

Vanity Fair's best-dressed list isn't "about stylish people who ... speak through fashion; it's about wealthy people who can afford to be excellent shoppers."

KATRINA ONSTAD exposes the lie behind so-called celebrity style **PAGE 17**



LYONS' TALE

J.Crew's president tells **Amy Verner** why she likes things messy **PAGE 16**

CURRY IN A HURRY

Chef **Vikram Vij** serves up his secret for savoury make-ahead chicken **PAGE 8**



SCHOOL SPIRIT



Identity politics still determine how kids of all ages dress, but this season's hippest back-to-school looks also subvert them. It's all about the mash-up, experts say. And an emulation of adult style

STORY BY DEIRDRE KELLY / PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISE VARRETTE

It's less than two weeks until the start of school and 17-year-old Alessa Dassios of Toronto is already mentally planning her wardrobe. "Short shorts top the list," says the Grade 12 student at R.H. King Academy, where uniforms are worn; the shorts, she clarifies, are for after 4 p.m.

"I'm also [incorporating] a pair of skinny jeans and a plaid shirt. I'm a prepper. That's my scene. But grunge kids and hipsters will want to be different."

As in other years, identity politics are a big part of what kids will be wearing in the classroom this season, making back-to-school fashion for fall 2011 as varied as the colours in a box of Crayola crayons.

Many, though, will also be injecting a healthy dose of individuality into their wardrobes, moulding standard or classic looks in their own distinct images.

"Back-to-school dressing this season is all about what we call mash-up style," says Nancy Dennis, Sears Canada's brand and trend director for children's wear.

"Layering colours, graphics, trompe l'oeil prints and accessories is such a fun, carefree look and allows kids to experiment and find their own personal style. Think Willow Smith: Her unique and confident style defines this mash-up approach."

As Dennis suggests, dressing to assert identity may be more important to kids than sporting a particular label, but celebrity influences remain strong.

"Each fall season, kids really take their cues from pop culture – that's a constant," says Gap Inc. Canada spokeswoman Tara Wickwire.

"But the inspiration changes with the players. This year, Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez, Emma Roberts, Vanessa Hudgens, Hailee Steinfeld, *Gossip Girl*, *Glee*, *Pretty Little Liars* and *Twilight* are all big influences."

So, too, is a relative pop-culture dinosaur like director Woody Allen. (Yes, you read that right.) The nerdy look that Allen perfected in movies such as *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* is making a comeback, including among tweens and teens who have never seen his films. One of the hottest looks among such junior hipsters is, for instance, heavy-frame eyeglasses fitted with non-prescription plastic lenses that even those with 20/20 eyesight are wearing.

"It's considered avant-garde," Dassios says. "Only you know that the glasses are fake."

Emulating adult style is a fast-growing trend, fuelled by easy access to new and sophisticated looks on the Internet and social media, Colin McDonald, style commentator for The Huffington Post, explains.

"Kids today are dressing more and more like their adult counterparts," he observes. "They have become more aware of the latest trends, designers and brands and are overwhelmed by a variety of them fighting for their attention."

The incorporation of more jolts of colour into their wardrobes is one way that young people are putting their own stamps on the season's fashion whirligig. Helping them along is Quagmire, a new Canadian kids-clothing line whose calling card is colour-shifting T-tie-dye screen prints change in tone whenever they're exposed to UV light, much like mood rings for the torso.

"They're super-functional shirts that are almost toys," Quagmire co-founder Geoff Tait says from the company's headquarters in Toronto. "We're totally amped to bring this crazy fabric technology to the masses – the colour-changing process absolutely blows the minds of 21st-century kids."

But gender differences still prevail.

"For guys," McDonald says, "it's all about the skater look: messy hair, hoodies, skinny and baggy jeans, plaids, stripes, tennis and hightop sneakers. For girls, it's about boho-chic, the mixing and matching of styles and patterns: chunky knits, leggings, vests, maxi-dresses, florals, clogs and boots."

Among the more adventurous, meanwhile, the direction is distinctly dressier. At GapKids, boys clothing is military-inspired, sporting crests, cargo pockets and skull motifs. For girls, there are new British-inspired collections, called Covent Garden and Portobello Road, featuring ruffles, paisley, knee-high boots, silks, mohair, polka dots and embellished graphic T-shirts.

Even denim is getting a remedial lesson in style.

"Jeans are selling well at GapKids this season, specifically skinny jeans for boys and girls, a new grey wash for boys and our legging jeans and skinny cropped jeans for girls in new colours including pink wash, stone and grey," says Wickwire. "At Old Navy, girls love the cheetah-print skinny jeans and boys are gravitating to the distressed skinny-style jeans."

Dassios, the 17-year-old, confirms that jeans remain a staple of the young (and the young at heart). But to be truly different this season, she is leaning more in the direction of dresses.

"I love wearing skirts and dresses, which is a little different because few girls choose them for everyday wear," she says.

"Teen style can be confusing," she concludes. "There are so many choices. But this is how I make it work for me – by standing outside the pack."

CAPTAIN OF THE CREW

Jenna Lyons – president, creative director and de facto face of iconic American clothing brand J.Crew – is a toucher. She is sunny about her mistakes. And she likes everything a little bit messy. You would never know it, though, from the skillful styling of the retailer's new Toronto store, its first outside the U.S. As Amy Verner reports, her influential way of combining the aspirational with the everyday seems as effortless as her own unique look

Some teenagers will just accept the monotony of school uniforms. Not Jenna Lyons. By seventh grade, she had already sprouted to six feet – mostly legs – when she made the switch to a French school in a Los Angeles suburb, where the mandated ensemble required what she felt was creative modification. “I would buy the skirts really small and the shirts really big so the proportions really shifted,” she recalls, adding that she preferred the boys’ boxy blazers and oversized sweaters to the girls’ versions. “It was fun and I couldn’t help myself.”

Lyons, now 43, doesn’t go as far as tracing a direct line from that moment to her current position as president and creative director at J.Crew, but it’s impossible to dismiss how her precocious restyling might have influenced her bold reshaping of a preppy apparel brand famous for its catalogue into a nexus of effortless cool.

During a recent media meet-and-greet with Lyons at J.Crew’s new store in Toronto, the girl-crush quotient among the assembled fashion reporters registers off the charts. As she reveals in an interview, her involvement in every detail of the 5,000-square-foot Yorkdale Shopping Centre space, the retailer’s first outside the U.S., is typical of the way she works. From the Serge Mouille light fixture to the array of art books on display to the bell jars containing pretty baubles, the look is patented Lyons: part aspirational and part everyday American.

Featuring rackfuls of neutral work and weekend wear, the Canadian store also bursts with an assortment of vibrantly hued cashmere sweaters, skinny corduroy pants, lacy underwear and nail lacquers. The merchandise, of course, is carefully curated, but it doesn’t feel forced. For Lyons, who has worked at J.Crew for 20 years, this balance comes naturally, she says.

“I don’t know how to do it any other way,” she explains. “Even when picking models or doing hair and makeup for the catalogue, it has to feel a touch tousled – not perfect,” she adds, shrugging her shoulders. “We left the floor unfinished in the store so it will age over time. I can’t wait until it gets scuffed up.”

With the introduction three years ago of Jenna’s Picks – a list of her favourite items that accompanies each of the 14 catalogues per year – she has become a spokesperson of sorts, lending the brand a viewpoint it didn’t have before.

For the most part, Lyons thinks that her choices have held up over the years,



J.Crew creative director Jenna Lyons, pictured in the retailer’s new store in Toronto, is modest about her rapidly growing influence in the fashion world: ‘When someone uses you as an adjective, that’s pretty incredible.’ KEVIN VAN PAASEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

but she is also okay with any duds. “Listen, I am the hugest mistake maker; there are things I do sometimes and I don’t know what I was thinking. But I think there needs to be an allowance for [that]. It might have felt right at that time, but I’m sure if I gave it a second look, I’d say, ‘Ohmigod.’ I [experience] that with my own outfits. I’ll look at a picture and think, ‘Ugh!’”

On this occasion, Lyons is wearing a midnight-blue crewneck sweater and an electric-green sequined skirt; her hair is pulled back into a pretty mess. Her goal, she says, is “touchability.”

“I want to be able to touch someone’s hair [or] put my arms around a friend and play with their sweater. I’m an affectionate person and I want people to look touchable.”

As creative director, Lyons oversees a 100-or-so-person design team that produces the J.Crew collections, including men’s, kids’, bridal, swimwear and accessories lines. Last week, a profile in *New York* magazine suggested just how influential Lyons has become, noting that J.Crew now informs designer collections rather than the other way around.

“When someone uses you as an adjective, that’s pretty incredible – to be part of the vocabulary,” she says. “But it’s also scary because we have to keep reinventing and pushing forward and not doing the same thing we did last month. How do you make it still feel ‘J.Crew’ but current? That’s where my head is at all the time.”

For now, the Toronto location only

carries women’s clothes, but Lyons, who lives in Brooklyn with her artist husband, Vincent Mazeau, and their four-year-old son, Beckett, hasn’t forgotten the guys: “We have a [men’s] site [in the works],” she says. “I can’t give you a date, but we’re hot on the trail.”

As the guests start leaving the Yorkdale event, they are handed tote bags printed with a map of Toronto. One contains an abstract floral-print scarf, a chain necklace with faceted black beads and hibiscus-pink nail polish. On their own, the tokens are charming enough, but it’s the message on the gift tag that stands out even more: “Enclosed are a few handpicked gifts that I thought you would enjoy – they’re some of my personal favourites for fall.”

Call it the Lyons touch.