

SOLE INSPIRATION

Two decades into his singularly vivid career, footwear artiste Christian Louboutin finds muses everywhere from French history to Hollywood

BY ELIO LANNACCI



Louboutin's Engin Spikes 120 (left) and limited-edition peep toe pumps inspired by Marie Antoinette (above).

It must have been fate that led a teenaged Christian Louboutin into Paris' famed music hall, the Folies Bergère. Expelled from school in 1980 at the age of 16, the celebrated shoe designer's first job was working as a behind-the-footlights theatrical apprentice on the same stage where Josephine Baker banana-danced. Supporting troops of showgirls during various productions, Louboutin quickly became enthralled with everything from wardrobe to set design. It didn't take long for him to start sketching what he saw night after night: women kicking up their legs and stomping their feet.

These early drawings are now considered a critical part of the Louboutin brand's DNA and a catalyst for the success of the multi-million dollar luxury shoe company best known for its fire-red soles. Recently celebrating his 20th anniversary, Louboutin, age 49 and proprietor of 43 boutiques in 20 countries, continues to benefit from his obsession with jumping showgirls.

The lavish book *Christian Louboutin*, published last year by Rizzoli, chronicles his vast archive of designs and his longstanding love of female performers. Although Louboutin's definition of "showgirl" has changed significantly—his list of influencers

have expanded to include women who have made their marks in the worlds of art, film and music—his desire to pay tribute to his favorites has not.

One of his earlier designs, a flat shoe named "Barbare" from his 1995 Spring/Summer collection—made of black velvet and PVC leather—was inspired by one of the most vibrant figures in European history, Gabrielle d'Estrées. A mistress to King Henry IV of France, d'Estrées' controversial and dramatic place in the French court has been well documented. Her fierce demeanor and supposed erotic authority in the palace bedrooms became the basis of one of the Louvre's most sexually charged acquisitions, *Gabrielle d'Estrées et une de ses oeuvres*. To pay homage to d'Estrées, Louboutin had a replica of the painting embossed onto the tongue of his "Barbare" shoe.

But flats aren't really what Louboutin is beloved for. His heels are truly the basis of the frenzy he's ignited. The luxury shoe market, long cornered by such champion brands as Jimmy Choo, Manolo Blahnik and the house of Ferragamo, was shaken to the core when fashion trendsetters of the Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell variety and A-listers like Gwyneth Paltrow and

Madonna started swaying the public with their own Christian beliefs in the late 1990s. Ten years later, in 2008, the gold rush hit when Oprah introduced Louboutin to her eight-million viewers.

He continued to salute strong, successful women in his Fall/Winter 2004-2005 Pigalle collection, which he has called, "an evocation of [the film] *Irma la Douce*." The movie, released in 1963, is about a too-sexy-for-her-times, larger-than-life call girl played by Shirley MaLaine. Capturing the essence of MaLaine's raucous portrayal, Louboutin's Pigalle designs contain an elongated tip and a razor-sharp heel,

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Celebrities and their Louboutins (clockwise from upper left): Oprah Winfrey; Beyoncé; Dita Von Teese with Louboutin; Natalia Vodianova with the designer; Amber Heard working the red carpet.

which reaches five inches high to reflect Irma's tough, smart and spicy demeanour.

During his spring-summer collection that same year, Louboutin decided to honour another Hollywood legend. This time, he named a smoldering strawberry-red heel "Gilda" to commemorate Rita Hayworth's celebrated role in the 1946 film of the same name, where she played a double-crossing temptress with a shady past. Designed in red satin with a delicate velvet ankle clasp, the shoe is built to tightly hold a woman's foot into place in much the same way that the film's Parisian costumer—Jean Louis—shaped *Gilda's* waist-cinching dresses to Hayworth's body.

In addition to his fixations with film stars, Louboutin has drawn significant inspiration from pop stars. While designing boots for his Fall/Winter 2008-2009 collection, he was driven by the notion of iconic divas. "Tina Turner inspired many models for me," he said of his ankle-length boots, which are crafted with fringe and made of soft suede. "She never ceases to impress me with her showstopper quality." To complement the shorter length boot, Louboutin also created the knee-height "Dolly Forever," a thoroughly modern take on the footwear country star Dolly Parton wore during her 1974 promotional tours in support of two of her biggest hits, "Jolene" and "I Will Always Love You."

While conjuring his Fall/Winter 2008-2009 line, Louboutin also returned to both cinema and the French court to capture a distinct Marie Antoinette aesthetic. "I didn't want it to be the [18th-century French painter] Hubert Robert kind of Marie Antoinette nor the colourless evocation of the period," he said of his design scheme. "I had in mind the Sofia Coppola version with stronger, vibrant colours." The shoe, which Louboutin daringly called the "Marie Antoinette," mirrored Coppola's opulent vision in many ways. Replete with beads and a fine heel, each had a small bunch of ribbons sitting delicately above a porcelain cameo, giving the effect of a tiny firework erupting over each ankle.

Louboutin went in an entirely different direction for his Fall/Winter 2009-2010 collection. Instead of royals and monarchs, he tipped his hat to two of his most sensual muses: Bettie Page and Dita Von Teese. While Von Teese toured the world with her highly successful nu-burlesque shows and partnered with MAC cosmetics as its Viva Glam campaign spokesperson, Louboutin was busy sketching and taking notes. Also referencing photos of '50s pinup Bettie Page, he turned out an exquisite collection called Lady Page that seemed to peek inside Von Teese's and Page's lingerie drawer, using fabrics reminiscent of animal-print undies, vintage negligees, fishnet stockings and satin teddies.

According to a recent profile in *The New Yorker*, there is a reason why he feels so connected to anything that titillates. "The core of my work," he said, "is dedicated not to

pleasing women but to pleasing men. Men are like bulls — they cannot resist the red sole."

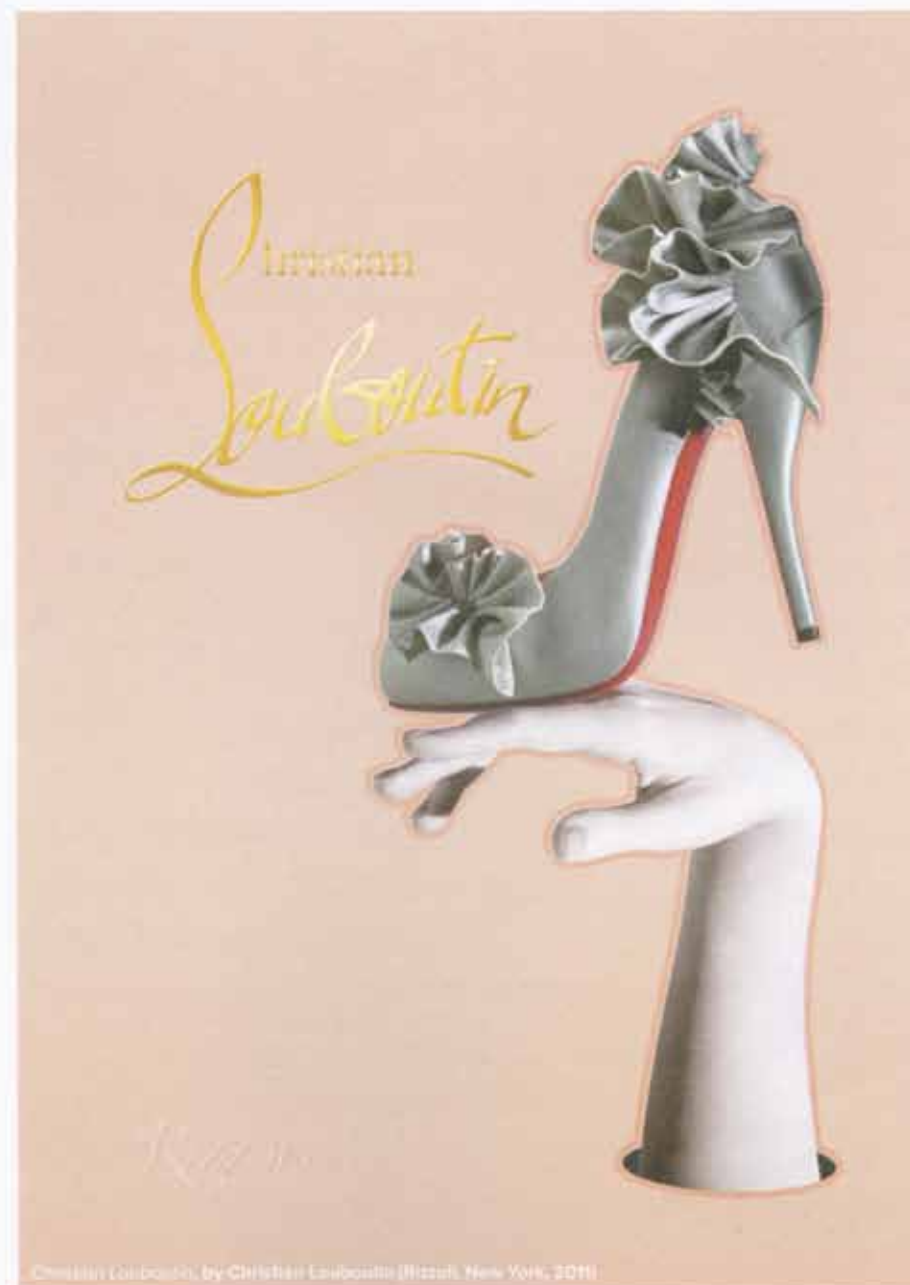
Apparently, neither can a competitive design house. Recently Louboutin filed a lawsuit against Yves Saint Laurent over its creation of a shoe with red soles, a signature that has, thus far, been widely perceived as exclusively his. He first turned soles red in 1993, during his third year in business. As legend has it, Louboutin was terribly displeased with how one of his design prototypes (for his now popular "Pansies" series) came back to him after assembly. Instead of rejecting the shoe, he looked around his atelier in hopes of finding a solution to his problem—he wanted a "finer" looking heel. To experiment, he borrowed his assistant's nail polish and began to paint the soles red, claiming it was a "revelation."

Louboutin's wrath was ignited by YSL's inclusion of a red suede shoe with a red sole in its Spring 2011 collection (which also included purple and green shoes with matching soles). After Louboutin filed suit,

YSL rationalized in court papers that, "Red outsoles are a commonly used ornamental design feature in footwear, dating as far back as the red shoes worn by King Louis XIV in the 1600s and the ruby red shoes that carried Dorothy home in *The Wizard of Oz*." (YSL also argued that it had been producing red-soled shoes as early as the 1970s). The battle between the iconic brands continues, with Louboutin countering, in an interview with the French newspaper *Libération* earlier this year, that his is "a red in a specific context [in the way that], there is Ferrari red [and] Hermès orange. Even in the food industry, Cadbury recently won a lawsuit against Nestlé for using purple packaging. All this proves that the colours play a part in a brand's identity. I'm not saying that red usually belongs to me—I repeat that this is about a precise red, used in a precise location." The ironic twist is that Louboutin agreed to a rare collaboration in 2002, designing a shoe for the finale of Saint Laurent's farewell couture show.

Aside from Saint Laurent, Louboutin's most talked-about collaborator has been acclaimed director David Lynch. Known for his groundbreaking TV series *Twin Peaks* as well as surrealistic films ranging from 1990's *Wild at Heart* to 2006's *Inland Empire*, Lynch was commissioned by Louboutin to photograph his shoes for an art exhibit (the show has, to date, traveled from Paris to London). Evoking the nouveau noir style of Lynch's most popular film, 1986's *Blue Velvet*—specifically the movie's main character, Dorothy Vallens, played by Isabella Rossellini—the group of photos frame Louboutin's shoes in a nightmare-ish narrative.

Never one to shy away from unconventional approaches, Louboutin's history in the fashion business has been all about freeing himself from the flock, not flying with it. And, in many ways, he treats his shoes as mini-stages. Judging by the joy and drama he has incited thus far, there's no predicting what kind of show he will put on next; but it is sure to be dazzling. /S



Christian Louboutin, by Christian Louboutin (Rizzoli, New York, 2011)

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Christian Louboutin footwear is available in Canada at Holt Renfrew and The Room at The Bay.