

EXOTIC APPEAL

Nancy Gonzalez is expanding the realm of ultra-precious leather accessories in colourful new directions.

By Tanya Dukes Photography by Anita Calero



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Nancy Gonzalez

FROM THE RELATIVELY MODEST beginnings of an eight-piece handbag collection available only at Bergdorf Goodman in New York, Nancy Gonzalez has built an impressive empire of style. The eponymous brand she launched in 1998, known for its use of luxurious skins—crocodile, ostrich, python (she follows strict regulations to ensure the species are not threatened)—now consists of more than 100 styles, each with the potential to generate new bags in different colours and materials. The collections are sold in more than 300 luxury retailers around the world.

That success is due, in large part, to Gonzalez's knack for upending the traditional perception of accessories in precious materials. By introducing a kaleidoscopic palette and intricate detail to the world of ultra-precious exotics,

she transformed materials once associated with staid classics into the stuff of chic must-haves. It's an approach that ensures Nancy Gonzalez handbags are just as likely to be seen in the hands of fashion's bright young things as in those of doyennes of more traditional tastes.

As she celebrates the 15-year anniversary of her label, Gonzalez is poised to vault to a new level. For starters: a spate of new boutiques in Asia, the launch of a handbag inspired by her daughter and a new fall collection that's pushed the boundaries of her creativity.

The globetrotting designer spoke with *Four Seasons Magazine* about her ever-growing brand, drawing from her knowledge as a quintessential handbag expert to offer advice on the pieces that should anchor every woman's collection.

How has the Nancy Gonzalez aesthetic evolved in 15 years?

My first collections consisted of just a few styles, realized with a small colour palette. Now there are three collections a year—Resort, Spring and Fall—each with about 150 completely new bags that are variations on new or existing styles. Each new collection has its own inspiration and colour palette.

In a sense, we function more like a ready-to-wear line than a handbag line. The brand's core values have always been the same. We encourage individuality. That's why there's no logo stamped on the outside of the bags. And the collections are large because we believe uniqueness is the ultimate luxury. With so many choices, in so many colours, the odds of running into anyone with the same bag are slim.

You proudly extol the Colombian roots of your brand. Does your collection have features that draw from your native country?

Colombia is my point of origin, my heritage, and all of my designs draw something from it. Colombia has an ancestral tradition of working with one's hands. Since pre-Columbian times, intricately woven pieces in pottery and gold have been made by hand. These techniques are used in my designs today.

You produce your collection in your hometown of Cali, Colombia. Who are the artisans you work with there?

I've instituted a special programme to train my artisans in the techniques used in my collection. Ninety percent of my employees are women—they're mothers supporting their families. I provide day care for all my employees with children under five years old. Design should strive to build a better world through the way it performs, and in the way it is created and produced.

You're known for introducing vibrant colours and special treatments into this market. What's your next innovation?

For Fall, we designed the collection with absolute freedom. Thanks to technology, we've created new hybrid materials: Croco-Zebra, Croco-Giraffe, Croco-Leopard and Croco-Python. The result looks like a completely new skin.

Your son Santiago serves as president and creative director of the company.**How does your partnership work?**

My team and I design the collections and manage all production. The collection then goes to Santiago and his team. They are responsible for selling the collection and marketing it. He gives a voice to my inspiration and oversees store design, business development and strategic planning. We function very much separately. Santiago and I are respectful of each other and have clear boundaries between our roles.

What was the process behind the new Cristina handbag, named for your daughter? Did she work with you to create it?

My daughter Cristina is a person who changes bags three times a day, and she is incredibly precise in everything she does. She is a young mother and is on the board of directors of her father's company, and she asked me if I could make a bag that would accommodate all her needs. Two days later, I received a two-page list of features the bag had to have, including a centre zipper that extended the width of the bag, a wide back pocket, a pocket for an iPad and a detachable shoulder strap. Little did I know so many people would think like her: The Cristina bag is doing great and now comes in four sizes.

Which bags should every woman have?

A tote and clutch are absolutely necessary in everyone's wardrobe. They take you from day to evening. I would recommend a neutral tote, but a clutch in colour. It's a misconception that a black clutch will be most useful. In fact, one in red or green will actually go with more things.

You travel constantly and clearly have lots of bags to choose from. Are you a maximalist or minimalist?

I am embarrassed to admit I am actually a super-maximalist. I bring everything. I like to be able to choose.



Above: Nancy Gonzalez, the designer at the helm of the eponymous brand launched in 1998

RIISING IN THE EAST

Nancy Gonzalez kicked off the 15th year of her brand with the opening of a 580-square-foot (54-square-metre) boutique in the prestigious IFC Mall, also home to Four Seasons Hotel Hong Kong. More boutiques are in the works for the region.

Tanya Dukes, a former style editor at Elite Traveler, writes for Robb Report and covers travel, luxury fashion and fine jewellery for a variety of publications.

**ANATOMY OF AN IT BAG** Nancy Gonzalez breaks down the elements of an investment-worthy handbag:**What's Inside Counts**

Examine a handbag's interior. Is it pristine? There shouldn't be wrinkles. Check the lining: When it's stitched into place only along the top edge of the bag, that's a sign of incredible quality.

Follow the Line

Scrutinize the stitching of each seam. Notice whether it's straight. If not, it's an indication of less-than-expert construction.

Material Matters

Look for top-quality leathers. In the case of bags in precious skins, the finest, most pliable part should be placed at the centre of the bag.

The Touch Test

A quality handbag should feel luxurious when you hold it. If you need to spend too much time eyeing the details, the bag is no good!