

THE SNEAKER PIMPS

How the humble trainer became the 21st century's most important status symbol

Daniel Scheffler

Sneakers are a perfect expression of 21st century society, both a mirror to and a microcosm of western culture. The humble trainer, as we call them on this side of the pond, encapsulates the finely balanced contradiction at the heart of the fashion world: the battle between individualism and uniformity. They're rampantly capitalist status symbols produced by global conglomerates and backed by the world's biggest celebrities, from Cristiano Ronaldo to Kanye West.

"The cultural aspect of sneakers is directly tied to the rise of hip-hop in the 1970s," says Sean Williams, creative director at Skechers. "It was a backlash against the establishment rules that said you must wear shoes to

be considered wealthy or intelligent." Off the court or field of play, sneakers were seen as "low class footwear".

Those pre-1970s days are a world away from the cultural dominance trainers enjoy today: "Sneaker culture is receiving visibility due to the internet, sports coverage, music videos, even local news coverage," says Williams. The market for them is ever-expansive: the industry today has annual worldwide sales of \$55bn, with the US grabbing about \$22bn of that. Forbes has even coined a word for it: sneakeronomics.

The UK is no laggard, either: Sports Direct is the third largest international retailer with sales of about \$2.5bn. Harrods, meanwhile, recently commissioned 20 top designers to produce limited-edition sneakers for its Catch Me If You Can campaign celebrating the anniversary >





From top: Nike X Supreme Dunk High Pro; Ron Wood Pow; A pair of Nike hightops customised by artist Tom Sachs



► of its gigantic Shoe Heaven department. The resale market for limited edition sneakers – some complete with autographs – is also exploding. But the truly rare – and truly expensive – sneakers, according to Williams, are the samples that never made it to retail, or a sports player’s personal model that never made it to retail. “To get your hands on them, you either have to know someone or be willing to spend quite a bit of money – and possibly give up a kidney,” says Williams.

And there are queues of people willing to spend top dollar on extravagant footwear purchases. They call themselves “sneakerheads” and they think nothing of spending four or five figures on the perfect pair of sneaks.

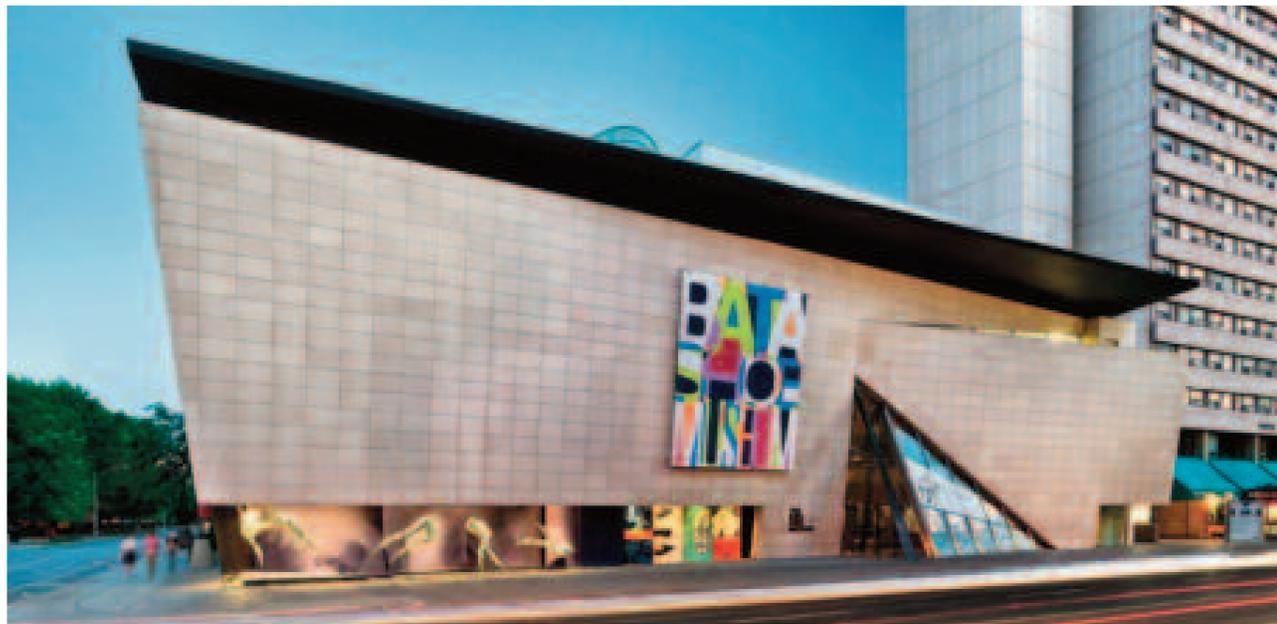
They form a tight-knit community, exchanging tips and information over the internet, and meeting outside stores at dawn as the latest limited-edition models are released. This culture, as Williams sees it, is made up of people who conduct themselves with “respect for the products, the creators and consumers of the product”. Williams says the term “sneakerheads” is used as a way to “form a bond with others that eventually transcends the sneakers themselves”.

This cultural significance hasn’t escaped the notice of academics. Sneakers recently took up temporary residence at the Brooklyn Museum with a show, entitled “The Rise of Sneaker Culture”. The exhibition, which originated in Toronto at the Bata Shoe Museum, explored how, in the words of Elizabeth Semmelhack, author of various shoe books and the curator of this show, “footwear is increasingly charged with conveying complex and nuanced social meaning”.

Society has long used shoes as a way of expressing gender, social status and cultural alliance. Today Semmelhack says sneakers in particular are used to “express masculism and individuality – something which men historically have not been encouraged to reveal through dress”.

Toronto’s Bata Museum, with over 13,500 items in its collection, was started by Sonja Bata in the 1940s, a proto-sneakerhead who traversed the globe in search of rare and unusual pieces. The current museum is a quirky landmark in old downtown Toronto, shaped, of course, like a shoebox. Designed by Raymond Moriyama, the museum is the largest of its kind in the world and features a selection of some of the most iconic shoes of recent times: the monogrammed silver platform boots of Elton John, a Terry Fox running shoe, white and blue patent loafers that belonged to Elvis Presley and even John Lennon’s famed Beatle boot.

The Brooklyn exhibition, which showcased approximately 150 pairs, explored the evolution of the sneaker from its utilitarian beginnings to its current role as “status symbol and urban icon”. The comprehensive, international works include collections from the Kosow Sneaker Museum, Northampton Museums and Art Gallery, and the archives of manufacturers including Adidas, Converse, Nike, Puma, and Reebok. But the real loot is the loans from private collectors including the legendary Darryl “DMC” McDaniels, sneaker guru Bobbito Garcia, and Dee Wells of footwear blog Ob- ►



From top: *The Rise of Sneaker Culture* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum; the facade of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto

► sessive Sneaker Disorder.

The scope for collectible footwear is growing as the technology we use to create trainers improves. “The current interest in futuristic design feeds well into the popularity of sneakers,” says Williams. “Many are now created using interesting technologies and innovative materials that make them cutting edge.”

So, now that your interest has been piqued, which sneakers should you be running out to buy? The sneaker world is scurrying for Kanye West’s new Adidas ones, and there’s also a resurgence in demand for nos-

talgia pieces like the Stan Smith collection. “Air Jordans never go out of style,” says Williams, “and a recent addition to the highly sought after list is the new Under Armour Curry One sneaker”. Stephen Curry was, according to the sneaker world, the hottest player in the NBA this past year, so it makes sense to pay tribute through your choice of footwear.

And once you own the coolest sneaks in town, you’ll be instantly popular and happy. “I have great friends I met through sneakers,” says Williams, “some of us don’t even just stare at each others’ feet anymore.” **1**