

PRESS RELEASE

January 2024

SNEAKER

17 February–26 May 2024

Sneakers are more than just shoes: from a childhood dream to a status symbol, an expression of identity to an investment, a fashion statement to a political one. Originally exclusively designed as a sports shoe, the sneaker has experienced a rapid rise since the 1980s. Thanks to the influence of basketball and hip-hop culture, they first made their way onto the streets, then into mainstream and mass culture, before finally reaching the runways of major luxury labels. The exhibition at the NRW-Forum celebrates the cult object with around 250 pairs of collector's items alongside design classics and social media icons.

Visitors enter the exhibition through an oversized shoebox showcasing perhaps the most coveted sneaker in the world: back in 1989, a prototype of the legendary *Nike Mag* featured in the film *Back to the Future II*. Around 25 years later, it went on sale as a limited edition. In the exhibition, the original prop shoe will be shown for the first time alongside the fully functional model with automatic lacing and LEDs.

How did these shoes become legendary – and who helped them achieve this status? The beginning of the exhibition highlights their roots in sport and music and explains their success using original models such as the *Adidas Superstar* from the 1970s: this originally functional training shoe became a lifestyle object and gained a foothold in school playgrounds. The *Air Jordan* series, a collaboration between Nike and basketball legend Michael Jordan, played a particularly important role in the early days. A highlight of the first section of the exhibition is the complete *Air Jordan 1* series from 1985 in all 20 colour variations, which is only owned by a handful of collectors around the world.

“Today, there is a real hype around sneakers, which is the focus of the main part of the exhibition. There are collaborations with stars and artists, international brands and even designers such as Salehe Bembury, Ruohan

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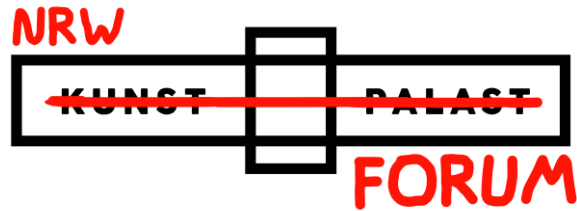
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Wang and Virgil Abloh. In addition to this, we regularly see unusual and surprising brand collaborations – like those with Lego, Swarovski, *Star Wars* and Tiffany,” says curator Alina Fuchte. On display are design objects such as the build-it-yourself *Adidas ZX8000 Lego 2020*, the *Nike Air Force 1 Tiffany & Co. 1837* and the *Adidas Superstar Crystal 2001*, which is jewelled with Swarovski crystals.

Sneakers have become collectors’ items around the world, sometimes costing thousands of euros and selling out in seconds. In 2005, the *Nike SB Pigeon Dunk* made it onto the front page of the *New York Post* due to the “sneaker riot” it caused: young people set up camp outside the New York store days before it went on sale as the police tried to keep the crowd in check – those lucky enough to get their hands on one of the 150 pairs were sent home in taxis for safety reasons. Today, the scramble for shoes takes place online rather than in stores, as part of so-called sneaker “drops” or “raffles”. Many shoes go viral thanks to their presence on Instagram or TikTok, such as the *Big Red Boots* by the US collective MSCHF, which are also on display in the exhibition.

As well as futuristic designs, the final chapter of the exhibition features sneakers that use innovative technologies such as auto-lacing, augmented reality and 3D printing. Looking ahead to the sneaker culture of tomorrow, this section also showcases anti-consumerist and sustainable approaches.

The exhibition is curated by Alina Fuchte, NRW-Forum Düsseldorf

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