

Dressing Women Well

From Italy to Omaha, Nan C. carries classic sophistication

by Karri Ann Frerichs

Nan C., located just off the Omaha shopper's beaten path on the southwest corner of 49th and Dodge, will soon celebrate 20 years offering classic and sophisticated threads. While architecturally inspired by Italy and mostly stocked by its designers, Nan C. is a "destination location" every local woman appreciating fashion "like art or a gourmet meal" should visit.

Within the boutique's clay-colored cement walls, Nancy Heller, the passionate but soft-spoken owner, ensures her clients leave decked in exclusive ensembles no other woman in the city is sure to own. "I want to make sure people aren't all dressing the same," Heller explains. "It's a luxury my clients have come to expect."

Heller, who rarely agrees to interviews to avoid being misinterpreted (she cringed as she recalled being described to carry "biker wear" during the all-black phase of the '90s), caters to the upscale tastes of women with a few hundred or more dollars to spend. Her collections are consistent every season, and though they don't react to trends, they move into the season's new cuts and colors. The featured designs tend to be timeless and appropriate for a woman of any age. Her own classic ensemble included a longer fitted denim jacket, classic button-down white shirt, charcoal pleated wool skirt and knee-high black suede boots with pointed toe and two-inch heel.



COURTESY MONICA BYRNE



COURTESY NAN C.

(ABOVE) EUROPEAN INFLUENCE: Nan C.'s shop has a heavy Italian architectural influence and focuses on clothes that make women feel confident and sophisticated. (LEFT) NEBRASKA-BORN DESIGNER: Monica Byrne's spring collection continues her trend of soft femininity.

way of thinking. Italy likes to dress women in a sophisticated, ladylike way. Women look more powerful."

While browsing through Italian collections surrounded by Italian antiques, a patron may expect only European designs, but Heller has given a few American designers accolades as well. One, in particular, is definitely unique, as Nan C. is the only store in the Midwest to carry this up and coming Nebraska-born designer, Monica Byrne.

The North Platte native, currently producing ultrafeminine, silk lace and chiffon lines out of her studio/showroom in the SoHo district in New York, entered Nan C. in the spring of '04 with her collection in a suitcase. "It was very clever of her," Heller remarked with a smile as she recalled meeting the young designer. "I let her hang it all up and when I saw it, I liked it a lot. She had a '20s theme for her Fall/Winter '04 collection, and we agreed to a one-day trunk show."

Byrne said she had always been interested in fashion and was especially influenced by Prada, Chloe, Chanel, and Madeleine Vionnet. In May 2002, she graduated from the textile design program at the University of Kansas. She also spent six months studying in Florence, Italy during 2000 and interned with independent designer Lucy Barnes in New York.


"Working for a small company versus a large corporation allowed me to really get both my hands and feet wet," said Byrne of her internship with Barnes, who shares the same public relations pro as Kate Spade. "Kate Spade and her publicist helped me out quite a bit, especially being from Nebraska and not knowing anyone. She agreed to meet me and help me with some

business connections. It's tough to start a small business in this industry, and I admired the way she runs hers."

Monica Byrne, LLC, launched in October 2003. Her look is and, according to Byrne, will always be feminine and soft. In working to create her brand, Byrne's goal is for her designs to be easily recognized by her clients. "I want a woman to walk into Neiman Marcus and know my designs when they see the clothes without looking at the label," she said. (Byrne was busy preparing for a big meeting with Neiman Marcus to negotiate selling her line at the time of our interview.)

Drawing inspiration from the 1920s and '30s, Byrne is currently working on her Fall '05 collection. "We're focusing on microscopic themes — for instance, very close-up pictures of, let's say, viruses. This fall's line will be very futuristic with Victorian twists. I'll be using a lot of metallic laces and some wools."

While anticipating her Spring/Summer '05 collection, a few pieces from her Fall/Winter '04 collection are still available at Nan C. Taupe and black silk camis with bead, sequance and button detailing — \$345 marked down to \$173, and an above-the-knee black chiffon skirt — \$350 reduced to \$173, remain.

Other designers carried by Nan C. include one Canadian designer, Lida Baday, and Peter Som from New York. Of her collections, 85 percent are Italian with Gunex trousers and skirts and Brunello Cucinelli cashmeres, both of which will be featured at Nan C.'s next trunk show Tuesday, March 22. Nan C.'s price points include coats, \$700 to \$1,500; pants, \$200 to \$500; tops, \$130 to \$300; and cashmere sweaters up to \$900. A variety of sales items are available as well. 

Nan C., 4911 Dodge St., in the historic Hilltop House, 551.4831. Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays, and closed Sundays.