

## Sneakers Unboxed: From Studio to Street

by Silvia Bombardini



*We travel on gravel, dirt road or street  
I wear my Adidas when I rock the beat  
On stage, front page, every show I go  
It's Adidas on my feet, high top or low*

Run-DMC, *My Adidas* - 1986

Sneakers are familiar to most of us. So familiar in fact that they tend to disappear – for all of their colourways, like chameleons in the urban landscape. As I leave the *Sneakers Unboxed: From Studio to Street* exhibition at London's Design Museum, I see them anew all around me. More so than any other shoe, everyone wears some: Nike here, Adidas there, New Balance, Converse, Vans. How much louder must the world have been I wonder, before the invention of the noiseless rubber-soled shoe, originally worn by prison warders in the late 19th century? Sneakers sneak up on you, it's what they do. But if all good design exhibitions should want you to open your eyes and look again, once more at the familiar products that surround you, *Sneakers Unboxed* aims to do more than that. Perhaps it's just a question of its subject: not only a product of design, in the words of curator Ligaya Salazar, sneakers are a 'phenomenon'. As such, an exhibition wanting to defamiliarize, and reintroduce its visitors to the history and evolution of sneakers, ought to focus on more than just their technical components, however much there might be to say already about those: the rubber soles, but also the anthropomorphised particulars of a sneaker's tongue, throat, mustache, eyelet and eyestay, the parts taken out or added in to reduce a sneaker's environmental impact, or improve the performances of the athletes who wear them to compete. It is certainly possible to – and in the aftermath of the Tokyo Olympics, many certainly will – visit *Sneakers Unboxed* to learn more about how a shoe can help its wearer run faster, or jump higher. But to an emphasis on innovative materials and make, the exhibition intertwines cultural, political and societal interpretations of what sneakers are and what they can do. At significant turning points in history, these different interpretations overlap. For example in 1984, when Nike signed rising basketball star Michael Jordan to wear their sneakers on the court, those sneakers became associated at once with outstanding athletic

performance, celebrity culture, and an act of rebellion – the black and red colourway of Jordan’s sneakers famously violating the NBA’s dress code. In the years since, those same sneakers turned into the cornerstone of an empire, spanning four decades and 35 models to date. The original, autographed sneakers that Michael Jordan wore on that court in 1984, sold at a Sotheby’s auction in 2020 for \$560,000.

But alongside the lucrative partnerships of sneaker’s brands with athletes, as well as with musicians, the exhibition gives due credit to the metropolitan subcultures who have espoused, even identified with particular models – who found meaning in sneakers that the brands who made them could not have foreseen, and at least in the early years of sneakers’ culture, might not even have approved of. Such as the Casuals who wore Adidas Trimm Trabs or Diadora B.Elite in Liverpool and Manchester in the late 1970s, or the Z-Boys with Vans in Santa Monica and Venice, California, in the early 1980s. London’s Grime artists and fans in hooded tracksuits and Nike Air Max – or ‘one tens’ in the 2000s. The Cholonbianos with gelled hairstyles and Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars in Monterrey, and Cape Town’s Bubbleheads who still wear obscure Nike models with ‘visible air’ designs. The show culminates with an overview of the state of sneakers at present: self-lacing models and sneakers made out of recycled ocean plastics coexist with high-end luxury and limited editions, which have led to riots and raffles, and an ever-growing resale market that’s turning some sneakers into financial investments never to be worn. Below, I speak with Salazar about terminology, subjective preferences, success and nostalgia as we unpack some of the themes and contradictions that surround the exhibition and these shoes that we all seem to like to wear so much, we may just owe it to them to think about them some more.

**Silvia Bombardini:** I’d like to ask you first about the exhibition’s title: ‘sneakers’ come in many names across different cultures. What makes this term more official, or a more proper choice for what the show is about, than say, ‘trainers’ – which according to the dictionary, is how the British refer to ‘a soft sports shoe suitable for casual wear’?

**Ligaya Salazar:** There are so many words across the world to describe sports shoes – trainers, creps, kicks – but sneakers is perhaps the term most readily used and understood globally and ultimately the best way to describe the phenomenon the exhibition unpicks.

**S.B.:** It is also a term with a history. Sport shoes were first marketed as sneakers just about a century ago, which simultaneously feels a very long and a very short time, considering that the global sneaker market is nowadays valued at about \$80 billion. Are we living in the golden age of sneakers, in your opinion? Or was that perhaps in the 1980s, when everlasting Nike models like the Air Force 1’s and the Air Jordan – as well as other brands’, like the Reebok Classic – were first released?

**L.S.:** We certainly live at a time when sneakers have become ubiquitous and in terms of sales, almost outpace any other shoe type. From a design perspective this also means that sneakers are being pushed in terms of material, shape, and style. So, I guess it is the age of the sneaker. When the golden age of sneakers was probably differs from person to person, I most certainly think that the early 90s produced some of the most interesting designs.

**S.B.:** Indeed, our taste in sneakers varies, yet there are some sneakers that always drive crowds. What is it that makes a model successful? Is the fans' uptake of particular models always predictable, or at least understandable with hindsight, or are there sneakers that became popular despite all odds?

**L.S.:** I guess it depends on what you mean by success. When sneakers were first adopted as style, in the late 1970s, success was measured by sales only and most brands had no idea that the sales of the sneakers had anything to do with them being worn for anything but sports. So, I guess you could say that all the early classics – Adidas Superstars and Nike Air Force 1's – became popular against all odds. In the case of Adidas, because their distribution network in the States made them rare and desirable. The Air Force 1's were discontinued despite the sales being high because Nike were developing new updated models for every season, only to be brought back by three Baltimore retailers due to popular demand. These days brands have much more powerful insight into consumer behaviour, not least because of social media, so they are more able to 'create' a successful model with marketing – but that still doesn't always work. Ultimately, it's the wearers that make a model successful. What is deemed a classic in retrospect is a combination of nostalgia and marketing. And which model is deemed interesting in terms of design has a whole different set of parameters.

**S.B.:** Let's talk about wearers for a moment then. When a style of dress trickles up from the streets to the runways, it can alienate the subcultures where it originated. Is that true for sneaker models too? Today there's sneakers – like the Jordan X Dior 1 Retro High – that retail for \$2000 and are resold for three times as much. Does the luxury sneaker threaten sneakers' popularity among kids with less disposable income, the progeny of those that were responsible for making sneakers cool in the first place?

**L.S.:** I think that today there are sneaker models for everyone at all price points. Some may feel alienated by the fashion designers' redesigns of sneakers such as the Balenciaga's Triple S or Martine Rose's Nike Monarch's, but ultimately the fields are merging considerably. Designers such as Salehe Bembury, who have designed for Versace and for New Balance are a testament to that fluidity. Of course, the most aspirational and hyped sneakers, such as the Jordan X Dior's are out of reach and maybe not even desirable to most, but the pace of releases means that there are other models out there. I do think that the scale of the industry means, and that's the same for fashion, that it's hard for subcultural expression

to have time to truly form before it's taken up or dictated to by the market. But if you look hard enough, they still exist in pockets around the world.

**S.B.:** The exhibition features over 200 sneakers: which one is the rarest, more precious model you're showing – and which are your personal favourites?

**L.S.:** The rarest and most precious models in the exhibition are the prototypes and player samples featured. The Jordan I prototype and player sample probably being the most valuable. There are too many favourites to list really, but if pushed, I'd say the original 90s Reebok Instapumps, a pair of CDG X Nike Presto Tent's and the Nike ISPA Road Warriors.

*Sneakers Unboxed: From Studio to Street* is on view at London's Design Museum until October 24, 2021.