

Manolo Blahnik - THE Book!

By Briar Jensen

Manolo Blahnik, creator of the "sexiest shoes in the world", is a cultural polymath according to author Colin McDowell, who says the breadth of his cultural interests sets him apart from many current designers.

McDowell describes his book on Blahnik as, "less a conventional biography than an examination of the roots and inspirations of a man who has long been acknowledged as foremost in his field."

The main focus is the years spent "forging the fashion personality" that is the basis of Blahnik's world profile.

The chapters loosely follow the journey of Blahnik from his childhood in the Canary Isles through to his current home in Bath and position as the world's leading (and most expensive) footwear designer. Thoughtfully, an entire chapter is devoted to his drawings and another to photographs of his shoes by Michael Roberts.

Like many great shoe designers, Blahnik started his career in a different direction.

His initial interests were in art and theatre design and his first appearances in Vogue were as a photographer. According to McDowell, it was some time before he found a field that would "accommodate his skills, aspirations, ambitions and, above all, his temperament."

A perfectionist, Blahnik designs his collections entirely on his own. "I don't trust anybody," he says. He does everything from the first drawings - which are works of art in their own right - to carving the initial lasts and heels as well as controlling the production.

"He's not just a stylist. He's also a technician and that's why he is such a success," says one factory colleague. High praise for someone who never undertook formal training in the art of shoemaking.

Blahnik is entirely self taught.

McDowell describes Blahnik as, "... a craftsman, at his happiest when working in his factories alongside his band of skilled artisans." This is evident from the images of him sketching at home and working in the factory. In contrast to those showing him poised and preened to perfection, it is in these photos that he looks most natural. Totally absorbed, yet relaxed, supremely confident but without pretence - an artist at ease.

The book contains many striking photos, not only of Blahnik's shoes, but of the



man himself, as well as images from his personal scrapbooks. Even the endpapers feature photos of the sample-laden museum shelves in his home.



While McDowell does an excellent job of capturing the spirit of the man, I would have liked to see more exploration of the nature of his shoes, because despite being one of the most copied designers in the world, Blahnik's shoes are not 'fashion' in the transitory sense. The layout of the book is excellent, the text mostly confined to the bottom half of



the page, the top half containing smaller photos or key passages in enlarged font. This enables

those with only a short time to browse through the book to come away with the essence of its content, making it an

excellent coffee table or reception hall book.

Manolo Blahnik by Colin McDowell - Published by Cassell, distributed in Australia by Allen & Unwin, \$85 hardcover.

* Briar Jensen is a freelance journalist based in Sydney.

