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 styling 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 so he concentrated his talents on footwear in particular.

His subsequent rise was meteoric. In 1977 he had his first runway collaboration with designer John Galliano in London. In 1978 he became the second man ever to be featured on the cover of British Vogue, and in 1979 he opened his first American collection. A consummate craftsman, Blahnik still oversees production in Milan in order to ensure that his vision is brought to life. His shoes are instantly recognisable and, with boutiques now located throughout the world, they have become synonymous with his distinctive blend of style, workmanship and luxury.

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

An Enquiring Mind: Manolo Blahnik at The Wallace Collection
10 June - 1 September

[Image of shoes and fashion items]
An intimate treasure house of artistic excellence spanning over 400 years, the Wallace Collection has long been a source of creative inspiration to Maria Blavnik. 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 artist'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.

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, Blavnik 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, clock and gold boxes with which the shoes are surrounded. Quality and excellence are key to Blavnik's ethos.

Blavnik 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 spectacles in eighteenth-century France, the Commedia dell'Arte and the performing arts; we admire the collecting passions of neoclassical commissioners and the revival of Antiquity; and we experience the erotic power of Boucher and Fragonard.

The question ‘in what way should the visitor experience the Wallace Collection?’ leads the visitor to think about the eighteenth-century decorative arts, the relationship between Italy and France, and on the links between the arts of the Grand Tour and the Rococo. The visitor to the Wallace Collection must learn to love and to understand by combining the story of the art with the story of the artist. Blavnik's shoes are a celebration of the beauty and craftsmanship of the Wallace Collection's art, and they serve as a reminder of the enduring power of art to inspire and uplift.
Manolo Blahnik at the Wallace Collection

From sketches to shoes

Manolo Blahnik’s painstaking process begins with drawing. His sketches translate his vision into two-dimensional reality, harnessing his many sources of inspiration. Showcasing process, rigour and creativity, this display distills the many facets that delight Blahnik’s inquiring mind. In the hall the panoramic friezes is juxtaposed with the Wallace Collection’s historic balustrade and newly-carved staircase on the landing, the delicate Treills sits amidst the lush Bouchar scenes, evoking the artist’s palette and his affection for nature.

The Small Drawing Room: 
Commedia dell’Arte

The Wallace Collection’s exquisite fine palaces by Watteau, Lancret, and Pastel speak to an eighteenth-century fascination for theatre and spectacles, 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.

Large Drawing Room: 
Connoisseurs and Collectors

The magnificent Boisle wardrobes that dominate the Large Drawing Room have a particular appeal to Blahnik. Along with the Dutch and Flemish paintings, porphyry vases and bronze sculptures presented here, they reference the collectors of the eighteenth century and their longing for the classics, 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.

East Drawing Room: 
High Baroque

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

West Room: 
A British interpretation

The West Room highlights portraits by British masters such as Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Lawrence – 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.

Oval Drawing Room: 
Love and Passion

Home to two Icons of romantic painting – Fragonard’s Swing and Boucher’s Mme de Pompadour – this 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 endless slipper flying through the air in Fragonard’s masterpiece connotes the celebrated passions of eighteenth-century Paris.

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 Rossetti’s serene and the extravagant showmanship of the so-called Style à la frangaise – Spanish style – with its contrasting colour, bows, ruffs, and costume jewellery, seen in Vigée Le Brun’s L’Ingres Costume. Against a display of works considered cutting edge in their time, the Study displays some of Blahnik’s most daring creations.

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 – set 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.

Boudoir: 
A Return to Simplicity

In a pivotal moment of Il Carnevalo, one of Blahnik’s favourite novels, the hero strolls at a masque painting by Grosz and contemplates the passing of an era. The Wallace Collection’s Boudoir; home to some of Grosz’s most evocative and emotional genre scenes, offers a fitting backdrop for a subdued and linear display of allusions in black and shades of grey.

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.