

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

DAVID EVINS

SHOE DESIGNER AND MANUFACTURER

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

DATE OF INTERVIEW

Tuesday, November 16, 1982

INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger

Spec. Coll.

gff

1.5.84

TT  
139

.073

v.34

FOREWORD

DAVID EVINS

ORAL HISTORY

David Evins is a shoe designer who has devoted his career to the design and manufacture of shoes of high quality. Since entering the shoe business, he has watched the transformation of a healthy industry into one which is small relative to the total volume done in shoes, and whose products are manufactured largely in Europe and the Orient.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DAVID EVINS

ORAL HISTORY

- 1 Birth in London; education in New York design schools
- 2 - 3 Illustrator for magazines and shoe pattern firms
- 3 - 4 Explanation of functioning of better priced shoe manufacturers  
in New York. How they worked with pattern making firms
- 5 - 6 David Evins, post WWII, sets up high priced shoe firm with  
George Miller
- 7 - 8 Developing the designs; visiting stores; brother handled  
production and administration
- 9 - 10 Sale of business to Genesco. Growth of European imports
- 11 - 13 Sale by Genesco to Marx and Newman. Shoes manufactured in  
Italy. Collection designed here, made in Italy
- 14 - 15 Differences in shoe manufacture between U.S. and Italy
- 16 Imports from Orient
- 17 Store shows
- 18 - 19 Working with apparel designers
- 20 - 22 Awards received
- 22 - 25 Developing a shoe collection by first studying current fashion  
trends, then selecting leather and other materials
- 26 - 27 Importance of some retailers in the past as help to designers
- 27 - 30 Technical aspects of shoemaking
- 31 Trimmings purchased in U.S.
- 32 - 34 Difficulties of starting shoe manufacture now in U.S.
- 34 - 36 Licensing as a marketing tool

Q: David, could we start with your own personal story. That is, where were you born and when were you born, and then let's proceed from there.

A: I was born in London. My elementary education was in London, and I arrived...My parents brought me here, at the age of 13. And at that time I had, of course, no idea what business I was going in, and got out of school and....What?

Q: I was asking where you went to school?

A: Where? I went to NYU. And I went for about three years. I wasn't too happy about it. And then I entered Pratt Institute, because I've always had an aptitude for sketching, designing...I didn't know what I was going to design....and illustrating.

Q: I'm sorry. I won't interrupt you anymore. But you didn't tell me when you were born.

A: I was born 70 years ago.

Q: Oh. That's 1912.

A: Right. And then...

Q: You said you were interested in lots of different kinds of design.

A: Exactly. When I got out of Pratt..I have to start thinking what happened all these years ago. When I got out of Pratt, my hope was to be a commercial illustrator. And I did some work for various designers that I...on a free lance basis, at that time. I wasn't employed by anyone. From there..

Q: Did you do illustration for manufacturers or for magazines or...?

A: Magazines. Publications. Again, on a free lance basis. One day I received a call from a shoe publication, and they wanted a free lance designer....I'm sorry. A free lance illustrator, to go around and sketch shoes, accessories, clothing, whatever, and that was really my first exposure to shoes. My father wasn't in the shoe business, and I never knew anything about shoes.

Q: Was he a manufacturer or a retailer or...?

A: No, my father was in the diamond business.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you just said he was in the shoe business.

A: No. Oh, no. He was not in the shoe business.

Q: Okay.

A: And I worked on this particular job....Again, it was a free lance job....for about three years. I got a little weary of it. I walked around the stores, looked at the windows, sketched the shoes, and then I had deadlines to meet. You know. On publications and so on. It became a bloody bore. And, now, let me see what the next step was. Then I received a call from a shoe pattern house. You see, in those days, a patternmaker, which is the technical end of the shoe business, in order to get shoe patterns, from which they made the money, they would hand out shoe sketches without charge, hoping in return there'd be a sense of obligation on the part of the manufacturer to give them the shoe pattern

business.

Q: How many manufacturers were there, about?

A: Well, at that time, in New York City, they must have had 80 different manufacturers.

Q: Really.

A: Oh, sure. New York City was the hub for quality shoes.

Q: Right. This is approximately what? 1932, thereabouts.

A: That was around '36. Somewheres around there. And I worked for this gentleman, and that's where I really learned the fundamentals of shoemaking, because the sketching of the shoes, and the making of patterns...I'd visit the factories and see actually how the shoes are constructed, and pieced together.

Q: So, the way it worked was that the patternmaker would be given a shoe design by a manufacturer?

A: No....

Q: All right. Then how...

A: Because in those days there were no such things as a shoe designer. Manufacturers employed patternmakers who were strictly technical men. Style wasn't that important in those days. And so the pattern shop owner, in order to get pattern business, would give the sketches away to the manufacturers. They copied this....or made a version of it, and so on, to ingratiate themselves, and then they would get brass bound patterns. That's what they were, that they cut the leather out of.

Q: Brass.

A: Bound patterns. The patterns were made out of cardboard

and then they had a brass edging around them, and then in the factory, they were given to the cutters, so they would, you know, just cut the patterns out of it. Cut the leather out of it. And that was a fascinating kind of business. I eventually became half owner of that business. And, I might add, in those days it was quite lucrative. Because there weren't many pattern makers. There were only about two in New York City, with all the manufacturing going on in that area. Now, I did that, until the war...

Q: Do you happen to remember the name of that firm?

A: McGee Patterns.

Q: McGee Patterns.

A: That's right. Let me see...At that time, yes...At that time...I found this out, being drafted in the army. And then they had, if you'll remember, a lot of government restrictions on the use of leather and the use of components and all that sort of thing. Anyway....

Q: It was the equivalent of the garment industry's L-85.

A: That's right. That's right. I'm trying to remember now...

Q: So there you were, working with all those restrictions...

A: That's right...So the result was that the manufacturers were obliged to improvise, using patterns and cut corners in the manufacture of shoes, and so on. So the business, the pattern business, suffered by it. Well, the next step...I found myself in the army and I was in the army for four years. And I had a lot of time to think about it, and I considered that I was really a ghost designer. That I was designing

shoes for shoe manufacturers without credit, without any recognition, and my hope was that when I got out of the army, I was going to manufacture shoes. And that was my first step. Just thinking about it. Now when I got out of the service, the first one that I contacted was Mr. George Miller, who was President of I. Miller. Very fine gentleman. He offered me a job, and I didn't want it. I said, "George, I want to go into business. I want you to help me." He said, "Fine."

Q: Excuse me. I don't want to interrupt your train of thought, but since you seem to know the history of the industry so well.... You mentioned that there had been about 80 shoe manufacturers...In New York.

A: That's right.

Q: Out of town, in St. Louis, for example. Were those centers of inexpensive shoes, and New York was the center of expensive shoes. Is that how it worked?

A: Correct. New York City was the center for quality shoes. St. Louis, New England, were popular priced shoes to low priced shoes. George Miller...Well, to make a long story short...

Q: No, don't make a long story short.

A: Okay. So we finally worked out some arrangement whereby I put up half of the money and I. Miller put up the other half and we became partners.

Q: How much money was half of the money?

A: I put in \$50,000 and I. Miller put up \$50,000, so we were equal partners. I might add that that \$100,000 disappeared in no time

at all.

Q: Really.

A: Because, in order to get a loft for the manufacturing of footwear, getting the machinery and getting it organized, it cost us about \$300,000. Oh, sure.

Q: In those days.

A: In those days. Yeah. And I didn't want to start in some little cubbyhole. I wanted a representative plant, and the Millers went along with me. They said, "Fine." With one proviso; your product has to be exclusive with I. Miller. In those days, I. Miller had stores all over the country. Besides their own manufacturing center. And again, right after the war, there were restrictions. You couldn't get everything you wanted. You couldn't get the lasts. You couldn't get certain leathers. And certain machinery. So it was really a waiting game. You had to improvise and do the best you can. Well, one of the interesting things was that I was so anxious to get started in manufacturing I found someone who was able to make cork clogs. And it seemed that the Millers had alligator that wasn't good enough for shoes. It was too stiff, South American alligator, and they just had it in the warehouse. They were ready almost to give it away. So I got the idea of taking these cork clogs, which required no shoemaking aside from just cementing the sole on, and covering the whole thing with genuine alligator. And I made a couple of hundred pairs, and put them in the Miller stores. And it was a smash hit. They loved it.

Q: How much did they sell for? Do you remember?

Q: Yes. They sold for about \$100 a pair.

Q: That was very expensive.

A: It was. In those days. And...But I didn't mind. I thought I'd start with fewer numbers, and get involved with the process of making shoes later on, at a different price range. After about a year, I think, or about a year and a half, the machinery came in and then I started manufacturing shoes.

Q: Where did the machinery come from?

A: Well, it came from...There was no Italian machinery in those days. It came from Boston. You had to look for factories that were willing to dispose of some of their machinery, so you really bought second hand machinery. Then I started manufacturing shoes. But I had a certain concept of design. I wanted lady like shoes. No jazz. No frills. A very, very fine quality. And I found out one thing. Although you have a product nobody knows out there, it just doesn't sell...You smile because you know what I'm talking about. My first friend in the shoe business was Stanley Marcus, and I presented the shoes to Stanley and he said, "Oh, these look great," and so on and so forth, and I said, "But how do you merchandise it?" And Stanley says, "I'll tell you what to do. We'll buy some of the shoes, but we want you to make a personal appearance, so that the public will know that there's a living person behind the product. It's not a corporate name." And that's how I actually started. I went to Neiman's, I went to Magnins...I remember Grover Magnin was very impressed with the shoes. And I found myself in no time at all going to about a dozen.

cities.

Q: How many shoes in the collection?

A: In those days? Possibly thirty. Forty. All types. From little low heels to high heeled booties, and all that sort of... Anyway, doing these personal appearances, I've had the opportunity of meeting all types of people and learning more about their requirements and the need of customers as far as shoes are concerned. And it was most helpful in the direction, whereby I knew I wanted to do lady like, feminine shoes, and just work in that direction, which I still am doing.

Q: Now, in your business with I. Miller--and was that called David Evins for I. Miller...

A: Yes. It was David Evins, for I. Miller, at that time.

Q: You handled the designing and the merchandising. Who handled the administration and the production?

A: Well, I had...I did the designing and part of the administration, but I never had a great knack for back office work--money and that sort of thing. I left that to my brother.

Q: Ah. You had your brother with you in the business.

A: Yeah. And he handled that phase of it. He handled the business end. And then eventually I expanded that business, whereby I had three salesmen--because I couldn't cover the whole country--And in time I was making...Let's see...I would say in about eight years I was making 1,000 pairs a day--Which in those days was a lot of shoes.

Q: A lot of shoes. Right. So your volume was approximately what?

A: You mean in dollars?

Q: Total volume. Yes.

A: Oh, I'd say about \$6 million. That was a success...

Remember, the shoes sold for \$29 in those days.

Q: That's a substantial amount of business.

A: Sure. And from there on, I just kept on doing it until I got an offer from Genesco. They wanted to buy the business. And I sold them the business...That's ten years ago. And part of the deal was that I would continue working with them. Which I didn't object to. And then a situation arose where we agreed to disagree, and closed up. But...At that period, there was a complete change in the industry. People like Geller, Palizzio, all the big factories, left New York and were all moving, and the market place was in Italy. And the reason for it was...or Herb Levine, for example. He closed too, at that time. Was because the prices of shoes... No, first of all, the union prices over here were so high that it was difficult to compete with the imports. The imports, primarily, from Italy. The Gellers were the first ones who moved out. And Palizzio then followed, with Herb, and then three or four others. And I saw the handwriting...

Q: What about Palter de Liso and...

A: At that time too. Yes. Palter de Liso. A very fine house. I saw the handwriting on the wall, and that didn't please me any, because all of these Italian shoes were coming in, and we just couldn't compete with them. I might add, the whole picture has changed today. If we

had a manufacturing business today, we could make the shoes a hell of a lot cheaper than what it costs us to make it in Italy.

Q: Really.

A: Sure.

Q: Is that because labor is now relatively less, or... materials or what?

A: Because the labor cost has gone up over there. And the simplicity of styling, you see. In those days they used to make platforms and two layer platforms and put an awful lot of work in them, which we couldn't compete with. But today, the big thing is the simple pump. Well, the simple pump, any manufacturer could make it, if there was one here making it. Unfortunately, there's only one small manufacturer left in New York City.

Q: Really? Who's that?

A: Cardone and Baker.

Q: Cardone Baker?

A: Cardone and Baker. But they've been in business for 50 years. There's another small one. Erika. They make 200-300 pair a day. And that's the whole shoe picture, industry in New York. It's a pity isn't it? So today, the whole shoe activity is in Florence and different parts of Italy, depending on what the price range of the shoes are.

Q: Now, there was a brief time, as I have it here, you do make shoes, also, or did, for Rayne-Delman.

A: Well, for Rayne-Delman, they were just another customer,

you see. I had Delman and I had Saks.

Q: I. Miller, I thought I remembered your saying that you made shoes just for I. Miller.

A: Yes. But then when Genesco got into the picture.

Q: I see.

A: Then I was able to sell everybody. And so there was no exclusivity. Of course, we had another...When I mention exclusivity...And you will remember that...Where stores were eager to promote something that they had exclusive. Well, in California, for example, I would only sell I. Magnin. I wouldn't sell another store. In New York, I would sell Miller. I wouldn't even sell Saks Fifth Avenue, you see. Of course today it's a different story. Today you sell everybody...But the policy of stores has changed in the meantime. So today, for example, the shoes I'd produce today, the word exclusivity doesn't even exist. And it's also no commonly a luxury.

Q: Well, now...I'm not sure I understand what the relationship is with Marx & Newman.

A: All right. When I sold my factory to Genesco...

Q: What year was that?

A: Ten years ago. I took about a year off. And..

Q: You sold your factory and your name.

A: Yes. And the name. Yes. But with permission to use the name, and so on. I wanted to go back into business. This business of not doing anything didn't please me. And then Marx & Newman...By that time I had a

pretty good reputation. People knew what I'd been doing and so on. And Marx & Newman bought the Evins business from Genesco. That's why they are able to use the name, you see. They set up a division for me, the Evins division, in Florence. All the...Every product that Marx & Newman makes is in Italy. And...See that picture over there. That's the building, that they're constructing. They're just putting it up now. Where it's exclusively Evins products. And I might add, it's been very, very successful.

Q: Now, how long has this been going on with Marx & Newman?

A: This is my fifth year.

Q: Your fifth year.

A: Yeah.

Q: So, how do you work it out now, technically? You design the collection here...

A: I do all my model work over here. You see all these? Then I have a patternmaker, who used to work with me years ago, who costs the models for me and he prepares it this way...

Q: Do you want to explain what it is, because...

A: In a dummy form, you see...

Q: In other words, what he's done is taken the form that you have, that you wanted to use, and he's covered it with leather, in the shape of the shoe...

A: Based on the design that I gave him. I prepare my whole collection over here. Then I select what I want to have made in Italy, and

we ship it over there, and then they make prototypes. And I go over there to check out the prototypes, the fit, the look, and so on. And decide what I'll have in the line.

Q: How many lines are you doing a year?

A: I'd say about four, but also a continuous kind of thing... Midseason kinds of things. Put in an extra couple of shoes. That sort of thing.

Q: Yeah, right. Taking perhaps some of the good bodies...in other fabrics or colors.

A: Sure.

Q: But that does mean that you travel back and forth quite a lot.

A: Yes, it does. Because, with all due respect to the Italians, who are great technicians, I cater to the American lady, not to the Italian. Italian feet are different than American feet. They've never heard of quads and triple A's. They've never heard of it. When I started, I was the first one that had four widths in lasts. In Italy, they make one width, and your foot has to fit into one width that they show in the store. I might add, it's changed now, somewhat, since American manufacturers are over there. But for their own use, they'll still make one, or possibly two. That is the width of the last. The shape of the last, is something...completely different. We have certain basic measurements that the Italians don't even understand. So for that reason, I'm there to check out the lasts, which is the base of the shoe. The fit. And check the measurements. And then after we have the

last, then we work on patterns, and we have to measure the height of the vamp, the height of the quarter, and other things.

Q: From my recollection, from what little contact I've had with shoes over the years, is that a run of sizes and widths, for an American store, is something like 12 or 15 different shoes. Right?

A: True. True.

Q: And they are now doing that for you?

A: Oh, yes. I was the first one where I insisted I wanted four widths, full and half sizes. They'd been accustomed to having one size. Five...not five. They start at 6, 7, 8. I do 6 1/2, 7, 7 1/2, and so on. And as I said, since my customer is the American woman, I think of her, and I don't think of the Italian lady. She has a life style that's different.

Q: So, you design the shoes...You send over the lasts...You send over the shoe for them to make the prototype.

A: Right.

Q: Do you buy your leathers here or there?

A: No, no. We don't even have tanners left in this country.

Q: Really.

A: Sure. Yes. You have one or two that handle cowhide. Well, I use very fine calf skin. Baby calf. And all of that is tanned in Italy today. And as I say, the market...You know, when you see buyers, dozens of them, who go to Italy, oh, maybe four or five times a year, to buy the shoes there. It's not the simplest way to manufacture shoes, I tell you that. Because the wear and tear is enormous. Going there, coming back, and so on. And

even if you speak Italian, the Italian mentality is completely different than the American. First of all, it's like the Mexicans. Manana. You give them a date when you want the shoes, and if it shows up a month later, why that's all right. The customer will take it. We haven't been trained that way over here. When we have a commitment with a store, we want it here at that time. Luckily, I have one manufacturer who does understand it, and I've had no difficulty. But where importers have shoes made in half a dozen different factories, under one label, then it becomes a problem, you see. But again, the business has changed in the sense that it's not as exciting as when I manufactured over here, where I had...I did shoes, for example, for the theatre. For all the movie stars.

Q: Let's go back and talk about those days. For example, obviously, the whole pattern making system has changed. Because you said when you started, there were two major firms that just made patterns.

A: That's right.

Q: What happened? How did that evolve into whatever it is today?

A: The patterns are now made in Italy.

Q: So that there really is no pattern making here at all.

A: No. There are no pattern makers left here.

Q: What about the inexpensive market. Do you know? Do they do the same thing? I mean...

A: The inexpensive market?

Q: Yeah.

A: Today....The inexpensive shoes are made in Korea and Taiwan

and Hong Kong, and also Italy, near the Adriatic. Around that area. And they have their own pattern makers, and American companies have what they call "Line builders." Which sounds like they're construction experts, but actually what they do is they stay in the factory and they just select the kinds of shoes and colors of leathers and so on to present the line over here.

Q: Are we talking about companies like Brown Shoe and...

A: Sure. Brown Shoe manufactures over here, but they also import a lot of shoes out of Europe.

Q: I see.

A: Oh, yeah. Most of them do.

Q: I really did not realize that.

A: Sure.

Q: So that, essentially, all that you do here..I mean, it's a significant part of the whole business...But in terms of the overall business and the commerce--the commercial sense--what you do here is design...

A: Exactly.

Q: And sell and distribute.

A: Right.

Q: And the rest of the process is done elsewhere. It's done in Europe...

A: It's done in Europe in the better market.

Q: And possibly in the Orient.

A: That's the shoe business today. But one thing I do miss,

coming back to what I started to say, is the association and the closeness that I had in those days, when I was in business, with the customer. Especially when I did personal presentations, and made shoes...colors that women selected, or heel heights that they selected, or whatever it may be. I kind of built up an understanding of their needs and their requirements. And....

Q: When did you start to do these shows? The equivalent, I guess, of...

A: They started, from the first day I began to manufacture shoes. Because if you'll remember, I said Stanley Marcus suggested that...

Q: Right. As a way of getting yourself known to...

A: So, in making these trips I became very well known, and had a good sized following, hereby when I made an appearance in a store, it became a special event. And it was great for the store. It was also good for my business, because it wasn't just a single pair of shoes that the woman selected, but the buyer would see if this particular number was selected by ten women, he in turn would write an order to cover the ten pair, to cover that type of shoe, which would be a guide for him. But...that part was the fascinating end of the business. Today it isn't.

Q: What happens with special orders today? You can't really handle them.

A: I don't have any special orders today. Today...manufacturing ...You mean can it be made in Italy?

Q: Yes.

A: It doesn't work. Because first of all the mentality of the manufacturer is such that a special order is something that you put aside and someday if he has a chance, if there's a chance to make it, he'll make it. So it's not reliable, and the customer may be waiting for months. Which is silly. I don't accept special orders today, at all. Because I hate to disappoint a customer, and I can't rely on the Italian manufacturer. But....

Q: Do you maintain a telex setup?

A: Oh, sure. Sure. Now, for example. I did the shoes for Mrs. Reagan. I had to send three telexes over there, just to make sure that it would arrive, for the Inaugural Day, and so on and so forth. And it's too much of a hassle.

Q: Well, now, why don't we talk about some of the work that you've done with individuals, like with the individual fashion apparel designers.

A: Yes. I have been a firm believer that footwear relates to apparel. If a woman wears a suit, and she wants a tailored shoe, it makes sense. And I follow apparel very closely. I've sort of always had a liking for apparel design. And I did...As a matter of fact, I've done shoes for Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta...You mentioned Norman Norell..for Norman. All his low heeled pumps. Practically everybody....And Galanos. Galanos has been my favorite all these years because I started just about the same time he did. And I'll never forget...He called me--and I'd never heard of him--and my wife prevailed upon me to look at his clothes, and so on.

Which I did. And he said, "Well, I want your shoe but I can't afford them." And I said, "You don't have to pay me. Someday you will." And we've had this association for years. Now, when I started manufacturing in Italy, dress designers...they work so late into the season. I have to work six weeks...six months in advance. You never have the right colors and the leather swatches...It became too complicated. So...

Q: Well, how did you work with Jimmy Galanos, for example?

A: Well, it was a joy. He'd get on the telephone and he'd say, "Look, I've got...The skirt length is this...And it's tailored," or, "It's dressy," or, "It's evening." I would guess, and try to imagine what he's talking about, and then just do the shoe right from the conversation. Once in a while he would sketch a shoe. He would say, "Something on this order," you know. Like an ankle strap, or whatever it may be. But his shoes were simple and mostly pumps. But the way he changed was the heel height. Which was important, because it relates to the hemline.

Q: So that you might be sending him 200 pairs of shoes.

A: Oh, sure. For a collection it was about that. But that in itself, taking care of the designers in New York was...the fashion business. Sometimes it was a labor of love. Because it wasn't the fact that ....some of them didn't have the money. This never bothered me. But I liked their work and I did it. And as I said, I did most of them. You name them, I used to take care of them.

Well, from there...Then I had these private people that I met through these personal presentations. That's where I got involved with the

people in the motion pictures business. And I did Lauren Bacall, Loretta Young, Claudette Colbert...all the old timers today, that you know of. And it was fascinating, because their taste level was completely different. And they wouldn't buy one pair. It would always be 15-20 pairs of shoes. And Magnin's did a great job in that department.

Q: Would you go out there to show them?

A: Oh sure. Oh yes. And today we don't have that sort of thing, you see. Because a woman could express her own personal ideas and say, "I want this type of a shoe. In yellow kidskin." Ora sandal, or whatever it is. And it could be done. Today it can't. The funny part is, I discovered on my last trip, that in Hong Kong, there's one fellow that comes to Beverly Hills twice a year and he takes special orders. Because he's able to copy whatever they want, or he'll do whatever they want color wise, and make it in Hong Kong, you know. They do that with dresses and shirts...So today, it's what I consider a very non-exciting business, in the sense that you don't have all these personalities involved with what you're doing. Today it's a matter of just developing a product that the store buys and likes and you sell it to the stores.

Q: You, over the years, have won a lot of awards. Would you tell us what those awards were and what they were for?

A: Well, I might add, I had so many I can't remember most of them. But the important ones were the Neiman-Marcus award, the Coty award, and then, in those days, the individual stores had their own award. It

could be...Garfinkels would have a special award. And I got an award, for example, from the Philippine government which always fascinated me. Because I developed the use of a certain material, a certain fabric that they had, a banana cloth, in making shoes. And so they sent me a statuette or something like that. Their version of an Oscar.

Q: And when did you win the Coty award?

A: The Coty award came...When did Dior have his new look?

Q: 1947.

A: Forty-seven. Forty-nine...I developed what we call today the shell pump, which is a very low cut pump, and it was developed on a form, of a special form, special last, to accommodate that low cut without pinching your toes. And it was a very successful shoe. And it was a new looking shoe. And silhouette. And that was basically the reason I got the award. And it was an achievement in technology more than design. So, the technology comes after you learn the shoe business. Then you learn how ...the technique of making shoes, you know.

Q: Well, I'd like to go into that in a few minutes.

A: But I have won numerous awards. I wish I could think of all of them.

Q: It would seem as though...An awful lot of people talk about the Neiman-Marcus award as being a really top level prestige...

A: Oh, there's no question about it.

Q: But does it continue now?

A: Not so....Yes, they have the awards. But it was such an exciting

event. Today they've cut it out, because Neiman-Marcus is owned by another corporation.

Q: They've cut it out entirely?

A: Yes, they've cut that out entirely. And believe me, if they still have it, I haven't heard about it.

Q: No, I haven't heard about it either.

A: No. But in those years, it was very important for designers. It gave them an opportunity to get known among other people, among other stores, and it was a really prestigious award. It was really something.... everyone tried to vie for it, you know.

Q: Had you gotten that before Coty, or after Coty?

A: Well, Coty came after.

Q: So you won the Neiman-Marcus award first.

A: Right. I don't even know what kind of awards you have left today. You do have a Coty award...

Q: Yes. Yes.

A: But...The award...The Neiman-Marcus award was really based on quality first. They were very, very fussy about the quality of a product and the originality of a product. Of innovating a new trend, or whatever it may be. And for designers, it was the prize package, so to speak.

Q: Right.

[Side 2]

Q: David, could you describe to us what goes into your development

of a collection?

A: A lot of thought, to begin with. You have to understand apparel. I should say, it's helpful. To know apparel. You have to understand the fashion cycles, and what and how it relates to accessories. You have to understand...And it's almost....You have to have a feel for it. When I say a sixth sense, it's important. You can almost guess. And that's why.... Mildred, you've seen designers...It may be in different parts of the country, come out with a similar thought, because there's a fashion cycle. My feeling has been, all these years, that a real change in fashion, a revolution, takes every 20 years. Every seven years is more or less of an evolution. And you can almost follow the cycles from Dior to Courreges. It was about a 20 year span. And by following the fashion cycles, you relate somehow to accessories. But you've got to understand it. So to me, the first thing you have to know is fashion. And that covers a whole range...It could....in apparel, in coats, suits, or whatever. Home decoration, for example. Oh, yes. Now, when I do a line, I chat with Bill Blass, with all of them. And I happen to be Treasurer of the Council of Fashion Designers, so I have an opportunity to chat with them all the time. And you get a feeling. Like, for example, this season, whereby we have a lot of tailored clothes--the suits, the jackets, the skirts, the woolens, the plaids, and all that sort of thing. My mind goes the tailored way. The tailored way in shoes would be high polished calf skins, stacked leather heels. Not high heels; medium to about 2 1/2 inches. Extension soles...By the same token, you might study, for example, the trend in evening wear or late day wear.

Whether the use of satin or failles or velvets, and so on. And then you decide, "Well, I'm going to use satin for evening shoes." As long as it relates to apparel. Because the buying habits of women, which is something that comes from experience; the easier a woman can select something to go with something she's wearing, the easier it is to sell the shoe. Now, for example I've got a whole...last season too for that matter...I did a whole group of satin shoes because for evening wear or late day wear, it's the simplest type of shoe a woman can buy. And it worked very well. Now, what were we discussing before?

Q: We were talking about how you develop a collection. And...

A: So, in other words, in my particular case, I sit down and I think of all these things, and then I condense the whole thing down, shoe wise, and that's why knowing the fashion cycles of shoes is important.

Q: So you've established the look--of tailored shoes--and your evening shoes...

A: And daytime shoes.

Q: Now what makes you decide about the materials you're going to use?

A: Well, in materials, to give you an example....In daytime shoes, I have to depend on the tanners for the color of leather, the type of leather (whether it's pig skin, calf skin, whatever it might be). So, we sample various leathers from different tanners. And then we build the line and I decide I'm going to use this type of leather or that type, whatever it might be.

Q: And the tanners all keep color cards over here?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. I get the color cards sent over here, just to...So after I have my color swatches, then it's a question of lasts, which...That creates the shape of the shoe. The toe shape. Should it be rounded? Should it be oval shaped? Or should it be squared off, and so on. And that's something that you yourself have to decide: Which would be attractive and timely, which is very important. So the last has to be...The last, actually, has to be developed in the last factory. Which is not in the shoe factory. That's a different business entirely.

Q: Owned by you? Or...Is it part of this business or a separate outside service?

A: It's part of the shoe industry, but it's...there it's a highly technical business, in grading the wooden forms, or the plastic forms, and so on. That's a business in itself.

Q: So that's done outside.

A: Oh, sure.

Q: Not by your company.

A: Um hum. So you develop the last, and there's heel heights. And you determine yourself whether you want to make a high heel or a low heel. But it's important that you create a character to the type of product that you want to manufacture. I, for example, will not make any extremely high heeled shoes because I'd rather let somebody else bother with it. And I don't like to make any fussy shoes with a lot of gingerbread, and so on. And I like to keep my simple silhouette, a quality, without any

frills. And to tell you how you build your line is really something that's within yourself. If this appeals to you, now the question is, will it appeal to a customer? To the buyer? So it's a matter of guessing your way through. No one knows how good the line is. You can have run into...do a whole line of things that you may like and then the buyers won't like it.

Q: When you mention buyers and liking it...There was a time when buyers really influenced your thinking, was there not?

A: Today, no.

Q: I've heard of a few merchants...No, I'm not talking about today. Years gone by. I've heard a few merchants, whose words were very influential...

A: That's true.

Q: In Neiman's, for example, Kay Kerr...Her opinion was... very valuable...

A: Yes.

Q: There was a man I've heard of named Ed Cohen...

A: Of course.

Q: Are such...Were such people useful to you, or helpful?

A: They were most useful. They were most stimulating, and very informative. But, unfortunately, in today's market, we don't have any of them. There used to be buyers that you could sit down and chat with them, that really had an understanding of the products. It doesn't work today, because these fellows are gone. Now they take...For example, they'll take someone out of lingerie and make them a shoe buyer. Now you tell me what

they would know about it. So, you don't have the same impact between buyer and designer that we had years ago. Oh, Kay Kerr was fantastic. You had a fellow at Saks Fifth Avenue by the name of Dahlberg, who was top man in shoes. And I'd listen to him all the time, because he was very knowledgeable. But in building the line, you really have to remember one thing: let it reflect what you think. In good taste. And, hopefully, it will be acceptable.

Q: Do you think that it would be appropriate to talk some about the technical aspect of the making of shoes? I say appropriate, because I don't know if this is ever going to be back in this country, from what you say.

A: I don't think so. Not for another decade. Because, number one, we don't have the workers anymore. You go to Italy, for example, you will find young people in every factory. Over here, the young people are not interested in shoes or in shoemaking. They're all interested in electronics. But remember, in Italy, shoemaking is a tradition. If the father's a shoemaker, the son, in most cases, follows his father. And that's why, you see, the young people, continuously working in Italian factories. Now, it might interest you to learn that in the designing area...Now, design in Italy combines patternmaking, or the construction of the shoe, in a school developed especially for that trade. Over here...Years ago, do you know, that F.I.T., for example, had a pilot shoe plant, where the manufacturers donated leather and machinery in order to teach young people the shoe business. There weren't enough young people interested in it, and they disbanded it.

And it was a pity.

The technical aspects of shoemaking...Well, is really highly technical. One sixteenth of an inch in the wrong place is a disaster. You've got to know measurements. You've got to know fitting. You've got to understand, on top of that, how the shoe is constructed; whether it's cement, sewn, or whatever it may be. You have to know the stitching of the shoe. How the pieces are put together. And that comes only from exposure and experience. See, now, if young people were interested in shoe making, or shoe design--let me put it this way--An intelligent approach is to get a job in a shoe factory. I don't care what kind of a job it is. Let them see what and how the shoe is made. How the various components of the shoe are put together. How the stitching of the upper is done, and the lining. I mean, these are all technical aspects. You can do all the talking about it and try to explain it; it won't work; you actually have to see it. And if someone fancies themselves that they would like to do the design, I don't care what the job is in the factory--sketch shoes--see how it is done. See how you can improve it, the look, or something or other, to create something of interest and present it to the right people.

Q: David, you have said that there are no shoe factories.

A: Not here.

Q: So that means...

A: Well, you do have a couple in St. Louis today, and some in California.

Q: Now, for example, how do you run a design room over here?

I mean, do you have the equivalent of sample hands?

A: I have one man, for example...In Italy they're called "modelists." Over here, they call them "pullover men." Because the unfinished upper is called the "pullover." But this fellow (and he's had the experience; he's an old timer)...He knows how to cut, he knows how to sew, and he knows how to put the pieces together.

Q: But when you construct your collection, you have to go to the outside to find a firm that will make you your...

A: The lasts. Right.

Q: So there obviously are still people who make lasts.

A: Yes. There is in New York.

Q: And then when your lasts come in, you have one or more...  
How many have you got? People who actually construct...?

A: Two. I have two people.

Q: Who actually put the leather on and...

A: On the last. Right.

Q: And your direction...You have selected the leathers which come in, the samples, and you have selected the heel heights and all the rest of it, and they execute it under your...

A: That's right.

Q: Under your leadership.

A: That's right. Now, to give them guidelines...I sketch on the wooden form, in this manner...You see...

Q: You actually take the wooden form and put your own sketch

on it.

A: That will give them an idea of where the upper should be placed.

Q: And that means that you sketch the front and you sketch the back.

A: Oh, sure.

Q: You sketch the whole thing.

A: Because if I sketch this on paper, the pattern maker, in interpreting the sketch, may decide the strap should be wider, the vamp should be higher, or whatever, and it would be all wrong. It would be completely out of proportion. Therefore, I do two things. I make a sketch of the shoe, in total--the heel, the toe shape, and so on. Then I take...

Q: On paper.

A: Yes. On paper. Then I take the wooden last and actually sketch on the last. This is the height of the vamp. This is the width of the strap...and so on. That's as far, technically, as I go. Over here.

Q: And then what comes out you send to Italy.

A: Right. And I send it to Italy, where...I give them the paper pattern, of that particular style. And they follow it.

Q: Well, now, the last we have between us on this desk has a leather upper...Now, was this done here, or was this done in Italy?

A: This was done here.

Q: This was done here.

A: Right.

Q: So that this man, who is working with you, actually followed your sketch and put the leather where the sketch indicated.

A: Correct. Then I send this to Italy, where they can duplicate it, you see. Hopefully, it comes out right.

Q: And they send you the equivalent of a stock duplicate, in the apparel market. They send you a duplicate, which you check over...

A: That's right.

Q: Do they send you sizes? Examples of sizes?

A: No. Sizes come in last. Sizes actually come in after you've sold the shoe. Because they have to grade the sizes, like in apparel.

Q: Then they do the grading over there.

A: They do that over there. It's not a simple business, as you can readily see. But it's working.

Q: Now, if you have trimmings on a shoe...Do you buy your trimmings over here?

A: I buy all my trimmings here.

Q: You do.

A: Sure. Especially for evening, with rhinestones and with braiding and with passementerie work and so on. I buy it over here, and then we ship it over there.

Q: From stock.

A: Right.

Q: So at least that part of the business still exists.

A: That part I can do here. But there are certain things they do

over there in Italy that we can't do here. For example, hand woven effects, like braided sandals, where they take about two dozen, eighth of an inch, narrow stripping and they braid it by hand. We don't have the women to do this sort of thing. Now they are able to do it because they have been braiding hats out of straw, and they make straw braiding. They can use the leather. That's an industry all by itself. It's all home work you see. So when it comes to a woven kind of a shoe, that's all hand done, over there.

Q: Incidentally, in what part of Italy is all this done?

A: Florence mostly.

Q: Uh huh. And near Florence.

A: Sure.

Q: Well, now, is it still possible to go into the shoe business over here?

A: No.

Q: You don't think so.

A: First of all, in order to start a business, you need workers, and there aren't any workers left in this area. None at all. The few remaining people are way up in years, and most of them are retired, and there aren't any young people left in this sort of thing. Number two, the cost of starting a factory is absolutely phenomenal. Unbelievably high. A simple machine, that used to cost \$1,000, today, a similar machine costs \$18,000. The equipment alone is just too expensive. But basically, if you've got the equipment, who are the people who are going to put the thing together? You don't

have them. They've all disappeared.

Q: So essentially, a designer of shoes...Or a designer who would like to do a collection of shoes, like Liz Claiborne, will sign up with a firm such as yours, which has the production facilities already going...

A: That's right. It's a matter of franchising the name, or using any designer's name, which is the thing today, in order to create an aura of "design" to a commercial product. Now, it seems to be that every dress manufacturer is doing a line of shoes. They haven't the slightest idea of the construction of shoes, and they just use the name for the product. Which is fine. Because women today--I don't have to tell you--are very label conscious. And so the manufacturers and the stores have found out that they can promote a label and sell a product a whole lot easier than instead of an unknown label.

Q: So that for now, and for the immedaite future, that appears to be...

A: Oh, no question about it. So for a young person to start a shoe factory, it's no cinch. They can make jeans over here. Or they can put anything together in fabrics in apparel, but you can't do it with shoes. There are too many elements. For example, a simple thing like sole leather. If someone started a factory over here, he'd have to import the soles. He'd have to import the heels. He'd have to import the components of the shoe--the inner soles--because the people that used to make them over here--the heel manufacturers--One of the best heel manufacturers in this area, went out of business about two years ago. So I wouldn't encourage anybody to

start a shoe business over here. Or be in the manufacturing business.

Now you know why I've got all these grey hairs, you see.

Q: I think you've stood up very well under these difficult conditions.

A: There's only one reason. I happen to love the business. I don't love the selling. I don't love the other aspects of the shoe business. But I love the design and the promotion and seeing the finished product. That I enjoy. So what I'm doing is not really a chore; it's a joy.

Q: Right. Thank you...David, let's just spend a few minutes on licensing, since that's something that your firm has become involved with, and about which you know. You know...We've just mentioned that Liz Claiborne, of course, is licensed here. But also that this company has licensed Evan Picone and in Cincinnati, Capezio. Could you just make a few comments on that. On those two?

A: Well, the emphasis today is on marketing. And with the importance to the consumer of the label--whether it's a Gucci or whether it may be...whatever label it is...a Halston, and so on. It can be pillows, it can be apparel, it can be anything. Bill Blass, to me, is the best example. He's covered 30 franchises, in licensing...It opens the door...For example, someone manufacturing bras...Selling bras can't be a very exciting business. I think it's a very difficult business. But if you put a label on it, that reflects a fashion label, or a fashion feeling, and the store carries another product under that same designer label, they can walk right in, because...Ralph Lauren, for example, is one. He's now gone into making shoes. Well, Ralph doesn't know anything about shoes.

Some company just licensed his name, and they're turning out a product, but they can walk into any store that carries Ralph Lauren clothes, and it's a natural. There's a tie in. Because in advertising, they can say, "Well, we've got Ralph Lauren suits, coats, dresses and so on, and here are the shoes." So it's a marketing proposition. And it has worked, seemingly, in a lot of stores. Of course, we will run into certain likes and dislikes of a consumer. For example, there are some women...Like, I had one woman express herself...She would-'t think of having bed sheets with Yves St. Laurent's insignia, or logo, on them. Others enjoy it. Seemingly, it does something for them psychologically, when they have...It gives them a feeling of assurance that they have somebody's label on them. And that's marketing today.

Q: Yes, it seems to be very important tool of marketing today, yes.

A: Oh, yes. Well, years ago, we never had that sort of thing. Years ago, the corporate label--the Stetson hat--was important to a customer. Today they don't care about corporate labels. They want a living human being, who actually made the hat. To make them feel that that's what it is. And that's the fashion note. So I don't...I feel that licensing has a definite place in today's economy. And the promotion of goods. Unfortunately, I've never gone into that, because I never believed in it. But I've made mistakes in my life. I should have gone into designing all kinds of things and possibly would have been a whole lot...into a different type of a business.

Q: Yes, I'm sure if you had gone in in about 1971 or '72, you might very well have...

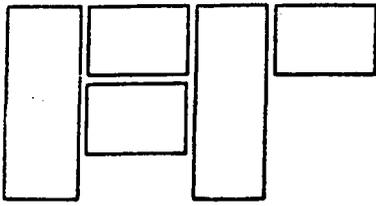
A: That's right. I could have done leather clothing, leather handbags and so on. The fact that I don't know anything about leather clothing doesn't make any difference, because the power of the label would be in footwear and leather goods, so the people would be interested in the leather clothing.

Q: So that that would have been a potential additional market for you.

A: That's right. That's right.

Q: Right. Thank you very much.

A: You're welcome, Mildred.



ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE  
FASHION INDUSTRIES

Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

1. No photocopying without written permission from the oral author or his designee. The Director of the Library will furnish addresses; the reader must write for permissions.
2. Written permission is needed to cite or quote from a transcript for publication. The user must send the Library Director the pertinent pages of final draft; the Director will assist in obtaining the final permission. The form of citation normally used is: "The Reminiscences of \_\_\_\_\_, (dates), pages \_\_\_\_\_, in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology."  
No fees will be charged for published use.  
User is asked to furnish Oral History Program with a copy of the published work.
3. In order to see PERMISSION REQUIRED or CLOSED memoirs, the reader must obtain the written permission of the oral author or his designee. Contact the Library Director for addresses. The reader writes for permissions. Written permission if obtained must be presented when the reader visits.