



The J in J.Crew

How Jenna Lyons became
the most unlikely of tastemakers
(a word she detests).

By Molly Young

Photographs by Martine Fougeron

JENNA LYONS IS physically demonstrative. If the creative director and president of J.Crew is baffled by a suggestion, she'll make a baffled face. If she is shocked by the price of a Hans Wegner chair, she'll pantomime a backward stagger. When a knit dress strikes her as drab, she'll enunciate the word *argh*. Lyons is discerning, but she's also six-foot-five in heels, and the fact that there's an awful lot of her means that even the subtlest expressions come across loud and clear.

lard "Mickey" Drexler, the company's chairman and CEO. "I e-mailed you about that—or did I dream that I e-mailed it to you?" Lyons checks her phone to find out.

Next up: clogs. The group pools around a table laden with teeny samples, prodding at the shoes and raising the question of when children can start wearing them. Four and a half years old is the consensus, though Lyons points out that "it's not the best acoustical situation on a hardwood floor," then mimics the sound of a child thundering about in hard-soled shoes. Onward to

cotton dress flush against her body. "It'll make the dress more of an idea as opposed to..." The thought goes unfinished. In addition to speaking in fragments, Lyons tends to evaluate clothing in abstract rather than visual terms—items need to be "engaging" or "elevated"—and she speaks in a collage of overlapping sentences. The same aesthetic extends to her office, which is a scrapbook in three dimensions: skirts, Sharpies, drawings, Lucian Freud and Egon Schiele books, a Céline bag, a sweating Starbucks iced coffee, and an entire wall of magazine cutouts

na," someone says. This is a joke, but it's also the right answer, and it hints at the power that Lyons has come to wield over the aspirations of young and youngish women. (A second hint: "Jenna Lyons girl crush" brings up half a million Google hits.) "Everyone from industry professionals to the younger generation of bloggers is crazy about her sense of style," says Nina Garcia, the fashion director at *Marie Claire*. "Jenna has mastered the art of the high-low mix."

The first thing you notice about Lyons—after her height—is that she doesn't look much

On the day I first met her, Lyons wore a loud combination of neon-pink T-shirt, color-blocked Céline skirt, and a dozen mismatched bangles. In navy Manolo Blahnik heels, she was taller than Dwyane Wade. It worked, somehow, just as her feathered skirts, gold sequined pants, and Henry Kissinger glasses somehow work. Where feathers and sequins meet J.Crew is largely a matter of styling, and though Lyons dislikes the word *preppy*, her choices always invoke the core prep values of ease, cleanliness, and conservatism. If her company has always prized a kind

out fourteen times a year to the ardent scrutiny of blogs like I Love J.Crew and J.CrewAholics, and points of contact between Lyons and J.Crew customers have quickly multiplied. She has given Oprah a tour of her closet, shared style tips with *Lucky*, *Glamour*, *Details*, and *InStyle*, and appeared on the cover of the late *Domino* magazine. ("Every girl I know has saved that issue," says Anthony Sperduti, a co-founder of the store-cum-advertising agency Partners & Spade and a friend of Lyons's.) At this point, she has shared with customers her favorite ice-cream sandwich, lip

end with a few snapshots for a "Saturday With Jenna" weekendwear promotion. Lyons recruited her husband, the artist Vincent Mazeau, to take some photos: a toasted English muffin, comfy moccasins, the *New York Times*, and Lyons painting Beckett's toenails neon pink. The toenail image, with all the liberal gender-bending it implied, immediately popped up on the network news shows, and Fox News' website featured an anti-Lyons piece advancing vaguely eugenicist notions. ("Why not make race the next frontier?" wrote Keith Ablow, a psychia-

ing: I was painting my nails and Beckett wanted his nails painted, too. I'm not surprised that he was interested in what I was doing. My God, my toes went from white to hot pink—it was very exciting."

Not a political statement, maybe, but Lyons's inclusion of her child in the catalogue, along with her slippers and breakfast, is precisely the kind of statement that makes her appealing to an audience looking for personalized, customizable fashion. "You can be running one of the biggest fashion retailers in America, but at the same time, you want it to feel



Lyons and her son, Beckett, working and playing.



This trait surfaces during a recent five-hour meeting to plot out a couple of J.Crew children's catalogues. A dozen employees are gathered to discuss neon leggings, polka dots, and the problem of photographing kids' pants without resorting to—as Lyons puts it, grimacing—a "crotch shot of a child." The meeting moves swiftly, with small talk, interruptions, and problem-solving all blending into a kind of shorthand made possible by the fact that J.Crew employees appear to live, breathe, and dream J.Crew. "Mickey's really excited about leggings," the senior designer Jenny Cooper tells Lyons, referring to Mil-

dresses, which are presented rapidly in groups of three. At the sight of one trio, Lyons tilts her head and says, "Solid and solid and solid. It just gets locked in. It needs—"

"—a little novelty to freshen it up," finishes an employee. Yes, precisely. Employees not only complete each other's sentences, and sometimes their boss's sentences; they also dress alike, in stripes, sandals, and neutrals daubed with bursts of color. Both the group-speak and groupdress suggest that Lyons has, at least in an operational sense, trained her employees to think like her. "Let's put a sparkly shoe with this," she says, holding a white

and notes from the artist Tom Sachs. ("Dear Jenna, Thank you for the meatloaf sandwich. Love, Tom Sachs.")

AT ANOTHER MEETING, this one for the forthcoming fall catalogue for adults, Lyons sits two chairs to the left of her boss, wearing cream-colored jeans and a blue seersucker men's shirt unbuttoned to several inches below her sternum. Drexler eyes his second-in-command between bites of a toasted bialy, then poses a question to the group of twenty executives: "How do we get more women to wear men's shirts, like Jenna is wearing?" "Show 'em a picture of Jen-

like anyone else in fashion. She has an emphatic jaw, flower-bud mouth, and warm eyes. Unlike many of the J.Crew employees' dark tans, hers looks incidental, not cosmetic, and the overall effect is of a woman who knows the might of her presence and handles it carefully. This is an honest stance but also a complicated one, as I learn when Lyons casually mentions that all her teeth are fake. "I'm not at all shy about it," she says of a genetic disease called incontinentia pigmenti. "I have quite a few scars on my skin, my teeth are conical"—hence the dentures—"and I have huge bald spots on my hair that are mostly closed up, but they're still there."

of sartorial comfort—nothing too tight, too short, too synthetic—then Lyons, with her bare face and occasional bralessness, is what happens when comfort meets chic.

The same goes for her Park Slope townhouse, which is a merry (but careful) assemblage of fur throws, drooping roses, and worn staircases. Her environs, as well as Lyons's husband and son, have been heavily photographed—or, less charitably, branded—by J.Crew since 2008, when the company introduced the "Jeuna's Picks" feature in its catalogue and on its website. Jenna's Picks, which collects her favorite items from J.Crew and beyond, now comes

color: bangle, spectator pump, notebook, bikini, statement necklace, diaper bag, and distressed sneaker. "I can't tell you the amount of women for whom Jenna invariably comes up in conversation," Sperduti says. "I don't know that many designers in her role that you could say the same thing about. Not from a company of that scale."

An unexpected measure of Lyons's celebrity was taken this April when a catalogue photo of Lyons and her son, Beckett, ignited a scandal nicknamed Toemaggedon by Jon Stewart. The project began innocently enough, when J.Crew's catalogue director asked Lyons if she would document her week-

trist and Fox News contributor, referring to the identity crisis Lyons had apparently exposed her son to. "What would be so wrong with people deciding to tattoo themselves dark brown and claim African-American heritage?" On *The Daily Show*, Stewart upbraided the newscasters for treating the photograph as though it were "a story about incest or cannibalism."

Lyons found out about the clamor through a J.Crew Google alert. Neither she nor the company chose to comment. "It was about sweatpants and moccasins and reading the paper," she says. "And that's what we were do-

tangible and touchable," says Mark Holgate, fashion-news director at *Vogue*. "You want people to connect with it." Her style, he says, is "nuanced, personal, layered, a little vintage. With the rise of the eBay generation, people are interested in making a statement with things that feel personal rather than just new." Lyons, he says, "understands how to bring together the fashion impulse with the sense of lifestyle."

This is not a role that Lyons will readily admit to, and when I bring up a word that is often applied to her, she expresses a shuddering distaste. "My goal is not to be a tastemaker," she says. "It has never been that. I

Lyons at her J.Crew office.



gained uptown girl, Holly Golightly, any number of Godard heroines. Move closer, however, and the impression skews. Wherever a look would seem to mimic its cultural referent too closely, some trick of styling swoops in to disrupt the cliché: The slim Jackie O. turtleneck is paired with a larksome faux-fur clutch or an Anna Karina trench with pumps the color of Fanta. None of these items is terribly exciting in its own right, or even recognizably J.Crew, but that is exactly the point. You can find a plain silk blouse at Urban Outfitters and cropped navy pants at Forever 21, but only J.Crew combines those items just so, with a leopard calf-hair pump and a skinny leather belt and the shirt in a perfectly executed half-tuck. Today's good outfit follows the same principle as an addictively well-sourced Tumblr. It is less about sexiness (and label worship) than it is about a gestalt of sophistication, intelligence, and humor.

Most shoppers are not accustomed to asking so much from their clothes. Intricate fashion narratives have historically been the province of run-

way designers, not mass retailers. Under Drexler and Lyons, however, J.Crew has fudged that line and even reversed a familiar arc of influence. Among the more zeitgeisty designers, there were shades of Jenna Lyons throughout last year's collections—more rarefied versions of clothes you could almost remember her having worn already. And this fall, the company will appear, for the first time, on the official Fashion Week calendar, presenting on a Tuesday morning before Badgley Mischka and Vera Wang. Within the fashion industry, the outlook for the presentation is sunny. "Given their solid fan base among Fashion Week attendees," wrote Izzy Grinspan at Racked, "we're guessing their Lincoln Center audience will probably be packed."

For a company at J.Crew's scale and price point, industry cachet alone is like ore: monetizable only when correctly processed. Lyons's modus operandi for fiddling with national tastes does not entail forcing weird things on a hesitant mainstream audience but instead teasing out the sensually

appealing aspects of weird stuff in order to make it less weird. One example of this involves the J.Crew catalogue models, many of whom are fashion-industry favorites with heterodox faces—women like Liu Wen, Carmen Pedaru, and Arizona Muse, who regularly appear on couture runways and in editorials inspired by Flemish Old Masters. In J.Crew, they are given tousled hair, dewy cheeks, and boyfriend cardigans. The effect is unabashedly lovely. Unlike most catalogue models, however, they do not invoke the prettiest girl in your college class or office but, rather, a new kind of aspirational figure: the prettiest civilian on street-fashion blog the Sartorialist, maybe. Lyons's recruitment of the Karmens and Arizonas may seem uncontroversial; like all models, they are young, slim, and symmetrical. Then again, how many mass retailers share mannequins with Karl Lagerfeld?

In 2009, the then-creative director was awarded a \$1 million bonus. This piece of information was met, remarkably, without sour grapes from any corner. It was generally agreed

that Lyons played an important role in the company's strong sales and resilient performance despite a crummy retail climate (sales increased by 14 percent in 2009), but there were plenty of other reasons not to begrudge Lyons her fortune. For one thing, she is a conspicuously nice person; for another, her success—and its partner, her ambition—have always seemed the subsidiaries of her excellent taste. In her case, money doesn't buy coolness but only enlarges existing opportunities to exercise it. Money buys a yoga teacher to come to the house on Monday nights, a 1969 Mercedes, and a wardrobe big enough to require its own room (with a fireplace). Money replaces the Radio Flyer wagon that has been stolen—twice—from in front of her home. The allure of Lyons's look is only half grounded in luxury; the other half draws upon a permissive sense of dishabille. With her messy hair and casual cuffs, Lyons offers an appealing kind of modern compromise: You can have it all, because you don't have to do it all perfectly. ■