestors' wooden shoes, clown shoes and Apollo astronaut Jim Lovell's layered Teflon astronaut boot. My favorite was the wooden shoe with the curled tip from Ariege, France. The men of the French valley used to make them as wedding presents for their fiancées. The height of the tip represented the amount of love they had for their brides.

The second floor of the 39,000-square-foot facility contains an extensive collection of Native American footwear, covering 90 pairs of boots and moccasins. The third floor features the rarest pieces from the Bata collection, such as bear fur and silk shoes worn by a Japanese samurai.

A third floor wall contained my favorite quote in the museum from my Mexican Revolution pal Emiliano Zapata:

*"It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees."*

The museum's director, Emanuele Lepri, came to the shoe museum in 2004 from the Prato Textile Museum in Florence, Italy. With dapper Italian roots, Lepri knows a few things about shoes. "Women are into shoes and consume their passion by buying new shoes. The actual emotion comes in the purchase of shoes," said Lepri, who wore a pair of brown Batas.

"Men develop some kind of friendship with their shoes," he added. "We are selective in buying them and we can wear them out because they become part of you. Men end up loving fewer shoes -- but more."

That sounds like a topic for Dr. Phil.

"Men are generally dragged to the museum by women," Lepri continued. "Then they end up having a better time than women. Women expect to see fashion shoes. We have very few fashion shoes. But men go crazy over Napoleon's black silk socks."

Robert Redford sent a pair of brown cowboy boots to the museum without the staff even requesting them.

When Elton John was asked where he wore his two pairs of outrageous shoes on display, he joked that they were "so modest he would only wear them when he went out grocery shopping," Lepri said.

Sonja Bata, who started amassing her collection decades ago, stepped up and realized her dream.

"I have two loves in my life," she said. "I studied architecture before I got married. Then I married a shoeman when I was 20 years old. I was determined to help him

grow his business because his family had been expropriated by the Communists in the Czech Republic. But I never knew this would evolve into this museum."