

# New Sensation

In a year that lacked clear trends, Jerome Rousseau made a big impression with his collection of luxury women's shoes.

By **JOCELYN ANDERSON**

When Jerome Rousseau turned 30 last year, he decided it was time for a change.

Already a successful footwear designer at Isabella Fiore, Rousseau was ready to strike out on his own. Within a matter of months, he made a splash with the Jerome C. Rousseau collection, 15 day and evening styles for women that debuted in fall '08.

"This was something I had considered for a long time, and I felt like I was mature enough to go ahead with it," said Rousseau, now 31. "I went into this with some high expectations. So far, it's even beaten my very best projections."

He sold nine styles at his first appointment with a retailer, and things only got better from there. He attended WSA last winter, and his innovative designs snared him even more retail clients.

Todd Hanshaw, DMM for Wynn Resorts in Las Vegas, bought the collection for the Wynn boutique Shoe In and the new shoe store, In Step, which will be located in the Encore tower, opening this month.

"I thought the shoes were a little different and very individual, but I didn't think they would scare somebody off," said Hanshaw. "We spend a lot of our time finding new designers, and it's probably one of our most difficult tasks to find someone who really has a different point of view, who is talented and who can produce for us and get it here in a timely manner. Jerome has done an amazing job."

The Canadian-born Rousseau studied footwear and accessories design at Cordwainers College in London, before going to work for designers such as John Richmond and Matthew Williamson. He moved to Los Angeles in 2004 to join the team at Fiore. After three years there, he was ready for his solo act.

He secured factory space in the Tuscany region of Italy and set up a studio in Los Angeles. Drawing from his love of eclectic music and art, he created a sexy, modern collection that includes heeled sandals, geometric block-heeled pumps and peep-toe booties, which retail from \$495 to \$1,200.

So far a self-funded venture, Rousseau's company has started small with the goal of expanding further and taking on investors at a later date. Still, the endeavor has had its share of difficulties, Rousseau said.

"The biggest challenge was to learn the business side of things — build a business plan, a cash-flow projection," he said. "Basically, your resources are fairly limited, and you need to do incredible things with them."

One way to build awareness on the cheap is to seed shoes to celebrities and have them be seen on the red carpet. Because Rousseau is designing for a woman of a "very versatile age," that leaves him a lot of options. The biggest star sighting yet has been Australian singer Lenka wearing his sandals on "The Tonight Show."

With the buzz surrounding Rousseau's debut, Wynn Resorts asked him to create a mini holiday collection for the new store's opening. He refabricated four styles, including the peep-toe bootie, in two colors each.



"He did some great things for us in oranges, yellows and golds — really vibrant colors," said Hanshaw. "The new shoe store is set to be much more fun and much edgier, but with the same sophistication level [as Shoe In]. Jerome Rousseau is going to be a very welcome part of it."

More recently, Rousseau presented spring '09, and several additional retailers picked up the collection, including Holt Renfrew in Canada; Harvey Nichols in Hong Kong and Riyadh; and Net-a-porter.com. Maren Roccamonte, associate buyer of women's designer shoes at Barneys New York, also added the line.

"His collection is edited and directional without being overstated and obvious," Roccamonte said. "He has a great personal energy and a lot of potential. We look forward to seeing how his collection evolves in the seasons to come."

Rousseau is now finishing his designs for fall '09, which he said are inspired by 1980s French new wave band Elli et Jacno, as well as the 1924 French film "L'Inhumaine," an artistic drama that highlights sharp angles and geometric shapes.

"In terms of the mood of the collection, I wanted to do something that's perhaps a little tougher, maybe rougher," said Rousseau. "The cuts are very light at the same time. I really love mixing contrasts, and there's something in the collection that's effortlessly sexy and almost has a 1970s glamour to it."

The assortment, however, will not include platforms or wedges. Though those styles have been a source of inspiration in the past, Rousseau said he is focused on moving forward in his designs and experimenting with color and shape — with the hope of becoming a permanent fixture in the footwear world.

"From the way things have been going lately, I don't think I will have a boring life," said Rousseau. "It's a constantly changing industry, and hopefully that will keep me happy doing this for the next six or seven decades."

**Above: Jerome Rousseau photographed for FN on Nov. 12 in Los Angeles. Below: Two styles for spring '09.**

