

The Birth of Department Stores

Fashion, design, toys, advertising
1852-1925

Press release



10 April
— 13 Oct 2024

Les Grands Magasins Dufayel. 1895-1900. Poster, lithograph © Les Arts Décoratifs

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PRESS RELEASE

1.

1. Leonetto Cappiello
(1875-1942) —
Au Louvre.
Jouets et étrennes
1922
Poster, lithograph
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Jean Tholance

From 10 April to 13 October 2024, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs is devoting an exhibition to the birth of department stores, which in the mid-nineteenth century became the new temples of modernity and consumerism. *Au Bon Marché*, *Les Grands Magasins du Louvre*, *Le Printemps*, *La Samaritaine*, and *Les Galeries Lafayette* reveal their multiple facets through the prisms of history, politics, and society, from the Second Empire up until their consecration during the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts of 1925.

A large part of the seven hundred pieces on display, ranging from posters to clothing, and toys to decorative art items, taken from the museum's collections, allow the public to understand the evolution of Parisian commerce from 1852 onwards. Launched by daring entrepreneurs, this new commercial concept led to the creation of spaces dedicated to women, shaking up the sales landscape, and foreshadowing the advent of consumer society. The emergence of fashion and its democratization, the invention of sales, the child as an innovative marketing target, but also the development of the concept of mail order sales, are just some of the themes developed over the course of this fascinating exhibition.

The Second Empire: a spectacular modernity

From the 1850s onwards, department stores laid the foundations of modern commerce and consumer society within a context of economic growth. Their emergence was linked to the structural reforms and proactive economic policy put in place by Napoleon III in an attempt to modernize France. The urban transformations of Paris under Haussmann were captured in the photographs of Charles Marville, and the development of railways by the numerous tourist posters praising these new holiday destinations. Department stores took advantage of the rise of the bourgeoisie, who were their primary customers. In a society where the beginnings of a mass culture were being established, the gradual birth of a certain modernity of leisure like “going shopping” became, similar to the theatre, ball, cafe, or concert, a new bourgeois distraction. These department stores were known as the “kingdom of women”, as described by Émile Zola in his notebooks and drafts for the novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies’ Paradise*).

2. *Au Bon Marché* —
Handbag and box,
1910-1919
Shaped silk taffeta,
printed on chain,
gilded metal,
and silk satin
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière

3. Jules Jean Chéret
(1836-1932) —
Aux Buttes Chaumont
1888
Poster, lithograph
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière



2.



3.

The department store: a commercial revolution

Zola was directly inspired by Aristide Boucicaut, founder of the first Parisian department store, *Au Bon Marché*, which opened in 1852. He had his portrait painted in 1875 by William Bouguereau, a major representative of classical painting. Aristide Boucicaut was the model of the successful entrepreneur during the Second Empire. He laid the foundations of modern commerce with major commercial innovations like the democratization of fashion, the invention of sales and seasonal exhibitions, the child as a new commercial target, and even mail order sales.



4.

4. Maurice Dufrène
(1876-1955) —
Dressing table from the
bedroom of Mr and Mrs
Pierre Levasseur
Circa 1921
Wood, bronze,
and mother-of-pearl
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Jean Tholance

5. Anonymous —
Dress in two sections
1860-1865
Silk faille and taffeta
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Jean Tholance

The democratization of fashion: the figure of the Parisian lady

The nineteenth century, the epoch of Baudelaire's "flâneur", was also that of the Parisienne, or Parisian lady, a mythical and protean figure, who flocked to the capital's department stores. These temples attracted the Parisienne: here, she could touch, look, and try things on. A poster by Henri Thiriet intended to promote an exhibition of household linens at the *Place Clichy* shows this tactile relationship with the merchandise on display. The economic model on which these establishments were based, namely the reduction of production costs, made it possible to set unbeatable prices. A large part of the population, both French and foreign, now had access to goods previously reserved for the elite. Clothing, whose production was gradually becoming mechanized and rationalized, was not immune to this process of democratization. The *Grands Magasins du Louvre* prided themselves on having an influence on fashion, arguing that they did not copy it but create it. Nevertheless, some department stores carried designer and haute couture models, as can be seen by a *Trois Quartiers* dress dated 1810, reminiscent of Paul Poiret's creations.

The invention of sales and exhibitions

Department stores introduced the notion of seasonality through exhibitions known today as sales. Amongst these, household linens, gloves, and lace, and even summer toiletries. These events made it possible to encourage sales throughout the year, thus reducing slow periods. The dates of these sales were communicated to customers via free advertising calendars. Posters made by the great illustrators (Jules Chéret, Jean-Gabriel Domergue, and René Péan), also played a decisive role in the promotion of such events. The wide variety of fashion accessories on display (gloves, fans, hats, feathers, stockings, and ties) reflect the rich variety of products on sale.



5.

6. Anonymous
(France) —
Horse tricycle
1880-1900
Iron, wood, and leather
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière

7. *La Belle Jardinière* —
Sailor outfit
Circa 1910
Wool and cotton twill
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière

The child as a new target

The appearance of children's sections in department stores reflected the growing place occupied by children within the nineteenth-century family. This socio-psychological evolution may thus be seen in the material culture of the time: children's clothes gradually became different from those of adults, as illustrated by the sailor outfit from 1910 from *La Belle Jardinière* or the Highlander outfit from 1907 from *Les Trois Quartiers*. The child quickly became a new commercial target, and was offered a range of optical, construction, and imitation games, mimicking trades or everyday activities, as evidenced by the miniature Singer sewing machine.



6.



7.

Mail-order sales

At *Au Bon Marché*, Aristide Boucicaut set up the mail order sales system to sell merchandise produced in large numbers. The richly illustrated sales catalogues also helped to expand the customer base both in France and abroad. A poster by Ferdinand Lunel shows how orders were transported from *Place Clichy* to the Parisian suburbs. A *Trois Quartiers* uniform illustrates the world of delivery staff. Initially an annual publication, these catalogues, printed in large numbers, quickly became seasonal, increasing with the development of various departments: household goods, gold and silverware, porcelain, lighting, rugs and decoration, travel items. Catalogues such as these make it possible to trace the evolution in the lifestyle and tastes of the bourgeoisie in terms of fashion, interior decoration, household goods, but also leisure activities.



8.

8. Jean-Gabriel Domergue
(1889-1962) —
Galleries Lafayette.
Emprunt national
1920
Poster, lithograph
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière

9. *Aux Trois Quartiers*
Félix —
Dress
1908-1910
Lawn (pure cotton)
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière

Decorating studios

The development of decorating or art studios in department stores was a phenomenon that emerged in the interwar period, with the appearance of a new generation of creators keen to rally together and revive the decorative arts. *Le Printemps* was a pioneer by inaugurating the *Primavera* design studio in 1912. Specializing in the mass production of furniture and art objects, this workshop offered decorative objects and modern furniture at affordable prices. It recruited young artists from applied arts schools, in tune with the new aesthetic trends. In 1921, *Galleries Lafayette* entrusted the management of their studio, *La Maîtrise*, to Maurice Dufrene (1876-1955). *Au Bon Marché* launched the *Pomone* studio, first directed by Paul Follot (1877-1941). Finally, *Les Grands Magasins du Louvre* created the *Stadium-Louvre* in 1923. Étienne Kohlmann (1903-1988) took over as artistic director of *Stadium* in 1927 but had produced works for the studio prior to that date. The remarkable buffet or sideboard presented in the exhibition, created circa 1924, testifies to this collaboration.

The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts of 1925

The event that symbolized the apogee of these decorating studios was the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts of 1925. For the occasion, each department store boasted a monumental pavilion where it showcased its most beautiful creations in terms of furniture, ceramics, textiles, glass, and other decorative objects. Photographs by Albin Salaün and François-Antoine Vizzavona capture the beauty of these buildings, both outside and in. Fashion pieces, furniture items, toys, and advertising posters housed at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs tell the story of the birth, not just of department stores, but of an entire epoch. This new modern commercial panorama in Haussmann's Paris gave a new place to women by providing them with reserved spaces. In these places of a new kind, the figure of the Parisienne emerged, cultivating a myth of beauty and elegance that is still very much alive today. A lively hub of invention and creativity, the International Exhibition highlights the fundamental place of department stores within the Parisian landscape, from the Belle Époque to the Roaring Twenties.



9.

Useful information

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— Les Arts Décoratifs

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Les Arts Décoratifs brings together
the Musée des Arts Décoratifs,
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the Camondo School, the Ateliers
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Johannes Huth, President
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