



What inspires **Christian Louboutin**? Olivier Gabet, curator of a major new exhibition in Paris devoted to the shoe designer's creative oeuvre, gives AIR an insight

Paris has countless soul-stirring buildings, but for Christian Louboutin none have such an emotional and artistic draw as the Palais de la Porte Dorée in the 12th arrondissement. As a young boy growing up in the area, Louboutin spent many weekends visiting the Art Deco building, admiring its spectacular frescos and bas-reliefs, exploring museum galleries dedicated to African art, or just daydreaming in the tropical aquarium.

It was during one of these outings that Louboutin first noticed a sign by the entrance forbidding visitors to wear high heels in order to protect the Palais's precious mosaic floor.

Intrigued by the image of a stiletto crossed with a red 'X', the young designer began sketching shoes and a life-long passion was born. His first designs borrowed forms and motifs from the Palais, while that sign went on to inspire his iconic Pigalle stiletto.

It is fitting, then, that the cultural institution that played such a pivotal role in inspiring Louboutin's vocation is the setting for a major new exhibition celebrating his work. "It could have been organised in a museum used to welcoming big fashion retrospectives," says exhibition curator Olivier Gabet. "But everything is connected to the Palais de la Porte Dorée since Christian's





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childhood and teenage years.

“The structure of the exhibition, the construction and the succession of the galleries were pretty much designed according to the identity of the Palais de la Porte Dorée. It is not so well-known among international audiences, but it is a real landmark of the Parisian landscape,” he says.

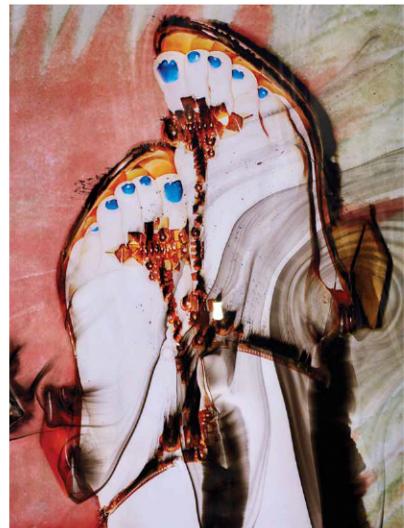
Divided into ten sections, *L’Exhibition[niste]* offers a highly personal exploration of the designer’s myriad sources of inspiration and his creative processes. Spanning 30 years, the show looks at how Louboutin’s love of travel and different cultures, as well as the worlds of theatre, art, literature and pop culture, inform his creativity. “It’s a comprehensive exhibition of the work of Christian – you really jump into his brain, into his vision and into his design,” says Gabet.

Louboutin came up with the title as a play on the idea of an exhibit and the act of exhibitionism. “Both are quite close [in meaning], but I like the more subversive notion that in

exhibiting my work I am exposing myself in a more intimate way,” the designer says. “I reveal a lot of myself, of my inspirations, of my creative processes in this exhibition and I wanted this to be reflected in the title.”

Capturing Louboutin’s effervescent character proved a key curatorial challenge. “As in any exhibition devoted to a living designer, the biggest challenge was to keep the spirit of life, joy and creation, in the context of the museum and the retrospective where people are more or less stopped for a while,” Gabet says. “Christian’s an energetic guy and you want people to feel that creation is also about energy, because very often it is related to suffering and struggling for inspiration.

“The second challenge was to make the visitor feel the sense of curiosity and generosity that, for me, defines Christian as a collector and as a designer,” he explains. “Many of his creations are deeply connected to a friendship, a chance meeting, an exhibition, a travel [experience].



Opening pages:
Pyrites + soulier Zuleika © Jean-Vincent Simonet
These pages, clockwise from top:
Still Life © Jean-Vincent Simonet; Christian Louboutin
@ Jose Castellar; Still Life © Jean-Vincent Simonet





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I think it's important to show this in an exhibition – it's not a succession of shoes, you feel the life in it. It was very important for Christian and I to keep this idea that an exhibition is an experience – it's like theatre."

The show features around 400 pairs of red-soled shoes, some of which have never been exhibited before, alongside collaborations with artists and craftsmen, from Bhutanese craftspeople to the director David Lynch. "I love the idea that when you invite a great artist or designer, he doesn't think of his ego first, but prefers to immediately invite others to join the party," says Gabet. "Christian very quickly proposed to invite a number of craftsmen and artists to participate in the exhibition, and he's a very knowledgeable connoisseur of decorative artistry."

Unlike many retrospectives, *L'Exhibition[niste]* doesn't begin with a biography of the designer. "Christian told me he prefers to jump into the work of the artist before knowing who he is, and he didn't want

text on the wall," explains Gabet. Instead, Louboutin commissioned New Zealand multimedia artist Lisa Reihana to create a hypnotic digital fresco that is shown towards the end of the exhibition. "It is really his life in images, music and movement," says Gabet.

The first room is dedicated to Louboutin's early years, showcasing around 60 shoes created before he launched his eponymous brand in 1991 and up until the early 2000s, along with sketches and mood boards. The room is surrounded by stained-glass panels produced by master glassmakers Maison du Vitrail; each one reveals details of people, places and moments that have fired Louboutin's imagination, from feathers at the Folies Bergère cabaret to Marlene Dietrich's top hat. "They were designed by Christian himself. He loved the idea of expressing himself in another field than shoes. It's his own homage to the world of craftsmanship," says Gabet.

The Treasure Room, meanwhile, features Louboutin's most cherished

These pages, clockwise from below: Christian Louboutin at the age of 14 leaving middle school © Christian Louboutin. Maquereau shoe created in 1987, at the Tropical Aquarium of the Palais de la Porte Dorée (based on a visual archives from 1988) © Christian Louboutin; Degrastrass © Jean-Vincent Simonet





creations, including the 'Puebla' shoe, inspired by the Native American Kachina dolls the designer has been collecting for more than 25 years. In the Bhutanese Theatre, burlesque dancer Dita Von Teese performs as a hologram on a hand-carved and painted stage made in Bhutan, while another room features nine female sculptures, crafted in leather and matched to the nine skin tones of Louboutin's inclusive Nudes collection.

The exhibition focuses on Louboutin's rich creative universe, but it is impossible to ignore his impact on popular culture. His trademark scarlet soles have become both celebrity staple and cultural touchstone, frequently namechecked in films and music – Jennifer Lopez even released a single called *Louboutins* in 2009. As such, one room is dedicated to shoes worn on the red carpet and in performances by the likes of Lopez, Beyoncé and Dolly Parton.

Since his teenage years spent hanging out at the legendary Le Palace nightclub – Paris's answer to Studio 54 – Louboutin has taken cues from pop culture, too. "It's fascinating to see that this young guy became a reference for all the musicians and actors he loved as a kid, and also for the new generation. So you have a very strong, deep, intimate and mutual relationship

between Christian and pop culture, because he was both nurtured by it, and he also nurtured it," says Gabet.

As the director of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, and co-curator of the museum's record-breaking Christian Dior retrospective in 2017, Gabet is no stranger to organising blockbuster exhibitions. "When you work on a historical [show] a lot of people can intervene, but not the person who founded the house," he says. "The House of Louboutin belongs to Christian, so you don't need to check anything with a public relations officer – he's his own boss. It makes a big difference because he is very risky and audacious."

On show until July 26, Mr Louboutin's latest creation is destined to be as wildly popular as his shoes. "Even if you don't know so much about fashion, when someone says they bought a pair of Louboutins, they don't need to mention detail – [you know] it is a pair of shoes," says Gabet. "You don't say that of many items in the fashion world."

L'Exhibition[niste] shows at Palais de la Porte Dorée, Paris, till July 26 lexposition.christianlouboutin.com

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