



With a career spanning nearly 50 years, Manolo Blahnik is one of the world's most influential footwear designers. Born in the Canary Islands to a Czech father and a Spanish mother he grew up studying politics and law but gravitated towards the subjects that were to become lifelong passions – literature and art – while a student in the 1960s. In 1965 Blahnik moved to Paris where he enrolled in classes while working at an antique decorating store. In 1969 he settled in London, taking up a position writing and shooting for *L'Uomo Vogue*. In 1971 he met Diana Vreeland, an event that proved a crucial turning point. After looking at some of his sketches, the famed editor-in-chief for *American Vogue* urged him to make his own accessories and to concentrate his talents on footwear in particular.

His subsequent rise was meteoric. In 1971 he had his first runway collaboration with designer Ossie Clark in London. In 1974 he became the second man ever to be featured on the cover of *British Vogue*, and in 1977 he created his first American collection. A consummate craftsman, Blahnik still oversees production in Milan in order to ensure that his vision is brought to life. He hand carves each last personally. No shoe leaves the factory before he has rigorously checked it over. His shoes are instantly recognisable and, with boutiques now located throughout the world, they have become synonymous with his idiosyncratic blend of style, workmanship and luxury.

He was honoured in 2007 with the title Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his service to the British fashion industry.

THE WALLACE COLLECTION



Manolo Blahnik

An Enquiring Mind: Manolo Blahnik at The Wallace Collection

10 June – 1 September

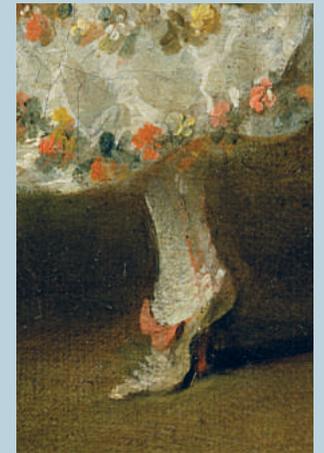
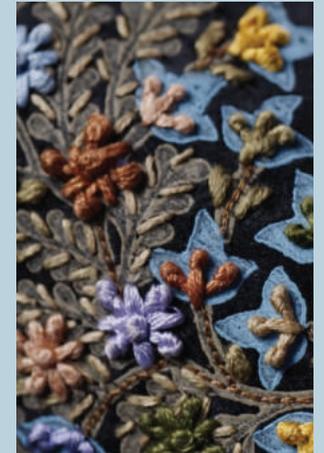


An intimate treasure house of artistic excellence spanning over 800 years, the Wallace Collection has long been a source of creative inspiration to Manolo Blahnik. He has established himself as one of the world's foremost shoe designers thanks to his constant intellectual search for the new and the beautiful in art and life, literature and film, and in the past and the present. With an *artiste's* eye for visual detail, he has drawn inspiration over the years from the Wallace Collection's paintings, furniture, porcelain, sculpture and works of art. His shoes evoke a world of luxury and beauty, and echo the qualities of skill and creativity found in the art.

With their displays of unrivalled eighteenth-century collections, the galleries form a sympathetic backdrop for a carefully curated selection of Blahnik's shoes. Each gallery has been assigned a theme that finds its expression in the shoes, leading to a dialogue between the old and the new, the art and the craft, the real and the fantasy. Above all, the presence of the shoes underlines the importance of fashion in the creation and understanding of eighteenth-century art, and helps us edge a little closer to understanding the thrill and novelty these works once possessed for their owners and still inspire in us today.

Just as the collectors of the works of art in the Wallace Collection sought to acquire the most beautiful, the most captivating and the most precious, Blahnik also seeks to produce shoes of exquisite quality and elegance. The presence of his works in the galleries underlines the artistry and craftsmanship behind what he does: orchestrating a team of skilled artisans to turn his initial sketches into three-dimensional objects in luxurious materials, constantly supervised by the designer himself. The same principle permeates the furniture, porcelain, clocks and gold boxes with which the shoes are surrounded. Quality and excellence are key to Blahnik's ethos.

Blahnik has worked with the curators to select masterpieces from his archive which help lead the visitor on an inspiring journey of enquiry around the Wallace Collection's great works. We learn about the rise of the public spectacle in eighteenth-century France, the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the performing arts; we admire the collecting passions of neoclassical connoisseurs and the revival fashions of Antiquity; and we experience the erotic power of Boucher and Fragonard.



Manolo Blahnik at the Wallace Collection



1 From sketches to shoes

Manolo Blahnik's painstaking process begins with drawing. His sketches translate his vision into two-dimensional reality, referencing his many sources of inspiration. Showcasing process, rigour and creativity, this display distills the many facets that delight Blahnik's enquiring mind. In the hall the sumptuous *Parissa* is juxtaposed with the Wallace Collection's historic balustrade and ruby-carpeted staircase; on the landing, the delicate *Trellis* sits amidst the lush Boucher scenes, evoking the artist's palette and his affection for nature.



2 The Small Drawing Room: *Commedia dell'Arte*

The Wallace Collection's exquisite *fêtes galantes* by Watteau, Lancret, and Pater speak to an eighteenth-century fascination for theatre and spectacle, one that finds a modern-day echo in Blahnik's creations. The light-hearted shoes presented here evoke - in texture, pattern, and colour - the bright costumes of the *commedia dell'Arte* and the contemporary passion for vibrant, multi-coloured porcelain.



3 Large Drawing Room: *Connoisseurs and Collectors*

The magnificent Boulle wardrobes that dominate the Large Drawing Room have a particular appeal to Blahnik. Along with the Dutch and Flemish paintings, porphyry vases and bronze sculpture presented here, they reference the collectors of the eighteenth century and their longing for the classical, noble ideals of Antiquity. The textures, colours and brilliance of the works of art are picked up in the materials of the shoes selected for display.



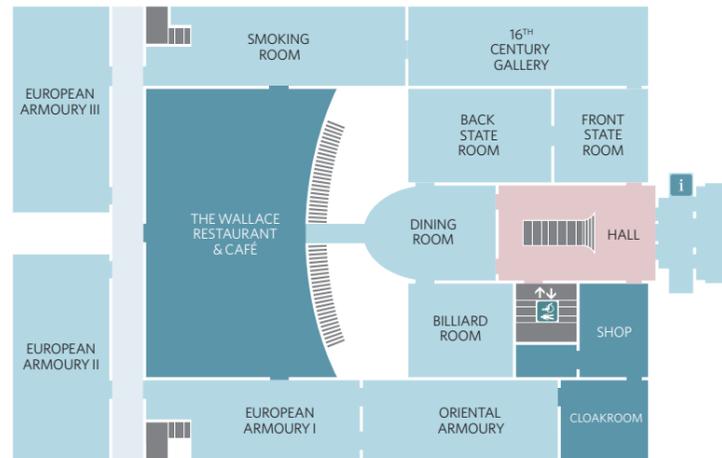
4 Oval Drawing Room: *Love and Passion*

Home to two icons of romantic painting - Fragonard's *Swing* and Boucher's *Mme de Pompadour* - the Oval Drawing Room makes a perfect venue for a selection of the candy-coloured shoes designed by Blahnik for Sofia Coppola's award-winning film, *Marie Antoinette*. Pompadour's silk dress, Venus's pink flesh and the artless slipper flying through the air in Fragonard's masterpiece evoke the celebrated passions of eighteenth-century Paris.



10 East Drawing Room: *High Baroque*

With its sumptuous array of gesturally painted oil sketches by Rubens, the East Drawing Room offers an aesthetic homage to the high baroque. The drama and excitement of this style is found in the glistening black and gold shoes, which complement the grandeur of the Boulle furniture on display in the room.



5 Study: *Avant-garde fashion*

In the late eighteenth century, two aesthetic influences pushed fashion to bold new heights: the architectural shapes and motifs of neoclassicism embodied in Riesener's *secrétaire* and the extravagant showmanship of the so-called *style à l'espagnole* - Spanish style - with its contrasting colours, bows, ruffs, and costume jewellery, seen in Vigée Le Brun's *Mme Perregaux*. Against a display of works considered cutting edge in their time, the Study displays some of Blahnik's most daring creations.



7 Great Gallery: *Masterpieces*

Against the colour, texture, and drama of some of the greatest paintings of Western art - Velázquez's *Lady with a Fan*, Rubens's *Rainbow Landscape*, Hals's *Laughing Cavalier* - sit some of Blahnik's most iconic productions. Ranging from early successes to recent creations, the shoes shown here have all been selected personally by the master of fashion in his own carefully-curated group of masterpieces, the works that most directly reflect the essence of his taste and artistry.



8 West Room: *A British interpretation*

The West Room highlights portraits by British masters such as Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Landseer - and pastimes such as outdoor sports, country walks and the hunt. Combined, these works - and the shoes against which they are juxtaposed - speak to a love of Britain at its most natural and beautiful.



f Boudoir: *A Return to Simplicity*

In a pivotal moment of *Il Gattopardo*, one of Blahnik's favourite novels, the hero stares at a moral painting by Greuze and contemplates the passing of an era. The Wallace Collection's Boudoir, home to some of Greuze's most evocative and emotional genre scenes, offers a fitting backdrop for a subdued and linear display of stilettos in black and shades of grey.



6 Boudoir Cabinet: *Opulence*

The refined and intimate Boudoir Cabinet, with its exquisitely detailed, diamond-mounted gold boxes and its delicately painted miniatures, offers a fitting home for Blahnik's carefully worked, jewel-encrusted shoes. Both boxes and shoes display a refined taste and an implicit understanding of how to create sparkle and elegance with precious stones.