

Considered by many to be the greatest women's shoe designer of the past century, the career of eccentric genius Manolo Blahnik has been celebrated with a travelling exhibition that showcased some of his finest work from the past 45 years.

The king of shoes

Manolo Blahnik Rodríguez was born in 1942 on a small island in the Atlantic Ocean but his shoes have graced catwalks, red carpets and the official residences of heads of state the world over. He was raised on La Palma, the fifth largest of the Canary Islands, an autonomous community of Spain off the coast of north-western Africa. The chief influence of his youth was his mother, who he would watch make her own shoes, something she did after growing dissatisfied with the ready-made options available to buy. It was from her that he is thought to have found his love for delicate fabrics like silk.

During his early life he was home-schooled in the idyllic surroundings of the banana plantation owned by his mother's family. His preference for his own company established at a young age, he was fascinated by the lizards that inhabited the gardens of his home, even fashioning footwear for these creatures out of the foil wrappers of chocolates.

This unusual pastime inspired the title of a documentary that was released in 2017. 'Manolo: The Boy Who Made Shoes for Lizards' features a who's who of celebrity contributors including

Naomi Campbell, Sofia Coppola, Anna Wintour and Rihanna. It offers an incredible insight into the inner workings of a man considered by many a genius of our time, although he would never approve of such a description.

'Stick to the extremities'

The designer has drawn on international influences throughout his career, something that can be traced back to his cosmopolitan life experiences. His Czech father chose to send him to boarding school in Switzerland in the hope of channelling the young man's energy in a productive direction. He would go on to attend the University of Geneva, initially studying politics and law to satisfy his parents before switching to literature and architecture after just one semester. After graduating he moved to Paris, where he studied art and stage set design, while also working in a vintage store.

London was the next stop on his travels and he fully immersed himself in the city's burgeoning fashion scene. Unbeknown to all but those closest to him, he had built up a portfolio of sketches that represented his ideas for fashion and

The exhibition contained many items from Manolo Blahnik's personal collection, believed to contain more than 30,000 shoes.

CREDIT: ANDREA DELBO/SHUTTERSTOCK



footwear. His friend Paloma Picasso, daughter of artist Pablo, played a key part in the launching of his career. In 1970, it was she who introduced him to Diana Vreeland, at the time editor-in-chief of US Vogue.

This meeting, which took place in New York, would put him on the path to prominence. Despite a bout of stage fright when finding himself before such an influential figure in the fashion world, he took the opportunity to present his portfolio of designs. Ms Vreeland immediately spotted his talent for designing shoes and encouraged him to focus his attentions on this area. Her advice: "Young man, stick to the extremities".

The years that followed saw him design shoes for a number of London-based fashion designers. His first collection, which hit the catwalk in 1971, was nearly a disaster. The shoes had heels made of rubber but Mr Blahnik forgot to add the steel reinforcements, meaning the models struggled to walk in them. This didn't stop his obvious talent from shining through. He opened his first boutique in London's trendy Chelsea district. His flagship UK store remains at the same site today. Ten years later, he launched his first US store.

Comfort comes first

'Manolo Blahnik: The Art of Shoes', a touring exhibition that explored Mr Blahnik's career, recently made its last stop at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto. Other venues had included the Palazzo Morando in Milan and the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, as well as Madrid and Prague.

Art curator, critic and author Dr Cristina Carrillo de Albornoz helped the designer curate a selection of his best work. Together they selected over 200 shoes and 80 original drawings, including some from his own personal collection. This archive, believed to contain more than 30,000 unique styles, is stored in two houses that adjoin his home in Bath, the city in southwest England that he has called home since 1981.

He has long specialised in women's shoes, realising early on that designing for men would not allow his imagination to run as wild as he knew it could. Credited with reviving the stiletto heel, he has in the past expressed a dislike for wedges, feeling they lack the sex appeal and femininity of a heel. Perhaps surprisingly for a designer of stilettos, Mr Blahnik puts comfort high on his list of priorities. "Being uncomfortable is unnatural," he has said.

A number of his most famous customers have expressed their surprise that his shoes are always comfortable, regardless of how high the heel is. This pursuit of comfort even led him as far as trying on each of the prototypes of his designs for himself. He continued doing so until a foot injury and subsequent medical advice encouraged him not to.

The exhibition's scope extended from his early work at the start of the 1970s through to the modern day. The items on display included one of the designs he did for the 2006 historical film Marie Antoinette, which was directed by Sofia Coppola. It also highlighted the things that have inspired him over the years including the botanical surroundings of his childhood on La Palma and the architecture he has drawn on from his travels. His appreciation for the beauty of Africa and the elegance of aristocratic Russia were also reflected.

A life spreading joy

More than 40 years on from opening his first store in London, the brand that bears his name has boutiques all over



Although Blahnik prefers his own company, the designer's flamboyant personality has seen him often rub shoulders with the most recognisable faces from the world of fashion.

CREDIT: ANDREA DELBO/SHUTTERSTOCK

the world including New York, Madrid, Moscow, Dubai and Tokyo. The recent addition of Taipei to the list brought the number of standalone stores to 18. His products are also sold at a number of high-end department stores.

All this success had been achieved without any formal training in shoemaking, although he did spend a short period learning from craftspeople in Northampton, the UK's footwear heartland. He picked up his skills by visiting Italian footwear factories and by talking to the artisans working there.

His involvement in the creative process goes beyond simply sketching the initial design. He also insists on handcrafting the first sample himself, for which he carves the last and cuts the material for the upper. Once a design enters production at his trusted partner factory in Italy, he oversees the process closely so that each pair exactly match his original design.

Discussing the delicate process of making a beautiful shoe, he cites three factors as important: the quality of the material, the technical skills required to make the components, and how the shoe is put together. "All these elements absolutely make the shoe what it is," he has said.

Mr Blahnik is as involved in his business as ever. He remains creative director of his eponymous brand and now counts on the support of his niece, Kristina, in the role of CEO. Her mother, the designer's sister Evangeline, held a similar position until 2013. He spends his days either drawing new shoe designs (always freehand on paper and always alone) or visiting the factories in Italy where his shoes are made. He describes spending time there as his "joy in life". Considering how much joy his shoes have given and continue to give women all over the world, it seems only fair that he should find some of his own.