



Influences of Two Midwestern American Department Stores on Retailing Practices, 1883-1941

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Marshall Field's of Chicago and the F. & R. Lazarus & Co. of Columbus, Ohio, were part of Alfred D. Chandler Jr.'s "retailing revolution." These two American department stores substantially influenced retailing practices in the United States, before they were assimilated into the Macy's brand in 2007. At Marshall Field's in the late nineteenth century, Gordon Selfridge instituted innovative methods of selling, including visual merchandising, which he later transported across the Atlantic Ocean. He also hired Arthur Fraser, whose artistry in window displays at Field's transformed that fledgling practice during the early twentieth century. Fred Lazarus, Jr., not only revolutionized merchandising practices at his family's department store, but in 1929 he joined Lincoln Filene, president of Filene's Sons & Co. in Boston, and Walter N. Rothschild, Sr., president of Abraham & Straus in Brooklyn, to create the holding company Federated Department Stores, which would become the largest company of its type by 1965. Fred, Jr., was also instrumental in convincing president Franklin D. Roosevelt to move the American Thanksgiving holiday to the fourth from the last Thursday in November, creating more shopping days for the Christmas retail season.

Before they were assimilated into the Macy's brand in 2007, Marshall Field's of Chicago and the F. & R. Lazarus & Co. of Columbus, Ohio, substantially influenced retailing practices in the United States. Like Macy's, these two American department stores trace their beginnings to the mid-nineteenth century: Field's was established as a dry goods store in 1852, and Lazarus as a men's clothing store in 1851. R. H. Macy opened his

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New York store in 1858. Both Field's and Lazarus employed visionary merchants who developed and implemented merchandising practices that significantly influenced their customers, their competitors' retail operations, and the fashion retailing business as a whole.

Information regarding these two stores can be found in several generic histories of the department store. In addition, Field's has two written histories: Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan's *Give the Lady What She Wants*, written for the store's centennial in 1952, and Robert W. Twyman's more scholarly work, *History of Marshall Field & Co., 1852-1906*, published in 1954. These secondary sources, and information from the Marshall Field's archives in Chicago, the Lazarus Family Papers at the Ohio Historical Society, and the archives of the magazine *Visual Merchandising & Store Design (VMSD)* in Cincinnati, Ohio, reveal the contributions to American fashion retailing of Harry Gordon Selfridge and Arthur Fraser of Marshall Field's, and Fred Lazarus, Jr., of the F. & R. Lazarus & Co.

Harry Gordon Selfridge

Before establishing the British retailing emporium that bears his name, Gordon Selfridge had a 25-year career with Marshall Field & Co. He began in 1879, when the major business at Field's was wholesale, catering mainly to a business clientele.¹ Given the small amount of retail trade, artistic display of the necessary staples that customers requested was not a major priority.² Merchandise was generally folded and stacked on tables or on wooden shelves behind counters above unadorned wooden plank floors. The assistance of a salesperson was required to access the merchandise, and little thought was given to displaying goods to promote impulse buying.

Marshall Field first asked Gordon Selfridge to work in the retail side of the business in 1883, and in four short years he was general manager.³ Young Selfridge was motivated, implementing innovative ideas and creative practices in the store with the intent of serving the customer.⁴ Marshall Field himself favored this policy and often reminded his workers, "Remember, the customer is always right."⁵ In addition to installing innovative revolving doors, Selfridge took out the old counters and high shelving that traditionally housed goods in the store interiors. Instead, he

¹ Robert W. Twyman, *History of Marshall Field & Co., 1852-1906* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1954), 105.

² Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 52; Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Give the Lady What She Wants* (Chicago, 1952), 224.

³ Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 105-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵ Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*, 180.

placed merchandise on tables in the center of the main floor to make items more accessible to customers.⁶

Selfridge was always interested in garnering the public's interest and in promoting the store.⁷ He believed in the power of advertising, and he employed several visual merchandising practices to bring in customers. Essentially, visual merchandising is the selling of a store's goods through visual means, incorporating not only advertising, but window displays and interior sales-floor design and display. One of the more creative innovations included in the 1883 remodeling of Marshall Field & Co. was the installation of two "show" windows, expressly for window displays of merchandise, on either side of the main entrance to the store.⁸ Previously, the store's windows were used exclusively to illuminate its interior. These two served as the store's only show windows until others were added in the 1890s.

"Window trimming," as it was known at the end of the nineteenth century, was not considered a highly skilled job, and the artistically inclined employees assigned to the task "were considered [to be] just a notch above the store porters."⁹ However, when a competitor of Marshall Field's started to receive acclaim for its outstanding window displays, Selfridge, now store manager, started looking for greater talent for Field's window displays.¹⁰ He found it in the small town of Creston, Iowa, where one of Field's traveling salesmen for the wholesale division noticed Arthur Fraser's window displays and recommended him to Selfridge.¹¹ Fraser was hired in 1895 on a trial basis and remained with Field's for the next forty-nine years. He came to be known as "the greatest displayman of them all."¹²

Arthur Fraser

In 1897, *The Show Window, A Monthly Journal of Professional Window Trimming*, began publication. It was edited by former Macy's displayman L. Frank Baum, future author of the Wizard of Oz books. The journal reported on the annual meetings of the newly organized National Association of Window Trimmers, offered advice on window-trimming

⁶ Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*, 203; Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 106.

⁷ Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 108-9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁹ Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 153; Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*, 224; Earl Dash, "Arthur Fraser, 1869-1947," *Women's Wear Daily* (8 July 1947), 71.

¹⁰ Homer Sharp, "Marshall Field's Arthur Fraser," *VMSD* (April 1994): 16-21; Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 152.

¹¹ Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*, 225.

¹² Dash, "Arthur Fraser, 1869-1947."

techniques, featured creative window displays from around the country, and was a sounding board on the debate about whether or not the money spent on window displays was recouped by the stores in sales.

According to *The Show Window* in 1922, “America’s foremost artist in window display” was Arthur Fraser. Fraser is credited with changing the look of traditional window displays by reducing the prevailing Victorian-style clutter.¹³ Most window displays of the 1890s consisted of stock merchandise from the store filling the space from top to bottom and side to side. Some were more artistically arranged than others, but “stocky” windows were the norm (see Figure 1).¹⁴ Instead of building bridges from spools of thread, or creating towers with handkerchiefs and cluttering everything into a window with a cheesecloth backdrop, Fraser limited the quantity of goods in a “less is more” style.¹⁵ Arthur Fraser brought a true sense of artistry to the field of visual merchandising during its formative years, and as a result, his windows dominated the pages of *The Show Window* magazine.¹⁶

The importance of window displays as a merchandising device in the early years of the twentieth century is reflected in the growth of Field’s display department, from seven people in 1895 to twenty in 1900. The investment in 12-foot-high by 14-foot-wide plate glass windows, purchased from Europe and installed at street level in the 1902-1907 edition of the Field’s store, also indicated the power given to, and the value of, the show window. These large windows also required the building of 12 x 14-foot backgrounds for the displays. By 1916, fifty people worked in the display department as carpenters, painters, sculptors, and craftsmen.¹⁷ Fraser had complete freedom running the department during his last twenty-five years at Field’s (1919-1944), with budgets ranging from \$150,000 to \$175,000. James Simpson, president of Field’s from 1923 to 1932 told Fraser it was “money well spent.”¹⁸

The first Arthur Fraser windows to receive significant attention in the press were his “red epidemic” windows of 1897. Red was the favored fashion color in Paris that year, and Fraser used it in all six Field’s

¹³ Sharp, “Marshall Field’s Arthur Fraser,” 18.

¹⁴ *The Show Window: A Monthly Journal of Practical Window Trimming* (Sept. 1898), 101.

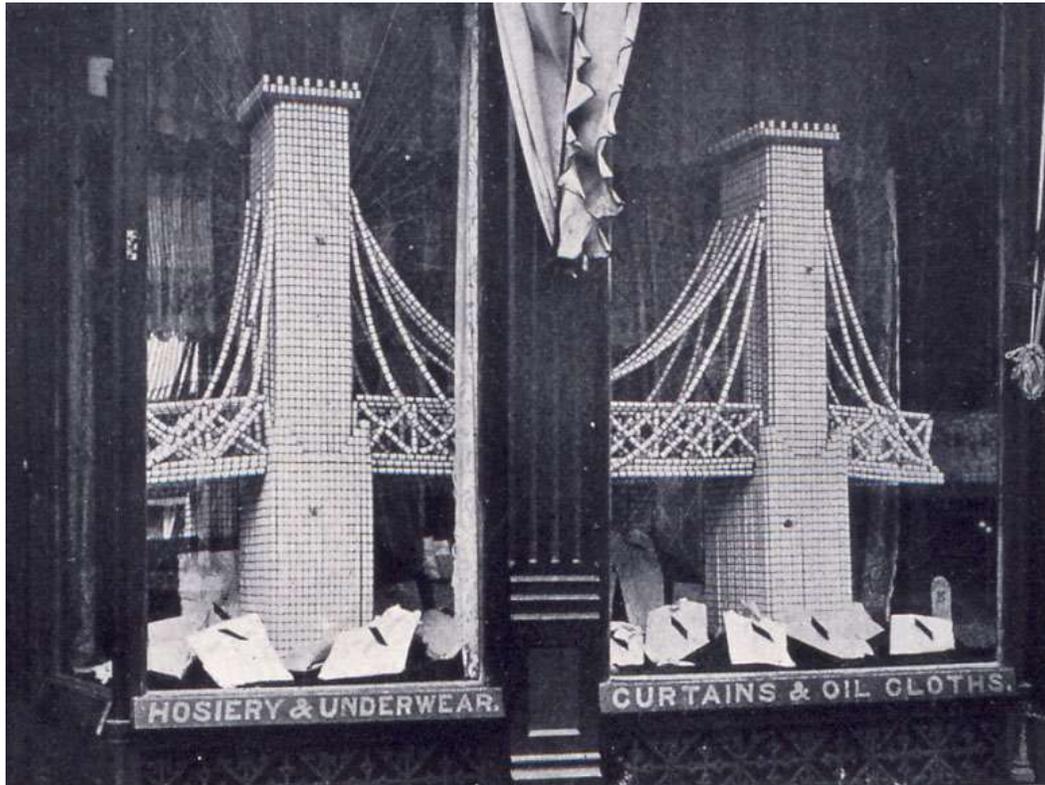
¹⁵ Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 153.

¹⁶ Sharp, “Marshall Field’s Arthur Fraser,” 16.

¹⁷ Lloyd Lewis, 1947 interview with Arthur Fraser, Marshall Field’s Archives, Chicago, Ill.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

FIGURE 1
Bridge Made of Sewing Thread Spools
(window display, 1897)



Source: *The Show Window* (1897), VMSD Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

windows to display red fabric, dresses, wraps, ribbons, bonnets, and petticoats.¹⁹ His windows of the 1910s and 1920s are probably his best known (see Figures 2 and 3). They were his most theatrical, and *The Show Window* featured them almost monthly.²⁰ It was during these years that Fraser introduced the use of mannequins and elaborate backgrounds to Field's windows, imitating museum-type dioramas that offered "selective

¹⁹ Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*, 225.

²⁰ Sharp, "Marshall Field's Arthur Fraser," 16.

concentrations of merchandise in settings that appealed to women's fantasies of luxury."²¹

FIGURE 2
Arthur Fraser Window Display for Marshall Field & Co., c. 1912



Source: Marshall Field's Archives, Chicago, Illinois.

Mannequins were not new to window displays, just new to Marshall Field & Co. Wax mannequins, which looked extremely lifelike, even to the point of using human hair, were available around the turn of the twentieth century. However, Marshall Field would not allow their use in his store windows because of their inherent problems. When exposed to the sun's warmth, the mannequins' arms got soft and their faces drooped.²² Marshall Field was not going to expose the store's reputation to an

²¹ Lewis, 1947 interview with Arthur Fraser; Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago, 1990), 64.

²² Lewis, 1947 interview with Arthur Fraser.

embarrassing spectacle such as he had witnessed on a trip to New York. While passing a store window with wax mannequins, Field noticed that one of the mannequin's heads had fallen onto its bosom because the sun had melted its neck.²³

FIGURE 3
Arthur Fraser Window Display for Marshall Field & Co., 1922



Source: Marshall Field's Archives, Chicago, Illinois.

Field's first "human" figures were headless dressmaker's dummies. In addition to lacking heads, the dress forms had neither arms nor feet, making it difficult to accessorize fashions with hats and shoes. *Women's Wear Daily* later credited Arthur Fraser with being the first person to do

²³ Marshall Field's Archives, Chicago.

just that.²⁴ The dress forms graced Field's windows exclusively until Fraser brought in wax mannequins after Marshall Field's death.²⁵

Display windows continued to play a dominant role in visual merchandising throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. These were the peak decades of window display, before the advent of television advertising brought the virtual "window" right into the consumer's home.

Fred Lazarus, Jr.

Although separated by years and an ocean, Fred Lazarus, Jr., and Gordon Selfridge shared a common interest in customer service. Fred believed that "Selling is the heart of retail, and satisfying the customer is the heart of that."²⁶

The F. & R. Lazarus & Co. was a family business, and Fred, Jr., was a grandson of its founder. In the 1880s, Lazarus was the biggest store in Columbus, and the largest in central Ohio. The clothing sold in the store was limited to ready-made men's and boys' clothing, however, until Lazarus opened a new six-floor building in 1909. The majority of the twenty new departments were devoted to women's and girls' apparel and accessories. It was billed as the "largest ready-to-wear concern in the Midwest."²⁷

As vice-president of Lazarus from 1917 to 1944, Fred, Jr., grew the business along with his three brothers, Simon, Robert, and Jeffrey. They opened the "Collegienne" shops in 1926, specialty departments that carried clothing in Junior sizes. This move was an effort to satisfy a newly recognized customer group, younger females.²⁸ In addition, while on a trip to Paris in 1927, Lazarus noticed dresses grouped together by size, rather than by price, which was the current merchandising practice in the United States. He realized that customers were able to find a wider selection of merchandise in their size when grouped the Parisian way, and he discovered that they frequently purchased more expensive dresses than was their initial intention. He brought this idea back to Columbus and implemented it in the Lazarus store.²⁹ He is still credited with establishing this U.S. merchandising standard.³⁰

²⁴ Sharp, "Marshall Field's Arthur Fraser," 18.

²⁵ Lewis, 1947 interview with Arthur Fraser.

²⁶ Lazarus Family Papers, 1850-1970, Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, Ohio.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "The Role of Fred R. Lazarus Jr. in Giving Us Department Stores Like Macy's and Bloomingdale's," A Touch of Business.com; viewed 2 May 2009. URL: <http://www.atochobusiness.com/business-topics/success-stories/fred-lazarus-jr-0080.html>.

During the 1930s, blouses, sweaters, jackets, and skirts—separates that offered more wardrobe options for less of an investment than dresses—were placed as open stock so customers could help themselves, rather than depending on a salesperson for assistance. Merchandise was taken out of drawers and off shelves behind counters, and out from glass display cases.³¹ This not only made the merchandise more accessible; it also eliminated the need for a large sales staff, which could result in greater profits for the store.

FIGURE 4
Flapper Dress "Made in Paris for the F & R Lazarus & Co.," c. 1927



Source: Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Fred Lazarus, Jr., was considered the financial wizard of the Lazarus store, and he wielded a great deal of influence inside and outside the industry.³² Another of his major retailing accomplishments was convincing president Franklin D. Roosevelt to change the date on which the American Thanksgiving holiday was celebrated. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln estab-

³¹ Lazarus Family Papers.

³² Charles Lazarus interview, 12 Nov. 1995, transcript of tape 1, side 1, Columbus Jewish Historical Society Oral History Project, Columbus Jewish Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio. viewed 2 May 2009. URL: http://www.columbusjewishhistoricalsociety.org/oral_histories/Interviews/HTML/lazarus.htm.

lished the holiday to be celebrated on the last Thursday of November. In 1939, however, the last Thursday of November was also the last day of the month, making for the shortest possible retail shopping season between Thanksgiving and Christmas. According to his nephew Charles Y. Lazarus, Fred, Jr.

. . . firmly believed that the retail business, Lazarus, in particular, could do a lot more business between Thanksgiving and Christmas if the calendar was changed so Thanksgiving always fell on the fourth Thursday in November. That way there was more time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and, hence, more shopping days. . . . He personally convinced FDR that Thanksgiving should be changed for the benefit of consumers.³³

Congress made it official and nationwide in 1941. Retailers across the United States have Fred Lazarus, Jr., to thank for these extra shopping days.

In 1929, following the lead of Fred Lazarus, Jr., the Lazarus brothers embarked on a significant business venture that would have an enduring legacy. They joined Lincoln Filene, president of Filene's Sons & Co. in Boston and Walter N. Rothschild, Sr., president of Abraham & Straus in Brooklyn, to create the holding company Federated Department Stores. This was a shrewd move to consolidate resources, diversify capital and financial risk, and provide venues to train and promote store executives and employees. Federated started slowly throughout the Depression of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s, but when Fred Lazarus, Jr., took charge as president in 1944, the company made additional store acquisitions that resulted in major profit increases. He served in this capacity until 1966. By 1965, Federated was the largest department store chain in the United States, operating ninety stores consisting of 18 million square feet of retail space, with a sales volume of \$1.2 billion.³⁴ Their nearest competitor, Allied Stores Corporation, had a sales volume of \$893 million.³⁵

Both Marshall Field's and the F. & R. Lazarus & Co. started as small local operations that expanded to have regional as well as national influence and, in the case of Field's, international influence via Gordon Selfridge. As department stores in the business of selling fashion (among other things), both enterprises illustrate through their respective histories the "change of fashion" in business practices that historian Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., referred to as the "retailing revolution."³⁶

³³ Ibid., tape 2, side 1.

³⁴ Federated Department Stores, Inc., *1964 Annual Report* (1965), 5 and 9.

³⁵ Allied Stores Corporation, *1964 Annual Report* (New York, 1965), 2.

³⁶ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 235.