Shoe obsession is not a new phenomenon. In some versions of the Cinderella story, which has roots in classical antiquity, the wicked stepsisters cut off their toes to fit the glass slipper. More recently, who can forget Carrie Bradshaw’s Manolo Blahniks in Sex and the City—or her assertion of “a woman’s right to shoes”?

A new exhibition at FIT, Shoe Obsession, turns the spotlight on our culture’s current craze, with more than 150 examples, almost all of them designed since 2000. Why are we so enamored with shoes right now?

As the price of designer garments has soared, and the general population has adopted a more uniform look, fashion has been increasingly expressed through accessories, says Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of The Museum at FIT, and the exhibition’s co-curator. “It” bags had a decade-long run, she says, but that trend peaked, and shoes have taken their place. “Shoes play so many different roles in our identity, and you can play with them,” Steele says. “You can wear simple ballet flats during the day and change into something high and ‘fetish-y’ for evening.”

The show features plenty of avant-garde shoes, says Colleen Hill, the museum’s curator of accessories and co-curator of the exhibition. Whether it’s Marielka Ratsma’s Biomimicry shoe, created with a 3D printer, or Noritaka Tatehana’s bizarre Lady Pointe shoes, originally designed for Lady Gaga (the ones on display were made for the museum), the show’s objects resemble fine art more than pedestrian accessories for actual women. “It’s really not about wearable shoes,” Steele says.

Shoe Obsession is co-sponsored by the Couture Council and Saks Fifth Avenue. The show runs through April 13.
Aperlaï (Alessandra Lanvin)
Fall 2011
Photograph courtesy of Aperlaï

Manolo Blahnik
Sedarby pumps, 2003
Photograph © The Museum at FIT

Nicholas Kirkwood
Fall 2011
Photograph courtesy of Nicholas Kirkwood

Alexander McQueen
Spring 2008
From the collection of Daphne Guinness
Photograph © The Museum at FIT

Roger Vivier (Bruno Frisoni)
Eyelash Heel pumps, fall 2012-2013
Rendez-Vous (Limited Edition Collection)
Photograph courtesy of Roger Vivier/Photo by Stephanie Ganiguès

Alexandre Birman
Resort 2013
Photograph courtesy of Alexandre Birman

Noritaka Tatehana
Lady Pointe shoes (designed for Lady Gaga), 2012
Photograph courtesy of Noritaka Tatehana