

DEPARTMENT STORES, MAIL ORDER CATALOGUES AND THE FASHION MARKET: ITALY IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper contributes to our understanding of the emergence of a “fashion system” and especially of the widening of the fashion market during the second half of the nineteenth century. It will focus in particular on the role of department stores, which – according to contemporary observers and historians alike – were at the center stage of a transformation that eventually resulted in the emergence of the modern fashion system notably by selling affordable ready-made womenswear. Taking a closer look at the merchandise distributed by early department stores, this paper argues for a need to reconsider their role in this process – and possibly the ways in which the fashion market was enlarged during this period. For its analysis, the article draws on an important, albeit little used source for the spread of fashionable womenswear, mail order catalogues. It shows that in terms of assortment, quality, and prices the female clothing featured in these early catalogues still shared many features of made-to-measure and was still far from being standardized and low-cost, as was more often the case in the United States. At the same time, these catalogues –and the department stores– did make a major contribution to the democratization of fashion through the spread of the latest designs and the sale of low cost fabric, which –together with the women’s magazine emerging at the time– made ‘fashion’ accessible to wider swathes of population.

The modern “fashion system” consolidated itself in the second half of the 19th century spreading from Paris to other Western cities. It is indeed in this period that the set of institutions that enable clothing to become something different from a plain manufactured product by providing it with an intangible – or symbolic – added value interacted in a cohesive way originating what sociologist and fashion scholar Yuniya Kawamura defines a “fashion system”.¹ According to Kawamura, “fashion is a system of institutions, organizations, groups, producers, events and practices, all of which contribute to the making of fashion, which is different from dress or clothing” and, for a fashion system to exist and thus for a fashion style to emerge, “the minimum requirement is a network of people that includes those who introduce or propose changes in dress and those who adopt at least a portion of the proposed changes. The proposers and adopters in this network must be in communication with each other, either directly [...] or indirectly”. It is important to stress that, translating this approach into a language that is closer to the one used by business (and economic) historians, the crucial condition for clothing to become fashion is that there is a (tight/smooth) interaction between producers and consumers. Mechanisms that enable the diffusion of creativity and new styles thus play a central role in the emergence of modern fashion. The article will shed light on the features of the early Italian “fashion system” by analyzing one of the mechanisms through which fashion was diffused from producer to consumer, that is by considering how early department stores contributed to the emergence of a market for fashionable goods.

¹ Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-Ology. An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (Oxford-New York, 2005) p. 48.

Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the major cities of the most advanced European countries experienced the shift towards a new consumption pattern and a new consumer culture that consisted in the ‘transformation of buying into shopping’ and that ‘was decisive for the definitive formation of the present-day consumer society’.²

Most of the literature on department stores, while stressing their unquestionable importance for the early transition towards a modern consumer society³, also suggests that with regard to the kind of merchandise offered by these outlets ‘drapery, together with *ready-made* clothing from the 1880s, remained central’ [italics are ours].⁴

Thus, what the literature suggests is that department stores both in Continental Europe and in the USA played a leading role in the emergence and the growth of the market for fashion and that this largely consisted in the trade of womenswear that was not individually tailored. Indeed, ‘historians have especially been keen to emphasize the highly theatrical nature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century department stores, with their glamorous displays and interiors adding value to goods that were often “mass produced and aggressively priced”’.⁵ Yet, while there seems little doubt that a larger number of households ‘enter the historical clothing scene in the late

² Rudi Laermans, "Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of the Modern Consumer Culture (1860-1914)," *Theory, culture and society* 10, no. 79 (1993), p. 80.

³ See for example Laermans, "Learning to Consume."

⁴ Geoffrey Crossick and Jaumain, Serge, "The World of the Department Store: Distribution, Culture and Social Change.", in G. Crossick a. Jaumain, Serge (eds.), *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939*, (Aldershot, 1999), p. 11, Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, 1997)., p. 26, Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché. Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920.*, (Princeton, 1981), pp. 34-35.

⁵ John Benson and Laura Ugolini, eds., *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society since 1700* (Aldershot-Burlington, 2006), p 10.

nineteenth century'⁶, the extent and features of their entrance and the exact role of department stores in this process remain to be clarified. Hence, accepting the challenge launched quite a few years ago by Crossick and Jaumin to 'strip away some of the mythology which surrounds the supposedly revolutionary character of the department store'⁷ this paper attempts to investigate *how* early department stores contributed to the emergence of a modern "fashion system" by widening the consumption of fashionable clothing. In other words, the aim of this article is *not* to question the importance of this new retailing format as a means to widen the market for consumer goods in general and womenswear in particular, but rather to elucidate the features of this process.

What this paper shows is that in late-19th century Italy – similarly to other Western European countries and the USA - department stores provided an important contribution to the diffusion of fashion. The analysis of the Italian case adds important information to this statement by showing that it was precisely the female accessories as well as the textiles that exhibit the distinctive features of "standardization" that are often – and wrongly – attributed to the womenswear traded by the *grands magasins*. This finding improves our knowledge of the role of department stores as mechanisms of fashion diffusion by stressing national specificities. Indeed, while US department stores moved more quickly and to a larger extent than their European counterparts towards standardization of clothing while the French ones "provoked a veritable euphoria of clothes buying' especially among the lower-middle classes" (Perrot),, in a follower country like Italy, department stores provided an important contribution to the diffusion of fashion mainly by spreading a

⁶ Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York.*, (Durham, 1997) p. 24.

⁷ Crossick and Jaumain, "The World of the Department Store: Distribution, Culture and Social Change.", p. 9.

sensibility and awareness for fashion, by diffusing and making accessible to an increasing number of potential consumers the latest styles (the same as those featured on the pages of contemporary glossy, and often expensive, fashion magazines) and, most importantly, by providing affordable fabrics and paper patterns through which fashionable attires could be reproduced overall inexpensively. Thus, according to Kawamura's definition of fashion system, the relationships that emerge among different actors can provide a much stronger definition of the specific characteristics of the fashion system than the single, individual actors involved.

On the contrary, the trade of female clothing that was not made to measure played a much smaller role in this story. While an earlier study demonstrated the importance of women's accessories in this process⁸, this paper will focus on female clothing, which the previous literature has made so central in claims about the widening of the fashion market and the emergence of a modern "fashion system" and about the success of early department stores.

The present research demonstrates that the womenswear sold by department stores in late 19th century Italy was still far from being standardized or readily available to large swathes of consumers. But at the same time during this period, these outlets were undeniably at the heart of the emergence of a modern "fashion system" thanks to the dissemination of a fashion gospel consisting of appreciation of changing stylistic trends, provision of technical instruments to reproduce those styles (e.g. paper patterns and affordable fabrics) and supply of inexpensive accoutrements to embellish otherwise ordinary attires.

⁸ Elisabetta Merlo and Francesca Polese, "Accessorizing Italian Style: Creating a Market for Milan's Fashion Merchandise," in *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture, and Consumers*, ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk (Philadelphia, 2007).

The lack of analytical studies on the prices and qualities of the stock traded by European department stores in this period does not enable to draw a fully comparative picture at this stage. Our investigation will thus focus primarily on Italy in the late nineteenth century, which however we believe is a good case for three main reasons: First of all, especially in the North of the country, the process of industrialization starting from the middle of the century and accelerating during its last two decades led to a revolution in consumption in a short period of time chiefly in the major cities of that region. Here, it also saw the emergence of the country's first department store, *Alle Città d'Italia* (originally called *Aux Villes d'Italie*), in Milan in 1877, which opened additional stores in other large Italian cities over the subsequent decade. Second, and related to the first point in that it confirms the significance of Italy as a fast growing fashion market, the country also became an important outlet for the French *grand magasins*, which had pioneered the new format in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, the Paris-based *Au Printemps* made a wide selection of its goods available through mail order eventually producing Italian versions of the catalogues and opening a shipping office in Turin in 1878. Last, but not least, this paper also contributes to the history of the Italian fashion industry, which – as is well known – only came to international prominence in the post-WWII period. However, as this article will show, some core elements of the Italian fashion system, namely a domestic distribution network as well as a dynamic fashion market and a diffused fashion culture already started emerging in the late nineteenth century. For sure, further research on these topics will lead to a fuller appraisal of the similarities and parallels between the Italian experience and those of other European countries (and, eventually, the US).

As a main source, this article draws on the mail order catalogues from both the Milan-based *Alle Città d'Italia* and the Parisian *Au Printemps*. They not only reflect the choice of products, and especially of women's garments, available in both outlets; they also, and probably more importantly, as this paper will argue, constitute a way to spread the fashion culture and make novel designs as well as relatively cheap fabric accessible to a larger part of the population (both in terms of income and geography), thus contributing to diffusion of fashion innovations in a more comprehensive way than the brick and mortar store. Mail order catalogues for *Alle Città d'Italia* are available twice per year from the 1880s until World War I; the Italian version of the *Au Printemps* catalogue can be found starting from the 1870s. The detailed examination that follows looks firstly at the types of merchandise sold by department stores (in their catalogues – and presumably the brick and mortar outlets) in the last decades of the nineteenth century on the Italian market, and assesses in particular the importance of draperies and fashionable goods – especially female clothing. Secondly, within the broad category of female clothing, the scrutiny of the catalogues makes it possible to define more clearly the variety and assortment of items traded as well as their stylistic characteristics. Thirdly, the information collected from the catalogues allows to understand the price range of womenswear offered by the early department stores and to identify the factors determining such prices. The analysis of these prices also makes it possible to compare them with estimates of the prices of similar garments that could be purchased through alternative channels. Finally, by crossing the information on the prices of the items sold by department stores with available proxies of incomes and consumption patterns a more detailed portrait of those participating in the early market of women's fashion can be obtained.

The in-depth analysis of these mail order catalogues will be complemented by evidence from contemporary female magazines and other data sources covering the market for female clothing in those years, thus achieving a comprehensive picture of the features of the commerce of womenswear in Italy. It is important to keep in mind that for this period, archival documents from the Italian department store *Alle Città d'Italia* are not available. For a background on their business history, we therefore had to rely on the limited available secondary literature. We did the same for *Au Printemps*.⁹

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, the history of the two department stores is sketched and the main characteristics of the mail-order catalogues are briefly documented. This is followed by an analysis of the assortment, quality, and prices of female fashionable clothing featured in the catalogues. Subsequently, this information is compared with estimates of costs of womenswear purchased through alternative channels and crossed with proxies of incomes and consumption patterns of Milanese households in order to define the scope of the market for fashion at the end of the nineteenth century. Together with the other evidence available this shows that the role of department stores in democratizing the market for fashion in this period was achieved by other means than that of the sale of ready-made clothing. The conclusion briefly summarizes the contribution of this article to the literature on the history of the fashion business,

⁹ The most accurate account of the evolution of the Milanese firm is to be found in Franco Amatori, *Proprietà e Direzione. La Rinascente 1917-1969* (Milano, 1989). See also Elena Papadia, *La Rinascente* (Bologna, 2005). For the history of Printemps and on its founder Jules Jaluzot, see Jean-Paul Caracalla, *Le Roman Du Printemps* (Paris, 1997).

1. Milan, *Alle Città d'Italia* and *Au Printemps* in the 1880s

Between the 1860s and WWI Italy, albeit unevenly and slowly was moving from an agricultural and backward economy to an industrial one, with a discernible acceleration starting in the last two decades of the century. The city of Milan was one of the frontrunners in this process, with economic indicators showing a positive trend more or less throughout this period. Population was growing (from 242,457 in 1861 to 261,985 in 1871, to 321,839 in 1881 and reaching 491,460 in 1901) eventually bringing Milan to overcome Naples as the country's largest city by the beginning of the 1900s.¹⁰ Milan was also undergoing a deep economic transformation that was to make the city the country's financial, commercial and – probably – industrial capital. It is thus in the context of a thriving urban economy in which activities related to the production and distribution of fashion goods were especially diffused – albeit unstructured – that the Milanese *Alle Città d'Italia* (through the brick-and-mortar store) and the Parisian *Au Printemps* (only via mail orders) traded their merchandise. *Alle Città d'Italia* was founded by the brothers Ferdinando and Luigi Bocconi who had started their business as street sellers of garments and fabrics. The Bocconis opened a clothing shop in the city center in 1865, whose success in 1870 urged them to move to larger premises widening the variety of merchandise to include linens, hats, shoes and furniture. In 1877 the brothers opened *Aux Villes d'Italie*, the first Italian department store, that changed its name to *Alle Città d'Italia* in 1880.¹¹ By the early 20th century the firm had branches in Genoa, Rome, Palermo, Trieste and Turin.

¹⁰ See Franco Della Peruta, "Lavoro e Fabbrica a Milano dall'Unità alla Prima Guerra Mondiale," in *Milano e il suo Territorio* (Milano, 1985).

¹¹ The Bocconis decided to adopt a French name for their business in order to stress the resemblance with the world famous Parisian *grand magasins*. However, in 1880, when Italian foreign policy became strongly anti-French, the name was changed to its Italian version.

The number of employees grew to 1,300 and in 1879 *Aux Villes d'Italie* boasted 13 departments and two factories (in Milan and in Turin) employing 900 workers for the production of ready-made men's and women's clothing (while made to measure was produced using domestic workers)¹² and a buying office in Paris.

Following a similar trajectory, *Au Printemps* was opened by Jules Jaluzot in 1865 in Paris in today's Boulevard Haussmann. Jaluzot had a deep knowledge of the business, acquired during his activity as head of the silk goods department of the *Bon Marché*, at the time the world's most famous *grand magasin*, soon becoming its major competitor. Since the beginning of its activity, *Au Printemps* with its sixteen departments (*comptoirs*) - silk goods, textiles, woolen goods, linens, shawls, furs, underwear, ribbons, laces, clothing, hats, gloves, haberdashery, carpets, trimmings and furniture – achieved a remarkable success and quickly growing profits.¹³

Both department stores also featured a thriving mail order business. In 1879 the Bocconis opened their own publishing house capable of printing 30,000 catalogues per year. Starting from June 1880 two catalogues per year were published (for the Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer collections) for a total of 40,000 yearly copies. In 1890 the mail-order office received 38,000 coupons used to place orders while 100,000 packages were dispatched from the company's shipping department.¹⁴

Already before 1874 *Au Printemps* made it possible to purchase via mail throughout France (including Alsace Lorraine) as well as from Switzerland, Belgium, London and northern Italy.¹⁵ In 1874 the scope of *Au Printemps'* mail order business was widened and included the Netherlands, the German empire, Luxembourg as well as

¹² According to Amatori, *Proprietà e Direzione. La Rinascente 1917-1969.*, p. 29 each of the branches employed some 100-150 domestic workers for the production of custom-made clothing.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31. The catalogues provided information on shipping costs outside Italy, suggesting that the Bocconi market was not exclusively a domestic one.

¹⁵ Caracalla, *Le Roman Du Printemps*.

the entire Italian kingdom. In 1878 the company opened shipping offices in Turin, Rosendaal (Netherlands), Basel (Switzerland) and Avricourt (chosen as a gateway towards Germany and Eastern Europe).¹⁶ In 1878, there were seven different types of catalogues, printed in several languages.¹⁷ In 1884 the firm claimed that it made 300,000 shippings per year, both in France and abroad and that some 2,000-3,000 order letters were received daily.¹⁸

2. Department store mail order catalogues in the last decades of the 19th century

In this period the main European department stores published mail order catalogues which often shipped free of charge to potential customers.¹⁹ Although it is not possible to quantify the exact diffusion of such publications nor to detail the channels through which they circulated, available evidence shows that mail orders were

¹⁶ The role of these shipping offices was to receive the products from Paris and to ship them to the customers.

¹⁷ In addition to the general catalogue there were smaller, specialized catalogues: haberdashery and trimmings; linens; jewelry; shawls; gloves; umbrellas; beddings.

¹⁸ The fact that in this time period mail orders represented such a conspicuous part of the business of *Au Printemps* reduces the fear that the goods displayed in the catalogue pages analyzed in Section 3 did not fully correspond to the real assortment of goods in the brick and mortar store of Paris. Indeed, if some 30% of all sales in 1880-1890 came from mail orders then the catalogues are a reliable source for studying the assortment and prices of goods sold by the French department store. Other evidence of the importance of the mail order business is provided by the fact that in 1881, when a fire destroyed the department store, the printer had just delivered 35,000 francs worth of catalogues for the great April sales. See Caracalla, *Le Roman Du Printemps*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Catalogues bear no mention of price. Indeed, announcements regularly published in leading Italian women's magazines advertise the publication of the latest catalogue issues stressing that they will be shipped free of charge to anybody requesting them by writing to the department store. Announcements of this kind are common, see for example issues of *La moda illustrata*, *La novità* and *Il tesoro delle famiglie* all published in Milan and addressed to different typologies of female readers. Department stores in the US also published mail order catalogues, which however feature several differences from those of their European counterparts. As will be mentioned in the following pages, the US catalogues seem to be characterized by a greater standardization.

introduced by the Parisian *magasins de nouveautés* before the 1850s and that by the last decades of the century the scope of this service was remarkable.²⁰

Quite surprisingly, historians interested in consumption as well as in fashion have devoted little attention to this material.²¹ Indeed, the main histories of department stores – like those of nineteenth century fashion – do mention catalogues but do not analyze them thoroughly.²² Yet, we can look behind the pictures printed in catalogue pages in order to shed light on the physical features of the goods sold in these emporia and, more specifically, to early department stores' contribution to the emergence of a modern fashion system. Did female clothing traded by these outlets represent ‘an increasingly acceptable alternative to tailor-made clothes [for the middle classes] or to the markets in secondhand clothes [for the lower classes]’,²³ thus easing the diffusion of fashion? Moreover, these publications supply critical figures concerning the prices of dresses and, eventually, information on the determinants of price variations within the clothing collections offering yet another test of the degree of standardization and of the mechanisms of fashion diffusion in this period.²⁴

²⁰ Miller, *The Bon Marché*, p. 26. However, prior to the present paper mail order catalogues have been used only once with the purpose of assessing the role of department stores in the emergence of a modern fashion market and even then with a much more limited focus.

²¹ The exception is represented by Merlo and Polese, "Accessorizing Italian Style." The mail order business has of course been studied in general terms, i.e. mainly looking at firms trading through mail orders and not through brick-and-mortar stores. As is well known, the mail-order business was much more important in the US than in Europe. On the American case, see for example the classic account by Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Chicago: 1950). For Britain, see for example Richard Coopey, Sean O'Connell, and Dilwyn Porter, eds., *Mail Order Retailing in Britain: A Business and Social History* (Oxford, 2005).

²² An example is provided by Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the 19th Century*, (Princeton, 1994) who goes no further than stating that department stores catalogues were important channels through which fashionable Parisian styles penetrated the French countryside (pp. 77-78). A partial exception is represented by Miller who however is not interested in using *Bon Marché* catalogues to collect information on the assortment and prices of the merchandise traded (Miller, *The Bon Marché*).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 34. We use ready-to-wear according to the most common definition (see for example Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary that defines ready-to-wear as ‘clothes produced in standard sizes and not made to fit a particular person’).

²⁴ Obviously, in this case the expectation is that a wide variety of prices within the same “broad” typology of merchandise (i.e. clothing) is consistent with a low degree of standardization.

For sure, it is important to stress several *caveats* when using mail order catalogues for this specific purpose. First of all, the scarce information on the quantity of catalogues published each year by these outlets²⁵ makes it difficult to estimate the exact weight of the mail order business in their overall volume of sales. This, however, is a minor problem given that the main goal of this paper is not to determine the *total size* of the market for fashionable clothing, but rather to assess in which ways department stores contributed to the widening of the market for female fashion, especially by defining the features of the clothing they sold and the typologies of customers who presumably could afford to shop in these outlets. Indeed, the volume of sales alone would not tell us much in this respect. Secondly, one must also consider the possibility that mail order catalogues targeted a different kind of customer from those of the real store.²⁶ Finally, the analysis is based on the hypothesis that the catalogues are a truthful replica of the brick and mortar store both with regards to the variety and quality of the assortment of merchandise and also as far as prices are concerned. While there is no possibility to test this premise directly, it is true that all the catalogues analyzed bear no mention of the fact that the stock of clothing presented in their pages is only a portion of that available in the store and no reference is made to the fact that customers could find a greater variety by shopping directly in the real outlet.²⁷ On the contrary, for example, the catalogues of *Au Printemps* analyzed in the following

²⁵ Information concerning the scope of the mail order business for *Au Bon Marché* in the second half of the century is provided by Miller, *The Bon Marché*. On *Alle Città d'Italia* see Amatori, *Proprietà e Direzione. La Rinascente 1917-1969*. Unfortunately no information of this kind is available for *Printemps*.

²⁶ For example, making mail order purchases required to know how to read and write, in addition to a certain ability in indicating the approximate measures of the desired garments. According to the 1881 census data, out of a total population of 321,829 in Milan only 227,268 (70.61%) declared to know how to read and write, while 88,150 (27.39%) claimed to be fully illiterate. See Comune di Milano, "La Popolazione di Milano secondo il censimento eseguito la notte del 31 Dicembre 1883," (Milano, 1883)

²⁷ There is no evidence that the clothing for sale in the mail order catalogues was a smaller selection compared to that available within the brick and mortar facilities. Mail-order catalogues present the novelties of the stores' collections, so it might be that in the physical store it was possible to find more goods (because the "old" collections were not discarded). This is however difficult to assess and is not relevant for our results.

pages openly claim that the merchandise purchased via mail is exactly the same available in the Paris store.

The evaluation of the characteristics of the department stores' market in the next section is built on the analysis of four mail order catalogues published respectively by *Alle Città d'Italia* and *Au Printemps* in the years 1883-85. The decision to compare the Milanese firm with a Parisian department store is justified by the fact that at least until the interwar years – and undoubtedly for the period before WWI – the French *grand magasins* were taken as the epitome of modern retailing. Furthermore, the Bocconis, openly referred to the Parisian outlets as their major rivals. After surveying all the available catalogues on the Italian market for these decades, an in-depth analysis was carried out for one catalogue of each firm for the Autumn/Winter season (1883-84 for *Alle Città d'Italia* and 1884-85 for *Au Printemps*) and for the Spring/Summer collection (1884 for both stores).²⁸ *Alle Città d'Italia* was by far the largest department store of the country, while the role of *Au Printemps* on the Italian market (at least in the major cities of the Northern part of the country such as Turin and Milan) was noteworthy as shown by the above mentioned opening of a shipping office in Turin (1878) and by the frequent ads published in Italian women's magazines. The decision to focus on these years is justified by the fact that by the 1880s the structure and contents of the mail order catalogues had reached a sort of well-defined standard that does not change much at least until the end of WWI, thus making the issues analyzed in this paper highly representative of the contribution of department stores to the widening of the market for fashion and of the purported

²⁸ The year difference between the two Autumn/Winter collections does not affect the analysis given the similarity of structure and contents of department store catalogues in these decades. This was also a period in which the Milanese economy did not experience relevant shocks.

triumph of ready-to-wear women's clothing in the last decades of the century.²⁹ Finally, the two *Au Printemps* catalogues taken into consideration are in Italian and are thus expressly addressed to Italian customers, i.e. the same target of the Bocconis'.³⁰ In addition, in the period here considered the exchange rate between the Italian Lira and the French Franc was 1:1, thus making the prices expressed in the French catalogue fully comparable with the Italian one. In order to achieve a complete picture encompassing all the items that were available to make up a lady's wardrobe, we have analyzed both Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer clothing for both stores (for a total of almost 550 garments). Considering both collections also checks for possible over- or under-estimations of the cost of clothing due to material specificities of seasonal clothing.³¹

3. Womenswear in mail order catalogues: assortment, style and prices

The catalogues here considered are overall quite similar and feature the structure that is the standard composition of such publications in Italy and France in this period. They are finely illustrated brochures of some 100 pages that open by introducing the firm to new customers and present the latest novelties to accustomed clientele, then move on to provide specifications on shipping modalities and costs and instructions on refunds.³²

²⁹ This claim is made on the basis of the many other catalogues of the period 1870s-1930s examined by the author.

³⁰ The Italian version of the catalog is the same as the French one.

³¹ We would expect Winter outfits to be overall more expensive because produced using a larger quantity of heavier fabrics in comparison to the light spring and summer dresses.

³² Instructions on how to communicate the correct body measurements for the purchased garments are also provided. Being able to provide the correct body measures was a crucial requirement for the purchase of garments via mail in a period in which the sizes did not yet exist.

The first merchandise featured in the *Alle Città d'Italia* catalogues are textiles and fabrics, which are offered in a truly wide variety. In this respect the catalogues act as a sort of “fashion adviser” for the reader, as is the case with the 1884 Spring/Summer issue that presents its stock of black silks and reminds that ‘black is the trendiest color for womenswear’, echoing the claims and counsels repeated in contemporary fashion magazines of that season.³³ In this same section of the catalogue, great emphasis is put on the ‘Season’s Success: The Siren’, really nothing more than 9 meters of fabric (available in two different varieties, at different prices³⁴) sufficient to make the model of garment presented in the illustration. Interestingly enough, the fabric is sold together with the paper model (pattern) of the dress (included in the final price). The custom of selling and advertising cuts of fabric that were of sufficient quantity and of appropriate quality for the making of a specific kind of dress (in Italian *taglio d’abito*) – at times accompanied by the paper model and the assembly instructions – is a common feature of both the Italian and the French department stores. In addition to the above-mentioned “Siren”, the *Alle Città d'Italia* Spring/Summer catalogue offered a *taglio d’abito* consisting of 9 meters of ‘extra quality’ heavy cotton (*cretonne*), in various colors and designs for 6.90 lire and one consisting of 9 meters of lower quality light cotton fabric (*cretonnette*), ‘with elegant decorations’ for 4.60 lire. In its turn, the Spring/Summer catalogue of *Au Printemps* advertises a *taglio d’abito* consisting of 14 meters of printed Alsace cotton fabric at 11.90 lire. As will be clear by analyzing the data discussed in the following pages, the price of the “Siren” is strikingly lower than the average price of female garments presented in the catalogue. This provides a first piece of evidence suggesting that possibly the widening of the

³³ *Alle Città d'Italia, Album delle novità*, 1884, p. 8.

³⁴ The price is 4.60 lire or 6.90 lire, depending on the quality of the fabric but also on the colors and patterns.

market for fashionable goods did not occur so much via ready-made clothing, but more via textiles and paper patterns that could be used to make dresses at home.³⁵

The catalogues of the Parisian and Milanese stores are similar also as far as their length is concerned, each varying between 85 pages (*Alle Città d'Italia*, Autumn/Winter 1883-84) and 124 pages (*Alle Città d'Italia*, Spring/Summer 1884).³⁶ The variety of items sold by the two department stores and their overall share within the total stock of merchandise offered by the firms is shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The figure shows that as far as the assortment of merchandise is concerned, the two department stores exhibit many similarities, albeit a few, smaller, differences must also be stressed. With regard to the former, it seems that “clothing” is the most important typology of goods for sale.³⁷ However, if we break down this category into smaller classes and distinguish between women’s, men’s and children’s garments, the picture is slightly different. Indeed, while womenswear is by far the largest group, the category of “accessories” seems to be prominent in all cases except for *Alle Città*

³⁵ Home production of clothing is considered to be typical of the pre-industrial period, while department stores should have changed this habit by making available affordable ready-made outfits. Our research, however, seems to tell a different story.

³⁶ As mentioned above, the letter to customers of the Bocconi Spring/Summer 1884 catalogue openly stresses that the number of pages has increased due to the company’s success. This partially explains why this issue is bulkier than the others considered. The catalogues of the French department store seem overall slightly more formal and detached (i.e. they feature a less colloquial language) than those of their Italian counterpart while they also present a wider variety of services available to customers. For example, *Au Printemps* offer a range of financial services (described at p. 4 of the 1884 Spring/Summer catalogue), while the Bocconis provided nothing similar to their clients.

³⁷ Of course, we had to group different categories of goods. In the accessories we included: gloves, umbrellas, shoes, shawls, trimmings, haberdashery and laces. Also less significant (i.e. less numerous) items such as luggage was assigned to this category.

d'Italia Autumn/Winter.³⁸ Another important class of goods is represented by “underclothes”, which are slightly more important in the French catalogue than in the Milanese counterpart.³⁹ Another remarkable resemblance is the overall little amount of pages devoted to menswear: for *Alle Città d'Italia* men’s outfits were featured in only two pages for the Autumn/Winter catalogue and nine pages for the Spring/Summer issue, while *Au Printemps* only devoted two pages in the Autumn/Winter catalogue, and in the Summer issue menswear was totally absent. Textiles in all catalogues occupy more or less the same amount of pages.⁴⁰

Table 1 and Figure 2 show the variety of womenswear on sale. The analysis of the data that follows devotes a greater attention to “outerwear”, using this term to refer to all those garments that were meant to be worn by the woman outside her home and in public occasions. All such clothes have been assigned to a specific stylistic category that mirrors the descriptions provided in the very pages of the catalogues. Instead, all the clothing that was designed specifically to be worn within the family (and thus not to be seen in public) was grouped together in a single class with no further distinction.⁴¹ This decision is justified not only by the greater attention and emphasis given to “outerwear” by the catalogues⁴², but also by the careful scrutiny – almost an

³⁸ On the importance of the trade of accessories in the business of the Milanese department see Merlo and Polese, "Accessorizing Italian Style."

³⁹ We have grouped together underclothes for women, men and children and have considered in this category also items such as nightgowns and socks.

⁴⁰ A very large amount of different fabrics could be presented in one page, while the number of dresses that could be illustrated and described in a single page was of course much smaller.

⁴¹ Basically, the sub-categories of “outerwear” have been defined according to the types of garments (models) vogue in those days. It must be stressed, however, that in that period the same term was often used to define dresses that were not exactly the same. The category *abito* (literary “dress”) includes complete outfits (without overcoats). The ulster is a double-breasted heavy overcoat. The dolman is a mantle-like outer garment with no sleeves, similar to the *mantelet* (a broader definition generally referring to a short coat with a cloak-like shape). The *visite* is a more richly decorated mantelet (as suggested by the name, nineteenth century etiquette codes indicated that these garments were to be worn by women when paying visits to acquaintances and friends). The category of “home dresses” is made of the garments defined as dressing gowns or *peignoirs*.

⁴² The *Alle Città d'Italia* Autumn/Winter collection features the smallest amount of home dresses (only 13%) while the largest amount is present in *Au Printemps* Spring Summer catalogue (34%).

obsession – with which nineteenth century etiquette codes and magazines described and commented on the appropriate dresses that well-to-do women should wear during the different daily occupations.⁴³ We thus believe that when shopping for clothing in the 1880s, a woman would be more attracted by those garments with which she would appear in public than to those that she would wear privately.

[Table 1 and Figure 2 about here]

Both the Italian and the French department stores attached a greater value to “outerwear” as mirrored by the fact that it is usually featured in the first and central pages of the catalogues and that it is illustrated by careful drawings accompanied by lengthy descriptions. Furthermore, all garments belonging to this group are given a personal name (usually a woman’s name) and they represent a larger share of the merchandise compared to the home dresses, with the group of “complete outfits” (*abiti* in Italian) showing the largest amount of items in all catalogues.

To sum up, there is no great difference in the variety and typology of womenswear sold by the Italian catalogues of the two department stores. The amount of models featured remains more or less stable, albeit *Alle Città d’Italia* show a more pronounced increase. A check on the names of the outerwear models shows that the same model (i.e. a garment with the same name) is not presented more than once.⁴⁴

⁴³ A very detailed description of the different attires suitable for different moments of the days is provided by Perrot, *Fashioning*, ch. 7.

⁴⁴ There are a couple of cases in which the same name is used for different types of clothing both in the same catalogue and in the different collections although no indication is given to the fact that the two items might be matched together. For example in *Alle Città d’Italia* Autumn/Winter catalogue *Rosalia* is both a hat and a dressing gown, while in the *Au Printemps* Autumn/Winter collection *Il Rapido* is a travelling outfit whereas in the Spring/Summer issue *Il Rapido* is the name of a mantel.

A closer look at the average amount of variants⁴⁵ for each category of outerwear reveals that overall the *Au Printemps* models were available in a larger number of versions, although the gap between the two department stores is not remarkable. Home dresses were offered in a much lower number of variants (always, on average, below 2), reinforcing the impression that this typology of clothing had achieved a greater standardization compared to outerwear. In the following pages we will investigate whether this conclusion is confirmed also by the price analysis. Finally, it must be noted that the French department store overall featured fewer typologies of garments compared to the Bocconi firm.⁴⁶

Let us now consider the prices of womenswear, in order to assess to what degree female clothing sold in these innovative retailing firms can really be considered standardized ready-to-wear. Were the garments offered in the catalogues more or less similar as far as prices were concerned, or was the variety still large?⁴⁷ In addition to this, the appraisal of the factors affecting the price of clothing (e.g. trimmings, quality of fabric etc.) helps to better understand which elements had a greater share in determining the cost of the final product. The figures presented in Table 2 enable us to draw some provisional conclusions.

[table 2 about here]

⁴⁵ In this paper the term “variant” is used to indicate the different versions in which a same model was offered. For example, the *abito Marietta* of the Bocconi Autumn/Winter collection, could be bought in three different versions, *Nancy* was available in four versions etc.

⁴⁶ The *Au Printemps* catalogues have no models belonging to the categories *ulster* and *dolman*. The Bocconis did not feature *mantelets* in their Autumn/Winter catalogue but introduced this typology in the Spring/Summer issue. The greater homogeneity of *Au Printemps* is especially clear in the Spring/Summer collection, when out of the 39 items of the “outerwear” category, 18 were simply defined as *abiti*, 3 were *visites*, 3 were *paletot* and 1 model which was not better defined.

⁴⁷ An analysis of the “stylistic” standardization of womenswear sold in department stores is beyond the scope of this article as it would entail a careful scrutiny of all the written descriptions of the dresses accompanying each model. However, some information on the stylistic variety can be inferred from the information presented in the previous section and especially from Table 1 and Figure 2.

The price of the garments uncovers differences between the two department stores and between the two collections of the stores, even if – not surprisingly – the Autumn/Winter clothes exhibit overall higher prices.

We will now consider the standard deviation and average prices registered by the prices of the different categories of garments.

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

The figures shown in Figures 3 and 4 suggest that the womenswear sold by both department stores still featured many differences and a high degree of variability. This is true not only with regard to the large amount of variants available for each model (see Table 1 above) but also as far as the spread of prices is concerned. Comparing the two department stores, we see that *Au Printemps* shows an overall higher standard deviation and thus a lower level of standardization. It is true that the Bocconi catalogue offered a wider amount of typologies of dresses (*ulsters* and *dolmans* were not available at *Au Printemps*) but where the comparison can be made, the prices of the Parisian department store show a much wider dispersion than its Milanese competitor and the category with the highest standard deviation is the *abiti* sold by *Au Printemps*, i.e. the category featuring the highest average price. This analysis suggests that at this stage the non made-to-measure female garments sold by department stores still featured a high degree of heterogeneity that made them not so dissimilar to the tailored (or at least handmade) garments typical of the preindustrial ages.

As for the factors determining the price of a garment, such information can be gathered only by a careful examination and comparison of the captions of the illustrations showing the different variants of the clothes. Albeit difficult to quantify in exact terms given the purely descriptive characteristic of these captions, the element that most frequently contributes to the determination of the price of each individual variant of a given model is surely the quality of the fabric employed (e.g. heavy wool instead of plain wool, fine silk instead of plain silk etc.). Less frequently it is the color or the kind of decoration/design of the fabric (in this respect, fabrics that display printed patterns such as flowers are generally used for more expensive dresses than their solid color counterparts), while the least important among the variables that affect the price of garments is the quality of trimmings and finishing (e.g. the use of fur trimmings or of metal buttons).

Average prices of both department stores are similar (Figure 3), albeit *Au Printemps* is overall more expensive.⁴⁸

4. Fashionable womenswear outside department stores

But how affordable was womenswear sold by these early department stores? Can we link the widening of the market for fashion to the diffusion of low cost garments by department stores? In order to answer these questions we need firstly to attempt a

⁴⁸ For such calculations we do not take into account the group of “fur coats” as a consequence of their low numbers and of ulsters and dolmans because they are not present in the French catalogues. The exceptions - the *visite* and the *paleots* - are overall negligible, given that the difference in price is less than 15.00 lire. On the contrary, the gap between the average prices is more remarkable if we consider the categories where *Au Printemps* garments are most expensive. This is especially true of the *abiti* (for sure the most expensive typology of womenswear featured in the Parisian catalogues with average prices of 64.00 lire higher than the Bocconi collection), but also of the *mantelets* (difference of almost 24.00 lire) and of the “home dresses” (difference of 16.60 lire).

comparison with the prices of female garments available in those years through alternative channels and then to relate them with some proxy of the incomes and consumption patterns of the Milanese population. The decision to limit our attention to the Milanese market has several justifications. Firstly, the fact that the Bocconi headquarters were in Milan and that the first store opened in this city gave the Milanese population a longer familiarity with department store shopping.⁴⁹ Moreover, as *grand magasins* were a typically urban phenomenon we can expect to find their customers chiefly among the urban classes. Finally, as previously stated, by the last decades of the nineteenth century Milan was emerging as one of the most advanced economic areas of the country, suggesting that within the Lombard city one could find a higher amount of customers with disposable incomes to spend on consumer goods such as fashionable clothing.

Since information on prices of clothing in Italy in the last decades of the nineteenth century has never been collected systematically, we must find alternative ways to estimate the approximate price of purchasing womenswear differently. In this period, if a woman desired a new dress she had two major options (besides the department store): making the dress on her own or resorting to a tailor or seamstress. Both of these possibilities were common⁵⁰ and shared the fact that the woman needed to purchase the fabric and other materials required for the dress. The price of resorting to

⁴⁹ Given the low numbers of Bocconi catalogues issued relative to the overall Italian population, it seems likely that the majority of purchases were made by visiting the brick-and-mortar store rather than by leafing the catalogue pages.

⁵⁰ Available historical studies do not make it possible to estimate which of these two options was most common. Indeed, one could say that technological improvements such as the sewing-machine and the paper pattern industry, in addition to the increasing availability of women's magazines (largely focused on fashion), progressively enabled women who made garments at home to achieve results that were increasingly similar (as far as appearances are concerned) to professionally made garments. On the pattern industry see Margaret Walsh, "The Democratization of Fashion: The Emergence of the Women's Dress Pattern Industry." *The Journal of American History* 66, no. 2 (1979), pp. 299-313. while on home dressmaking see Barbara Burman, ed., *The Culture of Sewing. Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford-New York, 1999). However, sewing machines in Italy were in those years much less diffused than in the US.

a seamstress to have a dress made can be estimated using invoices referring to this period. For example, two invoices issued by the Milanese seamstress Francesca Pilla in 1877 show that making two dresses (*abito*) in silk fabric (*faille*) cost 12 and 15.50 lire.⁵¹

Women's magazines provide further information. For example, in an 1883 article, the popular Milan-published *Il Bazar* claims that 'a wealthy woman can wear a dress that costs 50 lire per meter; can spend an equivalent amount of money to embellish the dress and about one third of the cost of fabric and embellishments to resort to one of those renowned seamstresses that charge you not only the making of the dress, but also their reputation'. The article continues with advice on how to save money: purchase fabric in a department store and make the garment at home or otherwise resort to one of the many seamstresses that do not have a celebrity name but are equally competent. In the latter case, 'total expenses will range between 20 to 50 lire, according to the complexity of the dress'.⁵²

Of course, in order to make sense of these figures we need some information on the quantity of fabric required to make a dress. These calculations, however, become awkward given the wide range of models that made up a fashionable wardrobe. In any case, fashion sketches published in women's magazines can help, although they too show a very wide variety of models and generally describe elaborate (i.e. necessitating large quantities of fabric) garments. For example, a French fashion plate featured in 1874 in a fashionable women's magazine suggests that an elegant model of a female dress would require 30 meters of fabric. Other information is provided in the French mail-order catalogue of *Bon Marché* for the Summer 1880 womenswear

⁵¹ Civiche Raccolte Bertarelli, Milano, Fondo "Pubblicità Milano". To this one must add the cost of home delivery of the dress (less than 1 lire).

⁵² *Il Bazar*, 1 August 1883.

collection that indicates that on average the dresses featured in its pages required some 12 meters of fabric.⁵³ Finally, we can also resort to the previously described *tagli d'abito* presented in the Spring/Summer catalogues of both *Alle Città d'Italia* and *Au Printemps*.⁵⁴ It is then possible to use this information to calculate the cost of making a dress roughly similar to the ones of the *Alle Città d'Italia* and *Au Printemps* collections by purchasing only the appropriate fabric – rather than the whole dress – from our catalogues. Table 3 shows how much a woman would spend for a reproduction of the most and the least expensive of the models sold by the Milanese and the French department stores if she resorted to these emporia only to purchase a somewhat corresponding fabric. It is important to stress that such a comparison is very approximate (and probably underestimated) because it does not take into account the cost of lace, trimmings and other frequently used embellishments. Obviously, the price would be higher if she decided to resort to a seamstress to have the dress made.

[table 3 about here]

The estimates in Table 3 confirm what had already been suggested by the captions of department store catalogs, i.e. that the element that most affected the final price of the garment was the cost of the fabric. In this respect, when department stores offered fabrics at a bargain price (as is the case, for example, of the black woolen fabric of the *Au Printemps* Autumn/Winter collection), the option of purchasing the cloth from the *grand magasins* and then making the dress at home did provide the opportunity to realize reasonably-priced garments that could have looked rather similar to the

⁵³ Unfortunately, the catalogue does not describe the dresses so it is not possible to compare them directly to the *Alle Città d'Italia* or *Au Printemps* collections analyzed in this paper.

⁵⁴ See above.

fashionable models featured in the catalogue pages (and which in their own turn mirrored those featured in women's magazines). This is confirmed clearly when we consider the *tagli d'abito* offered by both stores. In this case, the price was actually rather low, especially when compared to the average price of the matching typology of ready-made dresses (*abiti*) featured in the same catalogue. Probably, the final result would have been qualitatively superior if one resorted to a seamstress, but in this case the final cost of the dress would have been higher, at times even appreciably, depending on the reputation of the seamstress.

5. Potential department store customers

For all that, who could afford to purchase the garments featured in the catalogues? This is the final question that needs to be addressed in order to understand if the contribution of early department stores to the creation of a modern "fashion system" was mainly the result of the sales of inexpensive womenswear or if their main contribution must be searched elsewhere. In accordance with historians and contemporary observers, we move from the assumption that these outlets catered mainly to customers of the urban middle classes, who had previously been excluded from the fashion market and who strived to adopt a lifestyle (and especially a clothing style) similar to that of the upper classes. These classes represent a new market segment for fashionable goods that is largely seen as the main responsible of the "democratization" of fashion of this period. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to find information on the expenditures of the middle (and lower-middle) classes in Milan (as well as in Italy as a whole) in this period, given that most of the data refer

to the working classes (i.e. rural families and blue-collar urban workers).⁵⁵ We have thus relied on two different kinds of information: estimates of average wages of white-collar workers and professionals in Milan and very few household budgets (Table 4). As can be seen, the average wages of white-collar workers in these years differed widely, ranging from the 500 lire a year of a generic employee of Milan's Chamber of Commerce to the 4,000 lire a year for the head-office of one of the city's major banks. The incomes of professionals (lawyers, engineers and physicians) also show a broad spread. Furthermore, the fact that for this period we have only two household budgets for families belonging to the middle classes makes it quite awkward to assess how much of the income would be spent for clothing. In any case, in order to attempt a very rough calculation of what department store clothing was affordable for these families, we could say that the *average* expenditure would be of 19.2% of the income (with a standard deviation of 6.2). The total amount of money spent on clothing is shown in Column D, while Column E provides the approximation of the expense for each family member (based on the assumption that the average family size would be of six persons).

[table 4 about here]

By crossing the data of Table 4 with information gathered in the city of Milan during the 1881 census, it is possible to estimate the relevance of the professional categories of the head of the household relative to the overall population of the city. Figures

⁵⁵ See Giovanni Vecchi, "I Bilanci Familiari in Italia (1860-1960)," *Rivista di Storia Economica* II (1994). See also Sergio Zaninelli, *I Consumi a Milano nell'Ottocento* (Roma, 1973)., Marco Soresina, *Mezzemaniche e Signorine: Gli Impiegati Privati a Milano (1880-1939)* (Milano, 1992) and Alberto Banti, "Redditi, Patrimoni, Identità (1860-1922)," in *Storia d'Italia, Annali 10, I Professionisti* (Torino, 1996).

suggest that the sample of Milanese middle-class families of Table 4 is representative roughly of a mere 1.74% of the Milanese population. By contrast, if we consider the occupation of the overall working population of Milan in 1881 (206,909 individuals)⁵⁶, the most representative category was that of “salaried workers” of the manufacturing sector (94,861, i.e. 29.5% of Milanese total population) whose household budget is included in the last line of Table 4 and can represent a useful comparison with our middle-class families when we move consider who could actually afford to buy the womenswear items that were sold by *Alle Città d’Italia* and by *Au Printemps*.⁵⁷

If we consider the average price of the garments and the per capita expenditures of the Milanese households, the poorest among the middle-class families here considered could afford to purchase only one of the cheapest – and least fashionable – typologies of garments, i.e. the home dresses. On the opposite side, the most expensive categories of womenswear were unaffordable also for the wealthiest of the middle-class families considered. Not surprisingly, the working class household would not have been able to purchase any female garment from the catalogues. The selection becomes much broader when we take into account the minimum prices of womenswear. In this case, all Milanese families (including the working class one) could afford to buy something from the *grand magasins*, albeit for the poorest households the choice was limited to the cheapest categories of items, while the wealthiest family could actually purchase more than one dress, even selected among the clothing with the highest average prices. Yet, the most expensive garments (i.e. the items with the highest maximum prices) remained largely out of reach for the

⁵⁶ The census asked to which professional activity one belonged, so we have calculated the total active population summing up the occupants for each single category.

⁵⁷ For the sake of simplification, we have not taken into account the shipping expenses, which were higher for *Au Printemps* than for the Milanese department store..

middle-class households considered, suggesting that the top-range womenswear of these early *grand magasins* was still limited only to upper class customers. Keeping in mind that the expenditures of Table 4 represent the entire *yearly* clothing budget of these families, it is highly unlikely that these households could become regular department store customers at least as far as womenswear is concerned. Moreover, since the five households that we have considered represent a very small share of the Milanese population, womenswear sold in these outlets remained much too expensive for the majority of the city's dwellers.

We can now use the figures of Table 4 to estimate whether it was possible for these households to purchase womenswear similar to the garments sold by the two department stores from the alternative channels that we have previously described (see Table 3). Indeed, most middle-class families could acquire garments apparently comparable to the ones featured in the catalogues by resorting to different outlets. Even a dress comparable to the most expensive model of *abito* sold by *Au Printemps* could be purchased by eight out of the 12 households of table 4, albeit in most cases solely at the condition that it could be made by using at most nine meters of fabric. However, given the opulence of the dress featured in the *Au Printemps* catalogue this last hypothesis seems quite unlikely, in the end making it very difficult for the majority of the Milanese population to become the owners of a dress even only resembling the top-end department store collection. Moving to the cheapest garment sold by the two catalogues, we see that the ulster of the Bocconi Spring/Summer assortment is truly convenient compared to the available alternatives and, indeed, this garment was purchasable also by the working class household.

Conclusion

The data analyzed in the previous sections suggests that with regard to womenswear we should not give for granted that the garments sold by department stores in Italy in the 1880s – even if often referred to as ‘ready-made’ – possess the characteristics of standardization that we often associate today with clothing that is not tailor-made. On the contrary, both stores featured a wide assortment of different models of garments, making it possible to choose among a broad selection of dresses with different stylistic characteristics (not only silhouette and cut but also fabric and trimmings). Moreover, all the collections analyzed featured a significant dispersion of prices that was higher in the most expensive categories of garments. Prices were more homogeneous in the least expensive typology of garments, i.e. the home dresses. Indeed, this was the class of clothes that was perhaps less valued by consumers as “fashionable” because they were not meant to be worn in public occasions. Standardization thus seems to have affected the less fashionable among the fashionable products. This conclusion indicates that in Italy the widening of the market for fashionable clothing in the second part of the nineteenth century did not occur via standardization. Further research needs to examine to what extent other European countries also conformed to this model, which instead seems more suitable to the American case.⁵⁸

Most items of womenswear sold by the two department stores were also expensive – prohibitively so for all but a very small group of very rich consumers. As shown, most womenswear displayed in the catalogues was too expensive to enable the lowest segments of the Milanese *bourgeoisie* customers to purchase them. And even if we consider households of a relatively more affluent middle-class clientele (such as the

⁵⁸ See Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work*.

professionals) – their yearly clothing budget would have made it difficult for them to rely on *Alle Città d'Italia* or *Au Printemps* in order to stock the wardrobes of the women of the family. One could imagine that buying a department-store outfit would be an exceptional event reserved only to very special occasions. In truth, as we have seen in the previous pages, some of the Milanese middle-class families could have purchased womenswear from early department stores only as long as they did not buy any other item for the rest of the year. Based on mail order catalogue data, the French department stores were on average even more expensive than their Italian counterpart, probably because their home market was wealthier.

Does this therefore mean that such outlets brought no contribution to the widening of the fashion market in a newly industrializing country like Italy? On the contrary, our research suggests that in the Italian case early *grand magasins* actually played an important part in broadening the market for fashion, albeit this was not achieved primarily by selling affordable clothing. First of all, these new emporia made available cuts of fabric (*tagli d'abito*) that even in their most expensive version could be purchased by all households, including working-class ones. This suggests that the sale of low-cost textiles was crucial in explaining the role of early department stores in the creation of a modern "fashion system". Indeed, to make this argument even clearer, it must be stressed that the above-mentioned cuts of fabric were made precisely of the textiles that were the core of department stores' stock. Moreover, the major female magazines published in Italy in those years repeatedly advertised "bargain fabrics" available by both *Alle città d'Italia* and *Au Printemps*. Womenswear displayed in the catalogue pages thus seems important not so much as an object of consumption (i.e. a product that would actually be purchased by the customer) but rather as an illustration of what it was possible to achieve by buying textiles and other

accessories from the department stores instead of a complete outfit. This finding supports the initial claim according to which the major business for department stores in this period was not represented by clothing but perhaps by textiles and accessories. Indeed, it was precisely the female accessories as well as the textiles that exhibit the distinctive features of “standardization” that are often – and wrongly – attributed to the womenswear traded by the *grands magasins*.⁵⁹

Thus, in order to fully appreciate the contribution of *grand magasins* to the process of fashion dissemination, our research stresses the need to adopt a broader perspective and not to limit the focus to market transactions but to include instead more “intangible” elements. An example of such an element is the diffusion of fashionable models that was greatly increased by the spread of mail order catalogues. Actually, these publications contributed to spread illustrations of stylish clothing well outside the circles of those women who could afford to purchase (costly) female magazines. The comparison between the pictures of the dresses featured in the catalogues and those published in the main women’s magazines of these years shows a striking similarity. Hence, the fact that department store catalogues were shipped free of charge to anyone requesting them was a powerful means to diffuse the knowledge of what an up-to-date wardrobe should look like even among women with limited purchasing power. Clearly, as is well known, the same result was achieved by the *grand magasins* by granting free admission to the brick and mortar stores and by their impressive window displays. Thus, department stores contributed to the widening of the market for fashion in Italy not by selling (generally expensive) womenswear, but rather by disseminating a fashion “gospel” and by diffusing various instruments that enabled women with low clothing budgets to enter the fashion market.

⁵⁹ On the standardization of accessories see Merlo and Polese, "Accessorizing Italian Style."

Last but not least, this paper has also made a contribution to the early history of the Italian fashion system, which – as is well documented – only developed more fully after WWII. However, as the research reported here suggests, some of its constituent elements already emerged in the late nineteenth century. In this period department stores and their mail order services represented the first building blocks of a domestic distribution network, that apparently shared similarities with its more advanced French counterpart. Finally, the growing success of the Bocconi business shows that already in the last decades of the century the market for fashion in Italy was widening and becoming more dynamic and that, together with it, the interest for fashionable goods and a growing fashion awareness was spreading throughout society.

Archival Sources and Women's magazines

Civiche Raccolte Bertarelli, Milano, Fondo "Pubblicità Milano".

Il Bazar, Milan, various years

Il tesoro delle famiglie. Giornale istruttivo pittoresco di mode, lavori femminili ecc. ecc. Guida ad ogni maniera di lavori per le signore, Milan, various years

La moda illustrata, Milan, various years

La novità. Corriere delle dame. Giornale illustrato in gran formato delle mode, lavori femminili e di eleganza ecc. Milan, various years.

Mail-Order Catalogues

Alle Città d'Italia, Autumn/Winter 1883-84 and Spring/Summer 1884

Au Printemps, Autumn/Winter 1884-85 and Spring/Summer 1884

Bon Marché, Summer 1880

B. Altman & Co., Fall/Winter 1879-1880 and Fall/Winter 1886-1887