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The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis
Q. All right. Let's first talk about your coming to Bloomingdale's and the things...what you've been doing. Because I want a little bit about you in this tape. And then, talk in terms of these things that you heard about Jed Davidson.

A. I came to Bloomingdale's the day after Christmas in 1978, which is about to be eight years. I came in order to redirect the focus of the home furnishings fashion function from a decentralized, every fashion coordinator reporting to a merchant with the responsibility for an area, to a centralized office with a fashion director (something Bloomingdale's had never really had, for the home, that paralleled to a degree the function of the fashion director for clothing, which is pretty much taken for granted. Where, just as the fashion director for apparel has a series of people who worry about largely lingerie, men's, accessories, etc., so I would develop a staff where I would have people who would worry about tabletop domestics, gifts, and so on and so forth. And part of the challenge was recreating a function that way, making it a lot less competitive than it had been, unnecessarily, internally; where I would report directly to the general merchandise managers of the store, and go on from there.

The mandate, really--from Marvin, more than anything else--was the emphasis on something that had always been done at Bloomingdale's, with fashion office people, which was the
development of new product. Bloomingdale's recognized that by the nature of its physical locations, by the nature of its customer profile, was in a position to have product, and to buy product and to cause product, that was not necessarily available in the marketplace per se. In addition to the fact that part of the persona of the customer was continually asking us for that which you could only get at Bloomingdale's. It was very much accepted that Bloomingdale's was a place to seek things first, a place to seek things early. I think a lot of that had to do with... Without question it came out of, in the late '50s and early '60s, the furniture division and Barbara D'Arcy's rooms and all the things added to... There was a sense of adventure about Bloomingdale's that has been there ever since.

Being a New Yorker myself, and remembering Bloomingdale's as the place to go and buy your underwear, as to the years that that Thursday, or that weekday when the amount of rooms open was the hottest ticket in town. I remember that change, and fortunately for me it was during a period that was highly creative for my own life.

Q. You were at Wamsutta then?
A. No, before then. Wamsutta was a very short period of my life. I've always been a designer. A designer of textiles or a designer on my own. I was involved in the fashion industry for many years, as a textile designer, and in any case, I've lived through the growth of Bloomingdale's from the place
that you brought your underwear to a place...to the sort of place that it is today. And I think that a couple of the things that have always been very important in the nature of Bloom¬
ingdale's is that it's the only store in the world with a sense of humor, with a built-in sense of humor. It's part of its image. And it's a place where you expect something to be just a little bit off key, just a little bit more progressive, just a little bit more adventurous. Where, as a consumer, you get the sense of intelligence; you get the sense that Bloom¬
ingdale's is trying something out on you. Which is perfectly okay, because I think all of us are really interested in ex¬
perimenting. I think Bloomingdale's has really encouraged, in a funny way, self-help, in the best sense. That the Bloom¬
dale's customer can be her own decorator, or the Bloom¬
dale's customer can be her own fashion coordinator. Because Bloom¬
dale's has always provided, in enough areas--certainly in home furnishings--those things that normally you have to go to some¬
body and get made: Lamps, or pillows, or one-of-a-kind rugs, or a gift assortment. Those are all the things that you find, and you know perfectly well at Bloomingdale's that if you don't find it and buy it today, it may very well not be there to¬
morrow, and that it isn't anywhere else in town. So I think that a great many Bloomingdale's customers have become sort of instant decorators. Even though they say with great pride that they've done it at Bloomingdale's. I think that's important.

In any case, that was really the challenge that
Marvin gave me, which was to try to organize this thing on the one hand, in a business-like way, and on the other hand, do as much as I could to encourage and develop the private label...merchandise is really a misnomer...It's similar to product label in apparel, but to develop product that could be meaningful to Bloomingdale's in as many areas as possible. That's my job.

Relative to what we were talking about earlier, I have heard (I wasn't there, unfortunately, I think) about the days of Mr. Davidson, when...

Q. Which was what year?
A. I guess...I'm assuming the early '50s...I have to assume that that's the era. I really don't know. But, the point was that the sense that existed at the time was that in an effort to change Bloomingdale's from a basement store, which it had been, to a fashion leader, Mr. Davidson, who was a Franco-file, encouraged all the people who were traveling--the buyers (Barbara and her predecessor, I believe...I think I've heard some of these stories from Barbara D'Arcy), encouraged people to be at least knowledgeable of a foreign language (preferably French, if not French then at least Italian). People used to take lessons in languages before they traveled, at the end of the Second World War, and so on; to go to museums in foreign countries; to not discuss furniture in terms of veneer but in terms of period, and authentically, and period within its context; to know that what we can talk about as Victorian in one
country has another name in another country; that it is of an era, and to recognize the fact that when you talk about the Victorian era in England you're talking about the Civil War in America, and that there is a relationship between the English country house and plantation living. (Interesting, because we're living through a revival of that right now.)

But, apparently, this interest in an educated buyer, in the best sense of the word, was very much created by Mr. Davidson, and, in my opinion, very much encouraged by Marvin in many, many ways.

Q. Because he learned it from him?
A. I assume so. He never discussed it in exactly those terms. We never discussed it in exactly...

Q. He credits them with having set the path. He credits them with as having established a reason for merchants to have a higher cultural quotient than the majority of retailers expect from the merchants that they hire. He did that.
A. Well, we're also dealing in another era. We are dealing in an era when career-buyer, per se, is not necessarily quite the goal of...for younger people as it once was. Therefore, I've sort of pretty much taken it on myself to do a little degree about educating, if you like. In other words, if we make a decision as a company that we're going to do a promotion around Italy, for arguments sake, I will try to do as much historical information, physical and geographical information, as I can to advise them before they go, to help them
prepare. Because they're younger, and they're more transient than they once were, and, you know...I sound like the "old man," with my eight years of experience, but I mean, it's just a reference that's very clear. There are buyers in the store who've been there a long time, and there are buyers there who have been in the job a couple of years. Apparently, the life span...The life span...Or, the range of time of a buyer today is much shorter than it was 10-15 years ago.

Q. Also, I think the education doesn't always necessarily support what you're asking for. Because you're asking for a dimensional understanding of what those cultural trends were in terms of geography and, at times, sequence. One of the things I discovered in my focus interviews with college educated young women, when we were preparing what the point of view should be about launching Rive Gauche, was that they didn't know that equaled Left Bank. These were American girls. Who had gone to college! Who didn't know that Rive Gauche equaled Left Bank. More important, they didn't know that Left Bank stood for a style of life, a way of life, that had some reference to what we call Soho here. They didn't know...

A. Well, but I think one of the very first things that I learned, in terms of self-education, when I got to Bloomingdale's, was never to take anything for granted. And certainly never being afraid of saying the obvious. If I take for granted that Rive Gauche means Left Bank, and represents a style of life, I have no right to assume that anybody else does. And I
have got to feel perfectly free to say, "Do you know that?" without concerning myself about whether or not I'm going to hurt anybody's feelings. I think there are ways, I think it is simply the manner in which you do it. But I think it's become absolutely necessary to prepare people. We just had an experience like that very recently with the fact that one of the big sheet companies is introducing a collection designed by Liberty of London. Well, somebody of my age and era takes for granted Liberty of London. But the people who are involved in domestics purchases right now really don't know about it, other than that there is a little store on 60th Street called Liberty of London, and they don't necessarily make the assumption. We cannot assume that young people travel: They don't. The percentage of people traveling has not changed very much in the last 25 years.

Q. You don't think they're traveling with the same things in mind?
A. With the same goals and the same reasons...

Q. Maybe for a tennis game.
A. Exactly. Exactly. So that's all a part of it. And it's all a part of the fact that in order for this approach to succeed, in order for the store to have distinctive merchandise, it very often has to come from those places in the world that are best at doing it. If you want to buy Oriental antiques you buy them in the Orient. You don't go to South America for Thailand teak. And if you're going to go there,
you have to understand something about the history and the
culture of the Thais. You have to be able to translate it
to other people in a way that's titillating to them, to a
degree, just as you hope to translate the merchandise phys-
ically to the customer in a way that's titillating to the
customer. There's nobody standing there to explain it.

Q. Do you bring curators to work with you on this?
A. Curators?
Q. Yes. Or people who are culturally immersed in an
area?
A. Sometimes. It depends upon what the project is.
Q. I'm just curious...
A. Well, it depends. It's very difficult to say. I will
always try to take advantage of excellence...

Q. You're going to parts of the world now--this whole
Pan Pacific program that you've got mapped out for yourselves--
Now, I assume that you really know a lot about European culture
and art, etc., etc., but are you as tuned in on Pan Pacifica?
These islands and their history and their culture?
A. Partially, in that I...This is not my first trip
to Bangkok., you know, and I happen to be personally enor-
mously interested in Oriental art. So I've been able to, based
on my own background and experience, do some of it. But the
first thing you do is take advantage of the people you know
who are experts. The first thing I did was call Inga McKay
and sit down with her and have a whole long discussion with her
where she explained all the things to me that were in her book, that I had read, but on a completely different level. And I spoke to Inga, and I spoke to Jack Larsen, and I spoke to other friends of mine. And I had no one who could genuinely be helpful to me about Malaysia. I didn't know anything at all about Malaysia and ultimately ended up spending a good deal of time with the man who runs the Metro store in Kuala Lumpur which happens to be a store associated with us through the international services of the Associated Merchandising Corporation.

But, in the preparation, first of all, obviously, to a degree, it's commercial, so the preparation...The first thing I did was I met with the commercial attache of all five countries that were involved this spring promotion. I reported immediately to Marvin attitudes, and who would be helpful to us in traveling and who wouldn't, or whatever I could discover under those circumstances. Then, in terms of the aesthetic, you do as much preparation. But then again, I have the staff, who is going to research, to a certain degree, some of the areas, some of those areas of the world that are not known to us. And that's always interesting. It's very, very unusual for Bloomingdale's, after all these years of traveling overseas, it's very unusual to go to a place that nobody has been to. Because Bloomingdale's has done an extraordinary job of exploring the world. They may not do the world's best job in going back to some of the places they've been to,
but they've done an extraordinary job. There are very few total discoveries. And when you find one, it's invariably because, for some other influential reason, we haven't been there. China is the best example. Bloomingdale's buyers were almost the first group of buyers from the United States who went to China after the softening of the relationship in the early '70s. But, from my own rather personal experience, I had been in the silk business, you see, and I was printing on Chinese silk in Italy in the '60s, because the Italians were allowed to go to China, it was the Americans who were not. So I was getting first hand reports on the Canton fair from Italian friends as early as 1963, and from English friends at exactly the same time.

In fact, Bloomingdale's--from the commercial point of view; from the American, commercial point of view--was there. Bloomingdale's, when I went to Macao for the first time (and talk about that as the far end of the earth!), Bloomingdale's had already been there. When I went to "Zambalanga," in the Southern part of the Philippines, a Bloomingdale's buyer had already been there once before to buy the particular kind of weavings that that particular area is famous for. Bloomingdale's people. And also, as the Bloomingdale's organization was smaller, more time was spent traveling than is spent today, in the sense that trips were longer than they are today. So, genuine exploration was much more of a possibility than it is today because the difficulties of running a business
are much more complicated than they were. One goes to get something very, very specific accomplished. By the same token, those places have been edited. Maybe edited out, but they've been edited, so that when a buyer is going to go and spend two weeks in Europe and is ending up in four cities and you say, "Why aren't you going to these six other cities?" the likelihood is that a very serious decision has been made about the validity of those cities.

Marvin is the first person to say, "Why aren't you going to ... place X?" And you have to have a good reason for him not to go to a given place. If it's something he has heard about or read about. He sends me as much clippings as I send out to the buyers.

Q. Now that's...This is a very good point, about which I'd like to have you talk a little bit, about him, vis a vis the work that you're doing. Because what I'd like to get from you is a portrait of...If he is the man that makes the difference, how he makes the difference, in terms of the work that you're doing, in terms of your organization, in terms of how he interacts, just exactly as you're talking now. Tell me about the man.

A. Well, Marvin is very protective of Bloomingdale's. He's very, very concerned about image, in the large sense of the word, and that's a given. That's an axiom that we can deal with again later on. In addition to that, Marvin has almost a parental joy in what it is that you do. When I show
Marvin things that we've accomplished, I never show him anything that there isn't a point, that there isn't a reason I'm showing it to him. Most recently, for instance, the two of us were together... He and I were together in Korea in July, and we spent some time with a furrier who's very interesting company. And I said I wondered if these people would be interested in developing furs for the bed. And the answer was yes, and the first samples arrived and I immediately showed them to him, because he was part of the project. And he reacts in the most wonderful kind of parental way. He is very encouraging and very supportive. And that ties back to his concern about image, because he won't let us do anything that he thinks is questionable in terms of taste. His taste can sometimes be a little conservative, in that era, but he and I have a very interesting relationship there. Because I think one of the first things that I did at Bloomingdale's was recognize that this indigenous sense of humor that is part of Bloomingdale's (I think it's the only store in the world with a built-in sense of humor) is directly translatable into souvenir products. In fact, when I started working at Bloomingdale's, souvenir products at Bloomingdale's were the Bloomie's panty. Almost that's it. Beyond...that's it. And we began a series of things that started out...The very first one we did was a shop called "Among My Souvenirs," because there was...Christmas shopping...Because there was a great deal of concern about whether or not Bloomie's was "meaningful" at that time, as an
across board thing, because the panty was a little bit tongue in cheek and there were some questions about whether or not that really was something we wanted to really promote as a store. Nobody was really endorsing it, but nobody was really saying no either. But we saw the opportunities, and we saw them go with simple, inexpensive fun--tasteful things, from stationery products to coffee mugs to aprons and so on--that is now a gigantic business and has really spawned off--this airport shop and things like that. I really feel that I can take, to a certain degree, credit for picking up on what the intimate apparel people had done brilliantly: Taking somebody's idea and running with it in another direction.

And at the beginning, certainly, I had to have... I had to develop Marvin's confidence in me, in terms of the tastefulness, in terms of the product and the rightfulness of the product. He knows that, in theory, we don't do anything for the sake of doing it. There has to be a reason for it. Don't change anything for the sake of change. Don't design anything for the sake of design. You do it because it doesn't exist on the marketplace. Obviously, the prime example of that are the souvenirs. They don't exist on the marketplace. But, there was some time of showing him everything, to develop a sense of security on my part. I don't anymore. I only show him things now that I have some questions myself about, to a degree. And it really isn't so much in taste as a question of viability or... On the other hand, I will show him something
that we've come up with that we've come up with that I think he ought to know about because of the type of work that he does, because of the people that he may want to be giving gifts to--a variety of things that we do.

Q. So you establish a relationship...

A. He's very, very supportive of the product development at every level. I'm making the Bloomin's thing the focus of this conversation. I don't mean to, because it is a part of what we do. But he is continually referring and questioning...He's very proud of our ability to get people like Baccarat to make things exclusively for us. He takes this kind of parental pride in it, which I find marvelous. He's completely conscious of the amount of energy and effort that goes into what we do with textiles around the world. He's completely aware of the domestics industry. And another very important factor that that raises in my mind, which is above and beyond our developing a product, is the orchestration of product that we've had a hand in designing that we introduce rather than having exclusively, simply because we are not big enough to buy up the total quantity of certain products. Where there are manufacturers who understand the forwardness of our customer, and this sense of adventure that is so much a part of Bloomingdale's...

Q. Yes, you said something in the beginning that I would like to ask you to restate, or, not to restate but to repeat, and it was how he sees himself vis a vis Bloomingdale's.
You indicated that there was very little separation.
A. Oh, I think Marvin and Bloomingdale's are one, in many, many ways. I mean, without question, Marvin is a man with a family and interests, but I think his primary interest is Bloomingdale's, and I think his interests are related...in many ways.

You know we joke, we kid him about the fact that when he goes to a charity event Marvin has to spend a certain amount of time "working the room," and we know perfectly well that when he comes back from his "working the room" that he's going to report back on who he has seen and what he has accomplished, and invariably that accomplishment is directly related to Bloomingdale's: "I have gotten so-and-so to make a personal appearance." "I have gotten so-and-so to promise us we will get something first." "I have been talking to them about our relationship to this particular charity or organization." It's all a direct relationship that exists between Marvin and the store. And I think it's, you know, it's built-in as far as his personality.

Q. What else do you know about him?
A. Well, I think he's one of the kindest men I know. In a funny way. His heart's in absolutely the right place. He has a great warmth. And I'm saying these things because there are a great many people who would be shocked by my saying that since he has a...

Q. Not too many people talk that way about him.
A. Well, he has a brusque appearance. He's always late. He's always rushing, he's always running. And as a result of that he can be short in answers. He is very opinionated. He is more often right than wrong; therefore, I think he's allowed to have his opinion. But when it comes down to human values—concern and growth and disease or whatever...

Q. Errors?
A. Maybe a little bit less sympathetic of errors. Except that, again, the circumstances are explainable. There's always a because. But he really is, deep down, a very good man in many ways.

Q. In the eight years you've been with him, what have been the milestones, from your point of view, in what he has accomplished? Things that stand out for you?
A. Well he's opened five stores! In the eight years that I've been there. That in itself is a major accomplishment, it seems to me. And I think that's also important to him. I think the expansion of Bloomingdale's and what it represents into other markets...In the time that I've been with him, it's all of Philadelphia. We had a store in Jenkintown, but we opened the two stores in Philadelphia in my time, the two stores in Florida in my time, and the one store in Dallas in my time. That in itself is a major accomplishment. He has also, in my time, received the Legion d'Honneur and a (?) . . of the Italian order, for this contributions to international business.
And well deserved. He's worked like an absolute beaver, to get...

His theory, I suppose, is worth talking about. Everyone in the promotions that we have done, in the eight years that I've been at Bloomingdale's (except China, which is something unto itself) were all based on a fairly solid business base. We started out, for instance, with a...Oh, to use a home furnishings example, a spring promotion in the Philippines. Very, very, very solid furniture business that existed. Before you start a French promotion with a very strong business, not only in apparel but with a Baccarat and a "Malik" and "Trisoff" and people like that. Now, they may very well be bought through American agents, but that's neither here nor there; it still is a French product or a Philippine product or an Italian product. And what more is really said (and very often said to me) is go out and check on what's missing. What haven't we done as a store? Why aren't we involved in this particular country in this particular classification? And I have (several times, not every time) several times gone out on exploratory trips for Bloomingdale's and come back with a report on opportunities. Opportunities for various buyers. And you use this promotion as a series of focal points. It's a focal point to the customer. It's a focal point to the buyer. And I've said that in reverse order: It's a focal point to the buyer, to concentrate on an area. You develop merchandise and create merchandise that has a
cohesiveness with that base that you started out with, developing all the (?) . . . for arguments sake.

In the Philippines, having sent that buyer there, as a result of the fact that we had this furniture business and we were planning a promotion. And then you present it to the consumer. But in addition to that, you present it to the consumer not merely as chairs and tables and placemats and table cloths, but as an educational experience and as a cultural experience. The effort and energy that goes into maintaining your own TV crew, you can go to a foreign country and produce a tape about the history and the craft of block printing (for argument's sake, as we did in India last spring), our own crew sent over...Now, jaded in the sense that the crew came to me and said, "What do you think we should do?" and I gave them four or five options that I thought were good stories, meaningful to the consumer, but that also could be tied back to the product we were selling.

Q. Was that (inaudible) . . .
A. Yes. Under the (?) . . . But it's terribly important to Marvin that there be the cultural experience. With a capital "C" and a capital "E." That there are exhibitions in every one of the stores. There may be photo essays or historical or factual...There may be antique shoes in one particular place, for whatever reason. But there has got to be in every single store, an experience other than the shopping experience, relative to the promotion of that particular year.
So this year, when it was Bloomingdale's, there were photo-essays on New York at the turn of the century. There were discussions of the architecture of retail stores. There were a variety of exhibitions on this whole thing in New York City on theatre costumes, relative to the promotion itself. Because he believes very strongly that the experience must be larger than merely a shopping experience. And I couldn't agree with him more.

Q. And that is self-serving. It is. But it isn't the obvious self-serving concept of "we were there first," because there is, in that sense, as you were talking about, how do you keep it from sounding self-serving? A merchant has always basically said, "My job is to move the goods." And what you're saying is that here he is, a merchant who says, "I'll move the goods, but I think I have another responsibility here, to at least be able to converse with a segment of the population that will appreciate us more if we are treating them as people who have a capacity for understanding the cultural derivation or the historical derivation of this product." That's absolutely true.

A. There's another way of phrasing it too, and that is, you don't sell what you don't show. And Marvin believes firmly that he wants to show it better than anybody else. So that there is no issue of where the goods are going to be moved. They're going to be moved at Marvin's store, because Marvin is determined it's going to be presented in the
most extraordinary theatre. And "theatre" is a terribly important word. It's the intellectual approach and the surroundings of the merchandise, but it's also the theatrical terminology of the show business that is very much a part of anything he does. After that, the cultural nature of those exhibitions are absolutely relative to the presentation of the goods. On the floor. Absolutely relative. That's why Marvin gets involved in the choice of the wrapping paper. That's why Marvin gets involved in the choice of a shopping bag. That's why Marvin gets involved in what the decor is going to be. That's why Marvin arbitrates what goes into the windows, if there's ever an issue, because it's terribly important to Marvin. Whether or not he's ever addressed it in these words, it's terribly important to Marvin that the manner in which the goods are going to be shown is directly relevant to the manner in which the goods are going to be sold. And he's going to show them better than anybody else. That's why he walks through the store on a regular basis, as he does sometimes on a Saturday or Sunday, as a customer, and sometimes in a very formal way as he's going to do tomorrow with the management of the New York store. And I promise you, when he visits the branches, he will see every sign that has a missing letter, and he will relate what the store is doing to its comparable store, either regionally or financially within the chain. He knows, he will have seen you and he will tell you. I haven't been there yet but I am curious to see if he's got every location of
every department firmly locked into his memory (which, by the way, is one of his most extraordinary attributes, a phenomenal memory.

(Speed of recording becomes inaudible, not just difficult, at this point)
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