

STYLE SPY

THE STRAPPY SANDAL SCANDAL / ATHLEISURE IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY / NORMA KAMALI WAS RIGHT

Floral brocade
mules inspired by
Paris, the site of a
new Manolo Blahnik
boutique.
MANOLO BLAHNIK
MULES (\$925),
MANOLOBLAHNIK.COM



Your MANOLOS Are Safe

*The patron saint of stilettos
is not going anywhere.*

BY JESSICA IREDALE

A few of the things on Manolo Blahnik's 2020 to-do list: open new men's and women's stores in New York City; reclaim control of his company's license in the U.S.; and, of course, continue to create even more beautiful, more elegant shoes with even more freedom than he has had in the many years he's been in business.

The one thing he will not be doing is a sneaker.

"If I see another one of those super-expensive gymnastic shoes... What do you call those things?" Blahnik asks. "These mega-shoe companies doing these huge amounts of monstrosities. Not even the most feverish mind could create such a hideous thing for the feet."

Blahnik is calling from the Canary Islands, where he spent his childhood. He's ➤

finishing up his holidays with six of his 11 dogs and a mild chest infection, which is why he describes his time off as “not very good.” But anything is better than last year.

“Last year was turmoil. I achieved many things that I did want for a very long time,” he says, rattling off a list before concluding that 2019 “was too much. I’m so happy it’s finished, actually.”

This year should be heady too, but in a way that makes Blahnik feel rejuvenated. That’s an interesting word for a 77-year-old man running a nearly 50-year-old business that became a household name more than two decades ago thanks to the HBO series *Sex and the City*. Blahnik and his 43-year-old niece Kristina Blahnik, the company’s chief executive, are looking to the future, adjusting for the next generation as he watches his loyal clients from the ’70s “disappearing, or dying,” as he puts the morbid truth.

The Blahniks don’t intend to head into the sunset with them, and to that end, plans have been put into motion, and the rumor mill along with them. Terminating a licensing deal might sound like a mundane business decision, but when it entails the sudden end of a 37-year partnership with the behind-the-scenes industry stalwart George Malkemus, Blahnik’s longtime U.S. president who was largely responsible for the *Sex and the City* phenomenon, eyebrows are raised. The severed relationship was announced last April after Manolo Blahnik offered “unacceptable terms” to Malkemus, who also operates the license for the SJP by Sarah Jessica Parker shoe collection. In fact, Malkemus is opening SJP’s first brick-and-mortar store at Blahnik’s former TV-famous boutique on West 54th Street in Manhattan,

Blahnik on the red carpet in Spain.



which shuttered exactly a year ago.

For his part, Blahnik is opening new stores to reassure loyalists who were alarmed by the closing of the flagship. And he is not dwelling on the past: “It’s like a marriage. When you get tired—boom! A new one.”

Merchants too are looking beyond Blahnik’s annus horribilis. “While 2019 was a year of transition for Manolo, we are optimistic about the future,” says Roopal Patel, fashion director at Saks Fifth Avenue, which has a Blahnik shop on its renovated women’s shoe floor.

The patron saint of stilettos says he leaves strategic planning to his niece, while he focuses on the sensuous sculpture of his heels and the expressive colors that have made him a sort of footwear Pedro Almodóvar. Yet the sudden changes on the business

side have led to questions about Blahnik’s involvement in the design process. He’ll have you know the Manolos are all his.

“I work differently than anybody else, in the sense that my ideas come when I’m sleeping,” he says. “I wake up and I have next to my bed a pencil and a block of paper. People have much more order than me when they work, I guess. I don’t have many assistants. I do it with three people. That’s it.”

Kristina confesses to being one of those three. “He goes from one idea to the next, and then I’ll help him focus on one. Then we’ll work on it together,” she says. “I’m originally an architect, so you give me a springboard to bounce off and I’ll help you jump higher.”

Her goal is to thrive independently and not sell out in today’s leverage-seeking world of M&A. “I just don’t see why anyone would do that,” she says. “It’s an ever decreasing circle of people that have their own privately run businesses, but it’s those that are still run by the families that maintain integrity.”

The Blahniks see the acquisition of an Italian factory with which the designer worked for 30 years, the control of their U.S. distribution, and the new stores in New York (as a well as a boutique in Paris’s Palais-Royal that opened a year ago) as a means to express a new purity of ambition that will allow them to recruit a new generation of customers. The Spanish master knows that millennials are keener on comfort than their forebears, so he is learning to embrace lower heels.

“I cannot lose my high heels,” he says. “I love high heels. I cannot deal without having high heels.” Still, “I’m going down.” **T&C**

THE MANOLISTAS

BB

Meghan Markle

The demure duchess is devoted to the BB 105mm, named for ’60s sex symbol Brigitte Bardot.



NADIRA

Nicole Kidman

Even the Oscar winner’s favored pumps are dressed up—with a trademark Swarovski crystal garland.



SPEZIA

Rihanna

She’s not one to blend in. Her towering sandals feature Manolo’s highest heel: 115mm.



FEFE

Gwyneth Paltrow

Blahnik is always in search of “the perfect court shoe.” No wonder the queen of wellness is a fan.

