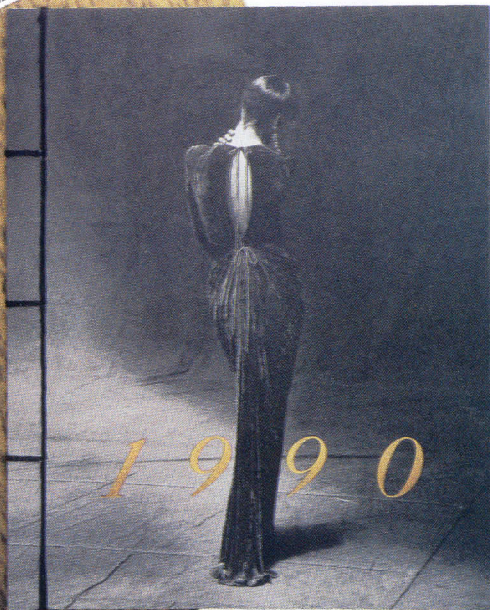


The Wizard of Bloomingdale's

*John Jay's bold use
of photography shapes the
public image of this
chic retail chain*

PHOTOGRAPH OF BOOKLET BY LEN DELESSIO

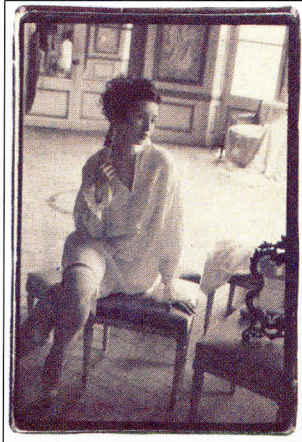
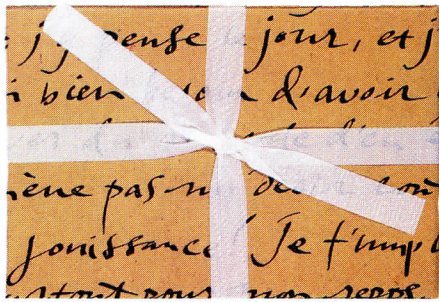


Hand-bound booklet containing photographs by Steven Meisel is part of Bloomingdale's current "1990" campaign.

By Russell Hart

ALTHOUGH PHOTOGRAPHERS and art directors depend on each other for survival, their relationship is often stormy. Photographers gripe that art directors cramp their style by showing up at shoots with sketches that defy the laws of optics, or cancel out their vision with heavy-handed cropping and dense overlays of type. Art directors grumble in turn that photographers can be prima donnas, willing to sacrifice graphic and conceptual needs on the altar of personal expression.





Ribbon-tied promo piece for spring 1989 "Dangerous Liaisons" campaign included four postcards with photographs by Deborah Turbeville.



That traditional rivalry makes the consensus of positive opinion among John Jay's photographers all the more remarkable. The 39-year-old creative director (and senior vice president) of Bloomingdale's is by virtually all accounts a photographer's art director—one who pushes his shooters to the limits of their creativity yet is still able to satisfy the need to sell the goods.

"He's one of those rare individuals who really inspires people to go the extra mile," says Geof Kern, a photographer whom Jay helped bring into the national limelight. Sheila Metzner, one of Jay's most called-on shooters and a former art director herself, is equally glowing in her praise. "The way John combines business with craft is amazing. And he's also an extraordinary human being."

What's amazing is that Jay is able to cultivate such relationships at all, given his enormous responsibilities—running the in-house equivalent of a large advertising agency. His duties include the creation of all newspaper and magazine advertising and of Bloomingdale's' justly famous (and on occasion infamous) direct-mail catalogues. In addition, Jay oversees a design shop that handles everything from product packaging to store graphics to the famous Bloomie's shopping bags. All told, from senior art directors down to production assistants, some thirty people look to Jay for guidance.

Then there are the store's buyers—Jay's clients. Jay says he is always correcting the impression that he doesn't have to deal with "real" clients: "There are 110 buyers in this organization, each one running his or her own little entrepreneurial business, and each one is a client."

Sheila Metzner delights in describing the experience of shooting Bloomie's recent "Mood Indigo" catalogue. The breaking campaign was inspired by the cool hues that couturiers had deemed hot for this fall. Models, stylists, make-up artists, assorted assistants and John Jay all showed up at Metzner's Manhattan studio one summer morning—only to learn that the whereabouts of the clothing to be photographed were unknown. A situation that might have caused a budget-conscious art director to panic was, in Jay's eyes, an opportunity. "John came up to me and said, 'Let's go, let's work,'" Metzner remembers, "and I said, 'But John, there are no clothes!' To which he replied, 'Well, let's do some nudes.'"

The entourage went on a blue binge, shooting blue lips, blue eyes, blue anything. One of the resulting pictures shows the back of a soft-edged torso against a purple-blue background, with a scarf-like swatch of blue fabric draped over the model's shoulder and twisted in a helix that expands to cover all but a tasteful hint of her derriere. This image became the cover of the catalogue, in spite of the fact that no product is depicted. All the picture sells is an image, a romantic dream that the customer buys into when she buys the real clothes displayed within—which did, as it turned out, show up at Metzner's studio later that day.

Such improvisation is part of Jay's operating method. "Even in the best of circumstances, it just doesn't work to show up at a shoot with a tight layout," Jay says. "It's dangerous to have everything mapped out in your mind." Metzner reports that Jay will actually work at a table while she shoots, experimenting with layout ideas and feeding

suggestions to her. These often have to do with the scale of the figure: If a full-length shot fills one page, for example, then Jay might suggest a tight head shot for the facing page. "That way," says Metzner, "I can design my images so that the forms and colors of one will relate to the forms and colors of the image on the facing page."

Photographers who've worked with Jay claim that his hands-on, catch-as-catch-can approach, rather than creating extra pressure, actually has a disarming effect. His shoots are famously relaxed. Jay believes that an art director who avoids such direct involvement does not really encourage creative freedom, but puts extra stress on the photographer, "by leaving it solely up to him or her to solve all of the problems."

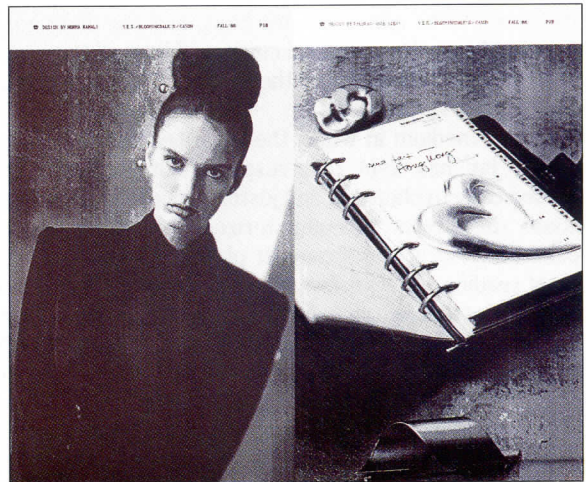
If playing loose with shoots and layouts is part of the secret to Jay's success, another is his willingness to take chances in his choice of photographers. When he called on Geof Kern in the spring of 1988 (after spotting his work in *Texas Monthly* magazine), the photographer's reputation was still very much a regional one. As the scale of the campaign Jay had in mind for him became apparent, Kern says, "I was incredulous about it. I was wondering, 'Why on earth would he want me to do this assignment when he could get anyone he wanted?'"

The campaign turned out to be "The Subject is Roses," and after a color launch in *W* magazine, Kern's pictures appeared in newspapers across the country. Jay's inspiration—and the reason for his choice of Kern—was a show called "Fashion and Surrealism" at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. Jay couldn't have picked a more perfect photographer for the tie-in than Kern, whose offbeat editorial work has a sensibility that recalls Surrealism's Dadaist origins. Kern himself puts it best when he observes that Jay "has the knack of hiring people who can do what needs to be done."

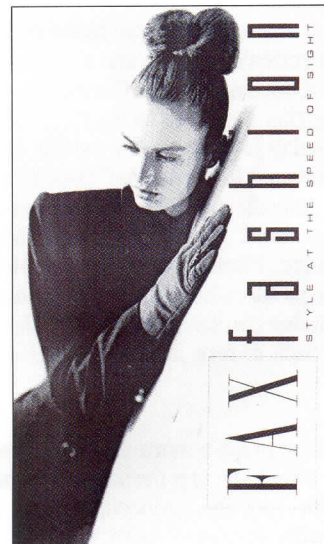
One way Jay coaxes photographers to their creative limits is by avoiding pats on the head. "He never tells me, 'That's good,'" says Geof Kern. "I never hear from him, 'That was a great shot.' It's always, 'What if you did this?' or 'What if we changed that?'" He always pushes for something a little different. He keeps you trying."

Bringing about that imaginative stretch may even involve a change of medium. Jay has made a practice of hiring photographers to shoot Bloomingdale's TV spots. He estimates that over half the ads, which he co-produces with an outside agency, are directed by still photographers. Sheila Metzner has made spots for Bloomingdale's, and relishes the challenge. "It disturbs me when an art director calls up and asks me to repeat myself. One of the pleasures of working with John is that he never does."

When John Jay arrived at Bloomingdale's in early 1980, he was a newcomer to advertising design. For three years he had been art director for MBA Communications, a small group of four monthly special-interest magazines that was one of Rupert Murdoch's early editorial ventures in this country. "Editorial work is a great, great training ground for many areas of design," Jay says, citing several lessons of his magazine experience. First and perhaps foremost was respect



To create an abstract—yet businesslike—effect for the fall 1988 season, Torkil Gudnason's photographs were transmitted by a fax machine before being reproduced in the "Fax Fashion" catalogue.



for the word. "The editor was my boss, and you don't go to the boss and say, 'Do you mind cutting 17 lines of this copy, because it's really getting in the way of this double-page spread of art I've created?'"

Even in a medium in which the word tends to have less currency, Jay has kept that respect. For example, you rarely see copy hyphenated and justified in a John Jay ad. Jay bemoans the advent of computerized typesetting, which "breaks the text in the strangest places, and fouls up the order of reading." He prefers his copy ragged, on one side or both. "Not enough art directors read," he says flatly.

A second lesson Jay took to Bloomingdale's from his editorial days was a sense of pacing. "A magazine obviously has a different feeling in the up-front column pages than it does in the editorial well," he says. "And it's different again in the back of the book. Putting a magazine together teaches you how to sustain your audience's interest."

Finally, Jay says editorial work sharpened his ability to conceptualize a subject. In a photographic venue that often values the subject's physical substance—the texture of fabric or the play of light on a bottle—over any idea about it, his attention to concepts can make the difference between a coherent series of images and a confusing muddle. (Jay cites Fashion Coordinator Jill Glover as a particular help in achieving this sense of focus.)

To this day Jay reserves a certain amount of space in any given catalogue for "editorial" pages, with images that don't depict a specific product but instead suggest a theme or enforce a mood. Sheila Metzner's "Mood Indigo" cover is one example. Photographer Steven Meisel says that a quarter of the pictures he took for Jay's current high-end "1990" campaign don't even show a particular garment. That soft-sell approach is rare among advertising art directors.

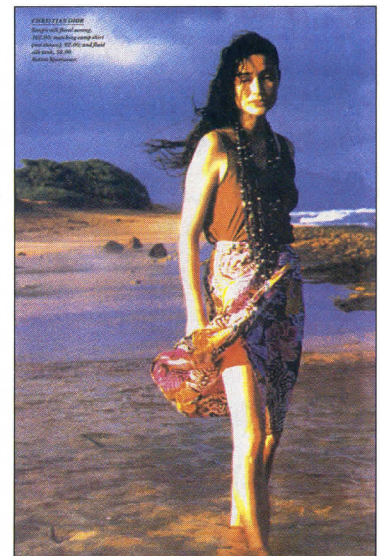
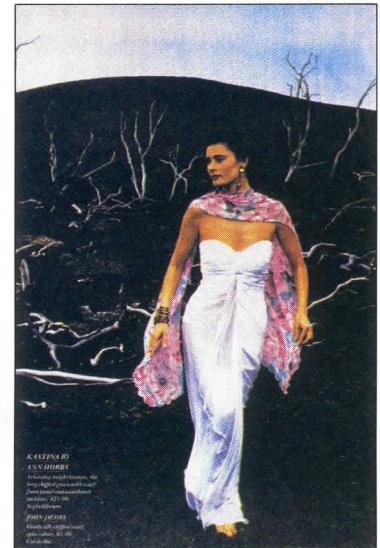
Some of Jay's more recent Bloomingdale's campaigns reflect (or are perhaps in some measure responsible for) the preoccupation in fashion photography with process—with ways of exploiting technical matters to set the photographs apart from the run-of-the-mill Kodachrome. The trend is more apparent in editorial fashion, which may explain Jay's inclination to participate in such experiments. But just as he pushes his photographers a step beyond, Jay has sought—and found—ways to test the limits of this trend as well.

One occasion for such an adventure was a planned change in the wares of a certain Bloomingdale's department known for its advanced styles. In early 1988 the decision was made to offer clothing that was still daring but at the same time more tailored, to suit the increasingly fast life of the professional woman. For Jay, the perfect symbol of the speed of modern business was the fax machine. ("Five years ago, the word fax wasn't even in our vocabulary," he notes.) What better or more appropriate instrument for the manipulation of pictures of the new styles?

Jay hired photographer Torkil Gudnason to shoot some of the department's apparel in black-and-white. Then he faxed the prints across town to his own office. The fax printouts themselves served as the final art, but unwilling to relinquish complete control, Jay made sure that print contrast and fax controls were fine-tuned to achieve the prominent



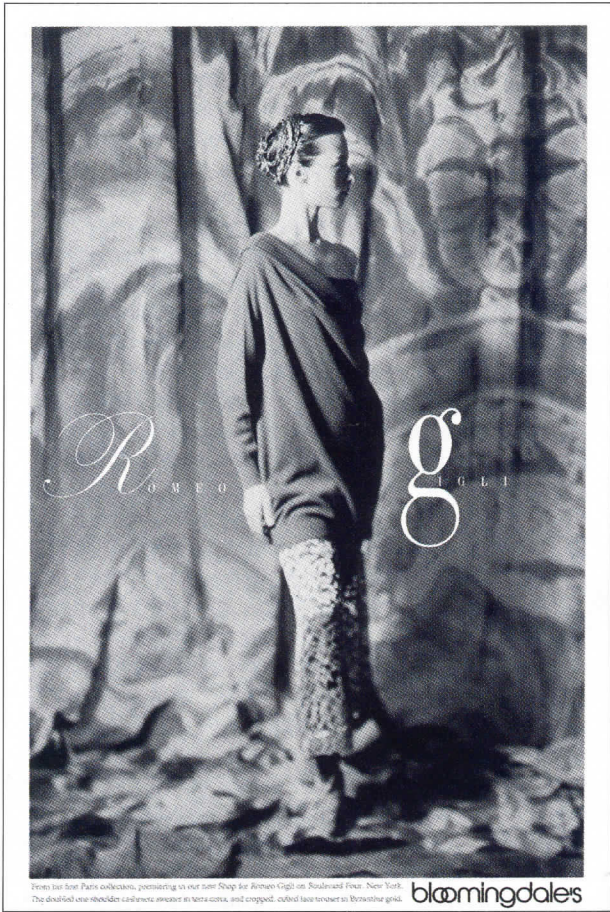
Lance Staedler's romantic images for the 1989 "Islands in the Stream" campaign were softened by being printed with a Canon laser copier.



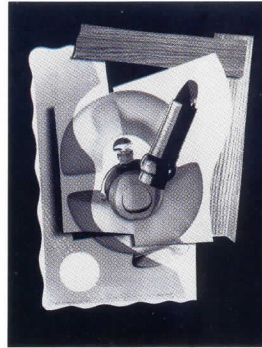
BLOOMINGDALE'S



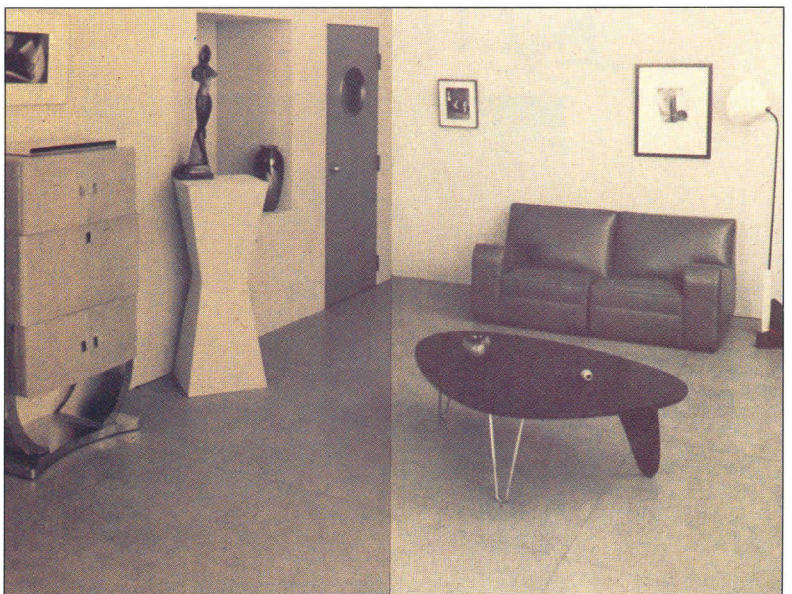
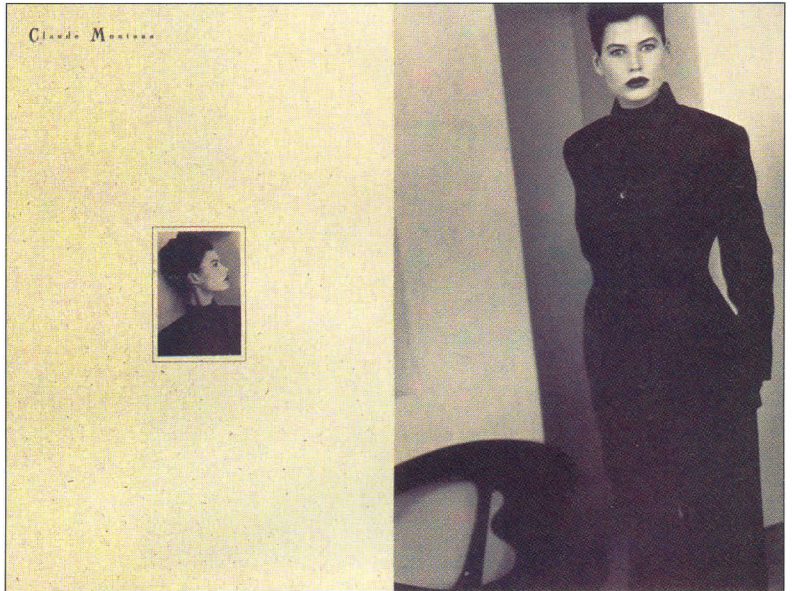
*Islands
in the
Stream*



Newspaper ad for Romeo Gigli (left) was photographed by José Picayo.

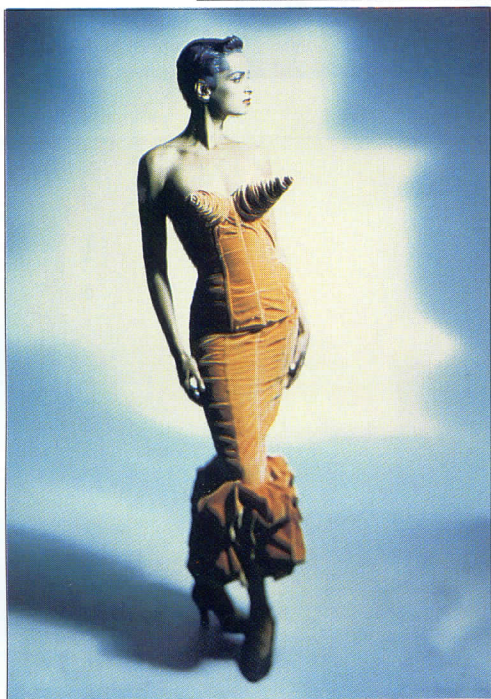


“The International Wool Collection” catalogue (below) was part of a fall 1988 campaign for Bloomingdale’s Boulevard Four section. Sheila Metzner took the photographs and directed the TV commercial, the set for which is featured in the bottom spread.



Surreal 1989 newspaper ads for Montana perfume (above) and Paloma Picasso perfume and lipstick (top right) were photographed by Geof Kern.

For Bloomie's current "Vive La France" campaign, José Picayo created images reminiscent of Joan of Arc, couturier Jean Paul Gaultier, and writer George Sand.



Vive la france
A CELEBRATED STYLE. A LEGENDARY WAY OF LIVING.



little bit of theatrics, if that means going out there and talking to people to see who else might benefit, then do it."

"Islands in the Stream" is a case in point. It happened because Jay exploited his connections as a consultant to DCA, one of Canon's advertising agencies. The company's new machine gets a prominent plug in the catalogue, beautifully printed on a vellum insert in the back.

The "1990" campaign is another case of corporate backscratching—because Jay's budget wasn't up to his vision of the campaign's catalogue, he asked the Diversified Graphics Company of Minneapolis to share in its production costs, in exchange for a conspicuous credit. DGC's contribution included hand-binding the booklet's accordion-like pages with thin black twine and producing a handsome copper-and-black slipcase. The result is as lavish a promotion as has ever graced the mailbox of a fashion-conscious woman.

Remarkably, despite Jay's mammoth efforts on behalf of Bloomingdale's, he manages to run a personal design business on the side. At the moment John Jay Design is serving as a consultant to a Japanese auto maker, creating the promotional concepts for the "repositioning" of some of its line. He has also taken on such unlikely projects as the creation of a poster for a boxing match between Mike Tyson and Tony Tubbs (the inaugural event for Japan's new Tokyo Dome arena), as well as the interior design for two Manhattan restaurants.

The closest Jay gets to fashion on the outside is in the work he does for the Robert Allen Corporation, which manufactures fabrics for the interior design trade. When the company approached Jay, he was blunt with them: If they wanted the cozy room set that is the stock-in-trade of interior design advertising, he was not their man. An initial consultation at the Boston-area home of the company's owners, its walls covered with modern art, gave him the reassurance he needed to depart from design-trade orthodoxy.

Coincidentally, a young assistant Jay had hired happened to show him some of his own art photographs. In these images, Jay saw the seed of a Robert Allen campaign. The assistant, Ken Matsubara, then shot a series of whimsical still lifes for Jay, with undulating swatches of fabric suspended in midair. "I wanted to take it to a more abstract level and still showcase the fabric," says Jay.

The ads ran in such lush books as *Architectural Digest* and *Interior Design*, and the departure has been a highly successful one. "If you see everyone zigging, it's time to zag," says Jay, with a slightly apologetic tone.

And there's more conventional wisdom where that comes from: "If a job isn't challenging, then you go out and create the challenge for yourself." Or, "If no one is turning up the heat on you, then you turn up the heat yourself." Jay's powers of positive thinking put him in a class with Norman Vincent Peale, and help him maintain his sanity when the demands of the Bloomingdale's machine (his term) threaten to overwhelm him. "The more you create, the more it wants. But that's why I'm here. It may be frustrating at times, but it's always invigorating and challenging." □

Russell Hart is a writer, photographer, and magazine editor, based in New York City.