

## Article

## Fashioning and selling the American Look: Dorothy Shaver and modern art



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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the pioneering efforts of Dorothy Shaver of Lord & Taylor department store in New York to promote American design and designers from the 1920s to the 1950s. With archival and periodical evidence, this article first situates her within a longer tradition of American fashion nationalism. It then argues that Shaver succeeded when others before her failed because she embraced the rising tide of modernism. This article examines her three major marketing promotions: modern decorative art in 1928, American designers in 1932, and finally, a cohesive “American Look” in 1945. No previous study has linked the three together to identify the common thread of modernism behind her long, well-known campaign for American design. With her success, Shaver built reputations for herself and her store as leaders in promoting American fashion, and in 1945, she ascended the last rung of the store’s corporate ladder to the presidency.

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### Diseñando y vendiendo el American Look: Dorothy Shaver y el arte moderno

## RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza los esfuerzos pioneros de Dorothy Shaver en los grandes almacenes Lord & Taylor de Nueva York para promover el diseño y los diseñadores americanos entre las décadas de 1920 y 1950. Basándose en la prensa y documentación de archivo, el artículo primero la sitúa dentro de una larga tradición de nacionalismo en la moda de los Estados Unidos. A continuación sostiene que Shaver tuvo éxito cuando otros antes habían fracasado gracias a que se abrazó a la creciente ola del modernismo. El artículo examina sus tres principales promociones de marketing: el arte decorativo moderno en 1928, los diseñadores norteamericanos en 1932 y, finalmente, un cohesivo “American Look” en 1945. Ningún estudio anterior ha ligado las tres juntas para identificar el hilo conductor del modernismo tras su larga y bien conocida campaña a favor del diseño norteamericano.

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### 1. Introduction

Dorothy Shaver was a leading American businesswoman who built a long (1921–1959) and successful career at Lord & Taylor department store in New York City.<sup>1</sup> She worked her way up the

<sup>1</sup> From the 1920s into the early 1970s, Lord & Taylor enjoyed a reputation for selling stylish, high-quality merchandize in an atmosphere that catered to the delights of upper middle-class female customers. Under Dorothy Shaver and her

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corporate ladder to become store president in 1945 and served in that position until her untimely death in 1959. Sales dramatically rose during her nearly forty years at the store, more than tripling under her fourteen-year presidency alone “from \$30 million to over \$100 million” (Leavitt, 1985, p. 248).<sup>2</sup> Throughout her career, what distinguished her and her store from competitors was Shaver’s passion for art, specifically modern art. The New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) recognized Shaver’s strong connection to the art world in November 1950 by inviting her to speak at the opening of the Good Design exhibition, which displayed over 100 objects from everyday life that embodied both beauty and function. Shaver told the crowd of modern art aficionados that her success in the business world could be attributed to “art and its universal appeal.” She declared: “I have learned from dollars and cents returns that art is neither remote nor esoteric nor removed from everyday life, but that it touches the heart and spirit of all people”.<sup>3</sup> Shaver acknowledged that many people were not interested in art in its traditional forms of painting and sculpture, but a chair, dress, or window display could affect them. These forms of creative expression might be called “design” rather than “art”, but Shaver argued: “to me, good design is simply art applied to living”.<sup>4</sup> In defining art broadly to include all forms of design, from architecture to furniture, fashion, and advertising, she did not distinguish between the cultural value of a painting and a dress. In this way, she disregarded what she saw as artificial hierarchies of modern art and promoted art and design in all aspects of her store, from the window and floor displays to the print advertising, and most importantly, to her tireless promotion of typically “American” design and style that she would term “the American Look”. These artistic efforts shaped Shaver’s career and led to her greatest business successes.

Shaver built a reputation for herself and her store from the 1930s to the 1950s as leading promoters of American fashion designers who were creating what was seen as a distinctly American style. Before this period, fashion designers in the United States often labored anonymously in the shadow of the great Parisian designers, whose work was then copied, reproduced, and sold around the world. Yet Dorothy Shaver, and several others before her, sought to break this historic reliance on Paris and allow American fashion designers to create a style particularly suited to American women and their increasingly active, modern lives. Shaver began her career at Lord & Taylor during the “machine age” of the 1920s, when the United States was pioneering a new mass-produced consumer culture. She saw potential in the ideals of modern art to provide American designers, such as Claire McCardell, with a unique esthetic to put an American stamp on fashions, furniture, and any number of consumer products. While others before her had tried to stimulate domestic fashion design by looking for inspiration from the American landscape and history, Shaver realized that rather

than looking to the past, Americans must look to the future. Shaver passionately believed that what could define “American” design was a combination of efficient mass-production with beauty. In creating more artistic mass-produced goods, American designers would also be democratizing the culture of consumption, in which beauty was no longer a luxury reserved for the leisure class. Instead, Shaver believed that all classes of consumers were entitled to good design – form, as well as function. Twentieth-century Americans, Shaver argued in a 1928 *House & Garden* magazine article, were no longer “satisfied to live in mere physical comfort”.<sup>5</sup> In modern art, Shaver believed that Americans would finally have a design esthetic to express their unique identity in consumer goods that she hoped would one day be sold around the world.

During Shaver’s long tenure at the store, Lord & Taylor marketed itself as embodying American style. She applied her modern art expertise and passion to develop new methods of fashion and style marketing. Most importantly, she nurtured American designers when few others were doing so, and in turn became an authority on modern design, playing a prominent role in the larger art community of architects, industrial designers, advertisers, museum personnel, publicists, and department store executives who created and promoted the look of American modernity. Shaver’s work to foster a homegrown fashion and design industry would help transform New York into a global fashion center and create a genre of “American” style that successfully applied modernism to the consumer culture of everyday life.

## 2. Modernism in art and design

In the years preceding the cataclysmic outbreak of World War I in 1914, modernism was revolutionizing the European art and fashion worlds. Department stores were some of the first institutions to display modern fine art in America. In the mid-1910s, the Gimbel brothers bought Cézannes, Picassos, and Braques to display in their stores in Cincinnati, New York, Cleveland, and Philadelphia (Leach, 1993, p. 136). Similarly, in 1915 the cosmetics maven Helena Rubenstein opened her New York salon where she displayed her modern fine art collection for her female customers to see (Clifford, 2003, p. 86). In exhibiting works of modern fine art and in selling modernist-influenced *couture*, department stores in the 1910s and 1920s were critical to introducing and popularizing modernism with American audiences, thus shaping middle and upper class tastes. The artwork helped to create a modernist atmosphere to sell the new fashions of Paris couturiers like Paul Poiret, who was credited in 1908 with transforming the fashionable silhouette from a voluptuous S-shape to a cubist-inspired, long, slender cylinder (Steele, 1988, p. 232; De Marly, 1980, p. 83).<sup>6</sup>

However, some major players in the American fashion industry abhorred the new modern look. After Poiret’s designs were popularized stateside in 1910, Edward W. Bok, longtime editor of *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, quickly emerged as the most visible crusader against Parisian fashions (Schweitzer, 2008; Hill, 2004; Nystrom, 1928, pp. 180–181).<sup>7</sup> Bok argued to his middle-class female readers that thanks to modernism’s influence, the historic French artistic genius had degraded to madness. Thus, in Bok’s estimation, Paris fashions no longer embodied the high culture of European civilization, to which Americans had so long aspired, and were now

immediate successors, the store moved further upscale from volume-based competitors like Bloomingdale’s, Gimbel’s, and Macy’s, while remaining more accessible to the middle-class than high fashion stores like Saks Fifth Avenue or Bergdorf Goodman (Perkins, 1947, p. 125). In the late 1920s, Macy’s was the largest New York store, with a sales volume at \$70–\$75 million, while Lord & Taylor rivaled newly opened Saks Fifth Avenue at about \$18 million in sales (“Another Record Christmas Trade,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 24, 1926, Proquest; “An Old Business,” *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 29, 1927, Proquest; and “New Store Will Aid Gimbel Profit,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 13, 1924, Proquest). Lord & Taylor was the jewel in the crown of Associated Dry Goods Corporation, which held several other stores, including James McCreery & Co., Hahne & Co., J.N. Adam & Co., Stewart & Co., and Powers Mercantile Co.

<sup>2</sup> These gains well exceeded Shaver’s goal when she became president of simply doubling annual sales (Perkins, 1947, p. 128).

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Shaver, no date c. November 1950, qtd. in “Dinner to Open First Good Design Exhibition at Museum,” Press Release, The Museum of Modern Art, Dorothy Shaver Papers (hereafter DSP), Box 8, Folder 11, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NMAH).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Shaver, February 1928, “Principles and Practice in the Decorating Service of a Retailer,” *House & Garden*, DSP, Box 15, Folder 3, NMAH.

<sup>6</sup> Poiret was especially sympathetic to the cubists and was an art collector himself (Troy, 2003, p. 42).

<sup>7</sup> Bok himself discussed his efforts in Chapter XXIX, “An Excursion into the Feminine Nature,” in his 1921 autobiography (Bok, 1921, pp. 327–332).

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