



Designer Christian Louboutin has resisted some gentle pressure to use “fake” materials for his shoes.

CREDIT: CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN



CREDIT: JEAN-VINCENT SIMONET

Louboutin is loyal to leather

In spite of some gentle pressure to push him the other way, designer Christian Louboutin has decided that using substitute imitation material in his shoes in place of leather would be a bad idea, for both financial and environmental reasons.

The designer, who made Pantone 181663TP famous by choosing (by accident as it turns out) to make the soles of his shoes this shade of red, garnered much attention at Paris Fashion Week in late February and early March because he timed the launch of a museum exhibition of his work to open at the same time. This exhibition, which has L'Exhibition[niste] as its teetering-on-high-heels title, explores Christian Louboutin's life, his work and his inspirations. It is scheduled to run until July 26 at the Palais de la Porte Dorée museum in the French capital.

The museum is in Paris's 12th arrondissement, the area in which the designer spent his childhood. His interest in art made him a frequent visitor to the Palais de la Porte Dorée. A sign there that he saw in the 1970s warning visitors not to wear stiletto heels inside is part of the exhibition. It showed a 1950s silhouette and the young Louboutin had difficulty believing that real shoes could look like the one in the illustration. He made his own drawings of it and this, in time, led him into footwear design. He revealed this and more in a conversation with *The Economist* to mark the opening of the exhibition.

Shoe designer Christian Louboutin has received encouragement to try out “fake” material in his collections in place of leather. He carried out his own research into the comparative merits of both materials and drew a clear conclusion.

All feet to the pump

“Every shoe starts as a silhouette,” Mr Louboutin points out. “When you are a shoe designer, something that you are very happy to accomplish is when you design a beautiful pump because a pump is like a face without make-up”.

Choosing the right last matters immensely but, with the correct last in place, he explains that designers can have the shape, the heel, the arch and the front that they want. The best way to try this out is to design “the most simple shoe”, a pump. If the pump is good, it opens up what he calls a huge amount of design options.

Design ideas aside, he describes his famous red soles as being an important part of his brand's identity and gives this as the main reason for fighting a series of court battles over this and over the specific shade of red he has chosen to use.



Displays of Christian Louboutin's work and inspiration are incorporated into L'Exhibition[niste] at the Palais de la Porte Dorée museum in Paris.

CREDIT: MARC DOMAGE

Sole to sole

Red soles chez Louboutin had "a very simple beginning". He launched the brand in 1991 and, for the collections he put together in that first year and in the one that followed, his shoes had soles that were either beige or black. But in 1993, he was designing a collection inspired by Pop Art. "All my drawings were bright in colour," he recalls. "I remember having the first prototype shoe in one hand and the drawing it came from in the other. Something was better in the drawing, but I couldn't understand exactly what." The shoe, which a model tried on in the factory of his manufacturing partners in Italy, looked like the drawing in profile and from the front, but from the back, the sole showed up "like a big, black stain".

While the designer was contemplating all of this and trying to decide what to do about it, the model he was working with sat down and began to paint her nails; you can probably guess which colour. Mr Louboutin borrowed the nail varnish and used it on the sole of the shoe because, he says now, rather than add any particular colour, he simply wanted to get rid of the black. "Suddenly, the shoe popped up," he explains, with the pun probably intended. "It looked like and had the vitality of my drawings." Therefore, "by

a happy accident", the red soles became an integral part of how he presented the brand to the world.

Leather and Louboutin

It was on being asked about fashion's ongoing struggle with sustainability that Christian Louboutin made his remarks about leather, declaring strongly that leather wins hands down in an environmental set-to with synthetic alternatives. This assertion goes back to work the Louboutin brand carried out on its own, to draw the comparison for itself and to make its own mind up. He received a request from "some people" to try to imitate the look of the leathers he uses (patent leather is a big favourite, but there are suedes and nappas in the collections, too) using

Soul man. Christian Louboutin discovered his trademark red soles by "happy accident".

CREDIT: JEAN-VINCENT SIMONET



"fake" material. Who these people were and why they wanted Christian Louboutin to go down this fake road he does not disclose.

"To have fake would cost much more money," is his stark conclusion. The particular fake material his contacts wanted him to consider would have come, partly at least, from plants. "To have this type of plant growing, you would end up killing trees," he says. "I'm a serious person. I'm not surfing fashion waves and I don't want to dive into a thing and find out four years after that the new elements are more dangerous for the planet because you are razing part of a forest to do your supposedly more sustainable thing."

It's not that Mr Louboutin fails to see the need for fashion brands to take sustainability seriously. He has strong views about recycling, for example. "Everything we do, we have an eye on recycling," he says. "Recycling, I can work around; I know what I'm talking about with it."

He says sustainability is something companies need to study carefully. Everyone jumping on particular bandwagons because they are popular makes him think of a fleet of ships, all moving in the same direction, at more or less the same speed until one of them suddenly realises that what they are all doing is wrong and chaos ensues.