

Samuel François

All jewelry by
SAMUEL FRANÇOIS

In conversation with
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PUT TOGETHER TEARY EYES, ENAMEL RINGS, SOME SKULLS, AND FLOWERS WITH GOLDEN FINISHES, AND YOU GET THE SURREALIST AND BAROQUE WORLD OF SAMUEL FRANÇOIS JEWELRY.

THE FRENCH STYLIST, KNOWN FOR HIS LONG CAREER AS FASHION EDITOR OF NUMÉRO MAGAZINE, FOUNDED HIS EPONYMOUS BRAND IN 2017 AND, SINCE THEN, HAS CREATED A WHIMSICAL, FASCINATING, AND ENCHANTING AESTHETIC THROUGH A SERIES OF BRASS AND BRONZE ACCESSORIES. HIS CAREER AS A STYLIST STARTED, AS HE WOULD SAY, "PAR HASARD", BUT HIS REAL PASSION HAS ALWAYS BEEN CREATION. SELF-TAUGHT JEWELER, SAMUEL FRANÇOIS' PIECES DRAW UPON ANTIQUITY, ESOTERISM, AND THE MACABRE, HAVING NAPOLI, ITALY, AMONG ITS MAIN SOURCES OF INSPIRATION. WITH ASTONISHING HUMILITY, HE CLAIMS TO HAVE NEVER SUCCEEDED AS A DESIGNER AND THAT HIS BRAND IS STILL TOO SMALL BUT HIS TALISMANIC INTERPRETATIONS ARE SOLD IN FRANCE, GREECE, USA, LEBANON, SPAIN, BELGIUM AND DUBAI. IN A CONVERSATION WITH ODDA MAGAZINE AT THE HEART OF PARIS, SAMUEL FRANÇOIS TELLS US ABOUT THE REASON THAT LED HIM TO CREATE HIS OWN BRAND, HIS INSPIRATIONS, HIS LOVE FOR ITALY AND HIS TEENAGE INTEREST IN DRACULA AND GOLDEN SNAIL ACCESSORIES.

CAROLINA BENJUMEA. You have worked for several years as Fashion Director for Numéro Magazine, and since 2017 you have had your own Jewelry brand. How did you go from Fashion director to jeweler of your own brand? How do these two jobs influence each other?

SAMUEL FRANÇOIS. So, first of all, I'm still doing the other job. The reason why I started to do my own jewelry is because I'm a creative person. I was trained as a fashion designer but I never really succeeded in doing that, unfortunately. I did my job by some kind of accident and then it went on to, as I would say, some kind of a career. But, in the end, I was missing something creative, and what can I say? When you work as a stylist, you end up being the one making everything possible—you have to be in the middle of the vision of everyone. You make the thing possible, but in the end, what you want to do, you basically have to sit on it most of the time. It's very frustrating because you have the first impulse and then in the end you have to respect the photographer's choice, the advertisers, the personality of the model, the one that doesn't want to show the breast—all these things. They tend to reduce what you want to do and in the end—your pleasure. But when you do something creative, when I do my jewelry, I'm the only one in charge, from the beginning till the end because as I work as a fashion stylist, I know what kind of images I can produce. I can also work as an art director and somehow, I can choose the images and I can choose a layout—I can do all of that. I think it's something that I learned in that field of fashion styling. So, I think it's something quite easy for me to do, especially if I do it for my products or my creations. In that way, I think this is very helpful. I would also say that one job influences the other one. I get inspired when I do research for one thing and it can go on the other side of my work. "En français on dit les vases communicants" —I think it works pretty much this way.

C.B. In your trajectory as a stylist, you have worked with supermodels like Kate Moss, Arizona Muse, and Giselle Bündchen. Being a stylist requires a certain amount of creativity and knowing the person you are working with to create the balance between the clothing, the person, and a good aesthetic. What do you think is the difference between working with clothes and working with jewelry?

S.F. The funny thing is that when I work as a stylist, I hardly use jewelry. I don't like that. I don't know how to use it to be honest, and each time I do it, it feels a bit wrong to me. In real life I can do it but in pictures it is very tricky for me. The difference in creating fashion accessories and working as a fashion stylist is, first of all, a difference of pace because the styling pace is extremely quick. I mean, you work from one day to the other. It's very rewarding because you work extremely quickly, the image is produced, and everybody is happy... or not. But it only takes, let's say, a few days to make a project. Whereas, doing jewelry takes a lot of time; there is a very long process between the inspiration and the actual drawing. I don't really draw but I sculpt my prototypes and then I give it to a founder and it takes time for it to be done. Then I have it and I get it golden and I play with it and I assemble the things. So it's very long, not to mention lots of mistakes because I make lots of mistakes! Things are not often right. They can hurt sometimes or be too heavy so it's a very long process. It's also very rewarding when you get the actual pieces because it's real. It's not an image, it's basically a different pace. So that's the main difference. Also, it's much more personal for me. The inspiration is much more linked to very deep and profound memories, tastes, fantasies. Working as a fashion stylist, you have to be aware of the "air du temps", as you say in French, and the fashion of today is absolutely the opposite of my taste. So I have to take that in consideration and to adapt my taste to things I don't like. I can do it. It can be fun. I can do it as a game but it's not my fantasies or what I like at all. So, I'm looking forward to the next fashion cycle because it's going to be better for me—hopefully.

C.B. The knowledge and love for jewelry is usually something inherited from our moms or grandmothers, how did you start your relationship with jewelry? Did you have a special piece growing up?

S.F. Actually, I don't have any. There's no jewels in my family at all. There was only a Louis d'or that was passed from woman to woman. It was some kind of treasure. But in my case, what I remember in terms of jewels, that I still have in mind, there were two things: One thing that my mom had, and I just got it recently, was an American fibula. It's silver with some coral in the middle, an ethnic jewel, which fascinated me when I was a child. There was also a little brooch. All these things were quite cheap. The little brooch was a moon face. I think it was blue and there was some glitter on it. It was something very cheap, funny, very fantasy and it was something that really attracted me. After that, when I started to get interested in fashion or reinterested in fashion when I was a teenager, there was that weird fashion moment at the end of the 80s. I remember some kind of accessories and I don't know why I ended up having golden painted snails on my clothes... Yes, this was a good experiment to go to school!

C.B. Did you get a lot of attention?

S.F. I did, a bit too much. I reconnected with a friend from high school that I haven't seen in like 20 years—or even 30! And she told me that my designs reminded her of what I did when I was a teenager. I don't really remember what I did but I think I started doing things at that point already—golden snails...

C.B. In the jewelry industry, especially in Paris, there are many historical, family owned Maisons that have been in the business for decades now and have become the reference for high jewelry. Is it hard to create a new jewelry brand considering that the competition is really high? What are the biggest challenges of doing it?

S.F. I'm very happy that you placed me in that kind of category but I am not in that kind of category. I do many more things that are quite fantastic—once again. It comes much more from fashion and my fashion background. I used to do showpieces when I was interning for accessories and yes, I think that's a different thing.

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So, I don't relate to that world yet—maybe one day but not for the moment. I didn't know how to make jewels, I just learned step by step and I got a chance to find a very nice craft mentorship that helped me do that. I really just started and I'm still extremely small so it wasn't that difficult, only the fact that I am self-funded. So, you know, that's the main difficulty. Coming from my fashion background, my work as a fashion editor helped me get a bit of attention, for sure.

C.B. You were born and raised in France, you have worked in Paris for several years and, apparently, you don't have any personal connections with Italy or any Italian heritage. However, your inspiration comes mostly from Naples, Italy. Could you please tell us what's so special about Naples that inspires you to create your pieces?

S.F. One of my first inspirations or big inspirational moments when I was a teenager were Italian movies from the 70s, or late 60s. Italian cinema is everything for me. I didn't learn Italian in school but when I started to work in fashion, I started to have to go to Italy and work with Italy. I think it became some kind of... "comment dire? ... émancipation!"—something very personal that wasn't inherited or given. It was some kind of a choice. It was a freeing choice to be in Italy, to love Italy, to learn things, to learn the language and to be interested in Italian culture. Another point is that I really like cities, I like history. I like strange places. That's the reason why I think I like Naples. And, like most of the people, I love Venice because it's something that you don't find in France and it's very exotic for me because I don't speak the language—it's like being in a dream! But I think it's linked also to some kind of emancipation of my early stages of being an adult. It's a discovery.

C.B. The creation process is the most important part when designing and every designer has their own. Some prefer to do it in the night, others fresh in the morning. Some prefer to do it with music and others outdoors. Can you please tell us what is your creation process and what practices work better for you when designing a jewelry collection?

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Coat and shoes
HUSBANDS

Jacket and shirt
YOHJI YAMAMOTO

Trousers BIANCA
SAUNDERS

"IT WAS A FREEING CHOICE TO BE IN ITALY, TO LOVE ITALY, TO LEARN THINGS, TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE AND BE INTERESTED IN ITALIAN CULTURE." —SAMUEL FRANÇOIS.

"MY JEWELRY WOULD SAY A LOT OF ME, BASICALLY MY TASTE, WHAT I REALLY LOVE, MY FANTASIES. IT'S REALLY MY LANGUAGE, ESPECIALLY WHEN I WEAR IT." —SAMUEL FRANÇOIS.

S.F. Inspiration is something very important for me, but I don't have a routine to work. I think it depends on some moments. The fact is, at the moment, mostly around lunchtime... the moment I work best is between eleven and, let's say, two. I used to draw, but I don't really draw anymore—I cannot properly draw jewels. I can sketch things rapidly but I'm much more interested in sculpting. I work a lot with wax; I work with the lost wax technique, I like sculpting, it's my way of doing things. It's much more 3D than 2D. That's a very important part of my process. Inspiration wise, museums, of course. Also, things that I totally forgot then come back, it's always the same things—they're somewhere there and they come up at one point. I remember one thing, one word or one image.

C.B. Is not common to see macabre subjects like death or the use of skulls in jewelry but you manage to take inspiration from the ossuaries and the cemetery of Fontanelles to create really beautiful pieces. What is it that inspires you from this subject and how has been the reaction of customers?

S.F. I think there has always been darkness, you see, and the skulls have always existed. Codognato, for example, or even like the Hells Angels accessories, like rings. I think it's something quite common. When I started to do that, it was because of Naples, because they have that code for death which is something very ancient, strange, dark, but it's also very joyful, with the colors. I don't know, maybe the same thing as

in Mexico. I like the fact of mixing these things, making it not too dark or too macabre, or making it a bit more fun. I like that kind of thing: ossuaries, even mummies. There's something I like about that, to be honest. When I was a teenager, once again, I think that I did my Dracula phase. Some friends called me "Monsieur Le Comte" because of Dracula. It's the thing I've always had. Concerning the reactions of the clients, some of them really like it: some of them are like... "Ah non, jamais!", There is no middle way. Also, I not only do skulls but I also do things that are a little bit talismanic. It's a thing, I like conjuration things, I like the idea of it. I don't believe in it, I wish I could. I mean, I like the idea of it. I would love the idea of having a real one if you have proof that it's a real one. There's something I really like about that.

C.B. As said before, looking at your creations, we can see that you use some non-traditional shapes, like skulls and eyes. Do you use non-traditional materials as well?

S.F. No, actually, no, not for the moment. I use very traditional materials. I work with brass, bronze, and silver. I could do gold, but I don't because it's quite expensive. In the future, yes, I will. I'm very interested in glass. So, for the most part, I work with beads. I have beads made in Murano. They're not like magnificent beads but I changed some shapes, or I try to recreate ancient beads. There's something I really like about glass because I think it's quite magic; I like the process of it, I don't know how to use more glass because

it's quite fragile, that's the only thing. And also, there is, again, color. I like color, it could be like fake stones. I like that. It's like Gothic paintings. I really like that. And yes, I would love to use wood. I would love to use some resin sometimes but I don't have the time. I don't have the space or the moment to do that. But I'm very interested in weird things.

C.B. Considering that your creations are not the classic small pearl earrings or necklaces, and instead we can see skulls, eyes, gilded leaves, flowers, and golden ornaments, for what kind of occasion would you wear your own jewelry?

S.F. I actually do wear my own creations or pieces and I started doing that because it was for me. I was doing things for me. I don't wear eccentric clothes, even though I like eccentricity. I think it's a way of showing what you like. I like antiquity, for example. So, in the beginning, my pieces were quite antique looking and I was really wearing them mostly when going out for drinks, even in the summer and in the holidays, mostly. By the way, even now, when I go on holidays, I bring my things and I sometimes wear four or five necklaces. Today, you do not see me with anything but I usually have one or two accessories. I think it's my language—it says something about me. I try my pieces on. I don't try the big earrings, of course! I mean, I could, but I don't. But sometimes I even try small ones. I always try things. People sometimes ask me on the streets "oh! c'est joli!"

C.B. If we analyse your creations, what do you think your jewelry says about you?

S.F. They would say a lot about me, basically my taste, what I really love, my fantasies. It's really my language, especially when I wear it.

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C.B. Today, having an environmentally-friendly brand is essential, and consumers do extensive research to know if the environmental standards are respected; how important is this to you? What actions do you implement in your brand to become more eco-friendly?

S.F. Actually, I am so small that I don't think it's important for the moment because I do things which are on a very small scale. If I were to do gold or things on a big scale, I would, of course, try to do things that are quite sourced or reused. The idea of reusing things is quite important. I have a very good friend that told me that it would be very interesting if I would use pre-owned stones. That's something very interesting. I am not at that point. I would say that my way of doing things is not linked to that, it is working with people who are artisans. They have a real "savoir-faire", even if it's not eco-friendly work—everything is made in Paris or France or by artisans. I mean, it's nothing that comes from the end of the world, and it's considered a "Patrimoine vivant". So, it is really local with very good artisans. I wouldn't say it's eco-friendly but it's ethical. Yes, eco-friendly, to be honest. It's also not totally possible when you do accessories, if you're honest. No, it's not possible.

C.B. You are a self-taught jeweler, which is really impressive considering the delicacy and quality a jewelry piece must have. Do you have a piece that is dearest to you? Why?

S.F. I think I have a favourite one for no reason except it's quite big and there's a lot. So, this I love. "Le colier avec des liserons, je l'adore celui-là". It's one of the pieces I did a long time ago. But yes, it's not because it was hard to do, but there was a lot of pleasure, and it's quite big and noisy and I love that. I can have things resting and then I take them back. But I think this one took a lot longer to make. Maybe two weeks but I'm quite slow. ●

