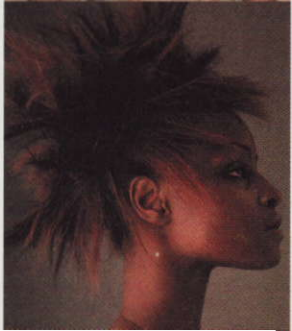
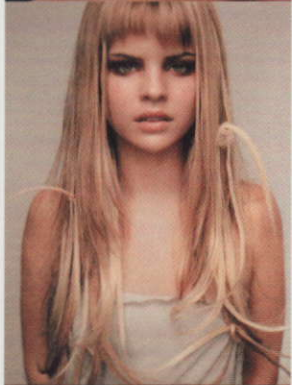


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By Jill Johnson

It was one of those days, typical of the New York rat race, when I had to stop in the middle of mad dashes to taxis and remind myself to breathe, "Inhale...exhale...no, no cursing at the witch who just nabbed your cab, think yoga class...inhale...exhale." It was a choice between fuming toxic thoughts or toxic fumes. Who can win?

So I arrived at 425 Madison Avenue with "oms" morphing into "oh my God, I'm going to be late for John Sahag!" But once I stepped through the door on the second floor, such anxiety succumbed to the all-embracing onslaught of tranquility: trickling water whispered in the waiting area, classical music seeped between scissors that waved like opera conductors' wands, granite ledges carved to nest hairdryers grew out of bamboo trees cut from steel.

And John Sahag himself—who responded cordially to my request for an interview with "I would be honored Miss Johnson"—is as soothing as a cup of chamomile tea. "One thing at a time, it's not going to help to panic," he advises in a soft-spoken accent—it sounds British to my unrefined American ear, but the layers of language beneath it are much more complex than that. Sahag is Armenian, but he was born in Beirut, moved to Australia as a teenager, dashed off to Paris at the age of 19, spent the better part of the last two decades in New York, and can speak *six* languages: Armenian, English, French, Classical Arabic, Turkish, and Italian.

He certainly has no problem expressing himself in words, whether discussing his "majestic craft," or questioning material motives, "For what? We were all born naked and we're all going naked," or talking about the seasons, "Seasons are important for our souls; they provoke different feelings." Words were all I expected. I thought we would just talk. But when the hands which have touched the crowns of Liv Tyler, Winona Ryder, Gwyneth Paltrow, Jennifer Aniston, and Brad Pitt, descended designedly upon my head, I knew I was in for a whole other level of expression.

I didn't need a haircut; I had just had one the week before. And I wasn't going to get a haircut, because John Sahag doesn't give haircuts. John Sahag creates masterpieces. "It's never the length, but it's how it's carved that makes it unique," says Sahag, who has become lost in the potential shapes within my hair. "Shapes have a sensitivity which should be captured. It's a bit like doing couture," continues Sahag (who should know—his father designed





haute couture in Beirut, when it was "the Paris of the Middle East"), "it's the uniqueness of the shape that makes it fashionable."

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Sahag asks, as though I were a guest in his home and the creative process in his mind has made him forget his manners. I opt for water. I don't want to miss a thing, not a word nor a snip. There's no trepidation—I'd never been in better hands—I just want to try to see what the artist's eye sees.

"It should look like nobody touched it—like it just grew that way," explains Sahag as he begins straightening my hair, first with a blow dryer and then with a flatiron. The iron and comb periodically fly from his hand or fall from the natural rock ledge on which they are placed carelessly. The master is lost in his medium. He doesn't notice the assistants dashing in and out of his space like ball boys, replacing the scattered tools and trying not to distract him. They don't.

Sahag invented the dry cut technique. He didn't intend to "invent" anything. It just seemed natural to him. It makes sense. How can you see the shapes and evoke their "hidden story" in flat, wet hair? His quick snips layer and mold my thick unruly mop. Hand and hair dance together. Shapes emerge. The artist is in heaven. He loves his job; that is quite clear. I dare to slip in a question between snips, "What steered you into this career?"

"I got a job sweeping the floor of a salon at the age of six. My dad's closest friend was a brilliant hairdresser in Beirut. I fell in love with it. Watching the ladies coming in and then

how they looked going out—it was like a miracle!" explains Sahag passionately. Once his family moved to Australia, Sahag continued on his career path, working in "a very hip salon" in Sydney. Then he moved on to Melbourne and began putting together test photos with famed photographers Helmut Newton and Henry Talbot. "I've looked back at those photos, and there's nothing ordinary about them. It was very daring, what we were doing, very abstract and powerful."

"I was very determined," says Sahag, "I had clear objectives: to save money and to go to Paris. There was no time to waste!" But the 19-year-old did have to break the news to his family whom he "loves dearly." "I told them I was going to Paris for six months and, now, 25 years later, they're still asking me, 'John, has it been six months yet?'" Sahag has an older sister and three younger brothers in Australia and, despite the distance, he says, "We're very close."

Soon after his arrival in Paris, Sahag had *Vogue* tears in his portfolio—not too shabby for a teenager. What advice does he have for budding hairdressers? "You must be passionate, and also realize it's not going to happen overnight. It takes five years just to grasp the basics," says Sahag, "I was doing 25 to 30 clients a day back then. Now I book on the hour. The cut is so refined it takes more time. I'm not in it for the race. I'm anti-commercial. It's not about the money; it's about doing beautiful work."

Even Sahag's new product line is tucked discreetly in back by the client dressing rooms, not at the front

desk which no doubt would be more conducive to making sales. John had pointed that out to me when he first gave me a tour of his Manhattan oasis the week before. "It took ten years to perfect the line," he told me. He's a perfectionist. He's also industrious. "We built everything in the salon ourselves, except the metal bases of the chairs," he explained.

With all this constructing and formulating and creating, it's hard to imagine how Sahag finds time to breathe. "What do you do in your free time, if you have any?" I ask as pieces of my hair cascade to the floor. "I am free all of the time!" replies Sahag cheerily. He is very much in a New York state of mind: "I like to work around the clock and be close to the fashion industry—the magazines, the photographers, the shows, the actresses. It's endless, really." Sahag spends about half his time in the salon and half on photo shoots. He might fly to L.A. two times a week. He is off to do the Golden Globes in a couple of days. "It's my kind of rhythm," he says. "I was traveling all over the world on editorial shoots for years. You get used to it. I feel like a kid on an airplane."

With all this traveling, I wonder if Sahag has time for relationships. "I have a girlfriend," he reveals, "she's a sweetheart, a wonderful soul." Will he have a family? "Well, that's not in my hands," he says, "Mother God decides that. My immediate family is here [in the salon]. We are incredibly close." They look like one big family—or one



To order from John Sahag's fabulous new line of products, call: 1-888-771-7527.

big rock band—with all the hairdressers in black leather pants. They look like they might head down to CBGB's for a quick set after their last appointments. Actually, Sahag will head to Chelsea and curl up with his cat and dog.

Will he stay in New York City forever? "Nobody is here forever," he replies pensively.

With decades of tear sheets from all of the top magazines, clients flying in six times a year from around the globe, celebrities such as Paltrow settling for the scissors of no other, and a product line which will transform manes and pamper olfactory senses, could John Sahag possibly have any goals left? "I haven't even started yet!" he says.

He has, however, finished with my hair. It's fantastic. The length is still there, but I think I've lost five pounds of hair in between. It's light. It's full of motion and character. He had told me, "Hair should look like it belongs to that person—like an extension of their soul." I didn't understand, but now I do. I can't explain. You will have to make your own date with Sahag, the hair god.