

# SELLING THE AMERICAN LOOK

There has never been a better time to sell abroad.

"American women drive world fashion," offered Anthony Hopenhajm, co-owner of Trianon, as he detailed why more than half of the sales of his American-made jewelry come from overseas. "They are more accepting, more daring. They are much more comfortable in achieving their own look despite the dictates of fashion."

It was this easy acceptance by American women of a natural shell earring designed by legendary Seaman Schepps (similar to the pair sold in the 1987 Duchess of Windsor estate sale for \$40,000) that made Trianon suspect that they had a product line with global appeal.

To market test, Trianon attended the St. Moritz show in February 1988, and experienced a rush of sales for their innovative line, which used gem-studded natural materials of wood and shell. They euphorically discovered that they had the right line at the right time, not only for the American market, but for the world market as well.

The now 23-year-old Trianon and its 50 employees rely on the design and selling skills of co-owner Hopenhajm, who believes in personally visiting retail prospects abroad, while they attend Basel.

"You can determine if you want to do business with them before you enter the shop," he explained. "You can learn the peculiarities of the market. London likes amethysts. In Belgium and Holland, anything blue sells. Italy prefers pieces in larger

scale and French women prefer more diminutive jewelry."

"In personal selling, you can respond to the local customers' preferences, and make a product the retailer can really sell. It is always easy to sell once, but the trick is to sell the right product the first time in order to sell again and again."

But Hopenhajm warns that when an American wants to sell abroad, he has to have a very special product. "It takes a little bit of nerve, guts and, yes, perhaps luck. Our best seller is a wood and gold bracelet that sells for \$7,000 and a pair of shell earrings for \$3,000 to \$4,000."

"Americans make the best clip-on earrings in style, size and proportion, with flare for using new colors and materials. But for any company to succeed, it has to do something a little different than its predecessors, and that is what we did with shell jewelry."

What advice does Hopenhajm have for young American designers looking to make sales in Europe? Make sure your product is finely made. "It is easy to get a first appointment but if your product is poorly designed and executed you won't be invited back. However, if you have a product that is original, well-made and fairly-priced, you will get that all important second date."

Twelve years ago, Anthony Hopenhajm and his partner Jay Bauer bought the 100-year-old Park Avenue Seaman Schepps, and with it came a heritage of designing for women, not for men visibly transferring wealth.

Seaman Schepps, born on the Lower East Side, became one of the first celebrity jewelers, with a stellar roster of customers: the Rockefellers, the DuPonts, Marlene Dietrich, the Duchess of Windsor, the British royal family, and as a tribute to its penchant for style-setting, Andy Warhol.

Seaman Schepps makes very individual jewelry and helps to define the American look. "American design is not over-studied, nor overworked. It is spontaneous," states Hopenhajm. Seaman Schepps is to be honored in a 100-year retrospective at the Museum of Arts and Design in the fall of 2004.

Key to the success of Trianon has been Hopenhajm's ability to visit his foreign clients at a moment's notice, taking a dozen or so trays stuffed into a duffel bag and slung over his shoulder. He uses the duty-free "jewelry passport," or ATA Carnet, issued by the United States Council for International Business, which is just around the corner from 47th Street. "They never disappoint, even fulfilling a request mere hours before the plane takes off."

Trianon's Anthony Hopenhajm allows that with the dollar at its lowest level in years (about 20% below the euro at this writing), there has never been a better time to sell internationally.

"Selling abroad is a learning experience, where we learn how to adapt our designs to the idiosyncrasies of individual markets, and help the foreign retailer sell that American look."

By George Capsis, June 2003

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