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Review by Helen Laville, University of Birmingham

Stephanie Amerian’s essay focuses on an admittedly short-lived aspect of the Marshall Plan: its brief involvement in department store import fairs in 1950 and 1951. Focusing on four fairs held between 1950-51 at Gimbels in Philadelphia, Macy’s in New York City and Jordan Marsh in Boston, Amerian’s essay offers a substantial review of the ideological and economic aims of the Marshall Plan. Scholarship on the Marshall Plan has tended to focussed on its impact in Europe, offering a rigorous critique of the export of American goods and consumer ideology. The impact of domestic technologies in Europe has been a particular focus, with Greg Castillo, Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann exploring the kitchen as a Cold War battleground.1 Amerian’s work offers a welcome shift from this focus, explaining that the Marshall Plan also sought to actively promote the import of European products to the United States. The promotion of European products at department store fairs, Amerian explains, served both economic and ideological goals. Increased sales of European goods would address the worrying ‘dollar gap’, and offer support for the economic recovery of nations devastated by war. In addition, the theatrical celebration of European products, industry, and lifestyle that was showcased at department store fairs also served to promote the ideological goals of the Marshall Plan, celebrating the generous American investment in European recovery. While the U.S. government was prohibited from conducting domestic propaganda to rally support for the expensive Marshall Plan, the glamorous department store celebrations of Italian, Dutch, or French products served as an effective public relations campaign for the goals of the Plan, encouraging American consumers to identify with liberal internationalism rather than isolationist or nationalist impulses. Amerian argues that “by ‘buying European’ at their local department stores, Americans would not only help to promote European economic recovery, but would also realize the value of the Marshall Plan’s liberal internationalism in the post-war world” (47). By supporting department store fairs, the Export Promotion Division of the Economic

Cooperation Administration (ECA) hoped to create a nation of ‘consumer diplomats.’ In highlighting the domestic side of the Marshall Plan, Amerian’s work joins that of Christopher Endy on the effort of the Marshall Planners to promote European tourism to American consumers.2

In this study of department store fairs, Amerian offers a well-researched and engaging insight into the history of global consumerism. The importance of creating the desire to consume is frequently overlooked; perhaps consumerism is too often seen as a natural and universal urge rather than a constructed and directed desire. Amerian’s account offers a fascinating insight into the construction of consumer desire. The Holland Fair at Gimbels in Philadelphia married consumer promotion with cultural display and royal pageantry, with Dutch Crown Prince Bernhard opening the celebration and hosting an opening dinner for 600 government, business and civic leaders. Shoppers were invited to view Dutch cultural artefacts such as Rembrandt paintings before making the most of the opportunity to purchase Dutch products. Perhaps in an effort to remind shoppers of the importance of keeping their receipts for their purchases, the fair also displayed Dutch historical documents, including the record of the sale by Native Americans of Manhattan Island to the Dutch. Over 300,000 Americans visited the fair, making their choices from over one million dollars’ worth of products. A boon for all participants, the fair gave Dutch manufacturers and retailers an opportunity to learn more about the tastes of the American consumer, and perhaps increase their export markets.

While Dutch authorities were enthusiastic about working with the ECA, other nations were less co-operative. The French Cultural attaché M. Richard spectacularly failed to understand the importance of cultivating American consumer tastes. Despite the best – and tactful - efforts of Helen Woods of the Division of Public Liaison, Richards insisted that department fairs favoured one department store at the expense of others, and insisted instead on arranging for French goods to be displayed at a trade fair aimed at wholesale retailers rather than directly to American consumers. Despite Woods’s efforts to explain the importance of cultivating American ‘taste-makers’ such as Vogue and Harpers Bazaar, Richard stubbornly refused the department-store model.

Despite Richard’s lack of co-operation, Woods assisted Macy’s New York store in their ‘Accessory Bazaar’ in September 1950. The Bazaar went far beyond the mere promotion of goods for sale, creating a 150-foot Parisian street scene to immerse shoppers in the Parisian experience. The store invited its customers to “come see how you can look as cosmopolitan as Madame La Comtesse at Maxims” (61). Capitalising on the boom in European tourism, but aiming at those whose budgets did not stretch to transatlantic flights, Macy’s asked, “Do you want to see Paris? Come to Macy’s tomorrow. For the dime it takes you to get here, you can take a fascinating trip to see the wonders of Parisian artistry” (62). While documenting the advertising and planning of the department-store fairs, Amerian’s assessment of their impact is somewhat limited. Perhaps such a small number of events could only ever have had a slight impact on U.S. consumer desire, but the success of these fairs in promoting European goods would be a fruitful area of further work, perhaps in combination with broader studies of the impact of European fashions in the United States. Karal Anne Marling’s exploration of ‘Mamie Eisenhower’s New Look’ offers an excellent example of a reading of the the political and ideological

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meaning of fashion.3 A review of the aesthetics of European goods on display at these fairs and their appeal to the U.S. market would be a useful development of this work.

The work of the ECA in supporting department store fairs was short lived. With the outbreak of the Korean war, Congress prioritized military spending over Marshall-Plan aid. The dollar gap shrank to manageable levels with the purchase by the U.S. of strategically important raw materials from the overseas dependent territories of Marshal Plan nations, making their consumer exports less critical. The efforts of Marshall Planners to promote European goods to American consumers had always been unpopular with American producers, who, like the domestic American tourist industry, were aggrieved that the U.S. government was blithely spending tax dollars to promote foreign competition for U.S. consumer dollars.4 Yet Amerin argues that despite their relatively short history, the department store European fairs were part of a longer history of global consumerism. She connects the department store fairs of the early 1950s with the far more well-known ‘Kitchen Debates’ at the 1959 Moscow Exhibition.5 Both events, Amerin persuasively argues, demonstrate “consumerism’s growing importance in battling the Cold War, as consumer goods carried ideological and political, as well as economic value” (69).

Amerin’s article situates itself within a well established field of scholarship which seeks to understand the role of consumerism and the U.S. promotion of global capitalism as a significant part of the Cold-war struggle. The work of Michael Hogan, Kristin Hoganson, and Victoria de Grazia for example has explored the impact of the post-war spread of American-led capitalism, assessing its cultural, economic, and ideological global impact.6 This article takes scholarship on the emergence of a post-war global consumer market in an interesting new direction. Critiques of consumerism can frequently be somewhat dismissive of consuming as a vacuous, meaningless activity. Amerin’s nuanced explanation of the promotion of European goods in the post-war U.S. is a reminder that consumerism is seldom a simple or uncomplicated transaction. American consumers, she explained, were buying far more than European goods – rather they were buying a feeling of sophistication, an assurance of their national prosperity and generosity, and an expression of internationalism rather than isolationism. Amerin’s essay reflects a broader history of global consumerism that seeks to understand the nuances and complexities of consumer desire in an insightful and meaningful way. The ideological, cultural and political meanings attached to items of consumption are not accidental, but reflect deliberate efforts on the part of retailers, manufactures, the media, and governments to attach additional layers of meaning and significance to the act of buying.


Amerian’s biography of Helen Woods adds a further dimension to the story. Woods, the independently wealthy granddaughter of American financier and philanthropist J.P. Morgan and the great-great-granddaughter of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton was dedicated to public service, having served during the war as Oveta Culp Hobby’s second in command at the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corp. Her work at the Division of Public Liaison demonstrates the importance of state-private relationships and networks in post-war America. Woods served as an intermediary between government and her extensive contacts in youth and women’s groups. In addition, Woods worked her personal contacts in support of the ECA’s programs. Her personal friendship with Dorothy Shaver, the redoubtable president of Lord and Taylor, enabled Woods to understand and engage with the world of fashion and retail on behalf of the U.S. government. Lisa Cohen’s excellent biography of the British fashion buyer Madge Garland details the efforts of the British government to engage with the fashion industry, sponsoring Garland’s visit to the United States to both promote British fabrics and fashion, and to learn more about American ready-to-wear techniques. A broader study of Cold-war fashion, which explored the ideological, economic and aesthetic meaning of cold war global fashion networks, would be a fascinating study, and Amerian’s work, like Cohen’s, suggests that there is a significant amount of material to explore. The lives of professional women in the age of the feminine mystique have been somewhat overlooked, and Amerian’s work on Woods’s contribution to the ECA offers an important corrective to that picture. Amerian’s current work on networks of professional women in New York City 1920-1960 will take this story further.

“In ‘buying European’ at department stores in the fifties”, Amerian concludes, “Americans were serving as domestic consumer diplomats, while also buying a piece of the genteel cosmopolitanism that war-ravaged Europe still had to offer” (69). This concept of ‘consumer diplomats’, like the concept of ambassador tourists, or military wives as diplomats, engages with a growing understanding of the ways in which American citizens encountered and engaged with U.S. foreign policy. Understanding of the role of the U.S. government in mediating these encounters, and the relationships with private networks which made these interventions possible, offers a fascinating expansion of traditional approaches to international relationships.

Helen Laville is a Reader in American History at the University of Birmingham. She has published widely on women’s rights in the Cold War years, including the monograph Cold War Women (2002), and an essay on Gender and the Cold War in the Oxford Handbook of the Cold War (2013). She has also published on femininity and consumerism in cold war film, including “Our Country Endangered by Underwear”: Fashion, Femininity and the Seduction Narrative in Ninotchka and Silk Stockings’ Diplomatic History (30:4, September 2006). She is currently writing a book on American women’s associations and racial integration.

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