The so-called Trophy Room of David Jones’ Silverwater archives is awash with evidence that the department store turned retailing into an art form. Exhibit one: Shelves groaning under the bundled weight of ageing mail-order catalogues dating back as far as 1895. Geared to entice far-flung customers to shop from their homes at David Jones, they contain descriptions, photographs and skilfully produced sketches.

Exhibit two: The contents of the Flat Map Table, opposite the shelving cupboard identified in the Trophy Room blueprint as ‘Credenza 2b’. Herein resides a colour-splashed treasure trove of early advertising posters from a golden era of poster design. One dated 1937 even suggests that David Jones was the first store to sell Coca-Cola. These are so impressive, in both style and execution, that they have been the subjects of major public exhibitions in their own right.

Exhibit three: A wealth of photographs, microfilm and colour transparencies, which combine to create a vivid visual record of the department store through the years. Images range from still life photography, fashion shoots, advertising and graphic branding, and include records of that most direct of all the retail arts, window display.

The cache reveals how determined David Jones has been to work with the best of the best. The department store has entered into artistic partnerships with some of the most highly regarded creatives this country has produced. Here are just three …
Internationally acclaimed designer Gordon Andrews, a multifaceted creative perhaps best known for his work on Australia’s earliest decimal currency banknotes, gave David Jones a major branding facelift. The story is told in a rather pointed 1984 interview that Barbara Horton secured within the archives. Gordon’s interviewer is Claudia Shaw and the timing somewhat unfortunate, as the opening paragraphs show.

‘Tragically, shortly before this interview took place’, Shaw’s introductory note reads, ‘an unthinking novice took most of Mr Andrews’ work to Tempe Tip, along with other valuable archival material kept by David Jones for historical purposes. Mr Andrews was understandably very upset to hear this, as was Barbara Horton’.

In 1946, while working as a ‘designer around town’, Andrews became a ‘visiting consultant’ to the advertising department of David Jones and worked with the firm for two days each week for about four years. He was hired by Mrs Eleanor Donaldson, the head of advertising, who ‘wanted to introduce to all the various departments smarter packaging, smarter presentation’, Gordon recalled.

Mrs Donaldson set Gordon to work designing just that; it included boxes for the fur department, unique wrapping papers, and the department store’s distinctive freehand logo, reading simply ‘David Jones’. ‘One of the most interesting wrappings I did was printed on greaseproof paper’, he said.

The thinking behind this was to have something which was a nice, fresh thing to wrap up ham, or whatever. I threw down a whole lot of leaves and applied green ink from a Japanese brush, which I flicked to achieve a spontaneous effect.

Gordon said he created all the restaurant menus and catalogues for the David Jones Art Gallery during this time, establishing a new ‘house style’.

‘Did you see the wrapping paper I did for the perfume department?’ the 70-year-old asked his interviewer. ‘It had a little repeat pattern of perfume bottles, white on grey?’

Well regarded though he already was, Gordon was also being given a rather unusual opportunity. ‘Mrs Donaldson asked me to do Christmas cards, and I just sat there and did it on her desk’, he said, recalling the freshness of the commercial art streaming out of him during his time with the store. ‘I still consider it to be one of my best graphic jobs. It was perfectly spontaneous. It was good fun.’ As he talks it is clear that Mrs Donaldson championed him. Asked whether he was happy at David Jones, Gordon replied that he was, although ‘sometimes it was frustrating; the buyers would not like something’. Asked if Mrs Donaldson was the reason much of his work was accepted, he replied, ‘That is true’.

**THE GRAPHIC DESIGNER – GORDON ANDREWS**

Gordon Andrews-designed invitation to a photography exhibition at the David Jones Art Gallery, featuring Max Dupain, Laurence Le Guay, Athol Smith and David Moore, 1949.
Charles Lloyd Jones casts an eye over the merchandise.

Gordon Andrews-designed David Jones packaging, now with distinctive cursive logo.
Of all the photographers who have shot for David Jones, none is more iconic than modernist master Max Dupain, and before he died in 1992 he revealed he had a Mrs Donaldson story, too. ‘[She] ruled the roost with a rod of iron’, he told Fairfax’s Good Weekend, harking back to a moment when she gave him a series of objects to be shot at his studio. For reasons he does not explain, an English photographer who happened to be in town at the time took the pictures instead, resulting in Max being summoned to Mrs Donaldson’s office: ‘You didn’t do these’, she told him, throwing the pictures down on the table in front of him. ‘I could only admit that I had not.’

Max Dupain’s interest in photography began in 1927, when the 16-year-old Sydney boy acquired what he would call ‘one of those magic boxes’. He created a darkroom in his family home, quit school, and immediately got a job as an apprentice with Cecil Bostock, who had just photographed the construction of David Jones’ Elizabeth Street store.
‘He had some good clients’, recalled Max of his mentor Bostock. ‘Harry [Henry] Bindoff of David Jones was his friend … [and] an extremely talented designer of window display, and at night in order to avoid reflection in the glass we would make photographs of these star windows.’

Max set up his own studio in 1934 and began to work extensively with David Jones both on tightly atmospheric studio-based still lifes of objects such as designer shoes, and on location fashion shoots. ‘I did a lot of fashion photography for David Jones before the war – about three years of it’, he said. ‘Some of my best illustration was done at that period but it was illustration only and could not be anything else. I keep the best of it stowed way in a cupboard as a souvenir of a diverting interlude.’

Max’s long-time colleague Jill White, who now manages the Max Dupain Exhibition Negative Archive, recalls him saying that David Jones was ‘one of his first [and] best clients in the early thirties [and] forties’. Casting her mind through Max’s work for David Jones, she describes the range of studio commissions: ‘Lovely fashion shots, product shots … Great hats on beautiful models’.

The photographer famously announced after World War II that he would abandon ‘the cosmetic life of fashion photography or advertising illustration’ yet continued