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THE FABRIC OF MANHATTAN

ART AND INDUSTRY IN THE ERA OF
A.T. STEWART

by
Patricia Wadsley

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2017
The Fabric of Manhattan
Art and Industry in the Era of A. T. Stewart

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

The Fabric of Manhattan
Art and Industry in the Era of A. T. Stewart

by

Patricia Wadsley

Advisor: Katherine Manthorne

Soft spoken, short of stature, his sleepy blue eyes gazing wistfully upon the world around him, the Irish émigré A. T. Stewart hardly looked like a titan of business. But by 1863, he’d built two architecturally significant department stores, he was one of the leading importers, manufacturers, retailers and wholesalers in this country, and he had begun to collect significant works of art, which today have pride of place in art museums around the world.

Like many wealthy nineteenth century New Yorkers, Stewart amassed his wealth through commerce. However, Stewart was not just a merchant. As a leader in apparel and home furnishings, Stewart made business and personal decisions which had a direct influence on the way New Yorkers and those across the country looked and furnished their homes, not only reflecting America’s taste but also shaping it. He was instrumental in shaping New York’s built environment, in establishing one of the first great hetero-social workforces and a national mail order service. He harnessed the media, developing and promoting one of American fashion’s first “brand” names and fostered a frenzy in carpet buying, that relied heavily on European imports, yet became distinctly American. Stewart’s achievements benefitted by both artistic
traditions and industrialization, as well as overseas connections, and a canny sense of what Americans wanted and how to get it to them.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to show the impact of Stewart on American material and visual culture in the context of immense cultural change and growth across the nation, and to credit Alexander Turney Stewart as one of the most prominent forces in what can only be termed an early nineteenth-century consumer revolution in the United States.
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The Fabric of Manhattan:
Art, and Industry in the Era of A. T. Stewart

Introduction

When A. T. Stewart opened the doors to his grand new clothing, textile and drapery emporium on Chambers Street and Broadway on the morning of September 22, 1846, New Yorkers had never seen anything like it. Five tall stories, covered entirely in shining white marble, supported by Corinthian columns all around, Stewart’s “Marble Palace,” as the store would soon become known, put to shame any of the dry goods stores in the neighborhood and eclipsed its most impressive neighbor, New York’s City Hall. The façade of Stewart’s new building swept over ninety feet on Broadway and 125 feet on Reade Street, with 11 foot tall plate glass windows spanning the entire building. Stewart’s Marble Palace dominated the landscape.¹

Writing in *Harpers Weekly* upon its opening, editor George Curtis mused that once our city was insignificant compared to London and Paris, but that was no longer the case:

“There is no finer street effect than the view of Stewart’s buildings seen on a clear, blue brilliant day from a point as low in Broadway as the sidewalk in front of Trinity Church. It rises out of the foliage of the (City Hall) Park, a white marble cliff, sharply drawn against the sky.”²

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With the Marble Palace, Stewart created an imprint on New York City and the nation as a whole. A few years later he followed this structure with his next department store, dubbed an “Iron Palace.” Taking up the full block on 9th and 10th streets and Broadway this building ushered in Ladies’ Mile. His private marble mansion on 34th Street, finished in 1872, surpassed those of any of the other millionaires of the day, including the Vanderbilt’s and Astor’s, who were still living in brownstones. Within Stewart’s home was one of the first purpose-built private art galleries, an accommodation which set the tone for millionaires’ mansions to come. He filled his gallery and his entire home with works of art which today have pride of place in museums worldwide.

Like many of the New Yorkers who were amassing fortunes at this time, Stewart built his fortune on commerce. However, Stewart was not just a merchant. As a leading retailer, wholesaler and manufacturer of clothing and furnishings, Stewart made business and personal decisions which had a direct influence on the way New Yorkers and those across the country looked and furnished their homes. He did not just reflect the taste of his customers, he also shaped it. By the 1850s, he paid the highest customs duties in the nation. By the 1870s, it was estimated that Stewart’s imports from Europe made of 10% of all the imports coming in to the Port of New York. He had agents located all over the world and textile manufactories in the United States and in cities abroad. His department store was known throughout the world, and his name was synonymous with shopping.

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Stewart’s achievements in the area of visual culture have long been neglected. He is often reduced to a footnote in scholarly texts on architecture, the rise of department stores, or of private art collections in the United States. An in-depth study of Stewart by historian Stephen Elias was written over twenty-five years ago. Two lengthy articles about Stewart’s business by Harry Resseguie date back to the 1960s. Moreover, these authors write about Stewart’s achievements predominantly in business terms, rather than in those of cultural production. More recently, architectural historians, such as Jay Cantor and Deborah Gardner have focused on Stewart’s contributions to the landscape of the city. But no twenty or twenty-first century historian has embraced Stewart’s cultural output as a whole, acknowledging its impact and analyzing the variety of factors and inspirations which led to Stewart’s dominance in mid-nineteenth-century visual, material and consumer culture.

Much of the reason for this neglect lies with Stewart himself. At his death in 1876, Stewart left one million dollars to his friend and executor, Henry Hilton, $25,000 to his most loyal employees, and the bulk of the rest of his fortune to his wife Cornelia. At the time, his worth was estimated to be 40 million dollars and he was the seventh richest man in America. With his million, Hilton promptly bought the “A.T. Stewart” name and business from Mrs. Stewart, destroyed Stewart’s business and personal records and through a series of misjudgments ran the “A. T. Stewart” business into the ground. After Cornelia’s death in 1886, Hilton additionally auctioned off Stewart’s entire art collection. Many of the footprints which may have allowed historians to trace Stewart’s life have been muddied.8

Still, along with these impediments, there is ample evidence of Stewart’s influence, much of it unexplored. There is extant merchandise Stewart sold to people across the country. Private archives of his contemporaries provide information, and so does the list of books Stewart read and kept in his private library, books which lend clues to the merchant’s interests and aspirations. Also, voluminous press reports, news items, and advertisements of the time add to the body of knowledge in a vibrant way.

Of course, all press reports, used too often by historians as fact, must be scrupulously reexamined with a skeptical eye, including the copious advertising, “news items” and long

features about Stewart, his stores and products. The practice of “puffery” was well in force during this time period. Many of the “news” reports are fawning, perhaps written to curry Stewart’s favor. Upon his death, stories about Stewart were hagiographies. Still, one cannot overlook the sheer number of all of these reports, items, reviews and advertisements—as well as their content. Any sort of “advertising” sheds light on consumer desires and desires, the kinds of products which were popular, in constant circulation—and distributed and popularized by Stewart. Also, by contrasting the amount of coverage of “A. T. Stewart,” his person and his products, with that of other merchants, one can strongly assert Stewart’s prevailing influence on nineteenth century consumer culture. This paper benefits from the scholarship of those who have chosen to write about Stewart, and further uses a combination of many other underexplored sources to resurrect Stewart in some small way, and give him the credit he is due as a producer, innovator, builder, manufacturer, promoter, purchaser and dealer whose buildings, merchandise, even his collection of art, altered the visual and material culture of this country in a significant way.
Old World to New

When Alexander Turney Stewart arrived in New York from Lisburn, Ireland in 1818, not even 15 years old, he arrived in a city almost as young as he was. Farms dotted the city landscape. Streets had not been carved above 14th Street. In lieu of any real sanitation, pigs roamed the streets picking up residents’ garbage. Stewart, or A.T. as he preferred to be called, had been born in Lisburn on October 12, 1803, to Margaret Turney and Alexander Stewart, a young farmer. A few months after the wedding, Alexander, the elder died, leaving a pregnant Margaret behind. Margaret remarried, but when her son was only a year old, she sailed off for America, leaving Alexander in the hands of his grandfather.

According to Stephen Elias, as soon as A.T. learned to write he was sending letters off to his mother. One can only speculate on how these early events shaped him, but certainly his years in northern Ireland were formative. Many northern Irishmen, including members of Stewart’s family, were landowners and identified themselves as British. Stewart was also educated, finishing out several years at Belfast Academical Institution. In 1818, he persuaded his guardian to allow him to travel to the United States to see his mother and to strike out on his own. He found her, now the owner of a second hand furniture store near Chatham Square, and moved in with the mother he never knew as well as a half-sister and an older brother.

He arrived with enough knowledge to become a tutor, and through his mother’s connections, was hired by Isaac N. Bragg’s Academy on Roosevelt Street, a school of some renown. Almost immediately, he joined Bragg’s Philo-Literary Society, made up of other teachers and residents in the Chatham Square area, debating such topics as, “Ought

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9 Ressegue, Elias and others report that Stewart’s birthdate was October 12, 1803, using the date of birth which was on Stewart’s casket. However, Stewart’s first employer in America, Isaac Bragg estimated Stewart’s age at the time of his employment in 1818 as between 14 and 16. “A.T. Stewart’s Early Life,” New York Times, May 23, 1886, 6.
10 Elias, 3.
Capitol Punishment Be Abolished.” Stewart, it was recorded in the New York Times after his death, won that debate, arguing that capitol punishment be maintained.13 At that point, Stewart was earning $300 a year, and was also drawing interest from the estate of his grandfather which had been turned into cash. Despite earning a comfortable living at that time, he had a falling out with Bragg, and looked for other opportunities. Stewart was quickly lured to New York’s burgeoning textile trade. Passengers’ lists record A. T. Stewart going back to Ireland in 1823, most likely to pick up the full inheritance left to him in his grandfather’s will in order to invest in textiles.14 Reports differ on whether he was able to claim it. He had, however, saved up enough money from his work as a tutor to make his first investment. Ireland was noted for its fine fabrics, and Stewart plunged his savings into lace, embroideries and other embellishments which were capturing the fancy of Americans at that time. That same year he started business in a shop in a tiny wooden building on Broadway two streets north of City Hall and joined St. Mark’s Church on the Bowery, where he met his future wife, Cornelia Clinch, the daughter of a prosperous ship chandler. Cornelia’s brother was one of the first acting collectors of the Port of New York, a position which could have greatly helped A.T. in his future endeavors.15 Stewart and his young wife moved into the back of his store at 283 Broadway, and started a brisk business. Within ten years his business moved to 262 Broadway, considered the less desirable side, to a space which was twice as large. Finally, in 1830, he moved again, to 257 Broadway 30 feet deep feet wide, and 50 foot deep where he stayed nearly 17 years. William Astor had built the building and in 1837, Tiffany and Young, the jewelers moved in next door. Stewart continued his buying trips to Europe, and filled the store with the latest imports from England, Ireland and France. Receipts from 1838 show evidence of Stewart selling silks, much in demand by prosperous New Yorkers, and already being sold to out-of-towners.16

13 Ibid.
14 Elias, 3
15 Anonymous, “The Death of Mrs. A. T. Stewart,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, November 6, 1886, 188. At the time, it was said that Stewart had married “above his station.”
16 Elias, 33, for buying trips; A.T. Stewart, Alex T. Stewart & Co. receipt: New York, 1838, United States Historical Records and documents, 1681-1911, MSS92/573, 25, Bancroft Library, University of Berkeley. (Berkeley, Ca.)
By the early forties, his reputation and bank account had swelled. But his career as a great merchant, known the world over, began with the Marble Palace--conceived as a grand showplace.
The World’s First Department Store

The Marble Palace was a radical departure from anything in the city at that time. Dry goods shops, as Stewart’s early stores had been, had always operated from small darkly lit wooden structures on Broadway and Pearl Street, oblong spaces rarely more than 25 feet wide and 50 feet deep. In 1846, the Marble Palace took up nearly a full block of Broadway between Chambers Street and Reade Street and its immensity as well as its design was astonishing. On the first floor, tall plate glass windows imported from France spanned the facade, separated by marble Corinthian columns. The floors above were nine bays wide and featured pedimented Italianate windows all round. The front entrances on Broadway, six in all, were on the widest stretch of a newly paved sidewalk, on a breadth of Broadway which allowed plenty of room for carriages to comfortably pull up and let passengers alight.17

While the exterior astonished, customers and commentators were equally impressed by its lavish interior. There were towering columns with ornamental capitals designed by leading sculptor Ottaviano Gori, each “depicting a cornucopia intertwined with the caduceus of Mercury, the god of Commerce.” At the bottoms of these columns lay a “material cornucopia,” made up of lavish displays of goods from all over the world: silks, laces, paisley shawls, leather goods, materials for sewing, a range of textiles and dry goods, for clothing and for furnishing the home.18 One account in the Commercial Advertiser further describes the sights inside:

The first floor is devoted to the retailing department entirely: the pillars which support it are surmounted by capitals, designed to represent commerce and plenty. The ceiling is painted by Signor Brigaldi, with an elaborateness of finish which almost defies detection. There are two sets of counters and shelves, of curled maple, highly polished. At the end of the floor nearest to Chambers Street, a flight of stairs with heavy polished balustrade leads to the second story. The rotunda, in

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the rear, is of an oblong shape, extending the whole width of the building, and lighted by a dome seventy feet in circumference. The side walls and ceilings are painted—each panel and space representing some emblem of commerce. A double flight of stairs leads to a beautiful gallery around the rotunda, supported by a bronze railing...some magnificent mirrors on the road from Paris 158 inches high and 56 inches in width, being the largest every imported. The floor is lighted by magnificent chandeliers manufactured expressly for this building by the Messrs. Cornelius of Philadelphia, and they are made to correspond with the rest of the ornaments and with the architecture.¹⁹

The large plate glass windows and the large dome, eighty feet from the floor of the ground floor, allowed light to flood the interior, forming a majestic setting, a vision which would inspire comparisons to church interiors. Light poured in from the street through the glass windows and dome, and as night fell, was supplemented by gas lighting, reflected by the tall mirrored walls. The low storage counters did not interrupt the vistas. One can argue that what could have seemed ordinary in other surroundings, like simple cotton or calico, took on the luster of the lush interior, becoming imbued with the caché of luxury objects. This plan was copied in stores around the country—and the world--throughout the remainder of that century and the next.²⁰

Historian Deborah Gardner states that Stewart did not underestimate the importance of this new building. Up until this point marble facing was used almost exclusively for churches and government institutions, and Stewart knew that it was “the first commercial building designed for the public which looked like a private institution.”²¹ Mona Domosh adds that a building like this could only add cultural legitimacy to a “commercial impulse.” Other historians note that Stewart’s Renaissance Revival structure was one of the first American uses of the Italian palazzo style first popularized in England by Sir Charles Barry, most notably in his Travellers Club, a private men’s club on Pall Mall, a structure Stewart no doubt took note of on his many trips to London. Indeed, although Stewart may

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have been taking his cues from Great Britain, he set the fashion in the United States. Stewart led the way; and merchants as well as other well-healed citizens of this country were eager to rid themselves of the plain Federal style for something that reflected their own aristocratic status.22

Although the reporter from the Commercial Advertiser credited Joseph Trench as architect, he additionally credited the Italian decorative painter Senior Brigaldi for “architectural design.” On September 21, 1846, The Evening Post stated that Stewart conceived the overall initial design, which was altered many times during construction. Other papers give Stewart total credit. But more recently, historian Mary Ann Smith unearthed blueprints of the store among the papers of architect John Snook, a junior partner in the Trench and Snook architectural firm. Snook’s papers include elevations of the original building and a payment of $200 to the firm in 1846. Still, no one denies Stewart’s influence. 23

Many books on architecture were discovered in Stewart’s study, on a broad range of subjects, and particularly relevant are his books on the architecture of palaces and the history of royal families.24 Stewart’s trips to Europe were frequent. In an influential study of Stewart’s Marble Palace, Winston Weisman of the Art Bulletin wrote, “in view of his capacities and interests, it is not difficult to imagine Stewart as an important factor in the scheme for his new store, a project which was of great personal concern. It is even possible that Stewart may have discussed the matter with English architects.”25 It is documented that Stewart sought out Sir Morton Peto, the British engineer responsible for Charles Barry’s Reform Club and other significant British buildings on later occasions.26

22 Mona Domosh. “Creating New York’s Nineteenth Century Retail District,” 216; Gardner, Diss. 1-80; It must also be stated that the Renaissance Revival style persisted and filtered down to architecture for the middle class, and can be seen today in both residential and institutional buildings which date back to Stewart’s time and more recently throughout New York City.
24 American Art Association, Catalog.
However, there are further inspirations for the interior of Stewart’s Marble Palace, and those lay right in his neighborhood in Manhattan. Stewart’s building and his older stores had been located in the center of New York’s nascent art district. Stewart, as a prosperous merchant, early became part of the art circuit and well acquainted with display venues. He was an early subscriber to the American Art Union; their frequent art sales and auctions were held from the late 1830s in a large open rotunda. Another site, just three blocks south on Broadway was leased from the city by John Vanderlyn in 1818 – the year Stewart arrived. There, Vanderlyn specifically built “The Rotunda Building” to display his panorama, “The Palace of Versailles,” and other panoramas created by artists after him. Those spectacles could have influenced Stewart. Stewart could have equally been influenced by what he saw at the National Academy, another frequent Stewart stop in the years before the construction of the Marble Palace. In 1840 the Academy had just joined forces with the New York Society Library and moved into an exhibition space which had 400 running feet of wall space and a skylight and displayed products from many different domestic sources. During that same period, the American Art Union auctioned its works in that building as well. The Literary Philosophical Society had meetings in the same building and John Scudder’s American Museum took up part of the space. It is reasonable to assume that Stewart was exposed to these aspects of culture and display.\textsuperscript{27} In fact, one can imagine Stewart, a frequent attendee at art exhibitions of the day, standing in the center of the Rotunda, admiring the sights of whatever exotic landscape or depiction of a great event from a foreign land was being shown at his visit, and envisioning not just arbors and gardens but his own products from distant shores arranged in tranquil displays. For his Marble Palace, Stewart undoubtedly appropriated many of these display concepts, from the unbroken vistas, the complete surround of objects to be seen, and certainly the skylight. Stewart also eschewed the traditional mullions and ordered his huge plate glass windows, enhancing exhibition methods and certainly breaking with any sort of display style exhibited in America at the time. Moreover, the dazzling assortment of goods under one

palatial roof was unprecedented in America, acquired, and arranged by Stewart, the showman. It wasn’t only *The Evening Post* and *The Commercial Advertiser* which took notice. Stewart’s building awed New York’s own Mayor Phillip Hone.28 “This is one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful edifices in the world,” Hone wrote in his diary. From that day forward, over 10,000 viewers, customers, and hobnobbers entered the store on a daily basis. This building was one of Snook’s first commissions. From the building’s prominence, the architect was commissioned by Cornelius Vanderbilt to design the first Grand Central Station as well as his own home. Peter Lorillard also asked him to construct a home befitting a man of his stature. Snook’s reputation was sealed and so was Stewart’s.29

By 1862, Stewart’s annual volume was 5 million dollars and he employed 500 male clerks to serve hundreds of thousands of customers.30

Despite the raves, there is still debate among department store historians over whether Stewart’s “Marble Palace” was actually a department store, and if so, the question lingers: was it the first in the world? There is ample factual evidence in Stewart’s favor.

Many historians have mistakenly given Paris’ Bon Marché that honor, although Bon Marché was not fully operative as a department store until six years later in 1852. Although Stewart was indebted to European aesthetics, architecture and interior design in a number of ways, the erection of his department store predates Aristide Boucicaut’s shop and any other stores in Europe or America. According to Rességuié, “Stewart was the first retailer in the world to erect a specially designed, functional, multi-floored building to house his store.” Gardner concurs. “(Stewart) in contrast to all who had gone before him, put all goods and services in a single building” and had the entire building, not just the first floor.” Even a historian of the French “grand magasins” gives credit to Stewart for building “the first multi-story building to handle a large volume of trade.”31

Scholars agree on the basic characteristics of a department store: a central location, many departments under one roof, free services such as the return of merchandise, delivery, a large volume of business and a number of accommodations such as reception rooms,

28 Phillip Hone diary, April 26, 1845, September10, 1846, May 31, 1850
29 Smith, 18-33.
30 Elias, 68.
wrapping and checking of parcels and a one-price policy. As late as 1846, dealers and customers, no matter what their station in life, haggled over prices.\textsuperscript{32}

Stewart’s Marble Palace exceeded all these requirements. His large store was compartmentalized, and each department had its own head, and each department head his own account book. Stewart instituted a one-price policy early on, feeling it would streamline business. He imported, manufactured and sold to the average customer, but also dealt wholesale. Furthermore, he was an innovator in the in-house services he provided. He was the first to have floor length mirrors, also imported from France. He was the first to have dressing rooms for women. He had reception and writing areas for his customers, was the first to have fashion shows, and although it seems that the one-price policy was largely in practice before the Marble Palace, it had never been attempted on quite so large a scale. The cumulative effect of all of Stewart’s policies, the vast array of merchandise under one grand dome in a structure towering over the city, was what made this so spectacular. No New York merchant could compete with him, and no longer would shoppers have to go from pushcarts to peddlers selling the lace pieces and textiles, or tiny shop to tiny shop for each article they needed.\textsuperscript{33}

One might wonder why this “first” is so important. It is another of Stewart’s policies which made his marble structure revolutionary—his open door policy—which literally opened the door to the spread of visual and material culture. Stewart’s “open door policy” allowed anyone to freely come in and wander around, peruse the many different kinds of products, take in the vast range of colors in textiles, accessories, and ready-mades, view the spectacular interior, and to have one’s visage reflected in full length mirrors dotting the vast expanse of shopping area. At this time many shops barred entrance to customers who they thought might simply be “looking.” Once allowed in, a potential customer was harassed until he, or she, made a purchase. Other venues, from art galleries to artisans’ workplaces charged admission. The Rotundas, the dioramas, even the glass blowers who set up shop all charged customers to enter and to see. Visual opportunities, such as the viewing of art and

\textsuperscript{32} Resseguie, “Department Store,” 303.
\textsuperscript{33} Lord & Taylor, History of Lord and Taylor, 15; Lord and Taylor has also been in the running as an early “department store” but it sold only textiles, and was far less diversified than Stewart’s. Furthermore, for much of its early existence it was on an unpaved side street, a location which discouraged potential customers from visiting the establishment. But it did have a one-price policy. A tiny ad produced by Lord and Taylor and featured in a newspaper in 1838, advertises their one-price policy. In Paris, Aristide Boucicaut, while still a small draper in 1838, instituted the one-price policy as well: see Miller, Le Bon Marché, 4.
even the work of artisans was limited. But in Stewart’s the viewing was free. Sales clerks were instructed not to hover. This sort of freedom, and freedom to look, was unprecedented.34

While panoramas provided visions of foreign lands, Stewart’s array of products brought these faraway places to the public in the forms of products. It was “tourism,” with an added benefit: “the advantage of touch.” Historian Joanna Cohen remarks, “the pleasures of visiting exhibitions were magnified in Stewart’s department store by the enjoyment of sensual gratification. Stewart showed how you could embody these faraway places, by wearing a scarf from India, or a shawl from France.”35 The immersive experience of shopping had a potent power for many, surpassing even panorama, theater, and art. New Yorkers of all types appeared, becoming part of the spectacle. Certainly, as thousands of customers and the curious rubbed shoulders each day, Stewart’s establishment was not just a visual and tactile experience but an olfactory and auditory one too. Were visitors to Stewart’s store reduced to hushed silences as they entered this cathedral of commerce? Did they rush in like a babbling mob? Whatever the answer, from that day forward, changes occurred in American life and in consumer culture. There arose a growing desire for material objects and ornamentation of both body and home. Luxury imports from European shores increased dramatically. Historians have linked all these factors to the birth of the department store, and a consumer revolution, but place that date later in the century. Stewart, as a leading retailer and importer, whose effect was felt across the nation could be said to have lead a consumer revolution in the early part of the century, an

34For Stewart’s open door policy, see Resseguei, Development, 310; Advertisements for exhibitions of panoramas, dioramas and “fancy” glass blowers can be found in the Commercial Advertiser, May 26, 1828, 2; September 26, 1827, 2; January 19, 1829, 4 and New York Daily Advertiser, November 4, 1819, 3. These ads are numerous and continue into the 1840s.
earlier periodization than historians have generally put forth. One can only say, that on that morning in September, with Stewart’s open door policy, material and visual culture in New York exploded.

Joanna Cohen periodizes a “consumer revolution.” during this early part of the century in “Reading the Retailscape, Examining the Art of Advertising in the Urban Northeast, 1830-1860.” While not addressing Stewart’s efforts in the marketplace exclusively, Cohen examines the advertising in this period to illustrate the greater demand for consumer goods, and argues against claims by scholars who place this periodization later in the century.
Business for the Million

It is curious that in the 19th century, after fighting a war to be free of European influence and to establish an American identity, for some, that identity started with luxury goods imported from Europe. Although many in the press noted that there was something for everyone at Stewart’s—“from a thousand dollar shawl to a packet of pins”—initially Stewart’s best customers were from the more moneyed classes. Stewart’s New York clients depended on him to stock a wide array of luxury goods from Europe. From opening day, he had drawn New York’s haute monde and soon drew members of the wealthy Southern planter class as well.

In a letter dated May 1850, Elizabeth Ann Valentine, the young daughter of Richmond, Virginia planter, Mann Valentine Sr. wrote to her brother William telling him of a buying spree in Stewart’s New York store. “It was splendid,” said Elizabeth Ann, relating that she had been reliably informed that “their receipts amount to $3 million a year.” It was at Stewart’s that Elizabeth Ann’s father Mann bought his daughter’s wedding trousseau for her upcoming marriage. In her letter, Elizabeth Ann detailed her purchases on that trip, including silk, muslin and calico dresses, handkerchiefs, a nightgown, garter boots and slippers, and her wedding veil of Irish Carrickmacrosse lace.37

In those days, and even now, the name Carrickmacrosse carried cache. Lace-making had long been a laborious process, and the expense of making it made it available only to members of the upper classes. Lace was invented in the 16th century in Venice, spread to

37 For details on the Valentines’ shopping trip to Stewart’s, the items purchased and Elizabeth Ann Valentine’s thoughts about the department store, see “Letter from Elizabeth Ann to her brother William,” The Valentine Family Archives, Valentine Museum, Richmond, Va.; also Gregg Kimball, American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 105, 285, 287.
Flanders, Britain and France, and the intricate lace patterns were originally hand sewn to a hand-made mesh backing. But in 1809, the British weaver, John Heathcoat invented a machine which would spin out the backing and not unravel the delicate web, an invention which sped up the process. The net became the basis for new laces, such as Carrickmacrosse, a combination of hand-made applique and machine made net, created exclusively by young women who had attended the Carrickmacrosse lace-making factory in Ireland. The factory had been established by British philanthropists to help young Irish women who had been victims of the famine. One would think that the concept of machine made lace would debase the value of the object. Instead, as factories like Carrickmacrosse became more common, hand-made lace went out of fashion, as affluent customers switched to machine made, and machine made lace became affordable to a wider population. Still, lace continued to be perceived as a luxury item, as machine made products also came to signify sophistication and progress. Stewart brought this new taste of luxury and progress not only to planters’ daughters but to the aspiring middle classes. For Stewart perhaps, Carrickmacrosse lace had less to do with all its attendant symbolism than with retaining a connection to his motherland. As philanthropists set up the lace making school for disadvantaged women, Stewart also contributed.


Stewart’s business widened and he began to also rely on the aspiring middle classes. His business prospered at a time of heightened class consciousness, as the newly coherent middle class and the newly wealthy gained on the established money. As besotted as these aspirants were with lace imported from Ireland, they were even more intoxicated by products imported from France. Stewart had been ordering and dealing in French textiles for years, as had other importers. By 1846, magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* were prized by subscribers for their reprints of illustrations of French fashions.\(^{40}\) Fine clothing had long been a signifier of status. But gloves – another area of importation and commerce Stewart would dominate by the 1840s - were another matter altogether.\(^{41}\)

Women wore gloves “not only as protection from the elements” says fashion historian Ariel Beajot, “but also as a defense from the gaze of others.” One’s bare hands revealed whether one worked, and got their hands rough and dirty,” and manual labor would give away that secret. The appropriate gloves disguised one’s social status, even allowing the wearer to cross class lines, or to remain in a certain class, and to maintain this charade, women were encouraged to wear gloves indoors and out. But they had to be the right gloves. As Beajot states, “they looked to the glove itself, reading class through fit, fabric, cleanliness, repair and color.” Of all the factors, fit was the most important, because it determined the shape of the hand. Small white hands were prized, so women wore gloves that were far too small for them. A tiny rim of fat puffed out on the skin beyond the glove, fat that was most often covered by a sleeve. Often the gloves were so tight in order to get the effect of the tiny ladylike hand they had to be wet to take them off, and would certainly have to be removed in the privacy of one’s home. Kid gloves were considered the proper material for wear; cotton and other fabrics were best left to the other classes.

Whether Stewart recognized the power of the glove, or simply responded to its popularity, he most certainly fostered glove frenzy. Stewart knew that the best kid came from France. As with lace, Stewart would import luxury products that had been put into the reach of a broader population by an advance in technology.

\(^{40}\) French fashions proliferated in New York at the time. *Godey’s, Peterson’s and the Monitor of Fashion*, the American Version of *Moniteur de la Mode* all featured fashions and patterns from France. The patterns often carried instructions in French. It helped if a reader had a working knowledge of the French language. For information, see “19th Century Fashion Plate Magazines,” accessed November 2, 2016/. https://www.nypl.blog/2014/09/25/19th-century-fashion-plate-magazines,

\(^{41}\) The purchase, proper etiquette and wearing of gloves in the 19th century has been treated extensively by Ariel Beajot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 46.
In 1834, Xavier Jouvin, a French medical student in Grenoble methodically devised a way to size gloves by measuring the hands of the citizens of his town. He came up with several standard sizes and then invented a cutting die which would allow standardization. Jouvin held the patent but shared the technology with other glovemakers, such as the company Fortin, Fils and Deschamps who soon produced gloves which became highly desired, the “Alexandre,” and much later, “The Jouvin.”

By this time Stewart had become firmly established in the French marketplace as a leading importer of silks. His name would have been known to Fortin, Fils and Deschamps. Stewart’s European background, frequent trips to Europe to oversee his interests once again benefitted him, but it was also Stewart’s appreciation for European traditions, combined with his ability to benefit from foreign ties and industrialization that would put him in the lead. By 1850, Stewart also had a contract with Fortin, Fils and Deschamps to become the sole distributor of their renowned Alexandre gloves in the United States. Alexandres became a sensation.

The novel, Household Puzzles was written by Isabel Alden under the pseudonym, Pansy. In the story, the female protagonist, Helen Randolph leads her family into poverty with her spending habits, particularly her need for the perfect gloves. At her mother’s funeral, the author recounts, “Helen and her three sisters were shrouded and the details of her dress were appropriate, especially the “the perfect fitting Alexandre gloves.”

Although Pansy looked at consumer spending in moral terms, as many authors of the time did, not all literature looked at glove buying as a moral question. Alice Haven wrote about spending “A Morning At Stewart’s” in Godey’s where she headed straight to the glove counter:

There is a long scarlet covered oval counter directly before us, the glove department. We know it is to our cost. We have worn no other gloves but Alexandre’s since our schoolgirl days, and Stewart monopolizes his manufacture. Let us acknowledge our one feminine extravagance. –a costly self-indulgence with gloves at $1.50, and those of the plainest, stitched backs are $1.60. We were not surprised to find that the total of the business at this counter alone is $300,000 a year.

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42 Beaujot, 46.
43 Pansy (Isabella Alden), Household Puzzles, (Boston: Lothrop, 1875); extract accessed October 25, 2016, isabellaalden.com/2014/10/28/helens-alexandre-gloves/.
In an influential article published in “Hearth and Home,” the author, writing under the pseudonym DJK, swooned over Stewart’s assortment of gloves, including but not limited to the precious Alexandres.

“Here are thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of kid gloves, silk gloves, chamois gloves, riding and walking gloves,” said DJK. “By the far off islands of the Mediterranean, in the distant factories of Lyon, in Paris and in Belgium thousands of hands have labored wearily, yet deftly on the skins of young kids until these beautiful and symmetrically shaped coverings for the hands have been fashioned, fine grained and odorous of perfume. This is the retail store of Stewart’s on Chambers Street…”  

Stewart’s hold on the glove market was further underscored by an article written by Nathaniel Parker Willis—one of the leading magazine writers at the time. Willis had written the article originally for The New York Sun and it was subsequently translated for the French language newspaper Le Courrier Des Etats-Unis, a publication for Francophones residing in New York. The article instructs women—in this case French women-- on how to get the proper fit in garden gloves and where to buy them. That answer, of course, was Stewart’s.

Stewart took strong measure to make sure he maintained his first place status. In “The Dry Goods Jubilee Edition of 1889,” of the Dry Goods Economist, the New York representative of Luxembourg glovemakers August Charles offered his memories of time spent in the glove trade. In the forties, he remembered, there was a sudden embargo on all gloves entering the country. The representative discovered the embargo was due to Stewart’s instigation of a reappraisal of all gloves entering the United States. Stewart wanted to be able to fix prices. The author went to see Stewart in his store.

“A small man came out and spoke in a very high falsetto voice, asking me what I wanted…” said the author. The author told him his problems and asked “What do Luxembourg gloves have to do with Paris gloves?” “I want to be protected,” said Stewart, and turned his back and walked away.

45 DJK, “Shopping at Stewart’s,” Hearth and Home, January 9, 1869, 43.
47 “The Manufacture and Distribution of French Gloves,” Jubilee Number, Dry Goods Economist, 1896. If this was Stewart, the idea of the falsetto voice is only in this account. Nowhere else is it reported that Stewart’s voice was “falsetto.”
Curiously, a magazine called *The Ohio Farmer* took a special interest in French gloves. Writing in 1869, one reporter in the magazine mentioned that counterfeits made up ¾ of all the gloves sold in New York. Stewart was in constant battle against counterfeiters of Alexandre gloves, and he learned the significance of a good trademark. Authentic Alexandre gloves, Stewart warned in his advertising, had to be stamped in a certain way. “Warning” read one ad, “Messrs. A.T. Stewart & Co. being the exclusive agents and importers of all the kid gloves made by Alexandre of Paris, respectfully caution buyers against imitations stamped inside “Alexander,” also “Alexandre Celebre” which are now in the market and sold as genuine gloves. All genuine Alexandre gloves are stamped: Medaille de 1re Classes, Alexandre, A.T. S & Cie, Exposition Universelle, 1855.”

Notably, no mention is made of the parent company, Fortin, Fils and Deschamps in France. By that time, the Stewart name superseded mention of this French stamp of authority. Stewart, one might venture, had created, promoted and distributed an article of apparel which he transformed into America’s first luxury brand. Women, like the fictional Helen Randolph risked solvency to get it.

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Courting the Press

During this part of the century, Stewart’s name began popping up with increasing frequency in newspapers and magazines. From the 1820s to the 1840s, the number of periodicals had risen from under a hundred to an estimated 2,526, with a total annual circulation of over 426 million. By the 1850s, coverage of Stewart in these periodicals was pervasive. Stewart didn’t just advertise in New York, he placed ads nationally in hundreds of papers. There were myriad “news” articles profiling Stewart in newspapers across the country, regular mentions of events and the latest merchandise in his store, and breathless reports on his latest commissions. One can speculate on several reasons for his sudden ubiquity.

The first deals with the content of his advertising. Much has been said about the lack of imagination in Stewart’s advertising, but upon closer inspection, the opposite is true. While advertising did not feature illustrations of products when Stewart began, and also predated the use of photographs in ads, Stewart starkly separated himself from the other merchants of the day with his subtle use of language. Stewart appropriated exhibition language and the language of art shows to promote his store. Other merchants “Offered” their wares,” or “have in store...” Even Lord and Taylor, Stewart’s competitor for the attentions of “the ladies,” advertised like a barker, alerting readers to “Cheap dress goods,” while Stewart regularly gave notice to New Yorkers of an upcoming “exhibit” of the fine goods he was plying. One ad read: “A T Stewart & Company will exhibit on Monday, November 29, Single Width Quality Brocades.” In another, “A T Stewart and Co. are now prepared to exhibit their extensive collection of French, English, German and Indian goods.” Stewart

was presenting his store not as a salesman would, but as an exhibitor, or even an impresario.50

Certainly art had been conflated with merchandising by others. Not only Stewart, but writers for newspapers and magazines had begun to discuss merchandise in artistic terms. In “Shopping at Stewart’s” *Hearth and Home*’s DJK views some of the products.

“To the right is a large Gobelin tapestry,” says the author. “Stand back and look at this coloring for a few minutes. Enjoy the gathering gloom of the dusky fire…it is necessary to study this piece of handiwork as you would a dog by Landseer, a horse by Rosa Bonheur, or Niagara by Church.”51

In his ads, Stewart merged with the world of art and separated himself from his competitors, by presenting himself, as a man of culture and taste, and in doing so, in leading his customers into a world of fine taste as well. On the selling floor, this attitude carried over. His salesclerks, instructed to study artistic concepts, advised customers on matters of taste and, it was said, were able to murmur “over the sheen of a bolt of silk.”52 Moreover, it appears that Stewart was desirous of cleansing himself of any whiff of a “salesman” in favor of something more genteel.

Certainly Stewart, like the writer of *Hearth and Home*, would have thought he could find that in the art world. Readers of the general interest monthlies and weeklies and the targeted art publications of the time were instructed in all manner of harmony of colors and taste, which Stewart was concerned with as well. However, perhaps even more intriguing for Stewart, the businessman, was that underneath this layer of gentility, the luminaries of the art world were engaged in masterful self-promotion. Frederic Church, for instance, with whom Stewart had an ongoing business relationship, employed an “agent” who not only secured venues for his various “Great Painting” tours, but also cultivated relationships with the press and made certain that every exhibition was heavily covered. It is said that

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50 Advertisements such as these appear in *The Commercial Advertiser*, August 5, 1850, 2 and October 28, 1850, 2, among other publications. On these pages, ads of other merchants can be contrasted with Stewart’s.

51 DJK, “Shopping at Stewart’s,” *Hearth and Home*, January 9, 1869, 43.

52 Elias, 48.
Church’s agent, John McClure, a Scotsman who emigrated to America, was responsible for Church’s popularity here and abroad, and made Church’s *Heart of the Andes* famous. By 1859, at the height of Stewart’s popularity in the press, Stewart was a frequent visitor of the Tenth Street Studio where Church exhibited *Heart of the Andes*. It is reasonable to assume that McClure’s methods left their imprint on Stewart. McClure’s relationship with Church was increasingly fruitful at the same time as Stewart’s popular Marble Palace was flourishing.\(^{53}\)

In later years, it has been noted, currying favor with the press was routine for merchants. In an essay about the marketing tactics of Harry Selfridge, the early twentieth century department store magnate operating in Britain, Erika Rappaport says that Selfridge had “a progressive faith in the beneficent powers of publicity. Selfridge spent money on advertising not only to appeal to shoppers but also to better court the press. The result, says Rappaport was a lot of “unpaid publicity” surrounding the store openings, and sales. This unpaid publicity in Selfridge’s time looked like news articles and appeared in foreign and domestic magazines, trade magazines, newspapers. The press had actively promoted shopping, says Rappaport, but Selfridge made sure they thought of him first. Selfridge formed relationships with the leading media moguls of the day. Department stores and the press formed a tight alliance.\(^{54}\)

One can strongly assert that this courting of the press—first by placing ads—was much earlier employed by Stewart, and fostered by what he had seen in New York’s art circles. Additionally, newspaper owners had long known the importance of advertising, far in advance of New York’s late 19\(^{th}\) century shopping boom. Stewart’s constant placement of paid advertising in periodicals across the country, as well the ongoing coverage he possibly received in exchange, suggests deft and calculated handling of the media. Nowhere is there mention of Stewart using a publicist, but the abundant advertising certainly paved the

\(^{53}\) For McClure’s promotion of Church’s exhibitions, see Gerald Carr, “The Icebergs Revisited,” in *The Voyage of the Icebergs: Frederic Church’s Arctic Masterpiece*, ed. Eleanor Jones Harvey, (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2002),11; also for visits to Tenth Street Studio, see: Jervis McIntee Diary, February 1, 1876, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessed November 15, 2016, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/diaries/mcentee/entry/18760201/.

way for an alliance between this merchant and the press. One of the most profitable alliances was with *Godey's Lady's book.*
The House of Stewart

*Godey’s* was the number one magazine in the nation, outselling any others. It was called *Lady’s Book*, but men read it too. It was owned by Louis Godey, the son of French emigrés, who had landed in Philadelphia. But during its heyday its editor was Sarah Josepha Hale, a Boston widow who moved to Philadelphia to take over the helm. At first glance, it looked like a repository of sentimental literature, but Hale published many of the best and most controversial authors of the time, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Beecher Stowe. She also increased the number of fashion plates *Godey’s* featured, and built a staff of over one hundred fifty women to hand-color illustrations and hand-bind the magazines. Godey’s became an overwhelmingly influential fashion magazine and instruction manual and arbiter of etiquette, home décor, choice of apparel, and even instructed readers on “how to read” literature. *Godey’s* was aimed at a reader who could afford to pay $3 a year for a subscription, a tidy sum during that time period. Neither Louis Godey’s business papers nor Sarah Josepha Hale’s archival correspondence reveal any contracts between Stewart and the magazine. However, by the end of the 1850s, *Godey’s* was prominently featuring, as editorial content, illustrations of clothing, designed and manufactured at Stewart’s and available for sale at his store. *Godey’s* alerted its own readers that they could not find Stewart’s fashion illustrations in any other magazines; that they were to be found “only” in *Godeys*, and additionally placed ads with that information in newspapers across the country.
The exclusivity and the promotion of such, reveals how much sway Stewart had over the hearts and minds of *Godey’s* readers, and women and men nationwide. Stewart’s illustrations in *Godey’s* also reveal not only what fashions Stewart was promoting, but how he wanted to promote himself.\(^5\)

In the early 1860s, the captions below illustrations of Stewart’s fashions credited “the house of A.T. Stewart.” Although the word “house” appeared in lower case, the wording is significant, especially if seen in contrast to other retailers who did not purport to be houses, in advertising or in practice. Stewart’s wording was most likely inspired by the great fashion houses of France with whom Stewart was familiar. By 1849, Stewart’s purchasing agent in Paris, Francis Warden, had become an acquaintance of Charles Frederick Worth when Worth was still a fledgling designer. When Worth founded the House of Worth, Stewart was one merchant who purchased rights to reproduce and refabricate Worth’s collections for mass market apparel in the United States. The House of Worth had been operating for two years before Stewart started promoting his own clothing, perhaps based

on Worth’s designs or perhaps his own, as arising from “the house of A.T. Stewart.” Certainly Stewart was branding himself like a great French house.56

The illustrations themselves tell a tale. At the time, Peterson’s Magazine, also out of Philadelphia, positioned itself as a competitor to Godey’s, although its target audience was the slightly less affluent reader who would be able to pay two dollars a year instead of Godey’s three. A comparison of the two magazines’ illustrations reveals two different depictions of women.

Peterson’s fashion illustrations most often depict women with other women. Frequently, they are in sisterly poses, as one woman lays her head on another, or rests her hand on her friend’s as they take dainty steps to pick flowers, or just remain in repose. Although Peterson’s featured silks later in their publication history, the dresses, unlike most dresses in Godey’s are often cotton, light colored and country like, most often American made. Stewart’s women in Godey’s are in marked contrast. Strikingly, women are featured alone far more often. The woman in the illustration typically looks as if she is heading off somewhere, towards something, in a direction forward. Her clothing is heavier, and more luxurious, and made of imported fabric. The frail, slightly timid creature so often depicted in Peterson’s is rarely seen in Godey’s, and never in Stewart’s illustrations. Then as now, women appropriated not just the fashions, but bodily demeanor from the pages of fashion magazines. One can almost imagine a reader choosing to fashion herself either after the demure Peterson’s woman, or a more fearless Godey’s lady, via Stewart.57

This difference between the two magazines is further supported by Sarah J. Hale herself. A widow, Hale was nothing if not independent. She hired many women who were “spinsters” and widows, who needed to work. The features in her magazine tell tales of women who enter the work force after the deaths of their husbands, or after they have lost

56 “The Amalia,” Godey’s, April 1860, 388; “The Lelia,” Godey’s, June 1860, 60; “...fashions from A.T. Stewart” Waltham Sentinel, November 18, 1864, 3; “Illustrations,” Peterson’s, January 1859, February 1859; For background on Worth and Stewart, see Elias, 40.  
their husbands to drink. She urged women to throw off restrictive clothing and get more comfortable. She told women where they could buy riding habits, often at Stewart’s. In Hale and Stewart’s day, not all of the modistes would even make riding habits, many considering it “man’s work.” Historians who look at Godey’s often perceive it as an antiquated purveyor of separate sphere ideology, but Hale was more subversive. If she saw a changing world, her ally was Stewart. The alliance of Godey’s and Stewart was powerfully persuasive.58

The author Henry James –perhaps not sensing Hales’ subversiveness nevertheless was victim to that persuasion. In his memoir, A Small Boy and Others James speaks of the regular weekly visits with his brother William to the Wall Street dentist, Dr. Parkhust, where he read Godey’s in the waiting room, recalling it as an “anodyne” pastime in this excruciating venture. His aunt would retrieve them after they had their heads filled with stories and pictures, to take them to Stewart’s store where they would see James’ “marmorean” sea of shoppers. For James and for many others, Stewart’s and Godey’s went hand in hand.59

By the time James was reading Godey’s, the number of seamstresses Stewart employed had increased to 900, far more than any one other New York business.60 By the 1860s, although French fashions were still the rage, it also became fashionable for “Americanized” styles of clothing. The Stewart business was churning out ready-made outfits, first by


60 In 1857, when other manufacturers laid off employees, Stewart kept all of his at full pay; see Elias, 49.
hand, then by machine in the later part of the 60s.\textsuperscript{61} A look at Stewart’s library reveals that he may indeed have had his hand in designing. Some books in Stewart’s collection, books dating to the early 1850s and before were \textit{Costumes}, \textit{Costume Phantasomie}, \textit{A History of Costumes}. Other titles refer to Victoria’s Court, and the courts of Josephine and the Empress Eugenie.\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Godey’s} carried illustrations other than those which came from the “house of A.T. Stewart.” For those illustrations, the magazine staff researched the history of clothing and added to contemporary dress sketches of classic, medieval and Renaissance clothing.\textsuperscript{63} Certainly Stewart, through his own research, was doing so too. Someone at Stewart’s had to be designing the clothes and giving instructions to the seamstresses. Although available records point to a fur designer in Stewart’s fur department, and later a carpet designer in his huge carpet department, no evidence yet points to any clothing designer other than Stewart. At the very least, Stewart’s knowledge of fashion through the ages, his knowledge of the history of fashion around the world, and his knowledge of fashion in the royal courts, contributed to the design of the clothing he manufactured, promoted and sold.

\textsuperscript{61} Harper’s New Monthly, June 1868, 551; Elias, 53; Jack Larkin, \textit{A Celebration of America’s Workers and the Nation They Built} (Guildford, Lyons Press, 2010), 127-133.
\textsuperscript{62} American Art Association, \textit{Catalog}.
Ladies Living at a Distance

Although many have given Stewart credit for the beginning of mail order clothing, it was actually Godey’s which paved the way, using Stewart as a powerful incentive. An 1864 notice in Godey’s Fashion Department page read: “Having had frequent applications for the purchase of jewelry, millinery, etc. by ladies living at a distance, the Editress of the Fashion Department will hereafter execute commissions for all who desire it, with the charge of a small percentage for the time and research required,” stated one of Godey’s notices. Readers were instructed to make out checks to L.A. Godey for “Dry Goods of any kind from Messrs. A. T. Stewart and Co. New York.” The long notice, placed on the fashion page, goes on to say that the publisher of the magazine would have no knowledge of these transactions, that there would be no returns of merchandise and that the requests for orders must be executed down to the minutest detail, including complexion of the buyer, hair color and height. It is difficult to believe that the publisher of the magazine, Louis Godey, the Godey of Godey’s Magazine and the same L.A. Godey who would be collecting the checks would have no knowledge of the transactions. At that time, Godey’s had 150,000 subscribers, and readership tripled when issues were passed from friend to friend. Godey profited from this venture. It didn’t take long for Stewart to follow Godey’s lead and start advertising mail order too. By 1868, “responding to letters from women across the country,” Stewart set up his own mail order business. Each ad contained the words “samples sent free upon application.” By 1870, he had one man in charge of mail order; six years after that he had twenty employees in the mail order department working full-time. Soon after he instituted mail order, he was making $500,000 a year in mail order requests, 42 million dollars annually in wholesale orders from retailers located all around the country and $8 million in retail in New York City. By 1870, that number had increased and news reports stated that, according to the IRS, Stewart’s downtown wholesale receipts totaled $89 million. All of the smaller retailers Stewart sold to from his wholesale business happily

64 Hale hoped that she would get readers to buy “family” subscriptions, or “club” subscriptions as opposed to passing issues around for free. See Elizabeth White Nelson, Market Sentiments: Middle Class Market Culture in Nineteenth Century America (D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 2004), 48-50.
mentioned Stewart in their local ads across the country; no doubt it added to the luster of their products. By the seventies, there were few people in the country who had never bought Stewart’s products.65

65 “Stewart’s Fashions by Mail,” Godey’s, vol. 74-75, 1867, 386; “Personal Gossip,” Hartford Daily Current, April 17, 1876, 3 for mail order; Statistics on business from Resseguie, “Development,” 320; “Internal Revenue,” Boston Traveller, June 30, 1865, 2.
WOMEN SHOPPING-WOMEN WORKING

It’s well documented that the age of the department store ushered in a new age for women, and shopping gave them a new agency, and independence. 66 Department stores were one of the few places to which women could go unchaperoned, freeing them from the confines of the home. Soon sweet shops popped up along the route to Stewart’s and later department stores which also catered to unchaperoned women. 67 The women who shopped were not the only women whose lives were changed by department stores. Stewart’s business gave hundreds of women employment. Although the typical working man or woman was not Stewart’s average customer, they certainly were his workforce. Stewart had long been known for taking care of his workers. During the construction of his Marble Palace, he also erected a men’s boarding house next door on Reade Street. Each man had his own apartment and Stewart put in a vast library which included books on instruction in French and Spanish, so his workers could better help his worldly customers. 68 But Stewart was indebted to women. They established his clientele, and increasingly made up the bulk of his workforce, if only behind the scenes. Along with the hundreds of seamstresses who labored in his store, as Stewart’s retail and wholesale empires grew, he employed thousands of women upstate and in New England. Stewart had purchased mills in these areas and female workers, from rural areas in America and from Ireland, spun a range of textiles. 69 In 1869, Stewart finally put female workers on the selling floor. This integration of men and women on the selling floor, the creation of a large hetero-social workforce, one of the first

68 Elias, 64; Smith, 29, 30.
of its kind and size, was a dramatic change for the city’s social and retail life. Much of the credit for this move into a hetero-social workforce has previously been given to Sarah Josepha Hale. In the pages of her magazine, Hale had urged women to get on the selling floor. But if Hale influenced Stewart, it was again Stewart’s ongoing infatuation with European manners and morés which made up his mind. In 1867, while attending the Universelle Exposition in Paris, and conducting most of his business activities by telegraph, Stewart took the time to write to his “partner” William Libbey by hand, perhaps because what he intended to share was delicate. In the letter Stewart asserted that “(my) objections to women are disappearing, especially since they are working in all the magasins in France.” Stewart additionally tells Libbey that he has already tried to hire a woman salesperson, but she was already working at Lord and Taylor. Although Lord and Taylor was still a much smaller store, and not as diversified, she did not want to leave.

During the same decade, activists and reform writers for the New York publication, The Revolution investigated working conditions at Stewart’s department store. Although they asserted that the women were underpaid, they concluded that the physical working conditions were adequate. This was also also detailed in Godey’s.

“Stewart’s workrooms as the finest.” the Godey’s author states, continuing with “in our vocation and desire to see the employment of working women, we have visited some of the largest workrooms in New York.” She appreciated that Stewart’s was “neither underground nor in an attic, but spacious a saloon, spacious and neat enough for a court ball.”

Stewart’s indebtedness to women apparently did not go unpaid. When female laundresses went on strike for better working conditions, Stewart gave his support by becoming the first to contract with them for their services. In Ireland, he had invested

70“Employment for Women,” Godey’s, September 1852, 128. Although Godey’s encourages women to work on the sales floor, integration of the selling floor has most often been reported as occurring later. Susan Porter Benson places the development of integrated sales work forces in the later part of the century in Counter Cultures Saleswoman, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores 1890-1940 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 24.
73 Foner, Women and the American Labor Movement, 155.
money in the Carrickmacrosse lace factory, which had been constructed by philanthropists to help women disadvantaged by the famine. In New York City, he not only had the cleanest and well appointed sewing room, a lavish selling floor and vast women workers’ lunchroom, he would begin planning a grand working women’s hotel, which could inexpensively house women without families or immigrants from abroad.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} “Home” \textit{Augusta Chronicle}, August 1859, 2; Elias, 169-178, 186, 193.
A New Nation of Carpets

When historians speak of “revolutions,” they often refer to wars, industry and in the case of social historians “consumer revolutions.” Certainly there is ongoing confusion about when and where consumer revolutions have taken place. Many point to Europe in the 1600s as the first consumer revolution, spurred by the demand for luxury goods, a demand which first arose in the royal courts, where luxury goods were used as social weapons. When others speak of a consumer revolution, they often point to America and the late 19th century’s Gilded Age citing that period’s robust print explosion and heavy industry as leading factors. But social historian Roberta Sassatelli recently reconsidered the concept of a consumer revolution, terming it be a “long term cultural phenomenon with multiple geographies and a variety of particular object histories.”

To look at Stewart’s cultural output, both a response and a cause of increased consumption and production, one would argue that Stewart deserves notice on that revolutionary timeline. Thirty years before the hailed and reviled Gilded Age, Stewart had already harnessed new technologies with an exploding print culture and early mechanization in the making of his monolithic merchandising enterprise. He had combined a number of artistic, commercial and technological influences to bring luxury goods to a broader population. Until now, this paper has addressed Stewart’s work with women, but Stewart’s consumer revolution extended to men as well, with the greatest part of his enterprise the manufacture, and distribution of carpets—another underexplored area in his business. With carpets, another luxury good Stewart made increasingly available to the masses, Stewart leapt from the boudoir to the boardroom.

In 1851, the A. T. Stewart business was bustling on Broadway and Chambers Street. In perusing the daily ads and items in newspapers across the country, readers could imagine the man himself was overseeing business on a day-to-day basis. Sales at Stewart’s were

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held regularly; goods were being purchased as usual.\textsuperscript{76} There was even a report that Stewart had purchased a ship, \textit{The Roanoke}, to help him transport his goods and supplies faster and more efficiently.\textsuperscript{77} But for many months of that year, Stewart was far away from his store and across the Atlantic. He had sailed for Great Britain sometime in 1851, headed for a sojourn at London’s “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations,” known informally by the name of the structure in which the exhibit would take place, The Crystal Palace. Here, he was in the company of a number of New York business connections, including \textit{Tribune} publisher Horace Greeley, and Stewart would stay until a few weeks before the Exhibition ended.\textsuperscript{78} Stewart, like other entrepreneurs from various nations, undoubtedly had travelled there specifically for the Great Exhibition, which functioned somewhat like an enormous “trade” show and had been organized by Britain’s royal family, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Before the Exhibition opened, American newspapers had been trumpeting the show, and Stewart, an avid newspaper reader, naturally would have perused his own department store ads in periodicals nationwide, and also gotten a preview of what was going to be at the Exhibition. It is not a stretch of the imagination to assert that Stewart spent much of the year of 1851 until he returned to New York making contacts, researching his interests and enjoying the Exhibition.\textsuperscript{79} He and Greeley were so impressed by what they saw that upon returning they set up a corporation to create a New York exhibition set for 1853 which they hoped would rival London’s.\textsuperscript{80}


\textsuperscript{77} For purchase of The Roanoke, “News of the Day,” \textit{Alexandria Gazette}, May 21, 1851.


In the 1830s, Queen Victoria had established a school of design to promote the “direct application of the arts to manufacturer.” Her husband, Prince Albert confirmed Victoria’s mission by announcing “the great principle of the division of labor (would be) the moving power of civilization effecting science, industry and art.” Victoria and Albert were eager to show off Great Britain’s ability to merge the arts with technology and science. The Exhibition was the Royal family’s showcase of the world’s -- and mostly Great Britain’s -- most astonishing and technologically innovative works. One of the most amazing products exhibited at the Exhibition—an Exhibition which covered 21 acres in London’s Hyde Park—was the main building itself—The Crystal Palace. Made of 2300 thin cast iron girders which could barely be seen holding up the sheets of glass which formed the towering walls which enclosed the “Palace,” the building allowed the sunlight to blaze through and illuminate the astonishing selection of products as no building had ever done before.81 Cast iron construction had been developed in England in the late 18th century by the engineer Thomas Tredgold, Britain still held the lead in construction in this material and The Crystal Palace was the first building to use cast iron construction in such a dramatic way.82

Many historians mark the beginning of the modern period as the Crystal Palace, and it marks a period of modernization for Stewart as well. Stewart’s new department store on Ninth Street and Broadway, the city block which would mark the beginning of the shopping district known as “Ladies Mile,” was an expansive edifice of glass held up by the thinnest cast iron, constructed after Stewart’s return from the Exposition and most certainly inspired by London’s Crystal Palace. When Stewart’s “Iron Palace” opened, thoughts of Albert’s

bazaar were gone, replaced by the “originality” of Stewart’s design. Although the design was attributed to architect John Kellum, Stewart was given credit too. It’s not unlikely that he had his hand in it, as well as other books about architecture, Stewart had a copy of Tredgold’s book in his library.83

But Stewart’s fascination with the Crystal Palace was not only the architecture. Inside the structure, Great Britain and its colonies established dominance in terms of sheer surface area, footage and number of objects. Much of the space at the Exhibition was given over to machinery, to “philosophical” and horological instruments, to mining and mineral products, to sculpture, “plastic art,” and fine art, which in Victoria’s day included a cradle carved in boxwood. However, the greatest number of products in one category were under the heading “Textiles,” and many of the textiles were carpets—carpets of every design.84

There was undoubtedly carpet mania in Stewart’s time. Although carpets had been seen on the floors of Europeans and Americans before Stewart started dealing them, they most often were flat weave, made on hand looms and looking somewhat like bedding. Textiles were expensive, so even these simple carpets were not seen in many homes. Knotted carpets came from Turkey, and were only in the homes of the wealthiest Europeans, and eventually wealthy or well-connected Americans. Benjamin Franklin, it has been noted, brought back some lengths of carpeting from Europe.85 Benjamin Latrobe wrote to Dolly Madison saying he had carpeting for the White House.86 In nineteenth-century America, when the members of the new “middling” classes aspired to go even higher, carpeting had the ability to raise one’s standing. The kind of carpeting under one’s feet would declare social status, stratifying social classes.87 Many paintings of that period emphasize the floor covering. A painting by Erastus Field of the Moore family, for instance, tilts the carpet up

83 American Art Association, Catalog.
84 Picard, “London’s Great Exhibition.”
87 Sherrill, Carpets, 16-20.
and towards the viewers’ eyes.\textsuperscript{88} Portraits of famous people often featured borrowed carpets to enhance caché.\textsuperscript{89} The painting \textit{Lady Washington (The Republican Court)} by Daniel Huntington gives prominent display to the wall-to-wall carpet despite the fact that neither George Washington nor Martha Washington had most likely ever even looked at a carpet of the type.\textsuperscript{90} In 1861, Huntington was surely responding to his public’s desire for carpets, rather than striving for historic accuracy. Carpets were on people’s minds and one of the biggest money makers in Stewart’s business were carpets.\textsuperscript{91}

One can speculate that one reason for carpeting’s power to stratify the classes was carpeting’s close relationship to fine art, connections easily found through its many designers. Early on, carpet making, in the manner of tapestries, was fine art. Many of the finest carpetmakers in Great Britain, located in mill towns like Axminster and Kidderminster had been lured away from the Gobelin tapestry factories in France. By 1839, Michel Chevruel, the lead chemist at the Gobelin factory had published \textit{The Principals of Harmony and the Contrast of Colors and their Application to the Arts}, the book which established the concept of complimentary colors; designers at Gobelin were not only specialists in color but were also taught to look at the works of Claude Lorrain to understand composition and design. In addition, the original Axminster carpets, if not designed by French emigrés, were often designed by artists, like Ludwig Gruner, a painter and engraver who served as Prince Albert’s art advisor, or by reproducing works of popular artists like Richard Ansdell and Edwin Landseer. Axminster carpet designs, first following the designs of Turkish carpets, then mimicking the look of neo classical and rococo French and English courts–echoed ceilings and frescoes. The ubiquitous center medallion was a reflection of a ceiling dome, the carpet borders were the rims of the ceiling, and the detail within the carpet was the design of the fresco. One might say that an owner of a fine carpet was virtually bringing art down from the heavens.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{88} Erastus Salisbury Field, \textit{Joseph Moore and Family}, 1839.
\textsuperscript{89} Sherrill, \textit{Carpets}, 16, 95, 250.
\textsuperscript{90} Daniel Huntington, \textit{Republican Court (Lady Washington’s Reception Day)}, 1861.
\textsuperscript{91} Elias, 74.
\textsuperscript{92} Sherrill, \textit{Carpets}, 250, also Michel Chevruel, \textit{The Principles of Harmony and the Contrast of Colors and Their Application to the Arts} (London: Bell & Daldry, 1872), iv-xxxii.
At the Exhibition, the carpets hung from nearly every stall and could be found in almost every department. It would have been impossible for Stewart to ignore their prominence. Gobelin tapestries were on display at the Exhibition in the French area. Axminsters, some of which decorated the floors of Buckingham Palace and other royal residences before being brought forth to the public were hanging everywhere in the British section. There were carpet manufacturers from the towns of Axminster and Kidderminster, carpets from Bright and Company near Macclesfield, Templeton of Glasgow, Crossleys from Halifax, Lapworth of London, and Jackson and Graham, who “employ artists of no common order to furnish them with design.” Through Gobelin’s and Great Britain’s experiments into the science of color—the makers of these carpets were able to weave together colors more vibrant and stunning in ways that had never before been done. Carpets were art which one could stand on.93

But what must have further intrigued Stewart was in the American section of the exhibition: Erastus Bigelow’s power-loom. Bigelow’s loom was capable of weaving two-ply ingrain carpets, which had hitherto been woven by handloom, and had increased output threefold. Bigelow also had invented a power loom for weaving pictorial tapestries and velvet tapestry carpets—faster and with more integrity of design and color than every before.94 Certainly, Stewart spied a revolution in carpeting—a carpet trade which would outdo any that had gone before in terms of volume—but the British were well ahead of him. Great Britain had already bought up Bigelow looms, years before Bigelow started producing his own carpets in America. The Crossleys of Halifax, for example, had secured an exclusive with Bigelow.95 Soon Great Britain was turning out the highly prized and pedigreed Crossleys, Kidderminsters, Grosvenors and Axminsters at a greater rate than

ever before. So Stewart returned to the United States at the end of that year, and as newspaper clips show, thousands of yards of carpet followed.  

The Exhibition was covered widely in American newspapers. Soon after his return to the United States, Stewart capitalized on the publicity and placed large ads in newspapers nationwide promising Axminster and Kidderminster carpeting. In addition to ads, hundreds of newspapers in all parts of the country carried news about Stewart’s latest commissions for private or public institutions. Stewart was selling not just to New Yorkers, but distributing nationwide, benefitting from two new changes in the country— the railroads which could transport his carpets and the new boom in purpose built hotels—both changes surging about this time.

“The Bridal chamber of the St. Nicholas Hotel in the most beautiful apartment that can be conceived of has been furnished with carpeting by A. T. Stewart,” crooned the Plattsburgh Republican. “The merchant prince of New York had a carte blanche to fit it up in whatever fashion he desired.”

“The Paris house of A.T. Stewart received orders for the refurnishing of the White House,” reported the Cleveland Plain Dealer. “The French, used to vast sums spent of state palaces are quite mortified at what they consider the insignificance of the appropriation, (yet) supporters say the purchase was “simple yet elegant.”

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96 In 1833, 300,000 yards of carpet were shipped to America, in 1870 that amount had grown to seven million yards and Stewart was one of the largest importers, according to Encyclopedia Britannica, (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica Supplement, 1891), 94-95; “Ad” New York Herald, April 19, 1858.

97 Stewart and other smaller carpet sellers had advertised Axminster carpets before the Exhibition. Even in the late 18th century, the name “Axminster” had begun to refer to all carpets made in the town of Axminster. Most likely, the carpets of the British Royal family were made at the original Axminster factory. Sherrill, Carpets, 250; “Ad,” New York Herald, April 19,1858, 2; “Ad,” New York Tribune, April 27, 1858, 42.

98 “Item” Plattsburgh Republican, February 2, 1853, 3.

“The Metropolitan Hotel has just opened in New York,” reported the *Boston Daily Atlas*, “with drapery and carpeting imported by A. T. Stewart.” The *Daily Missouri Democrat* recorded that Stewart had a $100,000 contract with the new Southern hotel, and this last figure may seem spurious. The finest British carpet yardage—made and imported in 27 inch strips—was five to ten dollars a yard, specifically if you were carpeting with Wiltons and Axministers as was reported. Stewart would have to have supplied a large percentage of imported British carpeting in that one hotel.

It was also a sign of the times that The *Plattsburgh Republican* continued its story by saying the entire idea of a Bridal Chamber was entirely too distasteful. And several newspapers refuted the White House story, saying that the carpets were indeed being made by Stewart, but in the United States on Stewart’s machines. In newspapers at that time, it didn’t matter that at that time Stewart did not have any carpet manufacturing facilities at all.

Still, it was clear that Stewart has made his imprint on carpeting and his success as a carpet dealer extended to the shipping industry through the Stewart “Maritime Department.” One writer first criticized “Prince Albert’s Bazaar,” as he called the London Exhibition, and went on to extoll Stewart’s commerce:

> The accomplishments of the managers of that mammoth show do not equal the individual receipts of our friend and neighbor (A. T. Stewart.) These considerations were suggested by the answer to a question put to a gentleman on board of the steamer “Golden Gate.” The question was “Who furnished you?” The answer, “A. T. Stewart and Company…” Then the following names were modestly mentioned as those being furnished by the same house: “Illinois,” “Pioneer” “City of Pittsburgh,” “Texas” “Emily Francis” “Hornet” “Comet, and others, the amount of furnishings which will probably be accomplished will be ten thousand dollars each. You ask, how is this all accomplished? We answer, on the same principle that Napoleon accomplished all his wondrous works…Let the above facts hint at the national greatness to which we are all growing.”

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The writer could not have known that Stewart’s success in the carpet industry was a direct result of Prince Albert’s Bazaar.

Many of these accounts stress that Stewart was given “carte blanche” or were fitted up in “the best style of Stewart.” Although Stewart’s ads for retail mentioned Axminsters, Brussels and “Turkey” carpets, items rarely referred to the makers, preferring to give credit exclusively to Stewart’s fine taste. Stewart, it was assumed, determined the look of the environment he was commissioned to furnish. When Stewart installed the carpets for the steamer, “The City of Hartford,” under the direction of his Maritime Department head A J Strickland, “it was splendidly fitted up in the style of A. T. Stewart.” Stewart was hired, or at least given credit for, the interior design.

Although some articles could have been “unpaid advertisements” or simple puffery, it hardly matters. What mattered is that readers wanted to know about carpets and in particular about carpets chosen and laid by A.T. Stewart. Throughout this decade, one could tell how well Stewart’s business was doing by the numbers of ads he for carpet “upholsterers” or installers. During the panic of 1857, for example, ads for carpet installers seemed to be on the decline. By 1858, Stewart’s ads for installers had risen, and no longer was he advertising sales. Economic historian Harry Resseguie reported that Stewart’s customs duties were the highest of any New York importer, and by 1860, they averaged $30,000 a day. Although that figure seems high, Stewart’s wholesale and retail volume averaged $50 million or more annually, and rarely did a ship come in without goods shipped for Stewart. A great percentage of that volume was in carpets. By 1860, it was true that many of the best homes, public facilities, and ships were furnished by the merchant prince.

Carpet journals sprang to keep merchants abreast of sales, and to teach dealers the finer points of carpeting. They read like combination trade and art journals and were read by the public, too.

105 “Ads,” The New York Tribune, May 1 and 18, 1858. Stewart placed ads for “layers,” “installers” and “sewers,” workers who would take the yardage and make a full carpet for a room or even for wall to wall.
106 Resseguie, Department Store, 317.
“The carpet is to the room exactly what the background is to the picture,” one article instructed. “It throws up the whole effect, the main features and their suggestions...the moment it becomes the least bit obtrusive or in the least noticeable it becomes vulgar and disagreeable...”

As the unknown author who extolled Stewart’s many accomplishments rightly pointed out, the above facts did hint at “the national greatness towards which we were all growing.” As hotels and shipbuilding signified the country’s growth, carpeting, specifically Stewart’s carpets, could be seen as a barometer of progress. As the millions of yards of carpets which entered the country each year were reported to be installed in various new public institutions, private homes and vessels, readers also became aware of the growth of the construction and shipping industry, the need for new labor to install these carpets, and their country’s bustling economy. One could say that carpets—despite being largely imported—became part of our country’s nationalistic fervor.

One did not have to look far to see how that nationalism played out. Many prominent Stewart customers were standard bearers of Americanism. The wife of the nation’s President, Mary Todd Lincoln purchased carpeting for the East Room of the White House from Stewart, along with many thousands of dollars of clothing and ornaments. Frederic Church, the painter and established leader of the Hudson River School, did business with Stewart when he was designing his home, Olana, in Hudson, New York. When they began decorating Olana, Church and his wife Isabel had recently returned from the Middle East, where they had acquired objects to fill this enormous home, and gave special attention to detail to their grand entry or “Court Hall.” Frederic and Isabel liked to entertain, and each object at Olana was chosen to delight the Churches and their visitors, from the mosaics so prized in Damascus and now in the Church home, to the mirrored surfaces and wall

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107 Carpet Trade Review, 4, 1877, 19
108 “Imports,” Carpet Trade Review, 9, 1878, 11; The Encyclopedia Britannica Supplement, (1888, 1891) 9, also reports that carpet imports had risen from 300,000 yards in 1833 to over 7 million in 1870.
109 Voorsanger,149.
ornamentation, to the Eastern inspired ornamental decorative paint patterns on the walls, all further illuminated by the large windows which, from Court Hall, offered a panoramic view of the Shawangunk Mountains. To ground this dazzling profusion of sights, the Churches ordered a simple “Arabesque” vine pattern, most likely a Wilton, from Stewart and had it installed wall-to-wall, a look that would not compete but only enhance their treasures. One can see the echo of a Turkey carpet in the almost abstract pattern, pulling carpet making full circle. It is interesting to note, that Church, known for his taste, invited Stewart’s input on carpeting. A letter from Stewart to Church, held in Church’s archives suggests that Stewart was advising Church on carpet patterns and styles.110

The carpeting that Stewart did install at Olana seemed to be making the rounds. The United States Senator from Minnesota, Alexander Ramsey, purchased the same pattern as Church. Of all the carpet patterns Stewart sold, it is odd that two disparate people chose the same type, and one wonders if Stewart simply had a bit extra on hand. Stewart had political connections, many from his dealings across the country, and it is likely he knew Ramsey on a personal basis.111 As seen from an early mail order receipt, Ramsey’s wife, Anna ordered and received the carpeting and a number of other furnishings from Stewart, including furniture in the Renaissance Revival fashion. Although Stewart did not carry furniture in his store, he was still happy to acquire it and sell it at a profit.112

Soon after, Stewart retained the services of Joseph Jagger, a veteran of the Halifax and Kidderminster factories, intending to make him head of the largest carpet making facility in the United States, his new factory in Groverville.113 Stewart also trademarked his own design.114 He was still relying predominantly on imported products, but Stewart distinctly

110 Olana site visit, Frederic Church archives, Hudson, New York. Old photographs reveal that Church, in the style of the day, added turkey runners on top of the Wilton. Interestingly, Church appears to have asked Stewart for advice on additional carpeting. In a response to his inquiry, Stewart wrote, with a bit of a chill, that there would be no more carpeting suitable for his home.

111 Ramsey was Senator during Ulysses S. Grant’s Presidency. When Grant became President, he appointed A.T. Stewart Secretary of the Treasury. Stewart was forced to resign due to conflict of interests. See Flake’s Bulletin, March 20, 1869, 2

112 “A. T. Stewart bill of sale,” Ramsey Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society

113 American Carpet and Upholstery Journal, April 10, 1908, 67.

claimed carpeting as something American, something that signified progress, and something—with his new stamp of approval—a trademarked Stewart carpet—that he best could provide. Perhaps designed for the upcoming Philadelphia Centennial, Stewart’s carpet design was nothing if not patriotic:

A. T. Stewart and Co-Trade-Mark for Carpets-Registered November 2, 1875:

“The pictorial representation of an eagle with uplifted wings, placed over a sunburst, with a bundle of arrows in one of his talons and a branch on the other, and the motto, “Forward” on a ribbon underneath, with the words “E Pluribus Unum,” on a narrow ribbon on his beak.”

Last Words

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the connections between Stewart’s business affairs and his art collecting though there are many. Stewart used his European connections to build up a vast collection of French art, including works by Gerome, Bougereau, Bonheur and Meissonier. Stewart was also in close contact with New York’s leading artists, belonging to the same clubs and associations which they did. He participated in exhibitions and dinners and special occasions to honor illustrious members not only of the artistic community but also of the city’s intellectuals. However, one cannot resist noting that despite the proximity of Stewart’s businesses to the art institutions of the day, and his connections to artists such as Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and the other artists who were so often in the immediate orbit of Stewart’s stores, Stewart dealt primarily at auctions and through dealers, predominantly Avery and Goupil. 116 Perhaps he insisted on separating business and pleasure.

One can also not resist suggesting that his first encounter with Goupil et Cie was on the site of his new “Iron Palace.” Goupil’s business was the very last on the block which stretched from ninth to tenth street—and Stewart waited patiently for him to vacate. 117 Although he frequently attended shows at the National Academy and knew its president, the artist Daniel Huntington, Stewart was reported to have purchased Huntington’s The Republican Court (Lady Washington) in 1865 from the Dusseldorf Gallery. 118 One wonders who advised Stewart on the Huntington. In the painting, George and Martha Washington are central figures, but the court and the clothing are reminiscent of a European court, with both neoclassical and rococo ornamentation. It seems to be the prominent fully

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116 Elias mentions Bierstadt twice: first to say that he always attended Stewart’s Sunday night dinners, second to say that he was in attendance at dinner on the night Stewart died. For Stewart’s acquisition of art through Goupil, see Leanne Zalewski, “The Golden Age of French Academic Painting: 1867-1893” (PhD. Diss., City University of New York, 2009) 34-65; also Goupil et Cie stock books, Series 1, Livre 1, 2, 3, 4 getty.edu, through Thomas Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.


118 “Item,” Lowell Daily Citizen, October 10, 1865.
carpeted floor—carpeting looking suspiciously like an Axminster—which led Stewart’s purchase. Stewart’s desire to purchase Hiram Powers Greek Slave most likely dates back all the way to London’s Great Exhibition, when he likely had first seen it exhibited—behind a red curtain. When Stewart finally purchased it, through the dealer Gambart, restrictions on viewing women’s bodies had been loosened—partially through the advent of department stores and the emergence of women onto the city streets—and Stewart joked that he would exhibit his new statue in the department store.119

One documented purchase directly from an artist was in his purchase of his Meissonier’s Friedland. A letter dated 1875 from Jean Louis Ernest Meissonier to “My Dear Mr. Stewart,” grieves the final separation of artist from his painting, long in the making, but takes solace in its ending up in the hands of his “friend.” One doesn’t know if Meissonier had ever met Stewart.120

However, Stewart indirectly and directly helped introduce European art to America, and American art to France. In 1867, as a commissioner for Paris’ Universelle Exposition, Stewart used his position to put Samuel Avery on the selection committee for American art for the show. This would be Avery’s first trip to Europe. Avery’s diaries reveal that not only did he make connections on that trip, but he met with Stewart’s art “agent” on trips hence. Avery no doubt would have made strong European connections at some point, but Stewart first helped him get there.121

120 American Art Association, Catalog.
121 Samuel P. Avery, Samuel P. Avery Diaries, iv- xii.
It is odd, and a bit sad to ponder Stewart’s relationships with the artists whose company he chose to keep, and whose art he loved. Albert Bierstadt, for instance was at Stewart’s home for dinner almost week, and was even there on the night of Stewart’s death. But Bierstadt made it his business to know those with the deepest pockets. Frederic Church was buying carpets from Stewart, and Church’s archives show that at one point, Stewart owed Church $10,000, most likely for an undisclosed work of art, but Church had never invited Stewart to his home.\textsuperscript{122}

One can see that on one occasion, Stewart’s business intersected with his private life; and his work as a merchant with that of an art collector. In 1874, he travelled with his wife Cornelia, a teenage Roland Knoedler, and Henry Hilton to Paris to go to the latest exhibition at the Salon.\textsuperscript{123} On his way back he stopped to persuade a prominent carpetmaker who also held the patent for an even faster box loom to leave his Kidderminster factory and work at Stewart’s new carpet mills in upstate New York, in the town of Glenham. This new carpet factory would be the largest carpet mill in America.\textsuperscript{124} However, Stewart died the next year, and when his art works went to auction, and his business went to ruin, people across the country wondered how the man who had become such a towering figure in commerce, a leader in the landscape and hardscape of the city, and an astute collector of fine art could leave his entire fortune in disarray, and leave this earth with no legacy. But Stewart’s original Marble Palace still stands, the exterior and marble columns intact on Chambers Street.\textsuperscript{125} His carpeting survives across the country. As for his art, one might

\textsuperscript{122} Authors such as Elias talk about Bierstadt’s and Stewart’s relationship, but in accounts about their interchanges, Stewart’s hospitality is never reciprocated. Church kept voluminous correspondence detailing dinners and guests at various parties. Never is Stewart mentioned at these fetes, although the debt is mentioned in a letter to Osborn. January 14, 1870.
\textsuperscript{123} “Passengers” \textit{New York Times}, September 17, 1874.
\textsuperscript{124} “Item” \textit{American Carpet and Upholstery Journal}, April 10. 1908, 66.
\textsuperscript{125} Site visit, Nov.12, 2016, Dec. 16, 2016.
look to the death of another leading art collector, one in France, for an answer. When he died in 1896, Edmond de Goncourt, left behind his final testament. “My will is that my drawings, my prints, my bibelots, my books, in a word the art objects that made the happiness in my life, be not coldly entombed in a museum and meet the stupid gaze of indifferent passers-by, and I request that they all be auctioned and scattered, so that the pleasure I found in acquiring each of them be given again.”

Today, however, one can admire the rows of gleaming 19th century white Renaissance Revival structures which line many streets of lower Manhattan near Stewart’s first store, or take pleasure by sinking into the warmth and the lushness of a well made carpet, or slip on a pair of nicely cut kid gloves, and benefit from Stewart’s legacy–most often without knowing.

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Figure 1: Thomas Rossiter, *Alexander Turney Stewart*, 1865, Courtesy of The Incorporated Village of Garden City
Figure 2: Childe Hassam, *The Manhattan Club*, (Stewart Mansion) 1891, Courtesy of Santa Barbara Museum of Art
Figure 3: *Broadway and Chambers Street* c. 1850 showing “The Marble Palace”

Lithograph, Eno Collection,

New York Public Library
Figure 4: *The Lelia in Godey's Lady's Book*

June 1860, 60
Figure 5: *The Sewing Room at A. T. Stewart’s*, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper
April 24, 1865
Figure 6: Erastus Salisbury Field, *Joseph Moore and His Family*, 1839, courtesy of Museum of Fine Art, Boston
Figure 7: Daniel Huntington, The Republican Court or Lady Washington’s Reception Day, 1861
Figure 8: *Court Hall*, with reproduction “Arabesque” carpet, Frederic Church Estate, Olana, photograph courtesy of Olana.
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