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Book Review

Designing the Department Store: Display and Retail at the Turn of the Twentieth Century.

Emily M. Orr, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019. 208 pp., 50 b&w illus. and 16 col. plates, \$102.60, cloth. 13 digit ISBN: 9781350054370.

Emily Orr's *Designing the Department Store* is a handsome volume and a significant contribution to the growing body of knowledge on the role of display in the development of the department store at the turn of the twentieth century. Her novel examination of commercial display brings together architectural, design and retailing history approaches. Here the reader will find careful analysis supported by a wealth of hitherto unexplored quotes, descriptions and images of the infrastructure for display. This is a study of a professional practice revealing not only its ideas, tools, materials, props, techniques and technologies but also the agency of architects, window dressers, shopfitters, and interior decorators in creating visual spectacles.

In recent years there has been a notable rise in publications on the history of display and 'visual merchandizing' (a term that emerged in the 1970s), amongst retail and design historians.¹ Although the theme of display and its importance to department stores is not new, only a few studies have explored it in depth. Orr points out that publications have tended to discuss display in terms of its impact on consumption and as a driver of modernity but have neglected its significance as a key site of design production. Ultimately, she argues, it was the act of display that transformed goods into commodities. As part of her analysis the author proposes the concept of the 'display moment' in the life of the commodity. This moment is defined as 'a distinct and professionally styled phase of mediation that takes place between production and consumption' (p. 18).

¹ See for example *Architectures of Display: Department Stores and Modern Retail* (A Lasc, et al, 2018); *Visual Merchandising: The Image of Selling* (Louisa Iarocci ed., 2013); *Boutiques and Other Retail Spaces: The Architecture of Seduction* (D Vernet and L de Wit's, 2007); *Cultures of Commerce: Representation and American Business Culture, 1877-1960* (E Brown, C Gudis & M Moskowitz, 2006); *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture* (C Grunenberg & M Hollein, 2002); and *Retail Desire: Design, Display and Visual Merchandising* (J Tucker, 2003), among others. A group of retail historians have been studying the infrastructure for display within the context of the department store: C. Walsh, 1999, 'The Newness of the Department Store: A View from the Eighteenth Century', in G. Crossick and S. Jaumain (eds.) *Cathedrals of consumption: The European department store, 1850-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate), 46-71; Stobart et al., 2005, Stobart, J. and Hann, A. (2005), *Sites of Consumption: The Display of Goods in Provincial Shops in Eighteenth-Century England, Cultural and Social History*, 2, pp. 165-188.; U. Spiekermann, (2000), 'Display Windows and Window Display in German Cities of the Nineteenth Century: Towards the History of a Commercial Breakthrough', in C. Wischermann and E. Shore (eds.) *Advertising and the European city: Historical perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate) 139-171; J. Whitaker, 2011, *The Department Store: History, Design, Display* (London: Thames & Hudson); and V. Howard, 2015, *From Main Street to Mall: The Rise and Fall of the American Department Store* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press).

The book discusses examples from the United States and Britain, referring mostly to the main stores in Chicago's State Street, New York's Broadway and London's Oxford Street and Westbourne Grove. Within each store the author examines the settings where the display profession developed, that is the shop windows, sales floors, workshops, factory floors and the associations and annual conventions that emerged in this period.

The volume is structured in four thematic parts. The first section about the brand-new architecture starts with the dramatic process of enlargement and transformation of stores in these years. According to Orr, this new type of architecture developed to serve display needs (p. 23). Although the author employs a comparative perspective between stores, and the narrative stresses commonalities and mutual influences, there is not enough reference and explanation of the differences in size, style and construction methods. Of necessity and in spite of an international flow of ideas, retailing practices and traditions responded to a sense of place, local culture and history.

The second section examines the theme of window display and discusses the development of the profession of window dresser, later called 'displayman'. Orr refers to key indicators of how the profession developed, such as the emergence of national associations, the trade press, and specialist guidebooks. There is fascinating detail and examples about the making of displays, the skills, tools, techniques and styles, to reveal a complex picture of expertise and creativity. What is perhaps missing is more credit to the role of store owners and managers, among other members of staff, in facilitating display. After all, display could only be effective if other retail practices and dynamics were in place, such as management, supply, budgeting and accounting, to name a few.

The next and third section on shopfitting is perhaps the most original in content and approach. There is little previous research on the history of the shopfitting industry from the perspective of its contribution to display and, thus, to the success of the department store. It examines the products and the firms supplying the large variety of furniture, fixtures, vitrines, cases and stands that allowed staff and customers novel ways of seeing and interacting with the merchandize.

The last section, on interior displays, explores the store's sales floors to show how decorations became part of the increasing responsibilities of the displayman. Among a variety of decorative schemes and themed displays driven by the annual seasons and special events, this chapter also discusses the 'model room'. The 'room' was a popular advertising strategy that not only enhanced the appeal of the store but that, crucially, contributed to the professional development of displaymen as interior designers. Their creations were so impressive that the author credits the designers with turning the department stores into tourist attractions.

Throughout the book, the author makes excellent use of some largely unexplored archive sources and images. A significant type of source is the ephemera, such as guidebooks and retail periodicals but particularly, the store's advertising and promotional material. This material includes printed store models, pamphlets, postcards, trade catalogues, almanacs and souvenirs, which are interrogated to reveal the richness of display's material culture and formats.

The book argues that the field of display design developed because of an international exchange of ideas. This makes a welcome difference with the many studies that deal with only one store or locality, missing thus the chance for a wider comparative perspective. However, in searching for the commonalities between the department stores in Chicago, New York and London, the book has overlooked intriguing differences. Terms employed across the Atlantic were not always the same, for example, the term 'department store', was not employed in Britain before the 1930s. Without abandoning an international and comparative perspective, future research could pay more attention to the richness and difference of the local and national contexts, as these continue to shape retail traditions and new practices.²

Mostly with an academic audience in mind, *Designing the Department Store* offers a thorough and fascinating view of how display design was practiced, who were the agents and how it contributed to make the department store one of the most modern and successful retail formats of this period. The author brings together the many and different ways in which display became a professional operation within the business; one with immediate and long-term effects on urban, national and international retail.

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² Jon Stobart and Vicki Howard, eds, 'Introduction: Global Perspectives on Retailing', in *The Routledge Companion to the History of Retailing*, London and New York, 2019, p. 2.