

Noritaka Tatehana, *Heel-less Shoes* (2018).



HEAD OVER HEELS

Tokyo-based designer Noritaka Tatehana incorporates ancient Japanese craft techniques into everything from giant hairpins to heelless platform shoes.

By CLAIRE BUTWINICK

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oritaka Tatehana's incredibly arched heelless shoes cannot be purchased in any shop. Standing up to almost 20 inches tall, encrusted with gold studs or

Swarovski crystals, or made entirely out of glass, the physics-defying accessories, notably worn by Lady Gaga and Daphne Guinness, must be custom-made in his Tokyo atelier. Customers—those who can endure the three-year waitlist—fly to Japan and spend at least one week with Tatehana, who works with them to collaboratively design a one-of-a-kind shoe and tours them through his city so that they can fully understand the culture and techniques behind his work.

Yet, despite the couture nature of his handmade creations (which are surprisingly wearable; Guinness often sports hers around the office), Tatehana does not consider himself a fashion designer. For nearly a decade, he has made sculptures using time-honored Japanese craft techniques, reenvisioning their traditional roots to site them firmly within the context of contemporary art. Creating abstract interpretations of antique Japanese hairpins and the platform clogs worn by 17th-century Japanese courtesans (which inform the design of his improbable shoes), Tatehana's meticulous work highlights the beauty in utilitarian objects.

In October, the Portland Japanese Garden mounts his first American solo exhibition, *Noritaka Tatehana: Refashioning Beauty*, which showcases Tatehana's heelless footwear as well as never-before-seen additions to his *Void Sculptures*, an ongoing series inspired by symbols and signs found in Japanese culture, and his oversized *kanzashi* hairpin sculpture series from 2014. Dispersed throughout the garden's Tanabe Gallery (located in the Kengo Kuma–designed Jordan Schnitzer Japanese Arts Learning Center) and Pavilion Garden, Tatehana's pieces are enhanced by their setting's balance of modernity and tradition.

Born in Tokyo in 1985, Tatehana grew up just south of the city in Kamakura, surrounded by old shrines, including the renowned Kōtoku-in Buddhist temple. Much of his work, including *Camellia*

Fields (2017)—a circle of acrylic and bronze-red camellia blossoms, a symbol of life and death in Japan—is informed by his hometown. He studied fine art, Japanese crafts, dyeing, and weaving at Tokyo University of the Arts, and designed his first pair of leather heelless shoes for his graduation thesis in 2010.

"[At university,] I realized I should pursue the life of a true artisan, rather than focusing on a career as a fine artist or designer," Tatehana says. "It felt like this life path would suit my nature better. When I create a work of art—whether it is a pair of shoes, a sculpture, or a painting—I approach it in the same way: with an emphasis and reliance on the craft."

Inspired by *takageta* (tall wooden sandals worn by *oiran*, or high-ranking courtesans, during the Edo period, roughly 1600 to 1868), Tatehana's heelless shoes transform a 17th-century status symbol into revolutionary stylish stilts. Their abnormal design captivated the fashion community and became Lady Gaga's red-carpet staple in 2011. After appearances in the pop star's 2011 music video *Marry the Night* and a handful of collaborations with *Commes des Garçons*, Tatehana's shoes began to register as art. The Museum of Modern Art featured them in its much-anticipated 2017 exhibition *Items: Is Fashion Modern?*; today, the Met and the Victoria and Albert Museum both hold Tatehana's work in their permanent collections.

"It's hard to design something truly new for the fashion circuit," says Christina Cacouris, co-curator of the Portland Japanese Garden exhibition, who formerly worked as an editor at *V Magazine* and for British fashion photographer Nick Knight. "And yet, by creating a heelless shoe, Tatehana-san created a new silhouette. By eliminating the heel yet elevating the wearer, [the shoes] make a person seem alien at first—like an ungulated human."

Refashioning Beauty features more than a dozen of Tatehana's platform heels—including a new pair of baby heelless shoes and "frozen" boots made of acrylic—in addition to lesser-known works of grand proportions. His *kanzashi* are enlarged versions of Japanese hairpins that historically symbolized

elegance and refinement. Reimagined as human-sized sculptures made of urethane-coated wood, the magnified objects lose their practical purpose and are rendered purely decorative. Tatehana enlists help from artists skilled in Japanese lacquer (considered the finest in the world) to create the enormous hairpins.

Tatehana's *Void Sculptures* are a contemporary take on traditional Japanese swords owned by the country's 15th-century warrior class. Inspired by Japan's culture of signs and symbols and guided by French philosopher Roland Barthes's text *The Empire of Signs*, the blades are made from the Japanese steel *tamahagane* and encased in acrylic. Crafted by Kunihiro Kawachi, the son of a 14th-generation Japanese swordsmith, each sword is equipped with a scabbard and hilt. "[Tatehana] connects himself to the lineage of a master craftsman when he creates his designs," says Portland Japanese Garden curator Laura Mueller. "[Because he realizes] that he doesn't have a lifetime to learn the craft of swordmaking, he works with the masters of that craft to maintain the excellence of the work."

While Tatehana collaborates with experts on most of his sculptures, he creates his heelless shoes by hand, sometimes soliciting help from an assistant. Beginning with the shoe's platform, Tatehana hammers nails into the bottom of the toe box to anchor the only element of the shoe that meets the ground. Then he hand-carves the shoe along the contours of a men's insole and glues the pieces to four three-dimensional parts that form the shoe's base. Finally, he applies the shoe's custom outsole, pulling it taut in all directions, and secures it with glue and water.

In a culture of mass-produced, easily disposable objects, Tatehana's elevation of traditional craft seems all the more imperative. His attention to detail reframes decorative items as artifacts and unearths traditional foundations of Japanese culture. "He [doesn't] want to be a lone success," says Cacouris. "He [wants] contemporary Japanese artists and traditional Japanese design to be seen on a global scale and to reignite interest in it. In that sense, he's more than an artist—he's a cultural ambassador." »



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Heel-less Shoes* (2018); Noritaka Tatehana with a work from his *Vanishing Point* series (2018); a work from his *Hairpin* series (2018). ✱

