

Fashioning Commercial Modernity: The Experience of American Merchandisers in Europe, 1870s-1930s

Over the past four decades, the history of fashion has gained academic legitimacy, thanks to the efforts of curators and historians who have researched the creative efforts of Parisian couture houses and the social meaning of dress as related to consumer identity. More recently, business historians have entered the fray and emphasized the importance of commercial enterprise, urging researchers to look beyond Paris and its “genius designers” to other nodes in the fashion system. Between 2013 and 2016, I served as the director for The Enterprise of Culture (EOC), a €1-million EU-funded collaborative research project on the business history of the European fashion industry. The EOC advocated a closer examination of the supply chain in the fashion system, stressing that a wide range of corporate actors, from fiber makers to mass-market retailers, have long been essential to the globalization, modernization, and democratization of fashion.

Building on these insights, I am working a new book on distribution within the transatlantic fashion system. My work examines the people, places, and commercial spaces, which, although largely hidden from the public eye, have been central to the flow of goods and information in fashion, broadly defined as style goods. My research in corporate archives, trade journals, historic photographs, and commercial streetscapes has yielded promising insights on the operations of numerous American businesses that were involved in procuring European style goods—couture models, millinery, textiles, lace, corsetry, baby clothes, clocks, and glassware, and so forth—for North American markets between the 1870s and the outbreak of World War II. This group of “fashion intermediaries” formed a human bridge between the manufacturers and wholesalers in Western and Central Europe and the booming consumer society of the United States. They included the American buyers who visited Europe on semi-annual purchasing trips; workers in the resident European buying offices of prestigious American department stores like John Wanamaker of Philadelphia; and the professional staff in firms such as the Associated Merchandising Corporation (AMC), the leading US-based buying organization which by the 1920s had offices in Asia and Europe, including London, Paris, Florence, Berlin, and Vienna.

This paper will examine the little-understood history of American merchandisers and their connections to Europe from the 1870s through the 1930s. It begins by laying out the broad history of the commercial networks that connected the United States to Western and Central Europe. It will then examine the European operations of the AMC in the 1920s and 1930s, examining the firm’s offices in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna in terms of business practices, cultural differences, transnational tastes, commercial space, and the daily work routines of resident buyers and stylists.