

All the Window's a Stage: Theatricality and Show Window Display, 1897-1917

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Introduction

In July 1899, *The Show Window* magazine praised the Economical Drug Company's "Novel Sponge Display." An inventive window trimmer crafted the Chicago store's display entirely of sponges, including the characters "the diver and John Bull," which were "made by fitting sponges over a roughly constructed form of wood, covered with heavy paper. In the case of John Bull, the hair, cravat, buttons, and boots were of dyed sponges... The face is a large, flat sponge, clipped with shears into the required features."¹ The same page of the magazine described "An Ingenious Window Show" from Aurora, Illinois: "comical heads adorned in old fashioned 'sun bonnets' arrayed on a frame occupying the entire window space. These heads, by a mechanical contrivance, are kept in constant motion, and the funny faces in a dumb way seem to invite the passer-by to come inside."² During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, stores across the country, from small town shops to large urban department stores, employed theatrical spectacle in their show windows in order to sell goods. Critics and historians have accused window trimmers of stimulating desire, manipulating consumers, and creating a culture of greed. Yet, contemporaneous proponents lauded show windows as combining profitability with aesthetic worth in a new form of edifying "practical art."

While historians have characterized the creation of show windows as an attempt by storeowners and decorators to prey on the longings of innocent victims, the application of a theatrical lens to the art of window display offers an alternative narrative. Theatre inspired the design and contributed to the content and function of show windows.

¹ L. Frank Baum, "Novel Sponge Display," *The Show Window* 5, no. 1 (July 1899): 47. John Bull is a character symbolizing the national personification of England.

² Aurora, Ill. Beacon, "An Ingenious Window Show," *The Show Window* 5, no. 1 (July 1899): 47.

Early window display can be considered among a number of cultural phenomena that were symptomatic of a turn-of-the-century American mass culture centered on the justification of amusement for its own sake. By the late 1910s, growth in artistic sophistication led to increasingly realistic, narrative-driven windows, guiding display from a theatrical to a cinematic aesthetic and prompting the characterization of show windows as a progressive, educative force. During these years, window trimmers conceived of their field as a form of art, possessive of commercial qualities but not singularly defined by consumer manipulation. Focusing on theatricality, exploring a broader geographical and economic range of evidence, and understanding decorators' intentions as separate from corporate interests and storeowners' agendas reveal that while show windows played a role in audience deception, they were also intended to promote public delight.

In order to understand the social and cultural significance of the show window, one must first examine window display in the context of three systems: economic transformations in retailing, visual merchandising technologies, and artistic entertainments. On the individual scale, an exploration of L. Frank Baum's biography demonstrates the ways in which his approach to window display was infused with theatricality. Baum was not unique in drawing inspiration from the stage; other trimmers also linked show window form and content to performance aesthetics. Furthermore, a "democratized" view of window dressing challenges traditional interpretations of the show window's gender and class politics. Comparing displays from 1899 and 1917 illustrates show windows' engagement with the social and political transformations of their historical moments, justifying the artifact's inclusion in the realm of cultural analysis. Applying a theatrical lens to window display balances the profit motives of merchants with the creative visions of window trimmers and the variety of spontaneous "off-script" audience responses.

The Rise of Visual Merchandising

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the structure of retailing evolved from specialized local shops and markets, with customers engaging in one-on-one discussions and haggling sessions with merchants, to general stores with fixed prices. Profitable shopkeepers increased the range of goods they offered, spurring departmentalization. The success of department stores rested on their system of low prices and quick turnover, fueled by a vast assortment and quantity of merchandise.³ The late 1890s, however, ushered in a crisis of

³ Rudi Laermans, "Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of Modern Consumer Culture (1860-1914)" *Theory, Culture & Society* 10, no. 79 (1993), 85-86.

overproduction. Out of necessity, storeowners turned to new forms of visual merchandising in order to keep distribution flowing.⁴

Facilitated by innovations in artificial color, electric light, mechanical motion, and plate glass technologies, images replaced words in advertising, as exemplified by ad pictures, posters, billboards, and electric signs. The show window perfectly combined these developments. Once domestic factories began manufacturing cheaper, clearer, and stronger plate glass during the early twentieth century, American retailers were no longer forced to rely on expensive imports from France. Glass dominated the landscape of business streets; by 1915, Americans were consuming half of the global production of plate glass.⁵ Plate glass prevented buyers from physically interacting with goods, introducing a layer of theatricality as performance and spectatorship replaced the utilitarian exchange of commodities. L. Frank Baum described the progression of display techniques over the course of the nineteenth century, from hanging goods on hooks outside of shops, to scattering them on cluttered tables and counters, to finally staging merchandise in eye-catching show windows. By 1899, he believed that visual merchandising “grew to be an art—almost a fine art, indeed.”⁶

Newly invented vibrant colors captured the imaginations of commercial artists. Articles detailing “the scientific arrangement of colors” instructed window dressers to harmonize the colors of goods with display backgrounds and props, and to pay close attention to the interaction of color with different types of natural and artificial lighting.⁷ Window dressers utilized electricity to take advantage of innovations in light, and to create arresting spectacles of mechanical motion. Experienced display men like Charles T. Walker gave advice to “my brother trimmers... who are obliged to do their own electrical work, and wish to enhance their displays by modern lighting and mechanical effects.”⁸ Sharing knowledge through periodicals like *The Show Window* instructed trimmers how to install electric devices like the Vanishing Lady, rotating fans, revolving Christmas trees, and illuminated fountains in window displays, whether they were working for large urban department stores or small town establishments.⁹ New

⁴ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 16.

⁵ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 40, 61.

⁶ L. Frank Baum, “1800-1900,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 249-251.

⁷ William M. Couron, “The Scientific Arrangement of Colors, Part I,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 3 (September 1899): 113-117.

⁸ Charles T. Walker, “Special Window Wiring, Part I,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 163.

⁹ Charles W. Morton, “Mechanical Electric Devices,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 5 (November 1899): 219-221.

strategies for photographing show windows produced images that embellished the magazines' helpful insights. By preserving a trimmer's ephemeral creations for future appreciation, window photography also inspired the practice of awarding prizes based on a display's "merits, originality, capacity to sell goods, workmanship and artistic conception."¹⁰ Profitability, then, was only one factor that window trimmers considered when designing and crafting their work.

Historians locate the development and impact of visual merchandising in a variety of social contexts. William Leach characterizes the show window as one of many "strategies of enticement" used by businesses to cynically target people's imaginations in order to manipulate their unconscious desires.¹¹ Since manufacturers and retailers increased their reliance on advertising to compete amongst each other and to boost consumption, the show window has been portrayed as a mechanism for deceiving the so-called "unwary purchaser."¹² An examination of contemporaneous thought, however, reveals a different characterization of window displays. In 1908, journalist Samuel C. Robertson elevated the show window to "a tremendous educational feature... In modern window decoration there is a subtle artistry and technique in the work of the decorator which in itself is educative."¹³ As window displays grew in sophistication, proponents drew on the traditional nineteenth-century concept of the moral uplift of art to recast the purpose and effect of show windows. An appropriate categorization of early show windows besides profit-driven humbug or refined high art is the burgeoning turn-of-the-century cultural system of popular entertainment. Theatre, vaudeville, dance halls, circuses, amusement parks, and window displays all contributed to a mass culture characterized by audience participation, mechanical amusements, exotic settings, and a sense of wonder. This phenomenon reached an apotheosis in the Midway Plaisance of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.¹⁴ In order to understand the theatricality and mass appeal of the show window, one must first delve into the background and philosophy of an early and avid champion of window display and wonder (and an eager attendee of the World's Fair): L. Frank Baum.

L. Frank Baum: The Wonderful Wizard of Windows

¹⁰ L. Frank Baum, "Prize Medal Offer," *The Show Window* 5, no. 3 (September 1899): 143.

¹¹ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 37.

¹² Michael Pettit, *The Science of Deception: Psychology and Commerce in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 124.

¹³ Samuel C. Robertson, "Ingenious Tricks of the Decorators in Show Windows," *Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 1908.

¹⁴ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 6-8, 23.

In 1897, Baum started *The Show Window*, a trade journal for window trimmers, in order to provide practical advice for beginners, create a national network of display men (he founded the National Association of Window Trimmers in 1898), and advance the profession. Ironically, Baum was not a professional window trimmer; the magazine began as a personal financial endeavor to allow him to retire from the arduous life of a traveling salesman and “find some employment that would enable me to stay at home.”¹⁵ The expertise Baum brought to window trimming derived from his background in theatre and sales, and from his personal philosophy to “gain all the meat from the nut of life.” In his youth, Baum wrote, produced, performed in, and toured his own plays. By the late 1880s, Baum moved with his wife’s family to South Dakota, where he opened “Baum’s Bazaar,” a retail store filled with dazzling commodities including candy, bicycles, and ice cream.¹⁶ Economic crisis sent Baum looking for other employment, and he turned to Chicago, where he worked as a traveling china buyer for the Siegel, Cooper & Company department store. The World’s Columbian Exposition took place shortly after the Baums’ relocation, and the family’s frequent visits to the fair inspired L. Frank Baum’s unique combination of technology and imagination in his publication.¹⁷

Baum’s intermixing of spectacle, artistry, and the unapologetic quest for profit pervaded the pages of *The Show Window*. Culver describes Baum’s approach to window display as an attempt to “achieve the same effects of wizardry [of the World’s Fair] in the midst of everyday urban life.” The show window, “an eruption of theater into the centers of commercial activity,” had to both let “objects tell some legible story” and “[induce] trade.”¹⁸ At the same time that Baum celebrated the artistic side of display, he also expressed a Barnum-esque view of people’s gullibility. Cook credits P. T. Barnum with establishing the “nineteenth century arts of deception,” in which “illusionism and realism were always interconnected.” Barnum’s success depended on the fact that his audiences were “amused even when [they were] conscious of being deceived.”¹⁹ Baum drew on his predecessor’s legacy when he counseled that the best advertiser was “the shrewdest and boldest... most acute student of the foibles of human nature.” He

¹⁵ Katharine M. Rogers, *L. Frank Baum: Creator of Oz* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 56-57.

¹⁶ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 56-57.

¹⁷ Rogers, *L. Frank Baum*, 46-47.

¹⁸ Stuart Culver, “What Manikins Want: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows,” *Representations* no. 21 (Winter 1988), 106.

¹⁹ James C. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 19.

admitted to window displays' deceptive purposes, but asserted "the people... love to gamble, and prefer a glaring uncertainty to a homely and modest surety... There seems to be no way to protect the people from imposition, even supposing they desired to be protected."²⁰ For Baum, art and advertising coexisted in a mutually beneficial (if morally ambiguous) way, justified by store profits and customer enjoyment.

Baum's works of children's literature maintained this emphasis of wonder over morality. In the introduction to *The Wizard of Oz*—published in 1900, the same year as Baum's window dressing manual *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows*—Baum asserted: "Modern education includes morality; therefore the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder-tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incident... the story of 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz' was written solely to pleasure the children of today."²¹ Following the Enlightenment, wonder was disdained as unscientific childishness and the antithesis of modernity.²² The late nineteenth century, however, witnessed a renewed celebration of childlike traits as "a growing number of 'overcivilized' Americans idealized the child's capacity for unrepressed emotional and imaginative experience."²³ Show window aesthetics and appreciation for humbuggery infused the Oz books as well. In the fourth novel of the series, *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (1908), Dorothy and her friends found themselves in an underground glass city. Baum combined the new visual merchandising technologies of color, light, and glass into one fantasy setting: "The rainbow tints from the colored suns fell upon the glass city softly and gave to the buildings many delicate, shifting hues which were very pretty to see." In fact, the houses "were all made of glass, so clear and transparent that one could look through the walls as easily as through a window." He also directly alluded to P. T. Barnum when the Wizard revealed: "I belong to Bailum & Barney's Great Consolidated Shows—three rings in one tent and a menagerie on the side."²⁴ Baum's wonder-infused fiction and spectacular window displays highlighted shifting attitudes toward modernity and a developing mass culture based on amusement for its own sake.

"Object Theatres"

²⁰ L. Frank Baum, "1800-1900," *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 251.

²¹ L. Frank Baum in Michael Patrick Hearn, *The Annotated Wizard of Oz: Centennial Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 4.

²² Pettit, *The Science of Deception*, 12.

²³ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 146.

²⁴ L. Frank Baum, *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1908), 31, 48.

In 1899, window display was still a nascent field. The majority of professional window trimmers came from modest backgrounds as clerks and craftsmen, and most worked in small towns.²⁵ *The Show Window* featured displays from stores of varying sizes in many regions of the country, as part of Baum's grassroots endeavor to foster community amongst window trimmers who felt their profession and skills were undervalued. Imaginative visual stimuli were evident in show windows from the start, even in the small town displays by inexperienced trimmers. Goods arranged in intricate, abstract patterns characterized early window display, transforming "merchandise into a permanent spectacle, into a show-like theatre of commodities."²⁶

Baum was not the only window trimmer who possessed a theatrical background. While trimmers most commonly listed "clerks, floor walkers, and unsuccessful merchants" as their former occupations, according to Baum's research for *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows*, 6% of display men were previously "theatrical men," 5% were "artists," and 4% were "sign and scenic painters."²⁷ Even nontheatrical display men learned to employ distinctly theatrical methods, as exemplified by the nationally renowned show windows designed by Arthur Fraser of Marshall Field's in Chicago. Fraser began his career as a dry goods clerk in Iowa. Harry Selfridge hired him as a display man for Field's in 1895, and by 1916 Fraser directed an artistic staff of fifty men and women. He drew inspiration from New York theatre, which "was going through a reform in scenic design."²⁸ During the 1910s, Fraser de-cluttered display style, and introduced lifelike full-body mannequins and elaborate backgrounds.²⁹

Scenic backgrounds demonstrated a direct link between window dressing and the theatre. Chicago's Sosman & Landis Scene Painting Studio, which "fitted up more theaters than any other one concern in America,"³⁰ moved to crafting backgrounds for show windows. They advertised "painted scenes for Window Displays, with moving mechanical and electrical effects."³¹ In December

²⁵ L. Frank Baum, "Some Statistics," *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 193-197.

²⁶ Laermans, "Learning to Consume," 92.

²⁷ L. Frank Baum, "Some Statistics," *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 193-197.

²⁸ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 69.

²⁹ Gayle Strege, "Influences of Two Midwestern American Department Stores on Retailing Practices, 1883-1941," in *Business and Economic History On-Line* vol. 7 (2009): 4-5.

³⁰ L. Frank Baum, "A Wonderful Window Attraction," *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 281.

³¹ Sosman & Landis, "Painted Scenes for Windows," Advertisement, *The Show Window* 5, no. 5 (November 1899)

1899, their “wonderful window attraction” featured layers of colored backgrounds creating the illusion of a forest in one-point perspective, and utilized similar electric lighting to the effects that had captured audiences’ imaginations at the World’s Fair. The display’s centerpiece was “three electric fountains play[ing] here constantly... changing in color constantly, giv[ing] a most remarkable kaleidoscopic effect to the sparkling waters.”³² This display marked a turning point in the sophistication and theatricality of window backgrounds.

Full-body mannequins functioned as actors in window displays, and their use became increasingly character and narrative-driven. Charles W. Morton’s “The Wedding Party,” a window display designed for Weinstock, Lubin & Company in Sacramento that was subsequently exhibited at the California State Fair, not only “represented the interior of a gothic church, with stained glass windows, pews and furnishings complete,” but also depicted the characters of “the clergyman, choir boys, bride and groom and the wedding party, represented by twenty-three life-sized wax figures.”³³ In the 1917 issues of *Merchants Record and Show Window* (the periodical that combined several trade journals, including *The Show Window*), Feldman’s Humanized Wax Figures advertised their mannequins, complete with painted-on faces and realistic wigs made of human hair, as possessing “the features and expression of living people.”³⁴ These wax actors played the dual function of indicating plots and characters in silent scenes while providing viewers with an attractive, imitable example of how to use the displayed goods.

Human performers joined in the show as well. Retailers hired both male and female window gazers to stroll casually down the street along the store windows: “Then he stops and gazes with an appearance of deepest interest. In five minutes a crowd is gazing with him.” The actors were costumed in “the ensemble of a man of leisure and wealth out for a stroll” to add to the store’s reputation.³⁵ Although staring into windows was considered indiscreet during the mid-nineteenth century, professional window gazers introduced a theatrical relationship between show windows and viewers by breaking the fourth wall and encouraging audience participation.³⁶

³² L. Frank Baum, “A Wonderful Window Attraction,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 281.

³³ L. Frank Baum, “Dry Goods Displays,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 159.

³⁴ Feldman’s Humanized Wax Figures, “Compare Feldman’s Humanized Wax Figures with the Ordinary,” Advertisement, *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 2 (August 1917): 5.

³⁵ L. Frank Baum, “Window Gazers Earn Money,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 2 (August 1899): 107.

³⁶ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 61.

Narrative became a frequently used context for displaying commodities. Many window designers employed an “associational” approach, emphasizing color schemes, luxury, escape, adventure, and leisure to disguise the retailer’s commercial purpose.³⁷ Addressing the 1917 Convention of the International Association of Displaymen, L. F. Dittmar counseled: “a window should tell its story – simply and in terms that all can understand.”³⁸ Gimbel’s in New York opened their fall 1917 season with displays based on the light opera *Chin Chin Chow*, which was set to tour at the Manhattan Opera House.³⁹ Though window scenes became progressively plot and character-driven over the course of the early twentieth century, some early displays involved narrative as well. The November 1899 issue of *The Show Window*’s wealth of Christmas displays presented several story-infused works, including a window by Ora Rinehart from Sioux City, Iowa, titled “The Waif’s Dream”: “The center of the window is arranged after a style of the setting of a stage; the scene is a reminder of a fairyland in extravaganza.” The description recounted a little girl musician journeying through the streets, falling asleep, and dreaming of her ideal Christmas.⁴⁰ Narrative was not only conducive as inspiration for window decorating; display was also utilized to sell narrative. Bernstein shows how children’s literature has been interwoven with material culture more than any other genre, asserting “the pairing, through play, of children’s literature and toys has persisted for three centuries.”⁴¹ Show windows often featured children’s books, toys, or both. Baum praised “two clever displays of the new holiday book ‘Father Goose.’” He claimed that the book was showcased because it “lends itself specially to display, because of its bright colored pages,” humbly forgetting to acknowledge that *Father Goose* was written by himself.⁴²

The concept of material culture “scripting” consumers’ behaviors proves conducive to a theatrical view of window display. Bernstein identifies an object’s “script” as “a set of invitations or prompts that by definition remain open to resistance and revision.”⁴³ With show windows, merchants functioned as producers and artistic directors,

³⁷ Ibid, 66.

³⁸ “Convention of the I. A. D. M.: Wednesday Morning Session,” *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 3 (September 1917): 42.

³⁹ F.F. Purdy, “Promenade de Toilettes,” *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 4 (October 1917): 18-19.

⁴⁰ L. Frank Baum, “Plate No. 693,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 5 (November 1899): 211.

⁴¹ Robin Bernstein, “Children’s Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; Or, The Possibility of Children’s Literature,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 126 (2011), 162.

⁴² L. Frank Baum, “Book Displays,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 279-281.

⁴³ Bernstein, “Children’s Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race,” 165.

comprising the financial side of the production process and seeking to use performance to convey a message and elicit specific responses from their audiences. The window trimmers executed the combined creative work of directors, playwrights, choreographers, and set designers. Yet, once the performance was prepared and the curtain pulled back, storeowners' commercial purposes and window trimmers' artistic visions yielded their power to the audience. As with all live performances, dynamic interactions between audiences and show windows morphed based on impulse, interpretation, improvisation, and accident. Audiences connect to and shape the culture they engage with; with plays, literature, or material culture, "agency and intention emerge through everyday engagement with the stuff of our lives."⁴⁴

Show window display, "where every window is a stage," revealed how storytelling and advertising combined to create captivating spectacles.⁴⁵ Show windows around the turn of the century offered yet another opportunity for mass audiences to enjoy entertainment that combined commercial and artistic aspects. The impact of show windows on passers-by contained elements of both a performance-spectator relationship and a profit-driven "look-what-happens-when-you-use-it technique" to convert viewers to buyers.⁴⁶ To understand these contradictory nuances, one must analyze how interactions with window display varied based on gender and class.

Lady Trimmers and Men's Furnishings: A Broader View of Gendered Display

Department stores provided one of the only societally condoned spaces for women to venture outside the home, a phenomenon that Laermans dubs "the public emancipation of women." Shopping as a leisure activity and as a familial economic function was "feminized," inspiring storeowners to plan advertising strategies based on female stereotypes. Retailers drew on contradictory images of women as thrifty housewives and as impulsive buyers who easily succumbed to their hearts' desires.⁴⁷ The trope of women as irrational victims of temptation was ubiquitous enough at the time to appear in fiction. In *Sister Carrie* (1900), Theodore Dreiser described Carrie's encounter with the Fair department store in Chicago: "She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally."⁴⁸ Leach claims that

⁴⁴ Ibid, 165.

⁴⁵ James David Buckley, *The Drama of Display: Visual Merchandising and Its Techniques* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1953), 11.

⁴⁶ Buckley, *The Drama of Display*, 72.

⁴⁷ Laermans, "Learning to Consume," 88, 96.

⁴⁸ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900, reprint New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005), 22.

window trimmers adapted their associational style based on gender, displaying men's wear in a "low-keyed, unassuming" manner, and depicting women's clothes in scenes of exotic luxury modeled on full-bodied mannequins.⁴⁹ This interpretation, however, oversimplifies the interaction of show windows with gender. Historiographical suspicion of consumer culture based on gendered perceptions of male-driven production as "authentic" and shopping as "the pastime of the rich and of misguided women" can warp scholars' perception of the social significance of material culture, and lead them to undervalue the show windows as a legitimate form of art.⁵⁰

In fact, male mannequins appeared throughout display photographs in *The Show Window*. W.F. Jones' "Clothing" display from Cleveland, Ohio featured seven mannequins depicting men and boys of various ages: "At the extreme left is the figure of a young man; next is shown a man in uniform; then a justice sitting on his bench; a man of middle age; finally, at the right, a man bent by weight of years. Two or three boy's forms are placed a little in front of these." The "prominent idea" expressed by the display was "the fact that clothing is sold for men of all ages and classes."⁵¹ The educational programming of the 1917 Annual Convention of the International Association of Display Men included five different presentations that specifically discussed techniques for displaying and selling men's wear.⁵² This evidenced that women were not the only targets of visual merchandising. A close reading of *Show Window* articles reveals that window trimmers did not harness absolute control over passers-by through display. E.W. Softley counseled display men to "be sincere and try to please."⁵³ William M. Conran assessed that "it is generally found that ladies know the colors most suitable to their complexion... It is usually poor policy for the salesman to try to get them to take 'something else'..."⁵⁴ "Keep your word," Baum advised, "have the articles new and stylish and marked in plain figures, so the ladies will know at once whether they want them at

⁴⁹ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 66-67.

⁵⁰ Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 102.

⁵¹ L. Frank Baum, "Department of Clothing and Men's Wear," *The Show Window* 5, no. 2 (August 1899): 128-129. This display's concept alluded to Shakespeare's "All the World's a Stage, or the Seven Ages of Man" speech from *As You Like It* – yet another theatrical reference.

⁵² James W. Foley, "Educational Program," *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 1 (July 1917): 52-56.

⁵³ E.W. Softley, "How to be a Successful Window Trimmer," *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 259.

⁵⁴ William M. Conran, "The Scientific Arrangement of Colors, Part 2," *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 177.

the price.”⁵⁵ Even when show windows were aimed at women, it was up to “the ladies” to assess the displays and decide whether the goods and prices were amenable.

Additionally, the notion that display men “were all men at this time” proves unfounded.⁵⁶ In 1899, Baum identified “about eighty women, mostly in small towns, who trim windows, and many of them are very expert.”⁵⁷ Miss Pearl Cummins, who worked for the Teague Store in Gainesville, Texas, was considered “one of the foremost lady decorators in the country” in 1917.⁵⁸ By focusing only on large department stores in cities, scholars risk losing sight of female trimmers’ contributions.

Show Windows and Democratization

For the growing urban middle class, department stores promoted a culture surrounding the purchase of commodities. Middle-class patrons distinguished themselves from the working class through buying relatively inexpensive goods that symbolized elevated social status. Laermans accuses department stores of promoting a “false democratization of luxury,” because theatrical displays upgraded cheap, mass-produced goods.⁵⁹ Leach asserts that the technology of plate glass deepened class divisions in upscale shopping districts. In contrast to the open-air stalls where immigrants and members of the working class typically shopped, elite department store merchants denied physical interaction between customers and their inventories. According to Leach, this “mingling of refusal and desire” added “another level of cruelty,” and “glass democratized desire even as it dedemocratized access to goods.”⁶⁰ Portraying window dressing as a technique utilized only by the most high-end retailers in order to tempt patrons to spend beyond their means, however, overlooks the variety of show window interactions experienced by viewers of different classes and/or in different regions of the country.

Not all stores with show windows were particularly large or situated in bustling urban centers, and as written by E. W. Softly,

⁵⁵ L. Frank Baum, “Our Friend, the Merchant,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 5 (November 1899): 229.

⁵⁶ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 67.

⁵⁷ L. Frank Baum, “Some Statistics,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 197.

⁵⁸ James W. Foley, “Plate No. 4381,” *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 3 (September 1917): 25.

⁵⁹ Laermans, “Learning to Consume,” 97.

⁶⁰ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 63.

"Window trimming in a large city is not what it is cracked up to be."⁶¹ According to Baum, in 1899, department stores made up only one in 430 retail establishments in the country.⁶² The National Cash Register Company assured small-town merchants that the show window "is as profitable, in proportion, to the smallest store in a country village as it is to the great emporium on Broadway."⁶³ The national network of window trimmers did not disparage the quality of displays beyond State Street and Fifth Avenue. Charles T. Walker, "one of the ablest of our latter day trimmers," even left the E. F. Silha store in Chicago to accept a position with Frankel Brothers in Des Moines, Iowa.⁶⁴ Baum particularly celebrated small town displays, a fondness that perhaps stemmed from his time running Baum's Bazaar in South Dakota. He believed that small towns "will become the schools" for self-taught window decorators.⁶⁵ He lauded the growth of the American general store and the rising number and status of merchants during the early to mid-nineteenth century as "a wonderful exhibit of the possibilities of a democratic country. We were called a nation of merchants." Baum then shifted to a condemnation of "the wealthy corporation," which he blamed for putting individual retailers out of work. He warned, "It will not take another century to place our entire commerce in the control of the very few. Then the 'merchant class' will become a 'millionaire class.'"⁶⁶ Far from celebrating the corporatization of merchandising, Baum denounced its adverse effects on small businesses.

Even in urban department stores, enjoying show windows was not reserved for upper and middle-class patrons. Displays in *The Show Window* featured different categories of items, ranging from luxury goods to mundane necessities, and stores of varying tiers, as shown by an "artistic tool display" from the Fair in Chicago.⁶⁷ The Fair marketed itself as a discount store, catering to the middle and working classes and to first and second-generation immigrants by offering a less expensive alternative to upscale department stores.⁶⁸ In September 1917, T. Guy

⁶¹ E.W. Softley, "How to be a Successful Window Trimmer," *The Show Window* 5, no. 5 (December 1899): 259.

⁶² L. Frank Baum, "Some Statistics," *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 193.

⁶³ National Cash Register Company, "About Show Windows" *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 189.

⁶⁴ L. Frank Baum, "Mr. Charles T. Walker," *The Show Window* 5, no. 5 (November 1899): 235.

⁶⁵ L. Frank Baum, "Some Statistics," *The Show Window* 5, no. 4 (October 1899): 195.

⁶⁶ L. Frank Baum, "1800-1900," *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 251.

⁶⁷ L. Frank Baum, "Tools," *The Show Window* 5, no. 1 (July 1899): 49-50.

⁶⁸ Scott A. Newman, "Jazz Age Chicago –The Fair," in Scott A. Newman, *Jazz Age Chicago*, <http://chicago.urban-history.org>.

Duey, acclaimed window dresser and professional draper, discussed the educational and artistic worth of show windows for “the masses of all walks of life.” Duey appropriated concurrent ideas about progressive education in his claim that “the great number of progressive business establishments... offer an unlimited supply of education to the public in the way of fashions, fabrics, novelties, decorations, et cetera, which are the results of the efforts of many of the world’s artists, designers and geniuses... There is art in the displaying of merchandise as well as in one of the great masterpieces of Rembrandt.”⁶⁹ Not only were window displays employed by retailers and enjoyed by spectators from many economic levels; show windows were viewed as a form of democratized art that were thought to contribute to the moral and social uplift of working-class urban dwellers.

Business Windows or Art Windows?

In practicing commercial art, window trimmers needed to appropriate and engage with contemporaneous cultural values in order to appeal to a wide audience of potential buyers. Quick and artistic window trimmers were deemed assets to their employers, considered equal in economic value to three salesmen.⁷⁰ Baum chastised merchants who demanded plainer windows in order to save time, effort, and money: “A ‘business window’ that has no attractive quality is not really a business window. It is a fool window... You *must* have an attraction that induces the pedestrian to stop and look, or your window is a flat failure. That is why beautiful, artistic and mechanical displays are to be encouraged... These are the real ‘business windows’.”⁷¹ Yet, the promotion of artistry in window display was not entirely cynical. Many retailers and display men viewed the relationship between their displays and consumers as reciprocal, not parasitical. In 1897, the merchant Robert Ogden of Wanamaker’s New York store employed such rhetoric when he declared his “mission to bring ‘beauty’ to ordinary people”: “humanity benefits by the art that is expended upon advertising, and the benefits include the artist himself and the audience to which he appeals... art belongs to commerce, it must be connected with ‘practical things.’”⁷² Even this profit-driven storeowner, for whom commercial purposes dominated notions of “art for art’s sake,” appreciated the potential of show windows as a form of everyday art.

⁶⁹ T. Guy Duey, “The Value of High Class Draping,” *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 3 (September 1917): 26.

⁷⁰ E.W. Softley, “How to be a Successful Window Trimmer,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 6 (December 1899): 257.

⁷¹ L. Frank Baum, “Business Windows,” *The Show Window* 5, no. 2 (August 1899): 139-141.

⁷² Leach, *Land of Desire*, 52

The style and purpose of show windows did not remain static. While the windows of 1899 represented the rise of a mass culture based on commercial art and popular entertainment, the window trimmers of 1917 engaged with the cultural and political transformations of their historical moment by casting their work in a more sophisticated light. *Merchants Record and Show Window* presented show windows as possessing edifying, aesthetic, and patriotic qualities. WWI prompted an increase in propagandistic displays urging viewers to enlist in the military, buy Liberty Loans, and contribute in other ways to the war effort, such as by donating to the Red Cross.⁷³ Assuming the title of 'progressive' social and political reform movements, display men celebrated "progressive retail stores" as "an educative force, suggesting new ideas, creating new demands, influencing the people to a higher standard of living..." In 1917, it was the job of the window trimmer "to work harder and keep the business wheels humming so as to create the usual amount of enthusiasm among the populace." Through designing uplifting displays, the window trimmer was "doing a bit for Uncle Sam."⁷⁴ The artistic quality of one's show windows aided the country by keeping the economy moving, promoting values of patriotism and self-sacrifice, and boosting the morale of passers-by in a time of global crisis.

Show windows' increasingly noble purpose grew alongside their artistic sophistication. The "consciousness of the eye" that the visual merchandising system helped to create contained an internal momentum.⁷⁵ More merchants hired professional display men instead of relying on their own abilities, and standards for professional-level display work increased. In comparison to the earlier cluttered windows, which could just as likely be filled with hardware, medicines, or groceries as with elegant millinery, fabrics, or crockery, displays were now housed in settings with hyper-realistic backgrounds, cut outs, wax figures, detail work, and natural products. George A. Smith's sporting display for the United States Rubber Company featured a twenty-five-foot-long scenic drop painted to look like the Maine woods. It was decorated with a functioning motorcycle, natural sheet moss, ferns and flowers, bacon frying in a pan, coffee boiling in a pail on an electric plate, and a wax mannequin dressed as a fisherman eating a bacon sandwich and drinking a cup of coffee. Smith also created a garden scene in response to President Wilson's proclamation, "Every one who creates or cultivates a garden helps to solve the problem of the feeding of the nations." The display garden had to be watered every other day and weeded every week for four weeks, during which time its

⁷³ James W. Foley, "Patriotic Work by Display Men," *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 1 (July 1917): 38.

⁷⁴ T. Guy Duey, "The Value of High Class Draping," *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 1 (July 1917): 36.

⁷⁵ Laermans, "Learning to Consume," 99.

tomato plants grew to be over eighteen inches tall. This display proved especially interesting to viewers, who passed by repeatedly in order to see “the plants grow from day to day.”⁷⁶ Smith’s garden scene provides a striking example of how passers-by resisted merchants’ commercial goals by engaging with the show window out of a curiosity born solely from the display’s visual attraction rather than a magnetic desire to purchase the advertised goods.

Conclusion

By the 1910s, show windows transcended theatricality; they were likened to the “picture play feature of [a] store,”⁷⁷ demonstrating that they attained a nearly cinematic quality. This begs the question: Was real bacon and boiling coffee necessary to convince potential customers to buy rubber boots and tires? In 1899, was a human made out of sponges an expression of the Economical Drug Company’s machinations to capture the weak hearts of women and force them to purchase beyond their means? The narrative of visual merchandising as a calculated ploy to instigate mass desire—especially among women— and reap the ensuing profits seems insufficient to understand why window trimmers crafted such elaborate, theatrical displays. Rather than evidencing a culture characterized by the acceptance and promotion of greed, show windows revealed that early consumer culture was interwoven with artistry and amusement, functioning as a form of popular entertainment as much as a form of advertising. The objective of merchants to use show windows to sell goods did not override trimmers’ creative visions, or dictate viewers’ varied off-script responses. The diverse regions, classes, and genders of window trimmers and their audiences bolster a more expansive view of display work. The show window’s engagement with political and social transformations locates it in the realm of culture rather than pure commerce. Considering the show window’s aesthetic and theatrical nature allows it to be treated not merely as a tool of capitalist tricksters, but as a historically readable spectacle of everyday art.

⁷⁶ George A. Smith, “Fitting Setting to the Merchandise,” *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 1 (July 1917): 13-17.

⁷⁷ J. C. Bodine, “Start Something,” *Merchants Record and Show Window* 41, no. 2 (August 1917): 27.

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