

Nine Lives

With an enthusiastic nature and modern sensibility, Nine West Creative Director Fred Allard aims to keep women au courant.

<< By Tatianna Beedar

10:24 AM: I arrive at 1411 Broadway, where I meet Fred Allard, creative director of Nine West Footwear and Accessories. Flanked by his team of accessories designers, Allard is selecting fabric for the upcoming collection. He is interested in some yellow and green canvas, and gets particularly excited over some embossed and printed cork swatches.

10:43 AM: Allard gives me a tour of the newly remodeled design floors. He shows me the inspiration closet, filled to the brim with assorted shoes and accessories that he and his staff have collected from around. Allard emerges with a vintage pair of YSL espadrilles.

"They are from 1972," Allard notes in his dulcet French accent. He adds that these espadrilles are particularly significant because when YSL first ordered the high-heeled version from Castañer, not only was it a design revolution for the espadrille, but it was an instant sensation.

Next the trend room—Nine West's chapel, as it were—for idea development. It is an oasis of art books and magazines where, at the moment, Allard is experimenting with a new method of presenting design themes so his staff can refine trend concepts. Oversized posters have been made of models Photoshopped into lifestyle scenes and accompanied by titles like *Cleaner Air*, *Deco Dance* and *Fast Track*. Although each theme is exponentially different, the graphic and vibrant fabric choices create a unified look.

11:19 AM: We drive over to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to view the recently unveiled Poiret exhibit. So far, I am struck by two facts about Allard: one, that he is incredibly smart, and two, his enthusiasm about his work is contagious.

I inquire about how he got into footwear design, and soon learn that Allard comes from an incredible pedigree.

"My father, René Allard, was the chief designer of Charles Jourdan from 1961 to 1984, and he was designing for Dior, because Jourdan had the Dior license then," he said. And even before that, from 1959 to 1961, Allard says, his father worked in the design studio of Roger Vivier and Christian Dior in Paris.

Growing up in Vercors, located in the south of France, Fred Allard had envisioned designing clothing, not accessories and attended fashion school in Paris.

After two years, he changed his mind.

"I wanted to learn accessories, so my father sent me to a factory in Brittany. And that was really tough, but I cannot tell you how much I thank him now."

Allard spent a year in the factory learning how to make shoes from beginning to end. During that year, the factory went out of business and Allard packed his bags and ran away.

With all the boldness of youth, he showed up at Stephane Kélian studios and said he wanted to be a designer. He was hired the next day, and by the age of 20, he was the lead designer. He remained with the company for the next 10 years, designing collections for Kélian and licensed brands including Jean Paul Gaultier, Claude Montana and Celine.

"I got an offer from Calvin Klein," he said. "I didn't know it, but at the time Calvin Klein was talking with Nine West about licensing." Nine West co-founder Vince Camuto refused to sign the agreement with Klein unless there was an established shoe designer at the helm. After meeting with Klein, Allard flew back to France to consider the offer.

The day after his return, Allard received a phone call from Camuto saying that he wanted him to come back to New York.

"He was calling me directly," Allard recalls. "I don't know where he got my number."

After some persuading Allard returned to New York and the rest, as they say, is history. That is, until Rhonda Brown entered the picture. Allard, less than enthused about the appointment, left Nine West at the end of 2004 to join Castañer. But when Rhonda Brown exited Nine

West in April 2006, Allard returned in October.

11:40 AM: We arrive at the Metropolitan Museum and I am feeling terribly unaccomplished. The feeling only intensifies as we enter the Poiret exhibit. The modernity, sophistication and construction of these breathtaking styles reach a level that can only be defined as timeless. As we look, I get the feeling that for Allard, something is happening—something that will seep in and take hold at a later time.

1:00 PM: Following the museum, we head over to Bespoke Gallery in Chelsea to view another exhibit. Earlier in the day, Allard mentioned that he has purchased some pieces to hang in his office.

The artist, Franck Salzwedel, as well as Bespoke Gallery owner Rhiannon Kubicka, are on hand and take us through his exhibit, titled "Rising Color." Salzwedel's color-saturated canvases have a meditative, if not mesmerizing, effect.

"The work speaks on its own. It is almost like a colored being," Salzwedel explains. "You enter the room and it speaks to you or it doesn't speak to you, and in the case when it doesn't speak to me, I like to share it with friends. I like to hear Fred's advice because he is very good with colors."

1:35 PM: Lunch at The Odeon restaurant in Tribeca. Allard expounds on his directional philosophy at Nine West.

"We are shifting everything to be more creative," Allard says. "At the same time, we are rebuilding something and we need to do it stage by stage. Today, we are at the stage of reestablishing confidence." Ultimately, Allard hopes, his efforts will result in Nine West being recognized globally as a major accessories brand.

That philosophy seems to be working out. Reaction to the latest collection was phenomenal, and internationally the numbers are soaring. Handbags are being sold to clients who previously had no interest, and Allard estimates that jewelry and shoe bookings are up by 20 percent to 30 percent.

3:10 PM: Inspiration shopping in Nolita and Allard purchases a few pieces from the boutique Zero Maria Cornejo, noting the strikingly resemblance to Poiret's designs.

It is fellow designer Jean-Michel Cazabat's birthday today and Allard needs to pick up a present for him at Le Labo, a custom parfumerie in Nolita. After we visit Resurrection, the designer vintage mecca, on Mott Street. Among the assorted vintage gems are stacks of Charles Jourdan shoes created by Allard's father. I spot a pair of multicolored sequined shoes. His look of horror says it all.

"Very Bollywood," he says.

"Your father's," I say.

"Are you kidding me?" Allard asks as I show him the Charles Jourdan label.

"Oh, Dad!"



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