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The Delight of the Fair Sex

SECOND PART

The Court is in session and there are a dozen people sitting round the table: the sales manager, his assistant and his secretary, the head buyer, one of his assistants, the man in charge of fabrics, the heads of the silk, wool and cotton departments, the advertising manager, a person without any special function... and the accused.

The accused appearing before the court is the chief window-dresser. The business manager has all the evidence in front of him, either pinned onto a big cork board or scattered over the table. First of all there are water colour sketches of window displays, some giving the general effect with vivid splashes of colour, others in more detail. Among the exhibits there is an old plaster statue of Venus, gilded on one side, apple green on the other, wax-covered wire volutes suggesting a submarine scene, a piece of fishing net covered with spangles.

The chief window-dresser puts forward his case.

« In window No. 52 » he says, « I plan to take advantage of the revival of Giraudoux's *Ondine* to feature fabrics like floating curtains of sea-weed. I'll need some sea-green glazed fabrics ».

« Which glazed fabrics do you mean ? » asks the sales manager.

« I can't say exactly. Surely you have some of those new, rather liquid looking artificial fabrics ? »

« Have you ? » they ask the man in charge of fabrics.

« Yes, some permon-argons. We've had some in stock since February. »

« How are they selling ? »

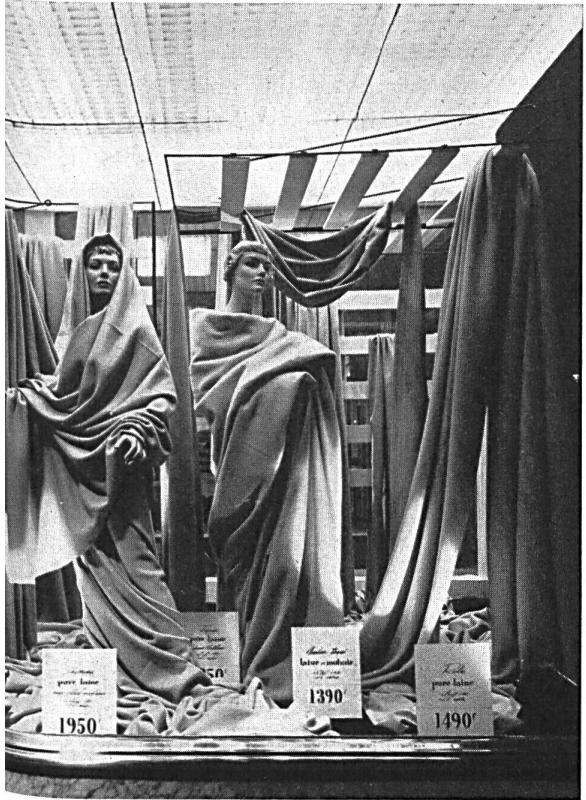
« They were featured in the special counter at No. 3 entrance » put in the head of the silk department, « but they did not meet with much success ».

« I know », pleads the chief window-dresser, « but haven't you seen the latest numbers of *Elle* and *Marie-Claire* ? There are pages devoted to these special fabrics. Dior and Givenchy are showing them in their boutiques. So, I thought perhaps it was the right... »

« Oh, that changes everything », replies the manager. « Have we some in stock ? »

« Yes, of course. Don't you remember ? » replies the head buyer. « We saw them together at X's last September. You took a fancy to them, and I had the bulk of their production set aside for us. »





An eternal beginning again. A continual search for new ideas. Always the same struggle to beat their competitors. At the same time the requirements of the business department must be taken into account, which in its turn has to think of the seasons, the stocks, the question of novelty and, above all, prices. They know just how far they can go where the customer is concerned. The survey and planning departments have worked out six months in advance that in the first fortnight of July so many swimsuits will be sold at such and such a price, so many camping outfits, so many souvenirs of Paris and so many yards of fabric. The head window-dresser cannot work in the abstract. He depends on the business department; he is expected to produce art and ingenuity based on something concrete. Three cheers for the setting — as long as it sells.

* * *

As soon as he leaves the room, his work begins. The studio is going to be busy during the next week, working on the plywood panels, finding fishing nets, shells, wire supports, dummies, anchors and chains. The « props » are painted by spray gun. The joiners hammer and screw.

« And how much do they cost? »

« 325, marked CX. »

« H'm, obviously they have possibilities. Only we'll have to give them a little publicity, because women are not used to them yet. Have you something ready Dupont? »

Dupont is the advertising manager. And he does have something ready. Photographs of Marie Hélène, her mouth open, as required by modern advertising art, one arm pointing skyward, her legs wide apart, her skirt of permon-argon, lifted and blown out by a mysterious gust of wind. With a little sales talk and the price in enormous figures — 795 Fr.

The photographs are handed round and compared with the sketches; someone sends for a bolt of fabric. All bend over the table, handling, feeling, judging, studying. Finally, window display No. 52 is adopted... and they move on to the next.

* * *

Twenty times a year the same scene is repeated in big department stores all over Paris. A fortnight beforehand, the window-dressing studio prepares the models; the designers ransack the museums and the flea markets, visit the couturiers' boutiques and scan the pages of the fashion reviews for ideas.





The electricians instal the wiring. A curtain is placed in front of the window (for a few hours only as it means a dead loss) and at the appointed hour everything is ready. The fabrics leap into place and subside gently into position; bluish lighting creates the submarine atmosphere. Labels fixed to pearly shells indicate the prices. No need to beat a drum. The public is already there, on the other side of the window ; the seething mass of women and girls drawn by the novelty and the fact of having seen in the suburban train, underground or bus, on their way to work that morning, a whole page given up to boosting the incomparable qualities of permon-argon, which is crease-resistant, washable, requires no ironing, is permanently pleated and enables a skirt to be made for only 795 Fr.

* * *

At one time, the presentation of fabrics was mainly the prerogative of the big drapers. In the days of the Second Empire and the *Bonheur des Dames* it was the firm's trump card. Since then fabrics have been joined by other branches, but they still keep their old importance. In a previous number of this periodical (No. 4/1955) we mentioned the difficulties which shops specialising in the sale of fabrics have in finding ways of varying their displays. The big department store does not experience the same difficulties. Its windows are generally large and well equipped; the decoration, even when costly, forms part of its sales policy. But its freedom is restricted in other ways unknown to the specialist shop — by changing fashions and seasons, the renewal of stocks, the need to show a wide range of different articles, competition, prices.





It must continually keep an eye on what the other shops are doing. And this starts up a sort of rhythm. There are periods when fabrics are displayed very simply on stands, rings and ladders, others when all the changes are rung with every conceivable decorative effect.

From the point of view of the man who runs a fabric department, the simplest displays are the best. The simpler the set, the less fabric is cut, soiled, scorched by the sun and lighting, dulled by dust — that is to say the more fabric recuperable, the greater the profit in his department.

For the chief window-dresser, classicism is of little interest. His aim is to find effects that are attractive and striking enough to make the public stop and have another look at his windows.

The advertising manager is interested only in the display that is eye-catching.

The life of a big department store is made up of a continual compromise between these divergent interests and points of view ; a fascinating life for those who view it from outside, an exhausting one for those who have to live it, but one they would not change for anything in the world.

* * *

And now the textile point of view.

Without a doubt the quantity of fabrics sold by the big Paris shops places them right at the head of manufacturers' best customers. For



fabrics are found all over the shop — silks, wools, synthetic materials and cottons as well as laces and guipures all have their own departments ; they even find their way into the haberdashery, the dressmaking and tailoring departments, among the coats, the sportswear, the fashions and furnishings. Whenever a corner is empty or a wall bare, it is filled by a dummy, a drape, a cascade of fabrics. Everywhere textiles reign supreme.

And that is why our little investigation into fabric displays ends in the department store. On these pages are to be seen different solutions, classic or artistic, subtle or startling. They prove the importance these establishments attach to showing fabrics, boosting them, displaying them to their best advantage and tempting the customer. Parisian shops have a style all their own, quite different from that of London, Milan or New York, a style that lacks neither originality nor good taste. We will say no more, for a dozen photographs and sketches are more eloquent than a whole series of articles.

Gala

We wish to thank the managements of the big Paris department stores *Au Printemps* and *Galeries Lafayette* whose kindness has made it possible for us to obtain the photographs and sketches illustrating the above article.

T. S.

