

GOOD THINGS IN STORE

Long set apart in a genteel world of its own, Lord & Taylor is struggling toward a new identity.

BY ANGELA VOULANGAS

I STARTED SHOPPING at Lord & Taylor out of convenience. It was the late '80s, I was at my first job, and the flagship store, on Fifth Avenue at 38th Street, was located just down the block. An enormous World War I-era limestone and tan brick palazzo, the store seemed curious, lost: muted. The quiet murmur of the first two floors became a positive hush as I went upstairs. I sensed a faded gentility each time a saleswoman rang up a purchase and took an inconspicuous moment to study my credit card in order to thank me by name. Neither intimidatingly upscale nor boisterously bargain-basement, the store seemed left out of retail evolution. It felt like my discovery, a place reserved for a few powder-scented older ladies and me.

It hadn't always been that way. In the '40s and '50s, under president Dorothy Shaver (see Paul Shaw's article, p. 74), Lord & Taylor put American fashion on the map. But as the brand weathered mergers and cost-cutting in the '80s and '90s, and multiple store closings more recently, it lost most of its fashion credibility.

In March 2005 Federated Department Stores bought May Department Stores Company, the store's owner, then went on to sell the Lord & Taylor chain to NRDC Equity Partners. That company's president, Richard Baker, initiated a \$10 million rebranding and ad campaign to rejuvenate the nearly 200-year-old store's image. The most visible component is a series of slightly surreal print ads directed by the David Lipman agency and shot by Mario Testino. The ads showcase an attractive, if odd, assortment of celebrities—the artist Ed Ruscha, model Lauren Hutton, and socialite Lydia

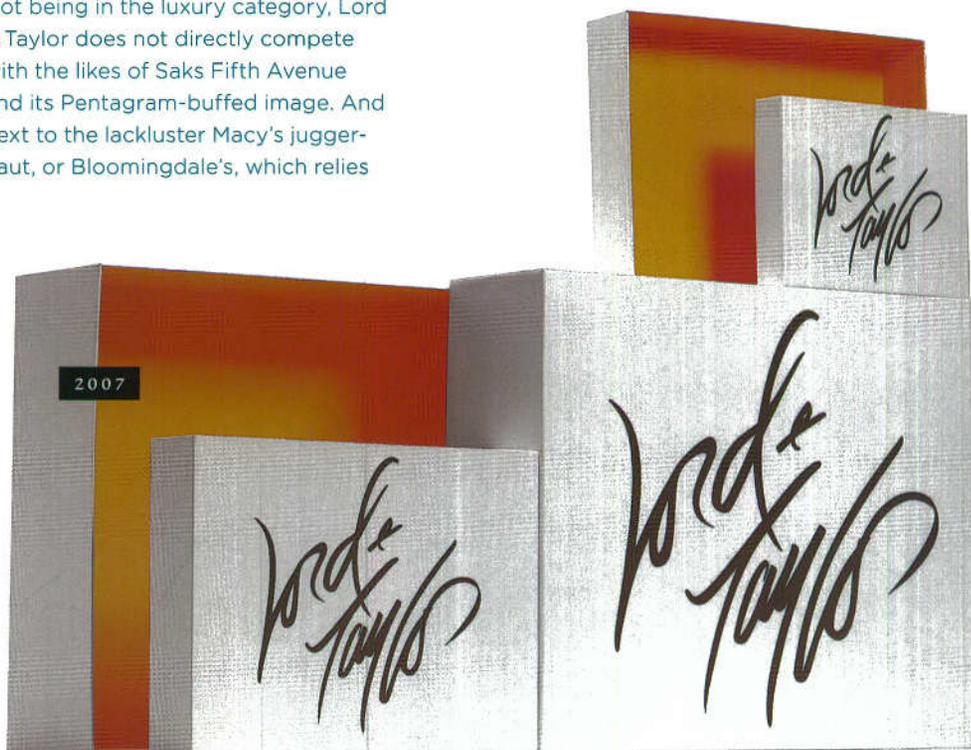
Hearst, among others, gamboling on lawns à la ads for Ralph Lauren. The results are glamorous, though the message is a bit vague.

A more finely tuned rebranding is now under way. The store's once dreadful paper goods (flimsy stock imprinted in an unattractive flinty gray) have been replaced with weightier bags and boxes featuring yellow interiors and a prominent, embossed version of the famous script logo. This design program is a step in the right direction, but so far the in-store upgrade is lagging. On a recent visit the tagline "Unapologetically Classic and Forever Relevant" was emblazoned everywhere like some sad self-help mantra. Another day, the main floor reverberated with house music—neither classic nor especially relevant.

Still, the store's position in the retail landscape hardly seems tenuous. Not being in the luxury category, Lord & Taylor does not directly compete with the likes of Saks Fifth Avenue and its Pentagram-buffed image. And next to the lackluster Macy's juggernaut, or Bloomingdale's, which relies

too heavily on former glories, Lord & Taylor looks pretty good.

During my last visit to the store, the unfailingly courteous salesladies confided to me that the iconic identity of yesteryear still had its fans: "People are very fond of that red rose. . . . The old cards are collectors' items now." The new paper goods are unlikely to end up in anyone's collection, but they are the clearest statement the store has made in years. Lord & Taylor needs to define what it wants to be and carry that image through consistently. But if the positive commentary on the fashion blogs is any indication, the public is definitely in the retailer's corner. As one commentator on Fashionista.com wrote last summer, the store is "really turning things around." No one should write off the "Signature of American Style" just yet. **P**





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