

An exchange programme launched by the JM Weston Foundation gave four footwear students, two from France and two from Japan, the opportunity to experience shoemaking in their different countries.

Footwear students step into the unknown

The JM Weston Foundation was established by the footwear brand to mark the 120th anniversary of its founding in 1891 by Edouard Blanchard. Its main aim is to promote artisanship and to ensure France's special *savoir-faire* is transmitted to the next generation. As part of this mission, in 2017 it launched the JM Weston Foundation Award in partnership with Les Compagnons du Devoir et du Tour de France, an organisation with a long history of passing on artisanal skills and techniques in France.

The award is inspired by the adventures of Eugène Blanchard, son of the founder, who at the turn of the 20th century was sent by his father to the US to study Goodyear stitching techniques and ways to work with variations into

shoe models. The town he pitched up in was Weston, Massachusetts, from which the brand eventually took its name. The methods that the young Blanchard brought back to France with him continue to be employed at JM Weston's factory in Limoges, a testament to the value of the time he spent in the US.

The brand wants to give young French shoemakers the same opportunity to enrich their lives and broaden their horizons. Clémence Rochard and Emma-Léa Marechal were the first beneficiaries of this initiative and were awarded the prize of a lifetime: a trip to Japan to increase their knowledge and to advance their shoemaking skills.

After being selected from the students who were coming to

The four students who took part in the exchange – (l-r) Masako Hoshino, Clémence Rochard, Emma-Léa Marechal and Tetsuhei Kamimura – at a ceremony for the JM Weston Foundation Award in Paris.

ALL CREDITS: VINCENT LEROUX





The shoes created by the students using the techniques they had learned during their respective trips to France and Japan.

the end of their training at Les Compagnons du Devoir, they spent two months in Tokyo with the support of the foundation. While there, they worked alongside renowned footwear artisan Yohei Fukuda, who taught them about traditional Japanese footwear manufacturing, as well as spending time in the workshop of Japanese brand Scotch Grain.

In comments to French media following the trip, Ms Rochard said one of the first things she noticed was that making a shoe in Japan seemed to require more precision and exactness than she has been used to in France. She added that in her home country "a certain artistic spirit" holds sway which leaves room for "less rigour".

For her part, Ms Marechal said the way in which the shoe is made in the two countries "is not in itself fundamentally different". She pointed to the extreme sense of client service in Japan as one of the key differences compared with France. She described her stay in Asia as "an incredible experience" and "a window into the world".

A valuable exchange

Their visit was part of a new French-Japanese exchange programme set up by the Foundation to allow artisans from the two countries to share their experiences and their culture.

At the same time that the two French students were in Tokyo, two Japanese students, Masako Hoshino and Tetsuhei Kamimura, were learning about French shoemaking at JM Weston's factory in Limoges and at the headquarters of Les Compagnons du Devoir in the suburbs of Paris. They were chosen by a jury consisting of representatives from JM Weston in Japan, the brand's second most important market, and Japanese artisans like Mr Fukuda.

The foundation paid the travel and accommodation costs of

all four students as well as giving them a bursary to cover their living expenses while they were away.

At the end of the programme each student was asked to create a pair of shoes using the techniques they had learned. Their shoes were displayed at a ceremony in the residence of the Japanese ambassador to France, where they also received the first JM Weston Foundation Award. The president of the Foundation, Christian Blanckaert, congratulated them for their "remarkable work" and expressed his delight at the success of the first award programme.

Explaining the foundation's choice of partner country, Mr Blanckaert said: "If ever there were a country which knows how to transmit the idea of supreme quality and excellence, it is Japan." Work is underway to organise a second exchange with Japan, he revealed.

At the end of his time mentoring the French apprentices, Mr Fukuda said: "They have worked hard on their projects and made beautiful shoes." He added that it was easy to work with them because of the skills and knowledge they already had from their training in France. Mr Fukuda also told *World Footwear* that he chose not to give them the answers to all of their questions because "the process is important". He felt it would be good practice for them to think and find some answers for themselves.

The Foundation hopes the students' experience in Japan will enhance their career prospects. It already works with Les Compagnons du Devoir to provide post-secondary school training and work programmes for young French people, but the Award and accompanying exchange takes things a stage further by offering aspiring French shoemakers the opportunity to immerse themselves in a professional environment and a culture which differs from the one they are accustomed to. 