



Howard Miller

Academic, businessman,
foodie... shoe blogger?

Howard Miller, chair of the Department of History, Politics and Philosophy, has an eclectic past.

He served in the U.S. Army, where he learned Arabic. He worked as a stockbroker in California. He earned a master's degree, an M. Phil. and a Ph.D. from Yale University researching Islamic culture and cuisine.

And he is Manolo, the Shoe Blogger, one of the first fashion bloggers on the Internet.

Yes, you read that sentence right.

Miller is a respected social historian, who at one point made a good living anonymously writing pithy—often cutting—but always hilarious, commentary on the latest shoe styles and the celebrities who wore them. What's more, he wrote about such things in the persona of Manolo the Shoeblogger, a fictional Spanish fashionista who writes in the third person and holds a love for the definite article "the."

A recent example from "the Manolo's" trip to Santiago, Chile, with Lipscomb's study abroad students in spring 2015, on shoeblogs.com:

"It is summer in the Hemisphere of Southerness! What better way to celebrate the quirky excitement of the Santiago de Chile, than with the chunky

platform sandals with the embroidered flowery details from the Prada!"

Miller's blog was so popular that he became a pioneer in the young and growing fashion blogging industry of the early 2000s and one of the first entrepreneurs to make money at it.

"It was a smart move, to stay anonymous," said Miller, "because most of my fans certainly didn't picture Manolo the Shoeblogger as a stout Christian man with four kids in Iowa!"

Yes, indeed. The blog was mentioned in *Vogue* in 2007 as "the first fashion blog – the prototype from which all others struggle to keep up." *Money*

magazine called Manolo the Shoeblogger the “new fashion online Sherpa.” Tim Gunn, host of the fashion reality show *Project Runway*, sent Miller notes. The *Philadelphia Enquirer* and the *New York Times* ran features touting the quirky blog.

The real Manolo Blahnik, a Spanish fashion designer and founder of the luxury shoe brand, said in response to questions about his possible authorship of the blog, “Sorry, not me. But it’s very funny isn’t it? Hilarious!”

Miller’s secret came out in 2015, and that summer, Miller began trading on that fame with a new blog—*An Eccentric Culinary History*—that explores the history of food from a more academic standpoint, using primary research sources. His first long-form post was on the sushi craze of 1905. It garnered 60,000 hits in the first week, and Miller was subsequently interviewed on the history of sushi on the public radio show “Here and Now.”

Despite his feisty alter-ego, Miller is no academic lightweight. He has published numerous papers on Islamic culture, cuisine and literature and a chapter in “*Food, The History of Taste*,” a James Beard Award-nominated book. He won a Fulbright Scholarship to go to Spain and is working on a book exploring the history of romantic love.

“This isn’t academic history, with footnotes and a dreary tone of measured knowingness. I wanted to use the blog format to show history to regular people.” Miller said. “I hope I’m helping people reassess things they thought they knew, and to send the message that this is a viable way to approach history: you see something that interests you, and you research it and write a story about it.”

Miller’s first blog, a political rant blog called *Traveling Shoes*, came in 2002. He moved from New York to begin his academic career and in 2004 found himself teaching in Iowa, needing a little extra income so his wife wouldn’t have to work.

As a social historian, Miller is a master at pulling together seemingly disparate information and noting their historical and cultural relationship. That ability served him well when he heard about a fake Nick Nolte blog at the time and read a profile of Manolo Blahnik. He put two and two together, and came up with a wholly new idea.

He created a fashion parody blog written anonymously as Manolo the Shoeblogger. Within months, his online blend of snarkiness, fashion commentary, humor and satire became wildly

popular in the blogosphere. Today, such cutting, gossipy commentary is a staple of the fashion industry, but at the time Miller began his blog, no one had done it online before.

“I had a sharp eye for making fun of celebrities. My wife would pick out the shoes, and I would create a little fantasy story around them,” Miller said. “I never dumbed it down, and that made it funny and quite popular for a while.”

His linguistic background allowed him to realistically write the blog in a Spanish accent, with his backwards grammar and trademark third-person references capping off the disguise.

So from celebrity shoes in 2005 to sushi parties at the turn of the century, Miller strives to make history something that people enjoy reading.

“All the Manolo can say is that this is the authentic voice of the Manolo,” the Manolo wrote in a 2005 interview with *ProBlogger*. “And, of course, the readers of the Manolo, they react most favorably.”

Within a year of launching *Manolo the Shoeblogger*, Miller launched *Manolo’s Prada Blog*, *Manolo for the Men*, *Manolo for the Brides* and *Gallery of the Horrors*. The blogging enterprise was bringing in six figures at that point, Miller said.

Originally, the blogs made money by including embedded URL links for Zappos, an online shoe retailer that was also a new Internet venture at the time. When the Manolo wrote about a certain shoe style, the text would link directly to Zappos where readers could buy that shoe. Miller received a portion of all the sales that were routed through his blog. He also sold ads on his blog sites, embedded links to Amazon products and sold miscellaneous “the Manolo” products like T-shirts.

“The timing was just right,” said Miller. But not for long.

At the height of his blog empire, Miller had 12 blogs, 13

writers contracted to work for him and was posting commentary of plus-size women’s clothes, home décor and men’s fashion. But by 2008, the Wall Street crash and the evolution of the industry caught up with him. He wasn’t the only one out there doing innovative things with Internet marketing anymore, and it cut into his profits.

“It is so hard now to break through all the voices,” Miller said of today’s blogosphere. “I succeeded because I knew promotion. But today blogs are super-professional, run by corporations, and it’s much harder to break through.”

The Manolo continued to post daily until 2011 and then two posts a week until 2013. Since then, the Manolo’s posts on *shoeblogs.com* have been sporadic and rare.

As a full-time academic again as of 2011, Miller wanted to do more serious, deep writing, but entertaining as well. In part because his agent is one of the top literary representatives for food history writers, Miller decided food would be his focus on his newest blog.

He launched *An Eccentric Culinary History* (*eccentricculinary.com*) in April and has posted various articles on poultry farming; prime rib; a terrible hamburger in Seville, Spain; the trendy use of mason jars; and several articles on Chilean cuisine (chronicling his adventures with Lipscomb’s study abroad students).

In July, he posted his first long-form, researched piece on the history of sushi in America. Through his research of the delicacy, he makes a case that America’s relationship with Japan was far more complex and nuanced than we may believe today when we see only references to America’s internment camps and racism during and after WWII.

Americans were eating sushi by 1904; American women were marrying Japanese men in the 1870s and Japanese restaurants spread across the West in the 1880s, Miller said.

So from celebrity shoes in 2005 to sushi parties at the turn of the century, Miller strives to make history something that people enjoy reading. By exploring the food people eat, the clothes they wore, the technology they used, historians today can understand more about how our modern concepts and society developed, and where it may go in the future.

So says the Manolo.