

POLLY MELLEN

BY BART BOEHLERT

POLLY MELLON HELPED SHAPE FORTY YEARS OF AMERICAN STYLE.

When I started at *Harper's Bazaar*, I ran to work every day—truly," says Polly Allen Mellen, recalling her first magazine job in 1950, "which I continued to do until I was the oldest fashion editor in the world." In her extraordinary career at *Bazaar*, and then *Vogue* and *Allure*, Mellen helped shape forty years of American style.

On the second floor of her sprawling Connecticut home, once an apple barn, is a huge sitting room and master bedroom with rough brown ceiling beams and white walls densely covered with photographs and artwork. Antique furniture, all in pale blue and white, fills the room, and a small white chandelier hangs overhead. A luxurious bed is set next to glass doors offering views down to the garden and pool and green valley beyond. "This is where Richard Avedon lay down and said, 'Now I know where I am going to have my nervous breakdown!'" exclaims Polly. She wears a long-sleeve striped T-shirt and jeans, and her feet are bare with painted toenails. Her face is free of makeup and untouched by Botox or scalpel.

"I'm eighty-one, in my eighty-second year," volunteers the girlish retiree in carefully enunciated Katherine Hepburn diction. Born into an affluent Hartford family, Mellen developed a passionate interest in clothes at Miss Porter's School, where she wore her Brooks Brothers cardigan backwards. She began her career selling sweaters in a New York department store's college department. "That was the closest I ever got to college," cracks Polly. "But I progressed from there and became the spoiled brat of the fashion world."

Her higher education began under that era's greatest fashion editor, Diana Vreeland, at *Bazaar*. "I was in love, no question, with Mrs. Vreeland," says Polly. "She believed in me and trained me." Her creativity bloomed. Given an ugly dress to photograph, she put it on a model inside out. The re-shoot was expensive. "I learned from my mistakes," she says. "I learned to get along with people."

In 1952, Polly married, moved to Philadelphia's Main Line, and had two children. After eight years of a "turbulent" marriage, she had to go to Reno, Nevada, for eight lonely weeks to get divorced. While waiting, she worked as a shill at a casino. On her return, Vreeland lured her back to *Bazaar*.



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN KLEIN

Vreeland assigned her to work with photographer Richard Avedon, who had his doubts about the young editor. "He felt I was too noisy, and he wasn't sure about my focus and concentration," she says, but they became a legendary team—and best friends. When Vreeland decamped to *Vogue* and took Avedon with her, it broke Mellen's heart. Luckily, along came an old beau, Henry Mellen, who, like Polly, was divorced with two children. In 1965, they married. Her good luck held; soon, Polly rejoined Vreeland at *Vogue*.

Her first *Vogue* shoot was a five-week trip to Japan with Avedon and the model Veruschka, who starred with a 7'2" Sumo wrestler. Some other *Vogue* editors were unhappy that the new girl got the plum assignment. "I don't have any friends here," she complained to Vreeland.

"Who needs friends!" the boss replied, "Get on with it. You go to the edge of the diving board and you dive off. You don't hesitate."

"My life took off in a big way then," Mellen says. Her sense of style too. "For me it was always less is more. Spare is more daring."

At photo shoots, Mellen never settled for less than artistic excellence. The best example may be the famous Avedon portrait of a naked Natassja Kinski being kissed on the ear by a python slithering up her body. "But I am a perfectionist, and when I look at that picture now I wish I hadn't put that bracelet on her arm," says the self-critical editor.

That wasn't the only great picture Mellen helped make. The history of fashion photography is full of them: Deborah Turbeville's bathing suit shoot in a Russian bath, Helmut Newton's picture of Lisa Taylor in a Calvin Klein dress with her legs spread as she ogles a man, Arthur Elgort's shot of Taylor driving a Mercedes-Benz with her hair blowing in the breeze. "She is the epitome of the modern woman," Mellen says, "deep in thought, not just looking beautiful. I love the picture that is taken *not* at the expected moment. The 'off' moment is more interesting."

After four decades of work, a change of pace beckoned in 2000. "It was time to move on to other things," she observes of retirement. Yet she still follows the fashion scene passionately. "I see young actresses on the red carpet wearing dresses that are too old for them," says this eternally youthful and eternally chic octogenarian as she rises to make her visitor lunch. "But I don't want to name any names." **BG**