

7. Golden age of the department store

by Jan Whitaker

The slogan “more than a store” is no exaggeration when it comes to department stores in their prime. They were genuine institutions.

Department stores were the show-offs of the retail world. Their floor plans mimicked the size and splendour of cathedrals, and on sale days they buzzed like the world’s busiest train stations. They hired great swathes of staff. In Berlin, for instance, the luxurious Tietz opened in 1911 with a legion of 8,000.

The big city stores sold almost everything imaginable during their golden years (from the early 20th century into the 1960s). Not just pots and pans but cars, aeroplanes and the treasures of the Romanoffs. Through its lengthy history Harrods has outfitted safaris and delivered gazebos to sheikhs. Macy’s sold fully furnished vacation houses complete with toothbrushes.

But despite the luxury merchandise, department stores were also about catering to the masses, the growing middle class of the industrial era. As part of their marketing strategy they sought to raise the level of taste and instruct people on how they might live graciously.

Selling often involved spectacular displays and over-the-top ballyhoo. Perhaps that meant having a plane make a pancake landing on the roof, as was done at Galeries Lafayette in Paris in 1919. Or maybe creating a non-stop festival atmosphere with live music, flocks of birds and truckloads of flowers.



They not only created spectacles, they were spectacles. Critics claimed their buildings were nothing but boastful warehouses but shoppers loved their mezzanines, soaring rotundas, glass domes and marble pillars. Store windows presented ever-changing merchandise displays, sometimes staged as human dramas portraying a wedding procession or everyday life in a messy bachelor pad, possibly with live models.

In the 1950s a US department store executive recommended that to compete with emerging discount stores, traditional department stores should create a circus-like feeling of excitement for shoppers, whether that meant bringing in bagpipers or Yugoslavian folk dancers. Why not a real circus? One was staged by an Arkansas store with clowns, an elephant and other animals.

Every floor was mobilised in the interest of commerce and public relations, including rooftops. Several stores, such as Boston’s Filene’s, had zoos with lions and tigers on their roofs. But Japanese stores went one step further. In addition to housing zoos, Mitsukoshi’s roof had a playground containing not only swings and merry-go-rounds but also a pond where children could catch goldfish. There were gardens with trees and shrubs, an ice-cream stand, even a Shinto shrine.

It was easy to spend the whole day inside a single store – and many shoppers did, women especially. Chicago’s Marshall Field’s had spacious women’s lounges equipped with writing desks, free stationery, sofas for naps and even sewing supplies. Department stores were likened to women’s clubs because for decades they were among the relatively few public spaces where women (and children) were welcomed, even fêted.

Their restaurants were notable for their grand dining rooms, often serving thousands of patrons each day and furnishing elegant yet friendly white-tablecloth service at affordable prices. The largest stores could have as many as half-a-dozen eating places, from formal dining rooms to snack bars.

Restaurants were but one of the additional services provided. There were beauty parlours, travel agencies, stock brokerages, ticket offices, free alterations and delivery, home-decorating advice and bureaux for repairs. In Sydney, Anthony Hordern & Sons offered a free animal clinic on its fourth floor. As war loomed and England feared gas attacks in 1938, department stores offered to gas-proof homes.

Free activities abounded. Of course there were fashion shows and lectures on childcare but also



cultural events. It was said that before the First World War when Parisian women talked of going to the Louvre, nine out of ten were referring to the department store of that name, not the museum. The store *was* their museum.

In fact, many department stores actively assumed the role of cultural centre, hosting art exhibits, orchestral performances and week-long expositions of international arts and crafts at a time when the products of foreign lands were not familiar to many people. In the US a curator of the Brooklyn Museum called Stewart Culin observed how many thousands of people visited stores each day just to absorb style. In the mid-1920s, when few Americans visited museums, he said department stores stood for “the greatest influences for culture and taste”. Among the notable art shows of the 20th century was a *salon des refusés* at Chicago’s Rothschild’s.

Was the glorious reign of the department store as the leading shopping format too good to be true? Perhaps it was. Over time competition grew stronger while the cost of all the extras became too much to sustain. And yet, while many grand stores are gone, survivors hold out around the globe. As landmarks and tourist destinations, they still attract delighted throngs.

About the writer: Jan Whitaker is a consumer historian living in Massachusetts. She is the author of *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* and *The World of Department Stores*.

8. The perfect staff-to-customer ratio

by Robert Bound

In that famous vector of quality on the X axis and staff numbers on the Y (don’t Google it, I made it up), it was found that more cooks do not necessarily a better broth make. In fact, an incremental increase in the amount of cooks was seen to have a proportionally detrimental effect on the broth. Surprising, isn’t it? I’m sure there’s some sort of platitude in this but I just can’t conjure it. I’m reminded of this particularly slinky slice of mathematics when I go shopping. Retail has a cook/broth problem too.

Shops with few customers but a phalanx of staff can be terrifying. Good: the cheery greeting you get from the welcome party of pretty girls at the Shinsegae department store in Seoul. Bad: the “*can I help you, sir?*”, “*can I help you, sir?*” and “*can I help you, sir?*” trilling determinedly from the over-staffed, under-busy retail emporium that feels a little like it might be the setting of a 1970s Italian *giallo* horror film. Every sleeve or shirt or shoelace you touch is greeted by a lurch of lizard-eyed interest. “We have it in green.” “We can arrange delivery.” “We only have two of these left, sir. Lovely, aren’t they? Aren’t they just lovely, sir?”

You and I will also have endured the zero-sum game of asking that benighted, lone-ranging shop assistant if you can try on the boots in a 10 and seemingly having to wait until ... the season’s changed and you now want a loafer. And a shave.

So what is the right number of staff? How many cooks? The best department stores do it right: one to run the department and a handful to help. Need some new socks in a dash? The junior can handle that. Need a suit to get hitched in? Mr Humphries himself will happily measure your inside leg. No fuss, no bother, no sharp-elbowed upselling from a gaggle of commission-maniacs.

How much do you enjoy dining in a blousy restaurant that believes it’s a *coup de théâtre* to have staff pour your wine, place your napkin, worry your cutlery with a spirit level, and interrupt your conversation to be sure they can be happy that you are? Well, you wouldn’t want to shop in a store like that either. Oh, and that reminds me: it’s too many cocks spoil the brothel. Right?

About the writer: Robert Bound is a senior editor at *Monocle* – and has never before stepped foot in a brothel.