

A Step Ahead

For the shoe lover, footwear possesses a fetishistic mystique that is hard to describe. There is an innate ordinariness to a shoe because of its inherent functionality which serves to underscore the beauty and rarity of a well-made shoe. While the story of shoe design is, not surprisingly, one of patriarchy and practicality, it is also a tale of wild creativity and true craftsmanship.

The art of shoe design is one that requires many years of specialised training to master and even more creativity to establish a unique brand point of view. Consumers have a constant hunger for new and beautiful objects to put on their feet.

Glass talks to three top shoe designers – Tabitha Simmons, Sandra Choi and Rupert Sanderson – to find out their take on the current state of the footwear market and what drew them to the accessories world in the first place.

Tabitha Simmons

British-born designer Tabitha Simmons has had a unique career. Simmons began her career as a model, before eventually turning to fashion styling and then shoe design. She launched her debut collection in 2009 and quickly became well known for her unique, highly wearable designs.

You have a long career in fashion, beginning as a model, then stylist and, then, designer. You are well known for your exquisite taste. In what ways does your early experience as a model affect or influence your brand?

Thank you. I think being a model really opened my eyes to how fashion shoots are created. Being immersed in the visual experience was compelling and naturally I became really fascinated by the styling aspect. It was a little-known career option then (before social media) and I feel so lucky to have stumbled upon it.

Few may realise you also have a degree in film and set design. How did your university training inform your work?

While I was studying for my degree, I worked at Joseph on a Saturday, which was THE clothing shop in London with an incredible curation of international designer brands. That is when I became interested in fashion. I loved Helmut Lang, Alaïa and Dolce & Gabbana. You could say that's when I started styling; helping clients put looks together.

How does your career as a fashion stylist, and with different brands, over the years shape the work for your own company?

I try to keep two separate mindsets. When I work on other brands, I become an extension of their aesthetic; constantly refining. I look at their DNA and history and try to push it forward as



Tabitha Simmons



Virgil Abloh and Sandra Choi



Rupert Sanderson

much as possible. With my own brand, I tend to do what comes straight from the heart and work by instinct. I also often reference my English roots.

Why did you decide to launch your shoe line in 2009? What did you feel was missing from the market?

I really wanted to create a timeless shoe collection. When I launched my brand, everyone was designing extreme platforms with lots of bells and whistles. So I guess I went against the grain and produced kitten heels and single-soled shoes: styles that transcended any ephemeral fashion.

Vogue once described your vision as “playfully chic”. How do you feel about this and how would you describe your aesthetic?

I think *Vogue* is right. I do love a sexy aesthetic. I like to create things that aren't only built for models, but for all types of women.

What inspired you to launch a bridal collection?

It was incredibly organic, I made bridal shoes for Poppy Delevingne's wedding and a few other friends of mine. I'm always so honoured when someone chooses to get married in my shoes; it's such a special day. I think that every bride should feel their most beautiful and to be part of the process, helping them feel like a princess, never gets old for me.

How do you hope to make brides feel with your unique bridal shoes?

When the bride-to-be orders shoes on our website, we will have the soles embroidered with their name and the date of their wedding, so they will become a keepsake of their special day.

As a mother, how do you balance work and family? What challenges have you encountered as a working mother?

You always feel guilty, as if you are never doing enough. However, I hope I can inspire my boys to have a good work ethic. Challenges I've encountered are having to miss school events when I am away, although I attend as much as I can when I am in New York. Travelling for work, one to two weeks at a time, is always a challenge.

Your brand has a celebrity cult following. How do you feel about the role of celebrity endorsements in fashion?

I am so lucky. I have always had fashion forward and extremely stylish girls in my shoes. Also, I love seeing a total stranger walking down the street in my shoes because it means they have walked into the store and chosen mine among all the other choices they had. That is the ultimate compliment.

How do you feel about the impact of social media on the fashion industry?

I think it has had a huge impact. It has really disrupted the industry in both good and bad ways. Now you can always contact the consumer and let them know what is happening in your company. We have a voice to our consumers.

More generally, what inspires you? Where do you go to relax?

Inspiration comes from everywhere; it isn't just from one source. It can come from art, architecture, travel, or my English heritage. I love relaxing at home with my family more than anything. No matter how busy, how much travel I have, I always ensure I make some downtime to spend with my family; that is the most important to me.

Tabitha Simmons SS18 Collection



Sandra Choi of Jimmy Choo

Sandra Choi took over the helm as creative director for Jimmy Choo in 2011. The niece of Jimmy Choo himself, Choi was the brand's first employee and eventually rose in the ranks to head of the brand. The mother of two daughters, married to an artist husband and with a company to run, Choi has a lot on her plate.

Glass recently spoke with her to find out how she stays focussed and inspired in a busy life.

When people think of Jimmy Choo, they generally think of Hollywood glamour and a *Sex and the City* lifestyle. What do you think of this reputation? How have you worked to evolve this concept while finding new direction?

The red-carpet glamour is very much a part of the brand DNA and one I am immensely proud of. Watching the designs come to life on the red carpet and worn by women who I admire is a wonderful feeling. However, this is very much one side of the brand and we have worked to transform the company into a dynamic brand that represents all the aspects of a modern-day woman's life. Jimmy Choo has become an accessories universe that offers women and men everything they need including trainers, boots, whimsical and functional pieces, sunglasses and scarves. Alongside the eveningwear, trainers and biker boots have become our best sellers.

As creative director, you have both modernised and expanded the vision of Jimmy Choo. How do you work to diversify the Jimmy Choo selection?

I am a mother with two wonderful young daughters, and am a wife who has a demanding job. Often I look at myself and consider what I need to make life easier or make myself feel better. I started looking at the essentials I needed in my wardrobe to enable me to fulfil my many roles. As a result, we expanded the offering to include trainers, which I wear for the school run, and the biker boots I wear on weekends. I also wanted Jimmy Choo to offer women and men everything they needed, so we worked to build this over the years and now the product offering is diverse and reflects the many roles we assume on a daily basis.

Additionally, it is important that the brand keeps up with lifestyle and cultural trends. Being aware of these is incredibly important in order to ensure the brand stays relevant. For example, personalisation is such a key thing for people, so our Made-to-Order collection is always being refreshed to include new fabrics, new styles, new ways for people to add their own stamp onto our shoes. Last year we also offered detachable buttons and jewels so customers could really put their personality into the shoes.

I am also constantly aware of trends. Androgynous dressing is one of these key trends in the fashion landscape at the moment. As a result, we have launched a collection called Borrowed from the Boys. Three key men's styles have been adapted for women's fit allowing women to assimilate the men's styles into their wardrobes.

What impact has adding men's shoes had on business? How do men's tastes and habits in shoes differ from those of women, in your experience?

The men's business is six years old and it is our fastest growing category and has so much potential. I love that it has brought a whole new customer base to the brand. Men shop so differently from women. Men, for the most part, shop based on what they need rather than what they want. They look for function and design rather than just aesthetics and for something that will last. More often than not, if men find a style that works for them, they will continue to buy this style for years to come rather than women who might have 100 different styles in her wardrobe. With this in mind, the men's collection has evolved and worked to focus on classic designs that have a functional purpose.

Moving on, what did you learn from your uncle?

I had a lot of respect for his talent as a shoemaker; he was an expert at the craft. He had a meticulous attention to detail when it came to the form of a shoe and its finish. He instilled the importance of this in me from the beginning. He taught me the fundamental principles of making shoes by hand. I will forever be grateful for the experience I learnt working with Jimmy and the people I met during the time we were there. It was an amazing journey and I was very fortunate.

From Princess Diana to Michelle Obama, Jimmy Choo has been associated with strong women throughout its history. How do you feel about powerful women? How do you describe the Jimmy Choo vision to your daughters?

Jimmy Choo has been built with a legacy of confident women who use fashion to convey a message of power and confidence and to express who they are.

I have a huge amount of respect for women who made and continue to make a positive impact in the world. The late Princess Diana and Michelle Obama are wonderful examples. The fact that they have chosen to wear Jimmy Choo is a huge source of pride for me.

To my daughters I would say Jimmy Choo offers an empowered sense of glamour. It is not just about superficial looks but it is about installing a feeling of confidence and beauty. We always define the Jimmy Choo woman by characteristics of daring, confidence, and effortless glamour.

Female business leaders are, unfortunately, still a rarity, even in fashion. How do you describe your leadership style?

Firm and fair.

Building on this, as a working mother, fashion is no easy path. How do you balance work and family?

It is hard. For the most part I try to keep work and family separate. At home, I am a wife and mother, especially when we have weekends at our house in Bath. This is my reset time where I turn my phone off and really focus on my family.



*Off-White™ Co Jimmy Choo
Collaboration from SS18 Collection*

What advice do you have for young people interested in building a career in business or fashion?

I would encourage people to gain as much experience as possible. Fashion is not as glamorous as it appears from the outside and people often find the experience eye opening. I worked in the atelier from the beginning and I saw every aspect of what building a fashion business entailed. My decision was informed and I had experienced all the ups and downs. I think people need to make an informed decision going into any business.

I sometimes regret not finishing my fashion degree at Central Saint Martins as I missed out on some of those great relationships you make with your peers. But the good thing about working in London is I am now able to catch up with them; there's a wonderful sense of camaraderie amongst the London designers.

Many people find fashion frivolous, particularly when it comes to expensive shoes. In your opinion, what value do shoes play in a person's wardrobe?

A lot of people underestimate fashion not only as a business but also as a mood enhancer. Fashion is such a powerful tool and having the right shoes or clothes can transform your mood. With the right pair of heels a woman or man can feel more confident in themselves. Fashion is not just about how you look but about how you feel.

Shoes are also an essential part of a woman's wardrobe as they enable her to fulfil certain functions. Whether you need trainers or boots or heels, you need something to put on your feet.

You are currently working on a collaboration with designer and DJ Virgil Abloh of Off-White. How did this come about? What is the goal of this collaboration?

Virgil and I met before he did a DJ set for Jimmy Choo's 20th anniversary party last September in New York and we chatted about his brand and creative ideas. I remember thinking how intriguing the end result could be if we fused our brands and ideas.

To collaborate with a brand like Off-White encourages Jimmy Choo to explore a new avenue and take part in a different conversation. This is a collaboration which people will find unexpected. It brings another edge to the brand that allows people to look at Jimmy Choo with a different perspective. I love to mix it up by getting together with another creative mind, and the outcome is a distilled product which encapsulates what each brand stands for.

Virgil is a connoisseur in fashion. I was impressed by his fashion intuition; he instantly identified my plain cotton T-shirt as Comme des Garçons, and this is when we started to talk about working together on a collaboration. We connected on that design level immediately. We clicked. It's so nice actually to meet someone who's got a different point of view and a completely different perspective.

Together we wanted to make something both figurative and luxury. We took risks on this collection. Like I said to Virgil, it reminded me of every single thing that is iconic for Jimmy Choo, but with a fresh attitude. Princess Diana is even a muse for this collection. She was a royal grounded in reality. Diana was real, not a fairytale.

Rupert Sanderson

British designer Rupert Sanderson launched his namesake shoe company in 2001. He had famously resigned from a disastrous career in advertising to learn how to make shoes at the Cordwainers College in East London and later went to work for Sergio Rossi and then Bruno Magli.

Glass recently spoke to Rupert to get his take on the business and art of shoes.

Your shoes are at once ultra-luxurious and wearable. From where do you get the ideas for your designs?

Always the only answer is "everywhere and everything". A flowerhead, a staircase, a film, a fishtail. Everything has to inspire.

What value do shoes add to a person's wardrobe, in your opinion?

They are, as they say on the tin, an accessory. They augment and (I would say this) make an outfit, change a mood, elevate the soul.

What challenges have you faced in building your brand?

Myriad. It's like life. It is a life.

What inspired you to pursue a career in shoe design?

Failing at something else and acting on a crazy instinct that I hope was proved right.

How did working with Sergio Rossi and Bruno Magli shape your career?

They provided the founding principles. I still run the things like a small Italian family fashion business.

You own part of a shoe factory in Bologna. What prompted this decision?

I actually own all of it now. Fear and desperation. I couldn't get anyone else to make my shoes and it was going bust. It now makes over 40,000 pairs a year.

Celebrities love your shoes. Who are your favourites and what is it like to work with them?

A four-Kate month is a good month. Winslet, Blanchett (C), Middleton and Moss. Big tick.

Shoes and drama seem a natural fit. What was it like to design shoes for the Royal Opera House? Are you a Verdi fan?

The process was fascination. It actually took over a year as a project and was as far away from fashion and its calendar as it's possible to be. Making costumes in the attic of the Royal Opera House (sat between Prince Charles and my mum on the opening night).

What inspires you?

Grrrrrr!

Where is your favourite place to travel?

Yorkshire (foot and bike). Italy (boat and car).



Rupert Sanderson
SS18 Collection