

# THE GODFATHER OF SOLE

For Christian Louboutin's passionate customers—Angelina Jolie, Lady Gaga, the Olsen twins, and Oprah, among others—his red-soled confections are far more than footwear, and their creator far more than a designer. For the shoe god himself, who recently completed a line of Barbies, the line between fashion and fetish is nearly invisible

BY VANESSA GRIGORIADIS

**D**eep in the heart of conspicuous consumption, in a 2.6-million-square-foot luxury mall in Orange County, there is, on a warm evening last spring, a small private party for Christian Louboutin. This is a time in which every woman must whisper about her purchases and feel like Cinderella's wicked stepister for contemplating so gauche a desire as a thousand-dollar pair of leopard-print booties. Every woman, that is, except the several dozen extremely real housewives of the O.C. who are gathering, in airy polka-

dot dresses and chunky David Yurman bangles, at South Coast Plaza to fête Louboutin, the warm, quizzical 46-year-old king of the heel—the “new Manolo Blahnik,” according to *Visionaire* co-founder Cecilia Dean—or, as one Mercedes-coupe-driving, abundantly spray-tanned Louboutin devotee puts it, cutting through the air with her French-manicured nails, “our shoe god!”

There's something so 1999, so *Sex and the City* about this scene, with the copious champagne, the servers passing mini cupcakes on lollipop sticks, the *clickety-clack* of astonishingly high heels on spotless marble

floors, and the ambient trill of women complimenting other women on their shoes. A boutique party? Didn't we replace these long ago with Art Basel and the Venice Biennale—places where similar fabulously shod people stand around and look at art they don't completely understand? Maybe this is full circle, because on this night—just one of a staggering number of nights that parties like this are thrown around the globe in Louboutin's honor—we are celebrating a new shoe, which looks like a cupcake with little bits of frosting. But

PASCAL CHEVALIER

## HERE'S LOOKING AT SHOE, KID

Christian Louboutin knows the secrets of a woman's sole.



it is much, *much* more expensive. The Marie Antoinette, as it's called, with teeny-tiny embroidery throughout by Jean-François Lesage and a decorative ankle strap with a painstakingly made-up porcelain face of the sovereign herself, costs \$6,295. "I was drinking a lot of wine at lunch with Jean," says Louboutin mischievously, "and we thought we should do a series of shoes named after different queens: Drag queen? Drama queen?"

The women teeter toward the shoe, which is presented inside an enormous, faux-jewel-encrusted egg, as though it had sprung forth from a very chic chicken.

"These shoes make my heart sing a little bit," says a brunette, clicking together her beige pumps.

"It's like . . . angels," says a blonde in menacingly high purple stilettos, studded with diamantés.

"I'm going to buy them, but I'll never wear them," says another, in turquoise heels with a poof of feathers cascading down the back. "I'll keep them on my mantel. I don't want to *hurt* them."

Louboutin listens patiently as his clients—"friends!"—coo and caw, his arms folded over a spotless white linen jacket,

declared bankruptcy to buy me his shoes."

Her mom shrugs. "It's no biggie," she explains. "Bankruptcy just sits on your credit report for a few years."

For a micro-second, Louboutin flicks his eyes to the ceiling and rolls them around. "It's just shoes, you know," he whispers, with a giggle.

But it is, and it isn't.

### The Anti-swag Mind Trick

Of all the ways that one can identify a Louboutin shoe—the slick Brian De Palma heels, the wry humor, the hyper-femininity, the perilous prices—the easiest is by glimpsing his ingenious trademark: the red sole. It turns out that the flash of red on the undercarriage of a woman's shoe is very sexy: "an invitation, a green light," as Louboutin puts it. It's also a convenient way to identify the haves and have-nots. Remarkably, the designer says, his business grew by double digits during the retail depression last year, and today he sells more than 340,000 pairs of shoes annually, with prices ranging from \$495 to an amount that he refuses to reveal. (Custom-made shoes, like one with a sole made entirely of rubies, can rise into the high five figures.)

been to make money," he says. "And as far as understanding financial issues, it is in one ear and out the other in a very pathetic fashion, really." He giggles. "I was at dinner in London after the financial crisis hit, and everyone was talking about the credit crunch," he tells me. "I said, 'What's 'credit crunch'? Is that a new gym?'"

Unlike most luxury brands, Louboutin's company remains independent and owner-operated. He says he doesn't believe in advertising or marketing, though he did trademark the red sole in the U.S., in 2008, and in the U.K., in 2009. Don't mess with the soles: Albert Elbaz, designer of Lanvin and a close friend, found this out the hard way when he asked Louboutin to produce a line for one of his early collections. "At the time, I thought the red sole was too strong for my collection," says Elbaz. "So I painted them black—a great mistake! He almost killed me." Louboutin also claims never to have "pushed" celebrities into his shoes on the red carpet. (Some celebrities receive a discount at his stores, but he rarely gives shoes away.) "Whether you're talking about a celebrity or any female, the most important aspect of women is desire," he says, his lips curling into a smile. "The woman needs

## "WHAT'S A 'CREDIT CRUNCH'?" ASKED LOUBOUTIN. "IS THAT A NEW GYM?"

his wide brow unwrinkled, a Cheshire-cat grin playing over his lips. This isn't how it usually works in fashion. It does not matter how many Marc Jacobs handbags a woman buys—Marc Jacobs is not gabbing with you at a party. Karl Lagerfeld is not having dinner with you. Stella McCartney does not want your company at a mani-pedi. But Louboutin is a special kind of designer. Perhaps friend Mary-Kate Olsen says it best: "When I was on the set of *Full House*, my favorite story was the Grimms' fairy tale about a poor shoemaker who was visited by elves that made his shoes in the middle of the night." She laughs. "And when you meet Christian, you realize a man like that really exists. He is the shoemaker out of the fairy tale."

It's not all so G-rated: Louboutin's accessibility is both part of his business plan and part of a deep, fervently held desire to insert himself into the relationship a woman has with her most beloved phallic symbol—her shoe. Though sometimes a lady's shoe obsession can get a little much, even for him. "I am so devoted," gushes a raven-haired 26-year-old in a skintight Dior dress, sidling up beside Louboutin with her mother lingering behind. "You know, I've run away from repo men in his shoes." She leans in: "My mom has even

Louboutin hatched the idea to redden the sole during his first collection, after watching his assistant paint her nails with red Chanel polish. It was a decision *nearly* without precedent. "Many Han Chinese women decorated the soles of the shoes they hoped to be buried in with Buddhist symbols so that they would make a good impression in the afterlife," says Elizabeth Semmelhack, senior curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, in Toronto. Louboutin's women are, however, much more concerned with this life. "Half of my women want a shoe to make them look a little tarty, and the other half are big tarts who want a shoe that looks classy," he says. "I think that in both cases the shoe completes the woman, gives them the element they don't have in themselves."

Louboutin has manufactured shoes under his name since 1992, when he opened a shop in Paris with an investment of \$160,000. In a stroke of his usual good luck, Princess Caroline of Monaco happened to pass by during the first month, and he worked her appearance to whip up buzz. By the end of the year he will have 32 boutiques all over the world—up from 19 in 2009—even if he claims not to care much about spoils. "My goal has never

to think: When can I have it? Ohhhh, I want it so badly, I can't wait. If you take that away from a woman, you take away a lot."

This anti-swag mind trick has worked incredibly well, and it's nearly impossible to name a high-wattage star who hasn't strutted around in Louboutin's shoes. Angelina Jolie hardly ever walks a red carpet without them. Naomi Campbell showed up to her court-ordered community service in his black leather stiletto boots. Tina Turner is a convert, along with Toni Morrison ("I cry at her books," Louboutin says), Patti LaBelle ("Girl, I once knew a lady who painted her own soles red—she was so pitiful," she says), and Oprah, who received 21 pairs of designer shoes, mostly Louboutin's, as a thank-you gift from Jessica Seinfeld after she appeared on her show in 2007. Lady Gaga wears her nude pumps everywhere, and says archly, "The red soles remind me it is very important to be consistent in the work." Christina Aguilera wore his shoes on her last tour, and Jennifer Lopez staked her musical comeback on a song named after them. Ashley Olsen says that Louboutins were the first adult heels she and her sister wore, at 14. "We had his brightly colored three-inch heels in every

single color," she says. "I loved them so much: they were sexy, but age-appropriate."

### The Gay Best Friend

Louboutin is the gay best friend not only to Hollywood stars: he loves all manner of stylish women, from Daphne Guinness to Princess Olga of Greece. "I could not say who my best friend is," he demurs. "I would feel awful to say that, because I would hurt a lot of people! Everyone is like a sister." He comes across as far younger than his years: at the discotheque, he's a flashy, 100-beats-per-minute

one of his "shoe signings" in the white marble corridor of the same SoCal mall. At a shoe signing, unlike a book signing, people actually show up, and 300 women are already on line by eight A.M., carrying their Louboutins in trembling hands, or sometimes plopping them on top of baby carriages, waiting for him to write their names—or his—with a neon Sharpie on their red soles. A black velvet rope encircles the glass table at which he holds court, a beige hat perched high on his head. The rule is one pair per woman at each signing, but the wilier among the group are whipping Louboutins off their feet as well, and

to select shoes for her prom. "I have seen this hundreds of times," says Louboutin later, leaning in close. "The father comes into the store and says that he is there to buy shoes for his daughter's first ball. He selects the shoe for her—always the same kind of shoe, a peep toe with a medium heel. The mother keeps saying the daughter can wear one of her old pair of heels, but the father insists. He always pays cash for the shoes, too." Louboutin giggles a little. "It is a nice ritual, you know, because the daughter does not get hurt, but what you're seeing is that the father wants to

## AFTER VISITING RWANDA, LOUBOUTIN NOTED, "VIOLENT, BUT NICE OUTFITS ON THE MILITARY."

dancer always on the hunt for a partner; for exercise, he prefers the trapeze; and, with a shaky command of English, he is often heard saying "Super-awesome!" when pleased. Yet he is also intensely Parisian, maintaining an old-world couturier's attitude toward handiwork and technology—he does not know how to drive, can barely use his iPhone, and started an e-mail account only a few years ago.

Despite his protestations about caring little for money, he is very good at spending it. His passion in life is travel, and he visits at least a dozen countries a year, such as Rwanda—"very violent, but quite nice outfits on the military"—and often picks up homes along the way. He owns a houseboat in Egypt and a 13th-century chateau near Normandy, and, more recently, he purchased an 11th-century home in Aleppo, Syria. "Christian is my soul brother," says Diane von Furstenberg. "For most of us, our friends come from school or early on in your life. Christian came later, but he is truly my best newer friend. We love to travel together. When Christian and I traveled in Uzbekistan, we even shared rooms—and sometimes a bed. We're very, very similar, two little Capricorn goats!"

Louboutin may be von Furstenberg's soul brother, but he's a soul sister to a lot more women, as becomes clear on another day spent at

he's too nice to turn them away—except when the shoe isn't clean. "Ugh, I cannot bear dirty shoes," he whispers as a blonde shakes a filthy black boot in front of him. "If a shoe has one scratch on it, I cannot even look at it."

But this is a rare moment of snark, because the rest of the day is taken up with Louboutin's listening intently to each woman's trials and tribulations, from the very trivial—how she and her husband flew from their second home in Cabo that morning ("You must come visit us!") or postponed a post-collegiate trip to Italy to meet him ("a whole three days!")—to the intensely emotional, with stories about recent divorce and the ways that his shoes helped her through that time by making her feel beautiful.

It is a long day, stretching on until 10 P.M. Someone faints. Louboutin's chapeau begins to wilt. Then something grabs his eye, and he begins to smile again: a father, with his teenage daughter, has appeared in the boutique

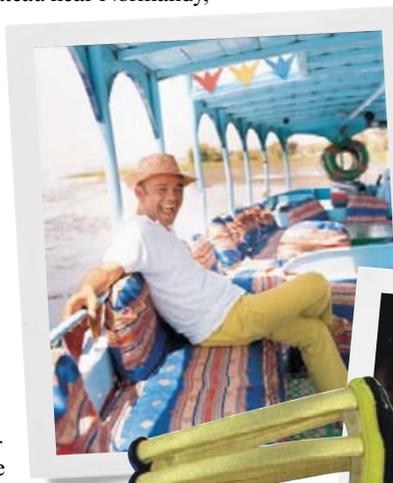
be the first one to see his daughter in heels—the first one to fuck the daughter."

### Playing Barbie

For Louboutin, the fixation on women's shoes began in childhood. He grew up in Paris's 12th Arrondissement, the youngest son of a housewife and a furniture-maker who designed prototypes for French train interiors. He is much darker in skin tone, almost oddly so, than the rest of his family. His father was blond, and his mother and two sisters—his siblings are more than a decade his senior—look like Snow White. "For a long time, I thought I was adopted, but my mother told me it wasn't so," he says. She convinced him instead that one of her ancestors had slept with a black slave on the family's long-ago voyage from Britannia. For reasons he does not know, he says, his father never spoke to him, except once, when he taught him to carve a piece of wood. "Basically, I grew up in a harem," he explains. "Women have no secrets from me."

As with the women at home, little Louboutin was doted on in school, where he often had the best marks in his class. When he was nine, he recalls, a teacher, noticing that Louboutin had become so pleased with himself that he'd written the words "M. Louboutin, Premier de la Classe" at the top of his schoolbook, subsequently yelled at him in front of the class. "I was so hurt," he says. "I never made an effort at school again, and became an autodidact, deciding my interests naturally." Soon he began to spend

time after school at a post-colonial museum, Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens. A sign with a 1950s spike heel crossed out



### DESIGNER SHEIKH

From top: Louboutin on a 2002 Nile cruise; with pal Daphne Guinness in Italy, 2004; the Ulona shoe, from his 2010 spring-summer line.



with an X hung on the wall, because high heels were not allowed on the wood floors. “I became a bit glued to that sign,” says Louboutin. “It was the 70s, and no one wore shoes with such a heel. I thought, How could someone make a drawing of a shoe that does not exist and tell people not to wear them? It was the first time I got in touch with my imagination.” From this point on, lost in his dreams, he obsessively sketched pictures of shoes in the margins of all his notebooks. “For me, looking at a foot is almost like being on LSD,” he says. “The foot for me is like staring at an ear—there is so much to see.”

By 14, he was fully immersed in the Paris fashion scene, dressing up in a look he calls “transsexual punk” and going out to nightclubs such as the Palace—“maybe not on a Monday,” but almost every other night. Whenever he came home late with a new friend, Louboutin would whistle as he approached the door, “then my mother would

other in a red-carpet gown, and a few in various states of undress: one in a negligée, another in a belly-dancing outfit, and a third in a catsuit matched with one of his “It shoes.” After an assistant brings him a large cup of Starbucks espresso (“What is this, for 10 people?” he asks), he caresses the sole of a Barbie foot. “Look how super-high the arch is—it’s really quite lovely,” he says. Then he throws a pained look toward the miniature Louboutinshoe prototypes. “They are too big, much too large,” he declares, shaking his head.

In fact, it turns out that everything is too big. As he walks down the aisle of prototypes, he stops at each one, insisting on revisions: the gown must be “much lower in the back, so we can see the top of her ass—the crack.”

He moves on to the Barbie in a negligée. “This must be shorter, tighter,” he says. “And maybe without the bra and panties underneath?”

“Well, it *is* Barbie,” says a Mattel design-

Louis Benech, in a small apartment next to his offices, without a kitchen. (He has been renovating a nearby penthouse for more than five years; “It’s very *La Bohème*, for me to stare out the window at the rain and cry,” he jokes.) And in Parabiago, a shoemaking center 15 miles outside Milan, he has built a modern apartment on the top floor of his factory, with hand-cranked windows, floors of smooth concrete, and red lacquered surfaces, the same color as his soles. “I love sleeping above my factory,” he says. “All night, I can lie there and dream of shoes.”

On a recent morning, a maid launders his clothes in the Parabiago apartment as he descends a spiral staircase to the factory’s second floor, where he arranges dozens of sketches for the next season’s shoes. Sitting at a desk filled with artifacts from his recent trips—a mask from Bali, a picture of La Madonna from San

## “ABOUT 3,000 WOMEN HAVE 500 PAIRS,” HE SAYS. “BUT THOSE AREN’T THE *BIGGEST* CUSTOMERS.”

leave her bedroom to sleep in my room, so that I could sleep in her larger bed,” he says. “My friends were always quite shocked that she didn’t mind if we had a fuck in her bed.” In the morning, his mother would have a pot of coffee ready and everyone’s clothes laundered. “I have only been to a laundry once in my life, and it was truly traumatizing,” he confides. “Very depressing.”

Mary-Kate Olsen is right that Louboutin’s life resembles a fairy tale, with only the most minor tests of character—even his career as a shoemaker began easily. After high school, he was hanging around the Folies Bergère, befriending the girls by showing them his fanciful drawings of shoes, but they eventually shooed him away. “I was so hurt,” he says. Wondering what else to do, he picked up a phone book and began dialing couture houses. His call to Balmain went unanswered, but Dior picked up, and the countess in charge gave him a job as a model-making apprentice at the Charles Jourdan factory in Nice. “It was like an angel looked down on me,” he says. However, the men at the factory were cruel to him—“When things would get really bad, I would pretend to call the countess on the phone, reminding them that she and I were very close friends.”

One morning during his spell in California last year, Louboutin takes a meeting at the Mattel factory in Long Beach to finish production on a set of Louboutin Barbies. A series of headless Barbies are lined up on a big conference table for his approval, one in a peacoat and jeans, an-

er, pursing his lips. “She can’t be naked.” “No?” says Louboutin. “Well, how about the belly dancer has tassels on her breasts, instead of a bikini?”

“I guess so,” says the designer, before adding brightly, “We’ve never done that before!”

Then Louboutin takes the catsuit Barbie—“It’s a cat burglar who likes to steal shoes!” says the Mattel designer—in his hands and jiggles it a bit. “And this, the dominatrix in a catsuit, could have a hood?” he asks hopefully.

The room falls silent.

### The Fairy Tale

With so many girlfriends to attend to the world over, it seems that Louboutin never stays still. Globetrotting provides him the opportunity to find unexpected baubles for his designs—last year, in Egypt, he fell in love with tiny Coptic crosses at a monastery, incorporating them into his new line. “I didn’t think the priest would have liked it if I said I was planning to put it on women’s feet,” he says. “So, first, when I asked for 80 crosses, I explained that I was very religious; then, when I asked for a few hundred, I said, ‘Oh, I am doing curtains.’”

But the place he is happiest is his factory outside Milan, where I meet him several months later. In the Grimms’ fairy tale about the shoemaker and his elves, the cobbler lives upstairs from his workshop, in a rickety attic, and Louboutin is most comfortable in a similar habitation. On Paris’s Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, where his business headquarters and a made-to-measure atelier are located, he lives with his partner, landscape designer

Sebastián—Louboutin, in a pair of pressed white pants and a polo shirt, spends an hour meticulously considering two dozen models about to go into production, mostly a series of voile-lace shoes he calls Madame Est Nude. He makes the same kinds of recommendations that he did for the Barbie outfits—everything should be lower, sexier, create more of a puff above the toes, and overemphasize a woman’s arch (“the most beautiful thing in the world”). When he’s done with each shoe, he exclaims “Super-class!” and claps his hands excitedly.

This scene could be replicated in any fashion office, but when Louboutin descends another flight of stairs, a new world comes into view: a Willy Wonka wonderland of proportions heretofore unknown to womankind, his very own fairy tale. Down here, in the factory,

50 men in matching baby-blue jackets work busily at narrow desks, periodically rushing down to the cellar, where more than a million dollars in dyed animal skins rests on color-coordinated shelves, waiting to be turned into shoes. First, Louboutin’s elves cut the skin fabric into the shape of an Egyptian collar (cute), then place the red sole on the shoe with a rolling pin (double cute), and a young boy hammers the heel into the shoe. (“He is an orphan, but happy!” whispers Christian.) The shoes are handed back and forth, forth and back, as they make their way through a short assembly line of the most

[@vf.com](https://www.vf.com)  
LADIES IN RED:  
A SLIDE SHOW  
OF LOUBOUTIN'S  
MOST FAMOUS  
CUSTOMERS.

adorable machines on earth, all the size of cigarette dispensers and covered with buttons in bright primary colors. Each pair is measured with a little metallic compass, then laid on a contraption like a stack of piano keys, to steady the sole. They are put in another machine, which blows steam onto the leather, like a tiny hammam. “When you put the shoe inside here, everything wrinkled disappears and gets softer,” says Louboutin, “just like a woman doing her ablution.”

*Everywhere there are shoes, shoes, shoes... It is almost too much to bear...*

has at least 6,000 pairs, if not more. She comes to Paris, and she literally buys everything. Then she flies back to New York, says, ‘I’m a little disappointed—there’s nothing in the store,’ and walks out with 80 pairs.” He grins. “She is *super*.”

#### Foot Fetish

Shortly after leaving Milan, Louboutin heads to Moscow for an art exhibition celebrating his fetish-inspired shoes photographed by filmmaker David Lynch. Here, the shoes are no longer frivolous, no longer

select the shoes for her, in a very coded ritual,” he trills. “One day, I helped her to her car, and when she opened the trunk it was stacked to the top with my shoeboxes. She’s buying the shoes, and she doesn’t even wear them.”

The exhibition is at the Garage Center for Contemporary Art, a 1926 bus station remodeled into an art gallery by oligarch Roman Abramovich’s girlfriend, Dasha Zhukova. Louboutin and his date, Melita Toscan du Plantier, the widow of the French movie producer, take seats next to Lynch and his wife, Emily Stofle. “These pho-

## LOUBOUTIN’S “SUPER-TOP” CUSTOMER? “DANIELLE STEEL. SHE HAS AT LEAST 6,000 PAIRS.”

“You know, I love it when women say to me, ‘Oh, I am your biggest customer—I have 15 pairs of your shoes!’” says Louboutin, climbing the stairs back to his design studio. “I’m like, ‘Darling, you have no idea.’ For me, a big customer has to own at least 500 pairs of shoes.”

*Five hundred pairs?*

“I’d say about 3,000 women have 500 pairs,” he declares. “But those aren’t the biggest customers. Those customers have”—a pregnant pause, and then a bit hesitantly—“about 6,000 pairs.”

*Six thousand pairs!*

These are truly the queens of the world, a clique that includes a Moroccan princess and, he says, Betty Lagardère, widow of French mogul Jean-Luc Lagardère, who is rumored to have a whole floor of her home reserved for Louboutins. Elite women who may own fewer of his shoes receive special service as well, like, he says, imperious Mme. Hariri of the billionaire Lebanese family. “With Madam, she will come to you first, but once you know her, you must come to her,” says Louboutin. “It is usually the same with the very rich, especially from the Middle East. On the first floor of her residence in Paris, there are 10 salons, and it seems that the entire luxury world is waiting in each one—the man from Van Cleef and so on. There she is in her makeup, with the eyes done and everything, but still in her robe—she just woke up at four P.M., fully groomed. And you explain to her what you can do for her. It is very *en privé*.”

*But who is the No. 1 customer?*

“The super-top customer?” says Louboutin. “Danielle Steel, for sure. She

the frilly embroidered Marie Antoinettes—this is shoe as weapon, as tool of domination over the male gender. All of the shoes in this exhibition are completely un-wearable outside the bedroom, though several have been custom-ordered for exactly this purpose.

A red stiletto with a 10-inch heel looks like it could be worn only by Barbie. A pair of black leather heels are glued next to each other, like Siamese twins. “I would not call myself a fetishist, in that I am not specifically sexually interested in these shoes,” says Louboutin as he scans the gallery. “But I must admit I love to look at them very much.

I find them so powerful, so beautiful.” He laughs. “O.K., maybe I am a bit of a fetishist.” He leans in close. “You know, I have one client in Paris, a psychoanalyst, who only comes to shop when I am in the store, and I must

tos are about a mood, a safe place, a secret place, cozy, protected,” says Lynch, motionless in his spotless white suit. “A place where you can fulfill your desires.”

The four of them stick close together at Zhukova’s 200-person banquet dinner in the restaurant of the Central House of Writers. “This is really one of the few places in Moscow that has preserved well over time,” says Zhukova, twirling through the party in a pink Rodarte dress. “It used to be a place that was only accessible to writers, politicians, and elites—but after Communism ended, it became open to everyone.”

This isn’t a party for plebeians, though, with many wives and daughters of oligarchs in attendance.

They are yet another international set of girlfriends for Louboutin, who has two boutiques in Moscow, with new shops planned for Jidda, Riyadh, and Beirut this year. Global economies may falter, but the needs of the tippy-top of the girl-chic set are too big to fail.

After the party, a dozen black BMWs snake through the city to a private club where Zhukova has arranged for Mark Ronson and Daisy Lowe to D.J. The banquettes are cluttered with dozens of bottles of liquor—imagine bottle service on a Russian

scale—set among platters of sliced oranges and watermelons, and a few hookahs. Louboutin takes to the dance floor, like Cinderella, floating on the constant stream of adulation. “It’s like I’m a young girl going to a ball,” he says, smiling. “Everyone wants me.” □



#### RE-INVENTING THE HEEL

From top: Louboutin and Diane von Furstenberg; with, from left, Melita Toscan du Plantier, Princess Olga of Greece, and Daphne Guinness; the Marie Antoinette shoe.

