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Fashioning Desire at B. Altman & Co.: Ethics and Consumer Culture in Early Department Stores

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FASHIONING DESIRE AT B. ALTMAN & CO.:
ETHICS AND CONSUMER CULTURE IN EARLY DEPARTMENT STORES

by

TESSA MAFFUCCI

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

2016
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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

Fashioning Desire at B. Altman & Co.:
Ethics and Consumer Culture in Early Department Stores

by

Tessa Maffucci

Advisor: Eugenia Paulicelli

We live in an age of fast fashion. Clothing is produced in greater volumes than ever before and the lifecycle of each garment keeps getting shorter and shorter. Many items are manufactured to be worn only one time and then thrown away—as disposable as a cup of coffee. There is much to be learned about our current fashion ecosystem by looking into the past. Beyond the garments themselves we must understand the larger historical and sociological context in which these articles of clothing were produced. How does the shopping environment shape the buying habits and fashion trends of an era? How does that system inform the worn identities of the individuals operating within it? The experiential quality of department stores has been eclipsed by consumer demands for faster, cheaper, and more convenient products, but e-commerce has yet to find a way to deliver the delicious and tactile experience of shopping. Did the mass culture of the early 20th century prefigure the fashion industry as it exists today? Can ethical business practices co-exist with modern fashion?
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1. INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is to explore the origins of mass-produced fashion culture through the lens of the department store, specifically the New York City department store B. Altman & Co., the edifice of which still stands at 365 Fifth Avenue. B. Altman was selected because its founder, Benjamin Altman, held uniquely progressive views for his time, advocating for shorter workdays, profit sharing business models, and commitment to the public good.¹ Altman, like his competitors and peers at other leading department stores, oversaw an era of transformation in the way Americans shopped, and was pivotal in effecting this change. At the turn of the 20th century, the Second Industrial Revolution was in full swing, and advancements in garment manufacturing and production, coupled with an enormous expansion of the U.S. transportation system, opened the door to an unprecedented rate of fashion consumption, which has only continued to accelerate throughout the last century. Together with innovations in dyeing techniques and the rise of merchandising and display, these early days of department store shopping worked to capitalize not only on newfound forms of desire, but also on a cultural shift that legitimated the having of those desires. Altman, like many of the other “merchant princes” of the early department stores, did not see any moral ambiguity in remolding desire to encourage consumption. Despite Altman’s philanthropic and socially conscious outlook he, like the others, worked to separate his customers from the social power that, as Marx said, each individual carries in his (or more accurately her) pocket.²

Early department stores created a space of luxury and desire for all shoppers, but specifically targeted women who were newly empowered in the marketplace to shop
independently without a male chaperone. The retailers saw this shift and worked to make shopping an entertaining and social experience tailored to women’s wants and needs. Selling was transformed into an art, highlighted by the theatrical performances and fashion shows that began to take place in department stores. These spaces were glittering palaces of colors and mirrors, glamorously illuminated with newly available electrical lighting. Altman’s flagship store on Fifth Avenue featured several lavish waiting rooms for his customers, including a writing room reserved exclusively for female clients where they could rest in luxurious blue velvet armchairs, correspond from mahogany writing desks, or make calls in private telephone booths. The entire experience of B. Altman & Co. was designed to make the shoppers feel pampered. Shopping was no longer a chore, but, as Thorstein Veblen observed, a social experience of leisure and luxury. Although some of the merchandise at B. Altman was priced prohibitively, the store did not cater only to the wealthy and elite of New York. The department store model functioned on a basis of inclusivity—all were welcome to come marvel at the displays and the goods. Department stores offered the first mass manifestation of aspirational shopping. For those who could not afford items such as a $40 ostrich fan (approximately $975.00 in today’s dollars) there were smaller and more accessible items available for purchase. Those with little disposable income could still buy into this lavish dream—and for those who wanted more there was the burgeoning credit industry, which Altman and his fellow department store owners fully embraced.

Although the grand emporiums no longer exist as they did in the early 20th century, the legacy of mass culture consumer fashion continues to drive the way we shop and think about our clothing.
2. ARISTOCRATIZED DESIRE

On July 12, 1840, Benjamin Altman was born in New York City to Philip and Celia Friedsam Altman, Jewish immigrants from Memmelsdorf, Bavaria. The Altmans had arrived in New York around 1836 to escape economic hardship and persecution in Germany. Throughout his childhood, Benjamin Altman worked in his father’s dry goods store on the Lower East Side. By the time he was around twelve years old, he had left school to help his father and older brother Morris run the shop. Both William Leach in *Land of Desire* (1993) and Leon Harris in *Merchant Princes* (1994) have noted the unique business acumen that these German immigrants brought to the American commercial landscape, with Harris noting that “The Kaiser had perhaps made more merchants than the Harvard School of Business.” Leach links the development of multi-use spaces for consumer pleasure to the German concept of *Gemütlichkeit*, a way of living that makes room for comfort and pure relaxation. To German Americans, the United States was missing a *gemütlich* quality—Americans seemed unable to relax and enjoy themselves, especially in public. German immigrants relied on public festival culture to strengthen the community they built amongst themselves, but they were sharply aware of a perceived lack of sociability and recreation in America on the whole. Leach notes one German American immigrant in 1846 who complained that “Doing business and praying are the highest moments of the modern republican, the American cannot get enthusiastic about anything. He can’t even enjoy himself.” As German festival culture began to permeate the mainstream, it encouraged all Americans to appreciate relaxation and taking pleasure in beauty and sensory enjoyment. This tradition
of comfort and entertainment was not yet incorporated into consumer institutions, but it laid the foundation for the palaces of desire that were to come.

**From Humble Origins**

In addition to working in his father’s store, Altman clerked at Hart & Dettlebach, a proto department store in Newark, New Jersey, for one dollar per week during his teenage years. In this job he worked alongside Lyman G. Bloomingdale, later of Bloomingdale’s, and Abraham Abraham, later of Abraham & Straus. Both Bloomingdale and Abraham came from Jewish Bavarian heritage, like Altman, and many of Altman’s future peers in the department store world were also of German ancestry, including John Wanamaker and Adam Gimbel. This small community of merchants was alternately collaborative and highly competitive.

In 1863, when Benjamin Altman was 23, his father passed away, leaving him and his older brother Morris to run the family dry goods store, then located at 258 Delancey Street. Within two years, both sons had opened their own retail locations. Benjamin Altman’s store, located at 39 Third Avenue on the Lower East Side, was named Dry Goods & Fancy, a prescient acknowledgement of the imaginative spectacles which were to come in the retail industry. Morris Altman had meanwhile opened his store, called Altman & Brother, at 331 Sixth Avenue near what is now Washington Square Park. The stores were roughly a fifteen-minute walk from each other and the brothers worked in partnership, with each listed on record as part owner in the other’s store. Within a few years, both businesses had expanded to include the properties next door, their success likely bolstered by the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the post-Civil War
years. By the early 1870s, the Altmans had closed the Third Avenue location to focus their efforts on the developing Sixth Avenue shopping district. Benjamin assumed operations at 331 and 333 Sixth Avenue, while Morris focused on their next venture—a new store to be built even further uptown, in a district that was to become known later as The Ladies’ Mile.

In April of 1872, an advertisement from The New York Times lists the 331 Sixth Avenue property now as B. Altman & Co., enumerating in an advertorial tone:

Tuesday last, B. Altman & Co., of No. 331 Sixth-avenue, displayed their tastefully arranged selection of Spring and Summer goods for the inspection of their numerous customers. Some extremely fashionable suits attracted much attention; while Llama lace in all the new designs for shawls, sacques and overdresses combined to render their show-rooms very attractive. Ladies underclothing in linen, cambric and muslin was shown in great variety, with pretty Nilsson and Dolly Varden white Swiss aprons of the coquettish pattern. An extensive assortment of striped and fine checked Japanese silks are offered at low prices, while an excellent quality of black gros-grain silk is sold at a price within the means of all who desire to appear in a toilet always neat, elegant and genteel. In the plainer dress goods poplinette, pongees, foulard and baleins hold a prominent place; they wash and iron like linen, but look much better than that material when made up. Gloves, ties, collars, hosiery, &c., are shown in all the novelties, Dolly Varden reigning supreme, in these as well as in parasols of every pattern. Housekeeping goods are well worthy of inspection, as some of the damask displayed is very unique in design. Russia leather predominates in traveling-bags, portmonnaies and fans, the latter being very desirable for the coming warm weather.13

Here, again, Altman anticipates aspects of modern shopping which were not yet commonplace in the 1870s. Shopping for clothing is seen today as largely a recreational pursuit, rather than an arduous task. We expect retailers to cater to our desires and play on our fantasies and imaginations. Everything from the visual display of goods to emulation in the form of acquisition, seen now in the form of celebrity endorsement, is
prefigured, if subtlety, in the passage above. Altman’s emphasis on display and attraction is especially noteworthy, evidenced by adjectives such as “elegant,” “genteel,” and “desirable.” The mention of “Dolly Varden” references a Charles Dickens character, which briefly led fashions during this time, while “Nilsson” refers to Christina Nilsson, a Swedish opera singer and countess who also inspired fashion trends. While iconic figures have influenced fashion since time immemorial, what is unique here is that mass market fashion was beginning to capitalize on aspirational dressing. In addition to this wish-inducing language, Altman also makes sure to note the variety of goods offered and the affordability of his pricing. These aspects together define modern fashion marketing—aspiration and accessibility paired together to drive consumption.

“Openings” and Spectacle

Altman was not alone in his early fashion marketing tactics—the B. Altman & Co. mention is followed by similar items from Bradbury Brothers, Wilson & Greigs, and Erich’s Temple of Fashion. These retailers had to tread carefully, however, because advertising had not yet become an accepted practice. Visual advertising especially was seen as vulgar, equated with the artifice and double-dealing showmanship of the circus, as opposed to the high culture of art and fashion, which was largely measured against, and borrowed from, the European capitals. The text cited above comes from a column titled “Spring Openings,” which was likely purchased collectively by the four retailers from a broker who acquired space in the newspaper, so that businesses could announce their goods in an understated way. The fact that Altman got top billing and the most real estate in the column suggests that he likely paid the largest share, again showing the dual
forces of collaboration and competition that were at play among the department store retailers.

Openings were a tactic of enticement that the early department stores employed to pull swarms of shoppers through their doors. By the 1870s, as the publication of *The New York Times* review demonstrates, these events had become widespread in retailing practice. Whereas previously individuals purchased, or made for themselves, new clothing on an as-needed basis, customers could now expect openings in the spring and fall, as well as at Christmastime. The timing was not arbitrary. In an age without air conditioning, the summer months saw a sharp decrease in shopping, especially the non-essential leisure shopping that department stores relied on and worked to encourage. The spring and fall openings were designed to generate interest in the fashions necessary for those seasons. They were also social events, heavily covered by the press, as evidenced by an 1887 review in *The New York Times*, titled “Delighting Female Eyes,” which states that “every fashionable woman in town attended the Fall opening of B. Altman & Co.” By the 1890s, a generally accepted calendar of sales rounded out the annual cycle of fashion merchandising.

Christmas spectacle epitomized these retailers’ new and unique marketing tactics, with the Christmastime events created for the enjoyment of children. Department stores recognized that these children would be their future customers, so they worked to cater to their whims and desires, just as they did for their adult clientele. Additionally, the retailers saw that entertainment for children also attracted mothers, crucial because the majority of department store shoppers were women. A trade catalog named *Toys and*
Novelties stated it bluntly: “Every attention shown to the child binds the mother to the store.” 17 The Christmas openings continued to become more and more elaborate, with extravagant decorations, parades, and music—by the 1920s and 30s the character of Santa Claus was thoroughly embedded with consumer culture and department store shopping. Jan Whitaker, in her book The World of Department Stores, notes that “the jolly man’s seasonal reign was extended to include photo sessions, parties, and breakfasts and lunches with the children.” Santa also kept up with the latest modes of transportation, “landing on store roofs in a dirigible or helicopter.” 18 Both Whitaker and Leach have theorized about the use of religious iconography for trade purposes. Leach asserts that before the 1890s, Santa Claus was a figure only recently established in the private bourgeois home, but that over time the use of Santa for commercial purposes gave public form to certain Christmas rituals. By the 1920s Santa’s position was secure. John Wanamaker, a devout Presbyterian and owner of Wanamaker’s department store, used Santa aggressively in his marketing, to the point where a local minister complained about the practice, but Wanamaker brushed aside the minister’s concern, replying: “Young people very early grow to understand that [Santa Claus] is a mere pleasantry and tradition. I do not believe that it detracts from the story of the coming of Christ.” 19 Although Benjamin Altman was not Christian himself, he clearly shared Wanamaker’s outlook that religion and modern commercialism could coexist peacefully. Altman pioneered Christmas-themed window displays in New York City, and the holiday windows remained a major attraction throughout his store’s existence. 20

The Christmastime openings showcase the elaborate spectacle that was to become essential to department store retailing. By the mid-twentieth century, fashions were being
delivered to the stores throughout the year and openings were no longer important as marketing tools, but spectacle and the spring and fall collections remained as important as ever. In New York City, fashion shows and “press week” took up the mantle of fashion showmanship, still intrinsically tied to the machine of the department store.

All this was far in the future when Benjamin Altman put on his Spring Opening in 1872. At this point the spectacle was much narrower in scope, lifeless in comparison to what was to come, but in the 1870s, the idea of openly presenting goods was still new and thrilling for the customer. The Altman brothers’ store at 331-333 Sixth Avenue marked a midway point between their father’s dry goods store in the Lower East Side and the meccas of shopping, which were on the horizon.

*The Ladies’ Mile and The Ladies’ Paradise*

While Benjamin managed their main store, Morris set to work securing another location further uptown. The brothers had selected a site at Sixth Avenue and 19th Street, when Morris, then 39, died suddenly from cholera. His obituary credited him as the founder of the retail trade on Sixth Avenue and commended him for being a strong supporter of the Early Closing Association, which advocated for shorter workdays for retail employees. The obituary also notes that he employed over 200 people at the time of his death and that all of them would be present at his funeral.21

Morris died in July of 1876, and by April of 1877, B. Altman & Co. was opening its new building at Sixth Avenue and 19th Street. *The New York Times* glowingly reviewed this latest commercial accomplishment, noting that “the increasing prosperity of
this establishment for some years past is fully proved by the construction of this large and beautiful edifice.”

The article continues:

It is four stories high, with basement, and, being built entirely of iron and brick, is perfectly fire-proof. The basement is very light, and divided into departments for receiving and delivering goods, and into machinery and boiler rooms for drying and heating purposes, and for the apparatus connected with the elevator. Then there are separate departments for lunch-rooms, and hat and cloak rooms for the employees. The ground floor is for general dry goods, comprising dress-goods, laces, ribbons, fans, silks, sunshades, and fancy articles of every description. The second floor is devoted to the suits, and to ladies’ and children’s undergarments. The third floor is divided into pretty and comfortably furnished rooms for fitting customers, &c. Part of the floor is used for the reserved stock of merchandise of the entire establishment, and for the work room supply department. The fourth floor is taken up by the workroom.

In addition to outlining the individual departments that gave their name to the department store, this article also demonstrates how these mega-retailers took the labor of fashion and removed it from the eyes of the consumer. Before the 1880s, there was very little ready-to-wear clothing being sold in the United States—every garment was either made by the wearer herself, or, for the wealthy, made before her eyes by a team of skilled craftspeople. Most women bought the raw materials to make their garments from a variety of small shops and then carried these items away themselves to be constructed in their homes. What department stores aimed to do was to separate the work of fashion from the consumer and present her only with the relaxing pastime of shopping. The foundational design of Altman’s new building segregated the workrooms from the selling floors. Meanwhile, the basement hid the receiving of goods and also elegantly integrated
delivery into the shopping experience. For the consumer, fashion’s work had become invisible and the act of shopping was one of pure pleasure.

It is impossible to discuss the history of department stores without mentioning Émile Zola’s iconic novel The Ladies Paradise (Au Bonheur des Dames), which was published in 1883. Zola’s text, eleventh in his Rougon-Macquart series providing a fictionalized account of a family living during the Second French Empire, is set in a department store, which gives its name to the title of the book and is very clearly modeled after the famous Bon Marché in Paris. The Bon Marché is widely considered to be the first department store in the world, dating from 1852 when Aristide Boucicaut took over the shop where he worked and introduced a flamboyant new style of marketing. His marketing techniques, together with the then uncommon practices of fixed prices and buying in bulk, allowed him to generate substantial revenue while selling goods at very low profit margins. This same model was to be employed by Altman and the other American retailers, who built on Boucicaut’s techniques and continued to evolve them, with marketing tactics becoming ever more extravagant and prices ever lower. The question of origin and which retailer innovated first is perhaps less important than the confluence of events that brought about the rise of the department store. Without mass production, public transportation, and densely populated urban areas these retailers could not have thrived the way they did.

Zola’s novel brings a haptic quality to the fragments of these early department stores left behind in newspaper clippings and silvering photographs. The Ladies’ Paradise opens with the female protagonist, Denise, stopping short, astonished, in front
of the department store and declaring “that is a shop!”26 She immediately dismisses the small town store where she had worked as the principal draper, she is so in awe of this enormous gilded structure. Throughout the novel shoppers and passersby are intoxicated by the store, mesmerized to the point of being oblivious of everything around them.

Zola immerses the reader in a flow of textures and colors, seen through the eyes of Denise “absorbed by the display” at the main entrance:

There she saw, in the open street, on the very pavement, a mountain of cheap goods—bargains, placed there to tempt the passers-by, and attract attention. Hanging from above were pieces of woollen and cloth goods, merinos, cheviots, and tweeds, floating like flags; the neutral, slate, navy-blue, and olive-green tints being relieved by the large white price-tickets. Close by, round the doorway, were hanging strips of fur, narrow bands for dress trimmings, fine Siberian squirrel-skin, spotless snowy swansdown, rabbit-skin imitation ermine and imitation sable. Below, on shelves and on tables, amidst a pile of remnants, appeared an immense quantity of hosiery almost given away; knitted woollen gloves, neckerchiefs, women’s hoods, waistcoats, a winter show in all colours, striped, dyed, and variegated, with here and there a flaming patch of red. Denise saw some tartan at nine sous, some strips of American vison at a franc, and some mittens at five sous. There appeared to be an immense clearance sale going on; the establishment seemed bursting with goods, blocking up the pavement with the surplus.27

The frenetic activity of The Ladies’ Paradise is seen in sharp contrast to the solemn and musty ground-floor shop of Denise’s uncle, an outdated specialty store selling only clothes and flannels. Uncle Baudu bitterly resents the department store for upsetting the patriarchal order of master and apprentice, as well as for undermining the profitability of his business. At one point Baudu exclaims “Drapers selling fur goods—what a farce!” and his wife chimes in that it is “monstrous” that the department store had “dared to add a glove department!”28 From the viewpoint of Uncle Baudu and the other
small tradesman, The Ladies’ Paradise is a ravenous beast, threatening to swallow up all other industry in its path. Denise, however, is not held in the grip of tradition. The more her uncle rails against the department store, the more attracted she is to it.

Enchantment was the hallmark of the department store on both sides of the Atlantic. A few years before Zola’s novel was published, The New York Times was lauding the new B. Altman & Co. establishment for providing everything “for the accommodation of the ladies.”29 The newspaper fawns over Altman’s “handsome elevator,” a modern innovation and blessing to the delicate female shopper. The architects are complimented for constructing the building with due regard for security and comfort, as well as for arranging the structure so as to allow for “perfect” ventilation and light. After spending several paragraphs detailing the garments available for sale, the author makes sure to note that Altman promises to “keep to the old standard, while making prices lower than ever.”30

Throughout the late-nineteenth century, B. Altman & Co. prospered and the store’s customer base grew dramatically. Altman continually reinvested his profits back into the business, renovating the store several times over the next thirty years, including adding two additional stories onto the building, and frequently transforming the look and feel of the store to outmaneuver his competitors in luxury and grandeur.31 The New York Evening Sun heralded B. Altman & Co. as the “Bon Marché of the New World,” and the store came to be known colloquially as “The Palace of Trade.”32 If the Bon Marché set the global standard on department stores, B. Altman & Co. was certainly a major arbiter of American fashion retailing.
Figure 1: Photograph from 1899 showing B. Altman & Co.’s Sixth Avenue store on the left and Siegel, Cooper and Co. on the right. Altman Foundation private collection.
The Ladies’ Mile district where Altman built his “Palace of Trade” encompassed not only Sixth Avenue, which was known as Fashion Row, but also portions of Broadway and Fifth Avenue stretching from 9th Street all the way up to 25th Street. The 1989 Historic District Designation Report for the Ladies’ Mile describes how Broadway emerged in the 1850s as the city’s most exclusive shopping destination for the “carriage trade,” but in the years following the Civil War, the stretch of Sixth Avenue began to transform into a major shopping street as well.\(^{34}\) In addition to the wealthy and upper class customers who arrived by horse and carriage, there was also increasing traffic from lower class shoppers who arrived at Fashion Row by way of the Sixth Avenue El train, which opened in 1878. Clearly, Benjamin and Morris Altman’s choice of location was no accident. An illustration from a publicity book shows the store with the El bifurcating the building’s Neo-Grec facade—for all of Altman’s elegance and luxury, he strategically positioned his stores to be accessible to customers from all walks of life.\(^{35}\) While Broadway contained smaller specialty shops, often located in converted rowhouses or in the first floor of office buildings, the buildings on Fashion Row were designed from the outset to offer a different form of retail. After Altman built his store in 1877, many others began to follow him to Fashion Row—when Chicago-based department store Siegel, Cooper & Co. decided to open a New York City location in 1896, they elected to construct their building directly opposite B. Altman’s.\(^{36}\) The architecture of Fashion Row reflected the shift in American shopping habits, away from small specialty stores toward behemoth structures of commerce.

Altman’s Sixth Avenue location featured mahogany woodwork, a glass-domed rotunda, and perhaps most importantly, large plate glass windows to display merchandise
Retailers in New York had begun to use glass windows as early as the 1850s, but the modern iteration of the display window did not come about until the mid-1880s. Prior to this retailers often displayed nothing at all, either because of a moral allergy to display or due to the fact that there was no precedent on how to exhibit manufactured goods. However, as the retailing climate became more secular and the competition became more intense, the department stores started showing off their goods in new and tempting ways.

Much like Walter Benjamin’s Paris Arcades, the Ladies’ Mile was a place of wandering and gazing. In addition to the publicized openings, the windows acted as an enticement and an invitation to passersby to come in and experience the merchandise. As early as 1882, B. Altman & Co. departed from the usual custom of holding a Spring opening and instead presented a general exhibition of new goods broadcast to the city through the store’s extravagant show windows. Mentions from The New York Times in the late 1880s describe the power of these windows in detail, under the headings “AS PRETTY AS A PICTURE” and “ART IN A SHOW WINDOW.” Altman was a pioneer in this form of visual merchandizing, using his extensive personal art collection to adorn his shop windows and drive sales. A mention in The New York Times describes one of these art-filled windows, saying:

A group of marble and bronze figures exhibited in a window of B. Altman & Co.’s store, Sixth-avenue and Nineteenth-street, is attracting a great deal of attention from passers-by. The principal pieces are an Egyptian woman, four feet in height, standing on a velvet-covered pedestal in the attitude of speaking, both hands resting on a table; and an Italian boy seated in the act of eating. The other members of the group are smaller statues and busts, representing Arabian and
other national peculiarities. The grouping is remarkably fine, and the exhibition is much admired.\textsuperscript{41}

As this passage demonstrates, it was first in department stores and not in museums that working class Americans were given an opportunity to experience art and distant cultures, albeit through the lens of merchandising and retailing. Altman in particular was conscious of the privilege of experience that his commercial success afforded him and felt a responsibility to share his wealth, both in terms of knowledge and capital fortune, with not only his family members and employees, but also the general public. In a transcribed excerpt from a diary Altman kept during a world tour taken in the late 1880s, one of his rare vacations, he notes that he “should not lose the diaries” not only because he treasures them, but also because he hopes that others might enjoy “some of the treats I had from this pleasure trip.”\textsuperscript{42} In the same diary, in an entry from June 19th, 1889, Altman visits a museum in Tokyo, which he finds “far in advance of our Metropolitan Museum” appreciating among other things the exhibitions of ancient and modern industries.\textsuperscript{43} The Metropolitan Museum of Art had been founded only in 1870, and in this diary entry is a clear sign of Altman’s socially-minded outlook on life. In his will, Altman left the vast majority of his personal art collection to the Metropolitan Museum, which was at the time the largest gift both in breadth and in appraisal value ever received by the museum.\textsuperscript{44}

The museum quality of Altman’s window displays encouraged all onlookers to partake in exotic fantasies and transporting daydreams. Further, the displays emboldened the viewers to come in and touch the merchandise, something which had not been allowed so freely in the past.
The emphasis on accessibility did not come without its problems. During the end of the nineteenth century there was a strong uptick in shoplifting, or at least the reporting of it, which reform-minded individuals attributed to the temptation bred by the new shopping culture. These shoplifters were often upper or middle class women who, if they were caught, claimed delirium induced by the overwhelming display of the goods. One incident from December of 1880 is reported under miscellaneous city news with the heading “The Wife of a Respectable Businessman Accused of Theft.” The woman is described as well-dressed and about 30 years old. She admitted to giving a false name to the police, and when asked what she had to say in her defense burst into tears saying “God only knows how I got into this trouble. I didn’t know what I was doing.” When her friends arrived to bail her out she signed the bail bond “Kittie King.” The shoplifter was in possession of several bundles of goods, which she had purchased, as well as a collection of items that she had stolen—including two lace shawls from B. Altman & Co. and two silk mufflers from Arnold, Constable & Co. The report notes that it was evident that she was not a professional thief. Nonetheless, shoplifting was a problem for the retailers, most of all because they had to deal delicately with the criminals, who were often among their most affluent customers. The displays along Ladies’ Mile were calculated to stir up feelings of desire and encourage impulse purchasing, but when the high-class shoppers turned into kleptomaniacs, a term coined during this era, the retailers often elected to look the other way.
While window displays and an open invitation to handle the goods offered both positive and negative results for the retailers, the burgeoning mail order business was a safe way to extend the reach of desire with very little risk. Altman began distributing his catalog before the famous Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog, if to a smaller and more rarified group of customers—the early Altman catalog was an extension of his customer service for his well-heeled clientele. To ensure prompt delivery of goods to these customers, Altman kept a stable of as many as 500 horses next to his Sixth Avenue store and rented stables in Saratoga Springs and the Hamptons to provide uninterrupted service for his vacationing patrons. The publication focused on the wealthy portion of the shopping
demographic in its early years, but even as circulation grew the catalog continued to operate, like the window displays, on the basis of educating the customer’s desire rather than enumerating a list of the store’s inventory. Unlike the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog, which traded in ordinary and necessary items, the Altman catalog made a point of presenting the extraordinary to its readers. A history of B. Altman & Co., compiled by a long-tenured employee during the early 1940s, points out while discussing the broadening of Altman’s mail order business that “Many of the prosperous, but provincial-minded and plain-living people of that era throughout the United States found that their children were developing standards of education, of culture, and taste, and knowledge of the art of gracious living, to which they had never aspired.”

Whether the department stores were unleashing or capitalizing on these new appetites is up for debate, but what is certain is that experiences that had been reserved for the very few were increasingly, in various forms, becoming accessible to the many.
3. HIDDEN FASHION LABOR

Factory-made clothing first appeared for men in the mid-nineteenth century due to the fact that male styles were less changeable and thus easier to standardize, but women’s ready-to-wear soon followed as sewing machines, pressers, buttonholers, and other machines developed to facilitate production. New York emerged as the center of American ready-to-wear garment manufacturing due to a confluence of reasons. New York City’s superior transportation system, namely the harbor, canal, and rail networks, made it an ideal site for both incoming raw materials and outgoing finished goods. As the financial center of the country, New York also offered ample capital to fund manufacturing endeavors. Added to that was the enormous influx of immigrant labor that filled the ranks of the city’s garment-making workforce. Much of this work, especially during the 1880s and 1890s as demand outpaced the existing production structures, began to take place in sweatshop conditions, either in factories or in the Lower East Side tenements where many of these laborers lived. This was a cause of great concern to reformers, although not out of worry for the wellbeing of the workers, but rather because of a fear that clothing made in dirty and crowded conditions would spread disease to the customers who bought these goods. Most factory production at the time took place in Manhattan in close proximity to the shopping streets and while this made sense logistically, the retailers bemoaned the presence of the predominantly male garment workers in their elite shopping district. Overcrowding became an issue, especially at midday, which was both the prime shopping hour and also the time when garment factories broke for lunch. Again, the work of fashion had to be hidden from the leisure shoppers.
**Altman’s Flagship Store**

As early as 1895, Benjamin Altman began acquiring property for the final relocation of his business. Recognizing that the Ladies’ Mile was becoming increasingly industrialized and commercialized, Altman set about securing his store’s position as one of aspirational luxury, positioned above and yet accessible to the lower classes. Over the next decade he slowly and secretly amassed property on Fifth Avenue and 34th Street in what was then a luxurious residential neighborhood. The Fifth Avenue location was still convenient for shoppers from the Sixth Avenue El, but the strategic genius of Altman’s move became clear in 1902 when plans were announced for Pennsylvania Station at 34th and Seventh Avenue, and again in 1903 when plans were approved for remodeling Grand Central Terminal.

The Fifth Avenue location opened in 1906, after nearly a year of construction. Benjamin Altman’s flagship store was designed in Italian Renaissance style by the architectural firm Towbridge and Livingston, later known for their work on other iconic New York City landmarks including the J.P. Morgan Building on Wall Street and the Hayden Planetarium at the Natural History Museum. The store was constructed to blend in with the lavish residential buildings that surrounded it, to the extent that no signage was featured on the exterior of the department store. In 1915, a twelve-story addition was joined to the Madison Avenue side of the building, expanding the store’s footprint to encompass an entire city block, bounded by Fifth Avenue on the west, Madison Avenue on the east, 34th Street to the south and 35th Street to the north. The tactics of enticement and leisure that Altman had offered at his Ladies’ Mile store were amplified at the Fifth Avenue location. Everything was bigger and more luxurious. The entire experience of
shopping, or even just walking by B. Altman & Co., was designed to stir feelings of aspirational longing for a well-bred, even aristocratic, lifestyle.

Figure 3: B. Altman & Co. Fifth Avenue store. 1914 publicity book.
Figures 4-6: (clockwise from top): B. Altman & Co. Fifth Avenue store women’s shoes, main floor, and elevator bank. 1914 publicity book.56
Figures 7-8: B. Altman & Co. (top) garage and stables; (bottom) delivery department. 1914 publicity book.
The flagship store was made of French limestone, quarried and imported for this express purpose, with corner pavilions, a spacious vestibule, and a marquise entrance extending from the store over the sidewalk to the curb, to accommodate shoppers arriving by carriage or car. A publicity book published by the company in 1914 and titled “B. Altman & Co’s Enlarged Store” outlines, in flattering terms, the majestic qualities of the finished establishment. The book is as much a eulogy to Benjamin Altman as it is a piece of promotional material, since Altman had died before the construction of the Madison Avenue addition was completed. The bombastic language includes such phrases as:

“The evolution of a great city, is, on a less titanic scale, representative of the evolution of the Universe.”

“The concentrated needs, energies, ambitions and endurance of a community, fused together in the melting pot of civic development, result in a gradual building up of a vast commonwealth, imposing in its commerce, splendid in its art, magnificent in its humanitarianism.”

“The greatness of a city is measured always, in the minds of men, by its commercial importance.”

The book goes on to detail how Benjamin Altman was one such man—an individual who, with honesty and integrity, shaped the city to his will. Rising from immigrant poverty through hard work and discipline to create a shopping center that had become “a household word in the world of fashion.” The same 1914 book outlines Altman’s main intention with his retail empire, to build a store where:
Shopping was to become a pleasure, instead of a task; a store in which the patron’s needs were not merely to be supplied, but anticipated; a store in which the personal comfort, not of the patrons only, but of employees also, was to receive the most thoughtful consideration.60

How did Altman and the other merchant princes reconcile their palaces of desire with the needs and desires of the workers who made and sold these dreams? Altman decamped from the Ladies’ Mile as soon as it was tainted by mass culture, yet mass culture was exactly the fantasy he was in the business of selling. The department stores, unlike earlier boutique shops, relied on the crowds that perhaps bought little on an individual scale, but collectively turned over high volumes—the same model on which fashion operates today.

The Fifth Avenue Association

Much like the Ladies’ Mile, the Fifth Avenue shopping district was soon threatened by the encroachment of the very industry that serviced the fashion trade. This time Altman, along with the others who followed him to Fifth Avenue, joined together as the Fifth Avenue Association to push back against the presence of factory workers in their exclusive shopping district. Starting around 1909, the retailers began meeting to discuss how they would handle this intrusion, specifically the “loitering evil” of workers on their midday breaks.61 The Fifth Avenue Association quickly gained the support of leading businessmen and property owners, as well as churches, police, and several political figures, including the Mayor.62 Even labor organizations offered to support the initiative, with a representative of the Amalgamated Garment Cutters Association joining the Fifth Avenue Association and lamenting:
“We have tried to prevent our men from loitering. We simply cannot do it. We have hired lofts as meeting places at the luncheon hour, but the workers prefer the sidewalk.”⁶³

He goes on to explain that part of the reason for the loitering is that many manufacturers lay off workers when the busy production seasons are over and tell their workers to hang around on a nearby corner until more work comes in. Additionally, the noon lunch hour is often an opportunity for tailors to visit the show windows and copy the designs on display. Although copying at this time was not yet seen as an infringement, but rather a necessary part of the production process, the members of the Fifth Avenue Association still reserved the privilege of access to the windows first to the shoppers and second to the workers who made the goods. The same representative of the Amalgamated Garment Cutters Association suggested that the police “can be induced to make the people move off the sidewalks more rapidly than they do at present,” while a representative of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Association suggested that factory workers be asked to walk around Madison and Union Square instead of lingering on Fifth Avenue, and this latter idea was lauded as the most practical solution.⁶⁴ Nowhere was there advocacy for workers’ rights within this conversation.

The Fifth Avenue Association was not concerned only with eliminating the visible presence of workers, they also joined together to beautify their retail quarter in other ways. From the outset there was discussion of managing both human and street traffic, guiding architectural choices, and lighting the storefronts in the evenings—all to increase the pleasure and ease of shopping on “one of the most magnificent streets in the world,” comparing themselves favorably to London’s Bond Street and the Rue de la Paix...
in Paris. Behind all the efforts of these merchants was a deep desire to emulate the regal quality of Europe and transfer a feeling of privileged aristocracy to their clients, amidst the commercial hum of New York City.

By December of 1910, the Fifth Avenue Association was featured in a full-page spread in The New York Times with the heading “TO BEAUTIFY FIFTH AVENUE AND HANDLE ITS TRAFFIC — Concerted Movement is Under Way for the Betterment of the City’s Famous Street.” This article notes the importance of architects in shaping the appearance of the avenue with strategic choices of building materials, planting of trees, installation of window boxes, and how the shop windows are “scientifically illuminated” until midnight to draw out out-of-towners to the street during the otherwise dead hours. The same article also reports that progress is being made on the loitering issue, but that there is still much to be done. Addressing the thousands of garment workers who spill on to the sidewalks at midday, the paper states with some sensitivity:

Efforts to overcome this must be of a tactful and diplomatic character, as they tend to create a class feeling. At first when the matter was in the hands of the police and the gruff “Move on there!” was the method used for clearing the sidewalks, garment workers were wont to believe that the rich wanted Fifth Avenue for themselves, despite the rights of others to use it.

Notwithstanding this acknowledgement of the worker’s needs, at the time of publication it seemed the best solution offered was to rope off areas in Union Square and Madison Square Parks and force the garment workers to congregate there. An update from 1911 on the loitering issue notes that an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 garment workers, specifically in the shirtwaist and suit trades, gather in the Fifth Avenue district
during the busy season, and that the congestion problem is actually worse during the slow seasons when even more unemployed linger on the corners in hope of work.\textsuperscript{67} Eventually the retailers successfully exerted pressure on the manufacturers to relocate entirely, mainly out of fear that factory employees would drive away customers, especially female shoppers who were supposedly frightened by the unkempt male garment workers.

A century later, in a very interesting study titled “The Fabric of New York City’s Garment District,” Andrew S. Dolkart outlines how zoning laws resulting from the Fifth Avenue Association are responsible for the placement and architecture of the Garment District as it is known today. What is pertinent here, however, is that the retailers held immense power in the early 20th century political landscape, while the manufacturers held comparatively little, and the workers significantly less still. The workers were dehumanized in press, their presence referred to as a “nuisance” or an “evil.”\textsuperscript{68} Despite the fact that these garment workers were necessary for the churning forward of mass fashion consumption, the consideration of aesthetics and presentation always took precedent over the needs of the workers, to the extent that one retail representative felt it necessary to point out that:

\begin{quote}
The employees, bending all day over tables and benches in these shops, with big buildings shutting out their light and air, naturally want to get, at the brief noon hour, a glimpse of life and a breath of air, and the avenue gives them this. They have to live and breathe as we do.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

Yet, this seemingly impassioned statement was only a preface for throwing responsibility back on the manufacturers, asserting that they should provide better conditions and
leisure spaces for their workers, so that they would cease to be a plague upon the shoppers.

**The Triangle Fire and the Rights of Fashion Workers**

Awareness of the plight of the garment workers was highlighted, tragically, on the afternoon of March 25, 1911, when a fire started in a rag bin at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, located in the Asch Building at the corner of Washington Square. Although this factory operated far away from the Fifth Avenue shopping district, the possibility that such a fire that could have occurred uptown was not at all remote. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was an anti-union shop, which employed approximately one thousand workers during the busy seasons, subject to the same issues of crowding and hidden labor which were being negotiated on Fifth Avenue. The shirtwaist — or simply “waist” — was a popular fashion item of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a button-down blouse modeled on menswear shirts, but made from fine cotton or linen. The simple design was worn tucked into the waistband of a skirt and sold individually or as an ensemble; although the garments were inexpensive, they were considered very stylish.

Soon, retailers were adding lace and frills to the shirtwaist, embellishing the iconic blouse to keep women buying new iterations of the same garment. One account states: "A very fashionable woman with a half a hundred waists boasts that there are no two alike." In many ways, the shirtwaist was the first embodiment of mass-market fashion in New York City, and around the world. The shirtwaists were modular, replaceable, and trendy—and they were being produced quickly by manufacturers struggling to keep up in a competitive industry with constantly changing styles.
In a 20th-century garment factory, the air would have been filled with combustible fabric dust and highly flammable fabric scraps would have been piled on the floors. When the fire broke out at The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, the workers had only a matter of minutes to escape the flames. Although the practice was illegal, many employers kept exit doors locked to prevent theft and “stealing time,” as well as to keep union organizers away and prevent walkouts. Female garment workers, who were the majority of the workforce in the production of shirtwaists, had attempted to organize against the unsafe and exploitative conditions for decades before the Triangle fire. Their attempts were sporadically covered in the press, though they were often described, like their male counterparts, as labor agitators, socialists, and anarchists. The fact that most garment workers were Jewish and Italian immigrants helped to further this narrative, since many of the women had belonged to labor unions in Europe before immigrating, and were familiar with organized labor tactics. A few American reform journalists, including Helen Campbell and Nellie Bly, wrote investigative articles on the conditions of working women, but their stories were largely relegated to women’s interest and society pages.

All told, 146 individuals died in the Triangle fire, mostly young women. The majority suffocated or burned to death inside the building, and others died trying to use the single fire escape, which quickly collapsed in the heat of the fire. 62 people died by jumping or falling from the burning building, witnessed by a large crowd of bystanders that had gathered on the street. The Triangle fire provided a gruesome and vivid symbol for the American labor movement and, unlike the strike activity, the fire evoked unequivocal public support for the workers. Although the local and national newspapers
covered the story aggressively, the discussion sidestepped issues of labor organization and collective bargaining. Instead, the workers were depicted as helpless victims murdered because the appropriate male authorities had failed to protect them.

Benjamin Altman, unlike many of his peers, was conscious of the plight of the worker in this new fashion system. Although Altman joined in founding the Fifth Avenue Association, he had a long history of caring for workers—at least his own employees. Both Benjamin and his brother Morris had participated in the Early Closing Association, which advocated for shorter workdays for retail employees. Additionally, the brothers were active in the liberal movement, despite, or perhaps because of, their role as wealthy merchants. Morris Altman was an early subscriber and financial supporter of D.M. Bennett’s periodical *The Truth Seeker*, a liberal paper devoted to “freethought, free discussion, liberalism, sexual equality, labor reform, progression, free education, and what ever tends to emancipate and elevate the human race.”

In a note dated September 9, 1873, Morris writes to Bennett:

> Just received your first number. Think highly of it. Call it a first rate paper. Enclosed is my subscription. Send it regularly. I take all liberal papers, as they are needed—the more the better. The tone of *The Truth Seeker* is high and sound. Keep it so. 
> Yours, & co., M. Altman

Perhaps Benjamin was less radical than his brother; there is very little extant documentation on his personal life, but a clear political bent can be gleaned from his actions throughout his lifetime. In keeping with a liberal and progressive-minded outlook, Benjamin Altman established a school on-site at his department store, fully accredited by
the Board of Education, which taught reading, writing, and arithmetic to the younger employees. Even after his brother’s death, Altman continued to support shorter workdays, and also closed his stores on summer Saturdays, so his employees could enjoy free time and even go to the beach—no small thing in an age without air conditioning. Shortened workdays meant limited selling hours and any missed shopping hour was a potential missed opportunity for a sale, especially if another retailer remained open. However, Altman was unique in advocating for limitations on working hours, even when other retailers did not follow suit.

Altman was a nonconformist in his behavior as a member of the moneyed class. He gave extensively to charity throughout his life, but unlike Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, or John D. Rockefeller, Altman actively avoided publicity for his charitable giving. Although he relied on marketing and public attention for the success of his retail business, he saw this as separate from his philanthropic work. He was solitary man who kept few close friends and generally avoided social functions. His personal physician Dr. Bernard Sachs observed after Altman’s death that although his “name was well known through his business and art purchases, I doubt if there were 100 persons in this city who knew him by sight.” His innate modesty and charitable instinct were evidenced in his posthumous giving—in addition to leaving his extensive art collection the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a fact which was not known publicly until the reading of his will, Altman also gave generous gifts to every one of his employees. Several of his long-term employees were given shares of capital stock in the corporation of B. Altman & Co., with Altman stating in his will that he was “desirous in showing [his] appreciation of the faithful services of the said persons, and of securing to them the fruits of their industry.”
This type of profit-sharing arrangement was unusual at the time, as it was far more common for businesses to be handed down through a line of family ownership, much like the arrangement that Morris and Benjamin found themselves in when their father died, leaving them the dry goods store on Delancey Street. However, since Benjamin Altman had no direct heirs of his own, his employees took on that role.

Michael Friedsam had been Altman’s right hand man since the 1870s and was the clear successor to lead the B. Altman & Co. business after Altman’s death. Friedsam had been responsible for running the store during the last years of Altman’s life, while the founder kept a close eye on operations from his home. In his will Altman left Friedsam all the contents of his library, as well as his personal photographs, diaries, and a large selection of his furniture and home goods. Although Friedsam was Altman’s cousin, the relationship was that of protégé and mentor, or even one of father and son. While other leading retailers, such as John Wanamaker, had groomed their sons to take over their businesses, Altman’s approach shared the legacy of his company among the employees who had helped to build it. In addition to the employees who received capital stock, sums were given to all remaining employees on the basis of their years of service. Altman felt that all his employees were responsible for his success and wanted to show appreciation to each and every one of them.

In the eulogy for Benjamin Altman given by Dr. Bernard Sachs, he describes the retailer as an “exacting general” in his business, but also asserts that Altman’s “employees were his children on upon whom he bestowed parental care.” This blurring between family and employee is taken up by Jeanne Abrams, in her comprehensive
article on Benjamin Altman’s life and legacy. She suggests that Altman’s progressive views on employee welfare could perhaps have been drawn from his cultural heritage and German traditions of paternalism. In his personal life, despite having no children of his own, Altman was the financial caregiver to his ten nieces and nephews. After his brother’s death in 1876 he took on responsibility for Morris’ four children. Altman was already financially responsible for his sister’s six children, since her husband had been murdered in 1869 by members of the Ku Klux Klan, while he was operating a branch of the Altman Brothers’ store in Marianna, Florida. This fatherlike capacity, coupled with a profound sense of responsibility, seemed to be the motive that informed his treatment of his workers.
Altman believed that happy employees made the best workers, which was not contradictory to his charitable aims, but certainly oriented his employee welfare programs toward results-driven initiatives. The Fifth Avenue flagship store was the first department store to offer subsidized meals to its employees in their own cafeteria. The entire twelfth floor of the Fifth Avenue flagship store was reserved for the exclusive use of the employees, with separate lunchrooms for male and female employees, the kitchen that served the subsidized meals, and private bathrooms. The eleventh floor included a “recreation room” for women and girls, while the roof was subdivided into a room for

Figure 9: Rare photograph of Benjamin Altman (far right, back row) with his family and employees. Michael Friedsam, Altman’s righthand and successor (far left, back row), Sophie Fleishman, Altman’s sister (far right, front row), Mrs. Donaldson, Altman’s housekeeper (seated center), and Altman’s nieces and nephews. Altman Foundation private collection.
female employees who “needed quiet,” a smoking room for male employees, a solarium, garden, and promenade. All these amenities were limited to B. Altman and Co. employees only, keeping their necessary activities off the sales floor and maintaining a pristine experience for shoppers. This type of separation had been instituted in Altman’s earlier stores, evidenced by the separate lunchrooms and cloakrooms for employees that were lauded in The New York Times article at the opening of Altman’s “Palace of Trade” on Sixth Avenue. The Fifth Avenue store had an onsite hospital with seven beds, a doctor, and two nurses ready to treat the needs of the employees, not only in emergency situations, but also to provide preventive care and to advise on personal hygiene. The retail employees had also established, with Altman’s support, a Mutual Benefit Association to provide liberal sick and death benefits above and beyond the standard allowances from the store. The publicity book published by B. Altman & Co. in 1914, following the final expansion on the Fifth Avenue store, mentions that although membership to the Association was not compulsory, over 2,500 employees participated in the program. Each of these initiatives simultaneously bound the employees to the store and kept their labor in line with the brand of B. Altman & Co.

The Altman Foundation, formally incorporated by a special act of the New York State Legislature in February of 1913, was established to “promote the social, physical, and economic welfare, of the employees of B. Altman & Company.” The legacy of the Foundation expanded to include charitable giving to a wide variety of institutions, led by the example of Altman’s philanthropy during his lifetime. However, at its core, Altman’s charity was directed toward his own employees first. As Abrams points out in her article, Altman’s magnanimous care for his employees was part of a larger trend toward welfare
capitalism, which had become a vital part of American business operations since the 1880s to “shield workers from the strain of industrialism” and discourage union activity.\textsuperscript{92} Although Altman went further than many of his peers, he was not alone in considering the employee in the name of good business practice.

Starting in the 1890s, groups, particularly comprised of women, began to join together to advocate for social justice for workers in the new marketplace. Principal among these was the Consumer’s League, now known as the National Consumers League, which was founded in 1899 by prominent social reformers Jane Addams and Josephine Lowell. Their first general secretary, Florence Kelley, is famously quoted as saying: "To live means to buy, to buy means to have power, to have power means to have responsibility."\textsuperscript{93} This outlook guided the work of the League, which engaged in active campaigning to protect working women and educate consumers about how they could shop responsibly. B Altman & Co. was a natural partner in this work, as Altman was already more conscious of the conditions of workers than many of his competitors. In an 1895 article in \textit{The New York Times}, Josephine Lowell is reported as speaking before a legislative committee appointed to investigate the condition of working women in New York City. Lowell states that her group has compiled a “white list” of stores where female employees are well treated and B. Altman & Co. is called out as an exemplary model of a store where workers are treated with benevolence.\textsuperscript{94} One of the key concerns at this time was that female employees be given ample rest, particularly seats behind the counters and adequate breaks, referencing the divided treatment of men and women in the workplace. Women were only recently joining this sector of the labor market, as clerking in earlier dry goods stores had been the exclusive purview of men. As Claudia Goldin
writes in her book “Understanding the Gender Gap” female workers were often barred from many occupations because they were seen as “marginal and transient” employees, unreliable for consistent work that required discretion and responsibility. However, as the fashion industry expanded, driven by department store culture, more and more women began entering the ranks of professional work previously reserved for men. In the early 20th century there was a marked increase in the number of women working in department stores as buyers, as well as merchandising and advertising managers. By 1915, almost a third of the approximately 10,000 retail buyers in the American fashion industry were women. Altman was an early advocate for hiring women, demonstrated by an 1885 announcement in The New York Times for a “fair for saleswomen,” still uncommon at the time. Generally white unmarried women were sought for these positions, and the vast majority of women, in both factory and professional settings, left the labor force permanently upon getting married, often not voluntarily but rather because employers instituted bars against the employment of married women. As young women were drawn from the home and into the marketplace, married women were increasingly isolated in the home. Simultaneously the relative price of goods, namely clothing, textiles, and shoes, was dropping precipitously, allowing these young women to purchase the products they worked to produce and, in the case of department store clerks, sell. Yet this new financial independence and access was at once liberating and confining—factory employees usually worked six days a week, starting at 5:00 in the morning and continuing until 7:00 at night. Meanwhile, department store employees could expect better pay, fewer hours worked, and significantly improved conditions over the factory workplace. In 1917, Arthur Brisbane, editor of the New York Evening Journal, wrote to
Michael Friedsam to share an editorial he had written showcasing the opportunities available to young women in department stores.\textsuperscript{100} The article, titled “A Dry Goods Man Advertises for EDUCATED Young Women,” suggests that employment in a department store acts as a “finishing school” for these women and Brisbane encourages his young female readers to call on the managers of the leading department stores, as they will find them “extremely anxious” to hire educated, competent, and ambitious young women.\textsuperscript{101} Like the factory workers, the women who joined the ranks of the department store usually found the rigorous commercial atmosphere preferable to work in the home. Even though the hours were long and the work was demanding, any leisure time they had was completely their own.

A 1915 report by the Consumer’s League provides a guide for women to instruct them on how to shop in a way that is conscious of the workers who produce and sell their clothing. The list of recommendations includes admonishments such as “Don’t shop after 5 o’clock or on a Saturday” and “Don’t leave your Christmas shopping until the fortnight before Christmas.”\textsuperscript{102} In addition, the report outlines the use of a certified labeling system, managed by the League to distinguish garments made in factories under approved conditions from those made under undesirable conditions. Florence Kelley, the author of the report, states “Since business is a matter of demand and supply, we are trying to create a demand for goods made in well ordered factories.”\textsuperscript{103} B. Altman & Co. is again on record as an ethical business according to the League’s “white list” signifying that Altman sold League-approved goods, in addition to maintaining a positive working environment for his employees. However, the increasing affordability of fashion products meant that the women working as producers in the fashion system were increasingly
occupying a dual role as consumers. The retail workers would be precisely the consumers who would shop during late hours or on holidays, as the rest of their time was spent on their productive labor. The widening of the fashion system hid the laboring classes not only by making the experience of shopping more beautiful and luxurious, but also by incorporating the workers into the shopping masses.
4. CONCLUSION

When Benjamin Altman died in 1913, his passing was front-page news in *The New York Times*. Although additional coverage followed over the next several weeks, the front-page headline was “BENJ. ALTMAN DIES, LEAVES 45,000,000.” The article hints that the city might inherit Altman’s art collection and mentions Altman’s lifelong attention to the welfare of his employees. His legacy was one of extreme wealth, tempered, or perhaps augmented, by his philanthropic work. Altman helped to establish the culture of shopping as we understand it today, yet he also worked to push back against the ravenous nature of the fashion industry, protecting his employees against punishing work weeks and easing the strain of commercial labor with services and amenities. Altman himself was a contradiction. His stores encouraged limitless consumption and desire, yet he was a restrained and retiring in his own life. The contradictions in Benjamin Altman echo the contradictions inherent in the fashion system. On an individual level we behave ethically as fashion shoppers, but as a collective mass phenomenon the fashion industry has proven itself to be morally corrupt.

This research demonstrates that the same issues that are found in the fashion industry today were present at the outset of mass-market fashion: exploitative labor, excessive consumption, and a dangerous relationship with desire. Are these elements inherent to the modern fashion system or have we simply not figured out how to solve them yet? Fashion, as a general term, encompasses far more than industrial fashion. We can explore the multivariate meanings of fashion in every culture and subculture. Even within a specific geographic region and time, fashion exists in many forms and with many meanings. For each individual, a garment will signify something different after a
year goes by, or even as a mood changes. Fashion is capricious and fickle. We fashion and refashion ourselves throughout our lifetimes, which makes analyzing a precise fashion moment a near impossible task. Additionally, the telling of fashion history is subject to the perils of any telling of history. The fashion canon is told by the victors, so to speak, the designers and brands that endure are the ones who tend to be hailed as the nodal points of fashion history.

Ultimately, Altman’s philanthropic mandate was the undoing of B. Altman & Co. as a commercial fashion icon. After Altman’s death, the foundation he established became the majority shareholder in B. Altman & Co. It was Altman’s intent that the foundation would ensure ethical operation of the store in perpetuity, as well as continue to make philanthropic gifts as he had during his lifetime. However, the Tax Reform Act of 1969, followed by the Tax Reform Act for Nonprofit Organizations in 1979, dictated that private foundations would no longer be allowed to hold more than 50% ownership in a commercial business.\(^{105}\) The Altman Foundation was instructed to divest of majority ownership in B. Altman & Co. by 1985, but the Foundation board decided instead to sell the business, including the retail property, outright. While the subsequent buyers mismanaged the store and ultimately went bankrupt, the sale was in fact a boon to the Altman Foundation. Since Altman’s death, the Foundation had been giving away roughly $750,000 in charitable gifts annually. After the sale of B. Altman & Co., with a significantly larger endowment, the Foundation gave away two million in 1986 and has continued to give on that scale each year.\(^{106}\)
For over 100 years, the Foundation has made gifts in the areas of health, education, the arts, and community building. When selecting the recipients of their awards, the Foundation follows the model established in Altman’s lifetime. In addition to his notable gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Altman gave to The Education Allowance, several New York based hospitals, and the National Urban League, a community initiative founded in 1910 to improve the working lives and living conditions of African Americans. Throughout all these gifts the unifying theme is access. In his lifetime, and afterward through the Foundation, this principle guided Altman’s approach to business and philanthropy.

Access is what differentiates mass-market fashion from fashion as a general term. The role of fashion, as it relates to the spirit of an age, needs to be understood through the struggle that is necessitated by each individual’s need for recognition from others within society and also the need to differentiate and individuate from the collective consciousness. The process of self-fashioning is one of mimetic self-recognition where the individual conforms to the universal, the customs and habits that are given, and then is driven back into the self in a moment of undifferentiated unity. The two aspects, universality and individuality, experience a moment of self-restoring sameness where the universal and the individual collapse into one another. Fashion is a tangible expression of this actuality.

To understand modern fashion, we must narrow the scope. The interplay between individual and collective behavior is assumed as a given, a critical aspect of fashion that exists whether clothing is mass-produced or not. However, with modern fashion this
relationship is complicated by a new vector on individuality and collectivity. Modern fashion lowers the barrier of entry—it is defined by an unprecedented level of access, not only to garments and textiles, but also to desires and dreams. The fantasy world that fashion is expert at stimulating in our minds becomes more forceful and more immediate. Starting with the age of department stores, we began to source our entire wardrobe from the library of the mass-produced, meaning that expressions of individuality began to operate on a substratum of collectivity and conformity. Even in the rare instance when an individual is capable of making their own clothing, it is unlikely that same individual has also produced the materials and tools used to make the garment. It is therefore very difficult to truly extricate modern fashion from this structure of mass production. Perhaps the spirit of our time is one of forced uniformity, but the inclinations and passions of an active consciousness have not ceased to be. The process of self-differing still takes place by reinterpreting and taking ownership over the fashion object. In dressing, the individual references customs of their own society and either operates in harmony or in opposition with these forms. Thus the locus of identity exists outside the individual and within the collective. It is the particularized actualities that together create an outward appearance of culture for a given historical age. Each fashion object is highly individual, but arises from a collective form of production and a shared consensus of behavior. Every manifestation of individual identity is subsumed into this collective consciousness. This is Hegel’s Spirit (Geist) behaving in its actuality. Although the Spirit receives habits and customs as immanent ways of being, “Spirit knows itself as spontaneously active in the face of them, and in singling out from them something for itself, it follows its own inclinations and desires, making the object conform to it.”109 The former movement, of finding something
for itself in the given modes, is the Spirit behaving negatively toward itself as an individuality, but in the latter, following its own desires and making the object conform to it, the Spirit moves away from itself as a universal being. This ebb and flow, alienation from the self and alienation from the whole, is exactly the dialectical movement that is expressed through the process of self-fashioning.

What then does this movement mean in the context of industrial fashion? The process of individuating is confounded. As more and more goods flow into the market, the individual is confronted with too many dreamsapes. The individual must position the self in relation to too many collective identities—the individual becomes confused. Siegfried Kracauer sees mass culture like an aerial photograph. It does not come from within the people (*Volk*), it forms above them and from this distance they are not individuals, but masses incapable of seeing the totality, each consumed with their partial function within the organizational whole. Through our participation as individuals, as both viewers and performers, producers and consumers, we become part of the mass—indistinguishable building blocks of the entirety. The masses are not active in thinking through the fashion object, they give rise to it, but they are not conscious of their constituting of it.

Fashion becomes entertainment, and as entertainment in a mass-produced culture, fashion is rationalized and becomes a productive process in itself. Work and leisure are collapsed into one and both are subsumed within a fleeting and manufactured desire. Dressing becomes an aesthetic manifestation of Taylorism. The pleasure derived from the experience is real, but the object is abstract. In attempting to possess it, to access it, we
are driven further away. The ephemeral and delicious nature of fashion is defined by access to a dream world that feels just out of reach. This is what mass market fashion can offer us.

Seen through the lens of mass culture, fashion reveals the subject in constant movement—reflecting otherness within itself and asserting individuality back into the collective spirit. Industrial fashion is the aesthetic response, a reflex, as Kracauer says, to the rationality of capitalist production. Labor once served to produce value, which is now only a side effect of the churning forward of the production process. How do the laborers in all levels of the modern fashion system feel about their position within the structure? Marx believes that the “‘productive’ worker cares as much about the crappy shit that he has to make as does the capitalist himself who employs him, and who also couldn’t give a damn for the junk.” Yet, there is a tangible value in the fashion object—it goes beyond commodity and touches on fantasy. It is precisely this element of “democratized” dream culture that brings alienation and exploitation to the experience of fashion. Much has been said in recent years about the democratization of fashion, and the research in this study clearly shows that equaling access to fashion began with the age of the department stores. The nagging question is whether mass-produced fashion is in opposition to the public good.

The industrialization of fashion production means we generate far more fashion objects each year—that is the mandate of fashion as a capitalist industry. Yes, fashion is simultaneously a dream and a reality, but mass fashion, the bulk of fashion produced and consumed globally, is unavoidably real. The sheer volume of it piles up in landfills and
overflows donation centers. The core issues of the modern fashion industry have remained the same since its inception, but the repercussions have intensified. For a tee shirt to be sold in New York City for ten dollars, the cost of labor needs to be low enough to occupy only a fraction of the wholesale price, which already includes the cost of materials and the global logistics necessary to get the garment from the producing countries to the retail floors. This metric leaves little space for fair wages for garment workers. Over the past century, Americans have come to expect increasingly lower prices for what they wear. In 1900, the average American family spent approximately 14% of their household income on clothing. By 2003, the average family spent only 4% of their household income on clothing, but were buying far more clothing items—approximately 60 new pieces per year. Global fashion companies, who rely on their reputations and branding to make sales, are not incentivized to show consumers how they manage to keep costs low and stores stocked with constantly changing styles. In the era of B. Altman & Co., fashion production issues were problematic in part because they were more immediate to the consumer. With the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, New Yorkers could not help seeing and feeling the destruction wrought by the fashion industry. The proximity of production meant that consumers were made sharply aware of the suffering of the factory workers. This proximity was precisely the issue at hand for the Fifth Avenue Association that Benjamin Altman helped to found. Retailers of mass-market fashion have known from the outset that showing the labor of the garment industry is damaging to the pleasurable dream world of fashion. The bliss of aristocratized consumption is tainted by any awareness of the effort that goes into maintaining it. This is why Altman and the
other early retailers worked to separate the labor of their employees from the selling floors of the department stores.

Today retail brands benefit from a vast physical distance between consumer and producer. Our garments are no longer made in the country where they are purchased, let alone the same city. Since the 1970s, when fashion production went global, retail brands have, rightfully, been the target of blame for unethical sourcing and production processes. One of the first fashion companies to capitalize on the financial benefits of global sourcing was Nike, and as a result they were the first to struggle publicly with the complexities of an international production system. Nike co-founder Phil Knight hypothesized that by designing and marketing high-performance athletic shoes in the United States, but outsourcing production to low-cost Japanese companies, he could undercut his US-based competitors who still produced domestically. As labor costs in Japan increased, Nike moved its production to Korea and Taiwan, and when those countries also began to develop, and thus as the cost of labor increased there as well, Nike encouraged its Asian suppliers to open manufacturing plants in China, Vietnam, and Indonesia. The rising cost of labor reflects a burgeoning consumer class in these countries—new shoppers ready to spend their wages on commodities such as fashion. Nike’s practice of relocating production for marginal decreases in labor cost echoes the innovations introduced by Le Bon Marché’s Boucicaut, and later adopted by Benjamin Altman. When buying in bulk, fractional differences in price became a crucial part of the functioning of the modern fashion system. Margins were kept low on the selling floor to keep purchase prices accessible to as many shoppers as possible, and thus costs had to be cut elsewhere. To continue this downward trajectory in retail prices, fashion production
had to be distanced from the consumer, and this phenomenon has been increasing each year since the early days of department stores. The newfound access provided to the consumer of mass-market fashion is paradoxically coupled with an alienation from the creation of the garments.

As Nike headquarters became less connected with their production process, oversight inevitably eroded, leading to the labor abuse scandals that Nike encountered in the 1990s and which continue to haunt them to this day. Since Nike erred first, this also means that they have been trying for longer than most of their competitors to remedy the problems that arose from a disaggregated global apparel supply chain. The corporate response to damaging labor violations was the model of private compliance, which was pioneered by Nike and continues to be the standard in corporate social responsibility. This model is based on in-house auditors, or third party associations, which are tasked with policing the overseas factories for violations. As Sarah Labowitz and Dorothée Baumann-Pauly have pointed out in their study “Business as Usual is Not an Option,” published by The NYU Center for Business and Human Rights, these audits have changed little for workers in garment-producing countries. In-house auditors carry the risk of bias and there are rampant problems with falsified records, lack of information, and gaming of audits. Even when the audits are done in good faith, they often focus on just one issue, such as workplace safety, at the expense of assessing other concerns such as the rights of workers to unionize.

Although this model has now been in place for decades, it is clearly not working to address the issues of the global fashion supply chain. On the morning of April 24,
2013, the factory at Rana Plaza on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh became the site of the deadliest disaster in the history of the global garment industry.\textsuperscript{114} Like the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in 1911, the workers were mostly young women, immigrants who had come to the rapidly industrializing urban capital in search of work to support their families, who remained behind in rural Bangladesh.

The factory at Rana Plaza, much like the early New York fashion industry, was run by small operators, subcontracting for the official factories on the books with global fashion retailers. The structures were hastily constructed, building permits were often obtained with bribes, and there was little attempt by the government to regulate the operations of these factories. When the Rana Plaza building collapsed, at least 1,129 workers were killed, crushed to death while making garments for at least 29 major fashion brands.\textsuperscript{115} The day before, workers had fled the building when explosion-like sounds and cracks in the walls indicated what was to come. An engineer called to inspect the structure was horrified by the cracks he observed and declared the building completely unsafe. Although the owner of the building, Sohel Rana, dismissed the engineer’s concerns, the shops and bank branch on the lower floors closed immediately. The five garment factory owners renting from Mr. Rana on the upper floors, however, ordered their workers back inside. The next day, under threats of losing pay or being fired, the workers returned to the building and when the generator turned on, the building shuddered and collapsed.\textsuperscript{116}

Survivors relayed the horrific experience to the worldwide press. The coverage was international and justifiably outraged. Firsthand accounts, as well as photos and
videos of the tragedy, filled the collective global consciousness. Suddenly, the labor of fashion was no longer hidden from its consumers.

As in the early fashion production system in New York, the factories in Bangladesh did not have sufficient or functional exterior fire escapes and the internal exits were locked to prevent the young workers from leaving. Like the shirtwaist workers, the workers at Bangladesh had staged demonstrations in the months before the fire, but their protests went unheeded and were largely ignored by international press. An immense public outpouring of horror and calls for change followed the Rana Plaza collapse, and, as had happened one hundred years prior, the consumers were shocked when the factory conditions were made clear to them. The public called for punishment of the parties directly responsible, and changes to the system that had allowed the tragedies to take place. In both cases the press relayed the story in sordid detail and spurred public outrage against the criminally negligent factory owners.

When examining the moral failings of the modern garment industry from its early days to now, the clear throughline is the lack of accountability that average shoppers have for the creation of the garments they wear. This is not the fault of the consumer on the individual level, but rather indicative of the structure of the fashion system as a whole. Mass-produced fashion encourages this disconnection. As the model of the early department store shows, modern fashion must sever the ties between consumption and production in order to encourage the shopper to enter the dream world of shopping escapism. The fact that early department stores emerged in tandem with visual advertising and showmanship further underscores this point. Altman and the other
retailers built their stores as sites of departure. In lushly carpeted departments for furs and undergarments, these early shoppers were meant to experience an unprecedented glimpse into the lives of luxury that had been previously reserved for royalty or the very wealthy. These middle and lower class shoppers were encouraged to play out their fantasies of leisure and affluence in the lavish shopping floors, as well as in the waiting rooms and semi-private spaces that the store offered. The fact that Altman’s department store featured a writing room and café for his patrons meant that they were being encouraged to linger in the dreamworld. There was an expectation that money would change hands eventually, but the retailers were not reliant on each customer making a hefty purchase—or even making a purchase at all. Today we feel entitled to peruse without buying, but this was a radical departure for these new shopping classes, which engendered a new ownership toward privilege and desire. Mass fashion could not exist without high fashion; the two are completely bound up with one another. What was unique about the department store was that all classes of women were now shopping in the same place, and operating on an equalized plane of access. Of course, that is not to say that department stores eradicated social inequality—just as fast fashion does not truly democratize the fashion industry. Rather, what these changes in modern fashion have accomplished is a cultural shift in expectation.

This expectation is caught up in the relationship between high and low fashion culture. In Georg Simmel’s seminal essay on fashion, he accurately assesses fashion’s elemental movement between differentiation and association, but his appraisal of the directionality of fashion is inaccurate. By his definition, fashion is inherently a form of imitation, with the styles of the upper classes being replicating by the lower classes, and
then “abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them.”

Thus, he sees fashion as a mechanism for social equalization, or at least one of social reorganization. However, this conception of fashion understood as the lower classes imitating the upper classes is categorically untrue. Again, early department stores reveal this essential nature of the self-fashioning phenomenon. If fashion styles operated as a one-directional path, why would society women choose to shop with the masses at the department stores? Why do wealthy shoppers today frequent the fast fashion chains of Zara, H&M, or Forever 21? Each of these brands, and the department stores before them, offered something unique in the way of experience. Modern fashion exists at once as high culture and also as mass culture. It is exclusive and inclusive in its various manifestations.

The publicity booklet published by B. Altman & Co. after Benjamin Altman’s death touted the store’s wares as provided to “grace the piquant loveliness of some American princess.” This aristocratic fantasy was perhaps most appealing to the newly moneyed, yet untitled, consumer class in the United States. On the other hand, the department stores hinted at the demi-monde, for those from bourgeois backgrounds these new stores were scintillating, hedonistic, and a little risqué. The shift from small specialty shops to large palaces of desire was egalitarian in the sense that these new stores offered something for every shopper—and brought them all together in a single physical location.

It is worth noting the effect that screen culture and digital technology has had on shopping culture, if only because it has not changed the structure of modern fashion as significantly as one might expect. The open access initiated by department stores has only
continued to grow with digital technologies that allow us to shop from anywhere with an internet connection. We no longer experience fashion in the form of a single channel, but rather from diverse and unexpected sources. The catalogs sent out by B. Altman & Co. now seem quaint, but the same principles drive shopping today—on Instagram or Pinterest we are stimulated by desire and the barrier to purchase moves ever lower. The delivery teams that Altman strategically placed in summer communities are simply an earlier iteration of same-day delivery. The essence of modern fashion is to educate the consumer’s desire and then smooth the pathway to purchase—only the tactics have changed, not the strategy.

Department stores are no longer the sites of desire and fantasy in the shopping world. A few retain the crusty pretense of aristocracy, but they are too heavily marked by exclusivity to capture the passion that department stores induced in their heyday. Those that remain have either gone the route of discount barns or museum-style institutions with their shopping floors subdivided and rented out to brands—a strange return to the specialty shops and arcades that department stores themselves eradicated. At the time that the Altman Foundation was instructed to divest of B. Altman & Co., retail shopping in the form of the department store was already in decline. Although the buyers purchased the rights to the brand name and logo of the store, it was the retail property on Fifth Avenue that contributed most significantly to the Altman Foundation’s endowment. Nonetheless, letters flooded to the office of John Burke, Jr., then chief executive of B. Altman & Co., lamenting the changing of hands. Handwritten notes, often signed “a loyal Altman customer,” poured in—begging the Foundation not to sell. One letter implored, “do anything to increase profits, but don’t leave us,” while another shopper wrote that she
would be “praying that [her] favorite store would remain.” Another letter attached a clipping of *The New York Times* article announcing the sale with the phrase “Say it ain’t so!” scrawled across the newspaper in red ink. Perhaps most telling of all was a letter from a devoted customer, which concluded with the statement: “It will be very sad if some officious do-gooders force a civilized store to become a frantic, hustling operation like Bloomingdale’s.”

Fashion and shopping excite dedication and even frenzy in the consumer. Like the society ladies turned kleptomaniacs, or like Denise in *The Ladies’ Paradise*, there is an emotional aspect to shopping for fashion that goes beyond any functional need. It is a luxury to shop ethically today, not only because of price, but also because of the supply of knowledge. Shoppers today, even more so than shoppers during Altman’s era, are operating with a significant lack of information about how their clothing is produced and by whom. The founders of the Consumer’s League attempted to resolve this issue, to educate the desires of shoppers in a different way, and to encourage a prioritization of what was right and fair over what was easy and fantastical. Benjamin Altman helped make the department store an American institution through his innovative business practices and his skill as a tastemaker in fashion, but it was his ethical approach that earned him the loyalty of his employees and customers alike.


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11 Abrams, “Benjamin Altman,” (see footnote 1).

12 Ibid.


14 Leach, Land of Desire, (see footnote 9), e-book location 1013.


18 Whitaker, The World of Department Stores. (see footnote 16), 74.


23 Ibid.


27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 “Altman & Co.’s New Building” (see footnote 22)

30 Ibid.

31 Abrams, “Benjamin Altman,” (see footnote 1).


35 *B. Altman & Co.’s Enlarged Store* (1914), HathiTrust, 12. [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nnc2.ark:/13960/t0sr1987k](http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nnc2.ark:/13960/t0sr1987k)

36 Ibid, 8.

37 Abrams, “Benjamin Altman,” (see footnote 1).


41 Ibid.


43 Ibid, diary entry, June 19, 1889.

44 Abrams, “Benjamin Altman,” (see footnote 1).


48 Abrams, “Benjamin Altman,” (see footnote 1).

49 Altman Foundation private archives (see footnote 42).


51 Ibid, 17.

52 Ibid, 20.

53 Abrams, “Benjamin Altman,” (see footnote 1).

54 Ibid.

55 *B. Altman & Co.’s Enlarged Store* (see footnote 35), 12.
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*B. Altman & Co. ’s Enlarged Store* (see footnote 35), 36.

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“Benj. Altman Dies Leaves $45,000,000” (see footnote 81).


98 Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap* (see footnote 95), 13.

99 Ibid, 51.


101 Ibid.


103 Ibid, 7.

104 “Benj. Altman Dies Leaves $45,000,000” (see footnote 81).


106 Jane O’Connell (President of the Altman Foundation) in conversation with the author, March 21, 2016.

107 Abrams, “Benjamin Altman,” (see footnote 1).

108 Interview with Jane O’Connell (see footnote 106).


118 *B. Altman & Co.’s Enlarged Store* (see footnote 35), 36.


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