



Tabitha Simmons

SHOE DESIGNER AND STYLIST

TABITHA SIMMONS RECENTLY CATALOGUED HER PERSONAL SHOE COLLECTION AND DISCOVERED she owns around 500 pairs. Given her line of work, such a hoard seems acceptable, but then the shoe designer's obsession with footwear started long before she launched her eponymous label in 2009.

"I have McQueen shoes from before I think they even had a shoe line," says the 45-year-old. She was styling Alexander McQueen shows at the time: "I would be scratching at the door, asking, 'Can I have a sample?' And they'd be like, 'Tabitha, you and your shoes!'" Simmons' soft accent, still thoroughly British despite her move to New York 14 years ago, lends her an air of innocence. "Now that I have a shoe line, it's even worse; a lot of them are at my office. I try to edit them and keep my favourites at home."

Simmons really tests her shoes. As a contributing editor for American *Vogue* and regular stylist for *Dazed & Confused* and *AnOther Magazine*, she's always racing around on set; and as a mother, she's continually driving her sons Elliot, 12, and Dylan, 10, to and from extra-curricular activities. "That's the good thing about being a woman designing footwear: you can make sure it works as well as looks great," says Simmons, showing off today's choice – a floral-printed flat, based on an English tapestry. It's these distinguishing prints that set Tabitha Simmons shoes apart. "All our prints are designed for us. I just think they have a great whimsy and a femininity. I still believe women want to be feminine."

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It's a claim she can substantiate; Simmons keenly consults social media for inspiration and as a means of following fans of her footwear: "I see people in our shoes on Instagram, and they're all over the world." Such consumer insights may now be on tap, but initially Simmons would look closer to home for feedback. She recounts how she would invite friends and editors to view her early collections: "It was really funny; they would all pick up very different shoes. That's how the Karen got its name, because Karen Elson picked it up. Grace Coddington picked up what became the Grace."

Simmons may be astute when it comes to understanding her clients, but she advocates art over adroit marketing strategies when designing. "I have never really followed trends. I have sort of worked from instinct. All the designers I've worked for always did what they wanted and what they felt at the time." Working for Dolce & Gabbana and Alexander McQueen in her formative years as a stylist clearly left an impact on the designer.

Simmons moonlighted as a model while studying film and set design at Kingston University. Though she claims she wasn't very good at it, modelling provided a springboard into fashion editing. A fortuitous meeting with stylist Katie Grand in her early twenties led to an assistant stylist job at *Dazed & Confused*. Simmons was subsequently asked to assist renowned New York stylist Karl Templer, which marked her indefinite move to the States. She was made fashion director at *V Magazine*, then, in 2004, moved to American *Vogue*, where she remains a contributing editor.

You might expect that Simmons' background in fashion, with its many insights and highlights, gave her an advantage when launching her shoe label, but she argues that the sense of immediacy required for styling can cloud one's vision as a designer. "Every single shoe collection was very different, because I was coming from an editorial side where it was about 'what's new, new, new?!'" Sometimes we need newness, but we also need to find our DNA. Those kinds of things take a bit longer. Now I feel like we have a handle on that."

Simmons admits to being a perfectionist – her shoes must be "comfortable, fashionable, timeless and functional" – but, inevitably, this leads to self-scrutiny. "I'm always thinking about how to improve. I don't think you ever look back and go, 'Great! I was really successful!'" she laughs. "You are like, 'Ah, how can I do this better?' 'Ah, there's the wrong stitching on this shoe!' There's always something to bring you back down to reality."

Luckily, her fans only see the fantasy; this season, it comes in the form of a dreamy shoe named Ginger (after Ginger Rogers). The buckled round-toe pump, embellished with magenta-winged dragonflies and vivid blue butterflies, was inspired by Art Nouveau pioneer Émile Gallé: "I love his wooden card table with dragonfly legs." For Simmons, ideas can materialise from anywhere. "Sometimes it's from travel, sometimes from a table. Or it could be from a chandelier, or a painting. I'm a bit of a magpie like that."

Story by JANINE LEAH BARTELS

Photography STEVEN PAN