

Women's History

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Women of Fashion

For many New England young women in farm families, dressmaking and millinery work offered opportunity for independence and creativity, and were acceptable enterprises for women. Fashion directed businesses which catered to a female clientele, separate from the mainstream industries run by and for men, were the backbone of the female economy. In the mid-1800's Ellen Demorest built a business for women who wished to appear fashionable in public. It grew from a millinery shop in upstate New York to a fashion industry in NYC, where Brooks Brothers and Lord & Taylor's had opened shops. Her husband published a women's fashion magazine and developed a pattern-selling business. Their fashion empire followed their social principles, with a special interest in improving the lives of women. African-American women were hired at comparable pay, invited to company social events, and treated as equals with whites. When wealthy, influential customers objected, they were invited to shop elsewhere. Once an exclusive luxury for the wealthy, Demorest linked fashion with needy women, giving them an acceptable way to achieve economic autonomy. A NYC reporter said, "No woman has done more than Mme. Demorest to secure the best interests of her sex."

A Jewish immigrant alone in New York in 1895, Lena Himmelstein quit her job as a seamstress to marry David Bryant. Sixteen months later, a destitute widow with an infant son, she began a seamstress business in her Manhattan apartment. Her dress design for an expectant mother began a fashion venture aimed at equality and freedom for pregnant women doomed to housebound seclusion once their "condition" was unconcealable. Her bold fashion statement challenged the tradition of secrecy and shame placed on pregnant women, and brought maternity wear and women, out of the closet, so to speak. Though the New York Herald hesitantly ran her first ad, expectant mothers did not hesitate to shop, and bought out the store in one day. Later, her introductory designs for the full-figured woman addressed women ignored by the fashion industry. For the first time full-figured women could buy fashionable clothes. Sales in her plus-size line soon overtook the maternity line. When opening a bank account, a teller misread her signature, and Lena who was too insecure to correct him, accepted his error and her new name of Lane. In 1917 Layne Bryant reported yearly sales of one million, and five million in 1923, but never forgot her poor beginnings. She offered employee benefits, long before company plans were common. She promised a free wardrobe to any woman whose wardrobe was destroyed in a disaster, and during WWII, her stores were centers for clothing donated to war victims.

The fashion industry was remodeled inside/out by a young Jewish immigrant from Russia named Ida Rosenthal. While the 1920's flapper look looked best on flat-chested women,

full-breasted, fashion-conscious women wore a bandagelike undergarment to reshape their bodies. “Nature made woman with a bosom,” Rosenthal commented, “so why fight nature?” She redesigned the undergarment as two cups joined by elastic, and called it the “Maiden Form Brassiere.” In business with her husband they introduced the first nursing bra, the first full-figure bra, and what came to be the standardized A,B,C, and D cup sizes.

Source

Enterprising Women: 250 Years of American Business, by Virginia G. Drachman