Marshall Field & Company: the space that made Chicago a fashionable place, 1900–1930

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Figure P.1
The great artery of the State Street Store, under the vast Tiffany dome, through which pulses daily a cosmopolitan stream of life.
Illustration drawn by Edward A. Wilson for *Fashions of the Hour,* October 1918, p. 1.
Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive

May 2025

Word Count: 12,157

Final Year

Unit 11 Thesis

Tutor: June Rowe

Abstract

This thesis examines Marshall Field & Company as a cultural force that helped define modern American womanhood between 1900 and 1930. It argues that the department store operated not merely as a site of commerce, but as a space of spectacle, identity formation, and social instruction. Through architectural design, advertising, and global merchandising strategies, Field's shaped and disseminated ideals of femininity, taste, and modernity. Drawing on material culture theory and visual culture analysis, the project investigates how imitation and authenticity, cosmopolitan aspiration, and gendered space intersected to position the store as both a producer and reflector of modern consumer culture.

The research is grounded in close analysis of archival materials, including *Fashions of the Hour* (1914–1934), alteration records, executive memos, advertising ephemera, and employee training documents, alongside memoirs such as Emily Kimbrough's *Through Charley's Door* (1952). These sources are interpreted using a multidisciplinary methodology that integrates cultural theory (Bourdieu, Benjamin, Hoganson, and Prown) with historiographical approaches to fashion, space, and consumption.

The study finds that Marshall Field's not only mirrored but actively shaped cultural expectations of the modern woman through its immersive retail environments and coordinated merchandising practices. It reveals how the store transformed fashion into a system of visual and spatial cues that enabled women to perform modernity, refinement, and national identity. Ultimately, this thesis situates Marshall Field & Company at the center of early twentieth-century American culture, revealing the department store's influential role in mediating class, gender, and aesthetic ideals.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor, June Rowe, whose profound knowledge and unwavering support have been instrumental throughout the development of this dissertation. Her insightful feedback, critical guidance, and encouragement have shaped both my research and my approach to understanding the complexities of the modernized department store and its intersection with fashion. Her expertise in the field has been invaluable in helping me refine my ideas and bring my project to fruition.

I am also incredibly grateful to the Abakanowicz Research Center at the Chicago History Museum for granting me access to invaluable primary sources that provided the foundation for my research. Their dedication to preserving the history of Chicago and its cultural institutions has been an indispensable resource.

Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my parents for their constant support and encouragement. Their belief in my academic journey has been a steady source of strength and inspiration. Their influence has allowed me to engage with this project from a place of connection to both my roots and my broader intellectual aspirations, shaping how I approached this research centered around Chicago's pivotal role in American history.

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Introduction

This thesis explores how Marshall Field & Company played a pivotal role in transforming Chicago into a center of fashion and modern consumption. Between 1900 and 1930, Field's became a central force in transforming Chicago into a fashionable capital by not only selling goods but by curating lifestyles. It argues that Field's did not simply reflect the cultural shifts taking place during this period but played an active role in producing them. Through their calculated physical designs, advertising strategies, and merchandising practices, a retail space was crafted that enabled women to view themselves as modern, fashionable, and cosmopolitan. The authority of Marshall Field's was influential in defining the contours of modern American femininity. Consequently, as this specifically American consumer identity began to emerge, Marshall Field's was at the forefront of the cultural tensions that arose within the established European fashion authority. By adapting, imitating, and reimagining transatlantic trends, Marshall Field & Company was able to distinguish the modern American woman. Its influence unfolded through three interrelated spheres: the physical space of the store, the aesthetic language of advertising, and the transatlantic circuits of fashion that grounded its authority.

The early twentieth century was transformative for American consumer life, shaped by industrial expansion, urbanization, and the rise of mass production and retail. At the center of this transformation was the department store, a modernized institution that simultaneously accelerated and mirrored the period's shifting economic and cultural values. Chicago, a city emerging as a national powerhouse of commerce and innovation, is an exemplification of this turning point in American history.

Founded in 1837, with a population of 4,000, Chicago was viewed as the most authentic American city in all of America. Unlike older American cities in the east, such as New York or Boston, this mid-continent metropolis was not associated with England and the Colonial and Federal Periods (Aylesworth & Aylesworth, 1986: 9). According to history professor, Joshua Salzmann, Chicago's advancement was so sudden and so astonishing that many witnesses figured it "must have been predestined by nature or God," emulating the nineteenth century view that American expansion and progress was inevitable. This popular doctrine is known as Manifest Destiny (Salzmann, 2018). Situated between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River watersheds, this locational advantage assisted in spawning a small trading post in the first half of the nineteenth century. Chicago's place as a transportation hub was secured when the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad began operating in 1856, making the connection between the eastern seaboard to the western frontier even more accessible (Aylesworth & Aylesworth, 1986: 9).

During this great period of expansion, however, the conflagration known as the Great Chicago Fire occurred in 1871. As the fire raged for more than twenty-four hours, it destroyed some three and a half square miles of the city, wiping out the entire business district and accumulating $200 million in lost property (Aylesworth & Aylesworth, 1986: 9). Conversely, as devastating the fire was, this event could be seen as the catalyst for the modernization of Chicago. While the physical disaster of the Great Fire resulted in numerous empty lots, the city was left with level ground for pioneering architectural experiments and a readiness to rely on building materials other than wood (1986: 110). Continuing to strengthen its strategic location as a transport hub, Chicago rapidly reshaped itself as a modern industrial metropolis, establishing itself as a national center for trade, manufacturing, and innovation (Cronon, 1991). Additionally, the city's thriving economy, surging population, and massive influx of immigrants

collectively contributed to a diverse and robust urban culture that was primed to engage in a new consumer lifestyle. Consequently, department stores evolved into institutions emblematizing modern life.

Within this context, Marshall Field began to build a retail empire. Originally established in 1852 as a dry goods store, Field's grew into an ideal for retail innovation. By the 1880s and 1890s, Marshall Field & Company had pioneered numerous business practices, such as fixed pricing, generous return policies, and devoted customer service, that reimagined the possibilities of the shopping experience and paved the way for the department store's dominance in the twentieth century (Wendt and Kogan, 1953). The store's motto, "Give the Lady What She Wants," encapsulated its dedication to customer satisfaction and reflected its appeal to women as central figures in the emerging consumer culture (Kimbrough, 1952: 91).

The transition of department stores from novelty to cultural hub was largely due to their rapid expansion during the second half of the nineteenth century, corresponding with the great economic and social transformations of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration (Howard, 2015: 10). Indeed, beginning around 1850, department stores began to adopt the latest innovations in urban construction. Such technologies included, as Vicki Howard writes, "iron, steel, and reinforced concrete construction as well as elevators, electric lights, forced-air ventilation, telephones, pneumatic tubes, and modern plumbing and heating systems" (Howard, 2015: 23).

The department store did more than sell products; it offered consumers a way of seeing and being seen. As Walter Benjamin suggested, such spaces functioned as the "dreamworlds' of capitalism, where fantasy, desire, and commodity culture blurred (Benjamin, 1999: 18). Field's physical layout and

visual spectacle invited women to perform and consume modern femininity. Its advertisements, especially their *Fashions of the Hour* periodical (hereafter referred to as *FoH*), extended this performance into the private sphere, framing fashion as a cultivated practice of taste. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, Kristin Hoganson's work on cosmopolitan domesticity, and Miles Orvell's notion of "the real thing," this thesis interrogates how Marshall Field's mediated the tensions between imitation and authenticity, national identity and European influence, fantasy, and reality. Furthermore, this project contributes to ongoing scholarship on department stores, gender, and modernity by centering Chicago, as opposed to New York or Paris, as a critical site of fashionable production. It also emphasizes the spatial and institutional dimensions of consumer culture, tracing how meaning was constructed not only through media, but also through architecture, layout, labor practices, and merchandising strategy. This thesis draws upon a substantial body of primary material, including issues of *Fashions of the Hour* published over a 20-year period, internal company memos, visual advertising, photographs, alteration price sheets, and firsthand accounts. All of which provide rich insight into Marshall Field & Company's operations and its far-reaching cultural impact.

To trace how Marshall Field's actively shaped the image and experience of the modern American woman, this thesis is organized into three chapters, each focusing on a distinct yet interrelated mode of cultural production: space, advertising, and fashion authority. These chapters follow a logical progression from the experiential and architectural, to the symbolic and representational, and finally, to the institutional and transnational. Together, they demonstrate how Field's constructed a comprehensive vision of modern femininity, establishing an ideal that was not only visible in-store but also circulated in print and reinforced through its global fashion practices. Through this tripartite approach—space, representation, and authority—this thesis argues that Marshall Field & Company was instrumental in

shaping the contours of modern American womanhood. It did so not simply by reflecting cultural change, but by producing it, creating the environments, images, and practices through which gender, taste, and identity were newly performed and consumed.

Methodologies

This thesis employs an interdisciplinary methodology grounded in cultural history, visual analysis, and feminist theory. The primary analytical framework is derived from Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2001), which provides tools for interpreting visual materials through a critical, contextual lens. Rose identifies three key "sites" of visual interpretation—the site of the image, the site of production, and the site of audience—which collectively allow for a nuanced understanding of how visual culture both reflects and constructs social meaning (Rose, 2001). This tripartite framework is used to interrogate how Marshall Field & Company's visual materials, such as advertisements, fashion spreads, photographs, and displays, produced specific narratives of modern femininity and consumer identity.

The research draws exclusively on a rich collection of primary sources. Firstly, *Fashions of the Hour* (1914–1978), Marshall Field's in-house fashion magazine, provides visual and textual representations of the fashionable, modern woman of Chicago and beyond. Next, store-produced pamphlets such as *The Store Book* (1933) and *The Store of Service* (c.1915), articulate Field's self-representation as both a commercial enterprise and cultural authority. Internal documents including memos on training and stock locations, executive meeting transcripts, alteration price sheets, and net sales reports, offer additional insights into the store's internal logistics and operational strategies. Lastly, photographs, advertisements, and display designs are subject to close visual analysis following Rose's interpretative model.

This visual methodology is supported by spatial analysis, informed by cultural geography and feminist critiques of public space. Department stores, as scholars such as Susan Porter Benson (1979,

1988) and William Leach (1984) have shown, played a central role in creating gendered spaces of modernity. This thesis builds on such insights to examine how Marshall Field's architecture, layout, and sensory environment structured consumer experience. It will expand upon how these spatial strategies enable women to participate in modern public life as autonomous subjects.

Textual analysis also plays a crucial role in interpreting both internal documents and public-facing materials. Alan McKee's *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide* (2003), offers a clear analytical framework for understanding how cultural meanings are constructed through texts by examining language, imagery, and form within their social context (McKee, 2003: 8). Christine Frederick's *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (1929), Emily Kimbrough's *Through Charley's Door* (1952), and Katherine Busbey's *Home Life in America* (1910), offer valuable contemporaneous perspectives on the cultural construction of women as consumers and the lived experience of department store culture. These texts are examined alongside trade journals such as *The Dry Goods Economist* and *Apparel Gazette*, which contextualize Field's practices within the broader retail industry, providing another viewpoint to employ McKee's textual analysis approach.

Through the combination of visual, spatial, and textual approaches, this layered methodology enables a comprehensive exploration of Marshall Field & Company as a cultural institution. The thesis focuses not only on what the store sold, but on how it used space, media, and design to produce meaning and shape modern womanhood in early twentieth-century Chicago.

Literature Review

For this research, I examine how Marshall Field & Company facilitated in making Chicago a fashionable city through advertising and architectural expansions between 1900-1930. While there is existing research on individual elements of this topic, I found limited information that covered my overarching topic. In this review, I focus on exploring the essential texts that comment on larger themes, such as the motives behind America's passion to consume, and the shifting desires within American culture. I will provide a framework for understanding the beliefs, values, and systems formed by material culture. Furthermore, specific texts on the transition from a rural to an urban economy, the department store as a spectacle, as well as the structure of meaning behind advertisements, directly impacted and informed my knowledge around the context of the department store and the new formation of American identity.

The Department Store

As the centerpiece of this study, the topic of the department store is a pivotal section for this research as Marshall Field & Company is considered one of the more notable names in American retail history. What William Leach regards as "institutions of consumption," the department store was an entity that began as novelty that quickly evolved into an institution. They formed cultural hubs within expanding cities, cultivating an aspiration that helped shape and define a new American identity. While there has been much written on the department store's beginnings, much of this research focuses on store performance and the cyclical nature of retailing done by marketing or research scholars. Vicki Howard traces the history of the American department store and how it can be understood as both a social and economic institution. In Howard's book, *From Main Street to Mall*, she examines the rise and fall of

these businesses by focusing on “the role of government, business, and consumers in the success and failure of an industry and a particular way of shopping" (Howard, 2015: 6).

Additionally, Susan Porter Benson has written extensively on the study of department stores. Her most notable book, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in the American Department Store, 1880-1940*, was the first of its kind to explore the complex and often contradictory politics of sales work within department stores during this time. Benson’s *Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880-1940*, examines the use and allocation of space in department stores to understand how these environments predisposed customers to buy and salespeople to sell (Benson, 1979: 201). Furthermore, Benson asserts that this form of analysis can “broaden our understanding of the developing culture of consumption, the daily impact of class structure in the United States and the workplace dialectic between store managers and salespeople” (1979: 200).

Since the department store catered primarily to women, the relationship between women and the department store is a pivotal section of this research. In the context of how femininity was repositioned within modernity, William Leach’s text *Transformations in a Culture of Consumption* examines the relationship between women and department stores between 1890-1925. Leach claims that not only did the department store provide women with a more secular and public lifestyle, but they also enticed women into a new individualism created exclusively by commodity consumption. In this context, Leach’s analysis can suggest that for women, the department store was a site of liberation, fostering the notion that “women ought to be treated as individuals with special interests and with desires for comfort and pleasure, [inducing] many women to believe that they ought to be served, not to serve others" (Leach, 1984: 336).

In contrast, Rachel Bowlby applies a combination of Marxist commodification theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the spectacle theory of Debord to theorize how women are dominated economically and sexually by the entity that is the department store (Lancaster, 2000: 164). In her book, *Just Looking*, Bowlby argues, "[Women] were to become in a sense like prostitutes in their active, commodified self-display, and also to take on the one role almost never theirs in actual prostitution: that of consumer" (Bowlby, 2010: 7). Overall, these writers assist in situating this research within an already established understanding of the significance of the department store regarding the various aspects in which this institution infiltrated and reimagined a new American culture.

The Modern American Woman

As the department store provided the spatial and commercial framework for new modes of female visibility, the figure of the modern American woman emerged as its most potent cultural expression. The modern American woman can be seen as an embodiment of the shifting ideals about gender, consumption, and public life during this period. This thesis aims to explore how Marshall Field & Company made Chicago a fashionable place; therefore, the role of women within a modernizing American landscape, such as Chicago, is at the core of this research.

Katherine H. Adams, Michael L. Keene, and Jennifer C. Koella have written extensively on the social impact of the visual media explosion in their book *Seeing the American Woman, 1880–1920* (2011). Resulting from a new age of invention, reproduction, and distribution, these writers argue that this period witnessed the expansion of the first truly national visual culture in the United States. The country began to be inundated by a vast array of imagery depicting American women, cultivating a new culture, what film historian Jean-Louise Comolli has termed the "frenzy of the visible" (1980: 122, cited

in Adams et al., 2011: 1). Concurrently, as images of women were situated within American culture continued to disseminate, women's lives were quickly becoming more public than ever before. As they began leaving home in unprecedented numbers to pursue new careers and take on new social roles, women were able to find new lives formed by their participation in this modern visual culture (2011: 2).

Liz Conor continues this examination with the supporting claim that the feminine subject was provided new conditions within this visually intensified scene (Conor, 2004: 7). In her book, *The Spectacular Modern Woman*, Conor reinforces the term coined in her title, asserting that "for women to identify themselves as modern, the performance of their gendered identity had to take place within the modern spectacularization of everyday life" (2004: 7). In essence, Conor contends that as modernity's illusions of women became synonymous with how women perceived themselves as modern, gendered representations became embodied (2004: 8). While this modern visual culture provided a way for industrialized and commodified image production to reinforce status of the "woman-object," Conor maintains this new culture created space for women to occupy on their own terms (2004: 35). Consequently, women were given agency to construct themselves within the image of the feminine spectacles they encountered, producing new meanings of the modern woman, whether socially, politically, or sexually.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned by Adams et al., the modern American woman was someone who traversed public space. Conor adds to this notion stating that such spaces intertwined women in "scopic relations" in which they looked and were looked at. Managing the various connotations that surrounded women's public visibility, she argues, became an integral component of

navigating the cosmopolitan scene (Conor, 2004: 46). In this way, the modern metropolis can be considered an influential condition of feminine visibility characterized by spectacle and patterns of global consumption. As Kristin Hoganson demonstrates in *Consumers' Imperium* (1998), American womanhood during this period was increasingly constructed through the circulation of international goods, ideas, and aesthetics, positioning women as active participants in a global consumer culture. These intertwined developments, such as urban modernity, visual spectacle, and transnational consumption, configured the modern city as both a stage and catalyst for new expressions of femininity. It is within this urban landscape that Marshall Field & Company played a critical role in shaping and performing modern womanhood in Chicago.

Modernity in the City

A fundamental element of this research is the analysis of modernity as it provides a social and historical contextual framework for the development of the department store and the city as a whole. Indeed, modernity can be viewed as the macrocosm mirrored by the microcosm of the department store. As modernity invokes a ruthless break with any or all previous historical conditions, it creates a new relationship between space, consumption, and fashion. Walter Benjamin's unfinished work, *Arcades Project,* chronicles the rise and fall of the Parisian shopping arcades and the city's changing cityscape in the nineteenth century (Hanssen, 2013). His innovative cultural theory of modernity has proven essential to my analysis. As Benjamin is considered the first to map out the relationship between space, fashion and modernity, this text underpins my objective to examine these relationships within my own research.

Marshall Berman describes modernity in, A*ll That Is Solid Melts into Air,* as a complex and contradictory experience defined by constant change, innovation, and disruption (2010: 15). For

Berman, modernity is not just a historical period or aesthetic style, but a lived condition that is characterized by the simultaneous exhilaration and anxiety of living in a world that is always being redefined. The conditions of modernity are a core aspect discussed in this research, so I turned to Leach (1993), who has written extensively on the formation of a new American culture produced by modernity. In Leach's text, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, his examinations of America's transition from a rural to urban society at the turn of the twentieth century have proven essential to my analysis. Additionally, it is important to emphasize Michel de Certeau's notion that the city becomes the hero and vehicle of modernity (1984: 95). Joel Tarr's text *The Chicago Anti-Department Store Crusade of 1897: A Case Study in Urban Commercial Development* has informed my reimaging of the significance of modernity within Chicago urbanization, therefore contextualizing the development of the department store. Furthermore, Tarr asserts that the evolution of the department store was a product of modernity in the city, supporting this claim with a variety of technological innovations, such as transportation improvements, construction developments, central heating, and mechanical elevators (Tarr, 1971: 162).

Another element of modernity to recognize is its role in transforming the concept of the individual. Elizabeth Wilson considers modern individualism as an "exaggerated yet fragile sense of self," contending fashion as a fundamental component in understanding modernity (Wilson, 1985: 12). As the city invited young women to appear publicly as modern, their transforming bodies, or as Liz Conor has named "the spectacular modern woman," became a form of feminine visibility that became synonymous with notions of the urban spectacle. In Conor's world, the City Girl and the modern metropolis go hand in hand with shared traits such as artifice, sophistication, and standardization of appearance (Conor, 2004: 46–7). Conor further examines the form of the modern woman through the

science of beauty, asserting that to become visibly modern, one must align themselves with commodity images. The modernizing visual scene made up pervasive advertisements, columns, and commentary on beauty products in print media deeply implicated modern women in the practice of cosmopolitan beauty (2004: 40). In this context, modernity becomes modern consumer culture.

Consumerism

A critical component of this research is the social and cultural context of American consumerism. It is vital to understand the emergence of a new consumer culture as a product of modernity, resulting in a shift within the American consciousness for how they viewed themselves as consumers. Generations of Marxists have looked upon the "world of goods" in modern society as a device to increase profits and exploitation, imposing control via the "false consciousness" of consumerism (Lancaster, 1995: 159). The Marxist tradition of equating consumerism with the production of "exchange value" and profit is a key aspect to this discussion. However, this outlook only scratches the surface of understanding the complexities of American consumer culture.

Thorstein Veblen was the first major writer to highlight the point that consumption has cultural as well as economic aspects. Veblen's ideas have had an important impact on the growing debate between historians on the origins and nature of modern consumerism. His sharp, penetrating, mocking analysis of America's new economic elite in the late nineteenth century is a key founding text in American sociology (Lancaster, 1995: 159). While Veblen's ideas make up essential preliminary work that influences the basis of this research topic, it is important to recognize the works of additional academics who have aimed to acknowledge the positive aspects of consumption. For instance, American historian Jackson Lears has notably scrutinized Veblen's model, equating the economist's reduction of

social rituals to an "attack on culture itself" (1995: 160). In this context, writings on consumerism from Douglas (1979) and Bourdieu (1977), who follow the Durkheimian approach, as well as Campbell (1989), have proven essential to my analysis. In Mary Douglas' book, *The World of Goods*, co-authored with Barron Isherwood, a more tolerant perspective on consumerism is presented through an anthropological lens to assert that the circulation of goods is a form of social discourse that is just as relevant to consider as oral or written forms of communication (Lancaster 1995: 166). Pierre Bourdieu continues this discussion with his concept of "cultural capital," which emphasizes the significance of taste, style, and education in modern society (Bourdieu, 1984: 70).

Moreover, Colin Campbell's analysis is based on a firm rejection of most consumption theories from Veblen to Bourdieu. Utilizing Weberian ideas and concepts to create a model of consumer subjectivity, Campbell redefines modern consumerism as "a distinctive form of hedonism, one in which the enjoyment of emotions as summoned through imaginary or illusory images is central" (Brewer et al., 1993: 48). Campbell further challenges previous consumerism theories by looking at the connection between the cultural history of romanticism and consumption. In his book, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Campbell writes, "The romantic ideal of character might have functioned to stimulate and legitimate that distinctive form of autonomous, self-illusory hedonism which underlines modern consumer behaviour" (Campbell, 1989: 200).

Stuart Ewen has famously covered the relationship between the origins of the American advertising industry and consumer society at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, Ewen's assertion that "advertising offered itself as a means of efficiently creating consumers and as a way of homogeneously controlling the consumption of a product," has proven essential to my analysis (Ewen,

1976). Furthermore, this research highlights the connections between advertising and modernity and examines their influence on consumer culture. In this context, engaging with advertisements, or what U.S. President Calvin Coolidge referred to as their "education" to production, enacted, in short, one's devotion to consumption (1976). I aim to use this framework to investigate how Marshall Field's utilized advertising to facilitate in creating a lifestyle formed by consumption, and to explore how the notion of "educational value" played a role in this new way of living (1976). Additionally, despite Ewen's previous claim, he expands on the function of advertisements that go beyond inviting an individual to buy its product. He theorizes that advertisements can invoke a self-conscious view that one has previously been socially or psychically denied (1976). In this context, one can improve one's social and personal frustrations through consumption.

These writers have laid the groundwork for the cultural context on the shift in American consumers consciousness during this period. However, due to the complex nature of consumer behavior, no single theory can characterize consumerism. For Marxist and Durkheimian approaches, a more open-minded outlook to the human complexities is needed to avoid generalizing the notion of the consumer experience. For Weberian approaches, its concept of "ideal types" of consumer character requires further development that goes beyond romanticism.

Material and Visual Culture

A fundamental element of this research is the analysis of the changing notions of material culture that were influenced by new forms of visual culture, as well as the change in response to these visual stimuli, which resulted in the desire to consume more. The relationship between these two cultural forms is embedded within this research as they provide primary evidence of the various processes of

change that occurred within American culture and identity at this time. John Potvin states that "exploring the display of fashion in its various spaces and places adds a neglected and compelling dimension to the synergy between material and visual cultures" (Potvin, 2008: 7).

In this context, Leach refers to department stores as "theatrical havens" that simultaneously rely upon and transcend the existence of commodities, wherein they can develop new life and meanings (Leach, 1984: 325). Jules David Prown has famously covered material culture in which he defines as the manifestations of culture through material productions (Prown, 1993: 1). Prown asserts that "human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged" (1993: 1). Prown's work within the field of material culture studies provides an established framework for understanding how to expand upon within this research.

Miles Orvell's text *The Real Thing* explores the tensions between imitation and authenticity within American culture. Orvell's research on these shifting desires provides a framework into understanding the beliefs, values, and systems formed by material culture. Orvell argues that material culture is crucial to the study of imitation and authenticity in American culture since it is inevitably integrated into our daily lives by conditioning our experiences, and materializes a measure of the changing notions of "the real thing" (Orvell 2014, xxxiv). Furthermore, Orvell examines the relationship between American and European culture, establishing Europe as the "home" culture, or "the originator of style," in which American culture was challenged to define themselves against. While Orvell acknowledges that his study may be situated within an older and more complex question as to how American culture has differentiated itself from European culture, he asserts that his aim is to frame these

tensions within a more modern understanding of the consumer society that evolved in America. By providing a broader analysis of the significance of technology to all aspects of American life and arts, Orvell's study explores the interrelated nature between imitation and authenticity. In this context, he states that "I am looking at something that is, if not exclusively American, at least characteristically so; and I am looking at its peculiarly American twist, for in no other culture is the notion of "the real thing" so open a window into understanding" (2014, xxxviii).

A key aspect of this research is the social and cultural context of the spectacle of the department store. Thus, it is vital to understand the development of American visual culture and the consumer-spectator relationship established within American identity. Leonard Marcus' *The American Store Window,* highlights the historical development of the window display in America. As Marcus asserts that the American cities of 1900 were becoming cultural as well as commercial centers, this research situates city store windows as a fundamental part of the city's shifting attitude of display (Marcus, 1978: 12). Additionally, Guy Debord defines his theory of the Spectacle as "the moment when the commodity has achieved the total occupation of life" (Debord, 2012: 6). In this context, Debord argues that the products of modernity, such as the department store, control the condition of one's existence by masking what he considers the "real world," conforming us to perceive the Society of the Spectacle as reality (2012: 6). As a result, Debord's writing provides a broader analysis of how the spectacle influences a society's beliefs, values, and systems.

Additionally, Judith Williamson's book, *Decoding Advertisements*, draws on semiotic and psychoanalytic theories in her analysis of the ways advertisements work, complementing a Marxist perspective to provide a method to understanding the meaning of "things" within our culture.

Williamson goes on to suggest that these forms of meaning can also be viewed as tendencies for which we feel and think (Williamson, 1994: 12). Since this research will primarily utilize advertisements produced by a department store, I turned back to Leach (1984) and his examination of the function of advertising within department stores. He proposes that the department store employed advertising techniques to boost the excitement of possibilities intrinsic to the commodity form. In this context, Leach indicates that "[department stores] attempted to endow the goods with transformative messages and associations that the goods did not objectively possess" (Leach, 1984: 327). Utilizing Leach's perspective of the department store, I aim to further interrogate his argument by applying Williamson's analysis of advertisements to this research.

To conclude, these texts have been vital in terms of understanding how the development of the department store and successive evolution of the American consumer society is situated within the modernizing city through material and visual forms. In the form of a case study, this thesis aims to interrogate the relationship of the microcosm of Marshall Field & Company mirrored by the macrocosm of the modernizing city of Chicago.

Chapter I: Situating the Modern Woman

Marshall Field & Company created a spatial and social environment that enabled the modern American woman to both witness and perform new forms of public femininity grounded in mobility, visibility, and consumption. As theologian Shailer Mathews claimed in *FoH*, the department store was more than a commercial enterprise, "it is human society in miniature" (Mathews, 1920: 8). For Mathews, the store functioned as a key site of modern life, a reflection of social change and civic aspiration.

The early twentieth-century department store emerged not only as a commercial institution but also as a social and spatial innovation that redefined women's roles in the urban landscape. Marshall Field & Company exemplified this shift, offering a site where modern womanhood could be practiced, observed, and legitimated. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's (1999) conception of the department store as a "dreamworld" and space of visual consumption, this chapter examines how Field's architecture and layout facilitated the emergence of the modern American woman as a spectator and participant in the spectacle of consumer culture. Through grand interiors, curated displays, and gendered spatial logics, the store redefined feminine mobility and visibility in the urban landscape.

The Department Store as a Spatial and Social Innovation

The department store's emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a significant transformation in the urban fabric and the social experiences of modern life. As an architectural and commercial form, the department store reorganized the relationship between public space, consumer culture, and gendered mobility. In Chicago, Marshall Field & Company stood at the forefront of this development. Situated at the heart of the city's commercial district, and rebuilt after the

Great Fire of 1871, the store epitomized the ambitions of a city determined to redefine itself as a modern metropolis (Wendt and Kogan, 1952: 22–5).

The scale, location, and architectural grandeur of Field's contributed to its symbolic function as more than a retail space. It was a civic landmark that invited the public, particularly women, to engage with the city on new terms. Designed by Daniel Burnham's firm and expanded between 1892 and 1914, the store's monumental columns, white terra cotta façade, and twelve-story structure embodied the ideals of Beaux-Arts classicism and progressive commercialism (Bluestone, 1991: 123–4). As illustrated in **Figure 1.1**, the integration of elegant interiors, skylit atriums, and open-plan layouts signaled a departure from cramped, cluttered retail spaces of the past, and offered a navigable and aesthetically curated environment for shoppers.

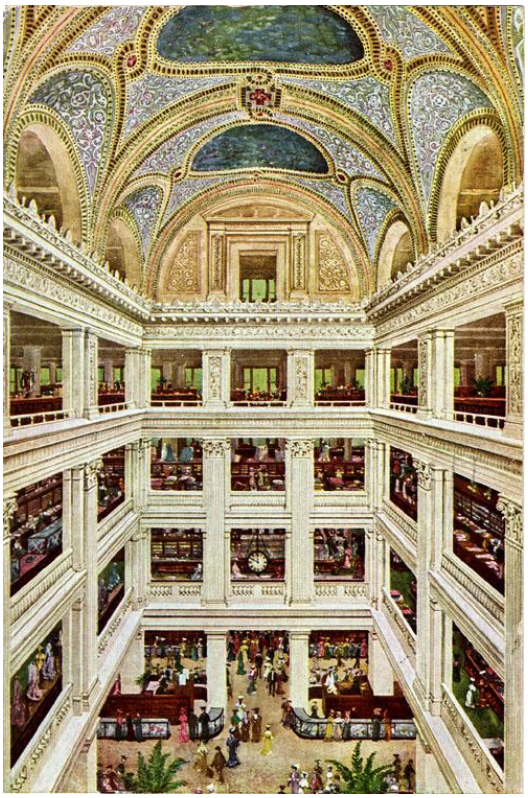

Figure 1.1
Tiffany Mosaic Dome and central atrium of Marshall Field & Co.'s Retail Store, Chicago. Postcard by Curt Teich for V. O. Hammon Pub. Co., c.1905.

The architecture and interior design of Marshall Field's echoed the grandeur of European department stores, from the domed ceilings to the marble arcades. However, within this imitation lay an assertion of Chicago's own place within global modernity. The store became a cultural landmark, not because it was purely original, but because it performed authenticity through curated aesthetics. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital, Field's space offered women the ability to inhabit taste, not through birthright but through consumer performance. The spectacle of shopping in a

"European-style" space allowed American women to both witness and enact a refined, cosmopolitan identity that was nonetheless rooted in their own modern lives.

These architectural elements aligned with broader shifts in urban planning and social norms, particularly regarding the presence of women in public space. The department store offered a legitimate and socially acceptable reason for middle-class women to move freely through the city, challenging long-standing boundaries between domestic and public spheres. Field's cultivated an atmosphere of refinement, safety, and respectability, encouraging women to linger, socialize, and consume (Frederick, 1929: 35–6). As stated by Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, the fundamental appeal of the entire store would be to patrons of wealth and taste. All others would follow (Wendt and Kogan, 1953: 262).

Marshall Field & Company's own publications reinforced this spatial philosophy. Pamphlets such as *The Store of Service* (c.1915) framed the department store as a site of hospitality and ease, aligning its architecture with ideals of comfort and care. Sales training manuals and employee memos further emphasized the importance of order, cleanliness, and demeanor, suggesting that the physical space was to be not only aesthetically impressive but socially instructive (Marshall Field & Company, 1933a).

The department store thus operated as both a spatial innovation and a cultural mechanism, structuring how women navigated urban life and modern identity. As Walter Benjamin observed in his reflections on the Paris arcades, the architecture of consumer capitalism was never neutral, but rather a stage upon which new subjectivities were formed and performed (Benjamin, 1999: 25–7). In the case of Marshall Field's, that stage was meticulously designed to foster a specific kind of modern womanhood: mobile, respectable, and aesthetically attuned. This ideal was further cultivated through visual media,

such as the four illustrations featured in *FoH's* article 'Shop Early in the Morning All the Year Round,' which depicts an elegant female shopper navigating Field's serene, orderly spaces that reinforced both temporal discipline and aspirational femininity (see **Figure 1.2**). Together, the built environment and its visual representations worked in tandem to design a modern feminine subject whose identity was equally shaped by spatial experience and the cultural cues embedded within it.

Figure 1.2

Illustrations highlighting the ease of shopping at Marshall Field's from 'Shop Early in the Morning All the Year Round,' *Fashions of the Hour*, January 1923, p. 13.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Navigating Consumption: Interior Layout and Movement

The layout and internal flow of Marshall Field's physically choreographed consumer behavior, enabling women to navigate the space with relative autonomy while internalizing the rituals of modern

consumption. As Susan Porter Benson states, it is vital to examine the use and allocation of space within department stores to understand the messages they conveyed to their customers and employees (Benson, 1979: 200). She further claims that the "rationalization of space, through its division into departments" was the "very essence" of these institutions (1979: 208).

Ahead of Marshall Field's 1907 expansion, the store gained thirty-five acres of selling space to be divided among 150 retail sections. To ensure cohesion and maintain customer flow, President John Shedd tasked Vice President James Simpson and Retail Maintenance Manager David M. Yates with the planning (Wendt and Kogan, 1953: 262). Benson notes that for store managers, space manipulation was key to influencing customer behavior and sales (Benson, 1979: 201). Yates challenged tradition by suggesting the relocation of basic goods to upper floors, allowing more visually appealing items to dominate the main floor. As he put it, "The era of piece goods is ending, but women who want them will go to the second floor. They'll go even higher for linens and ready-to-wear clothes" (Wendt and Kogan, 1953: 263). This reorganization reflects a modern consumption logic, prioritizing impulse and visual appeal over practicality, transforming the shopping experience into a spatial choreography of efficiency, novelty, and desire.

Field's manipulation of spatial design extended beyond architectural innovation to the strategic organization of its selling floors, as seen in a *FoH* spread titled 'On the Sixth Floor.' The floor was rearranged into specialty sections, with dresses at one end and coats, suits, and wraps at the other, enhancing convenience and consumer flow, "if you do not find your size or style in one section, you can quickly pass into the adjoining room and be fitted there" (Marshall Field & Company, 1927: 20–1). Shown in **Figure 1.3**, this layout exemplifies Benson's three-tiered strategy: designing the store as a

coherent whole, dividing space into functional zones, and directing movement through fixtures and displays (Benson, 1979: 202). The sixth-floor redesign functioned as both a spatial and psychological prompt, choreographing a seamless shopping experience while reinforcing ideals of refinement, efficiency, and the modern, discerning female consumer.

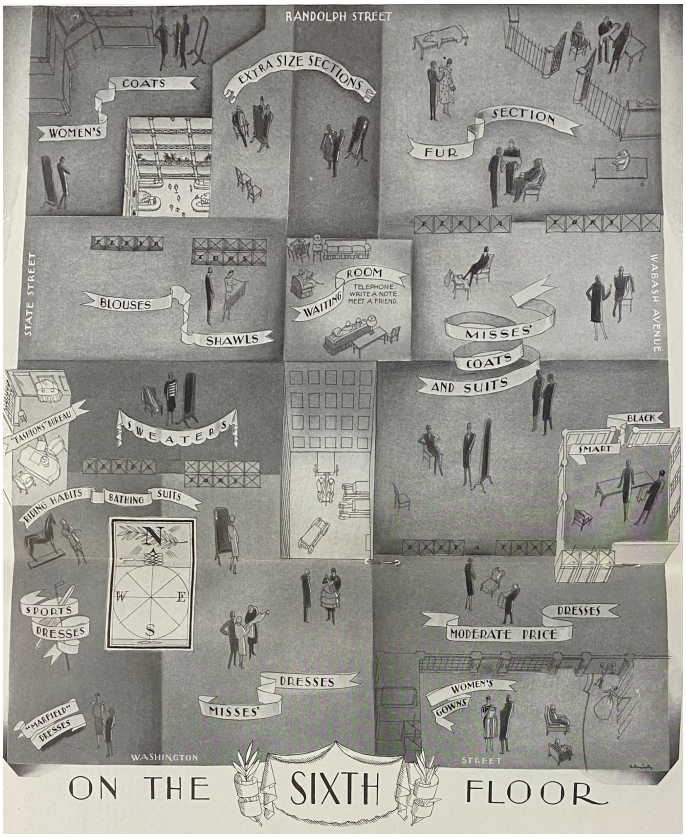

Figure 1.3

Map illustrating Marshall Field's redesign of their sixth floor from 'On the Sixth Floor,' *Fashions of the Hour*, January 1927, p. 20–21.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

The Store as Spectacle

Beyond its spatial innovations, Marshall Field & Company cultivated an immersive sensory environment that transformed shopping into a theatrical experience. This transformation aligned with what Benjamin described in his writings on the Paris arcades as the emergence of the commodity spectacle: a space in which objects were not only sold, but staged, inviting desire and fantasy (Benjamin,

1999: 17–27). Marshall Field's similarly positioned the department store as a place of visual seduction and cultural instruction where women could both observe and participate in the drama of modern consumerism.

The store's display strategies were crucial to this spectacle. Field's became renowned for its opulent window displays, which combined seasonal themes with artistic composition to stop pedestrians in their tracks. As contemporary trade journals emphasized, these windows were not simply advertisements, but aesthetic experiences that, as what the editor of the *Dry Goods Economist* noted, "make people who see them think," and drew shoppers inside (Ditchett, 1922: 88). One example from a 1922 window display featured a Persian setting adapted to exhibit modern gowns, framed by polychrome pillars with an arched backdrop made of silk and colored moldings to represent metals (see **Figure 1.4**). The color scheme for this lavish tableau of eveningwear was quoted as "changeable color effects in green, blue and purple with iridescent and high lights in orange, salmons, lavender and gold," presenting the garments as objects of aspiration and fantasy (1922: 87). Inside the store, visual cues continued to guide and enchant. Architectural flourishes, such as the Tiffany glass mosaic ceiling in the atrium, marble staircases, and brass fixtures created an atmosphere of elegance that mirrored the products on display. The carefully choreographed spatial flow led women through a sequence of departments, with curated vignettes and themed rooms offering not just clothing but a lifestyle ideal.

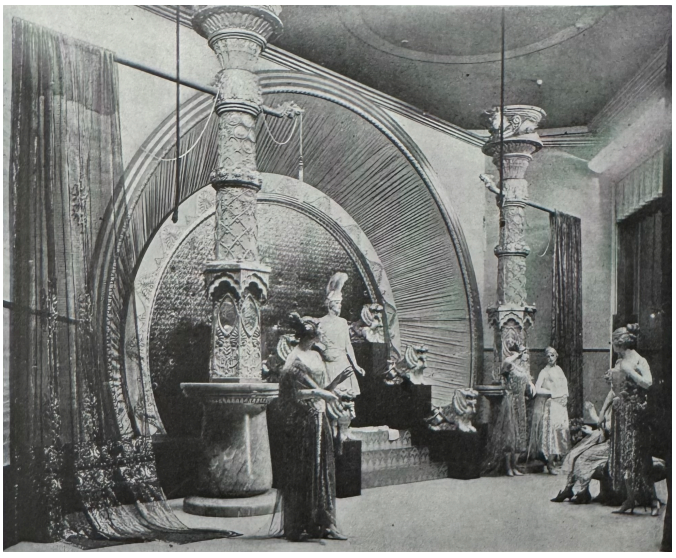

Figure 1.4
Window display featuring a Persian setting adapted to exhibit modern gowns (Ditchett, 1922: 88).
Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

The spectacle did not end at the store's threshold. Through in-house media like *FoH*, Field's extended its immersive environment into print, translating the spatial elegance of the store into visual and textual form. In an illustrated feature highlighting the Costume Salon, readers encounter a staged vision of fashion consumption framed by the subhead: "There is much the atmosphere of the Parisian atelier in the Costume Salon adjoining the Costume Section, with its Parisian models on display and its pleasant groups of sofas and chairs, where one may ensconce a friend to ratify one's choices" (Marshall Field & Company, 1920: 6). As shown in **Figure 1.5**, the accompanying images depict women in poised, contemplative poses, trying on garments while others look on approvingly, seated in clusters of refined furniture. This carefully constructed scene not only mirrors the spatial elegance of the store but also imbues the act of shopping with social and aesthetic meaning. By evoking the Parisian atelier, the article aligns Field's with the cultural prestige of European fashion while domesticating the experience for its American clientele. Such visual and textual staging transformed consumption into a ritualized performance of taste, sociality, and modern femininity. As a result, individual choices were not purely personal; they became acts of public validation, marked by refinement and discernment.

Figure 1.5

Illustrations of women shopping from 'A Dozen Shops on One Floor, the Sixth, Proffer the Mode in All That Makes Up Outer Apparel For Women and Misses,' *Fashions of the Hour*, Store Number 1920, p. 6.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

In this sense, Marshall Field's was not merely a commercial enterprise, but a cultural stage that cultivated an immersive environment where women could rehearse the performance of modernity itself. Through its design, display, and aesthetic spectacle, the store invited female shoppers to embody taste, navigate newfound freedoms, and construct identity through visual and spatial cues. These orchestrated experiences did more than sell products. They helped codify a new kind of public woman: modern, mobile, respectable, and stylish, with a presence in the city increasingly defined by refinement, visibility, and consumer poise.

Modern Womanhood as a Public Identity

By legitimizing women's presence in public space and framing consumption as a respectable activity, Marshall Field's enabled the emergence of a new form of middle-class female identity tied to visibility, refinement, and self-expression. In *The American Store Window*, Leonard Marcus asserts that the American cities of the twentieth century became places not only for business, but scenes for public performance. As department stores became more theatrical, shoppers began to dress up for their visits, intentionally or not, becoming part of the spectacle themselves (Marcus, 1978: 12). Department stores like Field's became ideal stages for this performance, presenting shopping not merely as an economic exchange, but as a stylized social practice.

This transformation was further cultivated through amenities designed to elevate the shopping experience. Marshall Field's included luxurious tearooms, writing rooms, and rest lounges that encouraged women to linger and socialize. As Benson notes, "these amenities helped to equate purchasing goods with a genteel style of life, to make the department store the women's equivalent of a men's downtown club" (Benson, 1979: 205). A 1909 promotional photograph of the tearoom

underscores this atmosphere of refinement: well-dressed women seated in elegant surroundings, their consumption of tea and fashion equally staged (see **Figure 1.6**). Such images reinforced the department store as a proper space for women to navigate public life respectably.

Figure 1.6
Photograph of Marshall Field's Tearoom, 1909.
Chicago History Museum; Chicago Daily News Collection.

The department store's attention to space extended beyond merchandising strategy into the realm of sociability and self-presentation, shaping how women experienced public life. An *FoH* feature from 1920 titled, 'Pleasant Places to Meet,' reveals how Marshall Field's designed its interiors to aestheticize not just shopping, but waiting, meeting, and lingering. The article guides readers through a curated map of intimate, "less frequented places" within the store, promoting spaces where public femininity could be practiced with grace and ease. From "an immense leather davenport placed just in front of the marble stairs," to the "classic benches about the fountain in the Narcissus Room," each location was styled with charm and intention. A Colonial-style nook with "Wallace Nutting Furniture

and chintz hangings," a restful Art Gallery where "one never hurries," and the quiet elegance of the Lingerie Section, described as "a receptive group of furniture in an atmosphere essentially feminine," all reinforced ideals of tasteful sociability (Marshall Field & Company, 1920a: 3). Beyond providing atmospheric resting spots, these amenities functioned as stages for performing modern womanhood in its most respectable, composed form. Therefore, Field's spatial ideology transformed acts of leisure and loitering into legitimate expressions of refinement and feminine presence in the city.

The early twentieth-century department store functioned as a dynamic stage on which modern American femininity was rehearsed and realized. While the physical space of Marshall Field's enabled the modern woman to perform her identity in public, it was not only the architecture or spatial design that shaped her experience. The store expanded its influence beyond the building itself, as it crafted and circulated ideals of modern femininity through the use of visual and textual media. Advertising, particularly their in-house publication *FoH*, translated the sensory and performative spectacle of the store into a consumable lifestyle. Therefore, Field's did not merely provide a stage for modern womanhood but actively scripted it. The following chapter examines how advertising functioned as a powerful tool of cultural pedagogy, creating a fashionable, aspirational identity rooted in consumption.

Chapter II: Advertising the Modern Woman

In the early twentieth century, advertising emerged as a powerful instrument not only of commerce but of cultural instruction. For Marshall Field & Company, it was a means of shaping modern femininity, teaching women how to look, what to desire, and who to become. Central to this effort was *Fashions of the Hour (FoH)*, the store's in-house magazine, distributed free to customers six times a year beginning in 1914. Originally conceived as a guide to seasonal styles, it soon developed into a richly composed publication featuring commentary on fashion, society, and culture, often illustrated with full-length portraits of actresses and socialites modeling Field's apparel (Wendt and Kogan, 1953: 293).

As Jules David Prown (1993) suggests, approaching *FoH* as a material and visual object reveals its role in encoding cultural values through form, tone, and composition. Its stylized imagery and refined language offered aspirational scripts of modern womanhood rooted in elegance, poise, and discernment. Women appeared in cultivated interiors or metropolitan scenes, posed in ways that performed an idealized femininity. These aesthetic choices functioned as soft instruction, guiding readers not only in dress, but in comportment, taste, and lifestyle.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's theory of spectacle and the flâneur, this advertising framework positioned women as both spectators and subjects of modernity, cultivating a visual literacy tied to aspiration and self-fashioning (Benjamin, 1999: 37). The magazine turned consumption into a mode of cultural participation, where readers were invited to see themselves reflected in, and transformed by, the imagery presented.

Through its layout, composition, and tone, *FoH* constructed a gendered visual culture that positioned Marshall Field's as a tastemaker and arbiter of refinement. This chapter explores how such advertising shaped the modern woman, not only as a consumer, but as a visual subject, embedded within transatlantic ideals of style, taste, and cultural authority.

Constructing Taste: Fashion, Class, and Refinement

Through curated imagery, narrative framing, and refined editorial language, *FoH* offered women a visual model of modern femininity rooted in taste and composure. As advertising shifted in the early twentieth century from text-dense formats to visually-driven layouts, Field's embraced this aesthetic transformation. The store employed restrained typography, generous white space, and elegant photography to cultivate an atmosphere of sophistication. The magazine's diction, emphasizing terms like "discerning" and "exclusive," reinforced its aspirational ethos. As Judith Williamson argues, advertising creates structures of meaning in which commodities and consumers become interchangeable, ultimately selling consumers a commodification of themselves (Williamson, 1994: 21). In this context, Field's did not merely promote garments but instructed readers on how to perform a stylish, modern life. Drawing on theatrical spectacle and emotional appeal, the store framed consumption as both a sensory and social experience. In line with Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital, Field's advertising modeled the acquisition and performance of taste as a strategy for identity formation and upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1984: 70).

This intersection of material desire and cultural instruction is powerfully illustrated in the first issue of *FoH* published in October 1914. The article titled, 'Around the Clock of an Autumn Day with the Well-Dressed Woman,' follows its subject from morning to evening, narrating a full day's activities

through the lens of appropriate dress and behavior. As illustrated in **Figure 2.1**, this page layout is structured as both a sartorial chronicle and a behavioral guide, implicitly instructing women not only in what to wear, but when, how, and why. Morning suits for domestic routines, tailored coats for shopping excursions, and elegant gowns for evening visits; together, they form a visual and textual choreography of modern femininity rooted in consumption, regulation, and display. These carefully curated ensembles serve a dual purpose; they meet the material needs of dress, while signaling a woman's social aptitude and class awareness. As Williamson argues, advertising imparts commodities with a "social meaning," suggesting that as two needs are crossed, neither are satisfied. Material things that we need become representative of other, non-material things we need, thus, the point of exchange between the two is where "meaning" is created (Williamson, 1994: 23). Within this framework, *FoH* operates as a cultural script, transforming the commodity into a vehicle of aspirational identity. It is not just clothing that is sold, but instead it is a lifestyle of timeliness, taste, and modern self-possession.

Figure 2.1

Page layout for 'Around the Clock of an Autumn Day with the Well-Dressed Woman,' *Fashions of the Hour*, October 1914, p. 8.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Furthermore, Field's advertising taught women how to embody fashion correctly, positioning taste as a form of cultural capital that could be learned, acquired, and displayed. An article titled, 'The Fashionable Airs of a Fan,' further exemplifies how *FoH* constructed taste as a visual expression and bodily performance. Rather than merely promoting fans as desirable commodities, the article includes detailed instruction on their proper handling, accompanied by photographs demonstrating the graceful movements expected of a modern, fashionable woman (see **Figure 2.2**). Through the subtle choreography of gestures, such as opening, closing, and carrying the fan with poise, the magazine translated refinement into an embodied practice. In this formulation, taste was not solely a matter of appearance, but a cultivated mode of comportment, signaling self-possession, sociability, and aesthetic discernment.

Figure 2.2

Photographs of women modeling fans from 'Paris Interprets the Spring Styles,' *Fashions of the Hour*, January 1920, p. 7.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Applying Bourdieu's (1984) insights into cultural capital and Benjamin's (1999) observations of commodity culture, it becomes clear that Marshall Field's advertising was instrumental in shaping not

only what women purchased, but how they imagined themselves as public, stylish, and modern subjects. In making the consumption of fashion an aspirational and aestheticized act, *FoH* helped define the contours of modern womanhood itself.

Cosmopolitan and Cultural Authority

Drawing on European influences while grounding itself in American individualism, Marshall Field's helped shape the image of the modern woman as both cosmopolitan and distinctly American, positioning the store as a cultural intermediary and authority on style. Field's advertising participated in a broader cultural project of cosmopolitan aspiration, wherein European fashion, French design in particular, was positioned as the gold standard of taste. Kristin Hoganson's notion of "cosmopolitan domesticity" is instructive here: American women were encouraged to look outward, to consume the world through style, while simultaneously affirming national sophistication through mimicry (Hoganson, 2007: 17). In *FoH*, Parisian fashions were frequently cited as inspiration, but always reframed for the American woman, suggesting not mere replication, but a refined reinterpretation. This tension between imitation and authenticity reveals deeper anxieties about American cultural legitimacy and the role of consumption in asserting it. Through globalized taste, Field's helped shape a specifically American mode of modernity that was both derivative and self-assured.

The 'Special Correspondence in Paris' features in *FoH* offer a striking illustration of how Marshall Field & Company employed cosmopolitanism as both an aesthetic and commercial strategy. Across the issues from 1916, 1923, and 1930, the accompanying illustrations carefully staged a visual narrative of transatlantic fashion authority. In the 1916 feature, sketches illustrate a renaissance of Parisian coquetry as a response to the Great War. Drawing on elements such as flowers, lace, and pastel

colors, the French capital remains the uncontested epicenter of taste even during conflict (see **Figure 2.3**). By 1923, the imagery had shifted. This illustration is featured in an article titled, 'The Ups and Downs of Hems and Waist Lines,' with a quote that reflects this shift, "Generally speaking, women in France are sponsoring shorter skirts for the street than those worn in America" (Marshall Field & Company, 1923b: 5). As seen in **Figure 2.4**, while still indebted to Paris, the figures appear more streamlined, dynamic, and uphold their preference for longer hemlines, thus reflecting American adaptations of European styles.

Figure 2.3
French fashion illustrations from 'Paris Interprets the Spring Styles,' *Fashions of the Hour*, April 1916, p. 7.
Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Figure 2.4
Fashion illustrations from 'The Ups and Downs of Hems and Waist Lines,' *Fashions of the Hour*, School Number 1923, p. 5.
Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Finally, the 1929 Autumn Exposition publication opens with a message stating that "A woman has only to see the new Paris clothes with skirts as long as waists are high to know that we are active participants in the Fashion Revolution of 1929" (Marshall Field & Company, 1929: 1). A year after Field's made this bold statement, the visual language of the 1930 Autumn Exposition blends French

influence with a distinctly American sensibility; the settings are less overtly Parisian, and the models embody a more assertive, self-possessed modernity (see **Figure 2.5**). Through this visual evolution, Field's presented cosmopolitanism not merely as the imitation of European fashions, but as an aspirational dialogue between Old World sophistication and New World modernity. In doing so, the store encouraged its clientele to see themselves not as passive consumers of foreign trends, but as participants in a broader, evolving cultural sphere that is refined, discerning, and distinctly modern. Internationalism thus became a key component of the store's authority, and by extension, of the fashionable identities it helped construct.

Figure 2.5

Fashion illustrations from 'Quiet Elegance,' *Fashions of the Hour*, Exposition Number 1930, p. 5.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Performing Fashionable Identity: Celebrity and Authority in Print

The cultivation of fashionable identity in *FoH* was further reinforced through celebrity endorsements and profiles of designers, actresses, and socialites. Interviews and photographic spreads featuring these figures lent credibility and glamour to the magazine's aesthetic prescriptions. As illustrated in **Figures 2.6–2.8**, celebrities functioned as embodied examples of the modern woman, modeling styles of dress, behavior, and consumption that readers were encouraged to emulate. Their presence authenticated the magazine's fashion advice, making it both desirable and attainable. By spotlighting individuals who embodied cultural prestige, Marshall Field's taught readers how to perform a sophisticated identity, suggesting that style, like taste, could be cultivated through careful attention to dress, demeanor, and consumption.

Figure 2.6
Mrs. Vernon Castle photographed by Victor Georg for *Fashions of the Hour*, October 1915, p. 6.
Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Figure 2.7
Photograph of two Chicago debutantes from 'Concerning the Débutante and Clothes for Her First Season,' *Fashions of the Hour*, School Number 1923, p. 8.
Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Figure 2.8
Photograph of Mary Garden from '"Fashions" Interviews Mary Garden,'
Fashions of the Hour, New Year Number 1928, p. 6.
Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

The presence of Jean Patou, in the feature dedicated to promoting his visit to Marshall Field's, exemplifies this strategy (see **Figure 2.9**). Patou's appearance at the store is framed as an event of considerable significance, suggesting that by hosting a Parisian designer of global renown, Field's offered customers direct access to the vanguard of international fashion. Through this association, the act of shopping at Field's was subtly reframed as a culturally aspirational experience. This strategy continued with features like, 'Observations from a Great Designer,' where Lucien Lelong offers broader meditations on personal style and taste (Marshall Field & Company, 1925a: 7). Lelong's advice elevates fashion from the realm of seasonal trends to an enduring expression of identity and cultural sophistication. His authority is not presented as distant or unattainable; instead, it is made accessible, positioning Field's clientele as participants in the same discourse of style and refinement.

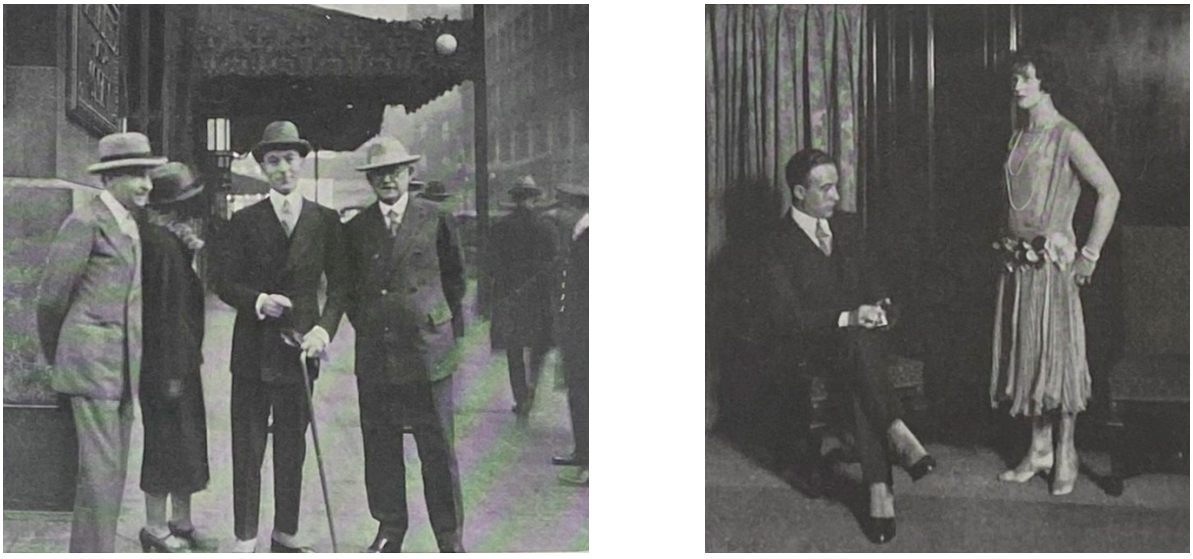

Figure 2.9

Photographs of Jean Patou at Marshall Field's from 'Jean Patou Visits Marshall Field & Company,' *Fashions of the Hour*, Christmas Number 1924, p. 8.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

The publication extended this framework beyond garments to the very materials of fashion itself. In 1925, the interview with Eugene Rodier casts textiles as sites of artistic and technical expertise (Marshall Field & Company, 1925: 19). Rodier's celebrated fabrics become markers of discerning taste, demonstrating how Field's consistently located cultural authority, even within the materiality of dress. Subsequently, this authority diversified across accessories and sensory experiences. 'When an Artist Designs Your Shoes,' with Mary Bendelari, and 'Lucien Lelong Discusses the Relation Between Perfumes and Dress,' reposition accessories and perfume not as peripheral luxuries, but as integral elements of a cohesive, expressive self. (Marshall Field & Company, 1928: 10; 1928a: 31).

Across these features, *FoH* employed the language and imagery of celebrity to authenticate its vision of modern femininity. Designers and actresses were deployed as accessible authorities, offering a roadmap to stylish selfhood. Through this strategy, Field's transformed its customers into aspirants of

cosmopolitan tastes, embedding the act of consumption within broader narratives of social aspiration, aesthetic discernment, and modern public identity.

Marshall Field & Company's advertising efforts played a significant role in defining and disseminating a modern, aspirational model of American womanhood. Advertising operated as a visual pedagogy, teaching women how to align their bodies, homes, and aspirations with ideals of refinement, cosmopolitanism, and cultural capital. Far from passive recipients, women became active participants in shaping their identities through visual consumption. This chapter underscores how Field's blurred the line between commerce and culture, positioning the department store not only as a site of shopping, but as a producer of meaning and taste. The next chapter turns from advertising to merchandising, exploring how Field's fashion authority was enacted through its buying practices, global networks, and strategies of authentication.

Chapter III: Fashioning the Modern Woman

While advertising shaped the image of the modern woman, Marshall Field & Company's fashion authority was equally embedded in its material practices of buying, merchandising, and display. By cultivating their authority through global fashion networks, transatlantic sourcing, and curatorial strategies, they translated European influence into a uniquely American vision of modern femininity. Field's was not only a retail space but a cultural gatekeeper, shaping national style by coordinating garments, defining taste, and educating its consumers (Bourdieu, 1984: 6; Breward, 2003: 78). By examining the store's role in constructing a modern American fashion identity, this chapter reveals how Field's positioned itself at the intersection of commerce, culture, and femininity.

Buying Trips and Global Style

By importing fashion from Europe, Field's buyers transformed global trends into symbols of elite taste, while negotiating anxieties around authenticity and imitation in American culture. Marshall Field's operated within a vast international web of fashion exchange. Buyers regularly traveled to fashion capitals like Paris and London to preview seasonal styles and negotiate exclusive imports (Wendt and Kogan, 1952: 130–4). Through these practices, Field's did more than source trends. It acted as a mediator between global fashion centers and American consumers. (Hoganson, 1998: 146–9). Its buying team, composed largely of women, served as taste translators who adapted European fashion to domestic sensibilities and lifestyles. These practices aligned Field's with broader transatlantic currents while allowing it to shape a distinctly American aesthetic.

FoH sourced most of its covers and fashion drawings from French artists commissioned through their Paris office. In Emily Kimbrough's *Through Charley's Door* (1952), an autobiographical

narrative of her experience working within Marshall Field's Advertising Bureau, she reveals that these artists accompanied Field's buyers to Paris openings, sketching selected models. While most dressmaking houses were reluctant to admit artists for fear of design theft, Field's was an exception. Their buyers, who purchased more than others, had greater freedom since their selections did not require approval from Chicago management. A Field's representative could attend an opening, choose models, place an order, and complete the transaction without oversight (Kimbrough, 1952: 223).

This practice is exemplified in the article titled, 'A Day with Some of the Grands Couturières,' with the subhead: "The creators of fashion bring to a vehement climax the accumulated experience of a week in the French capital" (Marshall Field & Company, 1923: 14). This double-page spread illustrates snapshots of the various fashion shows attended by Field's buyers and commissioned artists during couture season (see **Figure 3.1**). Indeed, Field's fashion authority rested on its ability to mediate between European innovation and American aspiration. Through this transatlantic network, Field's gained firsthand access to original European fashion, which was then adapted and reinterpreted for the Chicago consumer.

This process of translation was not merely logistical; it was ideological. What Miles Orvell identifies as "the American ideological embrace of imitation as authenticity," Field's artfully managed the tension between these ideas (2014, xxxviii). While their garments echoed European silhouettes, their presentation emphasized accessibility, democratic refinement, and domestic elegance. In Bourdieu's (1984) terms, this allowed Field's clientele to acquire cultural capital, not through elite access, but through learned taste and guided consumption. By presenting itself as both an interpreter and curator of global fashion, Field's helped define the modern American woman as both stylish and rooted in national

identity; fashionable yet unmistakably American. The store's use of international buying practices set the stage for its position as a tastemaker. However, the translation of global trends into consumer desire required deliberate strategies within the store itself.

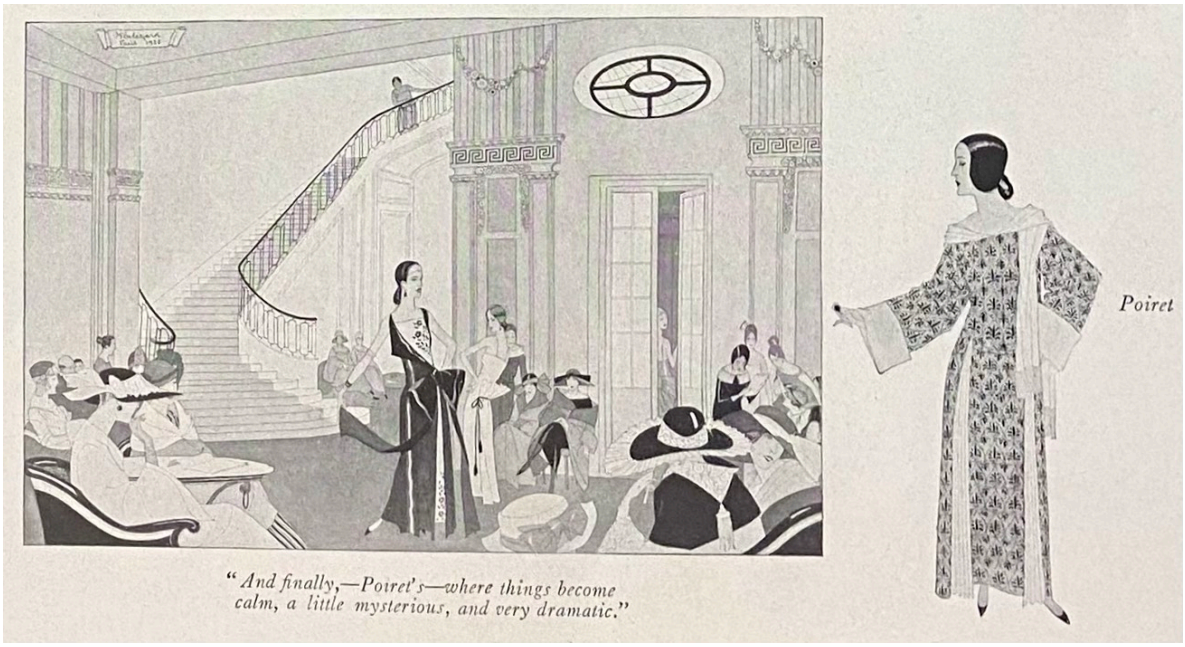

Figure 3.1

Illustrations from Martial et Armand and Poiret fashion shows from 'A Day with Some of the Grands Couturières,' *Fashions of the Hour*, June 1923, p. 14–15.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Merchandising as Cultural Authority

Through strategic merchandising and curated in-store experiences, Marshall Field's asserted its authority as a cultural intermediary in defining modern womanhood. Field's was not merely a fashion purveyor; it used merchandising as a tool to assert cultural authority. Through curated selections, department arrangements, and emulative guidance, Field's directed customers in how to conceptualize and embody modern style. These practices framed fashion not simply as a matter of choice, but as an orchestrated experience requiring discipline, knowledge, and discernment. As a result, in the form of cultural capital, Field's positioned itself as an educator of modern womanhood, shaping cultural values through their retail environment (Bourdieu, 1984: 85–6).

The Custom Apparel Salon and its neighboring sections at Marshall Field's were not simply luxurious spaces for trying on garments, but carefully merchandised environments that translated European couture into consumable and distinctly American expressions of taste. While their architectural refinement echoed the spatial logics of exclusivity discussed earlier, in terms of merchandising, these rooms operated as cultural intermediaries. They housed not only imported garments and accessories, but also the interpretive services of dressmakers, fitters, and saleswomen who helped clients tailor foreign fashion ideals to their own identities.

This practice is exemplified in the article 'Complete in One Act,' which foregrounds an illustration that portrays a scene of "life on the fifth floor" (Marshall Field & Company, 1934: 10–11). This image displays not only the merchandise available on this floor, but also the curated shopping experience. As shown in **Figure 3.2**, a seated woman consults with sales staff in the refined surroundings of the Custom Apparel Salon, where expert assistance enables her to assemble an elegant

wardrobe with minimal exertion. The ensemble, a custom-designed evening gown, a curated selection of Palter DeLiso shoes from the Shoe Salon, and a delicate tea gown from the Negligee Section, highlights the salon's integration of personalized service and high-end merchandise. Situated on the renowned fifth floor, this configuration of specialized departments exemplifies Marshall Field's commitment to custom, globally-sourced fashion presented through seamless, service-driven merchandising.

Figure 3.2

Illustration depicting a seated female shopper being assisted in the Custom Apparel Salon from 'Complete in One Act,' *Fashions of the Hour*, A Century of Progress 1934, p. 10–11.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

The article's closing lines encapsulate the broader logic of Field's merchandising approach, framing consumption not as mere acquisition but as an orchestrated, aspirational process guided by expertise and refinement: "This happy arrangement of sections on the fifth floor enables one to assemble

a practically complete wardrobe with the utmost economy of effort and the certainty of achieving an ensemble of the greatest possible originality and distinction" (Marshall Field & Company, 1934: 11). The emphasis on "economy of effort" underscores the store's service-oriented ethos, suggesting that sophistication and elegance were made conveniently attainable through expertly organized spaces and curated assistance. Meanwhile, the promise of "originality and distinction" elevates consumption into a creative and socially significant pursuit, one in which the consumer becomes an arbiter of taste under the subtle tutelage of the store.

By enabling women to "assemble a practically complete wardrobe" within a single, elegantly orchestrated space, Field's turned merchandising into a form of cultural instruction. It taught customers not just what to wear, but how to construct a coherent, modern identity through style. This aligns with what Bourdieu (1984) describes as the formation of taste within structured fields of cultural production: the store becomes a site where women learned to perform refinement, cosmopolitanism, and social belonging through material goods. Framed through Prown's (1993) material culture methodology, the store's merchandise and its curated presentation function as cultural artifacts; objects through which social values, aesthetic norms, and behavioral scripts were communicated, absorbed, and embodied.

Through the careful orchestration of goods and services across physical spaces and promotional media, Field's positioned itself as a cultural tastemaker, shaping ideals of modern femininity, sociability, and elegance. Within their immersive and instructional retail environment, merchandising became a tool for shaping public identity. Each gown, accessory, or custom fitting appointment encouraged women to internalize and perform the codes of respectable womanhood. As the

boundaries between commerce, culture, and class distinction were blurred, Field's played a crucial role in defining the modern female consumer, and, by extension, the form she was expected to inhabit.

Coordinated Fashion and the Modern Body

The shaping of the modern feminine body was not a byproduct of fashion merchandising at Marshall Field's; it was one of its central aims. Indeed, Field's merchandising strategies emphasized silhouettes that reinforced ideals of slimness, elegance, and propriety. This phenomenon aligns with theories advanced by scholars such as Liz Conor (2004) and Elizabeth Wilson (1985), who argue that the modern female body was increasingly construed as a disciplined and regulated surface, subject to cultural anxieties about sexuality, visibility, and control. More than a purveyor of garments, Field's operated as an agent of bodily discipline, shaping women's physical forms in accordance with the shifting ideals of modernity.

Evidence from 1910 alteration price sheets suggests bodily modification was a normalized and expected service in the shopping experience (Marshall Field & Company, 1910). These documents, detailing the costs of waistline adjustments, hemline configurations, and shoulder reseaming, reveal a critical, but often overlooked, mechanism of consumption: the tailoring of the individual body to align with contemporary ideals of silhouette and proportion. As a result, the body itself becomes a consumer good, a project requiring ongoing financial and aesthetic investment. As Conor (2004) and Wilson (1985) have theorized, the modern feminine body is a disciplined body: a visible expression of social ideals projected through posture, proportion, and self-regulation. Field's alteration services made such discipline materially accessible, reinforcing the expectation that women would reshape themselves in pursuit of modern appearance.

Field's promotional material further amplified these imperatives. For instance, advertisements for custom-made corsets repositioned corsetry within a modern framework, emphasizing health, poise, and freedom of movement rather than an antiquated form of restriction (Marshall Field & Company, 1919: 16). In tandem with structured undergarments, the lingerie and negligee illustrations from *FoH* reveal how bodily aesthetics extended into the private sphere. In Figures **3.3–3.5**, these images depict women draped in sheer fabrics that accentuate rather than conceal bodily contours, emphasizing posture, proportion, and the streamlined figure. By marketing negligees and undergarments as fashionable necessities, Field's subtly instructed women that elegance began with the unseen layers of their appearance, reinforcing the notion that the modern body was a constant, self-conscious project of construction and display.

Figure 3.3

Illustrated advertisement for petticoats and brassieres from 'As One Woman to Another,' *Fashions of the Hour*, Christmas Number 1920, p. 23.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

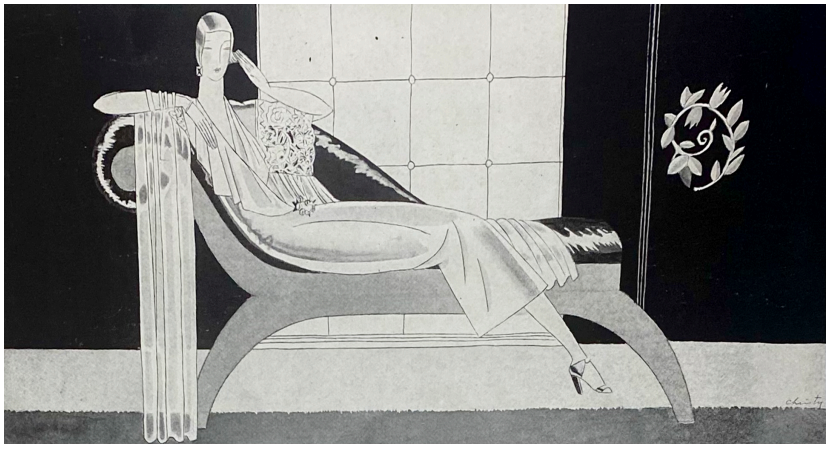

Figure 3.4

Illustrated advertisement for negligees from 'Oh Woman! In Thy Hours of Ease—Uncertain, Coy and Hard to Please,' *Fashions of the Hour*, June Number 1926, p. 18.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Through these coordinated merchandising strategies, Marshall Field's actively participated in producing a specific image of the modern woman: one whose body was at once naturalized and heavily mediated. As Conor (2004) and Wilson (1985) both contend, modern fashion did not simply mirror the emancipatory promises of modernity; it simultaneously reinscribed new forms of regulation onto the female body. Through alteration services, custom corsetry, and intimate apparel, Marshall Field's orchestrated a complex choreography of bodily display and control. By helping to construct a modern woman whose body symbolized the demands and promises of the modern urban world, these practices reflected uniquely American ideals of pragmatism and self-invention.

Figure 3.5
Illustrated advertisement for French foundation garments from 'Paris Puts Us in Shape for Fall,' *Fashions of the Hour*, Exposition Number 1930, p. 28.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

American Modernity and National Style

Marshall Field's contributed to shaping a national style that celebrated modernity, mobility, and self-definition through its translation of European fashion ideals into distinctly American modes of dress and display. This translation was reinforced through the store's global buying strategies, curated fashion environments, and claims to authority, which together framed fashion as compatible with democratic values: available, tasteful, and aspirational. In doing so, Field's positioned itself not merely as an importer of fashion but as an interpreter and producer of modernity on American terms.

Field's promotion of a distinctly American aesthetic was part of a larger cultural effort to shape national identity through fashion. Rather than exclusively valorizing European sophistication, *FoH* began to emphasize qualities associated with American modernity such as functional design, fresh silhouettes, and a certain understated vitality. In 1921, for example, the publication features an article titled, 'Where Fashion Bows to American Womanhood,' promoting Field's Custom Apparel Salon. This advertisement highlights the Salon's aims for crafting garments, whether "frocks, tailleurs, or mantles," that conveyed a "refined American individuality even while adopting the best that is to be found among other nations" (Marshall Field & Company, 1921: 11). This ethos aligns with Benjamin's (1999) theory of fashion as a "dialectical image," demonstrating how styles, once rooted in European aristocratic traditions, could be reactivated within a new, democratizing context. Breward (2003) extends this analysis by suggesting that fashion's circulation across cultural and national boundaries results in hybridized forms, where local identity is simultaneously affirmed and transformed. By selectively incorporating international elements, Field's reinforced rather than diluted a national style. American womanhood was thus presented not as an aspirant to European standards, but as a worthy arbiter of taste in her own right, confident, discerning, and deserving of styles adapted specifically for her lifestyle.

Marshall Field's promotional strategies did not simply imitate foreign fashions: they curated, adapted, and domesticated them to align with American values (see **Figure 3.6**). In doing so, the store helped define a distinctly American modernity that emphasized individualism, pragmatism, and a streamlined aesthetic. This gave rise to a new visual and cultural language of fashion—one that was both cosmopolitan and national in character, sophisticated yet grounded, aspirational yet accessible.

Through its global sourcing, curatorial strategies, and pedagogical displays, Marshall Field & Company shaped American fashion consumption at every level. From acquisition to embodiment, Field's acted as a bridge between European style and American sensibilities, offering consumers the tools to construct themselves as modern women. As this chapter has shown, Field's was both a participant in and producer of global fashion circuits, cultivating national identity through taste (Bourdieu, 1984: 99). In short, by importing European designs and recontextualizing them for domestic consumption, Field's not only shaped American fashion, but also mediated national identity through the lens of modern womanhood. The conclusion returns to this central claim, reflecting on Field's cultural legacy and its broader implications for understanding modernity, gender, and consumer space.

Figure 3.6

Marshall Field & Company advertisement titled "The Worlds Tribute" drawn by Orson Lowell, 1907.

Chicago History Museum; Marshall Field & Company Archive.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined Marshall Field & Company as a powerful agent in shaping the visual, spatial, and cultural contours of modern American womanhood between 1900 and 1930. From its grand architecture to its aspirational advertising, Field's produced more than goods; it shaped ideals of femininity, refinement, and national identity. Through merchandising strategies and immersive retail environments, the store taught women not only what to wear, but how to see themselves and navigate the modern consumer world.

Methodologically, I treated *Fashions of the Hour*, trade journals, and visual ephemera as material texts: objects that embody and communicate cultural values. Drawing on theorists such as Bourdieu, Benjamin, Hoganson, and Prown, I placed these sources within broader discussions on spectacle, consumption, and modernity. My analysis shows that Field's was not merely a translator of global fashion, but a producer of a distinctly American style: cosmopolitan in expression, national in tone. Its promotion of elegance, practicality, and individuality helped shape ideals of modern womanhood as aspirational yet attainable.

My decision to study Marshall Field's is both academic and personal. As a Chicago native, I grew up familiar with Field's legacy. Nonetheless, in researching its early twentieth-century presence, I came to understand how Marshall Field's shaped not only the commercial culture of Chicago, but also national ideals of womanhood, modernity, and class. Though it disappeared in name after 2006, Field's endures in the city's architecture and cultural memory. This project reimagines the store not simply as a bygone retailer, but as a cultural institution that shaped how women were seen and how they saw themselves. It is a story about fashion, but also about access, aspiration, and the construction of public

life in a changing city. To write about Field's is to write about Chicago itself: its ambitions, its contradictions, and its role in shaping the modern American experience.

In tracing how Marshall Field's merged merchandising with meaning and spectacle with strategy, this thesis has demonstrated that the department store was not just a backdrop to modern womanhood, but an active agent in its creation. By interpreting its spaces, advertisements, and apparel as cultural texts, we see how Field's translated global fashion into a distinctly American modernity: stylish, accessible, and ideologically powerful. In doing so, it helped script the contours of feminine identity and public life in the twentieth century, leaving behind more than merchandise: it left behind a model for how style could shape society.

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