

The Making of Bergdorf's Holiday Windows

By Jennifer Paull

[_Have you ever wondered, 'how do they do that'? Here's a behind-the-scenes look at the skill behind the spectacle](#)

Fifth Avenue glitters more brightly than ever this month, now that New York's department store holiday window displays have been unveiled, and it's hard to top the dazzling spectacle at Bergdorf Goodman's flagship. This year's theme is the "BG Follies of 2012," an Art Deco extravaganza that references Jazz Age showgirls, musicals and vaudeville. As people cluster around each window, there's one question that pops up again and again: "How do they *do* that?"

John Gordon Gauld might have the answer. A fine art painter, he has worked on the Bergdorf holiday window backdrops since 1998. Several of his projects have been included in the book *Windows at Bergdorf Goodman*. This year, his work can be seen in the "Act I / By Request" window, a bird's-eye view of an all-girl jazz band, and in the "Act III / Cast of Thousands" window, where dozens of miniature mannequins pose in toy stages that recreate the sets for the Ziegfeld Follies. Here, Gauld gives us a glimpse of the creativity,

long hours and teamwork that go into making each window come to life.



John Gordon Gauld

How did you come to work on Bergdorf Goodman's holiday windows?

JGG: Several years ago, I was interning at a Midtown gallery and during my lunch break, I saw people doing up the Bergdorf windows. I just walked over and asked for a job, and they said that I could start the next day as an unpaid intern. It's really fun to be a part of it. A lot of the same people have been there for many years.

When does planning for each year's windows start? Does the team have special sources of inspiration?

JGG: We start actually *while* we're installing the current year's windows. David Hoey, the display director, has already brainstormed some ideas for the next year's windows. He sits me down and says, let's talk about some new ideas... that's the very beginning.

He clues me in a lot—lends me movies, Jan Svankmajer films, and other interesting art films as inspiration. The Ziegfeld Follies sets, things like that. He always dreamed of coming to New York, to the theater, when he was growing up, and he was really inspired by painting, too. Those two [influences] come together in these windows.

The backdrops really set Bergdorf apart from anything else. Other stores just have a printed backdrop, but Bergdorf always makes sure it's truly painted, that it's art.

I get started in the spring; by August, I'm working seven days a week, 12 hours a day, and as it gets closer [to Thanksgiving], I'll spend weeks working 18 hours a day. But it's so interesting and I learn a lot. I'll get a bunch of mood boards and imagery they like. I piece something together that speaks to me, and hope that it's what they're looking for. It's rare that it's 100% perfect the first time; there's usually some refinement. There's always a learning curve at the beginning.



“Act 1/By Request”

Tell us about the nitty-gritty of putting all the elements together. How does it happen?

JGG: This year [Hoey] was working on an idea he’d had for a long time. Could we pull off a certain type of floor on a backwall for the bird’s eye view? So I did all kinds of samples, varnishing and staining. It’s real hardwood oak—black and white parquet. It couldn’t have just been canvas—we really needed the wood grain.

Installation works from the back toward the glass, so my stuff has to be done first. Most years, I’ll be in the window, either physically installing the backdrop or doing touch-ups, adjustments, finishing something right there in the window. Sometimes I’ll need to be in the

window painting while they're moving in props. It's kind of crazy to have mannequins around me in expensive dresses, while I'm still painting. Don't get paint on a \$20,000 dress!

That parquet floor was finished in early September. It was a good thing, because I insisted on getting it to Bergdorf's warehouse in Long Island City—and I was religious about bringing the finished [miniature stage set] boxes to the warehouse, too, as I finished them. It was lucky because they weren't here in my Red Hook studio! I was totally flooded by Sandy. I didn't have power for nineteen days, but I only had five stage boxes left and they'd been elevated. Everything else was ruined and I scrambled to get more supplies. But we did it.



“Act III / Cast of Thousands”

How does it feel to see the whole thing come together, when everything’s in place?

JGG: The lighting guy is amazing. You can’t really tell how it looks without the light. Sometimes you’ve done an install and it doesn’t look like that much—but then he turns the spotlights on and it’s a great moment. When I walk outside and see the whole thing . . . it’s a big accomplishment. Each part is a little triumph. I always make a point to go up and visit [the windows]. It’s so nice to hear what people say. We have this little joke, when we’re working hard and something’s not going right, we’ll say, “we’re doing this for all the children who come to see this!” It’s fascinating for people. But we are also doing this because it’s art. It serves a similar function as going to a museum—the exposure to art.

What are you particularly proud of this year?

JGG: The bird’s-eye view is unique. And the floor—really fantastic, really powerful. It’s unusual for me to have the chance to work with the design element. The little stage sets, too. They were sometimes only twelve or fourteen inches deep, but we tried to reinforce the illusion of depth with the layers, the atmospheric

backgrounds, the stairs, the tones. It's the same idea as in a painting: creating an illusion of depth with color.