

[Dr. Valerie Steele] Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of the Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City. Welcome to our Fashion Culture podcast series featuring lectures and conversations about fashion. If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag #FashionCulture.

[Steele] You know we often say, this person needs no introduction. But in the case of Christian Louboutin he really does need no introduction. This is the man who makes the most seductive beautiful red sole shoes that we all love so much. So I'm going to start with a question, how did and when did you first realize that shoes were important to you? That you maybe wanted to do shoe design.

[Christian Louboutin] I was pretty young. I would say. Well, that's different. I started to draw shoes when I was around 12.

[Steele] Okay.

[Louboutin] 12, 13, 14 etcetera. But at that time it was a bit of an almost like a nervous tick I would say something like that. I liked it. I was always producing shoes in profile. But I never thought that it was actually a job or work and so I just liked to draw shoes. But I never connected it. It took me a long time to connect that actually what I was doing was probably work and but to answer your question I started to design shoes but just thinking that I liked to draw shoes when I was twelve, thirteen.

[Steele] And at what point then in your trajectory did you start to think maybe I can learn how to do this as a career?

[Louboutin] So what exactly happened is that I had seen. So I was born and raised in Paris and I used to go to this museum which used to be called the Museum of African and Oceanic Arts that you now we discussed before. And so at the entry of the museum, there was a sketch a little bit like that. I mean not like this one. A sketch and it was cross like that in red and so it was like a shoe of women but it was a spiky type of stiletto so basically a pump from the 50s. But it was just a signality and it was basically saying it's forbidden to wear high heels and the reason is because the museum had beautiful floors, mosaic floors and then precious wood floors. It still has and so in the 50s that type of shoe was having a tip in metal and thin hidden metal so it would break the floors so it had been in the 50s forbidden to wear that type of shoes.

[Steele] I remember seeing that kind of sign around.

[Louboutin] So by being born in the mid-60s, I had no idea even about that shoe. I mean that type of shoe. So I was looking at that drawing and thinking it's funny it's a woman shoe but it's not existing and on the top of that it's forbidden, God knows why, but it's basically

really that first drawing which made me understand that most things are drawn first and everything you see at one point has been drawn.

So it could have been forbidden to I don't know cars and I may have designed cars so the first thing was really to reproduce that drawing and I was really questioning myself about that drawing but it made me understand that literally everything starts by a sketch. And any environment, if you look around you, everything has been thought by someone, has been designed, and has been processed. And so that's what exactly happened to me. I started to reproduce that shoe doing the difference in the shoe but it was always in profile with the heel and I was changing this tiny bit, the colors, etcetera. But it was very much that and so that was when I was doing that I was really not thinking more than you know I was bored in school to be perfectly honest so I liked to draw my shoes, do different colors, etcetera, and to stop being bored.

So because of that drawing and because of all my drawings that I was doing at school, I started to be considered a bit like a cuckoo type of child. Always doing like those sketches and because of that I started to have a lot of some people from the school would give me information about schools. So very quickly I ended up being an expert in shoes not even being so obsessed by that, I was obsessed by drawing not obsessed by shoes really at the very beginning.

But then when I got all this information about shoes I started to really love shoes even more and more. And one day someone I don't remember who actually I should find the person but I don't know who it was. Someone gave me a book and say you know you who like shoes I have this for you I brought this back from Bordeaux and the book was a gold cover and it was written Roger Vivier was the name of an exhibition of this person that I have never heard of called Roger Vivier and it was a retrospective of his work in Bordeaux which is south of France. And I looked and suddenly I thought oh my God it's actually great to do shoes and you can definitely go all the way and finish them and it's a beautiful job. So it's because also of that book that I thought ok I've been drawing, thinking I could do better, and it exists and it's actually it could be a job.

So from lying at school I have to tell you one other thing. When you're a kid, people, adult, you know grown-up, always asking so when you're older what do you want to do, what are you going to do, and sometimes it's okay and sometimes it's pretty traumatizing for kids because you're like okay I don't know what I want to do later I just want to have fun right so why do I have to think of all these things.

And so my best friend from school was absolutely traumatized because she just didn't know what she wanted to do and she was like what can I say. I said just say you want to be you know a pilot. She said are you crazy, a pilot, why a pilot? I said I don't know and you know the

plane, it's very nice. I say veterinarian you know doctor for animals. She says I hate animals. I say I don't know, say something. But I realized that it was complicated for some people and me I was actually lying because when people were asking me that I was always saying I want to do shoes. So people would say okay. I think okay.

So this sort of on your slides started to become a reality thanks to that book. So thanks to this person I would say the work of that person. And then so when I turned probably 16 to 17, I was really dedicated to designing shoes. But my dedication to shoes was going in a very specific direction. I wanted to design shoes for showgirls. So it had nothing to do with fashion. My really first focus was designing shoes for girls in music hall.

[Steele] And you got to know some of these women and saw what kind of shoes they wore and you told me once some funny story about the kind of things they would put in the shoes to make them more comfortable.

[Louboutin] Yes, yeah yeah. So I took my first job I would say was I was 17 and I started to work for Folies Bergères. So I was an intern for less than a year at the Folies Bergères and so I've never designed shoes at the Folies Bergères because it's a complicated thing to do shoes. You know the process is long. It's very expensive, etcetera. You have a lot of elements that you can add. Let's say if you want to do a dress with very little you can do a dress. If you really want to do a shoe which works which is not dangerous you have to have a lot of elements which was very costly. So, for this reason, I didn't do any shoes for the Folies Bergères but I've learned a lot about shoes, about the balance, the importance of the balance, the arch, reinforcement, a lot of technical things thanks to these girls because for a showgirl first the musical in Paris so I was at the Folies Bergères.

So you have this staircase going down and we have a very important expression in French. Any French person if you say that would tell you the name of the person who said it. And so in French, it's les bien je suis descendu which means, did I go down correctly? So it's in reference to stairs. So basically a very important element for showgirls in their training every day is to go down the stairs because in real life if you go downstairs, you look at your feet and you look at the stairs and you look at where you put your feet. In the dream world of the Folies Bergères music hall, you look in front of you, you smile, and you don't see your feet. So you basically learn to [Louboutin hits foot on the ground] to bang the back of your foot to see exactly where is the arch of the stair and so for a showgirl to be able to go down the stairs properly is really an achievement. So I don't remember what I'm talking about.

[Laughter from the audience]

[Steele] It's one of the ways in which you learned about how you can move in shoes.

[Louboutin] So all these things so all this to say that showgirls have been really a very important experience for me for my work because they know what they're talking about when they're talking about shoes when they're talking about men too, they know. But let's say to go back to shoes, they know what they're talking about when they're talking about shoes.

[Steele] And underneath the ball of the foot, there's a lot of pressure if you're wearing high heels and performing on stage. So what did they use to cushion that?

[Louboutin] Okay she wants to put in the direction of something I've been telling her yes.

[Steele] It's just such a cool story.

[Louboutin] So as an intern I was doing everything apart from designing shoes which I never did at the time. I was doing everything and so helping people, etcetera. And I was sent also to buy the food, the drinks. And so I would buy a huge amount of veal carpaccio and every day I had to buy veal carpaccio and they were always making jokes saying it needs to be cachette. It needs to be cachette which means with no blood.

And so one day I said why does everybody eat veal carpaccio all the time here. And they say you're so stupid, we're not eating them. I said what do you mean by that. They said it's to put in the shoes and so basically the veal carpaccio is making a cushion that's why it needed to be cachette with no blood of course. So what they were doing they were cutting a piece of the veal carpaccio and putting it in that part here. So when the pressure of the weight of the person goes on that low part, there was a type of natural cushion but of course, it had to be replaced every day because it was not, it was healthy I guess, but it was not the smell was a bit so so.

[Steele] Well it was not a high tech method. [Laughter] When and how did you start your own label?

[Louboutin] I started at the end very end of 1991 and I started so I have been working for different people. I mean I worked for the Folies Bergères but that was like few months and then after I started to work for different companies one being Charles Jourdan when I was 18 for a year. So I had to move to the south of France and then I worked for different companies in Italy most of the time and then for French companies. I worked for Maud Frizon, Chanel, Saint Laurent, etcetera.

I worked for many many many companies and then in 1988 Roger

Vivier who was alive at the time. So Monsieur Roger Vivier, not the brand right the man. Roger asked me to be his assistant for the exhibition that he had at the museum de la mode in Paris. It was his retrospective and he was 80 years old. So I was very very happy and very thrilled because he was a man why I had really wanted to design shoes. So I said yes yes yes yes yes and I worked for a year and had the best fun. He was a charming charming adorable person and extremely talented and so sweet. Anyway, so I worked with him and then when the exhibition stopped I just thought I can't work for anybody now. I'm not going to find someone so inspiring and working for him I never, again, I never designed any shoes.

I didn't design shoes for Folies Bergères. I didn't design shoes for Roger Vivier. I just was his assistant, secretary, etcetera, doing everything. But not designing. It was really about his work. But for me being early twenties looking at someone and looking at the work of that person was so fantastic. I was perfectly happy like that so anyway when the exhibition stopped, I just couldn't imagine myself working for anybody else. So I stopped so that was 1989.

And then I started to do landscaping because I always not always but let's say a little bit after 16 or 17 I was interested in garden and so I started to do landscaping. So landscape architect and but for some reason it's a fantastic work and but you have to be patient. You know you put something this and this is a tree and you know before it goes to that ceiling it's going to take you 20 years and so when you're 25 or something it grow, grow. grow. What is happening to you. So I was too impatient to enjoy it completely and so I was missing actually my really my heart which was really designing shoes. But I just didn't want to work for anybody.

And so totally by accident what happened is that I always loved objects. I was collecting object and so I was going into that gallery where was this antique dealer doing specialty of Swedish 1910 1920 furniture called Eric Philip. And I was trying to buy a lamp [Unknown designer] which is a French designer and he wouldn't sell it to me. So I had to go back and forth, back and forth, to try to buy that lamp. So he was so fed up to have me there. So one day he says what about your shoes. I said I stopped. He said why. So I explained to him and he says but why don't you start your own thing. I said, well yeah, I mean not completely excited because I probably was afraid. I was afraid I guess.

But he did everything to get rid of me so he said you know at the end of the gallery there is a photo gallery. They sell it. Why don't you do a shop? And I thought yeah that's not such a bad idea and then two or three days after I was having dinner with my two best friends and I spoke about that anecdote and they say yeah. Let's do it together. So the three of us started the company. But I started the company with one shop. And to me, as you are student from what I understand, that's

an important thing for me which I would have never started to show my work let's say through in a suitcase and open it and people say I like, I don't like this, etcetera, etcetera.

To me, it was important to start with the shoe and also the box in a way. You know I always loved fine jewelry and I always find quite fascinating when you for instance when you offer jewelry, the moment when you open the box. There is this type of unveiling which I always loved so to me the box of the shoe being the store speaks also of your work. So it's easier in a way to show the environment where you showing what you do is actually having an impact. Always.

So to me, it was important to have this impactful thing. I was showing without having a shop immediately. I started the company with the shop. I didn't even have a fax, nothing. I didn't even know how it was working really. But I had the shop. I had a type of cash machine which was not working very well. But I started like that. But I could see people were looking at the shoes the first client, etcetera. But they also were looking at the environment of the shoe, the shop. I had designed the shop, which actually was the picture. I had painted the shop. I had designed the shop myself, etcetera. So I knew exactly what I wanted and it was making part of my work. So this environment was making part of my work.

And I remember the first buyers who came, they were not coming to see our collection. They were coming to see a world, a very little world. But a world already and it totally makes a difference because you already have a larger part of your identity which is shown to the client. But also to buyers. So they like it, great. They don't like it, whatever, you know. You already have your identity. You've been working about that and people do understand and in general respect that. So the first buyer who came they were like okay if we don't buy, we don't buy but that guy is existing already. So it makes you it puts you in a very very different perspective.

[Steele] And how did your work evolve over time and at what point and under what circumstances did you suddenly think of the red sole?

[Louboutin] So it's two questions.

[Steele] Two questions yes.

[Louboutin] Okay so what is the question?

[Steele] The first one, how did your work evolve over time? You had your shop and you started creating and presenting it.

[Louboutin] So how did it evolve?

[Steele] Did they used to have a silhouette which was sort of your

look? Your high heels that you sort of tended to stay with?

[Louboutin] I would say that if I sort of look in a way. Let's say it was decades. I started with very very dressy shoes, very very dressy shoes and I went to very very bare shoes very nude shoes in a way. I would say that I started to dress the foot and I went in the direction of undressing the foot so that's being I would say is a big difference. It's a big evolution.

[Steele] Yes, that's fascinating. And at what point under what circumstances did you suddenly have this red sole idea?

[Louboutin] So I started in 91 the end of 91 and so I sketch everything and so I never did I never learned at school like let's say fashion or fashion design nothing like that. I guess that because of that I never had a type of strict way of designing. I never had a mood board or whatever and thinking okay the connection needs to be, it's about this, it's about that. I never was really that structured. What I was doing is sketching and sometimes I was having things in mind that I started you know I was influenced by things and I started to sketch. What happened with the red sole is that I had in mind actually an American artist but a larger scope of it which was pop art in general. So pop art and because of pop art was also Andy Warhol.

I was thinking of Andy Warhol so I started to draw shoes and the shoes were really in pop colors and only pop colors and I was doing the same shoe with on sketching it with repetition of different colors a bit like Andy Warhol, etcetera. But what I do when I sketch so I was thinking of Warhol. I have a very specific painting in mind which is called I think Flowers and but when I sketch I can be influenced by things but I never have documents next to me. So when I was sketching thinking of Andy Warhol pop art, flowers, etcetera. I did a shoe which is to sketch which was there called pensée. I called the shoe pensée.

To me it was exactly it was in reference to the color palette of Andy Warhol, the pop art in general and also a flower. So I reproduce. I draw the shoe and when the shoe arrived and when I did the fittings etcetera I was happy of the shoe existing. Then I looked at the painting and the interesting thing is that I was really having in mind so I drew that shoe which is a mary jane, pointy mary jane with the big strap and the flower. And the flower has three petals and it's outlined in a different color and the button, the middle, is outlined the same color of the outline. So in my drawing, it was exactly like that and it was full of colors.

So when I try the shoe on, it looked good actually. I mean the fitting was good so I was happy. I had the drawing and then I had the real shoe and looking at back and forth there was something more powerful in the drawing I would say. And I would but what is it and I couldn't really figure it out till the moment where I took the shoe. So all the

shoes were really with a lot of colors and so I turned the shoe to profile this shoe. So profile it looked like my drawing and I was happy, front it looked like my drawing I was happy. But from the back, you just had the heel and then her sole and the sole was black. And then suddenly there was a lot of black and there was no black in my drawing. I thought if there was a way to erase this I would see if I would be happy.

And so Sarah's girl was trying on the shoes had finished, we had finished the fitting. So she was painting her nails with a nail polish and so I said give me your nail polish I want to try something. And I remember she had like two nails done. She was like okay let me wait let me finish [Laughter] I said please give me your nail polish. So we had a bit of a fight. I got the nail polish. You know in the countryside in the factory in Italy and then I polish very quickly the sole and then suddenly it was exactly like my drawing.

So I thought okay you know it pops up the same way and I always try to be as possible close from my primary drawing. I thought okay that looks very nice, exactly like my drawing so I'm going to keep it like that. Then as it was a winter season I thought okay I'm going to do the sole's in colors. As it's winter it should be green Christmas and then I thought for some reason red looks better. And also yeah red looks better. But also in the early 90s, most women in France were dressed in black. And you could always hear so I was in the shop selling I could always hear I only wear black. I don't do colors. I hate colors. Or I don't like colors depending on the character. But I don't do colors so it was quite interesting for me to see the relationship with colors.

And so I remember going to that woman saying you say you don't like color but you have red. And she's says oh but it's different. It's red. I said red is a color. She said yes but it's different. Red is a color but it's not a color. You see we have red right. So I thought really if people even for people who don't like color red is another type of category in a way. So I thought if it has to be a color, it should definitely be red and then I really liked red with everything. So I started with that color thinking I may change color but then it became a really a sign of recognition of mine and then it became a trademark. And I thought okay it's no longer in my hands anymore. But I don't regret it.

[Steele] No no, it's so fabulous. Well I mean in the whole history of color actually the three colors that were first used by Neanderthals were red, black, and white. Centuries millennia before blue or green or any other colors came in. Yeah, reds a special color.

[Louboutin] It is a special color. But there is also this other thing it was very interesting so for the first two years I was selling in my first store in Paris and it was always very interesting to see the

relationship with nudity that women have with shoes. So, for instance, I always love very very low cleavage, decollete of the shoe which is a technical word.

[Steele] Toe cleavage.

[Louboutin] So you see a little bit of the cracks and so early 90s for some reason a lot of people didn't like that and would tell me there is something. I feel almost naked and then the person would buy a sandal and I say sorry [Laughter] what is the difference? You have all the feet sticking out, don't you feel more naked? And people would always say no and so it has to see with suggestion. If you are showing a little bit, there is something the suggestion is literally more powerful than showing everything. So it's often the case you know it's almost a difference between eroticism which is a suggestion and pornography. So I think that there is the same type of relationship you show less you suggest more you show everything people get bored.

[Steele] It's true a lot of experts in sexuality from Casanova to Freud have talked about the attraction of concealment. That a completely naked foot or a foot in flip-flop is just naked but if you're just showing a little bit, the toe cleavage or the back of the heel, it becomes more like a striptease. More like a play of seeing a little bit.

[Louboutin] Exactly. It helps, it provokes, and it pushes the imagination of people looking at it. So it's a power of suggestion.

[Steele] Now we have some questions here and we only have a few more minutes but let's see. What advice would you give a young shoe designer?

[Louboutin] To a young shoe designer. You know I would probably say that. What advice should I give to a young shoe designer - to really I mean I think that but it's not only about shoes. It's in general, is really you have to work. You know what I started to say, everybody's influenced. Everybody has influences, you go to a movie, you go to a theater you go to a play, you go to see an exhibition, you are going to be influenced, the music.

And the only way to show who you are is actually, a lot of people are going to have the same influence, are going to see the same show, are going to see Beyoncé shaking it, etcetera.

And so all of this is becoming a popular culture, a different role. But the way to show who you are which is important if you do fashion, if you create things, is to express yourself and to show who you are, what you like, what you are about. I would say is to for instance not have document. I started to speak about that. Let's say you see for instance when I was thinking of that flower shoe pensée. I drew it and

then when I looked at the painting the flower my drawing has three petals and it's outlined in different colors. When I looked at the real painting of Andy Warhol, the petals are four, there is no outline. It's completely, it has nothing in common but still, I was fully inspired by it and thinking to respect it but the fact you not to have any document it obliges you to think your way and it goes through your own filter of your own memory. You are going to retranscribe something your way.

If you have the document and you look at the document you are going to reproduce something which is not yours and which hasn't didn't have the time to go through your memory, through who you are, what you like it, etcetera, so you are going to basically do what I would call a copy and everybody will come out literally with the same thing. Why is because it hasn't penetrated yourself and coming back out with your hands with something else which is talking about you. So I would say that probably yeah that's what I would say as advice.

[Steele] I've never heard anyone say that. That's a very very cool description of the creative process.

[Louboutin] You can be influenced by anything. It's totally legitimate but don't systematically have a document and which is you know inspirational document. You should print it in your memory and then come out with what you remember because that's going to be the essence of what you've been seeing in that inspirational object, song, whatever you're thinking.

[Steele] Fascinating. That is a very unique and important piece of advice.

[Louboutin] You think it's good advice?

[Steele] I think it's really really interesting. I've never heard anyone say that. [Applause] That is so cool. Time for another couple. This feeds into the other one. What interests you right now and how is it feeding into your work? Are there any certain things I mean like we were talking before you travel a lot. Is that something that feeds into your work or is there something else that does?

[Louboutin] What everything is interesting in a way. Everything is interesting but I would say that there is one thing when I'm very very sensitive always was but more more it goes more I keep it in an important way is artisanship. And the reason is that I've always traveled always loved objects always bought objects and a lot of objects that I've been collecting for years that I haven't seen for years have been staying in my memory and has been written down. But that was a way that had been quite inspired for a long time.

Now I would add that it's important. The world has changed and a lot

of things get lost and if you see I have nothing against globalization. I mean it is what it is so it's not you know it's not to this. That's not what I want to discuss but in a way, it is important to keep some element of different cultures. Some and the privilege of traveling and seeing different cultures, different architectures, different way of living, whatever you know. There is so much diversity and that a lot of things get lost and that makes me very sad. A lot of technique, a lot of like weaving techniques, you know the e-cat, the way it was done, it doesn't exist anymore in some countries. A lot of technical artists things which are providing your terracotta, providing your jewelry, beautiful artisanship is disappearing and so I'm very sensitive to that topic and I actually object is an inspirational thing.

But also to work also with artisans because let's say I after 28 years now I have in a way a privilege to be able to do things, to do shoes which are going to be done by thousands and thousands and thousands of players and some shoes which are going to request a very specific type of technique and there will be few pairs. But I can still mix that through stores, events, etcetera. I can have a part of my work which is really I wouldn't say industrial but a bigger volume and a part of my work which is smaller volume.

But it reminds us to work with people who would lose those qualities and these quality needs to be you know given back to different generation, etcetera. But also even for me, it's almost like a laboratory. Sometimes you're doing something like you cannot reproduce. I do some things that I cannot reproduce more than two, three, four pairs or whatever. I'm still very happy of that. I would do that instead of thinking okay I can do a thousand pairs so let's forget about it and I will never also reproduce let's say if I've been working with artisans doing really beautiful carving I'm not going to say okay you know do me one carving and then I will cut it and do it and then I will do laser it and give it to a bigger industry.

I definitely don't do that. I will be inspired by that thing but I would do something else. So it's a laboratory artisanship also people who know how to do things with their hands, etcetera. It's an important thing but also it's to me it's laboratory which reminds me to drift again and to also go to a second part or to another part of my collections.

[Steele] That's very beautiful. Thank you very much.

[Louboutin] Welcome.

[Steele] Please join me in thanking Christian Louboutin.

[Applause]

[Steele] That was really lovely. Thank you.