

OBJECT LESSONS:  
DOMESTIC INTERIORS ON DISPLAY AT EATON'S TORONTO DEPARTMENT  
STORES

by

Susan Haight

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Carleton University  
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Susan Haight

## **Abstract**

During the interwar years the T. Eaton Company constructed a number of life-sized model houses and period rooms in their Toronto department stores as a means of marketing furniture and house furnishings. This thesis argues that Eaton's used these domestic displays in a program of public pedagogy intended to sell Torontonians specific ideas about middle class values as well as tables and chairs, carpets and wallpaper. Advertising, most notably in the *Toronto Globe*, complemented these object lessons in modern middlebrow domesticity.

Starting in the late nineteenth century many furniture retailers in Europe and North America had deployed such displays as marketing tools. Situating this commercial practice in a particular time and place enables a deeper understanding of its cultural meaning. Eaton's interwar displays reflected corporate imaginings of the local market: Thrift House (1926-1950) was designed to appeal to budget-conscious homeowners, while the Ideal Ontario House (1930-1936) encouraged more affluent Torontonians to buy Canadian made furnishings. The House of To-day (1929) targeted those willing to experiment with innovative art moderne designs. Period interiors featuring English and French historical styles remained a constant, reflecting the popularity of tradition during these decades. Mid level employees, such as interior designers René Cera and Phyllis Stagg, and innovative copywriter Edith Macdonald (known as 'The Scribe'), used their talents to teach shoppers about the aesthetics of interior design, financial literacy, and the impact of consumer choices on the national economy: a syllabus that reinforced a definition of appropriate middle class consumerism as disciplined desire.

As a site of display, Eaton's was linked to more obviously authoritative institutions of public pedagogy in Toronto, such as the Royal Ontario Museum. Through its focus on domesticity and its embrace of public pedagogy as a key marketing technique, the store cultivated an image as a civic benefactor, undercutting contemporary critiques of mass merchandising as essentially deceptive and corrupt. Case studies of the store's interwar domestic displays reveal successes and failures of Eaton's bid for cultural authority in a city of homes.

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Images of Eaton's displays and advertisements serve as crucial evidence for my arguments. Permission to reproduce this copyrighted material was kindly given by FTI Consulting Canada Inc. on behalf of Sears Canada Entities.

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Without publicly available archives and research libraries historians would be in a sad way. My heartfelt thanks to the staff who gave me access to file boxes, runs of magazines and trade journals, and interlibrary loan material at the Archives of Ontario, the MacOdrum Library, Carleton University, Library and Archives Canada, the University of Toronto Archives, the City of Toronto Archives, the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, University of Toronto, the Royal Ontario Museum Archives, and the Victoria and Albert Museum Institutional Archives.

Undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of Toronto, University of California Santa Barbara, and Carleton University allowed me to situate Eaton's house models and period rooms in broader historical context. My work experience in exhibition development at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal gave me an understanding of the behind the scenes labour

involved in producing and maintaining such displays, albeit in a different component of the exhibitionary complex. While vacationing at the family cottage at Lake Rosseau, our next-door neighbour Roger Simon, then a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, kindly read my thesis proposal. Roger told me that the house models and period rooms were exercises in public pedagogy, an insight that had a profound effect on my subsequent analysis. I wish he were still here to read the final product.

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It is traditional to end acknowledgements by expressing gratitude to those nearest and dearest. Unfortunately my parents Jane and Lockwood Haight did not live to see me reach my goal, but growing up with a real estate agent (Jane) and a graphic designer/photographer who designed our mid century modern house (Lockwood) clearly influenced my choice of topic. When my sons were not teasing me mercilessly about the

length of time the thesis was taking, they provided technical assistance (Alexander) and hugs (Thomas).

I have known Roland Kuhn since we were both callow undergraduates at the University of Toronto in the late 1970s. He is my best friend and devoted intellectual supporter, taking care of our children during my extended research trips to Toronto and elsewhere, reading draft after draft, and even dyeing his hair blue when nothing less would convince me to stop procrastinating. At least now I don't have to worry any more that he will have the dreaded letters ABD carved on my tombstone.

This thesis is dedicated to the memories of Edith Macdonald and Phyllis Stagg, women whose contributions to the T. Eaton Company and the shaping of consumer culture in Toronto are no longer hidden from history.

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## Chapter 1

### Teaching Modern Domesticity at the Department Store

On August 19, 1899 an advertisement in the *Toronto Globe* announced the installation of a new display on the second floor of the recently expanded T. Eaton Company department store at Queen and Yonge: an elaborate suite of rooms representing “a home complete in every respect” (Fig. 1.1). The ad’s lengthy text positioned the store as an essential partner in creating Toronto’s existing “city of homes” where “On every side there is ample evidence of the home comfort that abounds and the pleasant home surroundings enjoyed by families of every circumstance.”<sup>1</sup> Not content to rest on their laurels, however, Eaton’s managers declared “there is still room for greater usefulness.” The model house was intended to demonstrate the store’s ability to fully furnish a dwelling to elite standards of “grandeur, beauty and elegance.” The ad emphasized Eaton’s advantages in the field of interior decoration, stating that the “innate taste” of its in-house experts, coupled with access to the “best markets of the world” and “unlimited cash” had produced a display “that is not equaled in Canada.” No illustrations of the interiors were provided; instead readers were invited to see for themselves: “Come and be free to enjoy yourselves at your pleasure. Be free to ask questions or make suggestions. The more you do the better we shall be pleased.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Conditions in poor neighbourhoods such as the Ward, the inner city slum on the store’s doorstep, contradict this blithe generalization about housing in Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, August 19, 1899, 18. This freedom “to enjoy yourselves at your pleasure” was one of the innovations of department store merchandizing. Previously retailers had discouraged browsing with no intention of buying.

**THE T. EATON CO. LIMITED** "CANADA'S GREATEST STORE"

*Store closes to-day at one o'clock—our regular Saturday half-holiday during July and August. Other days we close at five o'clock.*

**ON PAGE 16 WE TELL YOU OF OTHER ATTRACTIONS FOR MONDAY.**

### An Elegantly Furnished Suite of Rooms.

Toronto has been well named the "City of Homes." No other city of equal size and population on this continent can boast of so many beautiful residences and comfortably furnished homes. On every side there is ample evidence of the home comfort that abounds and the pleasant home surroundings enjoyed by families of every circumstance. This store, by introducing new methods of business, has contributed largely to this existing state of affairs and brought greater home comfort and luxury within reach of all who wish to avail themselves of the facilities and advantages it possesses. But while much has been accomplished in the past, there is still room for greater usefulness, and this store is determined to make its influence more widely felt and so achieve still greater success in the homefurnishing business.

For some time we have been planning to give a practical demonstration of our ability to furnish a home complete in every respect. Our experts were set to work. The best markets of the world were open to them; unlimited cash was at their command, and with an innate taste and faculty for doing things in a way that is not equalled in Canada, they have put into shape a magnificently furnished suite of rooms, comprising

***Dining Room, Drawing Room, Library, Moorish Room, Dutch Reception Room and Bedrooms,***

Each of itself completely fitted with the brightest, up-to-date furnishings that can be had, and all together forming a display of Homefurnishings that has no duplicate in Canada. No idea of the grandeur, beauty and elegance can be conveyed in words. To appreciate it you must see it, and to see is to marvel at the ingenuity and skill that devised and planned the elegant and elaborate outfit.

But why say more? On Monday and the following days this suite of rooms will be open for your inspection. Our friends and your friends, the stranger and the visitor to the city, one and all, are invited to come and see this fine display, which, so far as we know, is the only one of its kind in Canada. It will show our advanced leadership in the Homefurnishing trade of Canada: it will emphasize our unequalled facilities for supplying the most luxurious furnishing the finest residence could demand; it will demonstrate once more that this is the one store where homeowners are sure of getting thoroughly reliable and up-to-date homefurnishings and fittings of every description. Come and be free to enjoy yourself at your pleasure. Be free to ask questions or make suggestions. The more you do the better we shall be pleased. Take elevator to the Second Floor.

**Figure 1.1**  
*T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, August 19, 1899, 18.*

A mere nine days after the opening, another ad boasted that over thirty thousand visitors had taken the store up on its invitation.<sup>3</sup> As a *Globe* reporter remarked, a life-sized house within a store was a novelty for Torontonians:

Although for years exhibitions of household furniture have been one of the features of the salesrooms of the big departmental stores, customers have never

<sup>3</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, August 28, 1899, 6. It is impossible to verify this claim. As the population of Toronto was just over 200,000 as of 1901, these visitor numbers seem unlikely. On the other hand, the launch of the display coincided with the Toronto Industrial Exhibition (later the Canadian National Exhibition), an event that attracted tourists from all over the province and beyond.

had the opportunity of comparing the effects produced by a finished apartment, it being generally recognized as impossible to show as a whole all the different articles of furniture which a patron of the store might wish to purchase.<sup>4</sup>

Not just any patron: surrounded by a garden and with an exterior “apparently of brick,” this lavish “model art home” contained a dining room, drawing room, library, bedrooms, a Dutch reception room and a Moorish room complete with, “Soft inviting divans, velvety Turkish rugs, a glowing warm fire in the grate and subdued light from the Turkish lamp suspended from the ceiling...”<sup>5</sup> The self-consciously artistic interiors devised by the store’s decorators were typical of a late Victorian style that historian Judith Neiswander has labeled cosmopolitanism.<sup>6</sup> While Neiswander argues this luxurious aesthetic can be linked to the confident liberalism of Great Britain’s upper middle class, Eaton’s model house suggests that the style’s popularity extended beyond the imperial centre to the wider Anglosphere.<sup>7</sup>

Decorating in this way required both cultural and financial capital: the *Globe* article cited above noted that the furnishings of the dining room alone cost \$2,300 at a time when that sum equaled the yearly income of a prosperous middle class Canadian

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<sup>4</sup> “Model Art Home,” *Toronto Globe*, August 22, 1899, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. According to this article, the store intended to add a kitchen to complete the model. Note how tactile aspects of the display are emphasized in this description.

<sup>6</sup> Judith A. Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home, 1870-1914* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 33-56.

<sup>7</sup> This included the United States: see Kirstin L. Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For a broader discussion of the transnational nature of ideas about domesticity, see Grace Lees-Maffei, “A Special Relationship: The UK-US Transatlantic Domestic Dialogue,” in *Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in a World of Globalization*, eds. K. Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 188-210; and Linda Young, *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries English Canadians probably relied primarily on domestic design advice found in British and American magazines and books. Although articles on interior decoration appeared in the earlier twentieth century in such general interest publications as *MacLean’s* and *Saturday Night*, Canadian magazines that regularly dealt with this topic, such as *Chatelaine* and *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, did not appear until the late 1920s. As this thesis argues, however, Eaton’s advertising, displays, and public lectures provided Torontonians with important sources of information.

family. Clearly not within the reach of most shoppers, the model instead represented a standard of living appropriate to a man as wealthy and aware of decorating trends as Timothy Eaton himself. This connection was implied by the presence of miniatures of Eaton and his wife Margaret in the stylish drawing room. A contemporary photograph of a room in the Eatons' residence on Lowther Avenue showing an interior inspired by the same fashionable Orientalism apparent in the model's Moorish room provides further evidence of the link to the decorating preferences of Toronto's premiere merchant family (Fig. 1.2).



**Figure 1.2**

*Interior, T. Eaton residence, 182 Lowther Avenue, Toronto, ca. 1899.*

*F229-308-0-2282, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*

*Note the theatrical atmosphere created by draped arch at the entrance.*

The anonymous *Globe* reporter was in no doubt about the effectiveness of the store's domestic exhibit:

Thus a six-room house, complete in every detail, has been constructed by the T. Eaton Company, and as it will stand for some months it will provide an object lesson to thousands in home decoration. That, while each apartment has been treated with a distinctly different style of decoration, the color scheme is harmonious throughout, is a credit to the decorators, and that such an exhibition of art has been given to the people of this country and to American visitors is a distinct triumph for the T. Eaton Company.<sup>8</sup>

Based on Eaton's advertising copy customers were encouraged to interact critically with this "object lesson...in home decoration." The fact that Eaton's viewed the display as a means of initiating a meaningful dialogue with Torontonians about issues of taste is indicative of the store's developing consciousness of its role as a cultural mediator between consumers and producers.

Founded in 1869, by 1899 the T. Eaton Company had evolved from a modest business selling dry goods to lower middle and working class customers into "Canada's Greatest Store." In many ways the story of the rise of Timothy Eaton's department store mirrors similar developments in other European and North American cities.<sup>9</sup> Over the previous three decades Timothy Eaton had created a vertically integrated enterprise that included a full-scale departmentalized retailing operation selling all manner of goods from ribbons to bicycles, buying offices in New York, London and Paris, an extensive mail order business serving customers throughout Canada, and various manufacturing

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<sup>8</sup> "Model Art Home" *Toronto Globe*, August 22, 1899, 6. The individual rooms apparently expressed different decorative themes, rather than a unified vision that encompassed the whole house. This decorative approach was fashionable in France during the second half of the nineteenth century. See Anca I. Lasc, *Interior Decorating in Nineteenth-Century France: The Visual Culture of a New Profession* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1995); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); and Louisa Iarocci, *The Urban Department Store in America, 1850-1930* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

facilities.<sup>10</sup> He kept a close watch on innovations in the retail field, whether carried out by his store's most important rival for the Toronto market, the Robert Simpson Company, or by such renowned operations as John Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, R.H. Macy's in New York or Marshall Fields in Chicago. Timothy Eaton prided himself on keeping abreast of the newest style trends in Paris and London: Torontonians had no need to go further than his store to obtain the latest fashions. By the late nineteenth century department stores such as Eaton's, with their large assortment of goods, spectacular displays, and amenities such as restaurants, lecture halls, and art galleries had transformed both the practice of shopping and the urban landscape in most Western cities. As Donica Belisle has shown, by the mid twentieth century Eaton's and Simpsons, together with their western counterpart the Hudson's Bay Company, had come to dominate retailing throughout Canada.<sup>11</sup> In their heyday these Canadian department stores had an enormous impact as major buyers, distributors, employers and, indeed, educators in consumerism.

The T. Eaton Company built its reputation on providing "the greatest good to the greatest number," which management interpreted as the best possible quality and quantity for the lowest possible price.<sup>12</sup> Eaton's added furniture to its wide assortment of goods in 1892, a move that was contested by Toronto's specialized furniture dealers on the grounds that department store staff were not qualified to advise customers on the purchase of this type of merchandise.<sup>13</sup> It is true that initially the company paid little attention to the finer points of style, buying furniture and home furnishings by the railcar

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<sup>10</sup> Full details about Timothy Eaton's success as a retail entrepreneur can be found in Joy L. Santink, *Timothy Eaton and the Rise of his Department Store* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Belisle argues that "Between 1890 and 1940, department stores were among the most powerful agents of Canadian modernization." Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 7,

<sup>12</sup> Edith Macdonald [The Scribe], *Golden Jubilee 1869-1919* (Toronto: T. Eaton Co. Ltd., 1919), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Santink, *Timothy Eaton*, 167-8. See Chapter 6 of this thesis for further discussion of the negative reaction of furniture retailers to Eaton's decision to trespass on their terrain.

load in order to bring down prices for the Brussels carpets, rocking chairs, and parlour tables in popular demand. The model art house took the store in a new direction: no longer content to be simply a provider of goods in bulk, Eaton's now assumed the task of curating those goods in order to produce a harmonious ensemble. By boldly installing a luxuriously furnished dwelling the store intended to put to rest any doubts about its mastery of taste, an attribute that was becoming increasingly important to a growing middle class. Eaton's exercise in upscale interior design also signaled that turn of the century Toronto was no mere colonial backwater, but a thriving city in touch with the best in Western material domesticity.

The 1899 house was only the beginning. In the decades that followed Eaton's managers made significant investments in the construction, renovation, and maintenance of many such displays. By 1913, the company's expanding trade in furniture and house furnishings necessitated the construction of a new building dedicated to this class of goods on a site close to the main store. Known as the House Furnishings Building, it included a substantial model bungalow that, based on Eaton's advertising, was once again designed to appeal to upper middle class customers.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the obvious desire to boost sales, however, the corporate rationale for investing in these early twentieth century displays can only be inferred from infrequent advertisements. The years following World War I are a different story: extensive materials in Eaton's archives indicate that the use of this form of marketing became more targeted and more diverse, a development that demonstrates an increasingly nuanced understanding of the cultural effects of buying and selling. The interwar decades saw, in addition to many more ephemeral interior displays, the creation of Thrift House (1926-1950), the House of To-day (1929), and the Ideal

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<sup>14</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 9, 1913, 18.

Ontario House (1930-1937), each of which aimed at a different demographic. Eaton's marketing of antique and period reproduction furniture also became more ambitious, culminating in the installation of a suite of meticulously crafted period rooms in the elegant art moderne College Street building, the flagship home furnishings store opened by the company in Toronto in 1930. Through these interwar displays Eaton's reflected and produced a range of materialized domesticities as part of the store's ongoing effort to encourage Toronto consumers to re-imagine their homes as deliberately designed environments. This activity was far from neutral: the values and interests of their corporate creator informed the room and house models. While it is difficult to measure the practical impact of Eaton's domestic visions on local interior decorating practice, the company's powerful position in Toronto retailing made it an important participant in interwar debates about the material, the moral, and the economic in the context of the home.<sup>15</sup>

Following a brief overview of the thesis, this chapter constructs an interpretive framework, detailing the ways in which sociologist Tony Bennett's arguments concerning the composition and purpose of an exhibitionary complex can be combined with educational theorists' ideas about public pedagogy to provide a useful lens when analyzing the cultural role played by Eaton's domestic displays.<sup>16</sup> As will be shown, model house displays were often features of the sites that made up exhibitionary complex. They were used to promote housing reform, illustrate both exotic and historic living conditions, and, in the context of the department store, market goods signifying

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<sup>15</sup> I am deliberately referencing Joy Parr here. This thesis is about the pre-history of one of the topics touched on in her book *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999): specifically the efforts made by a leading retailer to shape ideas about material domesticity in a major Canadian city.

<sup>16</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

appropriate standards of taste and economy. The chapter includes a historiography dealing with the work of historians of the United States, France, Great Britain and Canada about how taste has been a facet of middle class identity since the nineteenth century. The following section gives an overview of interwar Toronto, documenting the city's self-image as an Anglo-American 'city of homes.' Chapter 1 ends with sections about primary sources and the structure of the thesis.

### *Thesis overview*

This thesis argues that Toronto's T. Eaton Company functioned as part of the modern exhibitonary complex through its use of house models and period room displays as object lessons in a program of public pedagogy intended to shape local ideas about interior decoration as a form of modern domesticity. Eaton's continued commitment to this expensive form of marketing reveals a desire to achieve a position of cultural leadership that served both the bottom line and the corporate image. In its self-assigned role as an authority in matters of good taste and wise spending, the store promoted these values as important components of middle class identity.

Eaton's representation of domestic interiors, quintessentially private spaces, in the context of the quintessentially public space of a department store gives rise to questions that informed this research project. Given the argument that these displays functioned as a form of public pedagogy, what lessons were they designed to teach? Did the different displays have different intended audiences? Is it possible to determine how customers interacted with these houses and rooms? Were they effective means of selling goods? What was their life span and did they, and their intended message, change over time? Can

the displays be connected to larger cultural, social and economic issues affecting Torontonians? How does studying these displays enrich the historical understanding of domesticity and middle class identity in interwar Toronto?

Traditional historical methodologies were used to try to find answers to these questions. Archival research is the bedrock of historical inquiry; fortunately the T. Eaton Company archives, publicly held by the Archives of Ontario since 1988, include extensive textual material on the operations of the Toronto stores' house furnishing division. The Eaton's archives also contain black and white photographs of the displays, usually taken at the time of their first installation. Other relevant archives were consulted at the Royal Ontario Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. In addition to this material, an extensive review of Eaton's daily newspaper advertising yielded important information about the displays themselves, the way the store represented them to Torontonians and, through a shoppers' inquiry column, the extent of local interest in the subject of interior decoration. Popular magazines and trade journals from the interwar period also served as primary evidence. Careful sifting of these various sources has allowed the recreation and interpretation of the displays in the thesis. While the archival sources used were extensive, they did have their limitations. In particular it was difficult to find direct evidence of the ways in which Eaton's customers interacted with the displays as physical spaces. In this the thesis shares a common difficulty with many other scholarly efforts to document the history of every day experience.

Other scholars have made use of the Eaton's archives as sources for research on such varied topics as labour relations, corporate sponsored leisure programs, and the role

of department stores as nation builders.<sup>17</sup> A chapter in Cynthia Wright's 1992 dissertation first described Eaton's interwar use of domestic displays to promote interest in interior decoration.<sup>18</sup> This thesis takes the story of the house models and period room displays much further by providing more extensive research on their histories and by placing them in the larger context of a program of public pedagogy that connected the seemingly mundane practice of interior decoration to larger cultural, social and economic issues surrounding the performance of modern middle class domesticity.

Eaton's use of domestic displays was not unique: department stores throughout North America and Europe deployed similar devices to market furniture and house furnishings. Indeed, elsewhere in the thesis mention is made of displays created by Eaton's closest Toronto rival, the Robert Simpson Company. Thanks to the wealth of material in the Eaton's archives, however, it is possible to demonstrate significant links between Eaton's corporate culture and the displays. By 1919 the T. Eaton Company had been in business in Toronto for fifty years, time enough for the enterprise to have developed the practices and principles that made for a distinctive institutional identity. By documenting debates occurring behind the scenes, the archives reveal how tensions between core beliefs about the morality of spending, the store's desired image as a cultural institution and, above all, the profit imperative shaped the displays. The thesis unpacks these tensions as they surfaced in relation to the different houses and rooms.

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<sup>17</sup> See Ruth Frager, "Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Eaton Strikes of 1912 and 1934" in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, edited by Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, 189-228 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); Susan L. Forbes, "The Influence of the Social Reform Movement and T. Eaton Company's Business Practices on the Leisure of Eaton's Female Employee during the Early Twentieth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Cynthia Wright, "The Most Prominent Rendezvous of Feminine Toronto': Eaton's College Street and the Organization of Shopping in Toronto, 1920-1950" (Ph.D. diss., OISE, University of Toronto, 1992), 151-194.

At this point it is necessary to define key terms that contribute to the central arguments of the thesis. Bennett's exhibitionary complex emerged in the nineteenth century and included such new institutional forms as public museums, world fairs and department stores. These sites were public spectacles, but they also functioned as instruments of public pedagogy: a process of teaching and learning taking place outside formal educational structures.<sup>19</sup> Displays of physical things functioned as object lessons in the benefits of Western progress. In using the visual, and sometimes tactile, medium of the display as object lesson, museums, world fairs and department stores adapted a pedagogical technique developed by progressive educators in the early nineteenth century. After close examination of familiar natural and man-made objects, students would then build on their observations connecting them with knowledge they already possessed, in order to develop their powers of empirical reasoning. In the case of Eaton's interwar house models and period rooms, furniture and furnishings were used to create ensembles that functioned as object lessons in effective interior decoration. The thesis argues that this commercial exercise in public pedagogy had significant implications for the production of modern domesticity, an important component of middle class identity during this period. This argument relies on the definitions of modernity, domesticity and middle class underpinning the interpretation of Eaton's displays.

Modernity is widely understood "as a useful concept that encapsulates the social, cultural and material changes that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

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<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to the late Professor Roger Simon of the Ontario Institute of Education, University of Toronto, for introducing me to this concept. For further discussion, see Jennifer A. Sandlin, Michael P. O'Malley and Jack Burdick, "Mapping the Complexity of Public Pedagogy Scholarship: 1894-2010," *Review of Educational Research*, 81:3 (September 2011): 338-75.

centuries in the Western world.”<sup>20</sup> These changes included industrialization, urbanization, and rapid technological developments transforming transportation and communication. Old ways of life were destroyed and new patterns of behaviour were created through the revolutionary process of modernization.

In the wake of the creation of new forms of production the composition of the middle class changed, adding an army of technocrats, brokers, and middle managers to the professionals and small business owners that had traditionally occupied this social space. As a result of this expansion the middle class, a social unit situated between a lower class of manual workers and an elite upper class, became a larger political, economic and cultural force. Although middle class identity remained closely tied to occupation and income, other factors such as education and lifestyle were recognized as important status markers.

Developments in the public sphere affected the private sphere of middle class domesticity. As a descriptive term middle class domesticity is intertwined with the idea of home, a central location of social reproduction in the modern Western world. Domesticity involves both practice and principle and is profoundly gendered: women’s physical and emotional labour are central to the creation of a home that sustains the middle class identities of its inhabitants. During the nineteenth century the middle class home was conceptualized as a feminine private sphere of moral and emotional stability, in contrast to the conflict-ridden political and economic life of the masculine public sphere. Numerous historians have noted the contradictions underlying this conceptualization: while the Victorian middle class home ceased to be a centre of

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<sup>20</sup> Deborah Sugg Ryan, *Ideal Homes, 1918-39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 57.

monetized production, it remained embedded in the market as a centre of consumption. Starting in the late nineteenth century with the introduction of new technologies and the disappearance of domestic servants the role of the homemaker underwent a process of modernization, shifting from moral exemplar to efficiency expert. Efforts were made to professionalize domesticity through the medium of formal instruction in public schools and universities. In the informal world of public pedagogy, advertisements, mass market women's magazines and, of course, department stores reflected and supported the discourse of modern domestic professionalism. This thesis argues that Eaton's house and room displays should be understood as part of this pedagogical program. By framing good taste and wise spending as lessons that could be learned through interacting with the store's displays, Eaton's sought to persuade customers that knowledgeable interior decoration was an important component of modern middle class domesticity. The conflicting claims of aesthetics, fashion, comfort, and the family budget could be satisfactorily resolved through judicious purchasing.

It should be noted that modern domesticity in Toronto and elsewhere in the Anglosphere did not necessarily look modern in the sense of following principles enunciated by an avant garde movement of architectural and decorative arts designers that first emerged in the early twentieth century. Instead middle class homemakers were often exponents of conservative modernity; a seeming oxymoron that describes a pattern of combining modern conveniences such as electricity and plumbing with furniture and furnishings evoking traditional styles. Based on the research findings of the thesis, conservative modernism, or what might be called middlebrow culture, provides a useful

means of interpreting Eaton's promotion of period designs as appropriate expressions of a modern middle class lifestyle.

To summarize, this thesis contributes to the cultural history of interwar Toronto through its investigation of the role Eaton's domestic displays played in shaping ideas about the material forms of modern middle class domesticity. The review of Eaton's daily newspaper advertising has revealed a hitherto overlooked source of information about the store's activities and its efforts to position itself as a cultural institution of great benefit to the city. Individual case studies of the house models and period rooms demonstrate Eaton's sophisticated understanding of the needs and wants of various segments of the company's customer base. The significant contributions made by middle managers and mediators such as Edith Macdonald, Phyllis Stagg and René Cera are brought to light.

Finally, the thesis demonstrates the usefulness of public pedagogy as a framework for understanding the cultural labour performed by Eaton's displays. While the store clearly advocated consumerism, when it came to selling goods for the home this message was often coupled with appeals to a moral code that emphasized self-restraint. The house models and period rooms taught disciplined desire: Eaton's marketed interior decoration as the quintessential form of middle class self-expression but, through its displays and the associated advertising, the store also taught that such self-expression should be conditioned by considerations of suitability, thrift, group identity, and national interest. In terms of both medium and message, the store's activities were in tune with the times: the commercial use of house models and room displays should be understood as part of a larger story about the development of new forms of public pedagogy intended to create modern citizens.

*Exhibitionary complexes, object lessons, and public pedagogy*

The modern world is awash with man-made things: the promise and the peril of this abundance is one of the defining characteristics of modernity. During the nineteenth century mass production, complemented by mass consumption, reconfigured the Western understanding of the material environment, replacing traditions based on strict limits of possibility with expansive visions of unending progress. Obviously such a significant re-ordering of perception did not occur overnight. People had to be taught how to live with this new dispensation, so that they could both contribute to the march of progress and benefit from it.

Responding to this imperative, Western nations embarked on programs of mass education designed to provide children with skills they would need as modern workers and citizens. In the case of adults, the discipline of the work place was supplemented by various sources of informal education. For the literate, books and newspapers became increasingly available. Those not drawn to print media were not left out, as new sites of entertainment and instruction emerged “so that those who run might read.”<sup>21</sup> According to sociologist Tony Bennett, nineteenth century world fairs, museums, and department stores were all elements of an exhibitionary complex that used the display of things as a means of public pedagogy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Tony Bennett, “Pedagogic Objects, Clean Eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics,” *Configurations* 6:3 (Fall 1998): 357. The phrase “so that those who run might read” has its origins in the Bible. Nineteenth century museum promoters argued that visual displays, accompanied by brief labels, were effective mechanisms for teaching working class visitors with limited formal education.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 59-88.

This exercise in cultural engineering was inspired by a belief in the power of things to teach. European educational innovators, such as the Swiss Johann Pestalozzi, began using object lessons in primary classrooms in the early nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Students were instructed to use their senses to extract information from mundane natural and man-made things. Building on their initial observations, they were then encouraged to connect their findings to knowledge they already possessed. Through this process of discovery learning, grounded in the real world, practical habits of mind were cultivated. The hoped for result was an active yet disciplined citizenry fitted to meet the challenges of a changing world. Pestalozzian techniques spread quickly to Great Britain and North America: Egerton Ryerson, Upper Canada's leading educator, was an advocate.<sup>24</sup>

Nineteenth century world fairs were object lessons writ large. Starting with London's Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, they showed the products of industrialization and resource exploitation to a fascinated audience that included artisans and aristocrats. Although they attracted immense crowds, such spectacles were usually once in a lifetime events for visitors. While local annual fairs, such as Toronto's Industrial Exhibition (first held in 1879; after 1912 known as the Canadian National Exhibition), exposed the general public to the facts of material progress more frequently, they still represented special occasions.<sup>25</sup> The same could be said of more specialized yearly shows, such as London's Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition (first held in 1906).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Carter, "Object Lessons in American Culture," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> J. Lynne Teather, *The Royal Ontario Museum: A Prehistory, 1830-1914* (Toronto: Canada University Press, 2005), 71-2.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of Toronto's late nineteenth century Industrial Exhibition as a modernizing force, see Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Toronto Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> See Deborah Sugg Ryan, *The Ideal Home through the 20th Century* (London: Hazar, 1997).

Although the impact of these events was undoubtedly significant, it was necessarily limited by their brief life span.

The new public museums, often established in the wake of a great exhibition, were more readily accessible. A case in point is the South Kensington decorative arts museum, financed by profits from the Crystal Palace Exhibition. Henry Cole, its founding director, created admissions policies designed to attract both working class producers and middle class consumers with a view to improving public taste and, as a direct consequence, national economic competitiveness.<sup>27</sup> During the second half of the nineteenth century similar institutions were founded in Europe and North America.<sup>28</sup> Still, trips to such museums were also not everyday experiences.

Arguments made by Bennett and other scholars that nineteenth and early twentieth century world fairs and museums functioned as sites of public pedagogy based on the carefully organized display of objects seem well founded.<sup>29</sup> As elite projects with avowed educational objectives, and often run by boards appointed by some level of government, they can be clearly connected to the broader interests of the nation-state. The inclusion of department stores in the exhibitionary complex is less obvious and, indeed, Bennett does not explore this aspect to any extent. Although department stores were important spaces for the display of the products of industrial progress, they were

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<sup>27</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Examples include the Pennsylvanian Museum and School of Industrial Art, Philadelphia (founded after the 1876 Centennial Exposition) and the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry in Vienna (founded 1863). As we shall see, Charles Trick Currelly, the first director of Toronto's Museum of Art and Archeology (a component of the Royal Ontario Museum, founded in 1914) was also influenced by the South Kensington model.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to Bennett, see Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Elsbeth Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

commercial enterprises primarily aimed at selling, not teaching. In what sense, then, were they part of the pedagogical project of the exhibitionary complex?

While he did not use the term exhibitionary complex, the American cultural historian Neil Harris anticipated Bennett's linkage of world's fairs, museums, and department stores in his 1978 article "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence."<sup>30</sup> Harris is specifically interested in the ways in which display techniques developed in one of these settings were also put to use in rival contexts in attempts to shape popular taste. He argues that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries U.S. department stores were particularly effective in their use of display to establish their authority in matters of taste. The great retail emporiums adapted forms of public pedagogy associated with places of genteel rational recreation, such as exhibitions and museums, in order to connect commerce and consumption to cultural advancement. Various scholars have pointed out the synergies between displays created by department stores and those seen at the ostensibly educational exhibitions and fairs. For example, Louisa Iarocci suggests the Wanamaker department store's 1908 House Palatial display in New York "was inspired by similar exhibits at the St. Louis Fair of 1904," while Morna O'Neill argues that many of the design displays at the Turin Exhibition of 1902 were influenced by commercial room interiors.<sup>31</sup> Such was their

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<sup>30</sup> Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence," republished in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 56-81.

<sup>31</sup> The fact that exhibitions and department stores were so attentive to each other's innovations makes tracking the original source of various developments difficult. Louisa Iarocci, *The Urban Department Store in America, 1850-1930*, 118; and Morna O'Neill, "Rhetorics of Display: Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau at the Turin Exhibition of 1902" *Journal of Design History* 20:3 (2004): 205-25.

success that museums in turn borrowed display techniques associated with merchandising.<sup>32</sup>

Both Bennett and Harris are primarily concerned with the cultural history of public museums: the department store is at best of subsidiary interest. Thanks to the late twentieth century consumerist turn, however, the cultural role played by mass retailers has received significant attention from other scholars. In 1983 David Chaney departed from the usual business history approach to the department store, publishing “The Department Store as a Cultural Form” in the journal *Theory, Culture and Society*.<sup>33</sup> Just over ten years later William Leach’s *Land of Desire* (1994) situated department stores at the heart of a profound shift in American values.<sup>34</sup> No fan of consumerism, Leach argued that mass retailers in the United States co-opted the aesthetics of the sacred, seducing Americans away from republican virtue with “color, glass and light.” In the course of his critique, he assembled a wealth of information about the ways in which the stores used spectacular displays as “strategies of enticement.” While department stores’ focus on exhibiting objects had much in common with the world fairs and museums described by Bennett and Harris, Leach’s work, together with that of other scholars, suggests several important differences that affected the commercial practice of public pedagogy.<sup>35</sup>

One of these differences involves the target audience. Bennett’s interpretation of the exhibitionary complex is informed by Gramscian theories of cultural hegemony, as

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<sup>32</sup> See Harris, *Cultural Excursions*, 76-81.

<sup>33</sup> David Chaney, “The Department Store as a Cultural Form,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 1:3 (Fall 1983): 22-31.

<sup>34</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late-Nineteenth Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

well as by the Foucaultian concept of governmentality.<sup>36</sup> The world fairs and, to an even greater extent, the public museums, were designed to shape an ideal citizen who had internalized the values and behaviours necessary for national progress. As Bennett points out, this ideal citizen was understood to be male. In the case of the department store, however, the object and subject of governmentality was the female consumer. While not entirely an “Adam-less Eden,” the stores were explicitly feminized spaces that facilitated middle class women’s access to the public sphere. Leach emphasizes the seductive qualities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century retail palaces, arguing that consumers were victims of sophisticated forms of manipulation compelling them to buy. In contrast, Erika Rappaport’s discussion of the stores of London’s West End is more positive, suggesting that they were zones of feminine pleasure and sociability. Writing about the Canadian context, Donica Belisle acknowledges the enjoyable aspects of department store shopping, but agrees with Leach that these are undercut by the evils of consumer capitalism. Although their interpretations vary, these authors concentrate on the seductive nature of retail displays, equating sensual experience with emotional responses rather than the rational acquisition of knowledge.<sup>37</sup> As we shall see, however, department stores were equally adept at using discourses of public pedagogy and rational choice as marketing tools when dealing with their (largely) female audience. At Eaton’s shopping was constructed as both pleasure and work for the modern woman.

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<sup>36</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 8-11.

<sup>37</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*; Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver BC: UBC Press, 2011). Interestingly, in an article that predates *Land of Desire* by some years, Leach takes a more positive view of women’s encounter with the department store. He argues that it offered some middle class women significant employment opportunities as managers, while for many others downtown shopping excursions were a source of pleasure in much the same way as they were for the women Rappaport describes. See William Leach, “Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925,” *Journal of American History* 71: 2 (September 1984): 319-42.

Another difference lies in the temporal realm: if not an everyday experience, shopping in department stores was a regular feature of the lives of a large number of urban dwellers. Drawing on evidence found in diaries, Leach has documented how women from a range of economic backgrounds made frequent trips to downtown stores in New York.<sup>38</sup> In her 1992 PhD thesis Cynthia Wright details the ways in which Eaton's transformed the shopping practices of middle class women in Toronto by making the mundane tasks associated with household provisioning at once more enjoyable and more efficient.<sup>39</sup> While both Wright and Belisle note that various economic and socially marginalized groups were denied full participation in the consumerist culture of Canadian department stores, Belisle also shows that even these shoppers were affected by the aspirational lessons taught by mass retailing. Her analysis of Mary Quayle Innis's short stories suggests the degree to which the things associated with middle class identity had penetrated the imaginations of those outside the windows looking in.<sup>40</sup> All customers may not have been treated equally by store clerks, but in principle all were free to browse the object lessons of modern consumerism on exhibit at the department stores on a regular basis. Indeed department store advertisements encouraged looking around with no obligation to buy, in contrast to earlier retail customs that tacitly equated entering a shop with the intention to make a purchase.

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<sup>38</sup> Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption," 334-37.

<sup>39</sup> Cynthia Wright, "'The Most Prominent Rendezvous of Feminine Toronto': Eaton's College Street and the Organization of Shopping in Toronto, 1920-1950," (PhD diss., OISE, University of Toronto, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation*, 154-5; and "Guilty Pleasures: Consumer Culture in the Fiction of Mary Quayle Innis," in *Consuming Modernity: Gendered Behaviour and Consumerism before the Baby Boom*, eds. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh and Dan Malleck (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 258-73. The writer Mary Quayle Innis was the wife and frequent literary collaborator of University of Toronto economics professor Harold Innis. In her role as a homemaker she often shopped at Toronto's Eaton's and Simpson's department stores. See University of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1412, Innis Family fonds, Mary Quayle Innis diaries.

Finally, the practice of public pedagogy by retailers was a two-way street: store managers sought to learn as well as to teach in their interactions with customers. In *Imagining Consumers* (2000), Regina Blaszczyk argues that mass retailers acted as mediators between their clientele and the manufacturers of consumer goods.<sup>41</sup> Department stores' professional buyers gathered information about consumer preferences, information that they passed on to manufacturers in efforts to coordinate supply and demand. In contrast to the top-down messages presented by the exhibits on view at world fairs and museums, department store displays can thus be viewed as part of a two-way conversation between the retailer and the customer. The potential for meaningful dialogue was enhanced by the circumstances of consumers' encounter with this specific form of object lesson: goods for sale were accessible and could be both closely examined at the store and, after purchase, returned if found lacking. It was no accident that Eaton's actively solicited shoppers' comments on the effectiveness of the store's first house model. In the decades before marketing research methodologies were formalized, this desire for direct customer feedback was a recurring theme in the store's advertising.

Emile Zola, whose 1883 novel about a Parisian store, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, was based on thorough research, was perhaps the most eloquent nineteenth century analyst of the spectacular and seductive marketing techniques deployed by the new retailing form.<sup>42</sup> Historians of the consumer culture created by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century department stores have tended to follow Zola's lead by

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<sup>41</sup> Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Emile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise [Au Bonheur des Dames]*, 1883. English edition translated by Brian Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

concentrating on extravagant promotional events and exotic displays. In a recent example, Steve Penfold's *A Mile of Make-Believe* provides a scholarly examination of Eaton's Christmas parade, an annual event that reframed a Christian religious holiday as a secular celebration of childhood. Penfold argues convincingly that Eaton's parade made the store into the "centre of Christmas wonder," acquiring "tremendous cultural power" as a result.<sup>43</sup> Make-believe and fantasy were not, however, the only means to the end of producing modern consumers. The 1899 model art house was as much an object lesson as it was a spectacle. It was a practical demonstration of the skill Eaton's could presumably bring to bear on more modest decorating problems as well as a dream of unobtainable luxury.<sup>44</sup> When an advertisement confidently urged visitors to the 1899 Industrial Exhibition to add Eaton's to their itinerary, boasting: "The displays at this store are keen rivals to those at The Fair," the copywriter aligned merchandizing with education for the modern world.<sup>45</sup>

The spectacular aspects of department store marketing have received significant attention. The use of public pedagogy as a marketing tool has not been as closely examined.<sup>46</sup> Focusing on a specific form of display, this thesis explores the ways in which Eaton's used the progressive ideology of democratic public pedagogy characteristic of the exhibitionary complex to create object lessons intended to sell both

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<sup>43</sup> Steve Penfold, *A Mile of Make-Believe: A History of the Eaton's Santa Claus Parade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 185.

<sup>44</sup> Iarocci reaches similar conclusions about Wanamaker's House Palatial. Iarocci, *The Urban Department Store in America, 1850-1930*, 118-21.

<sup>45</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 4, 1899, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Although as early as 1982 Alan Trachtenberg pointed out its importance: "In department stores, buyers of goods learned new roles for themselves as *consumers* [italics in the original], something different from mere users of goods. The store itself conveyed that difference, taught it in the physical and spatial features it developed; it also taught consumption through an auxiliary institution it helped raise to vast powers in those years: advertising. Thus, the department store stood as a prime urban artifact of the age, a place of learning as well as buying: a pedagogy of modernity." Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 130-31.

material things and cultural practices that reflected shifting definitions of modern domesticity.

### *Model houses/house models*

Starting in the mid nineteenth century the physical aspects of domesticity became the subject of public debate. Prompted in part by housing crises and public health concerns arising from rapid urbanization, critics began to argue for improved dwellings.<sup>47</sup> Their proposals were frequently materialized at both world fairs and more specialized exhibitions. Model working class cottages were shown at London's Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 and at Paris's Universal Exposition in 1867, while the 1884 International Health Exhibition (also in London) contrasted a model sanitary house with its unsanitary opposite.<sup>48</sup> Such displays were inspired by a liberal reform agenda that used the medium to teach visitors about new ways of living, frequently involving the use of innovative technologies. They were three-dimensional representations of the social idealism of their creators. These progressive exhibits were often shown alongside models of historic homes and the dwelling places of other cultures. Visitors thus had an opportunity to compare the best of modern Western domesticity with possible alternatives. Some of these were obviously considered less desirable, while others evoked nostalgia for simpler times.

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<sup>47</sup> See Barbara Leckie, *Open Houses: Poverty, the Novel, and the Architectural Idea in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) for a discussion of the literature of housing reform.

<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant, eds. *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance* (London: V&A Publishing, 2006), 192; and Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870-1900* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 26-30.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the great department stores reworked this pedagogical technique, producing extravagant house models designed to encourage consumers to view choosing home furnishings as a form of aesthetic self-expression. Eaton's 1899 art house, with its representation of interiors that could only be achieved by the wealthiest Torontonians, was the flip side of the exotic primitive on view at the fairs: such levels of civilized luxury were equally foreign to ordinary shoppers. Perhaps the most extreme example of this spectacular domesticity was the House Palatial created for Wanamaker's New York store in 1908. Costing an estimated \$250,000 to build and furnish, it was "a truly palatial house of twenty-two rooms, halls and corridors, and a magnificent staircase...built of solid masonry, as a permanent educational feature."<sup>49</sup> These dream houses implicitly connected the great stores to the tastemaking authority of urban elites, thus elevating the retailers' reputations as sources of household goods. While most could not hope to achieve the level of consumption exhibited in the displays, shoppers did take away the lesson that choices made about furniture and furnishings were meaningful.

The House Palatial and Eaton's model art house were products of late nineteenth and early twentieth century economic prosperity. The spoils of industrialization and resource extraction were not evenly divided, but a spirit of optimism allowed many to dream. Architectural historian Louise Iarocci argues that Wanamaker's elaborate display encouraged shoppers to fantasize: "The visitor to the house [the House Palatial], like the customer in the store, was offered the potential of their own life-changing journey, an expedition to a grander version of a familiar place."<sup>50</sup> She contrasts this with the same

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<sup>49</sup> Iarocci, *The Urban Department Store in America, 1850-1930*, 115-22.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

store's Little Home that Budget Built, installed in 1923. Fantasy has been replaced by realism: "The effort to repackage the practices of buying and selling as an urban spectacle was largely replaced by the even more successful endeavor to entrench shopping as a convenient necessity."<sup>51</sup> In her account, this reorientation is connected to the beginning of the slow decline of the downtown department store as the preeminent shopping destination. Iarocci's project is to trace the history of the department store as both a built form and as a subject of visual and textual representation. Her discussion of model houses is intriguing, but is clearly shaped by a larger narrative of rise and fall that ends with the department store's decline into an obsolete exhibitionary site, its pedagogical aspirations no longer relevant.

The history of house models and interior displays at Eaton's suggests that Iarocci is correct in perceiving a move from spectacular luxury to more restrained domestic displays, but her conclusion that this shift indicates a waning of cultural influence seems overdrawn. Instead changes made to these display techniques can be connected to larger cultural, social and economic factors. Smaller families, higher housing costs, and technological improvements all had a part to play in transforming the stores' materializations of domesticity. In her classic study, *Moralism and the Model Home* (1980), Gwendolyn Wright details the ways in which the notion of the ideal home in the United States responded to new realities during the forty years from 1873 to 1913.<sup>52</sup> The ornate façades and specialized spaces of the gilded age gave way to simplified floor plans and exteriors during the Progressive Era. The interwar period saw further changes, reflecting a climate of economic uncertainty coupled with rising expectations that made

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>52</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Modern Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

past comforts present necessities for an expanding body of consumers. Effective merchandising became increasingly important, as buying priorities changed. Challenged by new products such as cars and radios, many furniture retailers in the United States and Canada turned to in-store house models as a means of refocusing shoppers on the expressive possibilities of homemaking.<sup>53</sup>

Eaton's interwar displays are of historical interest not because they were unique, but because the store's archives and advertisements make possible the reconstruction of the corporate thinking behind their creation. Thrift House, the House of To-day, the Ideal Ontario House, and the period rooms installed at Eaton's College Street store were specific responses to the challenges posed by a changing commercial environment, including concerns about payment methods, shifting fashions, and, not least, the competing displays created by Eaton's main Toronto rival, the Robert Simpson Company. While still retaining the aspirational quality of their pre World War I predecessors, these new object lessons were much closer to the realm of possibility for middle class shoppers.

Whether house models were actually successful in terms of boosting turnover in a sluggish market is open to question. Based on her study of furniture retailing in interwar Chicago, Jennifer Strayer-Jones argues that, although such models routinely attracted crowds, they were much less successful at garnering sales.<sup>54</sup> Cynthia Wright, the first historian to discuss the merchandising of interior decoration at Eaton's College Street,

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<sup>53</sup> My review of the Canadian trade journal *Furniture World*, and its U.S. counterpart *Good Furniture* indicates that both department stores and retailers exclusively devoted to house furnishings used house models and room interiors extensively during the interwar period. In the U.S. stores also frequently contributed furnishings to the model homes built as part of the national "Better Homes" campaign sponsored by the Department of Commerce.

<sup>54</sup> Jennifer L. Strayer-Jones, "No Place Like Home: Domestic Models in Chicago's Public Places," (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1996), 72-3.

reaches a similar conclusion about consumer response in Toronto.<sup>55</sup> There are certainly grounds for considering a number of Eaton's displays ineffective as marketing devices. Life-sized realistic models were relatively inflexible forms of display that required frequent changes if they were to continue to attract public attention. The Eaton's staff in charge of the displays wrestled with the challenge of keeping them fresh and relevant, often under adverse circumstances. Some of them, most notably members of the upscale Interior Decorating Bureau, disputed their usefulness. Nevertheless, for years Eaton's house models and period rooms occupied valuable space on the selling floor that could certainly have been used for more direct forms of merchandising. Given the demands on resources, and the uncertain results, the decades-long presence of house models within Eaton's requires explanation.

Arguably, house models were more than the sum of their parts. They differed from other forms of retail display in a number of important ways: unlike store windows, they were accessible spaces where shoppers could not only see the goods in context but step on the rugs, touch the curtain fabrics and even sit on the chairs.<sup>56</sup> By the third quarter of the nineteenth century retailers frequently used individual room settings to help shoppers imagine the way furniture and furnishings could be coordinated to create decorative effects.<sup>57</sup> House models took this mental exercise several steps further by creating the illusion of a complete dwelling. As they crossed the threshold people moved

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<sup>55</sup> Cynthia Wright, "The Most Prominent Rendezvous of Feminine Toronto." See Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>56</sup> Constance Classen argues that department stores have taken the place of other sites, such as the early modern curiosity cabinets, as locations where objects can be experienced through touch as well as vision. See Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 191-97.

<sup>57</sup> See Clive Edwards, *Turning Houses into Homes: A History of the Retailing and Consumption of Domestic Furnishings* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2005), 137; and Patricia Lara-Betancourt, "Displaying dreams: Model interiors in British department stores, 1890-1914," in *Architectures of Display: Department Stores and Modern Retail* (New York: Routledge, 2018), eds. Anca Lasc, Patricia Lara-Betancourt and Margaret Maile Petty, 31-46.

from the public commercial world of the store to the private domestic realm of an individual home, or so Eaton's claimed in an ad describing the model bungalow installed in the new house furnishings building in 1913:

It is no make-believe house. It is built of brick and stone, from an architect's plans. And, as you cross the vine-covered verandah and pass through the hospitable-looking door, you leave behind all thoughts of store and showroom and wander into the great comfortable lounge of a private house, where the walls are wainscoted to the ceiling in dark oak, and round about the big stone fireplace stand cosy leather-covered chairs and a splendid Jacobean table with books and reading lamp.<sup>58</sup>

If shoppers became visitors, furniture and furnishings also took on a different character in the context of the display. No longer isolated commodities, they were instead seen in terms of their collective contribution to the creation of an appealing domestic environment. This transformation by association made inert objects into homemaking tools. Moving through these home-like spaces, Torontonians could try out alternative domesticities in much the same way as they tried out new clothes in the store's fitting rooms.

Regina Blaszczyk's term "imagining consumers" is useful here: by reconstructing the specific histories of Eaton's house models it is possible to uncover corporate cultural agendas and, to a more limited degree, identify consumer resistance.<sup>59</sup> The early twentieth century marketplace was a confusing arena for both sellers and buyers, as the social distance between the two increased. Department stores were both admired and criticized for their dominance of the retail landscape. As the discourses surrounding the house models show, Eaton's managers were highly sensitive about the

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<sup>58</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 9, 1913, 18. This sense of the house model as a private space in a public commercial setting appears to have been a common trope: see Iarocci, *The Urban Department Store in America, 1850-1930*, 115-7.

<sup>59</sup> Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*.

store's public reputation. Profitability depended upon repeat business; repeat business required consumer confidence. Thus when the store's ads cast its interior displays as part of an ongoing dialogue with customers about taste, the copy told no more than the truth. Eaton's cultural and economic power was great, but it had limits. By presenting its displays as possibilities, rather than prescriptions, the store acknowledged this fact.

The question remains: why was taste in household goods such an important issue for both Eaton's and its middle class customers? Thanks to mass production, fashionable clothing had become widely available by the interwar years and, indeed, this line of goods was central for most department stores. Consumers' appetite for stylish garments had a certain logic: dress had long been seen as important to self-presentation, a key ingredient of one's public persona. In contrast nineteenth century domestic ideology constructed the home as a private refuge from the social pressures associated with the public sphere, an ideal that continued to resonate in the twentieth century even as it conflicted with lived experience. The pedagogical objectives underlying Eaton's model houses and period rooms centred on ideas about taste that, while acknowledging the importance of private preferences, established certain norms of middle class domesticity. Furniture and house furnishings both signaled and shaped values; the domestic interior thus had social, cultural, and economic significance.

### *The Politics of Taste*

Starting in the 1980s shopping and shoppers moved from the sidelines to the centre of academic study in a number of fields.<sup>60</sup> A major catalyst has been a postmodern turn

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<sup>60</sup> See Daniel Miller, ed., *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995).

away from the preoccupation with the relationship to the means of production as a determinant of social identity to the analysis of the role of consumption in the construction of modern subjectivities. Economic historians have argued that demand for things fueled the industrial revolution, rather than the reverse.<sup>61</sup> The growing importance of gender as a framework of interpretation has also played a crucial part, as it has helped to reveal the politics behind the seemingly ahistorical practices of everyday life. In an increasingly virtual world the material interactions between people, things and ideas has paradoxically become seen as key to understanding past cultural formations. People have made things, but things have also made people.<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, a version of this sense of the formative power of material culture lies at the heart of the ideal domestic interiors the T. Eaton Company built in its Toronto stores. Early twentieth century eugenicists may have argued that heredity was all-important, but at the same time many people believed in the power of environment to shape character. This conviction made material domesticity a matter of public concern. Ironically, the domestic environment acquired this cultural centrality as a consequence of its loss of productive importance and presumed detachment from the marketplace. During the early nineteenth century, a transatlantic evangelical movement positioned the home as a moral bastion that counteracted the destabilizing forces created by industrialization and urbanization. Although moral influence was rooted in appropriate relationships within the family, particularly between mothers and children, domestic surroundings also had a part

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<sup>61</sup> The landmark work is Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, eds. *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1982). This book sparked debates about the periodization of the consumer revolution that are still ongoing. For an update, see Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016). See also Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> See Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *American Historical Review* 110:4 (October 2005): 1015-1045.

to play in establishing correct values. An emerging Anglo-American advice literature argued that appropriate decorative choices expressed and instilled ethical commitments.<sup>63</sup> By the mid nineteenth century these writings began to take a more secular tone, but the belief in the home as an agent of civilization remained strong. These ideals became even more broadly available when the notion of the ‘model house’ as an object lesson in correct domesticity was popularized in the new mass-market women’s magazines.<sup>64</sup> The following is a brief survey of historical literature that analyzes the various manifestations of these ideas in Great Britain, France, the United States, and Canada.

Historians seeking to understand the hegemonic power of middle class culture have shown the ways in which public and private became intertwined in the formation of a distinct social identity. In their pioneering 1985 book, *Family Fortunes*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall detailed the close connections between the making of the British professional and entrepreneurial middle classes and the emergence of a domestic ideology celebrating the idea of home during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>65</sup> Previous feminist scholarship had used the concept of separate spheres as an

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<sup>63</sup> See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2006); and Linda Young, *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>64</sup> For general accounts of these magazines and their influence in the U.S., see Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jean Gordon and Jan McArthur, “Popular Culture, Magazines and American Domestic Interiors, 1898-1940,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 22:4 (March 1989): 35-60; and Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York and London: Verso, 1996). For Great Britain, see Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own: Domesticity and Desire, 1800-1914* (New York: Routledge, 1996). For the specific example of the efforts of one of North America’s most popular magazines to promote ‘ideal homes,’ see Leland Roth, “Getting Houses to the People: Edward Bok, the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and the Ideal House,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 4 (1991): 187-96. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* had a substantial Canadian readership: see Paul Litt, “The War, Mass Culture, and Cultural Nationalism,” in *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), ed. David Mackenzie, 329-30.

<sup>65</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 148-92.

interpretive framework, theorizing that industrialization and the consequent removal of production from middle class dwellings had resulted in the redefinition of the family home as a private feminized realm that sheltered women and children from the rough, morally ambiguous public world of male productivity.<sup>66</sup> Women's domestic work was increasingly obscured because it was not part of a capitalist economy in which labour was exchanged for pay. *Family Fortunes* reinserted the home into the history of the making of the English middle class by arguing that gendered public and private spheres were mutually constitutive: both were integral to the success of the middle class family as a social, cultural, and economic unit.

Davidoff and Hall used material evidence for the emergence of a distinctive middle class way of life to support their interpretation. They contended that during the first half of the nineteenth century the emerging private sphere was physically manifested by a house and garden located at a distance from urban commercial and manufacturing activities. Within the house itself distinctions were made between private spaces for family living and more public areas where guests were received. Middle class consumption of furniture and house furnishings was on the rise:

By the 1830s, a range of modifications and additions had unquestionably added both comfort and gentility. The early nineteenth-century taste, which favoured lightness and space, was giving way to the heavy upholstered cluttered effect of the mid and late Victorians. Cowper's sparse domesticity, the sofa, shutters and tea urn, had now burgeoned with carpets, curtains, redesigned grates, mahogany furniture, wallpaper, chintz covers and bedsteads.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Amanda Vickery provides a critical summary of the historiography of this framework in her article "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36:2 (June 1993): 383-414. Important texts using the public/private paradigm as an interpretive framework for the history of the US in the nineteenth century include Mary P. Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1740-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>67</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 375.

While Davidoff and Hall made connections between the prevailing domestic ideology and the spatial reorganization of middle class life, the material culture of the new domesticity was a small part of their larger agenda: the incorporation of gender into the history of constructing class identity. Written at around the same time, Katherine Grier's *Culture and Comfort* was a very different book that nevertheless also engaged with issues surrounding the production of middle class subjectivity.<sup>68</sup> Grier used a specific material practice, parlour making, to reveal how middle class Americans expressed values through things. Studying the period immediately following that covered in *Family Fortunes*, she provided a close reading of "the heavy upholstered cluttered effect of the mid and late Victorians."<sup>69</sup> Her central argument that homemakers sought to reconcile the conflicting claims of public gentility and private family comfort through their furnishing choices was not only based on the usual prescriptive texts and images, but also on curatorial analysis of surviving objects. Written to accompany an exhibition held in 1985 at the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, *Culture and Comfort* remains an excellent example of the use of material evidence to document cultural change.

While Grier was concerned with the microcosm of the Victorian parlour, her compatriot Richard Bushman provided a broad overview of the influence of a culture of gentility on the material world of the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his 1992 book, *The Refinement of America*, Bushman looked at the ways people, houses, and cities changed in response to the demands of new codes of conduct.<sup>70</sup> From 1700 on, Americans modified practices originating in the courts of Europe in an

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<sup>68</sup> Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988).

<sup>69</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 375.

<sup>70</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

effort to fashion systems of cultural distinction suitable to the more fluid social and economic landscape on the other side of the Atlantic. At first a means of demonstrating the legitimacy of colonial elites, in the new republic gentility became increasingly democratized, at least in theory: “Scores of books insisted that modest gentility could be achieved on modest incomes. A vine and flowers, a rag carpet, a book or two brought a family within the circle of respectability.”<sup>71</sup> The cultural capital evident in the domestic environment could compensate for a lack of economic capital, facilitating a belief that all Americans could gain middle class status if they cultivated genteel habits.<sup>72</sup> While Bushman concedes that other aspects of American culture were more obviously allied with systems of power, he argues that “vernacular gentility” became embedded in the national life and that it continues to be an important factor in shaping middle class identity.

Bushman’s *The Refinement of America* was a product of a growing interest among historians in the interconnections between material culture and cultural politics. The 1990s saw the publication of two important works on the effects of political and economic changes on domesticity and regimes of taste in nineteenth century France: Leora Auslander’s *Taste and Power* (1996) and Lisa Tierstein’s *Marianne in the Marketplace* (2001).<sup>73</sup> Both studies reflect the influence of Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of class distinctions in mid twentieth century France. In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (first published in French in 1979; English translation

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>72</sup> Bushman is careful to point out that, in practice, the genteel aspirations of poor whites and Afro-Americans in any economic position were often regarded as absurd. Ibid, 434-40.

<sup>73</sup> Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1996); and Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siecle France* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2001).

published 1984) Bourdieu argued that economic capital represented only one of the determinants of class position: cultural capital (knowledge) and social capital (access to social networks) were also significant in determining group identity. His concept of cultural capital included the idea that personal taste was based on a socially constructed set of preferences or habitus developed in childhood, rather than being simply a form of idiosyncratic self-expression. The home environment was central to the cultivation of habitus, although formal education also played a role.<sup>74</sup> Tastes were thus far from trivial: they were an important component of social reproduction.

Bourdieu's study was a snapshot of French society in the mid twentieth century. Auslander covers a much wider period in her history of interior decoration in France from the *ancien regime* to World War I. She begins by recounting how the royal court effectively determined the contours of taste and style from the reign of Louis XIV until the revolution.<sup>75</sup> Enlightened absolutism's political ascendancy over its potential aristocratic rivals was deliberately embodied in the luxurious appointments of Versailles. In geopolitical terms, France's political dominance in Europe was mirrored by its aesthetic centrality. During the decades of upheaval that followed 1789, however, the artisans that produced furniture and furnishings for the monarchy struggled to find a new clientele. It was not until the mid nineteenth century that taste in interior decoration was "used by the bourgeoisie as part of the process of class formation and to consolidate their position, excluding thereby both the aristocracy and the working class."<sup>76</sup> In doing so

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<sup>74</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>75</sup> Auslander's account of the transfer of power over style from an absolutist court to an expanding bourgeoisie is pertinent to this thesis. Her book is also concerned with another cultural transformation: the deskilling of French artisans through the separation of design and manufacture during the same period.

<sup>76</sup> Auslander, *Taste and Power*, 20.

they reshaped the meaning of the period styles that had once expressed the exclusive power of the monarchy. Bourgeois homes became sites where “bourgeois women represented their families, their nation, and eventually themselves.”<sup>77</sup> Auslander’s work thus provides historical context for Bourdieu’s snapshot.

Lisa Tierstein’s *Marianne in the Marketplace* explores this historical change from another angle by focusing on the anxieties associated with the transfer of political and economic power to the French bourgeoisie in the second half of the nineteenth century. She argues that gendered critiques of bourgeois taste made by various authorities on aesthetics during this period were coded expressions of elite fears that the power of an individualistic marketplace would corrupt republican virtues. Middle class female consumers were cast as the antithesis of rational citizens, a formulation that was hardly unique to France in the nineteenth century.<sup>78</sup> Tierstein argues, however, that the figure of the indiscriminate buyer was seen as particularly threatening in the French context, as the debasement of national taste would be disastrous for an economy reliant on a reputation for producing luxury goods of the finest quality. The solution was “the disciplining and channeling of the consumer’s desires,” a process that recast department store shopping as an exercise in the judicious selection of goods based on recognized aesthetic criteria. The potentially insurgent bourgeoisie was transformed into a guardian of French good taste.

Crossing the channel, two recent histories of material domesticity have documented the similarly weighty tenor of nineteenth century discussions of middle class

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 420.

<sup>78</sup> Similar attitudes can be found in Britain, the US and Canada. See Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*; Elaine S. Ableson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Donica Belisle, “Crazy for Bargains: Inventing the Irrational Female Shopper in Modernizing English Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 92:4 (December 2011): 581-606; and Bettina Liverant, “Buying Happiness: English Canadian Intellectuals and the Development of Canadian Consumer Culture,” (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2008).

interior design in Britain: Judith Neiswander's *The Cosmopolitan Interior* (2008) and Deborah Cohen's *Household Gods* (2006). According to Neiswander, this was "Truly a literature of ideas in the sense of being serious and not trivial" because "writings on decoration became a vehicle for expressing important social, moral, and intellectual concepts that the authors believed should be embodied in the home for the benefit of the greater society."<sup>79</sup> She analyzes an array of texts that instructed middle class women and men on how to achieve interiors consistent with the hegemonic liberal culture prevailing in late Victorian Britain.

Cohen takes a broader chronological view, charting the development of Britain's "infatuation with home" from 1830 to 1930.<sup>80</sup> She contends that early Victorian evangelicals managed to reconcile an austere religiosity with the acquisition of material comforts by ascribing moral meanings to household objects. Aesthetic choices were spiritualized and could form proper attitudes by osmosis: "Endowed with moral and artistic qualities, possessions—or so the Victorians came to believe—made the man."<sup>81</sup> As the nineteenth century continued, this self-fashioning through the selection and use of domestic goods ceased to have overt religious associations but continued to be seen as an important element in social reproduction. No longer a sign of grace, interior decoration became a vehicle for the materialization of the liberal individualism so prized by the Victorian middle class. At the same time, however, critics expressed concerns about the effects of an expanding market on taste that paralleled those of their French

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<sup>79</sup> Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Cohen, *Household Gods*, ix.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

contemporaries. Individual self-expression was all very well, but “there [was] a tension between individual whimsy and the idea of good taste.”<sup>82</sup>

Although these books deal with different national contexts, they converge in identifying an important cultural development: the effect of the relative democratization of access to material goods on Western societies. In the nineteenth century this phenomenon was cause for both celebration and concern. The great exhibitions displayed the abundance created by mass manufacturing but they also triggered aesthetic soul searching as critics deplored the use of cheap materials and meretricious ornament. In both Britain and France worries about the economic consequences of poor design prompted state intervention in the form of design schools and decorative art museums intended to reform the tastes of both producers and consumers. While the national government in the United States was not so proactive, important cultural centres such as Philadelphia and New York also developed similar educational institutions after the Centennial Exhibition in 1876.<sup>83</sup> The role of commercial distributors, and specifically the department store, in this effort to elevate taste was ambiguous. As discussed above, in the US context Harris has identified a struggle between the great exhibitions, the museums, and the department stores for influence over popular taste, while Tierstein and design

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>83</sup> In addition to the books discussed above, see Lara Kriegel, *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 192-232; Jeffrey Trask, *Things American: Art Museums and Civic Culture in the Progressive Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); and Ezra Shales, *Made in Newark: Cultivating Industrial Arts and Civic Identity in the Progressive Era* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

historian Patricia Lara-Betancourt have documented similar contests between aesthetes and merchants in France and Britain respectively.<sup>84</sup>

The twentieth century saw continued expansion of the market for consumer goods. At the same time taste became increasingly important as a marker of class. In the case of Britain, both Neiswander and Cohen argue that the middle class moved away from the eclectic cosmopolitanism of late Victorian and Edwardian interior decoration, choosing instead to conform to convention. Cohen is dismissive of the interwar years, stating that an earlier “quest for novelty and originality had come to an end.”<sup>85</sup> She links this retreat from self-expression to the post World War I growth and homogenization of the British middle class, as salaried positions became available in new fields of technology and administration. Newcomers to middle class status wanted to learn the rules and, as a result, they were far more likely to accept the prescriptive advice on offer from arbiters of good taste. In consequence “the inter-war aesthetic landscape narrowed.”<sup>86</sup> She contrasts the situation in Britain with the experiments in modern design occurring in continental Europe, concluding that “Where the spirit of ‘safety first’ held sway, modernism was doomed to fail.”<sup>87</sup>

Design historian Penny Sparke offers a different interpretation of this period in *As Long As It's Pink* (1996), arguing that an interwar feminine aesthetic of conservative modernity has been obscured and devalued in favour of a narrative celebrating the innovations of the masculine modern movement associated with such iconoclastic figures

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<sup>84</sup> Harris, “The Struggle for Influence,” 56-81; Tierstein, *Marianne*, 231-236; and Patricia Lara-Betancourt, “Conflicting Modernities: Arts and Crafts and Commercial Influences in the Decoration of the Middle Class Home 1890-1914,” (PhD diss., University of Kingston, London, UK, 2008).

<sup>85</sup> Cohen, *Household Gods*, 185.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-98.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe.<sup>88</sup> Her alternative view of modern interior design is part of a wider scholarly challenge to the accepted narratives of aesthetic modernity. Literary scholars have been particularly active in the last several decades, as they sought to broaden the canon of works considered worthy of academic study. Indeed, the concept of ‘conservative modernism’ deployed by Sparke is adapted from Alison Light’s *Forever England* (1991), an exploration of several interwar women novelists including Agatha Christie and Daphne du Maurier.<sup>89</sup> Light considers that these women, dismissed as hopelessly middlebrow by critics, wrote books as reflective of the tensions and contradictions of British modernity as their more obviously avant garde counterparts. Since the publication of *Forever England*, research on twentieth century middlebrow writing has become an academic growth area, with books, conferences, websites and even a publishing firm devoted to the recovery and redemption of this aspect of Western literature.<sup>90</sup>

This thesis follows Sparke and her literary counterparts in suggesting that Eaton’s attempts to shape the interior decoration of middle class homes should also be analyzed as a middlebrow cultural practice that reveals an alternative understanding of the meaning of modernity. Instead of adopting a dogmatic definition of good design, Eaton’s presented the various forms of interwar modernist interior decoration as options no better

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<sup>88</sup> Penny Sparke, *As Long As It’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (1996; repr., Halifax NS: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>90</sup> For information about the expanding field of middlebrow studies, see “Middlebrow: An Interdisciplinary Transatlantic Research Network,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.middlebrow-network.com/>. The creation of the network was funded by Britain’s Arts and Humanities Research Council. Persephone Books publishes the work of forgotten interwar writers, mostly women but including some men who also wrote about ‘women’s’ subjects such as domesticity and family: see Persephone Books, “Home,” accessed April 13, 2019, <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/>. For Canadian middlebrow literature, see Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith, *Magazines, Travel, and Middlebrow Culture: Canadian Periodicals in English and French, 1925-1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

or worse than more conventional schemes. The emphasis was on creating a domestic environment that was both in good taste, broadly defined, and adapted to the demands of modern family life.

Since the turn of this century, many scholars from a variety of disciplines and exploring different national contexts have been active in the development of the study of the interior: their work can be found in such recently established journals as *Home Cultures* (2004-ongoing) and *Interiors: Design, Architecture, Culture* (2010-ongoing) as well as in the Design History Society's longer running *Journal of Design History*, which began publication in 1988. From 2001 to 2006 the British government funded the Arts and Humanities Research Council's interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of the Domestic Interior, a five-year collaborative venture involving the Royal College of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Bedford Centre for the History of Women at Royal Holloway, University of London. One of the outcomes was *Imagined Interiors* (2006), a volume of lavishly illustrated essays about the various ways domestic space has been represented since the Renaissance.<sup>91</sup> The editors Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant point out the timeliness of their topic, given the current intensity of popular interest: "From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, across all facets of the media, images, descriptions and discussions of the domestic interior surround us... There is, in the West, an extraordinary fascination with the home, its appearance, function and identity."<sup>92</sup> Representations are not realities, but Aynsley and Grant argue that they nevertheless have much to tell about the changing nature of domesticity over time. While the history of taste is not the book's primary concern, the focus on representation is

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<sup>91</sup> Aynsley and Grant, eds. *Imagined Interiors*.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Both Neiswander and Cohen introduce their books by referencing our contemporary preoccupation with interior decoration.

relevant here because different forms of representation increasingly mediated taste, whether verbal or visual. Indeed, by examining Eaton's use of house displays in detail, this thesis amplifies the brief discussion of this representational medium in *Imagined Interiors*.<sup>93</sup>

It has been necessary to draw extensively on other national literatures to provide context for Eaton's displays because the material culture of middle class domesticity in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century has not received much attention.<sup>94</sup> Although Canadian architectural and decorative art historians have researched houses and interiors, published works have tended to concentrate on exceptional examples when dealing with this period.<sup>95</sup> For example, in 2013 a group of decorative art and architectural historians collaborated on *Artists, Architects and Artisans: Canadian Art, 1890-1914*, the catalogue for the exhibition of the same name at the National Gallery of Canada.<sup>96</sup> The catalogue includes chapters on the domestic environments created by Canadian artists and architects influenced by the British Arts and Crafts movement associated with William Morris. Such interiors, however, were the products of a specific

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 188-215. A recent book on commercial display contains a number of chapters specifically on model interiors and furniture retailing (including my own chapter on Eaton's Thrift House). Anca Lasc, Patricia Lara-Betancourt and Margaret Maile Petty, eds. *Architectures of Display: Department Stores and Modern Retail* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>94</sup> There is a significant literature about housing in Canada, but that is a different (though related) topic. Examples include Richard Harris, *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Peter Ward, *A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home* (Toronto: UBC Press, 1999); and Michael J. Doucet and John C. Weaver, *Housing the North American City* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

<sup>95</sup> There are unpublished scholarly works dealing with aspects of the topic, such as Cynthia Wright, "The Most Prominent Rendezvous of Feminine Toronto: Eaton's College Street and the Organization of Shopping in Toronto, 1920-1950," (PhD diss., OISE, University of Toronto, 1992); Euthalia Lisa Panayotidis, "The Bureaucratization of Creativity: The British Arts and Crafts Movement and its impact on Ontario education, 1880-1940," (PhD diss., OISE, University of Toronto, 1997); Denise Jacques, "Decent Furniture for Decent People: The Production and Consumption of Jacques & Hay Furniture in Nineteenth Century Canada," (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2010); and Nicola Krantz, "'Making a Business of Good Taste': Minerva Elliot and the Professionalization of Interior Decoration in Toronto, 1925-1939," (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2018).

<sup>96</sup> Charles C. Hill, ed., *Artists, Architects and Artisans: Canadian Art 1890-1918* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013).

aesthetic disposition and, while influential within a like-minded segment of society, were not characteristic expressions of middle class domesticity in Canada. The same might be said of Alla Myzelev's *Architecture, Design and Craft in Toronto 1900-1940: Creating Modern Living* (2016), which contains chapters on Casa Loma, Henry Pellat's Edwardian fantasy castle, Wychwood Park, an enclave of the aesthetically enlightened that included some of the same figures featured in *Artists, Architects and Artisans*, and the art moderne house designed for Lawren Harris by the Russian émigré architect Alexandra Biriukova.<sup>97</sup> Design and architectural historians interested in the Canadian reception and practice of modernism have tended to dismiss the interwar years as a period of conservatism in the design of and for the home and thus not worthy of extensive study, although Virginia Wright has acknowledged the important role played by Eaton's and Simpson's in publicizing European innovations.<sup>98</sup>

Joy Parr's *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral and the Economic in the Postwar Years* is a notable exception to this lack of scholarship on popular forms of Canadian domesticity, expanding consumerism, and the politics of taste. Her book deals with the years following World War II when the Canadian state became directly involved in promoting good design as an important factor in the manufacture of consumer goods. In a sense this thesis functions as a prologue to Parr's discussion of exercises in public

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<sup>97</sup> Alla Myzelev, *Architecture, Design and Craft in Toronto 1900-1940: Creating Modern Living* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>98</sup> See Christopher Armstrong's comments on domestic architecture in Toronto before World War II. Christopher Armstrong, *Making Toronto Modern: Architecture and Design, 1895-1975* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 10-11; and Virginia Wright, *Modern Furniture in Canada 1920 to 1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). See also Rosalind Pepall, "Jeannette Meunier Biéler: Modern Interior Decorator," *Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'Histoire de L'Art Canadien* 25 (2004): 126-49, for an account of the brief career of a modernist interior decorator in Montreal. Meunier Biéler was a protégée of Emile Lemieux, a leading decorator at Eaton's Montreal store. Her work appears to have met with the same buyer resistance as René Cera's in Toronto (see Chapter 4).

pedagogy carried out by the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Toronto.<sup>99</sup> Her underlying concern with the ways in which consumerism in Canada was disciplined by the institutions of democratic capitalism, as well as by the make-do-and-mend values of Canadian women, resonates with the argument found here that complex relationships between taste, consumer spending, and larger social, economic and cultural issues were materialized in Eaton's interwar house models.

With some exceptions the scholarly writings about taste, domesticity and middle class identity discussed above have tended to draw their evidence from texts and two-dimensional representations, often associated with the growing body of advice literature on the subject of interior decoration. This thesis explores a medium, a group of mediators, and a time and place that have not received as much close attention to date. Eaton's displays, coupled with the store's advertising, reveal the role a key retailer played as a would-be tastemaker by both exhibiting possible interior designs as life-sized environments and providing the goods necessary to produce similar effects at home. The microhistories of success and failure associated with these efforts show that selling taste was a complicated matter in interwar Toronto, involving ongoing negotiations between the retailer and the local market. Eaton's proposed, but consumers disposed, even as they learned about domestic modernity's potential materializations at the store.

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<sup>99</sup> Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods*. See Chapter 2: "Envisioning a Modern Domesticity," 40-63. It was no accident that Nora Vaughan participated in organizing both exhibitions discussed by Parr: a former Eaton's employee herself, she was married to Eaton's vice president O.D. Vaughan, who had previously managed the store's house furnishings division.

*Location, location, location*

Whatever Toronto is now, and whatever its future potential, during the first half of the twentieth century it was a resolutely middlebrow city. In 1911 the Ottawa-based writer Madge Macbeth alluded to its “smug prosperity,” while, following a visit in 1913, the English poet Rupert Brooke damned it with faint praise: “It is alright. The only depressing thing is that it will always be what it is, only larger...”<sup>100</sup> Twenty odd years later Canadian novelist Francis Pollock described the railings of home grown critics: “...they called it a slow place, a dull place, where English snobbery met American vulgarity and each thrived on the other... They called it a half-grown city, a nest of Methodists and Orangemen, of Puritans and Pharisees, who had not yet learned that Queen Victoria was dead. They called it a rube town, a hick town, an overgrown tank-town, with half a million people who confused DADA with Santa Claus.”<sup>101</sup>

Pollock’s novel, *Jupiter Eight*, focused on the experience of a small segment of the city’s population: Bohemians wishing themselves elsewhere. Toronto boosters presented a far different picture of prosperity and civility. They pointed proudly to new office buildings and busy manufacturing plants, as well as religious, cultural and educational institutions that signified a taste for higher things. Although the city remained second to Montreal in population throughout the interwar period, it hosted a larger number of financial institutions serving a prosperous hinterland of established farms and

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<sup>100</sup> Madge Macbeth, “The Glory of the Cities,” *Maclean’s Magazine*, 21:7 (May 1911): 35; and Rupert Brooke, *Letters from America* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1916), 84. A longer passage by Brooke about the city is worth quoting: “Toronto (pronounced T’ranto, please) is difficult to describe. It has an individuality, but an elusive one; yet not through any queerness or difficult shade of eccentricity; a subtly normal, an indefinably obvious personality. It is a healthy, cheerful city (by modern standards); a clean-shaven, pink-faced, respectably dressed, fairly energetic, unintellectual, passably sociable, well-to-do, public-school-and-‘varsity sort of city.” (79)

<sup>101</sup> Francis Pollock, *Jupiter Eight* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1936), 49.

small towns.<sup>102</sup> Toronto also benefited from geographic proximity to economic growth areas in northern Ontario and the western prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta. An expanding network of railways going north and west facilitated trade between centre and periphery, leading to the rapid growth of Eaton's mail order business following its inception in 1884. This success prompted the company to open a store in Winnipeg in 1905, the first of what would become a network of retail operations throughout eastern and western Canada by the end of the 1920s.<sup>103</sup> Despite this expansion, Eaton's remained very much a Toronto institution; its national reach was a point of civic pride for Torontonians.

Above all, however, boosters characterized Toronto as 'a city of homes,' a designation that suggested a commitment to home ownership as the bedrock of a stable society.<sup>104</sup> This commitment was physically manifest in the comfortable detached houses of the middle class residential areas: "The pride of Toronto is in the infinity of moderate-sized houses, nearly all of brick, and for the most part faced by well-kept lawns and flower gardens."<sup>105</sup> This is where Brooke's representative Torontonians lived, people who "could be exhibited in any gallery in the universe, 'Perfect Specimen; Upper Middle

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<sup>102</sup> According to the Canadian census in 1911 Montreal's population was 490,504 while Toronto's was 381,383; in 1921 the figures were Montreal 618,506, Toronto 521,893; in 1931 Montreal 818,517, Toronto 631,207; in 1941 Montreal 903,007, Toronto 667,567. Toronto did not officially become Canada's largest city until after amalgamation with surrounding municipalities in 1998. The Canadian census of 2001 lists Toronto's population as 2,481,494, while the figure for Montreal is 1,039,534. Wikipedia, "List of largest Canadian cities by census," last modified March 16, 15:52 (UTC), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_largest\\_Canadian\\_cities\\_by\\_census](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_Canadian_cities_by_census). As of 1920, five of Canada's seven biggest banks were based in Toronto, together with eight of the thirteen largest insurance companies. Allan Levine, *Toronto: Biography of a City* (Madiera Park BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2014), 151.

<sup>103</sup> During the interwar years Eaton's established stores in Montreal (1925), Regina (1926), Moncton (1927), Saskatoon (1928), Calgary (1929) and Halifax (1930). In addition, the company controlled CDS and TECO stores in smaller centres throughout the country.

<sup>104</sup> In 1921 60 per cent of Torontonians owned their own homes. This figure was double the median rate of 30 per cent for the twenty largest cities in North America. Lawrence Solomon, *Toronto Sprawls: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 21.

<sup>105</sup> Jesse Edgar Middleton, *The Municipality of Toronto: A History* Volume I (Toronto and New York: The Dominion Publishing Company, 1923), 402.

Classes; Twentieth Century' – and we should not be ashamed. They are not vexed by impossible dreams, nor outrageously materialist, nor perplexed by overmuch prosperity, nor spoilt by reverse. Souls for whom the wind is always nor'-nor'-west, and they sail nearer success than failure, and nearer wisdom than lunacy."<sup>106</sup> In fact people who shopped at Eaton's – or so the store's management hoped.

Toronto was also a British North American city, doubly colonized by Great Britain and the United States. In the early twentieth century the vast majority of its citizens were British either by birth or heritage, but increasingly powerful American economic and cultural influences were being brought to bear on their environment. In 1923 Toronto historian Jesse Edgar Middleton cast this confluence of forces in a positive light:

In a word, Toronto is British in the North American manner. The flattery of imitation may persuade some visitors that Toronto is as its neighbors, but these visitors would be wrong. Toronto and Canada are perfectly equipped to interpret Great Britain to the United States and the United States to Great Britain. We can take the best treasures of each country and work them into an amalgam called Canadianism, which we like to believe is a precious metal of itself, unique in quality, and warranted not to tarnish.<sup>107</sup>

While Middleton's recipe for creating Canadian identity may seem sadly retrograde now, during the interwar years it had a definite appeal for middle-class Torontonians who saw themselves as combining British gentility with American energy. It was this vision that created an urban fabric that combined downtown skyscrapers and garden suburbs.<sup>108</sup>

The shift from entrepreneurial to managerial capitalism had produced a new white-collar home-buying class made up of technocrats and administrators. At the same

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<sup>106</sup> Brooke, 79-80.

<sup>107</sup> Middleton, *The Municipality of Toronto*, 406.

<sup>108</sup> Arguably this combination of old world gentility and new world get up and go was equally appealing for middle-class residents of many cities in the United States.

time, social changes such as family limitation and the disappearing servant class meant that formerly prestigious residential areas, such as Jarvis Street, were falling into disfavour as their large houses became obsolete.<sup>109</sup> In the years immediately prior to World War I developers such as Robert Home Smith and Wilfrid Dinnick began to plan suburbs catering to these newly affluent buyers.<sup>110</sup> Home Smith's projects were particularly ambitious, involving the creation of several subdivisions on the 3,000 acres he had acquired near the Humber River. He took the phrase "Angliae pars Anglia procul" (A bit of England far from England) as his marketing slogan, and demanded that his architects approve buyers' building plans. Designs based on English precedents were promoted in the belief that such exteriors were consistent with middle class values.

It appears that, at this time, the choice of an avowedly English style for a Toronto home did not in the least offend nascent Canadian nationalism. Even as such architectural historians as Eric Arthur and Ramsay Traquair were documenting the vernacular architecture of Quebec and Ontario, architect W.L. Somerville rejected such designs as inappropriate for a truly modern Canadian family:

So much for our architectural background as a basis for a house of distinctly Canadian design. To the formal, conservative client, a design developed from these types would, no doubt, be satisfying, and to the architect an extremely interesting problem. But would it suit our friend of the plus fours with his informal ways and his wife's confessed weakness for the pictures of the "Group of Seven?" Such a setting for this family would be quite impossible. Something less architectural and more neutral in style is required. Then, what could be more so than the cottages of England? We have borrowed from this source in the past and again it seems to offer suggestions for our adoption. To an Englishman, our interpretation of an English cottage would probably appear quite un-English and

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<sup>109</sup> For a fictional account of the decline of Jarvis Street, see Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Jane of Lantern Hill* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1993 [1937]), 1-2.

<sup>110</sup> Home Smith's garden suburb development projects included Baby Point and The Kingsway. Wilfrid Dinnick's Dovercourt Land Building and Savings Company developed Lawrence Park (north Toronto). For The Kingsway, see Elizabeth Ingolfsrud and Alec Keefer, *Kingsway Park: Triumph in Design* (Toronto: Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy, 1994).

distinctly Canadian. Maybe it is, but we are largely influenced by the many charming cottages of no particular style or period one is always bumping into, in that “tight little isle.” The fascinating thing about them is the utter lack of pretence.<sup>111</sup>

Such houses were considered modern because they responded to the contemporary need for smaller houses with labour-saving amenities and less formal floor plans. They were also believed to possess character and individuality that lent charm to the suburban landscape and reflected the cultural distinction possessed by the occupants. For middlebrow Torontonians they fit the definition of home.

Interwar Toronto was thus not overly concerned about the disconnect between modern building methods and materials, and domestic architectural designs that alluded to the traditional building forms of Tudorbethan cottages or Georgian townhouses. Its citizens were equally comfortable combining the latest modern conveniences with interior decoration that adapted traditional furnishing styles to contemporary circumstances. This flexibility was in keeping with the city’s British North American identity: similar compromises were being made throughout the larger Anglosphere. Even when Eaton’s experimented with more overtly modern interior designs during the interwar years, the store remained attuned to the conservative tastes of many of its customers. Reconstructing the histories of Eaton’s domestic displays reveals a process of imagining consumers rooted in a particular time and place.

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<sup>111</sup> W.L. Somerville, “A House of Distinctly Canadian Design,” *Canadian Homes and Gardens* 3:8, 18.

## *Sources*

As a result of the cultural turn, historians have acknowledged the constructed nature of the archive.<sup>112</sup> Each research project involves painstakingly assembling a body of evidence from the bits and pieces that have survived the vicissitudes of time: fire, flood, war, indifference. Scholars defend their interpretations of the past with reference to this evidence, knowing full well they are building on shaky foundations. Historians are aware their narratives are partial, and yet they must do their best to make a story that represents honestly what can be known of the past.

This particular project of historical recovery was only possible because Eaton's corporate archive was publicly available. In 1988 the company donated the bulk of its records to the Archives of Ontario. The gift was huge, involving approximately 556 metres of textual documents and 99,000 photographs, in addition to other miscellaneous material. During the years that followed, archivists painstakingly organized the donation and created a digitized finding aid that has been a boon to researchers ever since. The documents and images that Eaton's kept over the years made possible the reconstruction of the history of the ephemeral cultural artifacts that are the subject of this thesis. Thanks particularly to the minutes of the store's House Furnishings Committee important insights could be gained into the behind the scenes discussions about various issues affecting the life history of the models. Plans for redecoration, the costs of construction and maintenance, and the value of the models as marketing devices were all topics of debate at these meetings. Such details bring to life the corporate motivations underlying these object lessons.

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<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Carolyn Steadman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 68; and Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

Vast as the Eaton's archives are, however, researchers can still be frustrated by the missing pieces of the puzzle. For example, the run of minutes from the House Furnishing Committee does not begin until March 1926, after the January opening of the Thrift House display. Even more unfortunately, the minutes for the period 1935 up to and including 1938 are missing. Revealing memos that were kept suggest the existence of a wealth of internal communications that have disappeared for one reason or another over time. It is also quite likely that some small telling details, so prized by the historical detective, have been missed because they are hidden in archival series apparently unrelated to the subject of this thesis. The archives are at once too big and too small to answer all the questions raised by the curious practice of building life-sized representations of the private home within the public space of the department store.

Frustrations aside, the boxes of documents contained material of interest in unexpected places. Discoveries included the extensive internal debate about credit that served as the institutional background for the creation of Thrift House and the report on the store's relations with Canadian furniture manufacturers prepared in response to the investigations of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads in 1935. While earlier researchers such as Cynthia Wright have documented elements of the story of René Cera's part in bringing art moderne interior design to Toronto, additional evidence emerged concerning his continued efforts to popularize innovative designs during his employment at Eaton's.

Binders containing copies of Eaton's daily advertisements in Toronto papers led to another primary source that complemented the Eaton's archives. Eaton's daily advertising, and particularly the ads appearing in the *Toronto Globe*, a morning paper

targeted at middle class readers, provided valuable information about the ways the store intended consumers to interpret the model house displays. The binders also introduced ‘The Scribe,’ a persona adopted by Edith Macdonald in Eaton’s ads throughout the interwar period. Macdonald, as discussed at length in Chapter 2, was an important figure at Eaton’s during these years: first hired as a copywriter in 1910, she authored *Golden Jubilee*, a book celebrating the company’s fiftieth anniversary in 1919, and managed the store’s shopping service for many years. Thanks to the correspondence column she maintained as a recurring element of Eaton’s daily ads in the *Toronto Globe*, it was possible to gain at least a partial sense of the needs and desires of Eaton’s customers. The Scribe’s suggestions on ways to overcome the decoration problems posed by the realities of mean entrance halls and north facing dining rooms helped put in perspective the idealized surroundings on display within the store.

The Eaton’s archive and the store’s advertising served as the major primary sources, but other archival material was consulted, as well as relevant publications from the period. Visits to the Victoria and Albert’s institutional archives in London, to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), and to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto made it possible to flesh out the narrative surrounding the T. Eaton Company’s donations of furniture to the ROM. Reviews of the Canadian and U.S. trade journals *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer*, *Furniture World*, and *Good Furniture* helped to contextualize developments at Eaton’s. Although *Canadian Homes and Gardens* and *Chatelaine* did not start publication until the later 1920s, these magazines were useful sources of information about trends in interior decoration from a Canadian perspective. Interestingly *MacLean’s Magazine*, English Canada’s leading

general interest periodical, frequently included articles on this subject during the early decades of the twentieth century.

As often happens, engagement with the primary sources shifted the thesis in a different direction from the original research proposal. The intent at the outset was to explore a variety of sites in interwar Toronto where private domestic spaces were publicly represented: department stores certainly, but also the Canadian National Exhibition, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Lillian Massey School of Household Science. Beyond this use by components of the local exhibitionary complex, model houses were employed by various interest groups in Toronto to introduce new technologies, promote real estate development, or teach modern household management.<sup>113</sup> The meaning of this extensive interpenetration of public and private clearly deserved investigation.

While working with the Eaton's archives, however, it became apparent that on their own the store's displays exhibited a diverse range of domestic pressures and possibilities that reflected the complexities of Toronto's evolving consumer culture. In pursuit of its primary corporate goal, profit, Eaton's claimed the cultural authority of a civic-minded institution. Embracing public pedagogy as a key marketing technique, Eaton's undercut contemporary critiques of mass merchandising as essentially deceptive

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<sup>113</sup> Examples include the Electric Home sponsored by the Electric Home League, an organization that claimed to represent all groups making up the electric industry (*Toronto Globe* ad, January 26, 1922, 9); the *Canadian Home Journal's* model home, used as the site of testing best domestic practice (*Canadian Home Journal* (November 1931): 44); a house constructed by builder Amedeo Longo to demonstrate the advantages of the Johns-Manville insulation system ("Newest Ideas to Be Shown: Secrets of Model Home to Be Revealed to Visitors Today," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, March 11, 1937, 29); and a model home used to promote a 175-unit bungalow development in Rosedale ("Governor's Bridge Opens New District: Beautiful Structure Promises to Promote Another Rosedale Residential Section: Model Home on View," *Toronto Globe*, May 24, 1924, 27). While these houses had pedagogical and display functions, they were also real buildings constructed in residential areas. Similar examples could be found in many other North American cities during this period.

and corrupt. Information about the internal debates lying behind the creation and maintenance of the models demonstrated linkages between business history and larger historical concerns. By associating itself with the promotion of the home as a centre of mindful consumption, Eaton's connected good taste and wise buying to the well being of the nuclear family, a central social, economic and cultural bulwark of liberal capitalist democracy. Guided by the sources, this thesis considers the ways commercial displays contributed to definitions of middle class domestic modernity in interwar Toronto.

### *Structure*

Following the general introduction in Chapter 1, the main body of the thesis is composed of five chapters. Chapter 2, 'Customer Relations,' discusses the way Eaton's used institutional advertising to create a positive image of the store as a public benefactor. Under Timothy Eaton that message was conveyed in masculine terms, often using military metaphors. In 1910, with the hiring of copywriter Edith Macdonald, Eaton's "Daily Store News" in the *Toronto Globe* acquired a more feminine tone, following the pattern of the new women's pages in the middlebrow press. Writing as 'The Scribe' Macdonald presented herself as a helpful guide to women negotiating their roles as modern consumers. Through the medium of the "You Were Inquiring" advice column, she responded directly to the concerns of individual customers.

This part of the thesis addresses a gap in the literature about advertising history. Authoritative cultural histories, such as Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream* (1985) and Jackson Lear's *Fables of Abundance* (1994), have tended to concentrate on content analysis of magazine advertising, apparently assuming that

newspaper advertising was too ephemeral to be worthy of close reading.<sup>114</sup> Other studies have focused primarily on the marketing of branded goods. In the case of this project, however, it is precisely the quotidian character of department stores' daily ads that make them of interest. Newspaper readers were encouraged to read the ads regularly, not only to be informed about sales but also to learn how to function as modern consumers. Often Eaton's ads described the house displays, reinforcing their pedagogical role.

Finally this chapter draws on Lucy Maud Montgomery's diaries to document one middle class woman's experience of material domesticity. While Montgomery's public role as a successful writer makes her an exceptional figure, in many ways her experience of homemaking is representative of the problems and pleasures of the majority of Eaton's customers: women with some discretionary income, but not enough to exempt them from the disciplines of taste and economy.

The next four chapters consist of case studies of specific house models and room interiors created by Eaton's during the interwar years. These case studies have been grouped into two thematic sections, the first being 'Taste' and the second 'Economy.' 'Taste' deals with displays that attempted to consolidate Eaton's claims to knowledge about the fundamental principles of interior decoration, as well as the most up to date trends in the field. 'Economy' concerns two house models that, in different ways, tried to guide consumer spending according to values central to the store's claims to be considered a civic benefactor.

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<sup>114</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). Erika Rappaport's discussion of the newspaper advertising campaign surrounding the 1909 opening of Selfridge's is one of the few analyses of this type of marketing by a cultural historian. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 142-77.

Chapter 3, 'Period Rooms: Culture and Commerce' deals with the history of Eaton's use of period rooms as tools for educating Toronto's largely British origin population about its design heritage. Period furnishings became popular with aesthetes in industrializing countries in the mid nineteenth century, just as mass produced domestic goods began to flood the market. Initially a reaction against popular taste, as time went on the use of period designs became the default choice of middle class homemakers. By the twentieth century Eaton's and other department stores were touting their expertise in the fine details of correct period decoration. In addition to installing period room displays at the store and sponsoring lectures about the history of interior decoration, Eaton's funded a collection of antique furniture at the Royal Ontario Museum that was intended to educate the tastes of both consumers and producers. The chapter brings to light an intriguing collaboration between two elements of Bennett's exhibitionary complex.

Chapter 4, 'The House of To-day: Marketing Moderne,' outlines the story of Eaton's attempts to popularize a new decorative style, then known as art moderne but now more commonly called Art Deco. This effort to develop a style in keeping with new technologies and new attitudes is associated with the Paris *Exposition des arts décoratifs* of 1925, but in fact Eaton's had flirted with some aspects of art moderne before World War I. In 1928 the store made a significant investment in the new style by hiring French architect-decorator René Cera to head a new art moderne department. Cera subsequently designed The House of To-day displays for both the Calgary and Toronto stores. This effort to create, rather than respond to, local tastes had mixed success. Nevertheless, the initiative serves as a telling example of Eaton's desire to assert cultural leadership.

Chapter 5, 'Thrift House: Good Taste on a Budget,' takes up the intertwined goals of taste and economy as materialized by Eaton's Thrift House, which was installed in the store in 1926 during the semi-annual furniture sale in January. Thrift House was part of a promotional campaign surrounding Eaton's decision to introduce installment credit for goods used in the home. The store had resisted providing any form of credit, even as time payments became more respectable thanks to the popularity of automobile financing schemes, because of a longstanding commitment to doing business strictly on a cash basis. Eaton's sought to overcome the perception of a betrayal of principle by associating installment credit with Thrift House and its attendant household budgeting service. Consumers were encouraged to plan spending with a view to purchasing household conveniences that would benefit the family unit.

The last case study, covered in Chapter 6, 'The Ideal Ontario House: Patriotism Begins at Home,' discusses the creation of a model house intended as a major display feature of Eaton's College Street store, which opened its doors in 1930. Eaton's sponsored an architectural competition calling for the design of an Ideal Ontario House, with a life-sized version of the winning entry to be built in the new store. The house was to be decorated with Canadian made furniture and furnishings, thus delivering a nationalistic message about the quality of Canadian manufactured domestic goods. This project was consistent with a long-held policy of promoting the store's commitment to supporting Canada's manufacturing industries. Eaton's claims to altruistic economic nationalism were periodically undercut, however, by suppliers complaining about the store's use of its mass buying powers to cut prices to the bone. These complaints were publicly aired during the meetings of the 1935 Royal Commission on Price Spreads

sponsored by the federal government. The Ideal Ontario House was dismantled in 1937, having failed in its mission to bolster sales of upscale Canadian made merchandise.

Chapter 7, 'Comparison Shopping,' concludes the thesis by summarizing the research findings and contributions to knowledge. The chapter argues that twenty-first century home furnishings retailers, most notably the global behemoth IKEA, continue to use similar marketing strategies linking commodified domesticity to cultural principles. As marketing devices, materialized domesticities and public pedagogies seeking to create and mirror middle class values are alive and well in the twenty-first century.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has introduced the concepts at the heart of the analysis of Eaton's domestic displays and associated advertising carried out in the body of the thesis. A brief overview provided a guide to the aims, objectives, methodology, main arguments, definition of terms and contributions to knowledge of the project. Subsequent sections went into greater detail concerning the nature of public pedagogy in the context of department stores, the history of models of domestic structures as spectacles and as tools of instruction, the scholarly historicization of taste as a component of middle class identity, and the characteristics of Toronto, the urban setting for Eaton's displays. The chapter ended with a discussion of primary sources and an outline of the structure of the thesis.

## Chapter 2

### Customer Relations

On January 2, 1919 the ceremonial opening of the main store entrance by Timothy Eaton's widow, Margaret, launched a year of special events celebrating the T. Eaton Company's fiftieth anniversary. Escorted by her son, company president Sir John Craig Eaton, she unlocked the door with a golden key. She was greeted by Margaret Smith, at fourteen the Toronto store's youngest employee, who gave her a bouquet of sweetheart roses and violets. Accompanied by an orchestra, a choir of three hundred voices sang the Doxology.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Eaton and her son, together with other dignitaries, then toured the entire retail complex, finishing at the House Furnishing Building where "an artistic arrangement of rugs, furniture, palms and flowers gave the place the aspect of a luxurious drawing room."<sup>2</sup> Orchestra and choir, having managed to trek *en masse* through the tunnel from the main building, now sang 'O Canada' and the national anthem.<sup>3</sup> As a final touch, the Eaton matriarch was presented with a miniature golden model of the original 1869 store which, when opened, was found to contain the golden key she had used earlier that morning to enter the vast retail complex that materialized fifty years of astonishing success (Fig. 2.1).

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<sup>1</sup> Probably the hymn, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

<sup>2</sup> "Splendid Ceremony Opens Store's Golden Jubilee," *Toronto Globe*, January 3, 1919, 7.

<sup>3</sup> In 1919 'God Save the King' served as the national anthem. 'O Canada' was not officially recognized as Canada's national anthem until 1980.



Figure 2.1

*Eaton's in 1919—Toronto Store, Mail Order and Factories.* Edith Macdonald [The Scribe], Golden Jubilee 1869-1919 (Toronto and Winnipeg: T. Eaton Company, 1919).

The ceremonial procession through the store was staged like a royal visit, with its religious and patriotic musical performances and displays of loyalty from devoted staff. At one point Mrs. Eaton demonstrated her common touch by stopping to comfort a veteran female employee moved to tears by the occasion.<sup>4</sup> The dignified atmosphere was somewhat compromised, however, by the behaviour of the crowds that followed the official party. A *Globe* article about the event pointed out the clash between ritual and commerce:

However there were some whose bargain-hunting instincts could not be turned from the trail of the 'marked down' sign by the excitement of the celebration. These, with little more than a passing glance at the procession wending its way through the building, turned over the goods on the show tables and demanded the

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<sup>4</sup> "A Touching Incident," *Toronto Globe*, January 3, 1919, 8.

undivided attention of the sales-folk. Not even the solemn strains of the Doxology or the voices of the choristers could draw these bargain-seekers from their quests.<sup>5</sup>

In fact attempts to resolve the contradictions implicit in framing the store as a disinterested civic institution while simultaneously attending to the bottom line were evident in Eaton's self-representation throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. Under the leadership of Sir John and his successor and cousin, R.Y. Eaton, the store sought to fine-tune the message about the public benefits of mass retail first articulated by Timothy Eaton when he adopted the slogan "The Greatest Good For the Greatest Number." During the year of the Golden Jubilee the official tag line was "Our Aim 'Better Service,' " signaling an enlarged vision of the store as not simply a bargain hunter's paradise, but as an essential source of assistance to Torontonians as they negotiated the cultural challenges posed by material modernity. For twelve months Eaton's rang the changes on possible interpretations of customer service, ranging from fashion shows keeping Torontonians in touch with the latest trends, to instructive "demonstrations of old-time industrial methods" contrasted with modern technologies, to lectures on beautifying the home, to – inevitably – sales.<sup>6</sup> The connection between consumerism and civic progress was the common pedagogical theme.

This chapter describes the larger institutional context for the subsequent case studies detailing the ways in which Eaton's various domestic displays communicated corporate visions of appropriate consumer behaviour to middle class Torontonians. The cultural power of the model houses and room interiors both depended on and contributed to efforts to establish the store as a positive force in community life. A major focus of the

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<sup>5</sup> "Splendid Ceremony Opens Store's Golden Jubilee," *Toronto Globe*, January 3, 1919, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Edith Macdonald [The Scribe], *Golden Jubilee 1869-1919* (Toronto and Winnipeg: T. Eaton Company Ltd., 1919), 276-81.

chapter is the evolution of Eaton's institutional advertising in the *Toronto Globe*, which played a key role in broadcasting not only the store's self-image but also its understanding of the needs and wants of its customers. The nature of the needs and wants specifically related to domesticity is also discussed below. During the first half of the twentieth century Eaton's associated entertainment and education with goods in a marketing format that spoke to the aspirations of middle class consumers living in a middlebrow city: the ideal customers for the store's message of progress through purchasing.

The Golden Jubilee of 1919 referenced past accomplishments, true, but more importantly the various promotional activities underlined the ongoing daily influence of the store on local standards of living. Throughout the interwar years that saw the construction of major Eaton stores in other Canadian cities across the country, the company remained sensitive to the particularities of the market in Toronto and its immediate hinterland. This chapter describes how, following the hiring of innovative copywriter, Edith Macdonald, Eaton's advertising in the city's leading middle class paper combined the themes of good taste and wise spending in a uniquely attractive package as the store sought to dominate retailing in a city of homes. Some sense of consumer receptiveness to these messages is recovered by examining the lived experience of Canadian author, Lucy Maud Montgomery, first as a homemaker in two Ontario towns and then in Toronto's Riverside subdivision.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> L.M. Montgomery's house in the Riverside subdivision (part of the development created by Robert Home Smith) was built in the English cottage style praised by architect W.L. Somerville (see Chapter 1).

### *Selling the Store*

The public celebration of important occasions in the life of a department store was not unique to Eaton's. In 1911 the John Wanamaker Company of Philadelphia and New York commemorated its own fiftieth anniversary with even greater pomp and circumstance.<sup>8</sup> Retail historian Sarah Elvins has noted how smaller stores in Rochester and Buffalo also used significant milestones as promotional opportunities.<sup>9</sup> Eaton's Golden Jubilee ceremony was unusual in one way, however: the focus of attention was on a woman. Margaret Eaton could be seen as simply a stand-in for her deceased husband Timothy, but her son John, the current president of the company, could easily have performed that function. Her centrality could equally be interpreted as a subtle reference to the vital importance of female shoppers to the store's continued success. After all, for at least nine years prior to the Golden Jubilee Eaton's had put a distinctly feminine spin on its advertising in a widely-read morning paper, the *Toronto Globe*.

This shift in the mode of address was a departure from the forthright masculine tone adopted while Timothy Eaton was alive. Joy Santink traces Eaton's embrace of advertising as a key merchandizing tool to 1886.<sup>10</sup> Previously he had been content to follow the customary pattern of brief notices published once or twice a week. Now, however, he started to insert columns on a daily basis that mimicked the surrounding text but used a larger font size. These ads were cast as news about a thriving business willing to work hard for the consumer's dollar. Usually they featured descriptions of sale items,

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<sup>8</sup> See Patricia Bradley, "John Wanamaker's 'Temple of Patriotism' Defines Early 20th Century Advertising and Brochures," *American Journalism*, 15:2 (1998): 15-35.

<sup>9</sup> In one case the installation of escalators was cause for special celebration. Sarah Elvins, *Sales and Celebrations: Retailing and Regional Identity in Western New York State, 1920-1940* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 143-4.

<sup>10</sup> Joy Santink, *Timothy Eaton and the Rise of his Department Store* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 121. Santink notes that Eaton's was influenced by the style of copy introduced by Wanamaker's advertising manager, John E. Powers.

emphasizing value for money, but increasingly the ads also became a platform for Eaton's defense of his business tactics:

Don't fail to get our meaning. We are retailing thousands of dollars worth of many sorts of goods at prices that pay anywhere from 25 to 75 per cent of the cost. As a trade principle it seems all wrong – it is, to say the least, unfortunate for somebody. But if it *is* to be done, this is the place of all in which to do it. If men blunder in their merchandise they must suffer. If other men need an outlet for sample lines or overplus of manufactures that are incidental to large production they must find it. We are here to gather from the blunderer or whoever from any cause needs a quick market for stuff, *price not considered*, desirable things for our constituents in the retail trade of this city.<sup>11</sup>

Like many of his generation, Timothy Eaton was able to combine a deep religiosity with unrepentant social Darwinism in his business dealings. He saw no contradiction between competitive price cutting and promoting shorter hours for store clerks: both were progressive retail practices in his view. Under his management, this blunt style of advertising associated the store with a gendered vision of merchandising as a battle for competitive advantage that benefitted the consumer.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the pace of business had quickened for distributors as manufacturing and transportation became more efficient. Turnover was the key to profitability, and daily advertising became seen as a vital mechanism for increasing sales. Initially, however, its usefulness was somewhat compromised by previous associations with the false claims made by patent medicine promoters and other suspect enterprises. An 1889 Eaton's ad met this criticism head on:

Amusing, ludicrous often, colored up with flowery phrases and sensational announcements—such, reader, is the general tone of advertising that seems to be the accepted thing. No wonder, then, at your incredulity in reading these. Your discrimination and mental reasoning set them down, unconsciously, intuitively, as so many words with more of a tendency to the lie than to strict truth. We employ the papers as a confidential means of telling, as friend to friend, whatever is to

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<sup>11</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, May 13, 1893, 8.

your interest in the store. No lying, no bragging, no humbugging; strict truth always.<sup>12</sup>

Here again the store's policy is described as a strictly no-nonsense approach that appreciates the reader's intelligent skepticism regarding the inflated claims made by other dealers and seeks a common ground of joint advantage.

The rejection of seduction in favour of an appeal to reason was to be a hallmark of the store's *Globe* copy for the next two decades. Eaton's copywriters frequently used the daily advertisements to teach Torontonians the benefits of the new approach to retailing. As innovators selling a diverse range of goods on an unprecedented scale, upper managers knew they needed to cultivate a positive image of the store as whole. In his 1998 book, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, Roland Marchand notes that the major U.S. department stores were pioneers in the kind of institutional advertising that would later be used to portray large-scale manufacturers and service providers as public benefactors. He argues that department stores had certain advantages over other forms of corporate capitalism when it came to claiming the status of public servant. Their role as distribution centres located at the heart of downtown meant high visibility in contrast to the more opaque operations of other businesses. Leading department stores sought to overcome the negative attitude of *caveat emptor* associated with retail by establishing fixed prices, guaranteeing satisfaction with goods, and allowing shoppers freedom to browse. As they expanded, the stores hoped to build a loyal customer base through a combination of low cost, broad choice, and convenience. This was certainly how Eaton's described its operating principles:

The true theory of modern businesses such as this is that the store-keeper is the consumer's agent. The retail buyer has the right to expect stores to be managed in

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<sup>12</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 12, 1889, 5.

his interest. If prices are depressed he should get all the advantages. A single small profit is all he should pay in any event, whether the goods are made in Canada or Asia.

The great storekeepers of the world accept this theory. They put capital and capacity at the command of the smallest buyers. Mercantile genius is simply doing the best we can by considering the interest of customers on a par with our own.

More than ever, this business appeals to your intelligent self-interest. Witness the magnificent stocks that fill the store, and the extremely low prices. In both respects we lead the retail trade of Canada.<sup>13</sup>

This constant appeal to “intelligent self-interest” countered widespread unease about the big stores’ business practices. The period from 1880 to 1900 saw the full emergence of the department store as a commercial type. During these decades the system of departmentalization was refined, enabling managers to track sales of different types of goods and adjust their buying and marketing accordingly. These were also the years, however, when such stores came under attack on a variety of fronts: unfair competition with smaller businesses, exploitation of workers and suppliers, misleading advertising, and the encouragement of reckless spending on the part of (female) shoppers. The emergence of large stores carrying a diverse array of goods, from pots and pans to Parisian fashions, under one roof, seriously threatened traditional specialized merchandizing. Even hostile observers could see the attraction of this new form of retailing. No friend to large department stores, the Canadian *Dry Goods Review* reprinted Alice Rupp’s description:

Some of the department stores in New York, Chicago, Denver and San Francisco are veritable paradises for the shoppers. Hypnotic arches seem suspended above the doors, and why not give them the preference, when in the department store the purchaser may leave her baby in the nursery, have a tooth pulled or filled, consult a physician, open a bank account, express a parcel, write a letter, mail it, send a money order, be manicured, engage cook or maid, a piano tuner, or almost any

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<sup>13</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 16, 1895, 12.

other help, have her picture taken, have her watch cleaned, order her laundry called for, get her dinner or lunch from free samples of ‘pure food,’ buy almost anything under the sun that is sold, from an unset diamond to a menagerie, from a Chinese scent stick to a heathen god. In the meantime her husband may be getting a shave or a haircut, a bottle of whiskey or a box of cigars, a set of harness or a wagon, athletic paraphernalia and boxing instruments, also a lawyer to draw up his will. All sorts of transactions done ‘while you wait.’ From the observatory on the roof to the conservatory next to it, to the electric light or power-plant in the sub-basement, the entire establishment is one grand, interesting, entertaining and instructive show.<sup>14</sup>

Rupp’s exhaustive list of services has a satirical edge, but even she acknowledges the department store’s appeal. Although specialized shopkeepers may have inveighed against unfair competition by stores such as Eaton’s, David Monod has shown they also adopted many of the new management methods in an effort to keep pace with the retail revolution.<sup>15</sup> Some relied on depth of product knowledge, service, and exclusivity as the means of combating the democratization of consumption by the department stores. As suggested by Rupp’s account, however, size mattered. Department stores simply had more to offer the consumer: price, variety, convenience, and spectacle. By the turn of the twentieth century they had largely succeeded in their efforts to be recognized as civic institutions. The use of daily newspaper advertising to communicate a positive image of department store’s business principles played a major role in securing public acceptance. In the case of Eaton’s the company became synonymous with the advantages of cash payments, an identification that would later become problematic as the surrounding cultural and economic environment changed.<sup>16</sup>

When Timothy Eaton died in 1907 two hundred carriages followed his coffin to its resting place in the family’s Mount Pleasant mausoleum, while thousands of ordinary

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<sup>14</sup> Alice Rupp, “Department Stores,” *Dry Goods Review* 9:1 (January 1899): 38.

<sup>15</sup> David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 149-94.

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 5.

Torontonians watched the procession pass. After his death, his youngest son John Craig Eaton became president of the company. Under his leadership, style and service would become as important to the store's relationship to Torontonians as the policy of value for money established by his father. In the first decades of the twentieth century progressive retailing was beginning to require a more nuanced understanding of consumer psychology. Quality and reasonable prices were no longer enough: more and more fashion became equally important as a selling point. At the same time, the new low budget chain stores were challenging department stores' domination of the market for staple goods. The realization that the retail landscape was changing prompted Eaton's to search for a new kind of copywriter. Inquiries were made in New York, as evidenced by a letter sent in March 1910 from the company's private office:

Dear Sir,

The fashion articles in the leading women's magazines appeal very strongly to us, and we wish to secure for our advertising staff a woman fashion authority who has the ability to tell her story in a bright, interesting manner. Articles such as that by Mrs. Simcox in the March Delineator are the kind we want, those in which interest is aroused before bare facts are introduced.

No doubt, there are a number of capable persons, less prominent than Mrs. Simcox, if we could locate them. Can you favor us by inquiring among the staff writers of such papers as the Ladies' Home Journal.<sup>17</sup>

In the event, Eaton's found the perfect copywriter closer to home. Shortly after the above letter was sent to New York, an advertorial appeared in the *Globe* titled "One Woman's Impressions of the New Suit and Dress Styles." Located directly above the usual advertising for Eaton's Friday bargains, it contained two closely written columns detailing the latest trends with reference to items newly arrived in the store. Price was not

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<sup>17</sup> Letter dated March 11, 1910, to Mr. R.C. Wadsworth, Home Pattern Co., New York from J.B.G., Private Office Letterbook, March 23, 1909 to February 7, 1911, F229-47-0-3, T. Eaton Company Fonds, Archives of Ontario.

mentioned, although quality continued to be highlighted. The overwhelming emphasis, however, was on satisfying Torontonians' "modistical expectations:" "Paris models and New York and domestic reproductions combine in an offering that is truly worthy of a community that asks for the best that artistic skill can turn out."<sup>18</sup> A new voice was speaking for Eaton's.

*Advertising the Department Store "From A Woman's Standpoint": Edith Macdonald and the T. Eaton Company*

Eaton's decision to hire Edith Macdonald as a copywriter in 1910 began a relationship that was to last long after her official retirement in 1936: she continued to work for the store as a free-lancer and consultant until shortly before her death in 1960.<sup>19</sup> Now a largely forgotten figure, in her day she was considered "one of the finest copywriters in this Company's [Eaton's] history."<sup>20</sup> Her writing was as distinctive in its way as the boldly combative screeds produced in Timothy Eaton's era, but it adopted a different point of view. Macdonald, who soon started using the pseudonym 'The Scribe' in her *Globe* ads, presented the store as a cultural resource. The copy she wrote for Eaton's during the first years of her career was characterized by literary references, flights of fancy, and the occasional satirical insight: in short her ads were a form of early twentieth century middlebrow literary production, pitched to gentle readers with both the cultural capital and the leisure to appreciate her texts. This was class, rather than mass, marketing. While her target audience may have been limited, however, she aimed at the store's most

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<sup>18</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 17, 1910, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Marjory Lang, *Women Who Made the News: Female Journalists in Canada, 1880-1945* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 174.

<sup>20</sup> Archives Department – Advertising – Eaton's News, F229-162-0-25, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

desired demographic: the aspiring residents of the city's comfortable inner suburbs, as well as the social elite in nearby towns and villages. In the years between 1911 and 1920 Macdonald offered Toronto's middle class women an imaginative framework for the successful negotiation of the expanding world of consumer choice confronting them in the early twentieth century.

Advertising was still in its infancy at this time, a fact that contributed to Macdonald's ability to fashion her unconventional career.<sup>21</sup> Born in 1876, she was in many ways a typical daughter of Toronto's Anglo-Celtic upper middle class. Her paternal uncle, John Macdonald, was a prominent wholesale merchant in the city who was eventually appointed to the Canadian Senate and who, perhaps not coincidentally, aided Timothy Eaton by granting generous credit terms in the early years. She was educated at the Bishop Strachan School, a private academy for girls from the city's Protestant elite. It is unclear how she spent her early womanhood, but by the time she was thirty she was writing a regular Saturday column for the *Toronto News*, titled "Furbelows and Fancies." This column, with its combination of literary musings and product placement for goods on offer at various Toronto stores, was the prototype for Macdonald's later advertising work for Eaton's. In a profile published in 1913 in the weekly Toronto journal *Saturday Night*, Macdonald claimed to have gained her entry into journalism by touring the offices of various Toronto newspapers until she found an editor interested in the concept behind

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<sup>21</sup> For accounts of the early history of advertising in Canada, see Russell Johnson, *Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Johnson briefly mentions Edith Macdonald's career at Eaton's (page 75), but his focus is on the development of advertising agencies in Canada, not on the in-house services at department stores like Eaton's and Simpsons. A better idea of this work environment can be found in memoirs written by women who worked for department stores in the United States. See Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, *Macy's, Gimbel's, and Me: How to Earn \$90,000 a Year in Retail Advertising* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967) and Emily Kimbrough, *Through Charley's Door* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952). Fitz-Gibbon began her career at Marshall Fields in Chicago, before moving to New York in 1926, where she worked for Macy's, Gimbel's, and Wanamaker's. Kimbrough worked at Marshall Fields during the 1920s.

“Furbelows and Fancies.”<sup>22</sup> A later article published in the Canadian mass-market magazine, *MacLean's*, suggests that her original idea emerged from a close reading of English women's magazines.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the source of her concept, starting in 1905 she successfully parlayed her interest in literature, fashion, and interior design into a career in journalism.

Given the nature of Macdonald's work for the *News*, her subsequent move to Eaton's in 1910 was a logical development. In the early twentieth century the distinction between journalism and advertising was often obscured. Others may have found this blurring of boundaries troubling; not so Macdonald. In a paper on “The New Advertising” delivered on her behalf by Marjorie MacMurchy at the 1913 triennial meeting of the Canadian Women's Press Club she stated boldly: “Carlyle wrote about aprons. Charles Lamb wrote about pigs. So perhaps after all it is not such a disgrace that journalism should find advertising hanging on to its dignified coat tails.”<sup>24</sup> She went on to argue that, in her case, the switch from newspaper journalism to commercial copywriting had actually enlarged her horizons as a writer:

As the member of the editorial staff of an estimable daily newspaper, I was called upon to spend much time and ink in the supplying of cures for freckles and recipes for pumpkin pie, while as an advertising writer it has been my high privilege to expatiate on Cubist pictures and review books by [Canadian feminist and novelist] Nellie McClung...<sup>25</sup>

While recognizing that “If the making of a name or the following of an art be one's object, advertising can offer no attractions,” she emphasized the practical appeal of the emerging profession for those “whose desires are set on the earning of a livelihood by

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<sup>22</sup> “Advertising Profession for Women,” *Saturday Night* 26 (March 22, 1913): 29.

<sup>23</sup> Gertrude E.S. Pringle, “Making Good in the Field of Advertising,” *MacLean's*, September 1, 1922, 60-3.

<sup>24</sup> “The New Advertising,” Vol. 1, File 7, 24, Triennial Report 1910-13, Media Club of Canada fonds, National Archives of Canada.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

interesting, well-paid work.” According to Macdonald, the “new advertising” involved “the investing of the commercial with the artistic, the endeavor to interest rather than urge, the employment of temperate, good English instead of the crude language of brag.”<sup>26</sup> In her view, this transition from hard sell to reasoned articulate persuasion transformed copywriting into a respectable occupation for well-read middle class new women such as herself. And then there was the sheer excitement of participating in the creation of a new cultural form: “There are no rules or principles laid down – no precedents to follow. The writer must supply the initiative, must originate rather than obey. So inventiveness and resourcefulness are primary qualifications. But how exhilarating this chance to create standards – to have full play!”<sup>27</sup>

This opportunity to play with the existing conventions of retail advertising is evident in the changes introduced in the format of the ads Eaton’s placed in the *Toronto Globe*. Eaton’s “Daily Store News” moved from a relatively modest space adjacent to the main editorial column to the very back of the paper, where it often occupied the whole page. Stylized images added visual interest, but the main emphasis was on the copy, which aimed at the lively, informative tone used in contemporary women’s pages in an effort to persuade readers that Eaton’s was a source not only of goods, but also of vital information about those goods and how to use them to achieve desirable ends. Torontonians seeking to replenish their wardrobes, redecorate their homes, or find the perfect gift for a difficult relative were encouraged to look to Eaton’s for the perfect answer to their dilemmas.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

In addition to writing copy that directly promoted specific goods, Macdonald invented a fictional persona, 'The Scribe,' who was credited with both the literary *jeux d'esprit* published under the title "From a Woman's Standpoint" and an advice column called "You Were Inquiring."<sup>28</sup> Together these two features served to distinguish Eaton's advertisements conclusively from those of their competitors. The fact that both columns were usually signed 'The Scribe' in a flowing hand, rather than printed, added to the sense that they were the work of an individual mediator between store and customer.

Writing as the Scribe allowed Macdonald to act as a Canadian variant of the urban flaneuse described by Erika Rappaport in *Shopping for Pleasure*.<sup>29</sup> The Scribe embodied a critical female gaze that was brought to bear on a broad spectrum of topics, mainly but not exclusively to do with the business of shopping. It was, above all, a mobile gaze that ranged throughout the store and beyond to Toronto's streets and houses and, at times, travelling as far abroad as New York, London, and Paris. If her gaze encompassed a world of possibilities, the Scribe's voice had authority. Through reading these components of Eaton's ads Toronto's middle class housewives were not only presented with practical advice, but also with fictions that teased out the hidden meanings of their consumer practices.

In these early years "From a Woman's Standpoint" served as Macdonald's most flexible medium of self-expression. She explored a variety of literary forms, from Hans Christian Andersen-like tales of consumer goods taking on a life on their own, to sharply

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<sup>28</sup> "From a Women's Standpoint" first appeared on October 7, 1910, while the "You Were Inquiring" column was introduced on September 30, 1911. T. Eaton Company ads, *Toronto Globe*, October 7, 1910, 16 and September 30, 1911, 28.

<sup>29</sup> See the chapter "Metropolitan Journeys: Shopping, Traveling, and Reading the West End" in Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 108-41.

observed comedies of manners, to essays that connected shopping to broader themes underpinning early twentieth century genteel culture. From a woman's standpoint a hundred years later, this approach to advertising may seem counterintuitive but the evidence suggests that Macdonald's middlebrow fictions resonated with her audience. The author of the 1913 profile of Macdonald in *Saturday Night* raised the obvious question about the effectiveness of her indirect technique, writing: "But what have all these articles to do with advertising?' an artless reader might ask. 'I enjoy reading them even more than I do the advertisements in the adjoining columns. But what do they have to do with the things I buy?' Answering her own query, the journalist concluded that Macdonald's success was the product of "the subtle law of suggestion, which is the very psychological principle of the best modern advertising."<sup>30</sup> Unsuspected by the artless reader, the artful Scribe was busily engaged in creating the culture of consumer desire. After all, "the modern writer of advertising is much too wise to waste any of the precious newspaper space."<sup>31</sup>

It would, however, be an oversimplification to dismiss Macdonald as a servant of corporate interests bent on exploiting the consumer. There was more to Macdonald, and to Eaton's, than that. Indeed there was much more to early twentieth century shopping than mere commercial exchange, as Rappaport and others have demonstrated. In several of her "Woman's Standpoint" columns Macdonald mused on the relationship between the store and city. She recounted stories of wandering through the aisles of Eaton's observing transactions involving a diverse array of Torontonians whose differences in age, sex,

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<sup>30</sup> "Advertising Profession for Women," *Saturday Night* 26 (March 22, 1913): 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

means, and interests could all be accommodated by the universal provider.<sup>32</sup> Transferring her gaze to the streets and neighbourhoods of Toronto, Macdonald cast Eaton's delivery system as a shuttle weaving together the city's disparate population through their common dependence on goods obtained from the store.<sup>33</sup> Contradicting the popular assumption that shopping was an exclusively feminine, and thus innately frivolous, activity, the Scribe suggested that the city was united by the practice of consumerism.

Nevertheless, the majority of shoppers at Eaton's were women and naturally women's activities and concerns were the main subject of "From a Woman's Standpoint." Here again, however, diversity was a major theme. The Scribe's consumer fictions depicted women who could be broadly defined as members of the middle class, but within that overarching category Macdonald identified a range of possible subject positions for Toronto's female shoppers. Her typology was primarily based on age differences: as women moved through the lifecycle of schoolgirl, debutante, bride, housewife, and doting grandmother the nature of their participation in the world of goods changed. Macdonald's fictionalized ladies bought different things for different reasons at different stages of life, although they almost always retained an interest in clothes. Within well-defined boundaries the "Women's Standpoint" column faithfully reflected the variety of the middle class woman's lived experience: a topic that, of course, was also a primary focus of female novelists labeled middlebrow by modernist critics. More than this, however, Macdonald used the persona of the Scribe to mount a defense of shopping that responded to widespread critiques of feminine consumerism that were prevalent in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>32</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 20, 1911, 16.

<sup>33</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 9, 1912, 32.

In “From a Woman’s Standpoint” the Scribe emerged as an ardent defender of the principle of disciplined desire. Entering the debate over the morality of spending, Macdonald used humour as an effective means of making her point while not detracting from the overall tone of the advertising page. She parodied the opponents of modern shopping practices, creating characters such as “the woman with the tailor-made face” who disdained bargain hunting or the earnest “lady with untidy hair and a hole in a finger of her glove” who “referred to the great store as ‘an ante-room to Vanity Fair.’”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, her fictional critics are women, not the men more usually associated by feminist scholars with attacks on shoppers as examples of wasteful, mindless femininity run amok. The Scribe counters the disparaging remarks of these straw women with examples of virtuous shopping. The bargain-hunting bride is setting up a new household, while a wife and mother’s journey to Eaton’s, a list of her family’s needs in hand, takes her not to Vanity Fair, but to “a big Family Storeroom.”<sup>35</sup> In another column, Macdonald sets the scene at a women’s club devoted to the discussion of serious political and social issues. The topic for the evening is supposed to be “Woman’s responsibility in civic affairs” but the speaker has had to cancel. Instead a mention of United States labour activist Florence Kelley’s campaign for responsible consumerism segues into a conversation about the way in which new fashions in clothing and interior decoration have improved civic life. The evening ends with a lady in pink proposing a series of resolutions supporting the current trends towards sensible clothing and comfortable furniture.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> T. Eaton Company ads, *Toronto Globe*, January 25, 1911, 16 and September 27, 1911, 16.

<sup>35</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 27, 1911, 16.

<sup>36</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, February 1, 1913, 28.

Eaton's decision to publish a slim volume containing selected "From a Woman's Standpoint" columns in 1913 strongly suggests that Macdonald's writings appealed to both the store's clientele and its upper management. Jennifer Scanlon, writing about the early twentieth century women's department at the giant New York advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, has noted the paradox of empowered female adwomen who assigned limited roles to female consumers in their copy.<sup>37</sup> Arguably Macdonald occupies a somewhat different position in her role as mediator between consumers and commodities. Writing not for a mass audience, but for a local, largely middle class readership, Macdonald constantly referenced the specifics of everyday life in the city. She sold Eaton's as a civic institution catering to individual, rather than generalized needs. Her narratives of disciplined desire taught early twentieth century Torontonians that shopping could and should be a rational, purposeful activity entirely in keeping with their public and private responsibilities. At the same time, it could be pleasurable.

By the early 1920s, however, Macdonald had discontinued her "From a Woman's Standpoint" column, although the persona of the Scribe continued to be attached to other components of Eaton's *Globe* ads. Unfortunately no evidence has been found clarifying the reasoning behind this decision. It may well have reflected larger cultural changes: after World War I the new woman was replaced in the popular imagination by the enfranchised modern woman, who played golf, drove her own car, and managed all aspects of life with brisk efficiency. Arguably the association between consumerism and progress was now broadly accepted as the middle class embraced novel comforts and

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<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995): 193-5.

conveniences: as a result shopping was naturalized as a normal activity that no longer had to be defended.

Whatever the rationale for the column's disappearance, it was definitely not a sign of loss of corporate confidence in Macdonald: during most of the interwar period she oversaw not only the *Globe* advertising but she also edited the *Eaton's News Weekly*, a glossy store magazine distributed to Toronto customers. Even more significantly, she was in charge of the Shopping Service inaugurated in response to needs exposed by the Scribe's "You Were Inquiring" column, an advertising feature that will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. During the 1920s, the focus on fashion at Eaton's became more intense as changes in the mode occurred more frequently. Ready-made clothing was democratizing women's wardrobes and the need to be in fashion became widespread. Macdonald traveled to Paris for the semi-annual showings of new clothing designs by famous couturiers, writing back as the Scribe about innovations in hemlines and silhouettes. Such first person accounts helped to maintain the tastemaking authority she had acquired in the pre-war years. Now, however, her copy was more closely tied to the imperatives of retailing: "From a Woman's Standpoint" was replaced by "Talking Shop," an occasional column that provided interesting tidbits about the store, its goods, and the behaviour of its customers:

A woman doesn't care a fig nowadays about telling the size of her shoes. A few years ago she who wore anything larger than fours hid it as a secret or confessed it with shame. "Yes, I like them very well myself," said a pretty young woman, looking down at her new pumps at a tea party the other day. "But they might be a trifle more comfortable; I really take 7 ½ double A, and these are only 7," she announced blandly to the occupants of the surrounding circle of chairs.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 28, 1925, 18.

The young woman's breezy acknowledgement of her shoe size reflects the flapper's rejection of the reticence of an earlier generation. A small detail, perhaps, but it connects Eaton's to the spirit of the times. During the 1920s the Scribe noted changes in modes and manners, observing the quickening tempo of consumer culture and relating her findings to her audience in a way that invited them to share her interest in this passing parade.

The Scribe's signed copy also included lively reports about various special events sponsored by Eaton's, encouraging readers to see the store as a source of entertainment and instruction. Subsequent chapters reference her descriptions of new model house displays, but she also wrote accounts of the special exhibitions, demonstrations, and lectures. As a pertinent example, Eaton's frequently invited well-known authorities on interior decoration to give lectures during the fall and spring expositions of house furnishings trends. Speakers included Frank Alvah Parsons, director of the New York School of Fine and Applied Art (now the Parsons School of Design), Grace Cornell, an educator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Ross Crane, head of the Extension Department of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>39</sup>

Crane's lectures, given in April 1920, are indicative of the practical approach to solving the problems of modern material domesticity found in many books and journals aimed at middle class homeowners during this period. As the Scribe told her readers, he dramatized his decorative principles very effectively: "Mr. Ross Crane is an entertainer as well as an instructor. There isn't a dull moment in his lecture. He sets his theories into

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<sup>39</sup> Frank Alvah Parsons gave a series of talks in April 1914 and again in April 1919, while Grace Cornell lectured in February 1929.

practice with actual chairs and tables and lamps.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the most effective demonstration in his repertoire was “Art versus Aunt Matilda,” a before and after demonstration about getting rid of Victorian clutter (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3):

“When I go home I’m going to take a lot off my mantelpiece,” was one of the whispers overheard yesterday as Mr. Crane preached his gospel of decorative simplicity. He showed up the “cosy” room in all its horror. It was set forth there on the stage—the genuine cluttered-up, homey scene, with its piano draped in silk and laden with ornaments, its tables enveloped in highly patterned covers, its chairs cushioned in fabrics of many colors, its walls hidden by senseless pictures, zigzag arrangements of photographs, Boy Scout banners, etc., etc. Even though you weren’t there, can’t you visualize it?<sup>41</sup>

This decorative disaster was made over in front of the audience into an attractive scheme where “Everything in the room except the pictures [was] dictated by utility – and the pictures supplied the color scheme.”<sup>42</sup> The Scribe’s vivid narrative made her readers aware of what they had missed, while making sure that the store’s role as a promoter of modern standards of good taste was widely advertised.

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<sup>41</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 22, 1920, 20.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



*Figure 2.2*  
*Ross Crane lecture, "Art versus Aunt Matilda – Before." Photo #658, F229-308-0-2015, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Note the abundance of knick-knacks.*



*Figure 2.3*  
*Ross Crane lecture, “Art versus Aunt Matilda – After.” Photo #659, F229-308-0-2015, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. The room has been de-cluttered.*

The 1930s saw certain readjustments to Eaton’s self-representation in the *Globe*. As the Depression wore on, the balance between taste and economy shifted once again. During the 1920s there had been occasional returns to a blunt discourse of business realities, as evidenced by the discussion of the initial promotion of Thrift House in Chapter 5. In general, however, the brusque directness of Timothy Eaton’s ads had been effectively superseded by more evocative appeals to the interests and desires of the consumer. The severe economic crisis of the early 1930s revived the popular critique of big business in general, and department stores in particular. When Eaton’s urged its customers to take advantage of the bargains created by overproduction and deflation, the

store's opponents seized the chance to accuse management of exploiting manufacturers and, by extension, workers. Once again the company turned to institutional advertising to put the case for large-scale retailing, but this time the feminine persona of the Scribe was often used to deliver the message. In columns titled "More About Eaton's" Macdonald described the store's many services and underlined its responsiveness to "The Big Problem – Living on Less Than Before":

The deeper the mystery, the better you like your detective story. The more baffling the pieces, the more you enjoy your jig-saw. How about that other phase of common perplexity, that involuntary puzzle – Living on Less Money?

Lots of people are remarkably good at it. They look just as smart as they did in the affluent past. Their children as well dressed. Their houses as interesting. Their tables as tempting. How do they do it? In the old days good taste was sufficient. Now it's good taste plus careful buying. Often desperately careful buying. Buying where nice food, nice fashions, nice furnishings can be got at rock-bottom prices.<sup>43</sup>

By framing the challenges of the Depression as a puzzle that could be solved by shopping at Eaton's, where "the triple essentials – Vogue, Variety and Value" could be found, this institutional advertising transformed shopping into a kind of game, albeit one with serious goals.<sup>44</sup> The store was presented as the consumer's ally, in bad times as well as good.

As will be discussed in Chapter 6, this emphasis on the benefits of low prices in promoting consumption was not without its critics. Just as in Timothy Eaton's day, Eaton's had to defend its business practices against the charge that the consumer's advantage came at the producer's cost. By the 1930s, however, the store had successfully entrenched itself in the affections of middle class Torontonians. The work of the Scribe in personalizing Eaton's as a place where customers were valued, understood, and

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<sup>43</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 5, 1933, 16.

<sup>44</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 12, 1932, 24.

cheerfully counseled contributed to a positive image that helped the company to resist the new round of attacks.

*“You Were Inquiring:” Interpreting a One-Sided Dialogue*

In 1923 the U.S. trade journal, *Dry Goods Economist*, published a lengthy article about Eaton’s. The section dealing with the store’s advertising noted: “A prominent feature of many of the morning newspaper ads is a column of answers to letters from customers received by the editor of the column. This column has a strictly personal note and is signed ‘The Scribe.’” Macdonald’s column, “You Were Inquiring” was particularly effective as institutional advertising, as “the strictly personal note” humanized the store, turning it from a business into a helpful source of practical advice. The column certainly seems to have been welcomed by readers of the ads, as it continued to appear until the late 1930s. It is valuable for the historian because the correspondence gives some insight into the real dilemmas that the Scribe’s readers sought to resolve through informed consumerism.<sup>45</sup>

Such advice columns were typical of the women’s magazines that were proliferating by the end of the nineteenth century. They could also be found on the women’s pages of the daily newspapers: when the Scribe’s “You Were Inquiring” column was launched at the end of September in 1911, the *Globe* was already publishing an “Answers to Queries” column as part of its “Women at Work and at Play” section.

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<sup>45</sup> It is impossible to know if Macdonald’s advice column was the genuine article: i.e. if she was responding to real letters or if the correspondence was an invention, designed to promote specific goods. It may have been a mix of the two, but the dilemmas dealt with are often quite detailed and idiosyncratic. If the column was a total fiction, it is a further tribute to Macdonald’s talents as a copywriter. It is doubtful, however, that Eaton’s management would have invested so much effort – and newspaper space – in wholly imaginary shoppers for such a long period of time (1911-1936). There was probably, of course, some picking and choosing in terms of letters that matched the store’s promotional goals.

The *Globe* columnist dealt with an eclectic range of topics, addressing issues as significant as the make up and responsibilities of the Dominion Cabinet and as homely as dying rag rugs.<sup>46</sup> Announcing her own column as a new Eaton's service, the Scribe noted that it simply formalized an existing practice of responding to questions sent to her by readers of "From a Woman's Standpoint."<sup>47</sup> She emphasized that her answers would be "impartial" and that correspondents were "invited to write whether purchase is involved or not."<sup>48</sup> At times the queries received strayed just as far afield as those dealt with by the *Globe's* columnist: the Scribe dealt with subjects as diverse as the correct pronunciation of poinsettia and recommendations for books about the labour question.<sup>49</sup>

From the beginning interior decoration was clearly a topic of great interest for shoppers, as one of the early exchanges illustrates:

Dear Scribe—If you are the "Woman" in the "Woman's Standpoint" column and know all about "dreams of drawing-rooms that don't cost much money," what would you do if you were me, and miserably hard up and couldn't afford mahogany and didn't care for Mission oak? What kind of chairs would you get? I have a good old walnut sofa and table, and a large padded chair. More walnut furniture would be out of the question, and so would the upholstered kind, because both are too dear.

That rose pink drawing-room you described last week is just what I want, a cosy, everyday sort of room. I know the "stale-bread" kind.

--Parkdale

Why, if I were all the sundry things you enumerate, I should have willow chairs—plain brown willow cushioned with a pretty yellow and russet color cretonne, using the same material for a loose cover for the big padded chair. You can get a very picturesque willow chair, one of the low comfortable sort, for \$3.75. And there are charming tables to match that can be used for books and plants, and look very homey and interesting.

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<sup>46</sup> "Answers to Queries," *Toronto Globe*, August 19, 1911, 11 and November 11, 1911, 10.

<sup>47</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 30, 1911, 28,

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> T. Eaton Company ads, *Toronto Globe*, December 29, 1911, 14 and January 7, 1920, 18.

If there is anything in handwriting, your fingers should have the true artistic touch. I'm sure you arrange flowers delightfully. Haven't you a reputation in that line?<sup>50</sup>

The advice given here is characteristic: the Scribe favoured informal living rooms designed to set their occupants at ease and including such personal details as books and plants. The comment about handwriting is also typical of the intimate tone adopted in her replies.

While considerations of advertising space meant that the store soon decided not to print the original queries, it is possible to infer consumer concerns from the Scribe's replies. Many of her correspondents were trying to find ways of compensating for the various physical deficiencies of their houses: narrow hallways, oddly shaped windows, unfortunate woodwork. Others were attempting to achieve a harmonious whole out of a disparate jumble of furnishings acquired willy-nilly over the years. The Scribe recommended colour schemes based on the orientation of rooms: warm colours for the north east, cool colours for the south west. In keeping with the reaction against Victorian visual clutter that informed most decorating advice at this time, she counseled against the use of too many different patterns. Figured wallpapers required plain window treatments and vice versa. Restraint should be used when it came to accessories, but Macdonald also warned against going too far in pursuit of decorative perfection:

The colors and other elements in your plan sound very attractive. One's only criticism would be that the room might be a bit too highly stylized. There's such a thing as harmony being so perfect and ensembling so exact that a room loses that lived-in look which is one of its chief charms. Leave your favorite chair and your faithful old writing table—it would probably be a gem if you had the mahogany scraped and polished. It's humanizing objects like these that make all the difference between a house and a hotel.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 18, 1911, 16.

<sup>51</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 8, 1935, 18.

Nearly twenty-five years lay between this advice and the Scribe's earliest suggestions regarding interior decoration. While the column gives evidence of changing trends, such as a more daring use of colour and a playful use of once abhorred Victorian pieces, her underlying principles remain consistent. The objective was always to create an environment that was as livable as possible, given individual constraints and preferences. Joy Parr has written about the ways in which post-war Canadian women "domesticated" their furnishings, whether new, second hand, or inherited: in an earlier period the Scribe's advice helped her correspondents to accomplish the same task.<sup>52</sup>

Customer response to 'You Were Inquiring' was enthusiastic; so much so that Eaton's created a Shopping Service to follow up on the business generated by the Scribe's recommendations. Edith Macdonald supervised these women, who were responsible for replying to the many private letters that were not published in the column. In the *Golden Jubilee* book, the Shoppers are described as "women of good taste and good judgment, who are qualified to shop with care, promptness and discretion."<sup>53</sup> Thus they were able to act as "a woman's Second Self" in the store whenever time, distance or other difficulties prevented coming in person. An insertion in a 1918 *Globe* ad outlined the skills needed for the position:

A good all-round education, at least (you can't know too much, as you may be dealing with masterpieces in art one moment and cream separators the next).

Good taste, and a highly developed sense of discernment – in other words, that wisdom which refrains from sending frills to the Junoesque type of woman, or a Futurist chintz to a country mouse.

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<sup>52</sup> Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 165-98.

<sup>53</sup> Edith Macdonald [The Scribe], *Golden Jubilee 1869-1919*, 198.

Familiarity with those things which the Average Woman buys for herself and her household – clothes, housefurnishings, and such accessories as her various social and domestic interests demand.

An ability to write a bright, concise, well-constructed letter. This is one of the foremost essentials.<sup>54</sup>

The Shopping Service is further evidence of Eaton's desire to create loyal middle class customers. This level of assistance was not limited to the upper classes, but the store clearly defined the "average woman" as someone with sufficient discretionary income to buy goods on a regular basis. Given the required qualifications listed above, the Shoppers themselves had a similar economic and social background. They fulfilled the promise implicit in Eaton's feminized institutional advertising by answering the manifold needs revealed in letters sent to "You Were Inquiring."

*Homemaking in Ontario 1911-1935: Lucy Maud Montgomery*

Inferences may be made from the Scribe's responses in her advice column, but it is hard to discover direct connections between Eaton's efforts to promote ideas about modern middle class domesticity and their reception by consumers. This section therefore takes an indirect route by analyzing Lucy Maud Montgomery's experience of domesticity during her years as a wife and mother living in Ontario, years that are roughly congruent with the time period covered by this thesis. As a well-known novelist and prolific journal writer, Montgomery was admittedly exceptional. In many ways, however, her encounter with the day-to-day realities of homemaking reflected the challenges faced by her less documented middle class counterparts as they sought to create successful homes.

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<sup>54</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 12, 1918, 22. Macdonald later claimed to have received almost two hundred applications in response "from teachers, nurses, bank-clerks, university students and graduates, dressmakers, women of leisure, etc. It is a form of work that appeals very widely to women anxious to take up a business career." Macdonald [The Scribe], *Golden Jubilee 1869-1919*, 207, 209.

In 1911, at the age of 36, Lucy Maud Montgomery married the Reverend Ewan Macdonald, a life change that took her from Prince Edward Island to Presbyterian manses in two different Ontario villages before she and her husband made their final home in Toronto. Prior to her marriage, Montgomery had never had a home she could truly call her own. The death of her mother when she was only twenty-one months old and the subsequent departure of her father to seek opportunities in western Canada meant that she was left with her maternal grandparents, who were not ideal caregivers for a sensitive and imaginative child. During her adolescence she shuttled between her grandparents' house, her father's new family in Prince Albert, and the homes of various paternal and maternal relations on the Island. As an adult, her career as a schoolteacher meant boarding with families in the local community. The last ten years of her spinsterhood were spent caring for her grandmother in the Cavendish house she loved, but that could never belong to her.<sup>55</sup>

These experiences left their mark on Montgomery's writing. The titles of her most famous works, the books making up the Anne series, associate her heroine with specific places: most often with the name of a house. Finding and making a home serve as recurring themes, and the successful achievement of a high standard of domestic comfort is held up as a worthy goal. In *Anne of Green Gables* Anne's initial failures as a housekeeper and cook thanks to a tendency to daydream serve as a source of comedy, but her eventual metamorphosis into a competent domestic manager is a measure of her growth into adulthood. In *Anne's House of Dreams*, Rachel Lynde, a critic turned supporter of the often-impulsive girl, comments favourably on the now married woman:

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<sup>55</sup> Montgomery's maternal grandfather, Alexander McNeill, predeceased his wife. He left ownership of the house to his son John, who later demolished it.

“Anne’s a good housekeeper,” she said to Marilla in the spare room on the night of her arrival. “I’ve looked into her bread box and her scrap pail. There’s nothing in the pail that shouldn’t have been thrown away, and no stale pieces in the bread box. Of course, she was trained up with you – but, then, she went to college afterwards.”<sup>56</sup>

Rachel’s fears that Anne’s intellectual accomplishments may have unfitted her for homemaking are gently satirized here, but the importance of good housekeeping to good living is not denied in Montgomery’s fiction. As her journals show, maintaining a well kept, attractive domestic environment was a source of personal pride and enjoyment. It was also a never-ending struggle.

Built in 1886, Macdonald’s first home in Leaskdale, Ontario had few conveniences.<sup>57</sup> She was dismayed to find it lacked an indoor privy and bathroom, although this was common enough in rural areas and small towns in 1911. Nevertheless, she embarked on homemaking with enthusiasm:

...I had a mental vision of what it would be like when we got it all in order and I ran over the house like a pleased child. It was *our* home and I was its mistress. No woman ever forgets that delightful sensation—especially if, like me, she has never lived in any house before where she had any rights or privileges beyond those of a dependent child.<sup>58</sup>

Thanks to her success as an author (*Anne of Green Gables* was published in 1908) Montgomery had sufficient funds to purchase furniture in Toronto. For the parlour she selected furniture “of Heppelwhite [sic] design, in mahogany done in brocade.” The library featured Early English oak, while the small dining room, “the most unsatisfactory room, having every vice a room can have” was crammed with the table, chairs, china

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<sup>56</sup> L.M. Montgomery, *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917; reprint, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1981), 90.

<sup>57</sup> It was, however, an improvement on the house in Cavendish: “It is not an ideal house by any means, but it will do, and it is certainly much more comfortable and convenient than my old home.” Jen Rubio, ed., *L.M. Montgomery’s Complete Journals: The Ontario Years 1911-17* (Middletown DE: Rock’s Mills Press, 2016), 46.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. Emphasis in the original.

cabinet and mirrored sideboard that convention required. The second floor bedrooms were furnished with painted suites, which probably included a bedstead, chest of drawers, washstand and dressing table.<sup>59</sup> Her journals do not mention where she did her buying, but her choices reflect the middle class preference for period furniture that will be discussed in the next chapter. Hepplewhite was an eighteenth century English furniture designer. His designs were considered appropriate for more feminine spaces, such as the drawing room or parlour, in contrast to the masculine character of the Early English oak that Montgomery chose for the library. Both styles, however, were firmly associated with Britain—and both could be obtained at Eaton’s.

When the house was finally in order, Montgomery expressed her satisfaction:

I am pleased with my home. I think it is furnished as comfortably as its limitations permit and in good taste, with things we will not tire of. At first, all our new possessions seemed to me to be a little strange to each other. But now they have got acquainted. Up to New Year’s I was so busy all the time that I really had no time to *enjoy* my home—to *realize* it. But now I have more leisure and am beginning to realize the delight and comfort of many things that have been long absent from my life—or were never in it.<sup>60</sup>

The “delight and comfort of many things” materialized Montgomery’s sense of having achieved stability through her marriage: “I am contented—I may say happy. There is an absolute happiness and comparative happiness. Mine is the latter. After the unhappiness and worry of the past thirteen years this existence of mine seems to me a very happy one. I am—for the most part—content.”<sup>61</sup> Although she acknowledged her home was not ideal, much of her sense of contentment was rooted in the production of a domestic environment that combined comfort and good taste.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 52-5. Once again, this is an example of the process of domestication described by Joy Parr in *Domestic Goods*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 51. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 52.

Unfortunately this state of tranquil contentment did not last. Montgomery found great joy in experiencing the birth and childhood of two sons, but chafed against the narrowness of life in a small village. When a stillbirth followed her second pregnancy in 1914, life in Leaskdale took a darker turn. The vicarious horror of World War I played havoc with her emotions, and no soon was the war over than she had to deal with her husband's descent into religious melancholy, as well as the death of her closest friend and relative, Frede Campbell. The vexed issue of union between the Canadian Methodist and Presbyterian churches in the early 1920s fractured her husband's congregation. When Ewan was called to the Presbyterian church at the town of Norval in 1926, she left her first Ontario home with mixed feelings of loss and relief.

The Presbyterian manse in Norval was a much more pretentious dwelling. Although also built in the nineteenth century, it had such modern conveniences as an indoor lavatory and electric wiring.<sup>62</sup> As is often the case, the move led to the purchase of some new furnishings. Deciding that her delicate Hepplewhite suite was unsuited to the larger proportions of the Norval parlour, Montgomery once again went shopping: "On my way back [to Leaskdale from a speaking engagement in Brantford] I stopped in Toronto and bought some furniture—a reed set and a nice, comfy, 'overstuffed' set for the parlor. I think they are rather ugly, clumsy things but oh, how comfortable they are.

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<sup>62</sup> Montgomery was particularly pleased to have electric light at Norval: "I *do* like the electric light. It is an odd thing that last fall was the first time that I ever felt a longing for electric light. I had always been used to oil lamps and never felt that I wanted anything else. I had a gasoline lamp which I used for reading and sewing and I like it better than electric light. Do yet for that matter were it not for the trouble of fixing it up. And our flashlights were a great convenience. But all at once, last fall, long before I knew there was such a place as Norval I began to feel suddenly tired of coming in and fumbling in the dark for matches—tired of wrestling with wicks that no maid *ever* got straight. I felt that I would like to have hydro. And here I have it. And after two weeks of it I wonder how I ever did without it! It gives me such a nice, omnipotent feeling to press a button —'let there be light and there *is* light.'" Jen Rubio, ed., *L.M. Montgomery's Complete Journals: The Ontario Years 1926-1929* (Middletown DE: Rock's Mill Press, 2017), 32. Emphasis in the original.

To sink into the depths of one of them before an open fire. The thought is a rest.”<sup>63</sup> Here Montgomery has chosen comfort over elegance, well-padded furniture of no particular style to replace the period beauty of Heppelwhite. It is an example of the same sort of “brisk accommodation” characteristic of Joy Parr’s post World War II Canadian women and suggests that fifteen years of homemaking had perhaps reordered Montgomery’s opinion of the relative priority of taste and comfort.<sup>64</sup> She herself was well aware of the competition between modern convenience and ingrained personal preferences that often lay behind equipping a house, as evidenced by her comments on the introduction of an electric stove in 1928: “We had an electric range installed today. The oil stove was done and since I had to get something I decided to get an electric range. I think I shall like it. It is clean and convenient. But if I had my choice of a cookery beast I’d choose an old ‘Waterloo Stove’ with plenty of good hardwood!”<sup>65</sup>

In many ways the move from Norval to Leaskdale meant a marked improvement in living conditions for the Macdonald/Montgomery family. Montgomery noted with pleasure that the Norval congregation was far more openhanded when it came to the maintenance and improvement of the manse.<sup>66</sup> However some significant drawbacks continued. As a minister’s wife Montgomery’s housekeeping was subject to the scrutiny of her husband’s congregation. Presbyterian pastors owed both their livelihood and their dwelling place to the goodwill of local church members, not to a centralized governing body. The Macdonald/Montgomery household differed from the norm because

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<sup>63</sup> Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, eds. *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery Volume III: 1921-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 272.

<sup>64</sup> Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods*: 4. Parr’s actual phrase is “briskly accommodating resistance.” I would argue that Montgomery resisted the suite’s aesthetic claims while valuing its comfort.

<sup>65</sup> Jen Rubio, ed., *L.M. Montgomery’s Complete Journals: The Ontario Years 1926-1929* (Middletown DE: Rock’s Mill Press, 2017), 203.

<sup>66</sup> For example, in 1928 the plumbing was improved and a modern bathroom installed. *Ibid.*, 220.

Montgomery's income from her writing permitted such luxuries as a motorcar and household help. This situation seems to have inspired curiosity and some envy in the parishioners of both Leaskdale and Norval.<sup>67</sup> Montgomery herself was constantly juggling her conflicting identities as minister's wife and writer/breadwinner. In her journal entries she frequently complains about the social demands placed upon her time because of her role in the community. She accompanied her husband on his tedious rounds of parish visits, organized various church and cultural activities, and entertained visitors who often arrived without prior notice. Domesticity at the manse, and Montgomery's performance as a wife and helpmate, was thus on public display to a greater degree than it was in the case of most of her contemporaries.

This uneasy situation came to an end with Ewan Macdonald's retirement and the family's move to Toronto. On the advice of real estate agent A.E. Lepage Montgomery bought a house on Riverside Drive just east of the Humber River. For the first time she actually owned her own home. Newly built, the house was designed by the architectural department of the Robert Home Smith Company in the Tudorbethan style popular in interwar suburbs in England and North America.<sup>68</sup> While the exterior gestured towards an imagined past, the interior plan was modern. Although she appreciated such amenities as an ensuite bathroom, Montgomery lamented the loss of her cherished parlour:

Today my packing had so far advanced that it became necessary to tear up my parlor and use it as a basis for further operations. It hurt me terribly. I've always loved this big shadowy room. And I like a *parlor*. I am sorry to think I will never have one again. They have become hopelessly out of date. There are only 'living

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<sup>67</sup>"I have discovered that certain Norval people have been trying to pump Mrs. Mason [Montgomery's live-in help] in regard to 'how much money I have.' No doubt it is a great worry to them." Ibid., 178.

<sup>68</sup>See Deborah Sugg Ryan "Living in a 'Half-Baked Pageant,'" *Home Cultures* 8:3, 217-44. Ryan sees the Tudorbethan style in interwar Britain as an essentially middle class domestic form reflecting conservative modernity.

rooms' now and a living room can never have the kudos of a parlor—that sacred room which was only opened up when company came.<sup>69</sup>

Each of Montgomery's moves in Ontario involved a difficult period of adjustment because of her strong emotional investment in her previous home. The departure from Norval was particularly wrenching due to her love of the house, her garden, and the local landscape. She found solace in unpacking possessions such as pictures with strong sentimental associations: "They [the pictures] are all dear to me for one reason or another and I have looked at them in many hours of joy and sorrow."<sup>70</sup> In contrast with the dictates of modern interior design authorities, such as Frank Alvah Parsons and Ross Crane, she valued her pictures for their personal meanings, not for their decorative effect. At the same time, however, she also compensated for the loss of Norval by treating herself to something new: "I went downtown and decided to make myself a present—something I have not done for a long time. I bought a Westinghouse electric refrigerator."<sup>71</sup>

Montgomery's lifetime coincided with major technological and social changes that affected everyday domesticity. As we have seen, she embraced new conveniences while expressing nostalgia for old ways of life. Indeed, in both her homemaking and her writing she exemplified a middlebrow modernism that focused on the problems and pleasures of ordinary lives. While her own experiences were unique on one level, she shared common ground with her contemporaries in her efforts to fashion her domestic environment.

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<sup>69</sup> Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, eds., *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery Volume IV: 1929-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 359.

<sup>70</sup> Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, eds., *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery Volume V: 1935-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

## *Conclusion*

Did Lucy Maud Montgomery ever write to the Scribe for decorating advice? Possibly, especially when she lived outside Toronto and was not able to visit the store in person with any frequency.<sup>72</sup> Those middle class women who did consult the Scribe did so because they valued her in her role as a mediator who would help them negotiate modern consumer culture. This chapter addresses a gap in the history of advertising by examining advertisements placed in daily newspapers, and uncovering the work of copywriter Edith Macdonald, popularly known as the Scribe, whose decades long contribution to the Eaton's public profile has largely been forgotten. The chapter argues that her feminine voice was a shift from the masculine producerist tone of the late nineteenth century and opened a space for dialogue with its most important customers. As we have seen, this advertising encouraged readers to view interior decorating as a significant form of self-expression, within the constraints of good taste and economy. The Scribe's "You Were Inquiring" column provides indirect evidence of the reception of this message as revealed in the answers to the homemaking concerns of its anonymous correspondents. Lucy Maud Montgomery's account of her own homemaking endeavours illustrates the importance of domesticity to one woman's sense of self and her position in the local community. The following chapters will consider the role of period rooms and model houses within the larger framework of corporate institutional marketing that sought to identify Eaton's with the production of a 'city of homes.'

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<sup>72</sup> We do know that Edith Macdonald and Lucy Maud Montgomery met at least once at a Canadian Women's Club tea. Macdonald mentioned the encounter in her "You Were Inquiring" column. They may well have met on other occasions, given their overlapping cultural interests. T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, December 11, 1911, 15. In 1920 the Scribe advised "Kilmeny" that "A stuffed-over chair of the slim, feminine gender might be added with impunity to your roomful of slender Hepplewhites. One can easily imagine their insufficiency in the hour of ease." The coincidence of Kilmeny, the titular heroine of Montgomery's novel, *Kilmeny of the Orchard* (1910) and Hepplewhite furniture is suggestive, if inconclusive. T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 15, 1920, 22.

## Chapter 3

### Period Rooms: Culture and Commerce

As they made their plans for an elegant new home furnishings building during the prosperous days of the late 1920s, Eaton's managers hoped that a suite of elaborate period rooms would generate lucrative commissions from wealthy Torontonians. When the store at College and Yonge opened in November 1930, one of its most celebrated features was indeed the group of period rooms located on the fifth floor. The displays included custom reproductions of rooms on exhibit in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, a modified copy of Marie Antoinette's boudoir at the Petit Trianon, and a genuine paneled interior removed from a London house built circa 1702.<sup>1</sup> Located next to the offices of Eaton's interior design service, these rooms were intended to signal the store's expertise in the creation of authentic period environments. By using a display technique associated with decorative arts museums, Eaton's allied itself with high standards of connoisseurship and historical accuracy. Despite this scholarly appearance, however, these rooms, with their combination of genuine antiques and high quality copies, also embodied the commercial considerations at play in the store's marketing of period interior decoration during the interwar years. The aura of historical truth surrounding the fifth floor displays conferred distinction not only on custom-made

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<sup>1</sup> Eaton's commissioned Messrs. Frederick Tibbenham Ltd., a well-known British firm specializing in the reproduction of period furniture and furnishings, to copy the Hatton Garden Room (original built circa 1730) and the Clifford's Inn Room (original built circa 1688). The copyists responsible for the Petit Trianon boudoir are not identified in Eaton's surviving records. It would be interesting to know the source for the reproduction, as the Petit Trianon was gutted during the French Revolution. Restoration work at Versailles, the Grand Trianon and the Petit was ongoing during the 1920s, thanks to funding provided by John D. Rockefeller Jr.; however it is not clear that the Marie Antoinette boudoir was included in the program. A complete description of the suite of period rooms can be found in T. Eaton Company archives. See File: Furnished Rooms 1919-1931, F229-69-22, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

reproductions but on the mass produced ‘period’ furniture and furnishings that had long served as Eaton’s bread and butter.

The explicit promotion of period styles at Eaton’s can be traced back to the early years of the twentieth century. A 1910 *Globe* advertisement exhorted customers: “SEE OUR PERIOD FURNITURE. There is very little modern furniture of the new patterns that does not have more or less ‘period’ in its design. To gain harmony in your decorative scheme you should understand the styles to at least a slight extent.”<sup>2</sup> For the next two decades the company regularly undertook efforts to teach Torontonians the specifics of period interior decoration through room displays, advertising, and lectures. Between 1919 and 1925 Eaton’s funded the creation of a collection of historic European furniture and interior fittings at the Royal Ontario Museum. Items from the collection were subsequently displayed not only at the museum but, on occasion, at the store. All of these activities were linked to the fact that period furniture and furnishings dominated British and North American markets from the late nineteenth century until World War II.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this dominance of period designs, until quite recently historians of early twentieth century decorative arts have concentrated on the emergence of the arts and crafts, art nouveau, and art deco design movements, identifying them as milestones along the way to the triumph of international modernism after 1945.<sup>3</sup> In the context of such narratives of design evolution, Eaton’s extensive commitment to marketing styles associated with the past as not only fashionable but modern seems incongruous. In fact, however, this emphasis on period furnishings demonstrated not only the realities of Toronto’s middle and upper middle class tastes, but also the complicated

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<sup>2</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 9, 1910, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Such histories follow the model established by Nicholas Pevsner’s classic study, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).

nature of domestic modernity within Western consumer culture before World War II. Even as individual designers such as Le Corbusier and collectives such as the Bauhaus school proclaimed the need for new forms in tune with the technological changes reshaping everyday life, British and North American consumers from a range of income levels preferred to fill most of the rooms of their electrified houses with furniture and furnishings that recalled long vanished times. True, exceptions were made in the case of kitchens and bathrooms, but these spaces were generally viewed as functional backstage areas that, while they provided necessary services, were hardly at the core of the family's aesthetic identity.

Since the cultural turn of the 1980s, various scholars have begun to explore the implications of a simultaneous embrace of old and new in the context of the domestic interior. In one of the earliest attempts to grapple with this seeming contradiction, Stephen Calloway's *Twentieth Century Interiors* (1988) shows how high end decorators such as Syrie Maugham chose to deploy historic styles in distinctly modern, often playful, schemes during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Writing about the colonial revival in the United States during the Progressive Era, Bridget May claims that the popularity of houses and furnishings reflecting an imagined Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage materialized old-stock Americans' discomfort about the changes associated with modernity: urbanization, industrialization and mass immigration.<sup>5</sup> In her book, *Ideal Homes* (2018), design historian Deborah Sugg Ryan offers a different interpretation of a similar phenomenon in England, arguing that the middle class inhabitants of the new interwar suburbs were untroubled by the apparent inconsistency between period designs and

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Calloway, *Twentieth Century Decoration* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholas, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> See Bridget A. May, "Progressivism and the Colonial Revival: The Modern Colonial House 1900-1920," *Winterthur Portfolio* 26: 2/3 (Summer/Fall 1991): 109.

technological innovations in their homes.<sup>6</sup> Tudorbethan dining suites and indoor plumbing were equal signifiers of the rising standards of living associated with modern progress.

The diversity of meanings these and other researchers have assigned to the popularity of period designs during the interwar years indicates the importance of context. As design historian Penny Sparke has remarked in relation to the recent fashion for ‘retro’ furnishings, it is important to attend to “the fundamental differences...that underpin what seem to be repeated references to the same thing.”<sup>7</sup> In the case of Eaton’s the emphasis on period styles was closely connected to the store’s claims of expertise in the field of interior decoration. At the beginning of the twentieth century the status of interior decorators was unclear: were they tradesmen or artists, amateurs or professionals?<sup>8</sup> A thorough grounding in the history of decorative art was considered an essential foundation for any decorator seeking elite patronage.<sup>9</sup> During the 1920s the store demonstrated its belief in the importance of this form of cultural capital by financing the ROM’s furniture collection and entering the antiques business. The growing bias towards British traditional styles in this decade reflects Toronto’s British North American identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah Sugg Ryan, *Ideal Homes, 1918-39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018). After all, Adolf Loos, modernist architect and author of *Ornament and Crime*, furnished interiors with Chippendale chairs. Stefan Muthesius, “Why do we buy old furniture? Aspects of the Authentic Antique in Britain,” *Art History* 11:2 (June 1988): 251.

<sup>7</sup> Penny Sparke, “Review of Elizabeth F. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (2006),” *Design Issues* 26:2 (Spring 2010): 80.

<sup>8</sup> See Grace Lees-Maffei, “Introduction: Professionalization as a Focus in Interior Design History,” *Journal of Design History* 21:1 (March 2008): 1-18.

<sup>9</sup> See Patricia Edmonson, “The Art-in-Trades Club: Selling Style,” in *Shaping the American Interior: Structures, Contexts and Practices*, Paula Lupkin and Penny Sparke, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 89-106.

In some ways this first case study differs from those in the following chapters, in that it is not centred on a specific display but rather on a long-term attempt to establish Eaton's authority in the field of period interior decoration. As this chapter will show, during the early twentieth century interior decorators seeking professional status often based their claims on extensive knowledge of the history of the decorative arts. The meaning of Eaton's various displays of period furniture and furnishings will be teased out from the actions and pronouncements of taste professionals ranging from the store's own copywriters and decorators to writers for the Toronto-based magazine, *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, and curators at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. The partnership between retailer and museum is explored in detail, as these two components of the exhibitionary complex collaborated in efforts to foster higher standards of design through exposure to historical precedents. Eaton's and the ROM did not create the Toronto market for period furniture, but they promoted ideas about correct taste that reinforced the association of cultural capital with domestic interiors linked to an imagined past of aesthetic certainty. The 1930 installation of the suite of period rooms is discussed as the culmination of Eaton's efforts to attain the very modern goal of establishing the professional and aesthetic credentials of its decorating staff.

### *The Evolving Role of the Interior Decorator*

During the nineteenth century modern developments such as mass production and a broader distribution of wealth led to an expanded supply of, and growing demand for, furniture and furnishings. According to Clive Edwards, middle class Victorian householders with disposable income largely relied on commercial upholsterers for their

decorative needs.<sup>10</sup> The results were not always satisfactory, as Anthony Trollope relates in his novel *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864):

But Alice Vavasor's drawing room was not pretty. Her father had had the care of furnishing the house, and he had intrusted [sic] the duty to a tradesman who had chosen green curtains, and green damask chairs. There was a green damask sofa, and two green arm-chairs opposite to each other at the two sides of the fireplace. The room was altogether green, and was not enticing.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly the social climbing Veneerings in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) are satirized for the fatal newness of their household possessions.<sup>12</sup> These fictional critiques echo the judgments passed in contemporary writings on taste in house furnishings that castigated retailers for the aesthetic crimes committed in the name of fashion and novelty. As discussed in Chapter 1, design reformers in Great Britain and France were worried that national taste was being corrupted by a deadly combination of mass production and indiscriminate acquisition.<sup>13</sup> Design historian Patricia Lara-Betancourt points out, however, that the rank and file of the expanding middle classes in Great Britain necessarily turned to retailers to supply furniture and furnishings even as they read advice in books and magazines warning them of the dangers of the marketplace.<sup>14</sup> In such style centres as London, Paris, and New York department stores and large furniture retailers attempted to counter their critics by establishing their credentials as bastions of good taste. Knowledgeable decorating staff and attractive displays played an important part in such campaigns.

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<sup>10</sup> Clive Edwards, "Complete House Furnishers: The Retailer as Interior Designer in Nineteenth-Century London," *Journal of Interior Design* 38:1 (2013): 1-17.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864-5; reprint, Toronto: Penguin Books, 1972), 46.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5; reprint, Markham ON: Penguin, 1971), 48.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the situation in Great Britain, see Patricia Lara Betancourt, "Conflicting Modernities: Arts and Crafts and Commercial Influences in the Decoration of the Middle Class Home 1890-1914" (PhD diss., Kingston University, London, UK, 2008).

The construction of the 1899 ‘model art house’ described in Chapter 1 was Eaton’s first known effort to assert the store’s ability to create complete interior ensembles. Descriptions of the display suggest an opulent eclecticism that would have impressed most Toronto shoppers. According to Judith Neiswander, however, decorative schemes involving “heavy velvet curtains,” “expensive curios,” “white Arabian lace” and elaborately carved golden oak furniture were falling out of favour by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> By the 1910s, the discourse and practice of good taste as defined by the critics of the day was changing. Historicism was shifting to the more purely historic, as the exuberant clutter of the Victorians was rejected by the succeeding generation. The ad copy in the *Globe* reflected the trend: while the sheer size and variety of Eaton’s house furnishing stocks continued to be emphasized, readers were also encouraged to consult store decorators about fashionable period effects:

In one of the innumerable Pierpont Morgan collections in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, may be seen some rarely beautiful examples of interior decoration – panels and friezes obtained from walls that have looked down upon Madame de Stael, Madame Recamier, or Marie Antoinette herself. And by productions of this aesthetic type, by the decorative art of the respective periods when Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI were kings, and Napoleon Bonaparte was Emperor, has much of the treatment in vogue to-day been inspired. The Wall Paper Section is equipped with a competent staff and every facility to carry out designs of this identical order – French period, Empire and Colonial effects in drawing-rooms, dining-rooms, and halls. And besides them, are being specialized the simpler Mission, and purely modern schemes of interior decoration.<sup>16</sup>

The ad claims familiarity with wall treatments displayed at a leading New York art museum – authentic artifacts collected by a famously wealthy connoisseur. This reference lends authority to the assertion that Eaton staff could accurately replicate such schemes

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<sup>15</sup> Judith A. Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home, 1870-1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 147-78.

<sup>16</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 30, 1911, 14. Note the emphasis on French period styles. British decorative traditions would later overtake their French counterparts in Eaton’s advertising – although France became an important source of new styles, as discussed in Chapter 4.

for Toronto householders. By the early twentieth century the historical collections of decorative art museums were widely seen as important resources for tasteful modern design.

Despite this knowledge, however, at this time Eaton's decorators were indeed tradesmen or, at best, artisans and draftspersons. The staff responsible for suggesting and executing wall treatments and those who could advise on the selection of draperies or furniture belonged to different departments, which were to some degree in competition for the consumer's dollar.<sup>17</sup> The need to draw on various decorative components in order to create an accurate period room may well have been an important underlying cause of the redefinition of the decorator as someone with taste, experience and deep historical knowledge capable of creating a harmonious interior from diverse goods. Eventually interior decorators in department stores were separated from specific sales departments and took on work that combined design and interdepartmental coordination. Their services were often offered to customers free of charge, with the cost to the store underwritten by purchases of the necessary goods. While the exact process of the role's evolution is not clearly documented in the Eaton's archives, ads in the *Globe* indicate that the store began to offer comprehensive decorating services to the general public in the early 1920s.<sup>18</sup> Once again, familiarity with historical styles was the basis of claims of decorative expertise:

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<sup>17</sup> See the discussion of this problem in a trade journal article: "The Need for Teamwork," *The Upholsterer and Interior Decorator* 63-64 (February 1920): 45-6.

<sup>18</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 9, 1923, 18. Eaton's had taken on large contract decorating projects before this time – most notably the decoration of Chorley Park, the new Lieutenant Governor's residence built between 1911 and 1915. For a discussion of the career of one of Eaton's first professional decorators, who later started her own business, see Nicola Kranz, " 'Making a Business of Good Taste': Minerva Elliot and the Professionalization of Interior Decoration in Toronto, 1925-1939" (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2018).

Your House o' Dreams May Be More Easily Completed With the Help of a Professional Decorator – and for such advice there is no charge.

Have you visualized your house as you would like it to be? Have you vague ideas about a Jacobean room...a homey Queen Anne room...a charming background for the antiques you have inherited? Or do you yearn for a smart, modern room? You will find it helpful, surely, to consult some one who has the whole period story at his finger-ends...some one who is conversant with old styles and modern replicas and settings.<sup>19</sup>

Eaton's own efforts to teach Torontonians about period design in the preceding decade had done much to create the "vague ideas about a Jacobean room...a homey Queen Anne room...a charming background for the antiques you have inherited" that the store's decorators now promised to realize.

#### *Exhibiting the Past at Eaton's Before World War I*

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Eaton's home furnishings departments had become an important component of the company's business. Developing from modest beginnings selling carpets and iron bedsteads, the store was now one of the main retailers of furniture and home furnishings in Toronto.<sup>20</sup> It was this expansion of trade that led to the establishment of the separate home furnishings building in the complex of structures surrounding the main store at Queen and Yonge. The company's furniture stock moved over to the new building in February 1913; other related departments had followed by 1919.

The move to new premises was marked by further actions to bolster the store's reputation in the field of interior decoration. Eaton's once again turned to the display

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<sup>19</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, November 15, 1928, 24. This quotation reflects the confusion around the word 'modern' in the 1920s: the "smart, modern room" is probably art moderne, while the "modern replicas" probably refers to copies of antiques.

<sup>20</sup> By 1919 Eaton's claimed to be "one of the largest retail furniture businesses in the world." Edith Macdonald [The Scribe], *Golden Jubilee, 1869-1919* (Toronto and Winnipeg: The T. Eaton Co. Limited, 1919), 61.

technique the store introduced to Torontonians in 1899: a model bungalow was installed on the third floor. It was a substantial structure with a dignified exterior made of Etonia brick and Caen stone.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 3.1  
 T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 9, 1913, 18. Artist's impression of model house exterior, Adam bedroom, and Wedgwood dining room with Chippendale furniture.

The *Globe* ad inviting the public to visit the new display claimed that the house was “decorated and furnished according to modern ideas of comfort and artistic effect” (Fig. 3.1).<sup>22</sup> In hopes of attracting the patronage of Toronto’s wealthier homeowners, the ad copy emphasized the use of expensive furnishings throughout the house to create this “veritable triumph of the decorator’s art.” Tellingly, this materialization of “modern ideas of comfort and artistic effect” involved a range of period styles, from the Jacobean entrance hall to the Wedgwood-inspired blue and white dining room with its Chippendale furniture, the drawing room fitted out with Georgian mahogany, and an Adam bedroom

<sup>21</sup> Etonia was an Eaton’s trade mark, while Caen stone was probably a form of plaster treatment that imitated the look of Caen limestone used in French medieval buildings.

<sup>22</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 9, 1913, 18.

“correct to the period in every detail.” More obviously modern features were also included, such as an up-to-date kitchen and a bathroom “fitted with all that is newest in improved sanitary construction.”<sup>23</sup>

The 1913 model bungalow reflected an increasingly sophisticated approach to design on the part of Eaton’s decorating staff. The proliferation of books and journals dealing with furniture history since the turn of the century meant that at least some consumers were potentially better informed than sales personnel about the specific features of a given style.<sup>24</sup> It was now necessary to attach recognized historical labels to the furniture and furnishings on display in order to show that the store’s employees possessed the cultural capital to advise wealthy customers about correct period decoration. There was also a marked turn towards British decorative traditions. It is likely, however, that the examples of Chippendale, Sheraton and Adams designs were twentieth-century products, in some cases imported from Britain and the United States.<sup>25</sup> Eaton’s advertising copy claimed that the display “demonstrate[d] how thoroughly the period idea has been carried out, while losing nothing in comfort.”<sup>26</sup> In order to be commercially successful, period interior decoration required a careful negotiation between the demands of historical accuracy and the realities of modern life.

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<sup>23</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 8, 1913, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Trade journals stressed the importance of knowing the details of period design: “There has been no single development in the house furnishings business more significant than the broad spreading of information regarding period styles in so short a space of time. Every auxiliary branch of house furnishing, from the magazines to the manufacturers has taken up the subject avidly. So necessary is it becoming to have a general knowledge of the period styles that any one uninformed is now handicapped in the trade.” *Good Furniture Magazine* 25 (July 1925): 3.

<sup>25</sup> Eleven years later an Eaton’s representative at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley stated that “Canada still depends upon the mother country for a large appropriation of carpets, furniture (particularly antique and exact reproductions), damasks, velvets, and brocades...” See “As Others See Us,” (reprint of article that originally appeared in *Furnishing Trades Organizer* of June 1924), *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 24:7 (July 1924): 59-60.

<sup>26</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 8, 1913.

As in the case of the 1899 display, the 1913 model house epitomized a luxurious life style that had little to do with the domestic realities of most of Eaton's customers. Nevertheless, it served as an object lesson in the creation of consistent period decorative schemes. Similar displays in stores in major fashion centres, such as Wanamaker's House Palatial in New York, made period styles markers of refined taste for all classes through their association with elite decorating practices.

In September 1913 Eaton's celebrated the store's fall opening with another spectacle: an historical pageant of fashion in which live models paraded the styles of the past. To complement this show of fashion through the ages, Eaton's created a series of domestic tableaux illustrating different periods in the history of furniture. An appropriately dressed female staff member inhabited each setting, thus animating the vignettes and emphasizing the connection between clothes and furnishings. This temporary display technique was so successful it was repeated for the 1914 spring opening.



*Figure 3.2*  
*'Gothic' room display shown at Eaton's Spring Housefurnishings Opening, April 1914. Photo #x559, F229-308-0-2032, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. This is an invented period style, in which ornamental details associated with architecture have been applied to furniture forms that would not have existed in medieval Europe.*

In addition to the 1913 tableaux, J.H.B. Webster, described as an “Eaton house furnishing expert” gave a series of public lectures on various aspects of interior decoration. Advertising copy stressed the educational value of these promotional activities:

Not only will the series of lectures tracing the History of Furnishings from the most remote ages and delightfully illustrated by lantern slides and by what decorators' parlance are known as “layouts” prove most interesting, but, assembled solely and entirely for educational purposes (for not a single price tag will be found on the articles, though, of course, after the Exposition is over, they may be purchased), is such a collection of period furniture with appropriate furnishings to which a realistic touch is lent by women in the sumptuous gowns of the various periods, moving about the rooms with languid grace or looking (one imagines) from their respective stations with a sort of mild wonder upon the

vagaries of the moderns.<sup>27</sup>

Although the sumptuous gowns, languid grace, and mild wonder of the time-traveling models connected period furnishings with a distant past, the *Globe* reported that Eaton's exposition taught "moderns" useful lessons giving them "the opportunity to satisfy the craving for a house beautiful and artistic, at a cost within reach of the slenderest purse."<sup>28</sup> This was a very different message from the exclusivity conveyed by the model bungalow. Through Webster's lectures, the meaning of the displays was re-framed. They were not strictly accurate evocations of the past, but instead possibilities that could be realized in the present through the purchase of factory-made furniture that referenced tried and true historical styles.

Eaton's 1913 use of history as a marketing device can be related to cultural currents in the world outside the store.<sup>29</sup> Pageants and tableaux re-enacting episodes from the past were characteristic forms of public historical representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>30</sup> They both reflected and constructed popular memory, providing a romanticized narrative that glossed over the tensions and complexities of history in order to produce a sense of shared traditions. The period room itself also has its roots in the cultural practice that Eric Hobsbawm and others have labeled "the invention of tradition." In her article, "Inherited from the Past: The American Period Room,"

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<sup>27</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 1, 1913, 14. The 1914 spring opening included a lecture series by Frank Alvah Parsons that included talks on period styles. See T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 11, 1914, 28.

<sup>28</sup> "Art of Home-Making Explained by Expert," *Toronto Globe*, 9 October, 1913; 9.

<sup>29</sup> H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> See David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Ronald Rudin, *Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878-1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); and Deborah Sugg Ryan, "'Pageantitis': Visualizing Frank Lascelles 1907 Oxford historical pageant, visual spectacle and popular memory," *Visual Culture in Britain*, 8:2 (2007): 63-82.

Dianne Pilgrim traces the origins of this form of display to exhibits in nineteenth century European museums that sought to preserve and communicate national traditions in the face of the dramatic changes in patterns of everyday life caused by industrialization and urbanization.<sup>31</sup> In the North American context, the so-called New England kitchen shown at the 1876 United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia has been linked to the growth of interest in Colonial decorative arts in the years that followed.<sup>32</sup> Often these recreations of historic environments were less than accurate, but they were nevertheless effective in shaping popular ideas about every day life in the past. As Neil Harris points out, there was arguably a dynamic relationship between evolving forms of period rooms displayed by exhibitions, department stores and museums.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century department stores were refashioning these evocative strategies of presentation to sell goods.

Writing in the late 1970s, Pilgrim was confronting the fact that these early museum period rooms were artifacts conjured up by museum practices that had their own history. Eaton's successive period installations were equally embedded in specific times and places. In the case of the 1913 displays, the store's decorators worked with manufacturers' versions of period furniture and furnishings to create ensembles that were then labeled 'Gothic,' 'Flemish,' 'Elizabethan,' etc. The displays that appeared at Eaton's in fall 1913 and again in spring 1914 were rudimentary room settings, not

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<sup>31</sup> Dianne H. Pilgrim, "Inherited from the Past: The American Period Room," *The American Art Journal* 10:1 (May, 1978): 4-23.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Filler, "Rooms without People: Notes on the Development of the Model Room," *Design Quarterly* 109 (1979): 6.

<sup>33</sup> Neil Harris, "Period Rooms and the American Art Museum," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46:2/3 (2012): 117-137.

meticulous reconstructions of historic spaces.<sup>34</sup> Apparently Toronto viewers did not question the authenticity of these representations, perhaps because the stylistic canon was still in the process of being defined.<sup>35</sup> Creating an atmosphere that conjured up a sense of connection to European cultural roots was enough.

Following World War I, however, the aura of the real thing would become more important to the establishment of the store's cultural authority. Thanks to the expanding literature on interior decoration in general, and period styles in particular, consumers were becoming more knowledgeable. Trade journals warned readers that they had to keep pace with their customers:

It is notable that in New York manufacturers have begun to utilize the collections in the Metropolitan Museum of Art by lectures and exhibitions for the benefit of their employees. Our own manufacturers would find it profitable to use in the same way museums and art galleries both in Toronto and elsewhere.<sup>36</sup>

As we have seen, Eaton's was referencing the Metropolitan Museum's collections as an inspiration even before the war. The store now heeded the call for a closer relationship with local cultural authorities by embarking on a pedagogical project in cooperation with Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM).

#### *The T. Eaton Collection of European Furniture at the Royal Ontario Museum*

In 1919 Eaton's agreed to donate \$50,000 in installments of \$10,000 a year to the ROM for the purpose of assembling a representative collection of European period furniture.

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<sup>34</sup> In her article, Pilgrim makes a distinction between settings and fully developed period rooms where the furniture is placed within an authentic interior structure. Pilgrim, op. cit., 13. It could be argued that the Eaton's displays were inferior to sets produced for first class theatrical impresarios like New York's David Belasco, who insisted on using authentic antiques in his productions.

<sup>35</sup> For the example of Georgian period designs, see Elizabeth McKellar, "Representing the Georgian: Constructing Interiors in Early Twentieth-Century Publications, 1890-1930," *Journal of Design History* 20:4 (December 2007): 325-44.

<sup>36</sup> "Improvements in Manufactures," *Toronto Globe*, December 13, 1918, 4.

The agreement drawn up by the company makes clear the benefits that Eaton's expected to gain from this act of corporate philanthropy.<sup>37</sup> In addition to such usual forms of donor recognition as the attachment of the company name to the collection in catalogues and object labels, Eaton's demanded the right to approve any reproduction of the Museum's acquisitions for the first year after their arrival at the ROM.<sup>38</sup> A further condition "That we shall have the power at any time to withdraw any object or part of the collection for the purposes of the Company" demonstrates a level of donor control that any self-respecting twenty-first century public museum would refuse to contemplate.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Eaton's was to have access to the collection at any time as a tool for employee training.

The fact that the ROM's Board of Trustees and Charles Trick Currelly, the curator in charge of the Art and Archaeology collections, willingly agreed to the strings tied to the Eaton gift was not simply due to a need for acquisitions funding at any price. Eaton's desire to use the collection as a resource for its house furnishings business was in keeping with the economic rationale that underlay the very creation of the ROM. A short review of the history of the modern decorative arts museum movement as it played out in nineteenth and early twentieth century England and North America will serve to place Eaton's letter of agreement in context.

As Lovat Dickson has argued, the arts and archeology component of the ROM originated as a colonial offshoot of one of the jewels in Britain's imperial crown: the

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<sup>37</sup> Minutes dated 4 March 1920. Board of Trustees, Minute Book Vol. 1, RG1A, Royal Ontario Museum Archives.

<sup>38</sup> This clause was presumably designed to prevent Eaton's competitors from copying the furniture for their customers.

<sup>39</sup> Minutes dated 4 March 1920. Board of Trustees, Minute Book Vol. 1, RG1A, Royal Ontario Museum Archives. The company also agreed to return the objects to the museum as soon as they were no longer needed.

South Kensington Museum in London (now the Victoria and Albert Museum).<sup>40</sup> Ironically, this museum was created in response to anxieties generated by an event designed to celebrate British industrial achievement: the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition. While the glass and iron structure that housed the displays represented a triumph of functionalist form that continues to resonate with historians of modern design, critics considered the British-made consumer goods on view aesthetically inferior to those produced by other manufacturing nations. This was particularly true of the French contributions to the exhibition.<sup>41</sup> Contemporary commentators attributed the superiority of the French-made furniture and furnishings to a tradition of government patronage and promotion of the arts and crafts that, by the nineteenth century, took the form of frequent trade exhibitions.<sup>42</sup> If Great Britain were to maintain its dominant industrial position, manufacturers could not simply rely on the price advantages created by innovative mass production technologies. They would have to start paying attention to quality as well as quantity.

How to respond to this national aesthetic crisis? How could British producers and consumers learn the rules of taste? Earlier attempts to train a class of artisan-designers had been less than successful.<sup>43</sup> In the wake of the revelations of the 1851 Exhibition, extensive reforms were deemed necessary to the existing system of design training. The

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<sup>40</sup> Lovat Dickson, *The Museum Makers: The Story of the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1986), 103.

<sup>41</sup> Lara Kriegel, *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 130.

<sup>42</sup> Kriegel, *Grand Designs*, 106-112. For a detailed account of the French system, see Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 110-40, 225-54, 351-76. Auslander suggests that the “culture of production” responsible for French artisanal achievement during the *ancien regime* was seriously eroded in the decades after the French revolution; nevertheless the widely-held perception that this continental trading rival excelled in matters of taste strongly influenced British policy makers.

<sup>43</sup>Kriegel, *Grand Designs*, 19-51.

Commissioners of the 1851 Exhibition decided to invest a major portion of the profits from the event in the establishment of a Department of Practical Art. The new institution was placed under the direction of one of their number, the dynamic and opinionated Henry Cole.

Cole had started his career in the British civil service at the age of fifteen, working first for the Public Record Office and later for the Postal Service.<sup>44</sup> While he made significant contributions to the work of both departments, his professional duties did not exhaust his abundant energy. He found time to pursue an interest in industrial design and, under the pseudonym Felix Summerly, created a number of designs for household objects, some of which were put into production. This avocation led to his involvement with the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers, and Commerce, his selection as one of the Commissioners of the 1851 Exhibition, and ultimately the directorship of what would become one of the world's greatest decorative art museums: the Museum of Ornamental Art, later known as the South Kensington Museum, and still later as the Victoria and Albert.

In Coles' view, good design could be reduced to a series of axioms and thus taste could be learned: it was not innate, nor was it the exclusive property of upper class connoisseurs. The best method of learning was through exposure to objects embodying aesthetic excellence, an experience that was not widely available to the public in mid nineteenth-century Britain. The creation of a decorative arts museum was thus central to Cole's plans for a national education in taste. The artistic training programs associated with the Department of Practical Art would reach an important, but limited constituency.

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<sup>44</sup> For further details of Cole's career, see Elizabeth Bonython and Anthony Burton, *The Great Exhibitor: The Life and Work of Henry Cole* (London: V&A Publications, 2003).

A museum, however, had the potential to appeal to a much broader audience whose encounter with beautiful things would subsequently guide their choices as makers and buyers of household goods. In case the specimens illustrating good taste were insufficiently instructive, Cole installed a gallery of items representing bad taste to make his rules absolutely clear.<sup>45</sup>

In 1857 the museum moved to its present site in the London residential suburb of South Kensington. Cole remained as director until 1873. His active acquisitions policies meant that the collections expanded significantly from the original core of objects purchased from the 1851 Exhibition. Artifacts illustrating the historical development of design in various areas of manufacture were organized according to their basic materials: wood, metals, ceramics, textiles, etc. The museum's decision to hold visiting hours in the evening made the collections accessible to workers in addition to the presumably more leisured daytime audience.<sup>46</sup>

The utilitarian approach that informed the initial creation of the South Kensington collections was in stark contrast to the exclusive spirit of connoisseurship that guided such institutions as the British Museum and the National Gallery.<sup>47</sup> This vision of the art museum as a mechanism for popular education in taste had a definite pragmatic appeal, however, for those of Cole's contemporaries seeking to extend cultural literacy in an age of mass democracy and mass production. The influence of the South Kensington model

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<sup>45</sup> Understandably, this component of the Museum of Ornamental Art was extremely controversial. Manufacturers whose products were displayed as examples of bad taste naturally protested and Cole ultimately closed the exhibit. See Kriegel, *Grand Designs*, 145-58. Proponents of 'good' (i.e. modern) design used similar pedagogical techniques in the twentieth century. See Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 128-9.

<sup>46</sup> Kriegel, *Grand Designs*, 168-9.

<sup>47</sup> In later years connoisseurship would also come to govern the V&A's activities, leading to a focus on collecting at the expense of public education.

soon extended across the Atlantic, shaping the ideas of museum founders in the expanding cities of North America.<sup>48</sup>

This influence reached the residents of Toronto as early as the mid-1850s through the work of Egerton Ryerson, a leading figure in establishment of public education in Canada West (after 1867, the province of Ontario). Upon his appointment as superintendant of education in 1844, Ryerson embarked on a fact-finding trip through Europe, investigating educational systems in Great Britain and on the continent. He was drawn to the theories of object-based learning associated with Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi, an approach based on inductive reasoning that seemed suited to the practical realities of life in a colonial setting. His faith in the power of object lessons was further reinforced by subsequent European journeys, including a visit to the Crystal Palace Exhibition, which convinced him "...museums could be educational, civilizing, moral tools that might also set examples for improved manufacture and help to build national identity."<sup>49</sup> The museum he established at the Toronto Normal School, a teacher-training institution, contained natural history specimens and pedagogical tools such as maps and models, but it also included copies of masterworks of European art. Torontonians unable to afford a European tour could thus still learn the lessons of good taste inherent in reproductions of paintings and sculptures created by great artists. While the connection between Ryerson's reproductions of fine art and the health of Ontario's nascent manufacturing sector may seem tenuous in comparison with Cole's well-developed program for stimulating achievement in design, it nevertheless marked the beginning of

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<sup>48</sup> Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson, eds. *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

<sup>49</sup> J. Lynne Teather, *The Royal Ontario Museum: A Prehistory, 1830-1914* (Toronto: Canada University Press, 2005), 76.

efforts to incorporate an awareness of the importance of aesthetics into the Ontario public school curriculum.

As museologist Lynn Teather has described, Ryerson's early efforts to establish a public museum embracing art and natural history did not result in a permanent institution.<sup>50</sup> In the early twentieth century, however one of Toronto's most effective cultural promoters took up the cause: Byron Edmund Walker. Walker's formal education had ended in 1860 at the age of twelve; shortly thereafter he began working as a bank clerk. In common with many of his contemporaries, however, he proved to be a life-long learner with interests that ranged from paleontology to Far Eastern art. These extra-curricular pursuits, while absorbing, did not distract him from achieving eminence in his profession and by 1907 he had risen to the position of president of the Canadian Bank of Commerce. Walker's prominence in Toronto financial circles, together with his known intellectual bent, led Ontario's new Conservative premier, James Whitney, to appoint him to the 1905-6 Royal Commission charged with reforming the University of Toronto. Walker may well have been the moving spirit behind the Commission's recommendation that a purpose-built museum was needed to house the important collections assembled over the years by various faculties within the university. The bulk of these collections were in the area of natural history, but they also included a diverse assemblage of man-made objects that had recently been receiving significant additions thanks to the archaeological work of a U of T graduate, Charles Trick Currelly.

Walker first became acquainted with Currelly through his son, Edmund Jr., who had been a schoolmate at Toronto's Harbord Collegiate Institute. Currelly's gift for making useful contacts was thus evident from his early teens. Later, as an undergraduate,

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<sup>50</sup>Teather, *The Royal Ontario Museum*, 86.

he became a protégé of Nathaniel Burwash, the Chancellor of Victoria College, a Methodist institution within the University of Toronto, and of James Mavor, an eminent professor of political economy who also served on the 1905-6 Royal Commission dealing with the university. Together Mavor, Burwash, and Walker helped Currelly to construct his career as a museum man.

Each of these three patrons made different contributions to Currelly's professional development. Mavor, who had emigrated from Scotland to Canada in 1892, was a proponent of the British arts and crafts movement, a loose coalition of artists and reformers that sought to combat a host of social and aesthetic ills by revitalizing artisanal craft production. Mavor's theories about the value of skilled labour resonated with Currelly, who had been interested in craft processes since his childhood in a small Ontario agricultural community:

During this period of my life I spent much of my free time watching men at work, until I knew a good deal about the different trades that were practised in the village: blacksmithing, wood-working, stone cutting and stone polishing. Later I had to work with archaeologists who knew nothing about these basic kinds of work, and then found what a great advantage I had in the study of early craftsmanship, as the village trades were much the same trades that one met in examining ancient communities.<sup>51</sup>

Possibly as a result of Mavor's influence he abandoned a half-hearted attempt to train as a Methodist clergyman in order to travel to England, where he planned to make a living as a woodcarver.<sup>52</sup> The fact that Mavor gave him a letter of introduction to the exiled Russian anarchist, Prince Peter Kropotkin, makes it likely that Currelly framed this somewhat quixotic plan in terms of the radical discourse of socially meaningful craft production that informed the arts and crafts movement.

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<sup>51</sup> Charles Trick Currelly, *I Brought the Ages Home* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956), 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

In the event Currelly did not become a woodcarver. Instead, an unexpected encounter with the archaeologist, Flinders Petrie, led to his being hired as a draftsman by the Egyptian Exploration Fund. This turn in his career path may have helped redeem him in the eyes of Nathaniel Burwash, who had encouraged Currelly to become a Methodist missionary and who was probably disappointed by his decision to give up his theological studies. Fortuitously encountering Currelly in London, Burwash saw his involvement with Petrie's Egyptian archaeological work as a means of acquiring relics of the holy land for Toronto.<sup>53</sup> He volunteered to mobilize financial support for a museum to house biblical artifacts, to be based at Victoria College. Currelly's career as a collector for the great and good of Toronto had been launched.

It was Walker the businessman and financier, however, rather than Mavor the academic or Burwash the theologian, who became Currelly's most important Toronto supporter. The two men shared a passion for collecting and Currelly was able to convince Walker that predatory American museums had not yet succeeded in scooping up all of the worthwhile artifacts of Old World culture. Walker created a small coterie of likeminded wealthy Torontonians willing to help finance Currelly's purchases of art and archaeological materials for a prospective museum and arranged for him to receive official salaried status and yet more funds as a collector for the university.<sup>54</sup> Shipments of Currelly's acquisitions began to arrive, reinforcing the need for a museum building to house them. A timely exhibition of Egyptian archaeological material in 1909 helped to make the case for a permanent display space to Ontario's politicians.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>54</sup> John M. Mackenzie, *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), 48-49.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 50.

In making their pitch to the Ontario government, Walker and his supporters framed the future museum as a source of industrial strength rather than as an institution dedicated to humanistic uplift. This was congruent with shifting priorities shaping changes in the province's educational policy. Lisa Panayotidis has detailed the development of manual arts training in the province's schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, noting the ways in which the tenets of the arts and crafts movement were reformulated by policy makers to serve the interests of a developing economy.<sup>56</sup> Of the multiple discourses surrounding programs for design reform in Great Britain, those that associated aesthetic excellence with enhanced manufacturing competitiveness were the most persuasive in the eyes of Ontario's political masters. Ten years after the museum opened in 1914, this pragmatic view of its social contribution continued to prevail:

What good is a museum, anyway? Back of the collection of these valuables from past civilizations all over the world is this idea: We are becoming a manufacturing country in many fields, but our goods of the finer sort will only sell, even to our own people, if they are made attractive. Manufacturers send their designers here to learn from the great craftsmen of the past; workers visit the Museum and argue over the best method of getting a given result. Both employers and employees thus raise their enthusiasm and increase their knowledge. The crafts of the country are the gainers, and the contentment and skill of the workers themselves make for a settled and prosperous country.<sup>57</sup>

The construction of the Royal Ontario Museum on the former cricket grounds at the corner of Bloor Street and Avenue Road marked the end of at least the first phase of Walker's efforts to sell the museum to Ontarians as an engine of economic growth. Not content to stand still, Walker and Currelly continued to push for the expansion of the art and archeology collections on the grounds of their usefulness to Canadian business. This,

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<sup>56</sup> E. Lisa Panayotidis, "The Bureaucratization of Creativity: The British Arts and Crafts Movement and its impact on Ontario education, 1880-1940" (PhD diss., OISE, University of Toronto, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> *Toronto Globe*, July 11, 1924, 4.

rather than the social prestige associated with giving to a cultural institution, formed the basis of their appeal to Sir John Eaton. Perhaps surprisingly, given the growing wealth and prominence of the Eaton family in turn of the century Toronto, and the source of that wealth in the marketing of consumer goods, the department store's owners had not previously been involved in funding Currelly's collecting activities. True, Currelly had once proposed approaching Timothy Eaton's wife, Margaret, for a donation towards the purchase of Egyptian antiquities, but this suggestion does not seem to have borne fruit.<sup>58</sup> By 1919, however, the positions of both the prospective donor and the recipient had changed significantly. For one thing, the museum was no longer a hazy prospect but a physical fact, and any gifts to the collections could readily be put on public display. For another, after Timothy Eaton's death in 1907 and the shift to the leadership of Sir John Eaton, the company had placed greater emphasis on its home furnishings business. Sir John had also raised the family's philanthropic profile, giving generously to such civic causes as the new Toronto General Hospital.

In other ways the timing was ripe for Currelly. The economic disruptions of World War I had undermined the security of the wealthy elites who had assembled huge stores of cultural property in earlier centuries. Even before the war Currelly had begun to collect a few original examples of historical furniture and furnishings, including an Elizabethan interior that became the basis of the first period room installed at the ROM in 1914. Both Currelly and Sir John were well aware that affluent Torontonians shared the prevailing taste for period furniture. Currelly persuaded Sir John that funding a representative collection of European period furniture would be a worthwhile investment.

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<sup>58</sup>Letter sent from Cairo sometime in 1908 from C.T. Currelly to James Mavor. James Mavor fonds, Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, University of Toronto.

One of the factors that convinced Sir John to back the museum's project appears to have been Currelly's connections to the South Kensington Museum. In a 1935 talk on "The Training of a Museum Director" Currelly declared, "Another thing most vital to the museum director is the friendship of men who have had the opportunity to specialize. I have nearly always found them most generous with their knowledge, and if the director can submit an object to a man who has made a life-long study of a somewhat minute branch of the subject, for the moment it is as good as if the director had that knowledge."<sup>59</sup> He acted on this principle throughout his life, with considerable success. Archival documents held by the ROM indicate that his relationship with H. Clifford Smith, the curator of woodwork at South Kensington, dated back to at least 1911, at which time Smith was buying antique furniture for Currelly's as yet unbuilt museum.<sup>60</sup> Writing to South Kensington's director, Sir Cecil Smith in October 1919, Currelly underlined the importance of Clifford Smith's continued assistance in purchasing material for the Eaton collection:

I am glad to say that Clifford Smith has started to work and sent us over a bunch of photographs of fine pieces of furniture, the bulk of which we have accepted by cable. A very wealthy and princely-generous man [presumably Sir John] is willing to give us a collection of furniture, and was very impressed that you were willing to purchase for us. It gave him a great sense of security; and I am therefore very thankful to you for making the start, and shall be grateful if you will keep Clifford Smith up to as high a point of enthusiasm as possible.<sup>61</sup>

It is no wonder that Sir John welcomed the sense of security provided by South Kensington's curatorial expertise. Buying antique furniture in the early twentieth century

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<sup>59</sup> C.T. Currelly, "The Training of a Museum Director" (typescript of a paper given at the meeting of the American Association of Museums, Washington, May 24, 1935). Currelly Papers, SC3, Box 2, Royal Ontario Museum Archives.

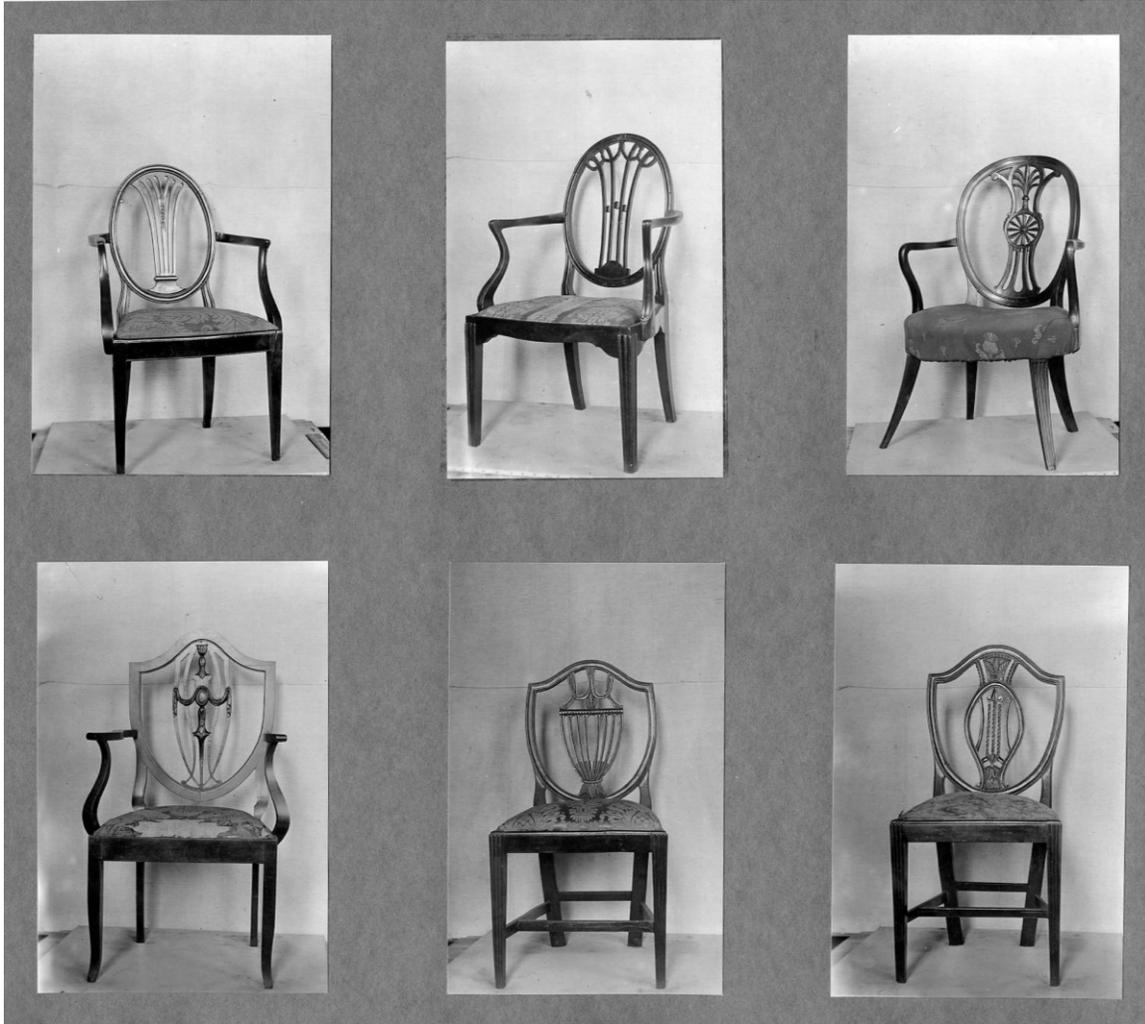
<sup>60</sup> Correspondence dated March 15, April 20 and September 24, 1911 from H. Clifford Smith to C.T. Currelly. RG12.3, Royal Ontario Museum Archives.

<sup>61</sup> Letter dated October 8, 1919 from C.T. Currelly to Sir Cecil Smith. File: Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum 1914-1947, Institutional Archives, Victoria and Albert Museum.

could be something of a gamble, as demonstrated by a notorious British court case in 1923. Two noted authorities, Percy MacQuoid and Herbert Cescinski, gave radically different evidence about the authenticity of antique furniture sold to wealthy businessman Adolph Shrager by Basil Dighton, a prominent London furniture dealer. Shrager lost the trial and a subsequent appeal, but in the process the potential vulnerability of the unwary buyer was exposed. Widespread reporting of the trial made public the difficulty of establishing the authenticity of furniture sold as genuine antiques in a time when a body of knowledge about the subject was just being developed. At the same time, however, South Kensington's authority in the field was re-affirmed. According to historian Abigail Harrison Moore, "The museum was cited throughout the trial as an indicator of quality, of the 'genuine' rather than the 'spurious' ...."<sup>62</sup> This reputation was already well established in 1919 when work on assembling the Eaton collection began.

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<sup>62</sup> Abigail Harrison Moore, *Fraud, Fakery and False Business: Rethinking the Shrager v. Dighton 'Old Furniture Case'* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 136.



*Figure 3.3*  
*Group of 18<sup>th</sup> century chairs donated to the ROM by Eaton's. F229-308-0-1208, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Under the terms of the donation, Eaton's craftsmen would have been permitted to make reproductions of these chairs.*

In his communications with Clifford Smith, Currelly was quite open about the economic imperatives underlying the creation of the collection: “Regarding your question as to the types we wish, the answer is: distinctly fine types that may be useable in the modern furniture industry, 75%; types that will round out the history of furniture, 25%” (Fig. 3.3).<sup>63</sup> Although the agreement with Eaton’s specified that the ROM would be

<sup>63</sup> Letter dated October 8, 1919 from C.T. Currelly to H. Clifford Smith. File: Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum 1914-1947, Part I, Institutional Archives, Victoria and Albert Museum.

responsible for buying decisions, it seems that Currelly believed, far from having a free hand, Smith's selections would be expected to meet the store's expectations:

I am sure our backers will pay a good price for good articles, and as there are millions behind [them?], don't stick at sending over photographs of fine things. At the same time, they are not anxious to pay anything like fancy prices; and I have associated with me at this end, one of the shrewdest furniture dealers in the world, who serves as the adviser of our patron as to whether he will give us the piece or not.<sup>64</sup>

Thanks to Sir John's premature death in 1922, however, it is possible that the ROM's purchases did not receive as much scrutiny as expected. There is no evidence that Eaton's managers intervened in any of the purchases made by the museum although, as will be discussed below, on occasion the store did make use of the collection for commercial purposes during the 1920s.

The Toronto papers provided extensive coverage of Sir John's final illness and death, indicating his importance as a leader in business and civic affairs. The many articles about his contributions to Canadian life included an account of his donation to the ROM in the *Globe*.<sup>65</sup> Tribute was paid to Sir John for his far-sighted decision to assemble a collection of antique furniture that would enable Canadian manufacturers to learn directly from the craftsmanship of the past. Previously the Canadian industry had been at a distinct disadvantage because competitors in Europe and the United States had far greater access to authentic historical models. Developments in popular taste had made such collections essential:

The basic reason for the almost fundamental necessity of antique furniture displays is that there is very little that is really new in furniture. There were attempts made in the early days of the Victorian era to create new designs, but the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. "One of the shrewdest furniture dealers in the world" may have been E. Bussell, head of Eaton's furniture department. See "Sir John's Gift to Museum Has Placed Canada in Van of Furniture Manufacture," *Toronto Globe*, March 31, 1922, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

modern trend is moulding itself after the fashions and notions of hundreds of years ago, and is endeavoring to bring [them] up to date in point of dimensions the furniture of those early days.<sup>66</sup>

While Eaton's catered to the taste for period furniture long before Sir John began funding the ROM collection, his donation may have been motivated by the perception that the 'modern' trend in high-end furnishing was moving towards a greater interest in stylistic accuracy on the part of buyers. He also shared Currelly's interest in encouraging Canadian manufacturers to produce furniture of higher quality, a goal associated with improved designs based on close study of acknowledged masterpieces from the past.<sup>67</sup> The growing popular knowledge about period styles, created in part by Eaton's own efforts at educating consumers, had created a class of discerning – and often well-to-do – buyers: a market the store wanted to cultivate.

#### *Selling Antiques and Reproductions at Eaton's, 1923-1945*

In April 1923, a year after Sir John's death, Eaton's announced the opening of the Fifth Floor Gallery of Antiques and Reproductions in the House Furnishings building. The creation of this gallery marked a further step in Eaton's campaign to attract the custom of Toronto's wealthier homeowners. Trading in antiques implied that store staff possessed the expertise required to serve collectors and connoisseurs of rare objects. Eaton's understanding of the marketing advantages associated with authenticity and uniqueness is evident in the advertising copy dating from 1926 promoting "recent arrivals in the Gallery of Antiques and Reproductions."

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<sup>66</sup> *Toronto Globe*, March 31, 1922, 7. The article specifically mentions the ways in which collections held in New York and Grand Rapids, Michigan, benefitted U.S. furniture manufacturers.

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 6 for a discussion of Eaton's promotion of made-in-Canada goods.

They can be reproduced line for line, tone for tone, even to the very dints that age wears in them, but when all is said and done, there is something about the “genuine antique” that is inimitable. It is this rareless [sic] quality which the collector senses and values. It is this which manages to convey something of the grace and romance of other days to the room which possesses even a few antique chairs or tables.<sup>68</sup>

The antique is here presented as a singular object but also as something that can be successfully integrated into a decorative scheme largely made up of more mundane furnishings. Its aura is not diminished by its surroundings; instead it lends cachet, ‘the grace and romance of other days,’ to its environment. Antiques are endowed with a power that the most perfect reproduction can never possess.

A few scholars have explored the cultural implications of the rapid development of the antiques market in Europe and North America in the early twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> Elites had collected historic decorative arts since the Renaissance but middle class interest in these goods was a much more recent phenomenon. Stefan Muthesius has linked the shift to the arts and crafts movement, which celebrated the pride in workmanship associated with pre-industrial labour.<sup>70</sup> Antique objects were well made and therefore intrinsically more valuable than the shoddy products of modern manufacturing. In her study, *The Cosmopolitan Interior*, Judith Neiswander argues that in England the trend signified a withdrawal from the optimism associated with the mid-century Victorian liberal consensus that had been materialized in eclectic decorative

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<sup>68</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 13, 1926, 18.

<sup>69</sup> In addition to Muthesius, “Why do we buy old furniture?”: 231-54, see Robert Crocker, “The Haunted Interior: Memory, Nostalgia and Identity in the Interwar Interior,” in Dolly Daou, D.J. Huppertz and Dinh Quoc Phuong, *Unbounded* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 103-28. The Universities of Leeds and Southampton have undertaken more extensive research on the British antiques trade between 1900-2000 as the result of a joint project. See “Antique Dealers: the British Antiques Trade in the 20th Century, a cultural geography” accessed April 28, 2019 <http://www.antiquedealers.leeds.ac.uk/>

<sup>70</sup> Muthesius, “Why do we buy old furniture?”: 235-8.

effects.<sup>71</sup> Instead the English retreated to a nationalist, inward looking aesthetic that celebrated the glories of the past in the face of growing economic competition that threatened the country's long-held industrial ascendancy. Deborah Cohen theorizes "For those [members of the British middle class] who embraced them, antiques offered a form of distinction, cultural capital all the more precious for the fact that it retained exclusivity in an increasingly homogeneous world."<sup>72</sup>

All of these interpretations focus on the situation in Great Britain. In North America consumers may have had similar motivations, but with a somewhat different inflection. In the United States the collecting enthusiasm of the very wealthy came very close to a form of looting, although at least these robber barons paid for the precious things they took. During the years around the first world war, however, there was a nationalist/nativist move towards claiming a heritage of American decorative arts, related to but distinct from European and especially English forms.<sup>73</sup> The 1925 creation of the American wing at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its series of period rooms celebrating the decorative arts from colonial times until the early republic, confirmed the value of this design tradition in the public mind.<sup>74</sup>

The Toronto case was different again. Well into the twentieth century Toronto was a predominantly British city, proud of its connections to the empire. Possessing objects representing the best of a European, and especially British, cultural heritage was seen as an escape from colonialism, not a surrender to it. Many English Canadians saw Great Britain's power and prestige as the dominion's best defense against absorption by

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<sup>71</sup> Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior*, 147-78.

<sup>72</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 155.

<sup>73</sup> May, "Progressivism and the Colonial Revival."

<sup>74</sup> Harris, "Period Rooms and the American Art Museum."

the United States in both practical and cultural terms. By furnishing their houses with antiques and well-made period reproductions of British period designs, Torontonians signaled their city's claims to the civilized domesticity associated with the mother country.

That being said, Eaton's venture into the high-end antique market had mixed results. The number of Torontonians willing to pay the higher prices charged for imported furniture, whatever its age, was limited. The store's advertising and sales staff did their best to develop the market by emphasizing the superior qualities of individual pieces. Occasionally stories about the provenance of an item gave it an added luster, as in the case of a chair that was linked to the ancestral home of John Graves Simcoe.<sup>75</sup> At other times furniture became mute witnesses to history: "Could it but tell all that it has seen! —this carved oak chest with the arches, scale carving and claw feet that place it somewhere between 1600 and 1700."<sup>76</sup> In 1929 Eaton's became the only North American member of the British Antique Dealers' Association, an affiliation that presumably helped to reassure potential antique buyers. Yet the store's promotion of genuine antiques as definitive markers of distinction was implicitly contradicted by the fact they were shown in the same display spaces as handcrafted reproductions of high quality. Advertising that pointed out the difficulty of distinguishing the original from a skilled copy did not help: customers might well have been confused about whether there was any substantive difference, other than price, between the two (Fig. 3.4).

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<sup>75</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, June 15, 1929, 30.

<sup>76</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, May 20, 1929, 28.

## Antiques and Reproductions *Which Are Which?*



**J.** An excellent reproduction of a Queen Anne roundabout chair—in rich brown English walnut with carving, cane paneling, separate strikers and effective lacquer covered seat. \$79.00.

**P.** A fine table in beautifully marked English maple wood—a modernized version of a Queen Anne design with scroll feet, which bestow a certain elegance. A most decorative piece of furniture. \$213.00.

**N.** One of a set of Queen Anne mahogany chairs, all in a fine state of preservation. Their lines are beautifully simple and very true to type with their own backs, cabriole legs and separate strikers. Each, \$20.50.

**J.** Splendid reproduction of one of the black lacquer corner cupboards that came into vogue with the china-collecting craze of Queen Anne's reign. The lacquer is beautiful. See also the reproduction, \$250.00. The gross for an set top, \$18.50.

**K.** An antique mahogany chair with all the grace of the simple deep back and absence of ornament—domestic covered, \$50.00.

**L.** Portrait of a general of Marlborough's day, an interesting old oil painting. \$750.00.

**M.** A delightful thing—an antique mahogany chest of drawers and elaborate marquetry. The serpentine front adds the charm of graceful line to its well-tooled work. \$285.00.

**A**n abiding charm lurks in Queen Anne furniture whether it be a "genuine antique" or a good reproduction. All the quaintness of a picturesque age lies in the curves of its cabriole legs and serpentine lines; all the decorative value of lacquer and marquetry, of colorful needlework and richly grained English walnut in its choice of material and embellishments. It is dignified furniture. Better still, it is comfortable and eminently suited to modern needs. The Gallery of Antiques and Reproductions presents it to you in an interesting display. The reproductions are chiefly of museum pieces made with the same skill that inspired the craftsmen who made the originals.

—Eaton's Furnishings Shop, Fifth Floor.

Figure 3.4

Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, November 17, 1925, 20. The ad copy suggests that reproductions are equivalent to antiques, thus contradicting other marketing efforts that stressed the value of the genuine article. Such mixed messages reflect the conflicting imperatives involved in trying to sell both types of goods.

During the 1920s Eaton's display of pieces from the ROM collection probably added to the slippage between antique and reproduction. The terms of the donation permitted the store to borrow items back from the museum whenever it wished, and such borrowings took place on a number of occasions while Eaton's sought to develop a reputation as a source of fine furniture. For example, in 1925 a series of period settings

containing a mix of furniture from the store and the museum appeared in Eaton's windows (Fig. 3.5). *Eaton's News Weekly* noted that in-house craftsmen could make reproductions of these museum pieces to order.<sup>77</sup>



*Figure 3.5*  
*Eaton's show window exhibiting a mix of the store's modern reproductions and antiques from the ROM collection in the period style associated with Charles II.*  
*F229-302-0-2066, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*

In effect, from 1923 on Eaton's and the ROM functioned as alternative sites for the display of period furniture. The close relationship between these two components of Toronto's exhibitionary complex is reflected in their use of similar didactic mechanisms. While C.T. Currelly and museum educator Ruth Home published articles on period styles

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<sup>77</sup> *Eaton's News Weekly*, October 3, 1925.

in *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, Eaton's advertising included shorthand guides to distinguishing features for the furniture buyer (Fig. 3.6). Both store and museum sponsored lectures on furniture history and both used period rooms to convey a sense of an entire decorative context to viewers. By the mid-1920s the ROM's displays included three period rooms showing the interior architecture and furnishings associated with the reigns of Elizabeth I, Queen Anne, and George II (the latter two rooms were part of the Eaton donation) (Fig. 3.7).<sup>78</sup> In 1925 Eaton's used a period room approach to display in the Fifth Floor Gallery at the House Furnishings building, but it was not until the move to College Street that the store installed a suite of rooms approximating museum display techniques.

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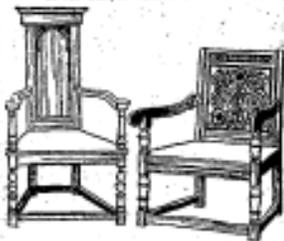
<sup>78</sup> "Visitors To Local Museum May Step Within Chamber In Which Elizabethans Sat," *Toronto Globe*, January 30, 1922, 7. The Elizabethan room was given to the ROM by an anonymous donor in 1911-12 and may be the earliest acquisition of an English room by a North American museum. John Harris, *Moving Rooms: The Trade in Architectural Salvage* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 165-6.

# Chairs and Their Development

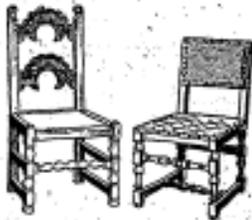
Illustrated by Fine Specimens in Our Gallery of Antiques and Reproductions



Circle Class Italian Sicilian chair, richly carved antique. \$200.00.



Jacobean oak chair of simple type modern reproduction, \$35.00.  
Carved Jacobean oak chair. Native fir. Tudor rose and baluster legs. \$49.00.



Derbyshire chair of oak large Jacobean—Homespun, ornate, good carving—modern reproduction. \$30.00.  
Cromwellian chair, oak, well-stuffed leather seat and back, reproduction, \$42.50.



Carolean oak chair, same pattern—excellent carving, ornate, spiral carving—reproduction, \$60.00.  
Carolean chair, upholstered oak velvet, richly carved with crested front and—reproduction—\$75.00.

REGARDED more in the light of throne than seats in which to relax—chairs were seen throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. The earliest examples of English chairs date from Henry VIII's reign, though that there were others: see my paper from Strutt's description of a well-to-do gentleman's house. He says the probabilities included "a piece of tapestry being the chief seat or bench at the upper end of the hall, three tables with forms and stools, inserted in the ground, and a hawk's perch. In the parlour, a table with forms, three joint stools, a plain cupboard, two twisted (turned) chairs, three little chairs for women, and four footstools, six tapestry cushions with arms embroidered in the middle, probably a striped Turkey carpet, and boxes with a blue silk in the hearth, and two backgammon tables."

## Tudor-Jacobean

In Elizabeth's long reign the country grew prosperous; chairs were more common and were found in the houses of the wealthy merchants. Bold-looking oak arm-chairs with spacious seats for forthright ladies, and padded backs that best escaped the ruffs, were the prevailing type. The backs were often richly carved, and were inlaid—an art introduced by Flemish joiners. The Tudor rose was a characteristic ornament, also numerous leaf scrolls and the rounded Renaissance arch. The flat front brace was a necessary feature in those days of dingy, uneven floors, ruffs, straw and usually dirt. The ornate Renaissance influence, though it was suited by the Puritanical severity of Cromwell's day, reappeared with redoubled richness in the time of Charles II.

## Carolean

From 1660—the fall of the Commonwealth—and Charles II. and his court

brought with them tastes, imbibed in their sojourns in Holland and France—among other things the soft case padded chairs of the Flemish, carved with scrolls and acanthus leaves, and out of compliment to the Merry Monarch, often also with crowns supported by cherubs. The latter Stuart (James II.) chairs—though still slender, case-backed and elaborated, show a leaning toward the Dutch simplicity which came in with William of Orange.

In Charles II.'s reign walnut superseded oak—chiefly because walnut was more easily wrought into turnings and spirals. Also the walnut trees planted in Elizabeth's day had now matured.

## Queen Anne

The high arched backs of earlier days now became lower. Arms were widened or disappeared for the accommodation of laced shirts. Legs assumed a new importance with cap and ball tracing. Great innovation there appeared in a cabriole (curved) leg of the Dutch. This accounts for the disappearance of the stretcher. Now in the new era of comfort and drastically all classes began to care their attention to style and better. Chairs were common in large houses, were seen even in the houses of the middle classes. Then new designers arose, the greatest of whom were Chippendale, Sheraton, Adams and Hepplewhite.

## Chippendale

The king of chair makers went through several phases before he arrived at "pure Chippendale." The Chinese feet and ribbed backs, the cupid's bow back, Gothic arch, straight Chinese and cabriole legs are all seen in his chairs. Adam and Sheraton both, with their light and dainty styles, show a result against the heaviness of Chippendale's chairs, and were influenced by the French. Hepplewhite, with his shield backs, arch and Prince of Wales feathers, has always a homely motif.

—HANS FURNITURE CO., 710th Floor.



Queen Anne velvet chair, rose back, beaded, cabriole legs, antique, \$85.00.  
William and Mary chair, velvet covered, high back, oval, antique, \$70.00.



Chippendale chair, mahogany, inlaid panel back, cabriole legs—reproduction—\$75.00.  
Chippendale chair, mahogany, Gothic, arched back, Chinese feet, straight legs—reproduction—\$75.00.



Adam chair, mahogany, with hand-painted decoration in color—antique—\$115.00.  
Sheraton chair, mahogany with beamed seat and neck—antique—\$100.00.



Hepplewhite chair with shield back, oval feet and Prince of Wales feathers—reproduction—\$75.00.

Figure 3.6  
Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, March 29, 1927, 18. The text notes design details symptomatic of particular styles and also provides some general historical information. Note that, with the exception of the Italian chair (top left), all the examples are British.



Figure 3.7  
Georgian paneled room, circa 1740, donated to the ROM by Eaton's.  
ROMA 428, F229-308-0-1208, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

*Canadian Homes and Gardens* published extensive descriptions of Eaton's newly opened College Street store in its December 1930 issue.<sup>79</sup> In a journalistic move that seems unbearably arch to a twenty first century reader, the tour of the building was narrated in the voice of the seventeenth-century English diarist, Samuel Pepys. An edited version of Pepys's diaries had been published in the 1920s, so his status as a commentator on the passing scene was well established in the minds of the magazine's audience. However self-consciously quaint, the choice of Pepys reflected the contradictions between the store and its contents. The building's art moderne shell

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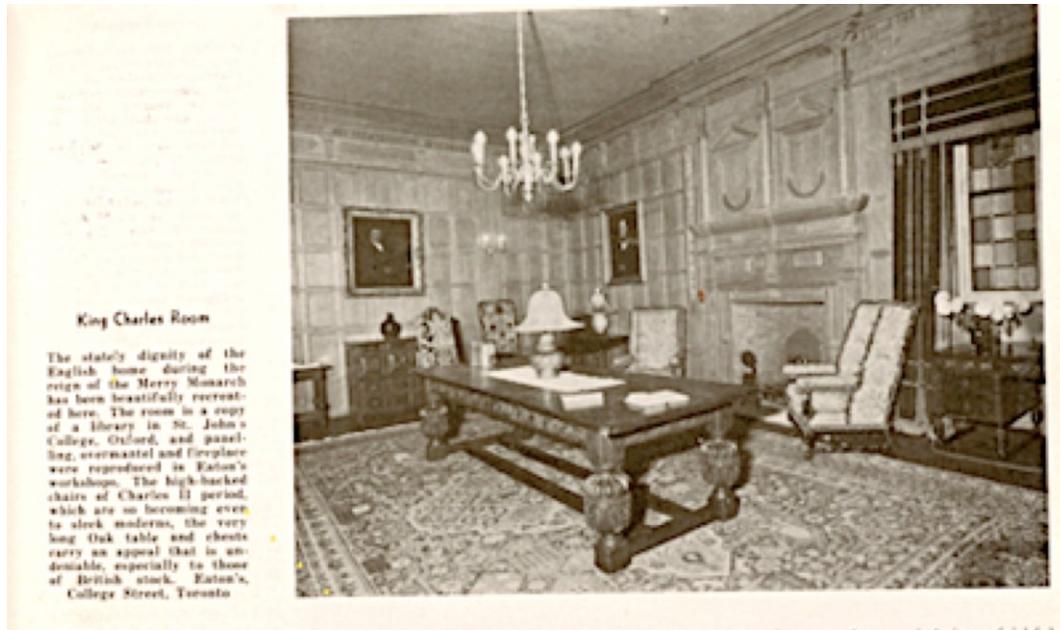
<sup>79</sup> Ellen E. Mackie, "And so to Eaton's – College Street," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* 7:12 (December 1930): 87.

enclosed goods in a hodgepodge of historical styles. Pepys, himself an anachronism in this context, is unfazed by the material anachronisms that beset him on all sides. He is interested in everything, old and new, but does confess that the seventeenth century room awakens a certain nostalgia:

We then to the fifth floor where I mightily glad of the opportunity of seeing King Charles' Library among the Period rooms all of which more anon. A high panelled Oak room and very handsome to look at in excellent harmony. A pretty cardboard sign did give out publickly [sic] that the fine panelling which doth well and truly copy the original to the life, hath been adroitly made in Eaton's own workshops. I confess I am vastly taken with a table there, which upon my soul if not antique, then Sir W. Pen and myself are mightily deceived. It being warped, cracked and knotted and mellowed with the gathered charm of age with melon bulb legs of the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century in Good Queen Bess's reign or thereabout. And indeed I do well mind on those grotesques and strap work, facades and pilasters of my boyhood days. A splendid sideboard there too, dated 1645, and handsome tapestries of antique design...all of which I did wonder at, deeply pondering on the manners and customs of all times.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Mackie: 88-9.



*Figure 3.8*  
*King Charles' Library, period room installed in Eaton's – College Street. Canadian Homes and Gardens 7:12 (December 1930: 89. The caption notes "The high-backed chairs of the Charles II period, which are so becoming even to sleek moderns, the very long Oak table and chests carry an appeal that is undeniable, especially to those of British stock."*

Pepys' wife, on the other hand, is drawn to the replica of Marie Antoinette's boudoir: "[a] chamber of much light hearted and winsome mien as must be the envy of many women of taste and quality."<sup>81</sup> In both cases, the modern reproduction's illusion of authenticity is praised. The preferences of husband and wife also nicely reflect the gender identities assigned to the different historical periods by early twentieth century commentators on the decorative arts.<sup>82</sup>

Torontonians following in the footsteps of the fictional Pepys would thus have seen a group of rooms that continued Eaton's practice of combining authentic objects and

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>82</sup> English Jacobean furniture was seen as masculine, appropriate for use in dining rooms and libraries. Eighteenth century French furniture, on the other hand, was viewed as a feminine style suitable for drawing rooms and bedrooms. See Jane Hamlet, "The Dining Room Should Be the Man's Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman's: Gender and Middle Class Domestic Space in England, 1850-1910," *Gender and History* 21:3 (November 2009): 580.

reproductions. Two rooms contained genuine paneling from T. Crowther and Sons, London dealers in architectural salvage, while another two were reproductions of rooms in the Victorian and Albert made for Eaton's by Tibbenham's, an English firm.<sup>83</sup> As mentioned in Pepys' account, the King Charles room was the work of Eaton's craftsmen, while the boudoir from the Petite Trianon was probably made in France. Photograph captions in *Canadian Homes and Gardens* suggest that the rooms were furnished at least in part with high-end reproductions of authentic period designs.<sup>84</sup> As a group these interiors illustrated the most popular period styles at the time: Jacobean, William and Mary, Queen Anne, Georgian and Louis XVI. In contrast to the experience of historic spaces offered at the ROM, shoppers touring the rooms understood that they could buy the trappings of the past and take them home. The interplay between the genuine article and the copy embodied in Eaton's display may well have been deliberate, as it underlined the store's ability to produce interiors and furnishings that were virtually indistinguishable from the originals. C.T. Currelly himself was ambivalent about the merits of genuine antiques when it came to home décor:

...I would like to say that I have comparatively little sympathy with the "old furniture" craze. We in Canada want to build up a great furniture industry, to have fine homes furnished with useful and comfortable pieces of furniture. I am afraid I have not been able to see any great virtue in an object because it is worm-eaten and a little bit broken. Originals are an absolute necessity in a museum, but I do not see that our homes will be one bit better if we possess original pieces of old furniture. I should not like to say either, that they will be worse; if people are rich enough and enjoy having old furniture, it is their own affair.<sup>85</sup>

Eaton's upper management anticipated that the rooms would lead to commissions for extensive interior decorating projects but their timing was disastrous. Thanks to the

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<sup>83</sup> For Crowther see John Harris, *Moving Rooms*, 117.

<sup>84</sup> Mackie, "And so to Eaton's – College Street."

<sup>85</sup> Charles Trick Currelly, "The Oak Period in English Furniture," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* 3:3, 20.

Depression even rich Torontonians were reluctant to embark on expensive renovations. If the market for quality period reproductions was flat, buyers of antiques virtually disappeared in the early 1930s. In 1931 Eaton's attempted to keep interest alive by regularly featuring the Fifth Floor Gallery in stand alone ads in the *Globe*, but by the end of 1932 the store's vice-president J.J. Vaughan had concluded "the Antiques business has run about to the end of its tether and...we should take every means possible to dispose of the pieces we have on hand."<sup>86</sup> Letters were sent out to select customers in early 1933, advising them of an unusual opportunity: "By this time you have met the words 'Lowered Prices' in connection with almost every type of merchandise. Yet there are rarities, works of art – antiques whose values increase as years go on, that are seldom found at lowered prices." For one week only, they would have a chance to buy "the piece on which you have set your heart" for 20 percent less.<sup>87</sup> It seems that even this sacrifice of prestige was not enough. In May 1933 J.J. Vaughan was urging that Eaton's antiques expert contact Toronto architects "with a view to placing some antique pieces where they will fit in with the general scheme of decorating..."<sup>88</sup> After ten years of investing heavily in the future of antiques the store was desperate to move inventory.

Better times in the late 1930s seem to have led to a reappraisal of the situation. In late 1937 J.J. Vaughan was open to the idea of new purchases "in order to have a representative collection, keeping in mind of course that there would be very little use in having extremely fine museum pieces that would not be suitable or possible to reproduce

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<sup>86</sup> Memo dated December 6, 1932 from J.J. Vaughan to O.D. Vaughan (manager of the House Furnishings division). File: Stock, Merchandise House Furnishings – Antiques, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>87</sup> Form letter to customers interested in antiques. File: Stock, Merchandise House Furnishings – Antiques, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>88</sup> Memo dated May 5, 1933 from J.J. Vaughan to O.D. Vaughan. File: Stock, Merchandise House Furnishings – Antiques, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

here.”<sup>89</sup> Implicit in the exchange between Vaughan and the head of house furnishings, O.D. Vaughan (J.J. Vaughan’s brother), is the understanding that Eaton’s was no longer in the business of selling antiques as such, but instead was using them only for display purposes as models that could be copied for interested customers. This change in direction was in keeping with J.J. Vaughan’s earlier perception that “When reproductions are being made so well and to sell at less than half the price of Antiques, the reproduction is gaining in favour and no doubt this will continue.”<sup>90</sup> This market for ‘genuine copies’ of period styles relied, however, on the continued exhibition of the real thing by the store.

World War II changed everything. The movement of the economy to a war footing meant that resources were directed away from consumer products, including furniture. This had the short-term effect of expanding the market for antique furniture, as alternatives were increasingly unavailable. In the longer term, Eaton’s Gallery of Antiques and Reproductions, and the associated period room displays, were stripped of much of their stock of both genuine antiques and high-class reproductions. In January of 1945 O.D. Vaughan received a memo from the House Furnishings Merchandise Office advising him that the situation was dire:

The Marie Antoinette Room had to be closed in the Fall of 1944 because suitable furniture was not available, and has remained closed since that time. The other historical rooms along the north wall on the Fifth Floor have been made presentable again for an institutional Furnished Rooms ad. for selling today, January 11<sup>th</sup>. While they are presentable, we believe that their furniture and furnishings are not in keeping with the backgrounds and room settings, and open criticism is reported by Mr. Russell by that part of our public which appreciates and understands period design.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Memo dated November 18, 1937 from O.D. Vaughan to J.J. Vaughan. File: Stock, Merchandise House Furnishings – Antiques, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>90</sup> Memo dated December 6 1932 to O.D. Vaughan from J.J. Vaughan. File: Stock, Merchandise House Furnishings – Antiques, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>91</sup> Memo dated January 11, 1945 from B.W. Smith, H.F. Merchandise Office to O.D. Vaughan. File: House Furnishings – Fine Furniture Gallery, F229-162-0-1185, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

The suite of period rooms had lost decorative coherence as a result of wartime scarcities, emptying them of their original purpose as demonstrations of expertise in historic interior design. Indeed they had become something of a liability, as the knowledgeable customers Eaton's sought to impress were well aware of the deficiencies of the displays.

These problems led to a debate about the future usefulness of the rooms as marketing devices. In his 1945 memo, B.W. Smith conceded the "fact that these period rooms have placed Eaton's – College Street in an unique position so far as stores are concerned in both Canada and the United States" but argued that this "may be discounted somewhat when it is remembered that the rooms have been installed for approximately fifteen years and their contribution to sales may not be expected to be great in the post-war period."<sup>92</sup> He noted that many of the store's sales and decorating staff favoured replacing them with more modern designs. While O.D. Vaughan conceded that the displays had not generated the hoped-for business in period decoration, he was reluctant to demolish them, given the original cost of construction. Instead he suggested that the exterior walls be removed in order to create a series of alcoves that would serve as settings for the store's collection of antiques. Eaton's fine modern furniture and reproductions could be shown nearby, benefiting from their spatial association with implicitly museum quality objects.<sup>93</sup> No decision was reached at this time, and the rooms were gradually commandeered as offices by the store's interior decorating service. Their fall from grace anticipated significant shifts in middle class taste during the post-war years.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Memo dated January 17, 1945 from O.D. Vaughan to B.W. Smith. File: House Furnishings – Fine Furniture Gallery, F229-162-0-1185, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

## *Conclusion*

Eaton's files on the company's antiques business include a clipping from the September 7, 1953 issue of *Time* magazine.<sup>94</sup> The article reports a reverse trade in antiques from the United States back to Great Britain. Two forces were at work: shifts in taste in the North American market toward modern designs and the persistence of austerity measures in Great Britain limiting the availability of new furniture.

Although the expanding mass market associated with the growing post war suburbs turned away from reproductions of period furniture, Toronto's elite consumers retained a certain fondness for period styles. The period rooms on the fifth floor of the College Street Store served as consulting rooms for Eaton's Interior Decorating Service where staff met with a high-end clientele that continued to demand period designs. Elements of the period rooms were even re-installed in the new Eaton Centre in the 1970s.<sup>95</sup>

As Canada's centennial approached, eighteenth and nineteenth century vernacular furniture made by early Canadian craftsmen became increasingly fashionable. There were already signs of this development in the 1940s as the ROM expanded its holdings of Canadiana. In 1951 this collection was re-housed in a new building donated by museum patron Sigmund Samuel. As genuine Canadian antiques became more expensive thanks to growing popular interest, a small-scale reproduction industry developed to furnish the century houses that well-off Torontonians were busily renovating in both the city and the surrounding countryside. Even the much-maligned Victorian styles began to be prized for

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<sup>94</sup> Typescript of clipping from *Time Magazine*, September 7, 1953. File: Gallery of Fine Furniture 1944 – 1952 – 1956 – 1960, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>95</sup> "DISCOVER EXPLORE ENJOY FIND!" Promotional brochure, ca. 1977. F229-162-0-385, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

their connections with the past. While these developments echoed the early twentieth-century Colonial Revival in the United States, Canada's more recent history of settlement made for a more limited heritage of fine furniture. Instead, Canadian antiques exhibited a rougher, even primitive aesthetic that was actually better suited to the casual lifestyles of the postwar era. Joy Parr has shown how postwar furniture designers drew on this heritage.<sup>96</sup>

In a further twist, by the beginning of the twenty-first century modernist design had effectively become a period style. Just as predicted in Eaton's ads of the 1920s, the innovative furniture created by Le Corbusier, Marcel Breuer, and their contemporaries was now seen as representing a particular moment in history. These designs' pretensions to timelessness reflected a habit of mind that was as historically contingent as the antiques craze of early twentieth century. And, through such distributors as Design Within Reach, it became possible to buy reproductions of classic modernist furniture and furnishings. Since 2004, *Atomic Ranch*, a publication featuring loving restorations of mid-century modern bungalows, has joined shelter magazines celebrating Victorian and Arts and Crafts domestic architecture and interiors. This trend is fuelled by a combination of nostalgia and an appreciation for design informed by well-established principles of taste. Just as in the interwar years, a taste for period furniture signals distinction. It may also reflect a twenty-first century longing for the lost cultural confidence of post World War II North America.

As this chapter has shown, during the interwar years Eaton's sold genuine antiques, exact reproductions, and factory-made furniture that reinterpreted period styles

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<sup>96</sup> Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 142-64.

to suit modern production and consumption practices. These various products appealed to different market segments, ranging from well-informed connoisseurs to anxious middle class householders looking for signifiers of good taste. The chapter argues that through funding a collection of furniture representing the history of European decorative art at the Royal Ontario Museum Eaton's acquired cultural prestige, an educational resource for training decorators and sales staff, and models for high quality reproductions. Eaton's mastery of an established canon of design was definitively materialized by the 1930 period rooms that associated the store with conventions of display that were deployed by museums and art galleries. Period rooms elevated the store's house furnishings business in the eyes of Torontonians; when the store's commitment to displaying antiques was eroding in the early 1950s, upper management feared that Eaton's would be degraded to the level of such cut price Toronto mass market retailers as Levinters.<sup>97</sup> Despite the turn to modern design, a development that Eaton's had helped to launch even while promoting traditional styles, good taste was still linked to the past in the middlebrow imagination.

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<sup>97</sup> Memo dated September 17, 1952 from O.D. Vaughan, Vice-President, to R.J. Henderson, Furniture-College Street. File: 770 – Gallery of Fine Furniture, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

## Chapter 4

### The House of To-day: Marketing Moderne

At the same time that Eaton's was teaching Torontonians the finer points of British and, to a lesser extent, French decorative history, the store's house furnishings merchandisers were also trying to assess the significance of new developments in interior decoration that claimed to be more in tune with the realities of the machine age. Around the turn of the twentieth century Eaton's ads had used the term 'modern' to mean either period styles modified to meet present-day ideas of comfort and utility, or new forms, such as overstuffed couches and chairs, with no pretensions to historicism. Even before World War I, however, the desire for interiors in keeping with the new technologies revolutionizing daily life was finding material expression in major European design centres such as Paris and Munich, creating a self-consciously modern style of decoration in the process. This chapter concerns Eaton's efforts to mediate what art historian Michael Windover has called "a mode of mobility" for an audience of skeptical, yet intrigued, Torontonians.<sup>1</sup> The store's most ambitious marketing move was the construction of the House of To-day in 1929.

Of all Eaton's interwar house models, the House of To-day was the store's most overt effort to define domestic modernity in terms of physical design. Other displays were arguably modern in their efforts to shape patterns of consumption in keeping with current ideas about spending, consumer citizenship, cultural allegiances, and self-expression, but these objectives were communicated through objects and spaces that echoed familiar forms found throughout the city's residential districts. In contrast, the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Windover, *Art Deco: A Mode of Mobility* (Québec, QC: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2012).

House of To-day was explicitly created to persuade Torontonians to experiment with a novel aesthetic that was called ‘art moderne’ at the time. Subsequently labeled ‘art deco’ by historians, this design movement sought to give a new look to everything from clothing to curtains. Despite the general use of art deco as a descriptive term now, this chapter uses the label art moderne because this is the way the style was referred to at Eaton’s in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup>

Advocating an avant-garde style of interior decoration involved significant departures from the store’s usual merchandising practices. Eaton’s hired a French designer, René Cera, who was heralded as a specialist in art moderne in the store’s advertising. While other house models functioned as more or less flexible shells that could be redecorated in a variety of styles, Cera’s designs for the architecture and interior decoration of the House of To-day made up a coherent ensemble that was not open to such changes. The model house was promoted as an exercise in adapting this new style to Canadian conditions, but its consistent use of a single decorative idiom demonstrated design principles that implicitly critiqued Toronto’s existing housing stock. By hiring Cera the store was speculating that a market existed for art moderne’s re-interpretation of material domesticity. Why did Eaton’s embark on this gamble in aesthetic pedagogy?

The prevailing taste for period reproductions discussed in the previous chapter gave Canadian manufacturers little incentive to produce designs other than the usual workmanlike variations on time-honoured forms. This design torpor stood in stark contrast to the pace of technological change shaping new patterns of work, leisure and domesticity. The proponents of art moderne argued that the new aesthetic suited the

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<sup>2</sup> The label ‘Art Deco’ was not used until the 1960s to describe this style of modern design. Bevis Hillier, “Introduction,” in Bevis Hillier and Steven Escript, *Art Deco Style* (London: Phaidon, 1997).

times, while retailers and manufacturers saw it as a potential solution to market stagnation. This chapter argues that Eaton's experimentation with art moderne was motivated by a wish to establish its credentials as a fashion leader in the sphere of interior design. Since the late nineteenth century the store had worked hard to solidify claims that it provided Torontonians with the most fashion forward clothes and accessories from Paris, then the acknowledged centre of haute couture. For store buyers, identifying important new style trends was as essential to success as negotiating advantageous prices with suppliers. From the early twentieth century onwards Eaton's had held spring and fall openings to introduce the newest fashions in clothing, fueling sales in the process. Attempts to apply the logic of changing fashions to period furniture and home furnishings, however, met with limited success.<sup>3</sup> When supposed novelties were really variations on well-worn themes, there was little incentive to redecorate. Eaton's, in company with furniture merchandisers in other North American centres, saw the emergence of art moderne as an opportunity to challenge this decorative stasis.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier attempts such as art nouveau to create a new approach to the domestic interior had failed to oust period styles from popular favour.<sup>5</sup> Aware that they were taking a risk, retailers hoped that art moderne represented a more enduring aesthetic shift.

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<sup>3</sup> Consumers' presumed desire for novelty led furniture buyers to pressure manufacturers for constant variations on period designs. See "Are There Too Many Lines?" *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 32: 4 (April 1932): 19.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the U.S. trade journal *Good Furniture Magazine* took this positive view in a 1928 editorial. "Is Modernism a Passing Fancy or a Fact?" *Good Furniture Magazine* 30 (March 1928): 111. While less optimistic, Canadian trade journals also kept an eye on the trend in the hope that it would increase the replacement market. "Editorial: The Future of Art Moderne," *Furniture World* 19:11 (November 1929): 33; "Modified Art Moderne," *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 29:2 (February 1929): 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> See Nancy Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 46-7, for a discussion of the failure of Art Nouveau design to achieve lasting popularity. Writing in 1928, Ross Crane dismissed design innovations since the third decade of the nineteenth century as disastrous: "Having wandered in the Wilderness of Bad Taste for three generations the American people have accordingly finally returned to the furniture designs of the historic periods.

As this chapter shows, Eaton's constructed the House of To-day as a demonstration of the store's mastery of the most advanced trends in design, thus consolidating its position as Toronto's leading source of home furnishings. The following analysis will seek to establish the broader context of Eaton's display by discussing the evolving role of fashion as a factor in merchandising. Eaton's early efforts to promote an emerging modern aesthetic will then be outlined, before moving on to a case study of the House of To-day as a means of marketing art moderne. The mixed results of this effort at tastemaking demonstrate both Eaton's cultural ambitions and the limits of the store's power to shape the market.

### *Fashion and retailing*

Fashion and modernity are closely linked. Both imply an accelerated pace of change and a rejection of the old in favour of the new. As more people came to participate in the developing consumer culture of the West, fashion became an increasingly important factor in their choice of goods. This was particularly true of women's clothing, and both producers and retailers were quick to respond to their customers' desire for the latest styles. By the early twentieth century a sophisticated fashion system had evolved that shaped the production, distribution and consumption of women's clothing in industrialized countries.<sup>6</sup> In principle it was a top-down structure in which a group of star

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Instead of Craftsman and the atrocities of the Golden Oak abomination, furniture factories are now turning out reproductions of the great English, French, Spanish and Italian styles." Ross Crane, *Interior Decoration: A Comprehensive Study Course for Furniture Men* (Chicago: The Seng Company, 1928), 130.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of fashion was applied to men's and children's clothing as well, but with less vigor. Throughout the nineteenth century men's clothing became increasingly uniform, so by the early twentieth century fashion innovations tended to be subtle, unlike the revolutionary shifts in women's dress. For an excellent discussion of the interaction between Parisian haute couture and the Toronto market following World War II, see Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001).

designers imposed their visions of feminine dress on an elite clientele. Those visions were then dispersed to the wider population through women's magazines and the merchandising activities of local retailers, who acted as accredited ambassadors from the epicenter of the fashionable world: Paris, France.<sup>7</sup> The rapid expansion of department stores during the second half of the nineteenth century was linked not only to a growing market, but also to that market's appetite for fashionable goods. Eaton's participated directly in this system, setting up a buying office in Paris in 1898, and regularly sending personnel from Canada to attend the seasonal shows of the leaders of haute couture. Bulletins about the latest style innovations were featured in the store's advertising, underlining Eaton's role as a key conduit of fashion knowledge for Torontonians (Fig. 4.1).<sup>8</sup> Eaton's buyers functioned as curators, selecting from the Paris offerings those creations they believed would sell to their customers. The new styles were introduced at spring and fall openings, which featured fashion teas where clothes were shown by live models. Wealthy women bought unique dresses imported from the Paris ateliers; consumers with more modest incomes had access to fashion through ready-made clothing that echoed the lines and colours dictated for the season by famous couturiers.

Thanks to the obsolescence built into the fashion system by rapid style changes, retailers were able to accelerate women's purchase of new clothing. Compelled by the desire to be in the mode, fashion-conscious consumers discarded perfectly serviceable goods in order to buy the latest thing. Retailers who were sensitive to prevailing trends

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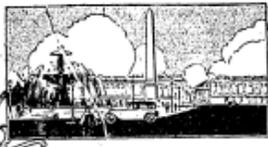
<sup>7</sup>See Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to its buyers, Eaton's regularly sent Edith Macdonald (The Scribe) to Paris to report on the couturiers' seasonal openings. See, for example, her comments on Jean Patou's 1922 fall collection in "Eaton's Daily Store News." T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, August 31, 1922, 24.

reaped substantial profits based on rapid turnover; those who did not were left holding unwanted goods.

# EATON'S DAILY STORE NEWS

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## Paris Sums Up the Fashions

*With Frequent References to Velvet, Full Sleeves and Tones of Brown, an Emphasis on the Slim Silhouette and Low Waistline, and a Naive Gladness That Women's Clothes Are Once More Quietly Subtle—Mysteriously Simple—Truly Feminine*



Paris, September 1st, 1922.

**IF WE APPEAR TO TAKE FASHIONS** very much to heart it is because Paris takes them to heart. Fashions are like other vivid, transient things that are as truly part of Paris as the venerable Porte Saint Denis—the balloons of many colors the weird old women carry round the Tuilleries Gardens to sell to the children—the pink-sailed boats the boys send floating over the pond in the Bois—the radiant masses of flowers in the stalls in the Place de la Madeleine. Paris without its latest fashions—unthinkable.

**Exit the Tomboy**

There are no basic alterations in the styles, but a radical change has come over their spirit. Old traditions have been revived and everything conspires to be gracefully and teasingly feminine. Rich crepes and velvets flow into long skirts. Lace laces say "princess and princess" on evening frocks. Sports hats are made of velvet. The shagiest of homespun suits consist of fur collars and windproof business. Even the new waterproofs—inspired by the raincoats that drenched the German army—have neckbands of fur and curved buckles to fasten them. Paris has scouted the last vest for the flapper who looks like a pretty youth. Flat-headed, tweedish capableness is no longer a style attribute for any one. We must take our hands out of our coat pockets and carry them in a muff.

**Skirts Longer?**

Yes, longer than we've been wearing them in Canada, but shorter than the mannequins have been showing them here for the past two seasons. At one after another of the grandes maisons inquiries as to skirt lengths were received as though the subject had ceased to be one of interest. "Suitable" was the invariable reply. A length suitable to the type of costume seems to be the point at which hems turn up. A gown reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance or the golden age of Greece must necessarily reach to the ankles. And a suit built for sitting looks faithless to its calling with a skirt that goes longer than nine or ten inches from the ground. So they argue, and so they show their models.

Generally speaking, the silhouette is a straighter line than ever. Maltross and Paton observe the rule rigidly throughout their collections. But Jeanne Lanvin and many others do not hesitate to break it where evening gowns are concerned. Infanta and Venetian effects serve as the spice of variety.

Even the simplest models do not lack femininity. The circular flare, added panel-fashion at the left side of the skirt, is one of the few new innovations. Full sleeves are another. Sometimes they billow down over the wrist like bishop's sleeves; sometimes they stop short at the elbow to be gathered into a tight cuff. Sometimes they are shirred like a jacket's sleeve, and often they are not full at all, but fit closely from shoulder to knuckles. Federal evening dresses have little caps over the top of the arm.

**Always Bloused and Buckled**

One thing you may pretty well take for granted is that coat or gown will be bloused into a low waistline and girdled tight over the hips with

the aid of a fastened buckle. This blousing and buckling is an obsession with the designers.

Bodies of gowns for morning, noon or for night fit flat as an undercoat around the shoulders and down the front. And will you be glad or sorry—the latest modistes threaten to depart? Often it resolves into a V-shaped back or front; square necklines are also in evidence.

**Every Designer Seeks Brown**

The browns in chateaux, the browns in ancient leaves, these warm browns with tinges of gold or red in them have things all their own way as to color. If you can wear brown you are kept to the new mode. That is for daytime wear. For evening it's first of all white, and then a shade between Chinese green, smoky pink, royal blue, cyanine or black trilled with silver or gold brocade.

Velvet claims primary place among fabrics—for the ceremonious costume

**Style Influences.**

They're conspicuous chiefly by their absence. These Autumn fashions of 1922 are, in the main, evolutionary. But here and there you see draperies, floating panels and the artlessness that are Grecian, as if sculptured by Phidias. And who can see velvet, full sleeves, a long, fine bodice and a waistline higher in front than the back, who does not hark back to thought to the Italian Renaissance?

But it's the femininity of the fashions which is what really counts.

*The Scribe*

Figure 4.1  
Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, September 15, 1922, 20.  
An example of an advertorial by the Scribe outlining the latest fashion trends from Paris.

Given fashion's success as a marketing tool for selling clothing, department stores such as Eaton's sought to apply the logic of the fashion system to furniture and home

furnishings. In this case, however, it proved more difficult to convince consumers to follow new trends. Eaton's advertised new wallpapers and textiles in spring and fall, following the seasonal promotional calendar established for clothing. The implicit analogy between clothing and interior decoration was difficult to sustain, however, because of the radically different patterns of use between the two categories of goods. As fashion scholars have demonstrated, clothing is intimately connected to the performance of self in the public realm. In the twentieth century, more and more people gained access to this means of self-expression as relatively inexpensive ready-made clothing became available. Dressing fashionably was above all a signal of modernity, indicating an ability to keep pace with a rapidly changing world.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, furniture and home furnishings occupied private domestic space shared between family members. While its occupants might desire to live in an environment that was convenient, comfortable and attractive, such goals did not demand constant change. Major purchases were made when new households were formed, usually upon marriage, but after that wholesale redecoration was rare. Merchandisers deployed various arguments to overcome this sales resistance, encouraging consumers to see the home as an ongoing project requiring frequent improvements, but such efforts had uneven results.<sup>10</sup>

Retailers were not helped by the fact that innovation in furniture styles was a rarified activity in the early twentieth century. Historicism of one form or another had

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon in the context of interwar Canada, see Jane Nicholas, *The Modern Girl: Feminine Modernities, the Body, and Commodities in the 1920s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 43-8.

<sup>10</sup> During the 1920s US retailers seized on the Better Homes movement, which was sponsored by the Department of Commerce under Herbert Hoover, as a means of promoting redecoration. See "Current Topics—of Trade Interest: Annual Meeting of American Homes Bureau," *Good Furniture Magazine* 21 (July 1923): 3-4.

dominated the market throughout the Victorian period. Efforts at design reform, whether the arts and crafts attempt to revive traditions of artisanship, or the art nouveau reliance on natural forms for inspiration, had failed to capture a significant share of the market. Few could afford the handcrafted products designed by William Morris, while cheap and nasty copies of art nouveau designs discredited the style.<sup>11</sup> Instead, as discussed in the previous chapter on Eaton's period rooms, most furniture buyers who had aesthetic aspirations played it safe by copying past styles that were unquestionably enshrined in the canons of good taste.<sup>12</sup> The result was a clash between bodies clad in flapper dresses that proclaimed modernity and homes that evoked the past. It was a stylistic anomaly that, in the eyes of some designers at least, cried out for resolution.

*Eaton's and Modern Design: Flirting with the Avant-Garde*

Virginia Woolf famously declared that the modern world began on or about December 1910.<sup>13</sup> One of the harbingers of change was the launch that year of an exhibition of post-impressionist art brought to London by her brother-in-law Clive Bell and his friend, the artist and critic Roger Fry. Historian Modris Eksteins dates the beginning of modernity to an even more explosive break with nineteenth-century convention: the first performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris on May 29, 1913. The event brought together the arts of music, dance and design in a discordant combination that literally

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<sup>11</sup> Troy, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Ross Crane, "Furniture that never goes out of style," in Ross Crane, *The Ross Crane Book of Home Furnishing and Decoration: A Practical, Authoritative and Sympathetic Guide for the Amateur Home Decorator* (Chicago: Frederick J. Drake & Company, Publishers, 1925), 85-102.

<sup>13</sup> This is a paraphrase: Woolf actually said "...in or about December 1910, human character changed...All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature." Virginia Woolf "Character in Fiction," in David Bradshaw, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38.

pitted the old against the new, provoking a riot. Eksteins argues that the ballet anticipated the destruction of bourgeois certainties by the carnage of World War I.<sup>14</sup> Modernity had many meanings at the beginning of the twentieth century: for the avant-garde, whether in London or in Paris, it meant breaking the rules of genteel Victorian culture. In this narrative, iconoclasm within the arts foreshadowed a more general upheaval.

A department store may seem an unlikely location for a confrontation with the shock of the new, but in April 1913 Eaton's invited Torontonians to view a selection of paintings from the Armory exhibition of post-impressionist art held in New York earlier that year. Organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, the exhibition included works by Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp and Georges Bracque. During its display in New York and subsequent tour of the United States the Armory show generated a great deal of controversy.<sup>15</sup> Cubist paintings were singled out for particularly scathing criticism, with a columnist in the *New York Times* describing Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" as "an explosion in a shingle factory."<sup>16</sup> Canadians were similarly both appalled and intrigued by the evidence of a visual revolution. In an Eaton's ad the Scribe responded to a query about the new art sent in by perplexed "Brockvillians" in soothing tones:

Art journals attempt to diagnose the movement, but the analysis is usually as difficult to understand as the pictures. In ordinary language, however, a Cubist has been described as an artist who feels freed from representing things as they

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<sup>14</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), 9-54

<sup>15</sup> The Armory Show was formally titled the International Exhibition of Modern Art and was held in New York from February 17 to March 15, 1913. Following the exhibition at New York's 69th Regiment Armory, Gimbel Brothers department stores exhibited some of the paintings in various US cities. See "Welcome to the 1913 Armory Show," accessed May 7, 2019, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~museum/armory/marketing.html>. It seems unlikely that any of the European paintings travelled to Toronto, as the only painters mentioned in Eaton's ad were two Americans: Simon Halpern and Andrew Dasberg. T. Eaton company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 22, 1913, 16.

<sup>16</sup> "Topics of the Times," *New York Times*, March 1, 1913, 14.

actually are, and who puts on his canvas things as he sees them, in planes worked out and built up in geometrical form. A Futurist is defined as an artist who seeks to express the emotion roused in him by what he sees, and to give at the same time the idea of motion. He employs color in its most vivid form.<sup>17</sup>

While she dismissed the paintings as "...the fantasy of...delirium," the Scribe went on to connect Cubism and Futurism with developments in the world of fashion, arguing that the effect of the movement had been positive in this context: "Happily, the influence of the new art upon fashions has made itself felt in a greater freedom of line, unconventionality of treatment and brilliancy of tone, all of which is to be welcomed rather than deplored."<sup>18</sup> The Eaton's ad announcing the exhibition of the Armory show paintings was titled "Modern Art and the Fashions," demonstrating the store's awareness of the significant interaction between high art and couture at this time (Fig. 4.2).

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<sup>17</sup> "You Were Inquiring," T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, May 9, 1913, 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* The Scribe offered to send 'Brockvillians' a set of small reproductions of the controversial paintings, as well as samples of fabric showing their influence, in an effort to provide further, more concrete information.



Torontonians a glimpse of the modern when the store hosted Poiret in October 1913 during his tour of major North American cities (Fig. 4.3).<sup>20</sup> His designs, which had freed women from tight corseting, only to entrap them in hobble skirts and, most recently, harem pants and lampshade tunics, were greeted with polite incredulity by his audience. A reporter for the *Globe* noted that spectators “laughed delightfully” when they beheld some of his more extreme effects.<sup>21</sup>

THE GLOBE, TORONTO, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1913.

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**EATON'S DAILY STORE NEWS**

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**Poiret, Creator of Fashions, Visits Toronto Next Wednesday**

**And in Compliment to Monsieur Poiret  
This Famous Style Dictator of Paris, and the first of the Great  
French Designers to Come to Canada,  
We Have Arranged for Tuesday, October Seventh, and  
Following Days, a  
Special Exhibit of French Model Costumes,  
including original creations by Poiret, Cheret, Bernard, Jeanne Lanvin, and copies  
by Kerzman, New York, of models by Poiret and Worth—a display that  
illustrates in happy manner the pronounced Oriental influence in the  
season's modes, especially the dominance of the minaret or lamp-  
shade tunics, which, in suggestion as reality, may be regarded  
as the distinctive feature of the robes and frocks of present  
season. To M. Poiret belongs the credit of originating  
this novel topic in the costumes designed by him for  
the recent production of "Le Minaret" in Paris.**

*You are cordially invited to view this collection of models in the Customers Department, where they  
will be exhibited to advantage in a suitable Parisian setting.*



**M. Poiret at the Door of His Atelier  
Paul Poiret, "The Most  
Radical Designer in Paris"**

**T**HE FRENCH MAN BEING responsible for a revolution in the fashion world, the models he has introduced in the past few years are not only new but also in a highly novel way. He has not only introduced new materials but also new methods of construction. He has not only introduced new materials but also new methods of construction. He has not only introduced new materials but also new methods of construction.



**Madame Poiret in a Minaret Gown  
Madame Poiret Wears in  
Her Home the Designs the  
World Gets Two or Three  
Years Later**

**F**OR THE FIRST TIME in the history of the fashion world, the models of Paul Poiret were seen in his home. The models were seen in his home. The models were seen in his home.



**As a Lady of Fashion Adopts the Minaret  
Two Costumes by Poiret, Shown by Eleanor Selwyn, at  
the New York Evening Herald.**



**The Atelier of Paul Poiret in the  
Rue D'Antin**

**T**HE model number 100 is the last creation of Paul Poiret. The model number 100 is the last creation of Paul Poiret. The model number 100 is the last creation of Paul Poiret.

**"Choose Your Covers  
With Thought of  
the Landscape"**

**"We May Well Learn  
From the  
East,  
Says M. Poiret"**

**Stand Here for Fall  
and Winter:**

**Store Opens  
9.00 a.m.  
and Closes  
5.30 p.m.**

**BEGINNING  
THIS WEEK  
STORE  
REMAINS  
OPEN ON  
SATURDAYS  
UNTIL  
5.30 P.M.**

**T. EATON CO.**

Figure 4.3  
T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, October 4, 1913, 20.  
The entire ad is devoted to Poiret, signaling the importance of his visit to Eaton's efforts to be seen as a fashion leader.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>21</sup> "M. Poiret and his gowns," *Toronto Globe*, October 9, 1913, 5.

In her own account of the event, the Scribe admitted that Poiret's latest clothes represented a radical departure from the usual standards of women's dress but pointed to his previous successes in changing fashion:

A few years ago he looked out of his window and saw women walking about comfortably in flaring skirts. He dreamed that he would cause them to wiggle along in skirts no wider than an ordinary stovepipe. And his dream came true. A little later it struck him that the feminine waist was far too small. He dreamed he would set things right and give us back the waist the sculptors put on Venus de Milo and the Winged Victory of Samothracia. His dream came true. Now he dreams again. As he stood there on the stage, showing us his latest gowns by cinematograph, a weird figure stepped onto the canvas – a figure in Turkish pantaloons and a lampshade contrivance over her hips. The audience giggled, at which M. Poiret turned round with a calm face. "Do not laugh," he said. "You will all be veering it in a lee-tle vhile."<sup>22</sup>

While Macdonald and the *Globe's* reporter agreed in principle that Poiret's designs had amused rather than enthralled Toronto viewers at the Royal Alexandra theatre, the comments in the Eaton's ad framed him as a fashion innovator rather than as a trickster who had gone too far in his attempts to impose on his audience. The Scribe may have mocked his accent, but her references to his past victories suggested that Torontonians should not dismiss his latest experiments too quickly. He was, after all, recognized as an artist in his field:

As for the gowns those mannequins wore as they drifted with sinuous, sylph-like glide about the lovely old garden of the Poiret Atelier [in his film presentation], one sits with halting pen when the call comes for description. As easily transfer to leaden type a Turner sunset, a Corot landscape or one of Boucher's allegories as those inspired creations of fabric and line – those mystic minglings of chiffon and sable, those gentle symphonies in satin and silver, those daring concoctions of diaphanous tulle, those amazing abbreviations, those brilliant adaptations from the barbaric east.

Poiret is a master. His visit marks an epoch in our sartorial history.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "When Poiret Came to Town," T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 9, 1913, 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

The Scribe's column struck a nice balance, conceding that astonishment and even rejection was a legitimate response to the new forms, while suggesting that Torontonians take a closer look before dismissing Poiret's work out of hand. Her allusions to art place him in the company of acknowledged masters, rather than with the rebels of the Armory show, but he is nonetheless presented as a revolutionary in his own creative sphere. As its presentations of post-impressionist paintings and Poiret's 'daring concoctions' indicate, even before World War I Eaton's saw potential advantages in associating the store with visual modernity. It might not be high art in the eyes of establishment critics, but it was novelty and, by exhibiting new art and designs from the acknowledged metropolises of Western civilization, Eaton's demonstrated its cultural awareness to Torontonians.

*Paris 1925: L'Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*

At the beginning of the twentieth century France's long reign over the realm of women's fashions remained unchallenged. This was not as true when it came to other luxury goods. There were fears among practitioners of interior decoration that French designers were losing ground to their German and Austrian competitors. While the French sought to privilege uniqueness and traditions of craftsmanship dating back to Louis XIV, groups like the Viennese Wiener Werkstadt or Munich's Deutscher Werkbund worked together with manufacturers to produce affordable good design that met twentieth century needs. When these designers displayed their work at international exhibitions, they showed room ensembles rather than individual objects, demonstrating how together the various elements composed livable environments. This ethos of integrated design even extended

to dress, a feature that clearly appealed to Paul Poiret. Following visits to the Wiener Werkstadt in 1910 and 1911, he was inspired to establish the Atelier Martine in order to produce designs for interior decoration that drew on the same mixture of Oriental exoticism, modernistic colour schemes and Directoire styles that influenced his clothing.<sup>24</sup> He sought to provide both the costumes and the setting for the performance of his version of feminine elegance.

Although his countrymen condemned Poiret's admiration of the Wiener Werkstadt, developments in French interior design both prior to and after the war suggested that some lessons had been learned. The idea of the ensemble was adopted as a method of display, and Parisian department stores created ateliers run by well-known designers capable of creating entire decorative schemes for clients.<sup>25</sup> These designers exhibited their work regularly at the annual *Salons d'Automne* in Paris, establishing distinctive styles that reflected individual interpretations of the decorative possibilities of modernity. Over time, commentators began to discern underlying commonalities informing the apparent eclecticism of these displays. French art moderne was becoming a style.

Design critics also perceived connections between modern interior design and fashion. After viewing a 1924 show of French designs in New York, the editor of *Good Furniture Magazine*, William Laurel Hardy, observed:

Indeed, 'modern art' [i.e. modern decorative art] in its pronounced developments of unconventional patterns of startling decorative combinations, such as red and green or black and silver, has been closely allied with the advertising propaganda of well known dress designers like Poiret. In times past it has often been said that

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<sup>24</sup> Troy, *Couture Culture*. For a discussion of the Wiener Werkstadt, see Rebecca Houze, "From *Wiener Kunst im Haus* to the Wiener Werkstatte: Marketing Domesticity with Fashionable Interior Design," *Design Issues* 18:1 (Winter 2002): 3-23.

<sup>25</sup> Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*, 169-83.

the fashions for interior decorations reflect the slow moving styles in architecture, but today there is a distinct effort being made to have the various arts and crafts applicable to home making, follow the fitful and ever changing modes of dress.<sup>26</sup>

Hardy's remarks were directed to the North American furniture manufacturers and retailers who subscribed to *Good Furniture Magazine*, a trade journal published in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which was a centre of the American furniture industry at the time. In the decade since the publication was launched, his readership had developed an increasing interest in style and design as important factors affecting consumer demand for their products. *Good Furniture Magazine* regularly published articles about the Paris and London house furnishing markets, indicating a perceived need to provide up to date information about European developments. That these developments seemed to be veering towards a "fitful and ever changing" pattern resembling women's fashions could be seen as a both a warning and an opportunity for an industry that had become too reliant on a conservative approach to product development based on reworking established period designs.

American furniture makers and merchandisers may have known about the new style emerging in Paris, but, at least in the eyes of their federal government, they had not acted on their knowledge to an extent that would justify the United States participating in the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* held in Paris in 1925.<sup>27</sup> Planning for this exhibition had started before the war in an effort to reinforce France's claim to leadership in the decorative arts in the face of the German and Austrian challenges to French pre-eminence. World War I had a devastating effect on the French economy and, in its wake, the government was eager to re-establish the country's style

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<sup>26</sup> William Laurel Hardy, "Seen in New York," *Good Furniture Magazine* (June 1924): 253.

<sup>27</sup> Hillier and Escritt, *Art Deco Style*, 59.

leadership in the field of luxury goods. As a result, when the exhibition project was revived in the 1920s, it was even more nationalist in its aims. Germany was effectively excluded from the event, thanks to a delayed invitation that made it impossible to assemble an effective display. Visitors noted that France dominated the exhibition, occupying two thirds of the site. Prominent features included pavilions dedicated to the work of the interior design ateliers associated with four leading Parisian department stores: Printemps (Atelier Primavera), the Louvre (Studium Louvre), Le Bon Marché (Atelier Pomone) and Galeries Lafayette (La Maitrise). Elegant boutiques housed the work of established couturiers, as well as more radical artist/designers such as Sonia Delauney. As a result of the exhibition, France became firmly identified with art moderne for the rest of the decade.

Many North American visitors to the Paris *Exposition* were uncertain about the market potential of French art moderne. *Good Furniture Magazine* published the opinion of a New York decorator who was decidedly unimpressed: “It [art moderne] will not be taken up or bought to any extent by our discriminating people, who have not any of the upset mental attitude of the war, which the proximity of the war on its own soil has brought to the mentality and the mental outlook of the people over there.”<sup>28</sup> This severe critique was balanced by Kem Weber’s adjoining article, which urged all those interested in the future of the decorative arts to visit Europe. He argued “In Europe it is the designer who studies the modern development of home living, and who incorporates in his

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<sup>28</sup> “A New York Decorator’s Opinion of the Paris Exposition,” *Good Furniture Magazine* 25 (November 1925): 260.

creations the features that lend this particular charm and grace to the modern interior.”<sup>29</sup> For Weber, designers alone had the vision to disrupt the recycling of traditional forms perpetrated by North American manufacturers and merchants regardless of the changing requirements of the modern home.

The conflicting positions taken by the unnamed New York decorator and Weber give a good sense of the spectrum of opinion following 1925. Between the opposite poles of outright rejection and enthusiastic support, however, lay a middle ground of tastemakers willing to experiment with the new aesthetic. Chief among these were the department stores located in major North American cities. New York was particularly open to European art moderne: during the second half of the decade exhibitions were staged by Macy’s, Wanamaker’s, and Lord and Taylor.<sup>30</sup> Industrial art educator C.R. Richards was dismissive of these efforts, writing “...various European examples placed before us in exhibitions at our great department stores in New York City and elsewhere...have left a very confusing impression on the public mind.”<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the stores laid the groundwork for the future development of modern designs suited to conditions in the United States.

Canadian observers were similarly ambivalent about the possibilities of successfully importing the art moderne style of the Paris *Exposition* to North America. In *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, Anne Elizabeth Wilson commented:

A short while ago, it was remarked that if the modernistic fabrics were to persist, they would require modernistic furniture to carry them. This was brought to pass

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<sup>29</sup> Kem Weber, “Why Should the American Furniture Buyer, Manufacturer and Designer Go to Europe?” *Good Furniture Magazine* 25 (November 1925): 261. Born in Berlin, Kem Weber became a leading industrial designer in the US in the 1930s.

<sup>30</sup> See Marilyn F. Friedman, *Selling Good Design: Promoting the Early Modern Interior* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2003).

<sup>31</sup> C.R. Richards, “Sane and Insane Modernism in Furniture” *Good Furniture Magazine* 32 (January 1929): 8.

at the Exposition, not only in furniture but in architecture as well. The effects were extraordinary, and have, in one sense, been far reaching. No Canadian or American buyer came back from the Exposition without at least one purchase of which he might be a little bit terrified, but of which at the same time he was a little bit proud. And although no actual embracing of the style has been evinced on this continent, these purchases have served as an introduction to the possibilities of a modernistic era. Perhaps they might be considered as small exhibitions in themselves, rather than as staple offerings.<sup>32</sup>

Wilson rightly detected a certain caution in the Canadian retailers' response to the new aesthetic. Eaton's brought back gift wares from Paris, purchases that involved only a limited investment of both money and tastemaking prestige.<sup>33</sup> Following the store's established pattern of reporting the latest style news, a 1925 ad commented: "It is trite to say that every age has been modern except the one in which we were born, but here in truth is modernity, different to anything that has gone before. An inspiration it must be – or a warning – to the art of the future."<sup>34</sup> Walking through the exposition Eaton's home furnishings buyers did not know whether to be entranced or appalled. This uncertainty may have been responsible for the unsatisfactory displays of art moderne furniture and furnishings René Cera found when he first arrived at the store in 1928.

### *Eaton's and Modern Design: Importing the New Style*

In his monograph, *Art Deco: A Mode of Mobility*, Michael Windover argues that the style "aestheticized systems of mobility which underpinned the modern societies that adopted it."<sup>35</sup> By the 1920s one of the most obvious of these systems of mobility were the fleets of passenger liners that transported people and ideas between North America and the centre

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<sup>32</sup> Anne Elizabeth Wilson, "The Exposition des Arts Decoratifs," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* 3:4 (April 1926): 29.

<sup>33</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, June 16, 1925, 18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Michael Windover, *Art Deco: A Mode of Mobility* (Quebec QC: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2012), 259.

of the new style in Paris. It seems entirely appropriate that Eaton's president, R.Y. Eaton, was persuaded of the importance of art moderne as result of voyages on the French ship,

*Île de France*:

The movement that needs study sure is this new art in Paris, especially in lighting. It is seen in practical application on the "Ile de France" the French Line steamer. It would be good if every one of our house decorating men and electric fixture men could at least go and spend a few hours aboard that boat when in dock in New York. And I feel sure that any of our people in those departments who cross the Atlantic should certainly cross on that steamer, as it is necessary to live with this new decoration for several days before seeing how important an idea it contains.<sup>36</sup>

Following the success of the 1925 exposition, the French Line had commissioned leading Parisian designers to decorate their newest liner according to their individual interpretations of the art moderne style.<sup>37</sup> As a result, travelers were immersed in the varied possibilities of the new decorative approach for the duration of their trip. In R.Y. Eaton's view, this extended exposure would overcome initial resistance to an unfamiliar aesthetic. His particular enthusiasm for the lighting effects used on board the ship may indicate an appreciation of the appropriateness of using art moderne forms for the delivery of electric light, a distinctly modern source of power. On the *Île de France* indirect fixtures tamed the glare of electricity, transforming it into a source of beauty.

In fact Eaton's buyers and decorators had already tentatively started to explore the possibilities of modernistic textiles some years before R.Y. Eaton made his recommendation. As Wilson implied, brightly coloured furnishing fabrics patterned with zigzags, geometric shapes, or splashy stylized flowers had made their appearance even before the 1925 exposition. They were followed by wallpapers, rugs, and the gift wares

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<sup>36</sup> R.Y. Eaton letter dated April 2, 1928. F229-13 (MS7632), T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>37</sup> The *Île de France* was launched on June 22, 1927.

brought back in 1925, but full-scale art moderne interior ensembles do not seem to have been featured at Eaton's until 1927. In September of that year the Toronto store advertised a "modernistic" living room, announcing that the "...vogue has swept over Europe. Now it's in America."<sup>38</sup> Disappointingly, the accompanying illustration shows only a window treatment and a chair that is vaguely art moderne in shape. By the following spring opening in March 1928, however, Eaton's decorators had produced a suite of five rooms located on the fourth floor of the Home Furnishings Building. This time the ad depicted a room with the characteristic curved walls, concealed lighting and a brilliant apricot and apple green colour scheme associated with the jazz age (Fig. 4.4).<sup>39</sup>



*Figure 4.4*  
*Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, May 8, 1928, 24.*  
*Sketch of art moderne living room display.*

<sup>38</sup> Eaton's ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 24, 1927, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Eaton's ad, *Toronto Globe*, May 8, 1928, 24. In addition to the apricot walls and apple green trim, there were also highlights of gold and vermillion. Some of the chairs were upholstered in brown, while the chesterfield was covered in blue undershot orange rayon.

The copy proclaimed: “What is modernity? Sixty per cent is lighting, thirty per cent is paint. The rest is made up of furniture, fabrics, sparseness of ornament – says one authority.”<sup>40</sup> Implicitly, modernity was easy to achieve, but the success of this room as drawn and described is open to dispute. The positioning of the bookshelves looks awkward and it appears as if the furniture has been supplemented by the odd piece from the store’s ordinary stocks.

Eaton’s 1928 fall openings in both its Montreal and Toronto stores represented a significant advance in the store’s marketing of art moderne. In Montreal, in-house designer Emile Lemieux created “L’interieur moderne,” a display consisting of a foyer, dining room, bedroom, boudoir and den. Toronto presented an “Exposition Moderne,” which seems to have been on a more ambitious scale, including examples of several different living rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms and halls. Both displays were furnished with pieces imported from France representing the work of such leading designers and firms as Sue et Mare, Pierre Chareau, DIM, and Edgar Brandt.<sup>41</sup>

Eaton’s thus followed roughly the same time line as the store’s New York counterparts in terms of the introduction of the art moderne style to the public. The rhetoric surrounding the increasingly ambitious displays evoked the spirit of the 1925 Paris exhibition, conflating moderne with modernity:

Are you au fait with the big new movement in decorative art? Do you know what the master craftsmen and decorators are doing to express the age of the skyscraper, the aeroplane, the radio? Things radically different, of course. Things in accord with the unaffected manner of today – with the frank speech, the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 24, 1928, 24. Apparently Eaton’s exposition included American and Canadian work, but only French, English and Scandinavian designers are named in the ad. “Modern Furniture Artistically Shown: Old Prejudices are Shattered by Exposition Staged by T. Eaton Company,” *Toronto Globe*, September 25, 1928, 16.

sensible clothes, the unconventional attitude, the demand for convenience. You who keep abreast of the times, we are counting on your interest in this very significant trend affecting everyday surroundings.<sup>42</sup>

The *Globe* reviewed the “Exposition Moderne” favourably, stating that the display would convert the most critical visitor through its “simplicity, charm and rare beauty.” Despite the fact that there had been a previous showing of art moderne decorative arts at the Exhibition of Architecture and the Allied Arts held at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1927, the scale of Eaton’s exposition justified hailing it as “the first of its kind to be held in Toronto.” The article concluded “Modernism is no longer a fad, a passing fashion, and this Exposition Moderne tells of its definite arrival and assured place in the history of design in a convincing manner.”<sup>43</sup>

The *Montreal Gazette* was also complimentary about Emile Lemieux’s “L’interieur moderne.” In this case, however, the reported comments of an anonymous visitor introduced a note of caution about the livableness of an art moderne interior:

One visitor at the preliminary showing, while convinced of the charm of the room, was heard to remark that one could never even dare wear a perfume or a handkerchief that did not pay homage to the same artistic design as the rest of the room. Chance Christmas presents would be utterly taboo. Modern art, apparently, is a very jealous master for it permits no mixing of its ideas by its devotees.<sup>44</sup>

Canadians were at last willing to concede the aesthetic appeal of art moderne, at least on a theoretical level, but they were uncertain about bringing it home. Convinced that that they were “furthering a movement which will become a period,” however, Eaton’s Toronto managers were prepared to import not only French goods but also French design

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “Modern Furniture Artistically Shown: Old Prejudices are Shattered by Exposition Staged by T. Eaton Company,” *Toronto Globe*, September 25, 1928, 16. Both Eaton’s and Simpson’s contributed displays of French art moderne furniture to the Art Gallery of Toronto’s Exhibition of Architecture and the Allied Arts in 1927.

<sup>44</sup> “Artistic Interior of Modern Style – Harmonious Blending of Detail Marks Exposition Today,” *Montreal Gazette*, October 26, 1928, 9.

expertise.<sup>45</sup> At the same time planning was underway for “L’exposition moderne,” the store was in the process of hiring René Cera, a French architect-decorator.

### *René Cera*

Paul Poiret linked Eaton’s to avant-garde fashion in 1913, and it is possible that Eaton’s found their expert in art moderne through him.<sup>46</sup> According to archival records related to René Cera’s subsequent employment by the store, he was working as the general manager of the architectural and interior design department at Poiret’s Atelier Martine when Eaton’s approached him in 1928.<sup>47</sup>

Cera was well qualified for his position at Atelier Martine. Born in Nice in 1895, he studied at the École nationale des arts décoratifs de Nice prior to serving in World War I. For three years following the war he was head of Maison DIAM [Décoration Intérieure Ancienne et Moderne] before moving from Nice to Paris. While employed at the Atelier Martine, he collaborated with Poiret on the design of one of the “Suites de Luxe” for the ocean liner *Île de France*, the very ship that R.Y. Eaton had praised as an outstanding example of art moderne interior decoration. Indeed, Eaton may himself have occupied this Suite de Luxe on one of his frequent trips to Europe.

The decision to hire Cera demonstrated both the store’s belief in the new movement and its lack of confidence in the ability of its existing interior decorating staff

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<sup>45</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Montreal Gazette*, November 15, 1928, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Eaton’s maintained a connection with Poiret after his 1913 visit, regularly sending buyers to his Paris shows. Eaton’s promoted his 1917 designs in a full-page *Globe* ad, and he visited the store again in 1927. By the late 1920s, however, his work was being eclipsed by designers like Chanel. T. Eaton company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 28, 1917, 18; “Wizard of Fashion Revels in Creating Charming Gowns,” *Toronto Globe*, October 25, 1927, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Eaton’s Archive Office People Files, F229-221, Box 1, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

to interpret the new style effectively. P. Portlock, the head of Eaton's buying office in London made this argument in a letter to vice president J.J. Vaughan:

On the other hand I think that the fact that Cera is a Frenchman, and is I am sure an artist, would be all to the good. Everything of course is a matter of opinion, but certainly the French opinion of much of what has been done in the United States under the cloak of Modern Decoration is looked upon as being false. For that matter in France itself it is only now that what could be called true is emerging.<sup>48</sup>

To sell art moderne to Canadians Eaton's needed a decorator with Parisian credentials and the store's management offered Cera generous terms: a salary of \$6,000.00 per annum and annual visits to Europe to research trends in interior decoration. Although he was to be based in Toronto, it was understood that he might also travel to Eaton's other stores as a roving ambassador for art moderne (Fig. 4.5).<sup>49</sup> Given that he was unable to speak English at the time he was hired, the store provided an assistant, Van Valkenberg, capable of acting as translator.<sup>50</sup> Cera was, in effect, treated more as a valued commodity than as a mere employee. Eaton's managers reasoned that his presence would give the store cachet, in the same way that buying from famous Parisian couture houses established its reputation as a fashion leader.

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<sup>48</sup> Letter dated August 16, 1928 from P. Portlock to J.J. Vaughan. Eaton's Executive Office General Files, F229-8-0-255, Box 11, T. Eaton Co. fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>49</sup> He traveled to Montreal in November, 1928.

<sup>50</sup> Transcript of interview with O.D. Vaughan, 1964. Eaton's Archives Office Subject Files, F229-162, Box 18, T. Eaton Co. fonds, Archives of Ontario.

**Réné Céra**  
*French Modern Art Decorator*

We have pleasure in announcing the engagement recently in Paris of this most eminent authority on art moderne.

Réné Céra was one of the first French designers and decorators to realize that art moderne was a vital and definite movement which had to be recognized, and had to be authoritatively defined.

Even before his intimate association with the great Paris Exposition of 1925, he had been the first man to install an art moderne shop in Paris. He had been director of "Martine," which was Paul Poiret's shop of decoration; he has held directing and creative posts with the famous firm of D.I.M., and was responsible for the wonderful suite de luxe on the steamer "Ile de France," which has been admired by thousands of trans-atlantic travellers.

In connection with our exposition of l'intérieur moderne on the Fifth Floor, and our furthering of a movement which we believe is destined to become a period, the services of René Céra should prove of benefit to the growing circle interested in true art moderne; and, as he is at present in Montreal, you are cordially invited to consult him.

Telephone the Department of Interior Decorating, UPTown 7000, for an appointment.



Figure 4.5  
*T. Eaton Company ad, Montreal Gazette, November 15, 1928, 9. The overly accented version of Cera's name may be an attempt to emphasize his identity as a Parisian decorator, or it may simply be evidence that the copywriter was careless.*

Cera arrived in Toronto in October 1928. His decision to risk leaving the Atelier Martine for Toronto may well have been based on his assessment of Paul Poiret's fading fortunes.<sup>51</sup> Also, the North American stock market was still riding high and people presumably had money to spend on novel interior design. In an interview with *Chatelaine* writer Blodwen Davies, Cera himself claimed that he had wanted to come to the new world ever since seeing a movie which depicted "a house where everything was done electrically at the push of a button." He confessed a certain disappointment in finding

<sup>51</sup> Troy, *Couture Culture*, 316-26.

that, in reality, “Here were people with vast new resources at their command, and they had not yet created homes to measure up to the advancement of their science.”<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, there was clearly an opportunity to play a role in modernizing North American domesticity.

The experimental nature of Cera’s position as head of the newly created Modern Art Department was highly unusual in the context of Eaton’s normal business practices. The department appears to have been quite distinct from the existing interior design service. Windover has argued that Eaton’s management was attempting to follow the model of the design ateliers at various Parisian department stores.<sup>53</sup> There is no direct evidence, but presumably the store’s interior decorators in Toronto, to say nothing of Emile Lemieux in Montreal, would have resented Cera’s special status. Certainly his reactions to their previous efforts in the sphere of art moderne design were less than diplomatic.

In early December Cera submitted a report to Eaton’s vice president, J.J. Vaughan. This in itself suggests the importance assigned to his work, as in the normal course of events he would have reported to the head of House Furnishings, J.J. Vaughan’s younger brother, O.D. Vaughan. Cera’s report, presumably translated by Van Valkenberg, bluntly criticized Eaton’s earlier attempts to market art moderne furnishings:

At present, the two great difficulties in introducing the true modern furniture here are – first, that we are not displaying *good* modern furniture, we have a collection of pieces, some good and many not good, but all poorly presented. The furniture itself must be selected and arranged by someone who has taste, and who *knows* the trade. The second difficulty is this – that its display now is something unreal, something artificial, not living...The display must become real and must be made

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<sup>52</sup> Blodwen Davies, “Adapting the Futuristic to the Present,” *Chatelaine* 3:2 (February 1930): 21, 50.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Windover, “From the inside out: Looking at Coverage of Canada in Surveys from Interior Decoration at Eaton’s,” paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada, Fredericton, NB, May 28-31, 2014.

by someone who knows sufficient of this new mode to arrange it attractively and liveably.<sup>54</sup>

Here Cera is implicitly justifying the decision to hire him by asserting his own claim to an authoritative understanding of the modern design movement. He is willing to concede that Eaton's interior decorators and display personnel are competent when it comes to more traditional furniture; indeed, Van Valkenberg writes "Mr. Cera himself, devoted to modern art, would unhesitatingly choose to *live* in one of our pre-modern styled rooms in preference to any of our 'modern' ones."<sup>55</sup> Lack of comprehension, however, has prevented the effective presentation of even the few good examples of art moderne design at Eaton's.

The report outlined a number of possible solutions to the problem of selling art moderne to Torontonians. The most ambitious involved the construction and furnishing of a hotel in the city that would immerse visitors in an art moderne environment. Cera suggested calling the hotel "Île de France," a name that explicitly connected it to the French ocean liner that had so enthused R.Y. Eaton and that Cera himself had helped to decorate. The thinking behind the proposal echoed R.Y.'s rationale for recommending that the store's European buyers travel on this ship: "The prime purpose of this hotel then, would be to introduce this modern movement in furniture in such a way as to present the modern idea as something living – (not something odd, unusual, queer, and all those descriptions which our [Eaton's] half-way attempts may to some extent have justly earned for itself) – and as such to have people actually living with it."<sup>56</sup> Cera conceded that not all of the hotel's guests would be inspired to bring art moderne into their own

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<sup>54</sup> Report to J.J. Vaughan, December 6, 1928, 2. Emphasis in the original. Eaton's Executive Office General Files, F229-8-0-255, Box 11, T. Eaton Co. fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

homes, but some would recognize its domestic possibilities through the medium of an urban place that combined the public and private application of the new movement.

It is difficult to tell how serious Cera was in proposing that Eaton's build a Toronto hotel. Other recommendations made in the report were more closely aligned with the store's retail business, although they also represented a departure from the way its house furnishings trade was usually conducted. While Eaton's ads marketed the expertise of the store's interior decorating staff, they were not represented as artists possessing a particular personal style. Their services were provided free of charge on the understanding that customers would follow their advice and purchase the products required from the store. Cera's understanding of his role as the store's "Modern Decorator" was based on the more elevated position occupied by interior designers employed by the major Parisian department stores. As he saw it, under his direction Eaton's Modern Art department would have an educational function:

The program would be to create in the store a Section De Luxe, grouping together all pieces of "modern" production of the best quality. This would be an organization something similar to a Parisian furniture house, (for example, DIM) where people who are interested in the modern idea and sympathetic to it would get the habit of gathering there and coming in contact with the Adviser, (such as Miss Thompson of the Book Shop). In this spot lectures could be periodically given on Modern Art and Furnishings, and also exhibitions of Modern Paintings, in order to create above all, an intellectual movement in sympathy with modern art and all those things allied.<sup>57</sup>

While there are similarities between this program and Eaton's other pedagogical activities in the area of interior decoration, Cera's vision of an "intellectual movement in sympathy with modern art and all those things allied" arguably went beyond an education in taste: his language suggests a desire to lead an aesthetic revolution.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 5.

Finally, Cera stated that, if the store was to communicate a true understanding of the new movement, it would be necessary to centralize all purchasing and display of objects in this style under his management. This was contrary to the existing departmental organization of Eaton's house furnishing business, which was structured according to the type of merchandise rather than its design. Although Eaton's management was clearly attracted to the model of the Parisian atelier in theory, they may not have realized how potentially disruptive of the store's operating procedures it would be in practice. Presumably staff in charge of buying wallpaper, floor coverings, lighting fixtures, etc. would not have welcomed any attempts to usurp their authority.

Management's response to Cera's proposals can be inferred from the decision to create a "House of To-day" display as one of the opening attractions for the company's new Calgary store in February 1929. A second version of this model house was installed in Toronto in September of the same year. The House of To-day was in essence a trial balloon. Consumer response would determine if Cera's ambitious plans for marketing art moderne were worth the investment.

#### *The House of To-day in Calgary and Toronto*

The second half of the 1920s was a period of increased investment in bricks and mortar for the T. Eaton Company. Following the first world war the automobile began to transform the retail landscape, transforming the way people shopped by making it easier to travel to towns and cities to buy goods. Eaton's nation-wide mail order business began to decline during these years, and Eaton's managers responded to the shift in buying

patterns by building new downtown stores in other important centres, such as Montreal and Calgary.

Unfortunately, the motives behind the decision to unveil Cera's first major design project in Calgary rather than Toronto or Montreal are not documented in the surviving company archives. Perhaps it was thought that a developing western city would be more open to the modern movement than the more established urban centres in the east. On the other hand, the rationale may simply have been that an art moderne house model would be sufficiently unusual to stimulate interest in the new store. In any event, the press coverage of the display in the *Calgary Herald* was positive: "The idea of meeting the needs of the present day, with their few hours of leisure and their many demands has been adequately met in this gay little house which serves to interpret in charming fashion, the new French mode, carefully adapted to the needs of the small Canadian household" (Fig. 4.6).<sup>58</sup> The reporter also noted that the furniture, while designed by Cera and thus French in inspiration, had been constructed by Eaton's craftsmen using Canadian materials. The colour schemes used in the house were also modern in feeling: a "gay orange door" led into a foyer in apple green, a shade that also dominated the living room. Interestingly a similar combination of pinkish orange and apple green was later used in the ninth floor art moderne restaurant in Eaton's Montreal store.<sup>59</sup> The combination had also been employed in the 1927 Toronto display of an art moderne living room, so it may have been a popular signifier of moderne design. The master bedroom and bathroom

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<sup>58</sup> "Many Novel Features will be Demonstrated to Public When T. Eaton Store Opens," *Calgary Herald*, February 26, 1929, 28.

<sup>59</sup> In a 1964 interview, O.D. Vaughan (head of the House Furnishings division during most of the interwar period and subsequently Eaton's vice president) claimed that "Cera was really the designer of the Round Room [Eaton's College Street restaurant] (also the Montreal Restaurant)." Transcript of interview with O.D. Vaughan, 1964. Eaton's Archives Office Subject Files, F229-162, Box 18, T. Eaton Co. fonds, Archives of Ontario. In the art historical literature the design of both restaurants is attributed to Jacques Carlu, with Cera credited as providing assistance in the case of the Round Room.

were rose coloured, while green again came into play in the kitchen. In a further gesture towards Cera's new home, "Canadian scenes [were] used with excellent effect throughout the rooms, while books by Canadian authors lin[ed] the shelves."<sup>60</sup> The reporter was also struck by the use of built-in furniture, including seating in the hall and a desk and radio in the living room.



*Figure 4.6*  
*Exterior, House of Today, Eaton's Calgary store, 1929.*  
*F229-308-0-2045, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*

Following the positive reception of his work in Calgary, Cera returned to Toronto and presumably continued his study of Canadian conditions. On September 4 an ad in the

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<sup>60</sup> *Calgary Herald*, February 26, 1929, 28.

Globe announced that the Toronto version of the House of To-day would open to the public on the following day.

THE DAILY GLOBE, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1929

**EATON'S HOUSE FURNISHINGS NEWS**



**HOUSE OF TODAY**

BY HEENE CERA

**Opens Thursday, Fourth Floor, House Furnishings Building**

**L**AST September we opened an "Exposition Moderne" presenting to Toronto the new ideas in house furnishings, after the manner of the Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratifs. Now you go a step further. We present for your approval a model house—completely equipped, furnished, built and furnished in the new style specially for Canadian adaptation. It has character, color and warmth, those things which make a real home, yet it brings certain decorative and architectural changes that are adapted to the needs and habits of today. In addition to the house itself there is a row of pretty little shops which contain a comprehensive range of modern house furnishings specially chosen in Europe and other countries.

**THE HOUSE OF TODAY**  
 demonstrates how the "new art" may be combined with traditional effect in Canadian homes. The construction of the house, the furniture (which was made in our own shops) and the lighting arrangements are all from M. Cera's original designs. The decorations have been worked out completely by him. The furniture, mostly of the new art, although historic and historic allusion is to the House of Today. You will look to him for the new ideas and decorative principles which have sometimes been associated with the word "Modernism." Beyond that will find an atmosphere of well-balanced, warmth and well-proportioned. It is said to have its place in any Canadian home.

**THE HOUSE OF TODAY DEPARTMENT OFFERS FOR YOUR APPROVAL** House Furnishings and Gifts in the new style specially selected by Heene Cera in Europe and other countries.

**IT EXTENDS THE FOLLOWING SERVICES** under the direction of Heene Cera:

- Complete installation of any new home, including architectural plans for house construction, decoration and furnishings.
- Furnishing and decorating the home complete or in part.
- The making of furniture in adaptation to habits, designed to specifications.
- Consultations for architecture and decoration of houses, houses, apartments, "shops, office buildings, etc.

**HEENE CERA**  
 an authority on the new art, is in charge of The House of Today Department. In Paris, where he was in connection with the work of modernization, he held the post of director of the National and Municipal Palace Department of a well-known French establishment.

Brought to Canada by THE T. EATON CO. to organize and show a development of the new art, Mr. Cera realized that success would depend primarily on the extent to which it was adapted to Canadian use. After several years he has produced a style, the basis of which, he learned directly by Canadian taste and climatic trials and conditions.

To demonstrate that this style is well suited to Canada, Mr. Cera has conceived and created The House of Today.

**T. EATON CO.**

Figure 4.7  
 Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, September 4, 1929, 24.

Based on the photographs of the exteriors of the Calgary (Fig. 4.6) and Toronto (Fig. 4.8) house models, Cera had made some changes to his original design. The Calgary house is essentially a cube with detailing at each of the rounded corners which seems to anticipate the streamline ornamentation characteristic of American art moderne design in the 1930s. The ad for the House of To-day's Toronto incarnation indicates a less orthodox structure that combines a three-storey rectangular unit at the back with a boldly curved two-storey front (Fig 4.7). A patio leading to the front door is inset under the cantilevered second floor with its ribbon windows. Visitors hoping to encounter a fully realized version of this image at the store would have been disappointed: probably as a result of space constraints only the first floor was built (Fig. 4.8).



*Figure 4.8*  
*Exterior, front entrance, House of To-day. Fourth floor, House Furnishings Building, Toronto, 1929. F229-308-0-2044, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Note the ribbon windows and smooth stucco exterior.*

Through the open door the rounded shapes of a staircase and a plinth topped by a statue can be glimpsed. The hall itself is round and, in the surviving photographs, it appears relatively large in comparison to the other rooms making up the model. Regrettably no plans for the layout of the house were found in the archives, which makes it difficult to establish how the various spaces documented in photographs related to one another. The House of To-day apparently contained a living room, dining room, kitchen with breakfast nook, bedroom, boudoir, nursery and bathroom. All of these seem to have

been on one level on the fourth floor of the store, although presumably the arrangement would have been different in a house built as shown in Eaton's ad.

In some ways, Cera's design seems curiously conservative. He maintained the convention of separate living and dining spaces, instead of adopting an open floor plan. This decision may, of course, reflect his assessment of Canadian preferences at the time. His main challenges to convention are manifested in terms of decorative effects. The furnishings in the living room appear quite different from the period furnishings so popular with middle class Torontonians (Fig. 4.9). Cera designed chairs and sofas in simple geometric shapes that were upholstered in either leather or plain fabrics. Rugs and draperies are also unpatterned, with the exception of a small throw rug under the piano, which echoes the striped ceramic surround of the fireplace. The walls are plain, lacking the wainscoting, paneling, baseboards, cornices, and even the door and window frames common in the Toronto houses of this era.



*Figure 4.9*  
*Living room interior, House of To-day, Eaton's House Furnishings Building, Toronto, 1929. F229-308-0-2044, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. The floor lamps and the occasional table in the alcove use chrome, a popular art moderne material.*

A similar restraint in the use of ornamental detail is found throughout the house model. The master bedroom features boldly striped bedcovers and upholstery, while a mural depicting stylized leaping horses hangs over the twin beds, but the general feeling is minimalist (Fig. 4.10).<sup>61</sup> The adjoining boudoir is livelier, containing a Navajo style rug, figurines and an eccentric dressing table, which looks capable of scuttling out of the room (Fig 4.11). The most decorative space in the house is the child's nursery, with its scattered toys and gaily painted furniture (Fig. 4.12).

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<sup>61</sup> Twin beds were considered to be more hygienic, and thus more modern, than double beds. Hilary Hinds, "Together and Apart: Twin Beds, Domestic Hygiene and Modern Marriage, 1890-1945" *Journal of Design History* 23:3 (2010): 275-304.



*Figure 4.10*  
*Master bedroom, House of To-day, Eaton's House Furnishings Building, Toronto, 1929.*  
*F229-308-0-2044, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*



*Figure 4.11*  
*Boudoir, House of To-day, Eaton's House Furnishings Building, Toronto, 1929.*  
*F229-308-0-2044, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*



*Figure 4.12*  
*Nursery, House of To-day, Eaton's House Furnishings Building, Toronto, 1929.*  
*F229-308-0-2044, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. A room clearly*  
*designed for creative play.*

A group of small boutiques were built adjacent to the House of To-day. These contained “a comprehensive range of modern house furnishings specially chosen in European and other markets.”<sup>62</sup> Each of the little shops was given a woman’s name, identifying art moderne merchandise with feminine self-expression. In her monograph *Designs on Modernity*, art historian Tag Gronberg has argued that the 1925 Paris exposition represented a consumerist woman’s city that brought together clothing and

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<sup>62</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 4 1928, 24.

interior decoration.<sup>63</sup> The little shops, Flora, Sylvia, Marie, Evelyne and Betty, may well have been inspired by the exposition's rue des Boutiques where all the ingredients for a fashionable ensemble were on view. Similarly, shoppers could find the accessories needed to complete an interior ensemble in the moderne style in the selling spaces adjacent to the House of To-day.

Although the House of To-day was stripped of many ornamental details Torontonians would have expected to find in a home, Cera's interiors were far from austere. The display was created to persuade visitors that art moderne was, if not precisely cozy, perfectly comfortable and suited to a middle-class lifestyle. Following the opening in September, Eaton's copywriters reported on the public response:

How would you like to live in "The House of To-day?"—That is what everyone says after visiting this extraordinarily interesting modern house, which has been built on the Fourth Floor of the House Furnishings Building. "How would you like to live in the House of To-day?"

It makes you pause and consider.

"I would love it in the Summer—but don't believe I'd like it for a Winter house," says one.

"Yet it's very restful," sighs someone else, sinking into one of the leather chairs in the living-room. —No clutter, just beauty, very calm, quiet beauty."

"I'd love to be invited to a dinner party in that kind of a dining-room," is someone else's comment. "Everybody would sparkle! —It's such a radiant room."<sup>64</sup>

These may or may not have been actual remarks made by shoppers, but the copy does reflect a promotional approach that framed the display as a catalyst for a popular debate on the merits of art moderne. In an ad that appeared on October 3, a series of 'bouquets and knocks' listed paired pros and cons presumably provided by the public. Favourable

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<sup>63</sup> Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 23-33.

<sup>64</sup> *Eaton News Weekly*, October 12, 1929. F229-96, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

comments on the beauty of the lighting and architecture were coupled with negative criticisms that the house was “too reminiscent of the machine age” and “the fireplace looks like a refrigerator.”<sup>65</sup> The ad ended by inviting readers to address their reactions to Cera himself, “who would be pleased to discuss with you these and any other criticisms you have to offer.”

In the short term, it appears the House of To-day generated controversy but not much in the way of business. By March 1930 Cera’s future at Eaton’s had become precarious. Perhaps influenced by the climate of economic uncertainty following the 1929 stock crash, vice president J.J. Vaughan wrote to R.Y. Eaton suggesting it was time to cut their losses:

If Cera does not do the [Round Room] restaurant and if the house for Lady Eaton is not proceeded with there is practically nothing for Cera to do. He was brought here as a consultant in “Modern” style and to do modern interior decorating. He is not being consulted and he is not doing any interior decorating, with the exception of what the Company is giving him, therefore we are approaching the point of a decision as to whether to retain his services further or not.<sup>66</sup>

Cera did stay with Eaton’s but in a significantly different role. The Modern Art department was closed and he was transferred to Merchandise Display. During the remainder of his long career with the store, with some exceptions as noted below, his design skills were principally applied within the interior of Eaton’s – College Street store. Cera thus moved from marketing moderne to using the moderne for marketing.

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<sup>65</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 3, 1929, 24. While much less organized, this attempt to engage Torontonians parallels efforts to gather consumer input used at the Design in the Household exhibition held at the Toronto Art Gallery (now AGO) in 1946. See Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Post-War Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 48-61.

<sup>66</sup> J.J. Vaughan to R.Y. Eaton, March 26, 1930. Eaton’s Executive Office General Files, F229-8-0-255, Box 11, T. Eaton Co. fonds, Archives of Ontario.

*Eaton's – College Street: The Store of Today*

At the time it opened in late October 1930 the College Street building was breezily describe in the ads as “in the classical style with a dash of modernity.”<sup>67</sup> The building was the work of the Montreal based architectural firm, Ross and Macdonald, which was also responsible for Eaton's Montreal and Calgary stores. It has since been recognized as one of Toronto's finest examples of what is now called art deco architecture. The Round Room restaurant designed by French architect Jacques Carlu, with input from Cera, was for decades an important setting for sociability in the city.<sup>68</sup> While the House of To-day did not make the move from the House Furnishing Building to the new store, the debate about art moderne's domestic possibilities did.

On at least two occasions, Eaton's publicized further experiments in the merits of art moderne interior decoration. In 1930 a group of socially prominent young matrons belonging to Toronto's Junior League undertook to respond to the question: “How does the smart young person of today like to have her house furnished? Does she take her Gertrude Stein and her Bartok into an *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Blue Danube* atmosphere, or does she demand consistency and chairs of bent steel tubing?”<sup>69</sup> Instead of providing a definitive answer, these ‘young moderns’ produced display rooms in both traditional and art moderne styles. With the help of Cera, Mrs. C.H.A. Armstrong created a modern bedroom with “No frills. No fol-de-rols. Just a beautiful symphony in silver and blue.”<sup>70</sup> Other women turned to the more familiar Jacobean and Queen Anne furnishings. If it was

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<sup>67</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 18, 1930, 24.

<sup>68</sup> See footnote 59.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Etta Macpherson, “The Smart Generation Furnishes a House,” *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (June 1930): 21.

<sup>70</sup> *Eaton News Weekly*, April 12 1930, 8. F229-96, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

not a ringing endorsement, this result at least tacitly acknowledged art moderne as a decorative possibility.

The publicity generated by the art moderne model houses at the 1933 Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago prompted Eaton's to once again feature the style at the College Street store.<sup>71</sup> This time the design of a whole series of displays was turned over to Cera. According to the *Globe*, the store had been turned into "A Century of Progress within a city block and behind it all the genius of René Cera, who has been planning this magnificent show for weeks and months."<sup>72</sup> It was an opportunity not only to showcase furniture and furnishing in the new style but also, through the complete redecoration of Thrift House (see Chapter 5 for the discussion of this house model featuring moderately priced furnishings), to demonstrate how some modest renovations could change the character of a traditional suburban house. The display was an argument in favour of art moderne on a budget:

No, don't say you couldn't bear inexpensive modernism, that when it's so plain it has to be so good. Of course, it has. But not costly. Wait until you see Thrift House. It's been done by Rene Cera, one of the world's high priests of contemporary decoration. He has undertaken to show that on the average outlay of money you can make a room restful, spacious looking, deliciously attractive in color—and smart as a Schiaparelli model. That's his gospel in furnishing.<sup>73</sup>

The results in terms of sales were disappointing once again and in 1934 the house was redecorated in the popular Colonial style. It seemed that middle class Torontonians were still not prepared to live in surroundings as "smart as a Schiaparelli model."

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<sup>71</sup> House Furnishings Committee Minutes, 18 July and 12 September 1933. F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Eaton's showed movies of the Chicago fair in September 1933. T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 12 1933, 18.

<sup>72</sup> "Modern Spirit in Furniture Seen in Show: Interesting Exhibition Opens in Eaton's College Street Store," *Toronto Globe*, September 27, 1933, 11.

<sup>73</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Daily Star*, September 29, 1933, 41.

The House of To-day and Eaton's subsequent efforts to popularize art moderne design may not have converted the average homeowner, but they do seem to have had some influence on Canadian architects. In 1936 Eaton's sponsored a national competition for the design of a mid-sized and a small house.<sup>74</sup> The great majority of the resulting submissions reflected European trends in modern architecture. Whether they were truly modern in same way as the work of Le Corbusier or the Bauhaus is debatable, but superficially they bore many of the hallmarks of the new aesthetic: flat roofs, ribbon windows, and plain stucco exteriors. The panel of distinguished Canadian architects responsible for judging the entries expressed surprise at the stylistic uniformity of the results, given that no restrictions had been placed on the exterior appearance of the designs.<sup>75</sup> The winning plans and elevations, together with miniature models of room interiors, were exhibited at Eaton's in 1936. Photographs of the display show that it, too, was inspired by art moderne. It may well have been Cera's handiwork as the head of merchandise display at College Street (Figs. 4.13 and 4.14).

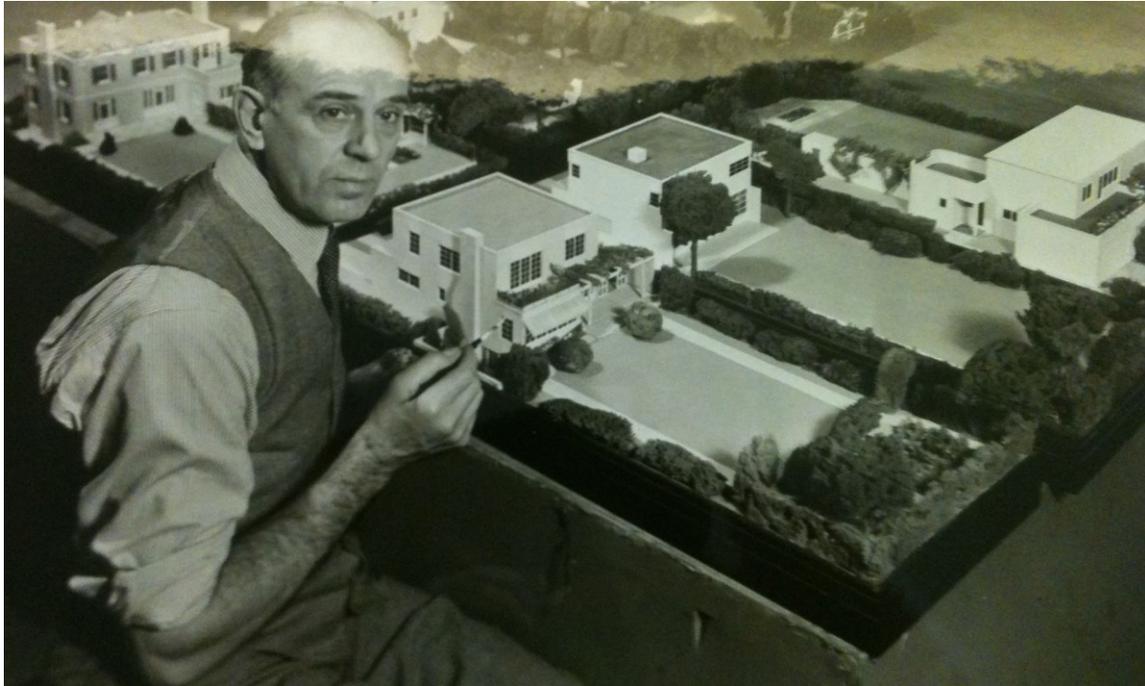
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<sup>74</sup> This competition is discussed at length in Susan Haight, "Machines in Suburban Gardens: The 1936 T. Eaton Company Architectural Competition for House Designs," *Material History Journal* 44 (Fall/Autumn 1996): 23-43.

<sup>75</sup> The judges were John Lyle, Mackenzie Waters and Bruce H. Wright.



*Figure 4.13*  
*Exterior, Eaton's Architectural Exhibition, Eaton's-College Street, 1936. F229-308-0-1048, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Note the signage asking "Which house do you prefer?"*



*Figure 4.14*

*Preparing models for Eaton's Architectural Competition Exhibition, 1936.*

*F229-308-0-1048, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Almost all of the houses are versions of a flat-roofed cube.*

### *Conclusion*

In 1934, Eaton's published an ad in the *Globe* claiming to have introduced "the Modern Movement in Art and Decoration" to Toronto. As proof, the copy cited the store's displays in 1926, 1927, and 1928. These exercises in aesthetic pedagogy were crowned by the creation of Cera's House of To-day. The ad then announced the redecoration of Thrift House in the art moderne style as yet another step in its efforts to bring modern design to the city's homes. In the midst of the Depression, art moderne styling might lead to "the rehabilitation of the furniture industry."<sup>76</sup>

One way and another, Eaton's had spent the best part of a decade marketing art moderne to Toronto's middle and upper class homeowners. The store had some success

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<sup>76</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 22, 1934, 18.

with the carriage trade, but the bulk of its customers resisted the new aesthetic. And yet the store persisted in its efforts to persuade shoppers that art moderne design was livable and even lovable.

Paul Nystrom, a leading American expert on retailing at the time, wrote on the dangers of anticipating style trends in his book, *Economics of Fashion*. Those too far ahead of popular tastes risked transforming a commercial enterprise into an experimental station, with potentially disastrous consequences for the bottom line.<sup>77</sup> He also conceded, however, that “Modern art is an illustration of a major style becoming the fashion in our own day.”<sup>78</sup> One of the problems facing Eaton’s was the fact that modern design’s stylistic identity was still in the process of being defined during the interwar years. Cera’s House of To-day was not necessarily the house of tomorrow and, by and large, Toronto consumers felt safer investing in tried and true period designs. The argument that interior decoration should reflect the realities of modern life fell flat with people who clung to the vision of home as a refuge in a changing world. During much of the 1930s economic uncertainty probably made it even harder to persuade consumers to invest in novel furnishing. The mode of mobility had to contend with an entrenched mode of stability in the struggle to shape popular ideas about taste and domesticity.

This chapter has explored Eaton’s efforts to engage with a novel design aesthetic known at the time as art moderne. Following earlier promotional successes featuring the avant-garde couturier Paul Poiret and motivated by the desire to position the store at the forefront of new stylistic developments in home furnishings, as well as fashions, Eaton’s managers experimented by importing a French expert, René Cera, to adapt art moderne to

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Nystrom, *Economics of Fashion* (New York: Ronald Press, 1928), 29-30.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the needs and wants of Torontonians. The House of To-day was an object lesson that materialized that process of adaptation. While the experiment had mixed results, it serves as further evidence of Eaton's pedagogical approach to marketing.

## Chapter 5

### Thrift House: Good Taste on a Budget

On January 18, 1926 the T. Eaton Company published a full-page advertisement in the *Globe* announcing the opening of Thrift House, a new model home located on the first floor of the store's House Furnishing Building.<sup>1</sup> Designed by Sproatt and Rolph, a well-known firm of Toronto architects, the display replicated a comfortable six-room, two-storey home with a neo-Georgian exterior, an architectural style popular in the new suburbs being built to the north and west of the city centre (Fig. 5.1).<sup>2</sup> While the illusion of reality was somewhat undermined by the fact that spatial constraints made it necessary to place the lower and upper floors side by side, this did not noticeably bother the Torontonians who flocked to see the new attraction. By January 22, Eaton's claimed that thousands of people had already visited the model home to see the marvels of interior decorating that could be achieved "for a sum wholly in keeping with the average, limited income."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 18, 1926, 16. The House Furnishing Building was part of a complex of structures owned by Eaton's, including factory, office and retail space, in downtown Toronto at the corner of Queen and Yonge Streets.

<sup>2</sup> The use of this more formal exterior style distinguished Thrift House from the cottage style evoked by Simpson's Budget Bungalow (introduced in 1924): see Robert Simpson Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 13, 1924, 15. At around the same time, Sproatt and Rolph were involved in the design of the high end Georgian Room restaurant on the ninth floor of Eaton's main store, which also drew on eighteenth century British design influences: see "Sproatt, Henry," *Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada*, accessed May 14, 2019, <https://www.dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/node/1322>.

<sup>3</sup> T. Eaton Company ads, *Toronto Globe*, January 22, 1926, 18 and January 18, 1926, 16.



*Figure 5.1*  
*Exterior, Thrift House, Eaton's House Furnishings Building, 1926. F229-308-0-2043, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Note the Georgian style entrance.*

The definition of “the average, limited income” embodied by Thrift House was generous: the cost of the furniture and furnishings was “less than \$2,600” at a time when over sixty per cent of Canadian wage earners made under \$1,000 a year.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning the display was designed to appeal to relatively well off professional and white-collar homeowners with sufficient disposable income to support the purchase of new household goods. Its position in prime selling space on the main floor was indicative of the importance Eaton’s assigned to these customers.

Thrift House was not only created to sell mid-range wallpaper and dining room suites. Much more significantly the display materialized new attitudes to spending that

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<sup>4</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 23, 1926, 24. For information on wages, see League for Social Reconstruction, Research Committee, *Social Planning for Canada* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson & Sons Limited, 1935), 6-7.

had come into play during the 1920s. During the interwar years the concept of thrift was being redefined as wise buying. This shift in meaning reflected the larger cultural changes triggered by mass production, urbanization, and the transition from scarcity to abundance for a growing portion of the population. The ordinary urban housewife, once primarily a producer, had been transformed into the family's purchasing agent. Toronto's middle classes were expanding thanks to the creation of a cadre of salaried middle managers needed to meet the demands of increasingly complex business enterprises. Fordism, with its time and motion studies, standardization of processes and products, and replacement of workplace satisfaction with higher wages, was laying the foundations for the post World War II world of mass consumption. Eaton's senior managers, born into Victorian values of frugality and self-denial, were negotiating a changing landscape that made many of them deeply uneasy. Thrift House, and the accompanying publicity campaign, represented Eaton's attempt to reconcile fiscal prudence with the increasing demand for higher standards of living that characterized interwar consumers.<sup>5</sup>

Given these concerns, it makes sense that Eaton's senior management chose to frame the opening of Thrift House as an explicit exercise in public pedagogy. The January 18<sup>th</sup> advertisement is text heavy: visual images are confined to a sketch of the exterior and a detail of a welcoming open doorway (Fig 5.2). The copy is divided into three columns with the headings "Thrift House Itself," "The Budget Idea," and "Thrift Bureau." Readers are tantalized by a deliberately vague description of the actual display calculated to pique their interest and bring them to the House Furnishings Building to see

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<sup>5</sup> See Marina Moskowitz, *Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) for a valuable discussion of the concept of a middle class standard of living in the United States in the early twentieth century.

it for themselves. The main focus of the ad, though, is “The Budget Idea” which the copy explicitly connects to Eaton’s launch of a new purchasing mechanism: “With the introduction of our **Deferred Payment Plan** [emphasis in the original]– requiring more thought and adjustment on the part of the customer than does our simpler method of cash payment – the T. Eaton Company will boom the budget idea in Thrift House and Thrift Bureau.”<sup>6</sup> Beyond its obvious function as a lifelike setting enabling shoppers to see furniture and furnishings in an appropriate domestic context, Thrift House was intended to model the modern principles of fiscal prudence underlying the responsible use of consumer credit.

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<sup>6</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 18, 1926, 16.

PLAN YOUR SPENDING.

# EATON'S DAILY STORE NEWS

PLAN YOUR SPENDING.



## The Opening of THRIFT HOUSE

On the Main Floor, House Furnishings Building

Takes Place Tuesday Afternoon at 3.30—On Conclusion of Lecture by Mrs. Seaver of New York

### Thrift House Itself--

Delightful little six-room dwelling built from plans by Messrs. Spensall and Ralph, Architects, Toronto.

Papered, painted and furnished by our interior decorators to show how comfortable and charming Thrift House--at your own home, flat or bungalow--can be made for a sum wholly in keeping with the average, limited income.

A two-story house, upper and lower floors placed side by side in such a way that imagination easily carries you up the stairway from one to the other.

### Cupboards, Fireplace, Windows

and doors are located with an eye to convenience and pleasing effect. If you're building in the Spring, Thrift House will give you many hints, architecturally.

### People-About-to-Be-Married

have a special claim on Thrift House. A "Thrift Advisor" is ready to talk prices for the furnishing of three, five, and six-room flats--or larger houses. She will make lists of what is needed--from furniture to tea sets. No charge for advice or lists of household equipment.

Through the Courtesy of John Wanamaker's of New York

### MRS. FRANCES SEAVER

Director of the Wanamaker Home Budget Service

Will Give a Lecture in the Concourse in Front of Thrift House on the Subject

"PLAN YOUR SPENDING"

Mrs. Seaver was the originator of this budgeting service which has become so popular an institution among Wanamaker customers. She is a well-known authority on all matters relating to home economies. She will discuss such questions as:

- How to balance income and expenditure.
- What properties of the family means should go to rent, household improvements, holidays, donations, etc.
- How to save systematically.
- How to buy more wisely and thriftily.
- Why it is so helpful and advantageous to plan your spending.

Time of Lecture--2.30 p.m., Tuesday

### The Budget Idea

COMMONLY associated with public treasuries, Governments base their expenditures on what is in the bag, or, as the French call it--budget. Household Science applies the budget idea to home management. In 1923 it was spread over the United States by

Messrs. John Wanamaker with "The Little Home That Budget Built"

set up in brick and plaster in their New York store and furnished in a way to prove the big advantage of buying with thrift and good taste. Linked with this was the Home Budget Service for the instruction of Wanamaker customers in the principles of wise expenditure. With the introduction of our Deferred Payment Plan--requiring more thought and adjustment on the part of the customer than does our simpler method of cash payment --T. EATON Co., will loan the budget idea in

Thrift House and Thrift Bureau

### Thrift Bureau

HERE are Thrift Advisors whose business is to straighten out the tangle of making ends meet. Or to put a nice, comfortable shape possible for spending and saving. When you come to consult them there will be utmost privacy in discussion. Just a personal talk with one intimately acquainted with the principles that govern the proper division of income. She will point out ways to wise living and she will

### Budget Your Income for You

--give you a working plan suited exactly to your needs, considering all your special preferences and predicaments. She will go deep into detail--of food, clothes, educating the children.

Thrift House and surrounding promenades will be open to the public on Tuesday and following evenings--for exhibition purposes only

FROM 7 TO 11 O'CLOCK

### Your Choice:

THE ECONOMY OF CASH PRICE OR DEFERRED PAYMENTS WITH AN EXTRA CHARGE

WITH Cash you expect to buy for less, whether it is a house or goods. Reasonable, because Cash Dealing involves least expenses for the seller. EATON Prices are Cash Prices, based upon the well-known economies of Cash Dealing, which enables us to offer the best values available on the average.

But if you prefer to purchase with Deferred Payments, you can do so in certain lines of merchandise by making arrangements with the PURCHASERS' FINANCE COMPANY, LTD., which has been formed for the purpose and which is located on the Fourth Floor of our House Furnishings Building.

With further notice, terms of the Purchasers' Finance Company, Ltd., is accredited persons only. On initial purchase totaling \$50.00 or more, a minimum cash deposit of \$20.00, and the remainder, plus the P. F. Co. charge of 7 1/2 percent, is payable in ten equal monthly payments. On classes of goods where the time set for payment is longer or shorter than ten months, the PURCHASERS' FINANCE CO.'s rate charged would vary also.

The Purchasers' Finance Company Ltd. Office is on the Fourth Floor of our House Furnishings Building, where full particulars may be obtained.



Figure 5.2

T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, January 18, 1926, 16.

Eaton's drew on the prestige of a major New York department store to promote the ideas behind Thrift House. Torontonians were invited to attend a special inaugural lecture on budgeting and financial management given by Mrs. Frances Seaver, an American home economist on loan from Wanamaker's New York, where she managed "The Little Home that Budget Built." The ad stated that this model home, which

Wanamaker's introduced in 1923, was the prototype for Eaton's own house display, conveniently ignoring Simpson's installation of a Budget Bungalow in 1924.<sup>7</sup> Just as Wanamaker's (and Simpson's) display was supplemented by a household budgeting service, the ad copy announced the establishment of a Thrift Bureau staffed by trained home economists capable of drawing up individualized budgets for customers desiring to adopt modern methods of planned spending. This service was offered free of charge and with no obligation to buy, although obviously Eaton's hoped it would show Toronto housewives how to manage their income in order to afford new furnishings and appliances.

At the time of their creation Thrift House and the Thrift Bureau were designed to promote the planned allocation of income on the part of Toronto's middle class homeowners. During the long life of the display, Eaton's would come to take a narrower approach to its function as a merchandising device. In 1926, however, Thrift House epitomized an important stage in the development of modern consumerism. Both the advocates and the critics of consumerist domesticity were wrestling with the implications of radical changes to everyday life produced by new technologies and rising expectations. Eaton's marketed budgeting as a mechanism for achieving middle class material aspirations without risking financial security. In a seeming paradox that illustrated the persistence of older values, the store also sought to expose the hidden costs involved in having your cake and eating it too.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of "The Little Home that Budget Built" see Louisa Iarocci, *The Urban Department Store in America, 1850-1930* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 195-7. "Budget" house models were popular features used by a number of department stores in the United States: see *Good Furniture Magazine* 20 (March 1923), 139-41 and 26 (June 1926), 302-3.

This chapter details the debates about credit and wise spending occurring behind the scenes at Eaton's prior to the launch of Thrift House and the Thrift Bureau. As we will see, the pedagogical intentions underlying the creation of this house model display were made explicit in an accompanying ad campaign that featured an essay competition on the pros and cons of Eaton's decision to levy interest charges on installment purchases as a means of privileging cash payments. The work of the women offering free financial management advice through the Thrift Bureau is linked to concerns about household budgeting documented in the women's pages of the *Toronto Globe*. A popular feature of the store's main floor, Thrift House's frequent redecoration was connected to changing ideas about the meaning of thrift and wise spending. The chapter argues that over its long life as a display Thrift House proved a flexible pedagogical mechanism, teaching the advantages of careful financial management in the 1920s, comparative decorative options in the 1930s, and the creative possibilities of the make do and mend interior decoration during wartime.

#### *Eaton's Corporate Culture and Installment Credit*

Internal memoranda preserved as part of the T. Eaton Company papers document the soul searching on the part of the store's senior managers that preceded the introduction of installment credit. In order to understand the resistance to providing this service to customers, it is necessary to place the debate in the context of a corporate identity that had been consciously developed during the decades since Eaton's founding in 1869.

Eaton's founder, Timothy Eaton, had more than a decade's experience in small town retail before moving to Toronto to open a dry goods store. Even during those early

years he demonstrated a growing reluctance to grant the credit terms expected by a largely rural clientele.<sup>8</sup> When he moved to the city Eaton made it his policy to accept only cash payment for his merchandise. Over time the commitment to “spot cash” became closely associated with the company’s efforts to market the store as having the best values for the lowest prices.

The importance of this policy to the store’s public image is underlined in the 1919 Golden Jubilee book. In its pages Edith Macdonald described Timothy Eaton as a retailing innovator ahead of his time:

When Mr. Timothy Eaton refused to adopt the charge account and marked his goods in plain figures with one unchangeable price he stood out among his fellow store-keepers in Toronto as an idealist—an oddity. Failure was predicted for his new policy. Who could run a successful store on a “No Credit” basis? It was a wild dream, they said.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, while not as original as Macdonald claimed, Eaton’s cash only policy served the company well during its first half century.<sup>10</sup> In her history of the store’s early years Joy Santink notes that cash payments provided the liquidity that enabled Timothy Eaton to negotiate better deals with suppliers, deals that meant lower prices and consequently higher turnover.<sup>11</sup> The refusal to grant credit also simplified customer relations: credit worthiness was hard to determine in the context of a growing city where shopkeepers no longer knew their clientele. The price of Eaton’s goods did not have to include the costs involved in administering charge accounts and absorbing bad debts. While Timothy

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<sup>8</sup> Joy L. Santink, *Timothy Eaton and the Rise of his Department Store* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 33.

<sup>9</sup> Edith Macdonald [The Scribe], *Golden Jubilee, 1869-1919* (Toronto and Winnipeg: T. Eaton Co., 1919), 36-7.

<sup>10</sup> Santink, 63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

Eaton was certainly not unique in following a “no credit” strategy, he used it to maximum advantage in his advertising to promote his store’s reputation for value for money.

By the store’s fiftieth anniversary, however, the retail landscape was undergoing significant changes. In 1915 Eaton’s main competitor, the Robert Simpson Company, advertised deferred payment for furniture and household appliances through its Home Owners’ Furnishing Club plan.<sup>12</sup> Initially offered only during Simpson’s semi annual house furnishings sales, the plan allowed approved members of the club to buy sale merchandise on an installment basis while prices were at their lowest. The price of the goods was unaffected by the method of purchase: cash and credit buyers paid the same amount. In effect, this meant that cash customers helped carry the overhead costs associated with credit services:

The cash and credit prices of house furnishings in some department stores and furniture houses are the same, which might create the impression that one is getting something for nothing. Such is not the case, at least not as a rule; the cost of the credit service is included in the mark-up of prices. There is an advantage to the instalment buyer in these cases, however, as the cash customers are helping to pay the costs of the credit system.<sup>13</sup>

Eaton’s senior managers did not approve of such practices, considering them fundamentally unfair in terms of the treatment of cash buyers. They continued to adhere to a cash only policy, even as they reached out to wealthier segments of Toronto’s population and moved into selling expensive luxury items such as antique furniture and top of the line pianos.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Simpson Co. ad, *Toronto Globe*, February 13, 1915, 3. It was later renamed the “Home Lovers’ Club.”

<sup>13</sup> “Social and Economic Consequences of Buying on the Instalment Plan,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* (January 1927): 31.

<sup>14</sup> A brief experiment with selling cars appears to have failed because of the refusal to adopt deferred purchasing. File: Employees – Reminiscences, Eaton’s Archives Office subject files, F229-162-0-900, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

As the 1920s wore on Eaton's upper management began to worry that strict adherence to Timothy Eaton's founding principles was causing the store to lose a significant amount of business. Lower level employees dealing directly with the public blamed sluggish sales figures on the company's refusal to provide credit services offered by other retailers, particularly Simpson's.<sup>15</sup> During this decade Eaton's was also expanding into new markets, such as Montreal, where customers were used to buying on credit. Commercial expediency eventually triumphed, but it was not an easy victory. As internal correspondence between company president R.Y. Eaton (1875-1956) and other members of upper management shows, the discussion about the pros and cons of introducing credit in the form of a deferred payment plan limited to purchases of consumer durables for the home was also a conversation about the morality of consumerism.<sup>16</sup>

Letters and memos exchanged by R.Y. Eaton and H.M. Tucker (1875-1959), manager of the Winnipeg store, are particularly revealing. Both men had learned the ropes of department store retailing under the tutelage of Timothy Eaton. R.Y. Eaton, a nephew of Timothy's, had become president of the company following the premature death of the founder's son and heir, Sir John Eaton, in 1922. He effectively held his position in trust until one of Sir John's four sons became experienced enough to take the reins. Under these circumstances, he was reluctant to depart from a policy so closely linked to the store's public image.<sup>17</sup> Tucker was also deeply committed to the cash

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<sup>15</sup> Deferred Payment Plan Committee report, October 23, 1925. File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton's Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Memo dated October 1, 1925 from R.Y. Eaton to H.M. Tucker. File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton's Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

system. His experience of Winnipeg's booming wheat economy of the war years, followed by a rapid decline in prices during the early 1920s, had only confirmed his suspicions about credit, suspicions he believed were shared by his customers.<sup>18</sup>

Tucker's reading of the situation in mid-1920s Winnipeg may have been reasonable, but overall attitudes to consumer credit in Canada and the United States were changing. Although a horror of debt was deeply ingrained in many North Americans, they increasingly felt entitled to the material comforts made possible by industrial innovations.<sup>19</sup> Consumer durables considered luxuries before World War I were redefined as necessities in the 1920s. This was particularly true of automobiles. Their cost had dropped significantly as a result of production efficiencies introduced by Henry Ford and others, but automobiles still remained out of reach for the ordinary consumer. Installment buying solved this problem, making it possible for workers receiving a regular income to obtain a greatly desired commodity. Deferred payment plans for automobiles proved hugely successful as a marketing strategy, leading retailers of other types of goods to follow suit. Ever the voice of doom, H.M. Tucker complained to R.Y. Eaton:

The success obtained by the automobile trade with this plan has had a damaging effect on practically all other branches of retail, except the lines necessary to the operation of the motor car, and this very success is to my mind the reason why numerous people offer clothes on terms, that the article might well be in the discard before payment is due. Its [sic] bound to encourage an extravagant type of

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<sup>18</sup> Memo dated August 7, 1925 from H.M. Tucker to R.Y. Eaton. File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton's Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>19</sup> Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 235; and Louis Hyman, *Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 36-7.

living which in the long run is not in the best interest of the consumer, retailer or manufacturer.<sup>20</sup>

For Tucker, the popularity of deferred payment plans for cars represented a slippery slope. Inevitably the undisciplined spending habits created by consumer credit would lead to economic disaster.

Responding to Tucker, R.Y. Eaton took a more nuanced approach to the problem. Although he was undoubtedly uncomfortable about abandoning the principle of cash only transactions, he was equally troubled about the possibility that the store might lose significant market share under his watch, arguing “If the motor trade alone were to have a monopoly of instalment payments, trade in other lines would be starved. If other lines offer instalment facilities there will be that much less available for motor payments.”<sup>21</sup> Although brought up to believe that a penny saved was a penny earned, R.Y. Eaton was well aware that a new generation of purchasers had different attitudes. Given the financial irresponsibility displayed by flappers and their male consorts, it was even possible to view deferred payment contracts as a lesser evil than the thoughtless frittering away of money. As he told Tucker in a letter dated August 11, 1925:

The instalment plan is certainly hurtful when applied to purchase of luxuries, as it might then mean deprivation of necessities later. But when applied to things of lasting value that the purchaser is entitled to have, it is not objectionable; it may even become beneficial. This generation has been indulged since infancy and scarcely exercises self restraint, therefore is going to spend most of the income on something. If part of the income is ear-marked for payments on useful articles of

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<sup>20</sup> Memo dated August 7, 1925 from H.M. Tucker to R.Y. Eaton., File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton’s Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>21</sup> Letter dated August 11, 1925 from R.Y. Eaton to H.M. Tucker. See also Memo dated October 1, 1925 from R.Y. Eaton to H.M. Tucker for competition from Simpson’s. File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton’s Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

some enduring value there will be less spent on movies and candies, and thus thrift will be fostered.<sup>22</sup>

R.Y. Eaton's cautious optimism about installment credit was shared by many of his contemporaries in the business world. In 1925 the *Financial Post*, a leading Canadian business journal, published a series of articles about this relatively new form of credit. While the series was mainly concerned with the mechanics of deferred payment, the larger social implications of its increasing popularity with consumers did receive some consideration. The author noted that those opposed to installment buying considered the use of credit by businesses and governments completely acceptable because it generated wealth, but criticized the use of consumer credit as wasteful extravagance:

The usual answer [made by those against consumer credit] to the above argument as bearing on the installment plan of buying is that in the case of cities and business the money is spent for productive purposes, but in the case of individuals it is simply to acquire luxuries. However, terming the articles luxuries and unproductive may be correct or incorrect. Do we know that the enjoyment of these articles has no productive effect on the purchaser? Do we know that their possession does not broaden his outlook on life, quicken his intellect, and spur his ambition so that his will and ability to produce are increased?<sup>23</sup>

The argument that consumer goods could have a productive value was considered particularly compelling when applied to so-called durable goods intended for use in the home. Labour saving appliances such as washing machines and vacuum cleaners clearly made the housewife more efficient:

The loan for the purchase of a family washing machine is usually classed as a consumers' loan and yet the net result of the use of the machine may be and sometimes is, an increased total production. When such is the case, and the purchase of the machine is possible only through a loan, then the consumers' loan

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<sup>22</sup> Letter dated August 11, 1925 from R.Y. Eaton to H.M. Tucker. File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton's Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>23</sup> *Financial Post*, November 6, 1925, 9.

should not be condemned as a detriment to the source of wealth, but rather should be credited with being an aid to increased production.<sup>24</sup>

Even less obviously productive household goods such as comfortable living room furniture could contribute to the broader social good by making family members, particularly sons and daughters, less likely to seek out commercial amusements in their leisure time.

By the mid 1920s many analysts of consumer spending had accepted that installment buying had come to stay.<sup>25</sup> Although personally sympathetic to many of H.M. Tucker's concerns, R.Y. Eaton had reached the same conclusion. Having decided it was necessary to introduce a deferred payment program at the company's Toronto headquarters, the problem became a marketing issue: how to persuade customers that the new service did not represent a betrayal of the cash only principle on which the store had built its reputation for value and honest dealing? Writing to Tucker, R.Y. Eaton acknowledged the difficulty but suggested that the company's recent experiences, gained during its expansion into the credit-positive Montreal market, suggested a solution:

The one great difficulty so far as we are concerned is to go into Instalment business without risking the reputation we have as a cash house. It is a very, very grave risk. This reputation gives the public an unquestioning confidence in our values generally, and if ever this reputation got damaged by associating our name with Instalment Selling, we would lose more business in the lines not normally bought on time than we would gain in sales of lines usually so bought. Hence our care in Montreal to constantly keep before the public the fact that we price goods on the basis of cash dealing, that we charge enough extra for time payment to cover its extra expense, and thus preserve the Eaton price as a genuine cash price. Time will tell how this works out, but so far there has been no evidence that the people's faith has been shaken in the integrity of our pricing, and there is evidence that habitual Instalment people have come to see our goods that otherwise would not have come at all if our only terms had been cash. We cannot prove it, but by our plan it is not unlikely that more people have been turned from Instalment to Cash Buying than have been turned from cash to D.P. [deferred

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<sup>24</sup> "Social and Economic Consequences of Buying on the Instalment Plan," 15.

<sup>25</sup> Carter, *Financing the American Dream*, 235-7.

payment]. At least the former are now doing business with a house that is constantly talking up the advantage of Cash Dealing and without the aspersion that we do so simply because our regulations forbid the other.<sup>26</sup>

These early experiments in communicating the differences between cash and credit to Montrealers would take on much more elaborate form in Toronto. Eaton's embarked on an intensive promotional campaign that aimed at teaching Torontonians how to manage their money in an increasingly complex consumer environment.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Budget Idea*

As mentioned earlier, Eaton's Thrift House was inspired by Wanamaker's "Little Home That Budget Built." Wanamaker's display was in turn the result of concerns about changing spending habits and rising prices that emerged in the early twentieth century and were heightened by economic pressures created by World War I. Anxieties about the erosion of the value of thrift found popular expression in the United States in a 'Thrift Week' initiative launched by the YMCA in 1916. Timed to coincide with the January birthday of Benjamin Franklin, an icon of Yankee penny-pinching, the annual week long slate of activities included speeches, essay contests, and own your own home campaigns.<sup>28</sup> After the United States entered World War I thrift campaigners focused on encouraging citizens to buy war bonds as a means of saving, but the 1920s saw a

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<sup>26</sup> Memo dated October 12, 1925 from R.Y. Eaton to H.M. Tucker. File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton's Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly the company took a different approach at the Winnipeg store, presumably in deference to H.M. Tucker's concerns. The Winnipeg Eaton's also installed a Thrift House, complete with a budget director, but did not introduce a deferred payment plan. Instead Winnipeggers were invited to sign up for the "save-to-purchase plan" whereby the customer's selected furniture was held by the store until a series of "easy payments" was finished. Five per cent interest was paid on the money deposited. T. Eaton Company ads, *Manitoba Free Press*, January 21, 1926, 12; February 11, 1926, 22. Apparently this experiment was unsuccessful, as the Winnipeg store had adopted the deferred payment plan by the semi-annual furniture sale in late July, 1926. T. Eaton Company ad, *Manitoba Free Press*, July 29, 1926, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew L. Yarrow, *Thrift: The History of an American Cultural Movement* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 80-95.

reformulation of the meaning of thrift that added wise spending to the traditional notion of putting money by for a rainy day. Thrift was becoming modernized.<sup>29</sup>

The “budget idea” was an important element in this process of modernization. As Eaton’s initial Thrift House ad pointed out, formal budgets were usually associated with large-scale public and private enterprises. They were one of the tools used by scientific managers seeking to reform the haphazard practices of their entrepreneurial predecessors. Home economists involved in similar efforts to transform domesticity sought to apply the principles of rationally planned expenditure to the household. Their commitment to this task was reinforced by the recognition of the growing importance of consumer education in an increasingly challenging marketplace.

The discipline of home economics first emerged in late nineteenth century North America as one of many middle-class educational initiatives associated with the Progressive movement.<sup>30</sup> Based on the principle that the home was a key social institution, this new field of activism appealed to both liberals and conservatives. By introducing a new spirit of professionalism to the traditional tasks of homemaking leaders of the movement argued the day-to-day drudgery of cooking, cleaning, and childcare would be transformed into efficient and meaningful female labour that made a valued contribution to the nation. By definition, professional expertise demanded professional pedagogy. The formulation of rules of best practice served as the basis of an educational program that established and reinforced middle class norms at a time when many Anglo-Americans believed their culture was in danger of being submerged as a result of large-

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<sup>29</sup> Joshua J. Yates and James Davison Hunter, eds. *Thrift and Thriving in America: Capitalism and Moral Order from the Puritans to the Present*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2011), 209-334.

<sup>30</sup> For a brief overview of the history of home economics in the U.S., see Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 1-17.

scale immigration. In the public schools home economics education was aimed at girls who, it was believed, needed to learn the right methods to care for their own families or to work as domestics in the houses of their social superiors.<sup>31</sup> In the realm of higher education, home economics was in the contradictory position of supporting a gendered view that issues associated with domesticity should be the focus of women's academic work, while at the same time opening up careers for its almost exclusively middle class female graduates in such diverse fields as teaching, applied sciences such as nutrition, and commercial product development. Academically trained home economists deployed a discourse of expert authority to position themselves as mediators between the private home and the public good.

By the 1920s the discipline of home economics was firmly established in the public schools as well as a recognized subject of study at many universities in the United States.<sup>32</sup> University programs covered a range of topics, including “nutrition, bacteriology, interior design, scientific management, household economics, conservation, and developmental psychology.”<sup>33</sup> This eclecticism reflected the complexities of modernized domesticity as envisioned by the interwar leaders of the home economics movement. Recent historians of home economics, reacting against second wave feminists' dismissal of the discipline as a pink ghetto within academia, have sought to recover the movement's pre-World War II history of engagement with major social,

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<sup>31</sup> This was true in both the United States and Canada. In Toronto philanthropist Lillian Massey's initial foray into home economics involved cooking classes for working class girls. Massey would later donate funds to the University of Toronto for the construction of a building to house a faculty of household science, a post-secondary program for middle-class women.

<sup>32</sup> While it was less dynamic at the university level in Canada than in the United States, programs did exist in a number of provinces. In Ontario there were faculties at the University of Toronto and the Macdonald Institute in Guelph.

<sup>33</sup> Elias, *Stir It Up*, 12.

economic, and cultural issues.<sup>34</sup> Studies of the impact of home economics teaching on foodways, the assimilation of new domestic technologies, and corporate product development now contribute to a much more nuanced appreciation of the relationship of home economics to modernity.<sup>35</sup>

Ironically, historians have not been as interested in the work of home economists in economics.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the concentration on the home led to important insights into the changing nature of economic life resulting from industrialization. The transformation of the domestic sphere from a centre of production to a locus for consumption stimulated studies by a number of researchers during the 1920s, most notably Hazel Kyrk, who won the Hart, Schaffner and Marx prize for her University of Chicago PhD dissertation in economics, which was later published as *The Theory of Consumption* in 1923.<sup>37</sup> Jessica Peixotto, a professor of economics at Berkeley, was another prominent figure investigating the economics of the household in relation to consumption during the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> Her book, *Getting and Spending at the Professional Standard of Living* (1927), documented her study of the household budgets of a sampling of her Berkeley

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<sup>34</sup> As Megan Elias has noted, the publication of *Rethinking Home Economics* in 1997 galvanized this reconsideration of the topic. Megan J. Elias, “No Place Like Home: A Survey of American Home Economics History,” *History Compass* 9:1 (January 2011): 97-105; Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, eds. *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> See Elias, “No Place Like Home” for an overview of the recent literature.

<sup>36</sup> The work of Bruce Pietrykowski is an exception. See “Economic knowledge and consumer behavior: home economics and feminist analysis” in Bruce Pietrykowski, *The Political Economy of Consumer Behavior: Contesting Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 27-53.

<sup>37</sup> Hazel Kyrk, *The Theory of Consumption* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923). Kyrk received her PhD in economics at the University of Chicago in the same year as the Canadian economic historian Harold Innis.

<sup>38</sup> Peixotto was one of the very few female economists in this era who managed to secure a position in an economics department. Others, such as Kyrk, would find employment in home economics departments, social work faculties, and government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Home Economics.

colleagues.<sup>39</sup> She concluded that there was a significant disparity between the actual income of academics and the standard of living they, and society at large, expected them to maintain. Peixotto's work marked an important departure from earlier research on standards of living, which tended to focus on working class families. She suggested the ways in which the promise of new consumer goods had reshaped the material aspirations of even those groups in society that claimed to value high thinking and plain living.

Turn of the century Progressive economists, both female and male, concerned with the plight of the working poor were the first to foreground the wife's management of the family income as a key element in the creation of social stability. Well-fed and housed workers would not be driven to patronize saloons, or worse, engage in subversive political activity. Gradually, however, attention began to turn to the middle classes in the wake of economic fluctuations and cultural changes that threatened to undermine the position of those seen as core supporters of the liberal capitalist order. As early as 1912, the *Journal of Home Economics* called for research on middle class expenditure:

... we must realize the responsibility that belongs to the great middle class in any country, those whose incomes lie between poverty and riches. It is an immensely important class. It upholds standards of comfort and refinement; out of it come most of the leaders; it has in general worked hard with brain and hand and understands conditions both above and below its own; it bears more than its share of all public burdens. Its needs should be met, its problems studied, and to that it is that Home Economics invites you. The study of this middle class income is as greatly needed as that of families who live below the poverty line, for poverty is in itself what Mrs. Simkovitch [sic] has called "an automatic standardizer." One cannot make mistakes in spending what one has not, but as incomes go up in scale this power of choice enters in and mistakes abound. The mistakes are said to be the greatest in the incomes between \$2000 and \$10,000.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jessica Peixotto, *Getting and Spending at the Professional Standard of Living: A Study of the Costs of Living an Academic Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

<sup>40</sup> "Editorial: The Spending of the Income," *Journal of Home Economics*, 4:3 (June 1912): 304. The "Mrs. Simkovitch" referred to here was Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, a leading settlement worker in New York.

In this way, the previously private matter of the middle class household's financial planning became framed as a subject of national concern. Thrift Week in the United States was only the tip of the iceberg: education, broadly defined, was the Progressives' preferred remedy for the all the ills of modernity and thus financial literacy initiatives took place on a number of fronts. The public schools were obvious venues for communicating the message to the young, but adults were an even more critical constituency for training in wise spending. Banks introduced budgeting services; less predictably so did department stores. As a 1923 *New York Times* article proclaimed, budgets were news.<sup>41</sup>

Certainly they were news as far as a number of correspondents writing into the *Globe's* 'Homemaker' column were concerned. During the 1920s a variety of women ranging from farmwives, to minister's helpmates, to businesswomen with office jobs described their financial dilemmas and detailed their budget planning techniques in letters to Katherine Kent, the pseudonym adopted by a series of female journalists who moderated this forum on all matters to do with the home. Most correspondents were struggling to maintain appearances on incomes that did not match their aspirations. The anonymity of the newspaper allowed them to air difficulties within a community of virtual neighbours whose judgments would not affect their social position in their real lives. Writers such as "Susan Subdued," a minister's wife whose willingness to go into debt to support an automobile came in for a lot of criticism, could nevertheless profit

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<sup>41</sup> "Bard of the Budget is Abroad in the Land," *New York Times*, July 1, 1923, XX14.

from the opportunity to learn from the experience of others without having to expose her financial circumstances to her husband's congregation.<sup>42</sup>

Many of the letters described budget allocations based on the size of the family, their geographical location (urban or rural), and their financial and other resources. Rural dwellers could often supplement meager money earnings with food products from their farms, while urbanites could benefit from greater opportunities for comparison shopping. Such differences made it difficult to apply 'one size fits all' budgeting formulas to "The Homemaker's" readership. Katherine Kent's correspondents were well aware of this problem. As "Budgeteer" wrote in 1927:

A budget adviser who knows her business will tell you that the preliminary plan is the most important thing of all. When the family have taken a bird's eye view of the whole situation, and made their deliberate decision in advance as to what things are most necessary and worth having, the battle is half won. Sample budgets are only guides, because every family has individual problems to consider, and personal tastes and ideals enter in so largely. No one has a right to tell you how to spend your money, but an outsider with an accumulation of experience along this line can help you decide the relative importance of the various items which go to make up the family budget.<sup>43</sup>

"Budgeteer's" letter was written in response to an earlier article by Kent in which she cited advice from the "budget expert of one of our big stores."<sup>44</sup> Both Eaton's and its rival, Simpson's, offered a household budgeting service to their customers by this point, so Kent's expert might have been associated with either store. While "Budgeteer" criticized the budget expert for "glibly quot[ing] percentages and try[ing] to fit the family into one particular pattern," Kent pointed out in her reply that this was not actually the case. Instead the department store adviser conceded from the outset that allocating

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<sup>42</sup> "Among Ourselves: A Budget for Six," *Toronto Globe*, January 17, 1925, 17. For examples of critical responses, see *Toronto Globe*, January 27, 1925, 18; January 28, 1925, 13.

<sup>43</sup> *Toronto Globe*, February 5, 1927, 19.

<sup>44</sup> "Among Ourselves: About the Family Budget," *Toronto Globe*, November 16, 1926, 15.

income on the basis of abstract percentages would not meet the needs of specific households. Dividing income into rule of thumb percentages for food, shelter, clothing and so on could serve as a starting point, but the adviser encouraged couples to make appointments to go over their particular circumstances with her, so that a budget could be tailored to fit their situation.

### *Eaton's Thrift Bureau*

Whether or not Kent's expert worked for Eaton's or Simpson's, the advice she gave was consistent with the approach described in Eaton's ads about the work of the Thrift Bureau. Eaton's distributed a budget book titled *Plan Your Spending* in 1926 that outlined the principles of financial management in broad strokes, but the store also stressed the availability of trained home economists who would meet customers in the privacy of offices adjacent to Thrift House in order to prepare individualized budget plans. One ad, which appeared in the *Globe* on April 21, 1926, described "three imaginary but typical problems" that a Thrift Bureau adviser might be asked to solve (Fig. 5.3). Readers of "The Homemaker" might well have found these dilemmas laughably remote from the realities of their lives, but the ad did convey the message that budgeting could benefit the most prosperous middle class family. It might be hard to sympathize with the travails of a Toronto family "reduced to \$10,000 a year" but the staff of the Thrift Bureau could be relied upon to come up with a plan:

A family of seven with \$12,000 a year suddenly find they must live on two thousand less. Madam comes to talk it over with a Thrift Adviser. Finally a budget is drawn up – based on the following alterations in the previous scale of expenditure: that the two youngest children be placed in less expensive schools; that for the summer vacation a cottage be rented at a resort not far distant instead of the usual two months in a seaside hotel. That one maid be dispensed with.

Otherwise their mode of living remains undisturbed, even to the saving of \$200 per month.<sup>45</sup>

While this 'imaginary problem' would not resonate with the bulk of the *Globe's* readership, the copy suggests the demographic range of consumers Thrift House and the Thrift Bureau were designed to serve. The other case studies described in the ad involved a business girl with a salary of \$1,500 a year trying to save for a trousseau and a family living on \$6,000 that wanted to redecorate their house. In each instance there is more than sufficient discretionary income to make budgeting a series of choices between wants, rather than an unhappy process of juggling various urgent needs.

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<sup>45</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 21, 1926, 16.

"BRIGHTEN THE HOME" WEEK

# EATON'S DAILY STORE NEWS

"BRIGHTEN THE HOME" WEEK

## THRIFT BUREAU

Where People Bring Their Big and Little Problems of Personal and Household Expenditure



**AS SOME GAY MIND** has put it—"Don't ask your money where it goes; tell it where it's going." And this is the function of our Thrift Advisers—to help you plan your spending; Thrift doesn't signify being hard up. Thrift in its true, dictionary meaning, is the state of thriving; good management; the habit of saving. Our Thrift Advisers are specialists on the subject. They will budget your income for you. Not a budget according to a fixed and far rigid, but one drawn up to suit your tastes and your mode of living. They will show you how you can regulate your expenses to cover the cost of something extra—a trousseau, a journey, a newly furnished room.

### Engaged to Be Married

A girl who earns a salary of \$1,500 has promised a man she will marry him in a year's time. How to save enough out of \$125 a month to buy linen and a trousseau. The Thrift Adviser drafted a plan: so much for robes and board, so much for luncheon, car fare, amusements, etc.—with \$30 a month over, or \$180 at the end of six months for the dress. The next six months, by adding three allowances to savings, \$249 would accumulate for her trousseau. That's a happy bride-to-be.

### Three Imaginary but Typical Problems

#### Reduced to \$10,000 a Year

A family of seven with \$20,000 a year suddenly find they must live on two thousand less. Mothers cannot talk it over with a Thrift Adviser. Finally a budget is drawn up—based on the following alterations in the previous scale of expenditures: That the two youngest children be placed in two expensive schools; that for the summer vacation a cottage be rented at a resort not far distant from all the usual two months in a seaside hotel. That one must be dispensed with. Otherwise their mode of living remains unaltered, even to the saving of \$200 per month.

#### For a Family of Five

They had lived comfortably on \$6,000, but now the house needs redecorating throughout, and no money exists for the purpose. The Thrift Adviser suggested a family council and the Budget plan. It was adopted. Each member of the family agreed to cut down expenses. By the new scale of living—at no pretension to any one—a furnishing fund of \$65 a month was accrued. This in addition to the regular saving of \$78 per month. Result: \$143 at the end of the year to redecorate the house.



### The Living-Room

The interesting pattern cloth with deep jewel, mauve, purple and long shades. Pink, beige, blue and of more formal and subtle—its match sets—price \$185.00 for two pieces.

OUR THRIFT ADVISERS WILL HELP YOU PLAN YOUR SPENDING.

## THRIFT HOUSE ITSELF

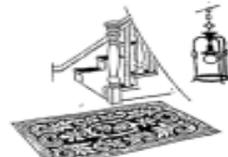
The Charming Little Six-Room Dwelling Furnished for the Householder of Average Means

THESE LITTLE SKETCHES at right and left give you glimpses of Thrift House in its new trappings. Every room is different from before. Come and visit it again. If you're thinking of furnishing a house yourself, ask at Thrift Bureau for lists of furniture, linen, kitchen equipment and so forth. You'll get invaluable help.



### The Dining-Room

The dining set are one flowering on the wall—a carved border of pink tulips and blue lilacs at \$3 each a pair. The top pleated paper to which the border is applied is 90 cent a roll. The chair backs in a large olive oak and oak—\$185.00 for three pieces. No upholstery in large with a large set.



### The Entrance Hall

Such a quiet hand-woven rug set in brown and tan colored with red. Size 60 by 27 inches—price, \$25.00. Most little two light fixture—\$14.00.



### The Bathroom

At the left—English country paper of glass white, patterned chocolate with black tree lilies with red, blue and blue flowers. \$2.50 a roll. Ceiling is white with blue line—\$1.25 a roll.

### The Bedroom

At the right—the quiet lighting of simple color scheme in the owner's bedroom. \$106 linen, double bed and dressing table—\$295.00 for set of 4 pieces.

**"Cash" or "Deferred Payments"**  
**TERMS AND NO** collection expense our lowest charge included in EATON'S Cash price. EATON'S Prices are based on selling for cash only and do not include these expenses inseparably from installment selling, and which are absent in Cash sales. Thus the amount of EATON'S "cash only" price.  
**DEFERRED PAYMENT TERMS** are available on certain classes of merchandise at a reasonable rate charge through the Personal Finance Company, Ltd. On purchase of FORMAL DRESSING SUITS, Deferred Payment Terms, until further notice, see EATON'S (27-1) FLOOR and the conditions, also the P.F.C.'s rate charge at 7% discount, payable in TEN EQUAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS. It is not necessary to keep the entire amount of \$250.00 in any one department. This amount may be made up of purchases from these departments and several other departments.  
**Compare Our Values on Either Basis!**

Store Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Saturdays: 8:30 a.m. to 1 o'clock

T. EATON CO.

Figure 5.3  
 T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, April 21, 1926, 18.

Other ads promoting the Thrift Bureau encouraged a collaborative budgeting process that involved the entire family. Wanamaker's Frances Seaver recommended this approach in the lecture associated with the opening of Thrift House.<sup>46</sup> This move away from an automatic assumption of patriarchal control of household finances reflects

<sup>46</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, January 20, 1926, 16.

changing attitudes to marriage and the family in the 1920s. The middle class husband and wife were increasingly seen as economic partners, although with different roles. Writing for *MacLean's* in 1927, L. Kirke described her own experience of partnership: "One evening my husband and I talked the matter over from every angle and decided it was his duty to increase the income and mine to diminish the expenditure. Next we planned a budget and, while it was far from ideal, we at least found out where the money was drifting, and were able to divert it into what seemed to us the proper channels."<sup>47</sup> Although Kirke warned against heedless installment buying, she acknowledged its usefulness when it came to buying consumer durables such as labour-saving appliances, stating "...I am more than ever a firm believer in economizing energy by spending money, and not in economizing money by spending energy." Such new attitudes to household financial management dovetailed neatly with Eaton's marketing.

Throughout 1926 Eaton's used Thrift House and the Thrift Bureau to promote the message that tasteful surroundings and wise spending were not mutually exclusive goals for Toronto's middle classes. Thrift House taught consumers how the middle class home should look; the advisers staffing the Thrift Bureau drew on their authority as "trained home economists" to show them how they could achieve higher standards of material domesticity without breaking the bank. Frequent redecoration of the display during its first year of operation insured that popular interest was maintained.

#### *Marketing Installment Credit at Eaton's*

A close reading of Eaton's ads in the *Globe* in the months following the launch of Thrift House suggests a continuing corporate unease about unduly emphasizing the link

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<sup>47</sup> L. Kirke, "Planning the Family Budget," *MacLean's* (June 1, 1927): 93-4.

between Thrift House, the Thrift Bureau, and the option of using installment credit to buy new furniture and furnishings. While the ad copy conceded that the store's deferred purchase plan represented one way of financing modern domesticity, cash payment was still described as a better choice. The economic wisdom of buying with ready money was practically reinforced by the terms and conditions for granting credit. Should customers prefer to pay by installment, they would first have to apply for approval to the office of the Purchasers Finance Company, a subsidiary that Eaton's management had set up purposely to establish some semblance of distance between the store and its consumer credit financing agency.<sup>48</sup> In the event that credit was granted, buyers would have to purchase at least \$50 worth of goods (later reduced to \$25) and pay twenty per cent down. The outstanding balance, together with a seven per cent carrying fee, would then be paid off at regular intervals over the next ten months. In another *Globe* ad the seven per cent fee was justified on the grounds that "Those extra costs inseparable from any Time Payment Plan and absent in Cash Selling namely extra Accounting Expenses and Loss of Interest are born by the PURCHASERS FINANCE COMPANY LTD., thus preventing such costs from entering into EATON Cash Prices, which remain based on the low cost of Cash Selling."<sup>49</sup>

Eaton's deferred payment plan contrasted significantly with plans available through Simpson's Home Lovers' Club. The rival store made no distinction in price between household goods bought for cash and those bought on credit. As mentioned above, Eaton's upper management considered this practice to be essentially inequitable

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<sup>48</sup> Telegram dated January 8, 1926 from H.M. Tucker to R.Y. Eaton. File: Credit Business in Eaton Stores, Deferred Payment Plan, Eaton's Executive Office general files, F229-8-0-48, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>49</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 16, 1926, 22.

because under such circumstances cash customers must necessarily be sharing the business costs associated with offering installment buying. Competitors' claims that they were able to offer credit accommodation to shoppers for free had long rankled with R.Y. Eaton. The imposition of the seven per cent service charge was not only intended to cover Eaton's costs, it was also a deliberate mechanism for getting consumers to think critically about the cost structures that lay behind the prices assigned to goods in Toronto's rival department stores.

Eaton's senior managers were well aware that there were definite dangers associated with this method of financing. They feared that customers, believing that installment buying was the solution to their monetary difficulties, would apply for credit only to be denied as a bad risk by the Purchasers Finance Company. Such an outcome would clearly not benefit customer relations.<sup>50</sup> The Thrift Bureau could serve as a means of filtering out potentially unsuccessful applications. More importantly, it validated a rational, informed approach to the use of credit that would help reduce the company's

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<sup>50</sup> The text of the following letter from an aggrieved customer suggests the shame attached to a denial of credit: "On April the 4<sup>th</sup>, last, I called at your local office and placed an order for a washing machine as listed in your catalogue on the terms of \$8.50 down payment and the remainder spread over a term of months. My order and my money - \$8.50 - were accepted in the usual manner after I had signed an application order form. I was assured that delivery would be in from 3 to 10 days but I heard nothing further until Saturday last when upon my return to my home I was painfully humiliated when informed by my wife and other members of the household that your local office had telephoned there during the day and informed them that my order had been refused by your office and that I should call in at your local office and I would have my initial payment refunded. Personally I have received no word whatever from your office despite the fact that I alone entered into and fulfilled my part of a contract with your company. On the other hand other persons who have no part in the contract have been given to plainly understand that your company rejects a contract with me on the grounds that my credit is not equal to a monthly payment of \$9.00. I therefore state without prejudice that the action of your local representative in so carelessly and willfully spreading such defamatory reports against me over a telephone in such a promiscuous and indiscriminant manner has caused me to suffer grave damages inasmuch as my wife's affection for me has been thereby alienated and the harmony of my home disrupted; other members of my household have lost respect of me and I have suffered physically as a result of the humiliation." Letter dated April 15, 1929 from Mr. E.A. Lowry, Guelph, to T. Eaton Company Limited. File: Claims and Settlements, L-Y, 1926-1935, F229-27, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Apparently credit was denied Mr. Lowry on the advice of the Bank of Commerce.

exposure to bad debts. The women (and men) who consulted the Thrift Advisers were, by definition, not spendthrifts but thrifty spenders seeking the counsel of experts. Wise allocation of income enabling an appropriate standard of living replaced self-denial as a pre-eminent bourgeois virtue. Nevertheless, Eaton's advertising still privileged saving as the best way of achieving consumer goals. Deferred payments were deliberately framed as a second-best means of acquiring goods.

Eaton's managers were not content simply to trust that Torontonians would absorb the messages put forward by the company's advertising about its credit terms. In May 1926 Eaton's announced an essay contest designed to test whether its pedagogical goals had been achieved (Fig. 5.4). Entrants were to write a response not exceeding two hundred words to the question "Should the buyer who pays Spot Cash be asked to pay as much for an article as the buyer who is given ten months to pay? If so, why? If not, why not?" An independent panel of three judges would choose one hundred and sixteen winners, who would receive prizes totaling \$2,000; first prize was \$250.

\$2,000.00 in Prizes

## Great "Answers" Competition

*Open to Men, Women and Children*

### On Cash Prices and Instalment Terms For House Furnishings

1st Prize . . . . .	\$250.00
5 Awards—each . . . . .	\$100.00
10 Awards—each . . . . .	\$ 50.00
50 Awards—each . . . . .	\$ 10.00
50 Awards—each . . . . .	\$ 5.00

EATON prices have always been based on selling for cash only, and have never included any of those expenses which are inseparable from instalment selling, but which are absent when the customer pays spot cash. \* \* \* \*

In adapting our present Deferred Payment Plan, therefore, we were called upon to solve the following problem:

Should the buyer who pays Spot Cash be asked to pay as much for an article as the buyer who is given ten months to pay? In other words, should the Cash Buyer pay less; should the Deferred Payment Buyer pay more; or should they both pay the same amount?

We solved these questions to our own satisfaction and to the satisfaction of thousands of our customers, by continuing the EATON policy of giving the Cash Customer the full benefit of paying spot cash, and by adding a reasonable extra charge for goods sold on the Deferred Payment Plan. In order to make this practicable, of course, EATON CASH PRICES had to be low enough to stand the addition of the extra charge and still favorably bear comparison. \* \* \* \*

In spite of this we still hear the question occasionally: Why do you make an extra charge for goods sold on the Deferred Payment Plan?

*We are therefore placing before the public the same question that confronted us when our present Deferred Payment Plan was inaugurated, viz.:*

**"Should the BUYER WHO PAYS SPOT CASH be asked to pay as much for an article as the BUYER WHO IS GIVEN TEN MONTHS TO PAY? If so, why? If not, why not?"**

Contestants are to answer the above question, which is the subject of the competition.

### RULES

Prizes will be awarded according to the merit of the argument and the clearness with which it is presented.

Answers must not exceed 100 words.

Answers must be entirely original, but may contain quotations from well-known authorities.

Name and Address of contestant must be placed in sealed envelope and attached to entry.

Entries are to be brought or sent to the Contest Office, Fourth Floor, House Furnishings Building, T. EATON CO. They must be received not later than Tuesday, May 16th, at 5 p.m.

Awards will be made by an independent Committee of Judges whose names will be announced in due course.

T. EATON CO.— reserves the right to use for publication any or all of the prize-winning answers, but if so desired, will not publish the name of the competitor.

Figure 5.4  
Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, May 1, 1926, 26.

A number of the winning essays were subsequently incorporated into Eaton's *Globe* ads. One of the \$100 prize winners, Miss Nora Lewis, departed from the essay format and instead used Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If" as a literary model:

IF banks would lend their money and not charge a single cent,  
IF firms could run for fun and disregard the increment,

IF clerks would keep their books, and take their pay in pleasant smiles,  
IF other clerks would aid them – free – by keeping careful files,  
IF mails would carry free each notice, bill and “paid” receipt,  
IF postmen could afford for love to serve each town and street,  
THEN every firm that dealt in realms where “Ifs” like these were true,  
Could give rock-bottom prices, and ignore the “balance due”  
But IF prosaic facts were true, and two and two make four,  
Then merchandise on credit costs inevitably more.  
And I submit, it’s honesty, and simple common sense  
For the one who gets the credit to cover its expense.<sup>51</sup>

Miss Lewis’s entry was untypical in its wit, but her underlying argument was consistent with the other prize-winning essays that survive in the pages of the *Globe*. There may have been dissenters among the contestants, but their opinions went unpublished.

According to a 2011 article by Donica Belisle, many commentators in English Canada in the early twentieth century portrayed female consumers as foolish women whose “ability to reason was overwhelmed by bargain counters, sales pitches and attractive goods.”<sup>52</sup> Department stores were favorite targets of critics, who complained that they seduced women away from the paths of virtuous frugality. Eaton’s management was aware of this critique and even shared some of the same concerns about changing spending patterns, as evidenced in the letters exchanged by R.Y. Eaton and H.M. Tucker. The company, however, fought back against the charge that it was itself a corrupting influence. Through Thrift House, the Thrift Bureau, and the publicity campaign surrounding its installment credit policy, Eaton’s constructed an alternative identity for shoppers as rational consumers capable of carefully evaluating their options in the marketplace. Appealing to this rationality, Eaton’s did not present deferred payments as an easy option but instead made it clear that credit necessarily involved an additional

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<sup>51</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, July 10, 1926, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Donica Belisle, “Crazy for Bargains: Inventing the Irrational Female Shopper in Modernizing English Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 92:4 (December 2011): 593.

cost. The store could also claim that, through the services provided by the Thrift Bureau, it was helping to educate consumer citizens about the fundamentals of financial management. Even as Eaton's sought to attract Toronto's carriage trade, the store's publicity continued to emphasize the principles of thrift and value for money. A 1930 ad publicizing Eaton's elegant new house furnishings store on Toronto's College Street stated that its opulence did not signal a change in the company's relationship to its most important customers:

Of course, there's a woman in the case. A woman is as essential to a store like this as Helen to the tale of Troy. It's the Thrifty Customer. She is the figure of chief importance in the plan for EATON'S-COLLEGE STREET, this woman blessed with the knack of stretching dollars to their furthest limit. She is the toast of the evening, so to speak, the inspiration of the new building.... the woman who has to achieve a comfortable, interesting house on the proverbial shoe string, she will be the most radiant customer of the new store.... As in the present House Furnishings Building, as it has been through all the sixty years of EATON history, so will the chief glory of the new building rests on the wide selection of its stocks and the lowness of its cash pricing...<sup>53</sup>

In keeping with this commitment, when Eaton's house furnishings business was moved to the College Street store a new version of Thrift House was built in a prime space on the main floor. During the 1930s, however, the display's role as an imagined domestic environment enabling customers to envision the decorative possibilities of new merchandise became increasingly important. The Thrift Bureau advisers were increasingly promoted as specialists in economical interior design rather than as experts in general household budgeting. Ironically, it appears that the Depression made Eaton's senior management less anxious about accepting consumer credit as a strategy for attracting customers in difficult times.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 20, 1930, 28.

<sup>54</sup> Indirect evidence of this change in attitude during the 1930s can be found in the addition of men and women's clothing to the list of items that could be bought on the deferred purchase plan. Previously these

### *A Women's Domain*

Unlike the other displays discussed in this thesis, it is possible to go some way towards reconstructing the day-to-day operation of Thrift House. While the archives hold few clues about the identity and background of the “trained home economists” that staffed the Thrift Bureau when it opened in 1926, some educated guesses can be made. At that time home economics programs similar to those described above in the United States were well established in the city’s educational institutions, ranging from the public high schools to the Lillian Massey School of Household Science at the University of Toronto. Both high school and university syllabi indicate that budgeting and interior decoration were taught.<sup>55</sup> It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that Eaton’s could draw on a pool of qualified local candidates for the post of Thrift Adviser. That these candidates would be exclusively female was virtually axiomatic: home economics was an explicitly gendered discipline.

By contrast, in the early twentieth century the sale of furniture and house furnishings was typically a male preserve.<sup>56</sup> The women of Thrift House were in an anomalous position both in terms of their sex and their relationship to the bottom line: they offered advice on purchases and escorted customers to the relevant sections of the

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goods were excluded on the grounds that they had minimal resale value and granting consumer credit could lead to extravagance.

<sup>55</sup> For Ontario high schools, see Ontario Dept. of Education, *Ontario Teachers' Manuals: Household Management* (Toronto: Copp, Clark Company Limited, 1916 [reprinted 1923, 1924, 1926, 1929]). For the University of Toronto, see University of Toronto Archives, Faculty of Household Science, Calendar for 1926-1927.

<sup>56</sup> See Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 180.

store but they did not sell goods.<sup>57</sup> In some ways their advisory role was similar to that of the staff of the more prestigious Interior Decorating Bureau, but the predominantly male members of this service received commissions for store sales related to their design projects.<sup>58</sup> Apparently this was not the case for the women of Thrift House. Their situation was more closely aligned with that of the women of the house furnishings shopping service that responded to the decorating queries of homemakers unable to visit the store in person. Like the shopping service, they were positioned as implicitly middle class women of taste and expertise in goods who were nevertheless approachable and happy to help with the smallest of consumer problems. The close relationship between the store shoppers and the Thrift House advisers was eventually made physically apparent when both groups were given office space in the mezzanine located on the roof of the College Street version of the display.

This inference is further reinforced by the identity of the individuals associated with the management of the house model and its staff of advisers, which can be extracted from various corporate records. Notices about signing authority indicate that, as of September 1, 1927, Miss Nora Gray was responsible for Thrift House as part of her work as head of the shopping service for house furnishings.<sup>59</sup> Apparently Gray left Eaton's following her marriage in October of the same year to O.D. Vaughan, then head of the

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<sup>57</sup> Descriptions of their role circa 1945 probably reflect practices developed much earlier. See memo dated September 4, 1945 to Mr. A.H. Young, Winnipeg Store from G.W. B [Barber], Eaton's College Street. File: Trend House/Small Homes Decorating Service, 1945-1950, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>58</sup> File: Staff Commissions – General/Contract/Interior Decorating 1931-1942, F229-69. T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>59</sup> Staff Superintendent- Incoming Notices, 1927, F229-61, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Before working at Eaton's Nora Gray graduated from the University of Toronto with a BA in Commerce and Finance. On October 15, 1927 she married O.D. Vaughan, then head of the House Furnishings Division and subsequently senior vice-president of Eaton's (1942-1961). As Mrs. Vaughan she was involved in the post World War II home furnishings exhibitions at the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario discussed in Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 40-63.

House Furnishings Division. In any event, by July 1929 signing authority for the house was assigned to a Miss P. Stagg.<sup>60</sup> It is unclear if Stagg also took on Gray's role as head of the house furnishings shopping service, but she did report to the overall head of Eaton's shopping services, Edith Macdonald, until the latter's retirement in 1936. Stagg herself was to remain in charge of Thrift House until it was finally dismantled in 1950.

Born in Brockville in 1905, Phyllis Stagg studied at the Pratt Institute in New York under the supervision of art educator Walter Scott Perry.<sup>61</sup> She obtained a certificate in interior decoration and applied design in 1926.<sup>62</sup> The Pratt Institute was created in 1887 by philanthropist Charles Pratt with the aim of providing higher-level design and technical education for working class men and women. By the 1920s the school was well established as centre for practical design training. The Pratt Institute also featured an extensive program of studies on the household arts, including courses on "homemaking on small incomes."<sup>63</sup> It is thus possible that Stagg had some exposure to budgeting as well as design prior to being hired by Eaton's.

Stagg's long career at the store reflects the importance of the services she and her staff provided to Torontonians. She was for many years the sole female member of the House Furnishings Committee and the committee's minutes record her involvement not only in the frequent redecoration of the Thrift House display but also the management of the Ideal Ontario House (see Chapter 6 for discussion of this house model). As early as March 1929 the committee members agreed that she should be responsible for writing style notes for *Eaton's News Weekly* and the House Furnishings Advertising Office "due

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<sup>60</sup> Staff Superintendent- Incoming Notices, 1929, F229-61, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>61</sup> "Thrift House at Eaton's College Store," *Furniture World* 11:3 (March 1931), 27.

<sup>62</sup> "582 Finish Courses at Pratt Institute," *New York Times*, June 18, 1926, 9.

<sup>63</sup> "Pratt Girls to Run Budget Households," *New York Times*, May 15, 1922, 13.

to her knowledge of the merchandise.”<sup>64</sup> Although, as mentioned in Chapter 4, on a few occasions the decoration of Thrift House was turned over to others, Stagg’s vision of good taste on a budget predominated for more than two decades. By 1949 she was clearly recognized as an authority, as *Canadian Homes and Gardens* featured her advice in an issue dealing with the theme of do-it-yourself decorating. True to the guiding principles behind the original creation of Thrift House, Stagg emphasized careful attention to spending:

Remember...THE BUDGET: Before you make any decisions, gather the family together. Sit down with a piece of paper and pencil and list their ideas on the subject. Have a column for ‘wants’ and you’ll be flooded with an endless stream of suggestions. Have another for ‘needs’ and keep it down to absolute necessities. And then make a note of the sum of money your budget allows for such expenditures (one quarter of the value of the house is a safe estimate) and fit the lists to the pocketbook.<sup>65</sup>

The issue was illustrated with photographs of four rooms designed by Stagg. The magazine presented her advice as a series of suggestions, rather than hard and fast rules; they were intended to function as “a springboard from which to develop your own ideas.”<sup>66</sup> Arguably this was the role of Thrift House throughout its history: the display and its staff empowered women of modest means to imagine practical improvements to their domestic environments.

### *Materializing Good Taste on a Budget*

The extensive promotion of Thrift House in the pages of the *Globe* enables the documentation of frequent changes in decoration during its first year of operation. For the

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<sup>64</sup>House Furnishings Committee Minutes, March 18, 1929. House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>65</sup>Phyllis Stagg, “Basic Guide for the Home Decorator,” *Canadian Homes and Gardens* 26:10 (October 1949): 26.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

most part interwar department store displays were short lived. Show windows changed often, reflecting the store's dependence on the quick turnover of goods. Life-sized house models, however, usually had a different trajectory. Like their counterparts in the residential areas of the city, they represented a significant financial investment and thus were not lightly discarded. Instead they were subject to an ongoing process of maintenance and renovation not dissimilar to the patterns of upkeep that could be observed in Toronto's better neighbourhoods. The untypical decorative turnover that characterized Thrift House during these early months was calculated to stimulate public interest in both the display and its pedagogical message. The rate of change slowed following the first year of operation; from then on the minutes of the House Furnishings Committee show that the redecoration of Thrift House normally coincided with an accepted calendar of household refurbishment in the spring and fall. Contemporary writers on middle class domesticity encouraged homemakers to adjust their décor in keeping with changes in climate: darker and heavier furnishings suitable to winter months should be alternated with lighter fabrics in the spring.<sup>67</sup> The store not only adhered to this conventional seasonal pattern, it also reinforced it through its promotional activities. In addition, Thrift House would usually be refurbished during the semi-annual store sales held in February and August. These regular changes conveyed the idea that the middle class home was a constant work in progress. The fashion cycle worked as a mechanism for selling clothing; as we have seen, Eaton's merchandisers hoped that a similar pattern of change and renewal could be sold to homeowners. Convincing Torontonians that Thrift House combined fashion and practicality was important to the display's success.

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<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Anne Elizabeth Wilson, "The House in Summer Garb," *MacLean's* 39:11 (June 1, 1926): 77-8; and "Comfort and Distinction at Small Cost," [Advice on inexpensively freshening up the home for the winter] *MacLean's* 39:20 (October 15, 1926): 69-70.

From the beginning Eaton's promoted Thrift House as a realistic representation of a middle class home. The awkwardness of placing the upper and lower floors side by side was airily dismissed; the model had been constructed "in such a way that imagination easily carries you up the stairway from one to the other"<sup>68</sup> (Fig. 5.5).

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<sup>68</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 18, 1926, 16.



*Figure 5.5*  
*Thrift House hallway, Eaton's House Furnishings Building, 1926. F229-308-0-2043, T.*  
*Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*

In a *Globe* ad that appeared a few days later, the Scribe further bolstered the illusion that Thrift House was a private domestic space, rather than a merchandise display:

Men take off their hats and women drop their shopping manner as they step through the doorway. The atmosphere of Thrift House is so home-like you assume the character of a visitor to a private house. Would any hostess have arranged flowers more charmingly than those daffodils are arranged in the purple glass bowl in the living-room?<sup>69</sup>

The Scribe described the launch of Thrift House as a “house warming,” albeit one that attracted thousands of curious visitors. Despite these gestures towards the noncommercial, though, the display was characterized by an inevitable tension between the imperatives of salesmanship and the claim to provide disinterested advice about interior decoration and financial management. All of the rooms included price lists on the walls in addition to such housewifely details as charming flower arrangements (Fig. 5.6).

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<sup>69</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 23, 1926, 24.



*Figure 5.6*  
*Thrift House interior showing living room with view into sunroom, Eaton's House Furnishings Building, 1926. F229-308-0-2043, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. Note the price list on the wall.*

According to the ads, from the outset Torontonians proved perfectly able to join the dots between the store's imagined domesticity and their own realities. The Scribe reported that visitors expressed "every phase of approval from admiration to amazement" with one "smart-looking woman" exclaiming "I wish I could move right in...The sight of that linen room makes me hate my stuffy, inconvenient little flat."<sup>70</sup> Although few shoppers were in a position to replicate Thrift House in its entirety, hopefully arousing discontent with their existing surroundings would lead them to buy something for the

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<sup>70</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, April 23, 1926, 24.

home, even if it was only the shelf for cook books which “has...won many housewifely hearts” for a mere \$4.50.

While regular changes in décor sought to imbed the home in the fashion cycle, spending on home furnishings was stripped of many of the negative associations with wasteful extravagance applied to women’s clothing by virtue of its connection with the socially sanctioned goal of making a comfortable home. Belief in the importance of environment to the development of character had led to the sacralization of the home during the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> By the late 1920s more secular ideas about the importance of aesthetics and efficiency predominated in discussions of domesticity. As previously discussed, the move towards defining a good home in terms of its physical attributes occurred at the same time that the middle class household became predominantly a centre of consumption, rather than production. Increasingly good taste in interior decoration became accepted as the outward expression of approved social values. Achieving an appropriate domestic environment within the confines of a middle class income was an important measure of success for the entire family.

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<sup>71</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 1-31.



*Figure 5.7*  
*Thrift House exterior, showing roof-top mezzanine occupied by Thrift Bureau staff, Eaton's – College Street Store, circa October 1930. F229-308-0-522, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*

This close association with the material and moral aspirations of Toronto's middle classes may help to explain Thrift House's extremely long life as a display, first at the House Furnishings Building and subsequently at the College Street store, where it remained in active use until 1950 (Fig. 5.7). The house model thus successfully weathered not only the Depression, but also the housing crisis and consumer scarcities created by World War II. Over the decades it was variously redecorated in "oak furniture of picturesque design," art moderne, and Colonial maple.<sup>72</sup> When, as mentioned in

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<sup>72</sup> T. Eaton Company ads, *Toronto Globe*, October 8, 1931, 18; September 26, 1933, 18; and September 27, 1934, 18.

Chapter 4, members of Toronto's Junior League were invited to deploy their skills as amateur interior decorators, Thrift House served as the setting for an experiment in taste

(Fig. 5.8):

Does Toronto's younger set like the new idea in decoration? Or does she prefer period treatment? Has she a yearning for antiques? Or does she consider a compromise more interesting? ...The collected opinions of the Junior League argue in very different ways that all these schemes are popular—as displayed in the rooms which you are invited to inspect on Monday and during the week.

The scheme was designed to illustrate this all-absorbing topic of house decoration from the customer's viewpoint, and in order to present it from various angles, we secured the co-operation of the Junior League.... A committee was appointed, each member of which took charge of a single room.... Each lady chose her own furnishings and discussed schemes with our decorators as if she were furnishing her own house.... You will find the results of our experiment extremely interesting.<sup>73</sup>

According to the minutes of the House Furnishings Committee, this promotional event was extremely popular with Toronto shoppers, drawing 21,600 during its first week.<sup>74</sup>

The examples of different decorating schemes suggest that the display had the advantage of being relatively adaptable to the changing needs of Eaton's house furnishings departments.

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<sup>73</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 22, 1930, 28. This event took place before the move to the College Street store in October 1930.

<sup>74</sup> House Furnishings Committee Minutes, April 9, 1930. House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.



again proved its value as a site for imagining middle class domesticity in Toronto. A *Globe* ad that appeared on September 21, 1942 portrayed the model house as the home of the fictional Jeffersons, a family deeply involved in the war effort:

You'll be interested in the Jeffersons...our fictitious family who have moved into Thrift House. They've adapted it to wartime conditions...as you might your home. Mrs. Edith Jefferson is an energetic worker in Red Cross and defense duties...her husband, John, is with a war industry...15-year old Bill is an Air Cadet with model airplanes an absorbing hobby...Nancy, the daughter of the house, is secretary to a steel executive. Each has a distinct personality expressed in his or her room treatment...Nancy with her studio bed-sitting room which she has furnished on her own...Bill with his workroom adjoining his sleeping quarters...Mrs. Jefferson's "office" with bulletin board and clippings...Mr. Jefferson's chart room where all the family gather to pour over maps and periodicals. We're sure you'll want to duplicate a lot of their ideas.<sup>76</sup>

The Jeffersons' storyline was continued in several more advertisements that detailed the ways in which they had adapted their domestic surroundings to meet the demands of a national emergency. In a 1943 ad, Torontonians were urged to revisit the house model (Fig. 5.9):

The kind of home that reaches right out and shakes your hand...that's every homemaker's dream! And in these days, when you can't make a lot of dramatic changes in your décor, it's the little things that bring the sparkling homey look! "Thrift House" teams with such tips...that you can do yourself. A swish of paint, and you've some lovely turquoise furniture. Some cutting and pasting and you've a gay chintz-covered dresser. Some snipping and sewing and there's a gala chintz panel appliquéd on your bedspread. See these and other artful tricks in "Thrift House," newly done over for the mythical Jefferson family, and changed in plan to allow for a two-bedroom apartment for daughter Nancy whose husband is in the service. An inspiration for your own home!<sup>77</sup>

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was relatively unaffected by the war, although appliances and high end imported furniture became hard to get. Graham Broad, *A Small Price to Pay: Consumer Culture on the Home Front, 1939-45* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 151-2; T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, January 18, 1943, 24.

<sup>76</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, September 21, 1942, 28. This example of decorating for total war was the subject of an article in *Canadian Homes and Gardens*. See "Keyed to a New Order of Living," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (November 1942), 29-33.

<sup>77</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, March 22, 1943, 26.



Figure 5.9  
 T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, March 22, 1943, 26.

In this way, the women responsible for Thrift House sought to turn the ‘make do and mend’ message of much wartime propaganda into a form of domestic creativity.<sup>78</sup> Constraints were celebrated as opportunities to discover new solutions to decorating problems, an activity that had the added benefit of promoting morale. The negotiation between discipline and desire persisted, even as full time employment made greater discretionary spending possible for those on the home front.

<sup>78</sup> In addition to Thrift House, Eaton’s created other displays that reflected Toronto’s housing crisis during World War II. In 1941 the store installed the Wartime Home, a model based on wartime housing plans, in the College Street basement. T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, July 30, 1941, 24. This model would later be joined by a one-room living space designed to be shared by female war workers.

Following World War II, the House Furnishings Committee frequently debated the future of Thrift House. These debates reflected ongoing practical concerns about the most advantageous use of space on the main floor of the College Street store given changes in merchandising, but the discussions also raised an issue that had troubled some members of staff from the inception of the house model: the idea of thrift in relation to the corporate image Eaton's wished to project to consumers. In 1926 J.J. Vaughan had questioned the decision to furnish the house with mid-priced goods, suggesting that more high-end furnishings should be shown in a main floor display.<sup>79</sup> Apparently this criticism was refuted, as the policy of promoting goods aimed at middle class consumers remained in place. Shortly after the move to College Street, the House Furnishings Committee was asked to comment on whether or not it was necessary to maintain both Thrift House and the more up market Ideal Ontario House. The committee members responded that, as the models "appealed to two classes of people whom we wish to cater to," they should both be retained.<sup>80</sup> During the Depression and World War II various room settings and house displays aimed at low income consumers were mounted in the College Street basement, while Thrift House continued to promote goods calculated to appeal to members of Toronto's professional/managerial class.

As outlined above, when Thrift House was first introduced Eaton's ads stressed that thrift was a matter of wise spending and thus of as much interest to those with significant discretionary income as those living from paycheck to paycheck. A resolutely middle class Thrift House was thus not considered a contradiction in terms by Eaton's

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<sup>79</sup> House Furnishings Committee Minutes, December 28, 1927. House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>80</sup> House Furnishings Committee Minutes, December 23, 1930. House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

managers. During the 1940s, however, some members of the store staff questioned the aptness of the name. The House Furnishings Committee was once again asked to justify the connection between the title of the model and the ideas about domesticity it materialized. They argued for the continued relevance of the definition of thrift embodied in the display:

A suggestion was read that Thrift House should be renamed Mayfair House as this would be more in keeping with the class of furniture currently being displayed there. The Committee felt that “Thrift” did not necessarily mean inexpensive, and that no change should be made as the “Thrift House” name had been built up over many years. It was suggested that when the house is done over for Spring 1948 Opening, the advertising should emphasize that “Thrift” does not mean cheapness.<sup>81</sup>

For more than twenty years, Thrift House had served as a valued merchandising tool, reflecting and shaping the domestic environments prized by middle class Torontonians. Once again, however, the consumer landscape was changing.

As discussed in Joy Parr’s study of postwar consumerism in Canada, scarcity of many consumer goods remained a fact of life in the years immediately following the war.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, pent up desires led to lively discussions about new domestic possibilities, with a particular emphasis on smaller homes for working and lower middle class families. When the resources were finally available for the construction of new housing, it became clear that Torontonians’ residential expectations had changed significantly since Thrift House was first constructed as a representative middle-class dwelling in 1926. Efforts had been made to update the model house, such as the installation of a picture window, but the disjunction between the display and the open plan ranch bungalows being built in the fast developing outer suburbs was too great.

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<sup>81</sup> House Furnishings Committee Minutes, October 24, 1947. House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>82</sup> Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods*.

Thrift House had at last outlived its usefulness: it no longer functioned effectively as model for Toronto's new homemakers.

In 1949 Eaton's advertised a new display: Aluminum House, a seven-room bungalow clad in an innovative building material located on the fourth floor of Eaton's College Street. In keeping with more informal post-war lifestyles, the house featured a combined living/dining room. Acknowledging the ubiquity of the family car, it also had an attached garage. Photographs in the Eaton's archives visually demonstrate the intensity of Torontonians' interest in new approaches to housing in the post-war period (Fig. 5.10).



*Figure 5.10*  
*Aluminum House exterior, showing line up to view. Eaton's – College Street Store, circa 1949. F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*

When Thrift House was finally dismantled in 1950, Phyllis Stagg and her staff of consultants were relocated to the fourth floor, where the Aluminum House had been rechristened ‘The House of Trends.’ While Stagg continued to influence the domestic interiors created by the city’s expanding middle classes, she now managed the House of Trends Decorating Service.<sup>83</sup> Arguably the shift in emphasis signaled by this name change epitomized an important development in Eaton’s corporate culture. Residual Victorian values held by R.Y. Eaton’s generation were no longer part of the marketing mix, even though, as Joy Parr has shown, they still influenced middle class consumer choices.<sup>84</sup> Good values and low prices remained important, certainly, but the store now placed fashion above thrift when it sought to sell modern domesticity to Toronto’s aspiring homemakers.

### *Conclusion*

Over the years visitors to Thrift House were invited to imagine how modest, affordable changes could make their homes more convenient, comfortable and attractive: goals that were more consistent with prevailing patterns of domestic consumption than radical makeovers. While ongoing attempts were made to tie the consumption of home furnishings to a fashion cycle that privileged novelty, these were paralleled by appeals to the ‘make do and mend’ spirit prevalent among middle class homemakers during the interwar period. Furniture was frequently described as a long-term investment, an attitude

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<sup>83</sup> In 1957 Stagg accepted a plaque from the American magazine, *Better Homes and Gardens*, that recognized Eaton’s “continuing and sincere assistance in helping families plan, build, furnish, and equip better homes.” While the award was ostensibly given to the store, the evidence points to the importance of Stagg’s leadership. “What goes on around Eaton’s” (ca. November 1957). J. Heffernan files, F229-93, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>84</sup> Parr, *Domestic Goods*.

that necessarily militated against frequent replacement with the latest trend. Eaton's customers were encouraged to take advantage of the various repair and refurbishment services offered by the store. Slipcovers, curtains and wallpaper could work wonders at moderate cost. The non-threatening women of the Thrift Advisory Bureau were on hand to suggest how limited funds could be used to maximum advantage. Throughout its life as a display Thrift House materialized the value of disciplined desire, a value indicative of the tensions at the heart of Eaton's corporate culture where the balance between sales and service, broadly defined, was a matter of constant negotiation. Its removal in 1950 was an early indicator of changing attitudes towards credit and consumerism in the second half of the twentieth century.

As this chapter has shown, when first installed Thrift House was linked to the introduction of installment credit, a payment option that was made explicitly less advantageous than paying cash. The exchanges between vice president R.Y. Eaton and the manager of the Winnipeg store, H.M. Tucker illustrate the importance of this policy shift in the context of established corporate culture. The association of the display with a Thrift Bureau staffed by women and offering free household budgeting services is evidence of the importance of financial management as an element of modern domesticity, which was recast as professionalized homemaking in the interwar years. Over the decades Thrift House was regularly redecorated, encouraging middle class Torontonians to spend discretionary income on refurbishing their homes. Good taste and wise spending were presented as complementary, not contradictory. Thrift was not frugality; as debates over the name of the display indicate, at Eaton's thrift meant wise spending on the comforts of home.

## Chapter 6

### **The Ideal Ontario House: Patriotism Begins at Home**

As part of the planning for Eaton's sumptuous College Street store, O.D. Vaughan, head of the House Furnishings division, asked the company's New York buying office to make inquiries about the value of house models as merchandising tools. The Eaton's archives contains a reply quoting Miss Byse, Wanamaker's budget director, as being of the opinion that such models were valuable assets and would be particularly effective in Toronto, as it was "a city of homes."<sup>1</sup> Vaughan also sent letters to large furniture retailers and department stores in other U.S. cities. Following this preliminary market research, Eaton's announced an architectural competition for the design of an ideal Ontario home in December 1929. The competition program indicated that a version of the winning entry would be installed as an important feature of Eaton's College Street when it opened in 1930.

It is interesting that Vaughan found it necessary to conduct a survey of some of Eaton's U.S. counterparts before deciding to include a new house model in the plans for the company's flagship house furnishings building. After all, by this point Eaton's already had a considerable amount of experience using a variety of model houses and rooms as promotional devices. The Ideal Ontario House, however, was a much more ambitious structure than earlier interwar displays such as the House of To-day and Thrift House. Like the new suite of period rooms installed on College Street's fifth floor at the same time (see Chapter 3), and in some ways harking back to the model art home of 1899 (see Chapter 1), the house was intended to appeal to a wealthier clientele. As originally

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<sup>1</sup> Ideal Ontario Home, House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69-22, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

planned it was also supposed to function as material proof that Canadian domestic architecture, furniture and furnishings had come of age. In other words, customers in the market for high quality design and craftsmanship no longer needed to look beyond the nation's borders for such goods.

Behind the official program for the house model lay a history of complicated relations between Eaton's and the store's suppliers. Under Sir John Eaton's leadership, Eaton's had been prominently involved in supporting the "Made in Canada" promotional activities of the Canadian Manufacturers Association.<sup>2</sup> Following his death in 1922, Eaton's senior management continued this policy. At the same time, the buying power of Eaton's, together with a few rival department stores such as Simpson's and the Hudson's Bay Company, laid the company open to charges of exploiting manufacturers dependent on their business. Depression conditions in the 1930s brought this conflict into the open through the hearings of the federal government's Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Mass Buying.

This chapter explores the various ways in which the Ideal Ontario House reflected contradictions that undercut the effectiveness of this attempt to materialize Eaton's ambitions for Canadian-made upper class domesticity. At the outset, the judges expressed disappointment in the architectural competition's failure to produce a design that was truly an ideal Ontario house. Later the display's implicit standardization of interior decoration did not interest those with sufficient funds and cultural confidence to demand individualized domestic environments. As the Depression deepened, Canadian furniture manufacturers were not able to produce goods for such a limited market segment. Eaton's

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Bliss, *Northern Enterprise: Five Centuries of Canadian Business* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1987), 250-2.

can be seen as either a promoter or an exploiter of its suppliers: the store's attempts to position itself as a patriotic supporter of homegrown industry by the prominent display of Canadian furnishings in the Ideal Ontario House were undermined by its efforts to cut costs at a time of economic crisis.

### *Eaton's and the "Made-in-Canada" Movement*

Economic protectionism has a long history in Canada, dating back to Sir John A. Macdonald's National Policy of 1878. Designed to shelter the new country's fragile manufacturing sector from competition, especially from a rapidly industrializing United States, the policy relied on high tariffs that made foreign goods prohibitively expensive. Associated with the Conservative party, protectionism was attacked by the Liberals as benefitting producers at the expense of consumers. Classic liberal economics held that competition and free trade were the true generators of national progress in terms of industrial development and higher standards of living. This critique gathered traction as the predominantly agrarian territories west of Manitoba joined Confederation in the early twentieth century. Western consumers objected strongly to paying higher prices in order to foster eastern industrial development. In 1911 a reciprocity treaty with the United States became the centerpiece of the Liberals' campaign for re-election.

The Liberals went down to defeat in 1911.<sup>3</sup> Business leaders in Ontario and Quebec rallied opposition against the proposed reciprocity agreement, arguing that it would cripple Canadian manufacturing and thus harm national sovereignty. While lowering tariffs was not the only contentious issue at play during the election, this

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Patrice Dutil and David MacKenzie, *Canada 1911: The Decisive Election That Shaped the Country* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011).

element of the Liberal platform alienated important party supporters.<sup>4</sup> The so-called Toronto Eighteen, a coterie of powerful Liberals, published a manifesto declaring that the prosperity of the Laurier boom years (1896-1911) was largely due to the party's tacit adherence to the National Policy introduced under the Conservatives. John Craig Eaton, president of Eaton's since his father's death in 1907, was a member of this group. Laurier's opponents made emotional appeals to national sentiment and imperial loyalties, arguing that trade reciprocity would inevitably lead to political annexation by the United States. In an era when English Canadian identity was closely linked to membership in the British Empire, this rhetoric swayed the electorate outside of Quebec. Within that province, opposition to Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal party made strange bedfellows of Robert Borden's pro-Empire Conservatives and Henri Bourassa's French Canadian nationalists.

To a certain extent John Craig Eaton's opposition to the proposed reciprocity treaty was against his own financial interests as a merchant seeking low prices from suppliers both at home and abroad. Thanks to a large domestic market, U.S. manufacturers could achieve economies of scale that their Canadian counterparts could only dream about. From another point of view, however, the department store's profits depended upon keeping relatively well-paid and secure manufacturing jobs in the country. Based in Toronto, a city that had increased significantly in size and wealth since the turn of the century as a result of a growing manufacturing sector, Eaton's benefited as a major distributor of the goods produced. In addition, by the turn of the century the business was vertically integrated, manufacturing a range of products from ready-made

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<sup>4</sup> Another key element leading to the Liberal defeat was the party's commitment to developing a Canadian navy, which failed to satisfy either anti-imperialist French Canadians or pro-British English Canadians.

clothing to drugs. Thanks to the store's mail order division, introduced in 1884 and expanded as Canadian railways developed, supplies could be forwarded efficiently to consumers in the west. If reciprocity came into force, however, those profitable east-west linkages might well be undercut as westerners turned to buying cheaper goods from across the line.

John Craig Eaton's membership of the Toronto Eighteen was far from his only gesture of support for Canadian products. From 1912 onwards, Eaton's served as an important stage for the Canadian Manufacturers' Association's efforts to market patriotic consumerism.<sup>5</sup> The department store's annual exhibitions of Canadian-made goods were accompanied by newspaper advertising that extolled the country's industrial progress. During the early years of World War I, a period of downturn before military production boosted the economy, Eaton's also proclaimed the store's role in keeping factory workers employed. In July 1915 an ad for the store's semi-annual sale of furniture and furnishings offered "a breadth of selection and an array of values which positively have never been equaled in the notable series of similar events featured in the Store through the long run of previous years." In addition, "every piece of furniture in the Sale is Canadian-made – the very cream of the cabinet-making of the numerous factories at Preston, Stratford, Paris and other centres of this great national industry, having been secured upon extraordinarily advantageous terms, the manufacturers being willing to make unprecedented concessions in order to keep their workmen employed."<sup>6</sup> Two days later another ad attributed these "unprecedented concessions" to Eaton's cash only policy, which enabled the store to purchase with ready money sorely needed by the industry "in

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<sup>5</sup> Andre Siegel and James Hull, "Made in Canada! The Canadian Manufacturers' Association's Promotion of Canadian-Made Goods, 1911-1921" *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 25:1 (2014): 1-31.

<sup>6</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, July 31, 1915, 22.

such stringent times as the past year, when practically no furniture factories have been working full time.”<sup>7</sup> During the economic downturn immediately following the war, the store stepped up its promotion of Canadian-made furniture and other goods, associating consumer decision making with nation building. Eaton’s presented itself as a public benefactor of both workers and consumers during troubled times, with no acknowledgement of the possible contradictions between economic patriotism and low prices (Fig. 6.1).



Figure 6.1  
Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 31, 1920, 28.

As both David Monod and Donica Belisle have shown, this portrayal of the department store as a benevolent member of the community was strongly contested in

<sup>7</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, August 2, 1915, 14.

Canada throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Monod's account of the struggles of smaller specialized Toronto retailers to limit the growth of Eaton's and Simpson's mirrors similar battles in Europe and the United States.<sup>9</sup> In the early 1890s, when Eaton's added furniture to the house furnishing goods it was already selling, the store was apparently threatened with a boycott. Timothy Eaton's institutional advertising from this period explicitly defended this intrusion into lines beyond the traditional remit of a dry goods business. The ads countered criticisms by arguing that the development of department store retailing represented an inevitable progression towards greater efficiency in distribution:

This nineteenth century isn't entirely free from traditional dullness. Every little while we find ourselves handicapped by a boycott of some sort, presumably intended to spoil our chances in certain lines of business. We were confronted with such a condition when wall papers were added to the store, and more recently when the furniture department was inaugurated. At no time has the effect been satisfactory. Progressive retailing isn't a mere catch phrase. It means such progress as dull methods cannot easily withstand.<sup>10</sup>

As later developments during the interwar years indicate, furniture retailers were not wrong to fear Eaton's competition. It is possible that manufacturers also anticipated problems from the very beginning. In an account of the origins of the store's furniture business in the *Golden Jubilee* book, an employee commented "They did not find many factories that were anxious to sell to T. Eaton & Co." on the first buying trip to Ontario's

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<sup>8</sup> David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 194-233.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Erika Rappaport's account of the opposition to Whitely's in *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16-19. For the situation in the U.S., see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 26-32.

<sup>10</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, September 30, 1892, 6.

furniture manufacturing centres.<sup>11</sup> However the buyers were able to purchase enough goods to fill a couple of train cars on that occasion, and soon “we had no difficulty in buying goods from every manufacturer.”<sup>12</sup>

Understandably Canadian manufacturers found it difficult to resist the lure of bulk buying by Eaton’s and other department stores. Large orders for semi-annual sales in February and August not only kept factories in operation during traditionally slow times, but the stores’ extensive advertising stimulated consumer demand. Eaton’s annual “Made-in-Canada” promotions also supported manufacturers by making national pride a consideration for shoppers. For example, in 1919 as part of the year long celebration of the company’s fiftieth anniversary, Eaton’s presented an exhibition illustrating Canada’s progress in manufacturing since 1869.<sup>13</sup> During the month of February visitors were invited to view demonstrations contrasting the artisanal methods of the past with the processes of the industrialized present. While nostalgia for the old ways was evoked, the displays also aligned the store with the irresistible forces of modernization that were transforming the nation. All manner of goods, including furniture, benefitted from an association with the marketing power of the country’s largest department store. It was a relationship Canadian manufacturers could not resist, however hard the bargain.

In the early 1920s, however, there were signs that Canadian furniture manufacturers were growing increasingly concerned about their vulnerable position. During the Laurier years, they had been content to rely on a brisk business in basic furniture needs. Eaton’s was ordering “rocking chairs and parlor tables...in thousands,”

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<sup>11</sup> Edith Macdonald [The Scribe], *Golden Jubilee, 1869-1919* (Toronto and Winnipeg: T. Eaton Co. 1919), 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> “Contrast Old and New Ways,” *Toronto Globe*, February 6, 1919, 7.

and furniture makers like Daniel Knechtel of Hanover, Ontario, were making handsome profits.<sup>14</sup> With the end of the boom times in 1913, the uncertainties of the war years, and the trade depression that followed shortly after, the industry was forced to reassess its practices. A well furnished home had been an important goal for Canadians aspiring to middle class gentility before the war, but now new goods were competing for the consumer's dollar. In the pages of *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacture* complaints were made about the change in priorities:

A good part of the trouble seems to be, not that money is not plentiful or that it is not being spent, but that it is being spent in other than what we consider to be ordinary channels. Money that formerly went for every-day commodities: furniture, wood products, clothing, hardware, etc., is now being spent on motor cars and their upkeep, radio, pleasures and sports of all kinds. People seem to be on pleasure bent and are inclined to stint themselves in many directions so that money will be available for pleasure and recreation. As far as this phase of the present situation is concerned it is not clear just when and why a change will occur.<sup>15</sup>

Time and again writers for the publication urged the industry to counter consumer indifference by investing in marketing, rather than leaving this important task entirely to the retailer. In a 1922 article, "Can Sales of Furniture Be Increased?" T. Lyle Bloggs asked: "Is the furniture industry to stand still and allow the retail trade to create the market for the class of furniture that is most easily sold and gives the best profits, or is the industry going to be master of its own destiny, create its own market, and educate the people to [buy] honestly made, well designed, but not necessarily costly furniture?"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Macdonald, *Golden Jubilee*, 65. For Daniel Knechtel see Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 131-3.

<sup>15</sup> "Facing the Future," *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 24:6 (June 1924): 47. As shown by the discussions regarding credit detailed in Chapter 5, department store senior managers expressed similar concerns about changes in consumer spending priorities.

<sup>16</sup> T. Lyle Bloggs, "Can Sales of Furniture Be Increased?" *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 22:3 (March 1922): 53; "What of the Coming Year? Will Furniture History Be Made in 1924," *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 23:12 (December 1923): 45-6.

Similar concerns had led to collaborative marketing efforts in the United States, most notably through the Better Homes Movement, an industry initiative that sponsored an annual Better Homes Week celebrated with coordinated retail displays and model house installations throughout the country.<sup>17</sup> Canadian efforts to develop a similar promotional model fizzled out fairly quickly.<sup>18</sup> Some of the larger manufactures, such as the Gibbard Furniture Company and Snyder's Limited, did begin to invest in advertising directly but most of the industry consisted of smaller operations that could not afford the expense.<sup>19</sup>

Even the confidence stemming from tariff protection was being eroded. Canadian manufacturers feared they were being relegated to producing low and medium grade furniture. Economies of scale meant that American manufacturers with access to a wider market had the excess capacity to compete in the small Canadian market for higher classes of goods. An Eaton's ad for a suite made by Berkey and Gay, a well-regarded Grand Rapids, Michigan, firm, provoked protests in *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer*. More in sorrow than in anger a Kitchener manufacturer commented: "We are sorry that the store in question, which is supposed to favor Canadian made goods over all others, allowed this type of advertising to appear in connection with this suite."<sup>20</sup> Such advertising would presumably encourage consumers to associate quality with products made in the United States, an inference that served to perpetuate underlying weaknesses within the Canadian market:

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<sup>17</sup> Henry W. Frohne, "Good Furniture Magazine, Since 1914 Pioneer of the Better Homes Movement," *Good Furniture Magazine* 19 (October 1922): 193-6. The movement would become a pet project of Herbert Hoover during his tenure as Secretary of Commerce. See Janet Hutchison, "The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922-1935," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986): 168-78.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, "Canada's First Furniture Week a Success," *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 22:5 (May 1922): 52-3.

<sup>19</sup> Langton Fife, "Canada's Furniture Makers Now Doing Constructive Advertising," *Marketing Magazine* May 17, 1924, 313-15.

<sup>20</sup> Bloggs, 53-4.

As you know United States manufacturers are producing a very great variety of designs at the present time, and having a large market they can readily dispose of all they make. In Canada, unfortunately, at the present time the demand is for medium grade goods almost exclusively, the demand for the higher grade lines being almost entirely absent, making it impossible for the Canadian manufacturers to produce exclusive designs in sufficient quantities to make it profitable.<sup>21</sup>

It was precisely this impression of Canadian furniture and furnishings as second rate that the Ideal Ontario House was designed to combat.

### *Designing the Ideal Ontario House*

During the second half of the 1920s Eaton's had built new stores in both the west and the east of Canada; the company's ambitious plan for its new College Street store was thus intended to embody corporate aspirations for dominance of the retailing scene not only in Toronto but nationally.<sup>22</sup> As originally designed by the Montreal firm of Ross and Macdonald, one of the country's leading architectural partnerships, the College Street building was to include a 670-foot thirty-two-storey skyscraper surmounting the world's largest department store: a fitting climax to this program of rapid expansion. The structure was also intended to shift Toronto's central retailing district north, following the movement of the city's wealthier homeowners away from the downtown core. In order to maintain the valuable synergy with its nearest rival, Eaton's offered Simpson's a nearby lot for its own new store.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> John Craig Eaton had actually begun planning for a new Toronto store prior to World War I, when he started assembling the necessary real estate. Mark Osbaldeston, *Unbuilt Toronto: A History of the City That Might Have Been* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008), 159-60.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 159-64. Simpson's turned down the offer and instead built an extension to its existing building at Queen and Yonge.

Thanks to the Depression, only the first phase of the projected College Street complex was actually built. Instead of containing Eaton's entire Toronto operation, just the store's house furnishings departments and a number of high-end specialty shops were installed in the new location. A shuttle service between College and Queen allowed shoppers to move between the two sites to help overcome the awkward separation of goods. As Toronto historian Mark Osbaldeston points out, the anticipated northward movement of retailing did eventually occur; unfortunately for Eaton's, though, it leapt over College Street to come to rest a few blocks further on at Bloor and Yonge.<sup>24</sup>

When Eaton's management was contemplating the College Street store in the mid-1920s, however, these problems were in the future. The building was intended to communicate the strength of the business, a strength rooted in its connection to a nation tentatively evolving a distinct identity in the years following World War I. The stripped down classicism of the exterior design signaled a modernity rooted in Eurocentric cultural traditions, while the materials used to achieve this effect were Canadian. Descriptions in the press emphasized the point: "It is a Canadian building throughout, the stone, marble and building materials provided by home industries and manufacturers."<sup>25</sup>

The Scribe's advertising copy in the *Globe* was positively lyrical on the subject:

The building itself sings a paeon of praise to the land of its birth. The grey exterior is of limestone from the Tyndall quarries of Manitoba. It is the finest, more rare quality known technically as "ivory buff." The black granite at the base is from Mount Johnson, Quebec, and the brown granite surrounding the show windows is from Gananoque, Ontario...Much of the charm of the interior of the store is due to the liberal use of monel metal, its silvery brightness producing a very smart modern note in decoration. 67 per cent of monel is nickel, a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>25</sup> "Luxury Lies Within, Bronzed Doors Await Eaton Store Opening," *Toronto Globe*, October 29, 1930, 13.

characteristically Canadian product...EATON'S COLLEGE STREET is entitled to wear the made-in-Canada label.<sup>26</sup>

A letter to the editor of the *Globe* suggests that the building's message had been received.

Charles W. Barber commented: "The splendid success of this great organization [Eaton's] from the beginning has been largely due to its preference for Canadian materials in all its buildings and undertakings. As this young country advances, its buildings stand as a great Canadian monument to the management of Canada's great store."<sup>27</sup>

Those Canadian materials had been used to create a building that projected an elegance notably lacking in the mixed-use jumble of structures that made up the main Queen Street site (Fig. 6.2). According to Monod, although Eaton's may have outperformed Simpson's in sales, in the early twentieth century, the latter store catered to a 'better' class of customers. Simpson's physical environment was doubtless a contributing factor: "Of Toronto's two greatest stores, Simpson's was certainly the grander, with its brown stone Romanesque exterior, high ceilings and dark oak showcases."<sup>28</sup> John Craig Eaton had been determined to change the popular perception of his store as a source of low priced staple goods patronized by working and middle class customers. Building a new facility at College Street had been part of a corporate rebranding strategy since before World War I, as the company had quietly assembled the necessary real estate in 1910.<sup>29</sup> The war and the uncertain economic situation in the early 1920s delayed the project, but the

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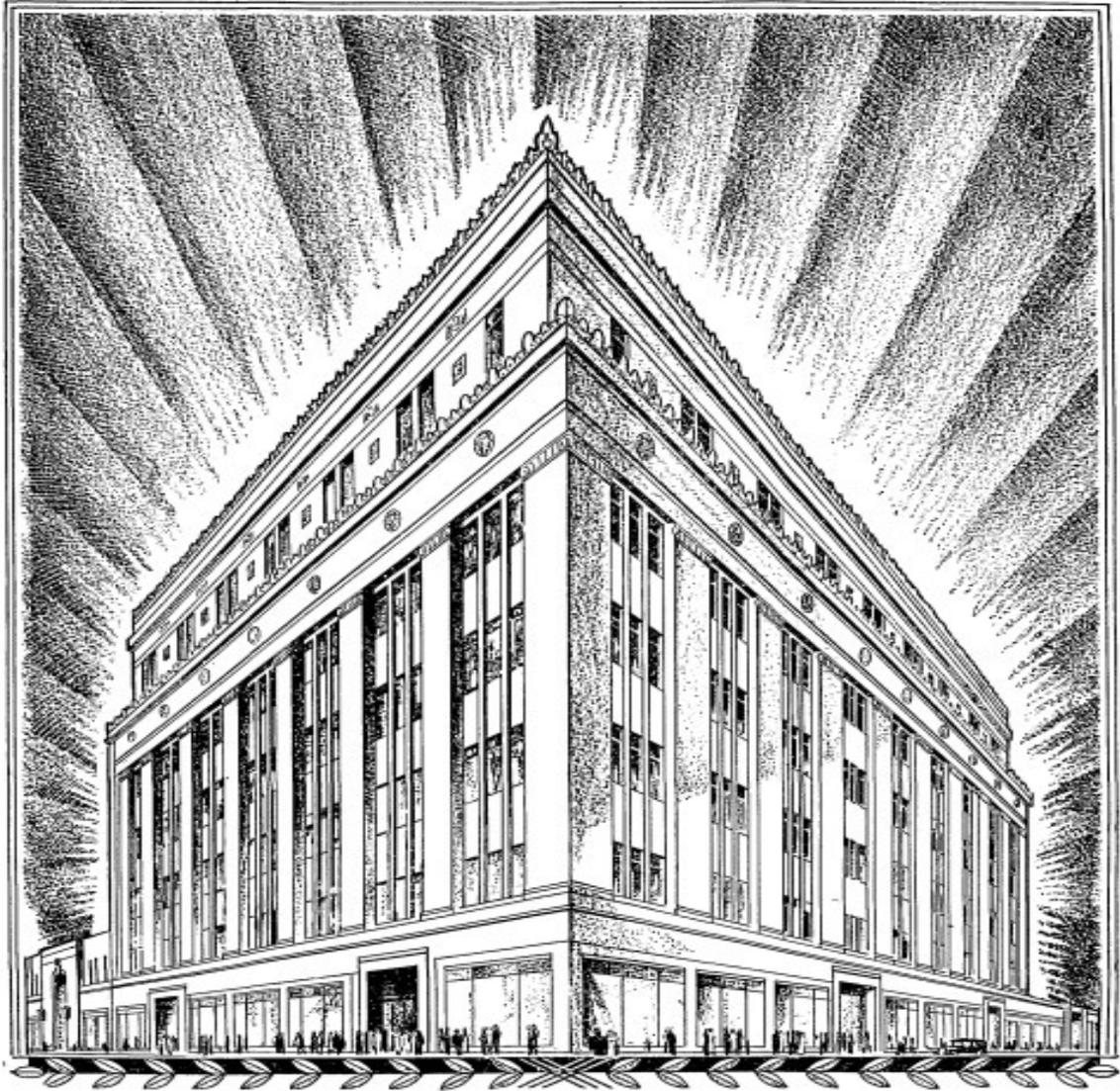
<sup>26</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 21, 1930, 22. The ad copy also detailed the building's positive effect on the local economy: "The large employment of labor throughout the difficult industrial period of the last year is noteworthy. Stonemasons, bricklayers, plasterers, carpenters, painters, metal workers, all branches of the building trades have been represented. Since last August, for example, the total daily average has been between seven and eight hundred men."

<sup>27</sup> "Canadian Materials Preferred," *Toronto Globe*, October 31, 1930.

<sup>28</sup> Monod, *Store Wars*, 118.

<sup>29</sup> Obaldeston, *Unbuilt Toronto*, 159.

construction of Simpson's luxurious addition to their Toronto store in 1928 demanded a countermove. Even though incomplete, Eaton's – College Street's first phase, with its attractive retail spaces crowned by the superb Art Deco restaurant and auditorium, represented a significant step towards consolidating the store's cultural authority in Toronto.



ANNOUNCING THE OPENING OF  
**EATON'S - COLLEGE STREET**  
ON THURSDAY · OCTOBER 30<sup>TH</sup> 1930

*Figure 6.2*

*Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, October 28, 1930, 18.*

One of the features of Simpson's 1928 addition was an elaborate house model designed and executed by Tibbenham's, an English firm specializing in period reproductions. The half-timbered Tudorbethan exterior was made of authentic materials, including "genuine old bricks taken from buildings of the Tudor period," "roofing tiles

[that] have...weathered the storms of centuries in England” and “oak ...from buildings which were erected in the period between 1490 and 1600” (Fig. 6.3).<sup>30</sup> Appropriately named Avon House, the seventeen-room structure was built on the fourth and fifth floors of the Simpson’s store. While the exterior was a faithful recreation of the past, the interior of the model was more eclectic, with rooms decorated in various period and art moderne styles. The opening of this striking display on April 16, 1929, was attended by “the Toronto social world.”<sup>31</sup> If Eaton’s hoped to compete with Simpson’s for the high-end furniture market, the displays at College Street would have to be equally compelling.

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<sup>30</sup> “Avon House Offers Welcome to Toronto,” *Toronto Star*, April 17, 1929, 24. From the description of the display, the interior was not supposed to convey the impression of a coherent house: “The seventeen furnished rooms are not intended to represent the idea of a complete house, they are rather a series of individual rooms exemplifying various schemes of furniture and furnishing.” In this sense, Avon House was different from both Thrift House and the Ideal Ontario House at Eaton’s – College Street. Robert Simpson Company ad, *Toronto Star*, April 17, 1929, 14.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

**The Study Table and Staircase**

Avon House has a superb example of the Elizabethan hall and staircase as seen in the English Museum. It is a fine example of the Elizabethan style, and is a fine example of the Elizabethan style. It is a fine example of the Elizabethan style, and is a fine example of the Elizabethan style. It is a fine example of the Elizabethan style, and is a fine example of the Elizabethan style.

**The Furniture and Furnishings**

Even the most important traditional pieces of furniture and furnishings are shown in the advertisement. The furniture and furnishings are shown in the advertisement. The furniture and furnishings are shown in the advertisement. The furniture and furnishings are shown in the advertisement.

**The Remains of the Tudor**

Tudor buildings built not only for themselves but for succeeding generations. They lived when Hawkins calls the work. Lanes of Architecture, the Lane of Memory, Avon House is looking in the glow of that Lane of Memory. The remains of the Tudor are shown in the advertisement. The remains of the Tudor are shown in the advertisement. The remains of the Tudor are shown in the advertisement.

**THE ROBERT SIMPSON COMPANY LIMITED**

Figure 6.3 Robert Simpson Company ad, Toronto Globe, April 17, 1929, 14.

Simply imitating Simpson’s appeal to many Torontonians’ nostalgia for their Anglo-Celtic roots was obviously not enough. While Eaton’s copied its rival by engaging Tibbenham’s to reproduce some of the interiors for the College Street store’s suite of period rooms (see Chapter 3), the store’s managers also envisioned a new house model that would reflect local progress in domestic refinement. Evidence of such progress was already available in the pages of Canada’s first shelter magazine, *Canadian Homes and Gardens*. Writing in 1926, editor J.G. Hodgins asserted:

A Doubting Thomas—and there are always skeptical individuals, it seems—questions our ability to continue to give material relating chiefly to Canada. “You

can't keep up this pace," he says; "there is not enough 'good stuff' in this country."

Is there not, indeed!...Across Canada there are very many homes, beautiful in exterior design and appointed with care and taste. There are homes in Canadian cities and throughout our countryside of such distinction, that, as we are permitted to present them, will undoubtedly serve to emphasize that Canada has truly emerged from its "swaddling clothes," in the matter of home beautification.<sup>32</sup>

By the late 1920s Canadians in more modest economic circumstances could at least participate vicariously in this raising of national standards in domestic architecture and interior decoration through reading the magazine. Thanks to Eaton's, Torontonians were even more fortunate because they were able to experience it in three dimensions at the College Street Store.

In order to heighten public interest in the proposed model, in December 1929 Eaton's announced a competition for the design of an ideal Ontario house that would subsequently be erected in the new building. The competition was open to all architects, architectural students and draftsmen living in Canada. Substantial prizes were offered as an inducement to participate: the winner of the first prize would receive \$2500 and the commission to produce the design for the display, while smaller amounts were given to runners-up. All together the prizes totaled \$7,000. The distinguished panel of judges included A.H. Chapman, president of the Ontario Association of Architects, Professor Eric Arthur of the University of Toronto and the Montreal architect Philip J. Turner, who taught at McGill University.

As the competition program made clear, the ideal Eaton's had in mind was well beyond the reach of most of Ontario's residents. The house was to include a hall, coatroom, large living room, dining room, library or study, kitchen, one principal

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<sup>32</sup> J.G. Hodgins, "Editorial," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* 3:1 (January 1926): 11.

bedroom, two other bedrooms, a guest room, three bathrooms, nursery and servant's quarters, as well as a garage with space for two cars. The estimated cost of construction was not to exceed \$30,000 Canadian. Over two hundred plans were submitted but the judges were disappointed to find that "an outstanding design which could be called typically 'Ontario' has not been achieved." With the single exception of an art moderne design submitted by Ian Forbes, the houses ran a narrow gamut of architectural styles that would have been quite at home in most upscale suburbs in North America. Twenty-six year old Toronto architect Harold Savage won the first prize almost by default, because his design at least had the merit of simplified interior detailing that would lend itself to the display of merchandise (Fig. 6.4).

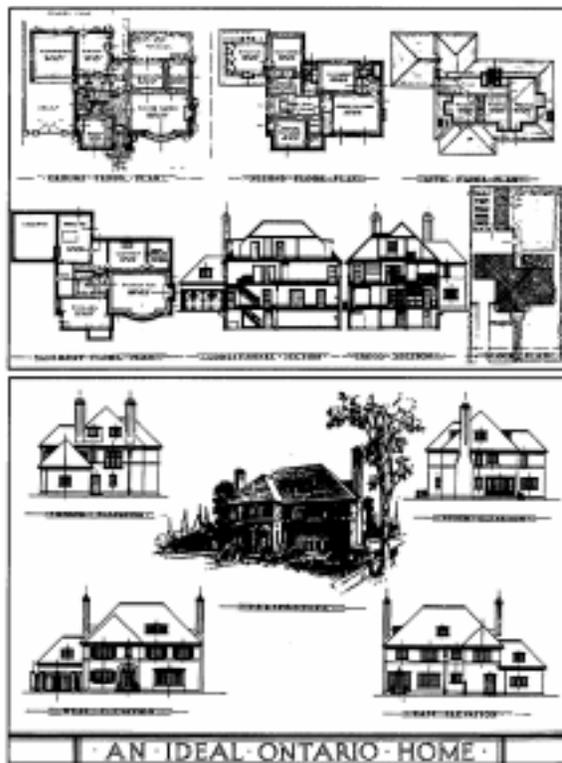


Figure 6.4  
 First-prize winning design, T. Eaton Company 1930 Architectural Competition for an Ideal Ontario Home. Harold Savage, architect. R.A.I.C. Journal, April 1930, 138-9.

Although Eaton's ads for the competition had stated the winning design would be built within the College Street store, documents in the company's archives suggest considerable debate about the long-term value of such a display. O.D. Vaughan's correspondence with retailers in the United States supported the plan, although the letters contain evidence of some practical uncertainty about whether to build it on one floor, as with Thrift House, or more realistically on two floors of the store, with an internal staircase leading to the bedroom level. Members of the sales staff were unconvinced by Vaughan's research, arguing that wealthy Toronto clients "would not have more than a passing interest in a complete Show House on the \$35,000 mark. The intimacy of a few good rooms would make a more lasting impression, and produce more Sales against floor space and upkeep."<sup>33</sup> They recommended evading the earlier published commitment: "We have advertised the \$35,000 House, but it will be forgotten about 3 months after the Opening. Why not propose to suspend the construction of the House on the grounds that in view of the Studies being made for the Extension, the House will be constructed in another part of the Store. Don't cancel it, but transfer to Suspense Account. Find a graceful way of placing the change of front, that is all that matters."<sup>34</sup> One of their main concerns seems to have been the possibility of invidious comparisons between Simpson's historically evocative Avon House and the prosperous but clearly suburban Ideal Ontario House.

In the event, the objections of the sales staff were over-ruled. A modified version of Savage's floor plan, minus the attic nursery and basement billiards room, was installed on the fourth and fifth floors at College Street. In contrast to the elaborate façade of Avon

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<sup>33</sup> Typed document dated May 12, 1930. Ideal Ontario Home, House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69-22, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

House and even the more modest brickwork of Savage's original elevation, the exterior imitated white stucco (Fig. 6.5). Altogether the two-storey structure occupied 10,000 square feet of selling space, with an annual rent of \$10,000 dollars that would be charged back to the various furnishing and furniture departments. In a special College Street number of the *Eaton News* it was described as "a beautiful home, for those whose budget permits a certain lavishness of expenditure...and in whose homes every consideration is given to beauty and comfort."<sup>35</sup>



*Figure 6.5*  
*Exterior, first floor of Ideal Ontario House, Eaton's-College Street, 1930. F229-308-0-2047, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario. The decision to include drainpipes as an added touch of realism is interesting.*

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<sup>35</sup> *Eaton's College Street* (Toronto: T. Eaton Company, 1930), 19.

The interior of the model was more elaborately finished than Thrift House, in keeping with its pretensions. The main rooms had handsome cornices, hall and study were paneled, and most of the floors were covered in fashionable broadloom carpets.<sup>36</sup> The presence of a maid's room, three fireplaces, three bathrooms and two dressing rooms clearly signaled the social class of the imagined inhabitants. Sources for the interior decorations were in keeping with the nationalist themes expressed not only by the competition, but also by the College Street building:

The entire furnishing and decoration has been carried out with products of the Canadian Factories, including Carpets, Curtains, Covering Fabrics, Wall Papers, Electrical Fixtures and Furniture. Our Interior Decorators have endeavored to show the effect that may be obtained by using existing merchandise, it being a double triumph for Canadian manufacturers, by employing stock models and all Canadian. To see is to be convinced.<sup>37</sup>

The store's interior decorators took a decidedly conventional approach, choosing furniture that may have been made in Canada but was inspired by European period styles. For example: "In the dining room the mahogany furniture is worthy of special attention. The subtle lines and proportion that one expects in an old Hepplewhite piece are to be found faithfully interpreted in the fine sideboard, which, together with the other pieces, was produced in our own workshops."<sup>38</sup> The master bedroom contained "a modern interpretation of late Queen Anne" suite that was also custom-made by Eaton's cabinet-makers, a decorating choice suggesting that the claim the house was furnished with "existing models" was not entirely true. Other rooms, however, were said to feature "choice example[s] of the most important factories," "furniture made in one of the

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<sup>36</sup> As vacuum cleaners became more prevalent, wall-to-wall broadloom was becoming more fashionable than the previously popular use of hardwood floors and Oriental carpets.

<sup>37</sup> Typed document: The Ontario Model House. Ideal Ontario Home, House Furnishing Office Records, F229-69-22, T. Eaton Company papers, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

exclusive factories in Ontario” and “walnut furniture [that] is another graceful conception of our leading Ontario cabinet-shops.”<sup>39</sup> The Eaton’s archives contain stills of these rooms, but, as with the interior shots of other house models, these are in black and white. While it is impossible for this reason to have a true impression of the effectiveness of the interior decoration, at the opening visitors were reportedly impressed by “an atmosphere of distinction and charm.” (Fig. 6.6).



*Figure 6.6*  
*Detail of living room, Ideal Ontario House, Eaton’s – College Street, 1930.*  
*F229-308-0-2047, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.*

The *Toronto Star*’s account of the opening crowd’s varying reactions to Thrift House and the Ideal Ontario House is revealing. Both models were popular: “All day to-day [Thrift House]...was jammed with people” while “a maze of critical callers” entered

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

the Ideal Ontario House.<sup>40</sup> Torontonians marveled at the number of bathrooms in the upscale display, and were particularly struck by the decorative approach taken in one example of this typically utilitarian space: “Lustrous black marble was used for the walls and floor, the only lightening effect being from the nickel trim. No one could fail to take his bath seriously in such solemn surroundings. Black fluted pillars flanked both sides of the tub and the lavatory was in silver pearl tone.”<sup>41</sup> Although shoppers may have been impressed by the level of “domestic comfort expressed in figures that many people can afford who have ideal incomes...most of those who saw this ideal home had more practical intentions about the Thrift Home two storeys below.”<sup>42</sup> Thrift House, with “all its color and charm...produced with a certain budget,” still represented a set of aspirational goals for the ordinary Toronto householder, but those goals were at least within the realm of middle class possibility.<sup>43</sup>

If the Ideal Ontario House was not meant to represent domestic reality for the majority of Eaton’s customers, it was intended to serve as a symbol of civic, provincial, and even national, achievement. The model was planned based on the belief that not only had Toronto had grown and developed to the point where the city had sufficient wealth to support stores that catered to tastes shared by an international Anglo-American elite, but that, all things being equal, this class of purchaser would respond to an appeal to consumer patriotism. By choosing to furnish the house model with Canadian products, Eaton’s presented evidence that Canadian manufacturers had reached a level of quality

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<sup>40</sup> “Within Eaton’s Walls is ‘Home Beautiful,’ ” 33; “Opening of Eaton Store is a ‘People’s Affair,’ ” 5. *Toronto Star*, October 30, 1930.

<sup>41</sup> “Stress Beauty in Furniture at Opening of Eaton Store,” *Toronto Star*, October 30, 1930, 34.

<sup>42</sup> *Toronto Star*, October 30, 1930, 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Toronto Star*, October 30, 1930, 33.

equal to their international competitors. That point was to become moot, however, in the face of economic catastrophe.

### *An Industry in Crisis*

Eaton's had the misfortune to open its luxurious new store a day after the first anniversary of the Black Tuesday stock market crash. Thanks to the benefit of hindsight, College Street has been viewed as something of a white elephant: a venture that failed to achieve the anticipated success in high-end furniture retailing. If Eaton's suffered from the consequences of over-confidence generated by the brief boom during the late twenties, however, at least the company could rely on a core advantage: the ability to use its buying power to secure low prices from suppliers. In the early 1930s Canadian furniture manufacturers, still a disparate group of relatively small-scale producers located chiefly in Ontario, were once again confronted by offers they could not refuse.

When the Ideal Ontario House was installed in the new College Street store in 1930, it was still possible to believe that the economic downturn would be short lived. By 1931, however, the situation in Canada had deteriorated significantly. One of the side effects was a rapid decline in consumer confidence. Retailers and manufacturers alike had complained during the 1920s that Canadians were not choosing to spend their disposable income on home improvements. That discretionary spending was now being deferred from necessity, rather than choice. Two short months after the gala College Street opening, the ads for Eaton's semi-annual furniture sale in February sought to encourage shoppers by emphasizing the bargains made possible by the slump:

Our conditions were particularly favorable for buying this year. Our tremendous Pre-Moving Sale depleted our stocks to such an extent that we were able to go to

the factories and replenish our stock at new low prices. THE PRICES ON FURNITURE ARE, IN MANY INSTANCES, 20% TO 35% LESS THAN EVEN A YEAR AGO. Consequently you can buy better made furniture for much less than for many years.<sup>44</sup>

Consumers were not only offered record savings, they could take pride in supporting the struggling Canadian economy: “When you buy a suite – a table – a bookcase, or any piece of furniture, it has a far-reaching effect. Yours may be but one purchase, but collectively, these orders placed through all the Eaton Stores, make up a vast Canadian enterprise which affects thousands of Canadian workers.”<sup>45</sup> It was much the same argument the company used during World War I and its immediate aftermath to encourage buying during an earlier period of crisis in the industry.

For the next three years, while the country experienced the worst economic downturn in its history, Eaton’s ads continued to represent the store as a saviour of Canadian manufacturing jobs. The lure of low prices was combined with exhortations to help “keep the wheels of commerce turning, not only for Factory employees but also for all engaged in Transportation, in Retail and in Finance.”<sup>46</sup> The need for patriotic consumption had become a matter of such urgency that the ads claimed an unprecedented co-operation between manufacturers and the store. Copy promoting a “Made-in-Canada” sale in October 1931 included a message signed by president R.Y. Eaton:

Many Manufacturers, anxious to keep their workers more fully employed, have responded generously and have agreed to sell us a quantity of their products at bare cost of labor and material. We on our part, have undertaken to sell these goods, as well as a selection of Canadian-made merchandise from our own stocks, at prices covering bare cost of handling, thus making the price much below usual.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 3, 1931, 44.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, October 10, 1931, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Albeit temporarily, Eaton's seemed willing to adopt the principles of a co-operative movement that was fundamentally opposed to capitalist systems of distribution.

As the Depression deepened, the sense of economic uncertainty led to persistent buyer resistance throughout the early 1930s. Prices had fallen significantly, but consumers stayed out of the market anticipating further reductions. By linking spending to the return of prosperity, Eaton's hoped to revive the store's business. As in the case of the introduction of deferred payment, Eaton's ads taught lessons in financial literacy. This time, however, the subject was the interdependence of home and nation. Using the example of the purchase of an easy chair, Eaton's placed the consumer at the centre of the national economy:

Somebody buys himself an Easy Chair. Or his Wife or the Family buys it for him – or they buy it for themselves. One of those big, enticing, stuffed over chairs in which you can stretch out or curl up and think how wonderful home is. Pampered? Selfish? Squint a mental eye at the trail winding up to the chair: Lumberjacks axing down the wood...rivermen logging it to the mill...mill hands sawing it into planks...cabinetmakers building the chair...upholsterers adding stuffing, springs and covering...And along the trail, fabric weavers, spring makers, sales men, office men, stenographers, train-men, truck drivers! These men and women get WORK and WAGES when people buy easy chairs...These men and women are THROWN OUT of WORK when people cease to buy easy chairs.<sup>48</sup>

In 1926 Eaton's redefined thrift as wise spending involving a careful budgeting of income to obtain an appropriate standard of living. During the Depression the store pleaded for an enlarged vision of consumerism as integral to the wellbeing of the nation. Without the consumer, the producer perished.

At the same time that Eaton's was promoting an image of the large department store as a public benefactor, critics were arguing that mass merchandizing was a cause,

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<sup>48</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, January 1, 1934, 18.

not a cure, of the current economic misery. Within the furniture manufacturing community there were complaints about the coercive buying practices of the big stores:

Why should buyers for large organizations, regardless of how large they may be, be permitted to dictate the prices which should be paid or be supplied with furniture at less than cost. It isn't good business. Apart from that, it is decidedly unfair to the smaller stores who are compelled to pay market prices for all they buy. Such a practice does not help anyone, for the larger stores could sell just as much furniture at better prices if they had to, and it tends to give the larger merchandising organizations a strangle-hold on the furniture industry as a group.<sup>49</sup>

Writing immediately following the first semi-annual sale at College Street, the editorialist at *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* was reiterating a charge that had been made against mass buyers throughout the 1920s. Manufacturers had sought to cut costs through introducing modern accounting methods and scientific management practices, but as Joy Parr points out in *The Gender of Breadwinners*, the material realities of the business often defeated such efforts.<sup>50</sup> Although attempts to use fashion as a selling point often fell short, furniture had become style goods in the eyes of retailers, with all of the problems and none of the advantages that the designation implied. Manufacturers were expected to come up with new designs on a semi-annual basis, but unlike clothing, turnover in furniture was a much slower proposition:

Close out losses and large inventories of slow selling lines during recent years seem to point to the necessity for cutting down the number of new designs produced each year. The clamour of the [retail] buyers for something new has in many cases carried manufacturers to their present position. The path is strewn with piled up stock representing new lines that received fair attention at the January shows and later could not be sold without attaching close out prices.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "Better Furniture Prices Needed," *Canadian Woodworker and Furniture Manufacturer* 31:2 (February 1931): 29.

<sup>50</sup> Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*, 145-62.

<sup>51</sup> "Are there too many lines?" *Canadian Woodworker and Manufacturer*, 32: 4 (April 1932): 19.

Dependent on mass buyers even in good times, the industry was at their mercy when demand fell. The situation forced them to make “heroic reductions in overhead, expenses, wages and everywhere else where an opportunity offered itself.”<sup>52</sup> But the furniture manufacturers were not alone in believing themselves victims of a distribution system dominated by big business.

H.H. Stevens, the ambitious Conservative federal minister of trade and commerce, seized the opportunity offered by the general discontent to raise his political profile. In January 1934 he made a speech in Toronto attacking mass buyers, accusing them of using their financial power to squeeze concessions from embattled manufacturers. He argued such actions had precipitated a race to the bottom, harming both workers and independent retailers. Initially Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, a close associate of both R.Y. Eaton and Simpson’s co-owner Joseph Flavelle, attempted to call his rogue minister to heel. Stevens had touched a chord, however, and Bennett, bowing to popular opinion, agreed to the creation of a special committee tasked with investigating predatory practices in the marketing of both agricultural and manufactured goods. The investigations conducted by the so-called Stevens committee were front-page news for months. Although Eaton’s “emerged virtually unscathed” from intensive interrogation, the inner workings of its operations were widely publicized.<sup>53</sup> The committee’s auditors explored such topics as executive compensation, profits and losses, and advertising practices. Stevens seized upon an ad for Madras textiles produced in Scotland as evidence of Eaton’s predatory buying practices. The copy for the ad, signed by the Scribe, boasted that the store’s buyers had managed to undermine the Scottish producers’ attempt at price maintenance,

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<sup>52</sup> Testimony of C.V. Fessenden, industrial consultant. Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1935), 4241.

<sup>53</sup> “Probe of Eaton’s Exempts Concern From Complaints,” *Toronto Globe*, June 16, 1934, 1-2.

to the ultimate benefit of Toronto consumers. Stevens' colleagues on the committee, however, were inclined to give the store a pass in this instance, in view of the fact that the Scots were combining to fix prices. It was, as they commented, "a case of Greek meeting Greek."<sup>54</sup> At least one member of the public was also unconvinced that mass buying was a threat to the community. Writing to the editor of the *Globe*, "One of the Speechless" commented: "These mass-selling operations have acknowledged that the consumer is a party to any equitable settlement of the problem of existence."<sup>55</sup> The letter proposed intelligent regulation as solution to potential abuses.

As R.Y. Eaton's attempt to shut down H.H. Stevens at the outset suggests, the company was extremely sensitive to critiques of its business practices. This was particularly true during the volatile years of the early 1930s. Eaton's had worked hard to create an image of the store as public benefactor, an image that Stevens was out to destroy. As part of the effort to marshal evidence for the defense, store managers commissioned a study of the company's relationship with the furniture industry. Conducted by John L. McDougall, under the supervision of Gilbert Jackson, an economics professor at the University of Toronto, the subsequent report outlined the industry's problems: the small scale of the Canadian market, the production of too many different designs in short runs, and general over capacity. Indeed, in the eyes of one informed observer, mass buying was a solution, not a problem:

The bank manager who had the widest contacts in the industry gave it [as] his considered opinion, that the big stores had been the salvation of many organizations. When the turn came they were found with heavy inventories. Demand receded at a shocking rate. Prices of raw materials were falling. The finished goods were rapidly going out of style. The question was not whether they would or would not sacrifice these stocks. It was when, with what speed and at

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<sup>54</sup> "Cost of Doing Business in Year," *Toronto Globe*, June 13, 1934, 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> "Mass Selling," *Toronto Globe*, November 21, 1934, 6.

what prices. If they had been forced to work such stocks off through their other customers they would have half of it yet and the loss would have been much more severe than that in fact experienced.<sup>56</sup>

Although one unnamed manufacturer mentioned an instance of pressure to cut prices, it was acknowledged that this was due to “a defect of the individual’s [the buyer] personality” rather than a normal negotiating tactic. McDougall noted: “None of those to whom I talked were ready to say that the buying policies of the large stores had been a serious factor in producing the current conditions. When the question was put – had they themselves been subject to undue pressure – I was met by the statement that 75 percent of all the trouble was the result of conditions within the industry.”<sup>57</sup>

There is no evidence that Eaton’s ever drew on McDougall’s report in order to defend mass buying. While store managers may have taken comfort from his findings, they probably realized that the manufacturers he interviewed would have been reluctant to put any criticisms of Eaton’s on the record. As the presence of a clipping from the trade journal *Furniture World* in the archives indicates, Eaton’s was quite aware of the hostility department stores attracted from both suppliers and their independent competitors:

You can’t blame the departmental stores altogether. They buy in quantity and have to buy cheaply. Their furniture departments have large rents to meet, large assessments to pay, and, altogether, large overheads to overcome. Their salesmen are poorly paid, it’s true, and because of this they are usually low-calibre men who know little of furniture merchandising and who, if it weren’t for the store advertising, would sell very little furniture. Yes, there are many handicaps against which departmental furniture departments operate – and we would judge few of

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<sup>56</sup> “A Preliminary Report to Professor Gilbert E. Jackson on the Canadian Furniture Industry by John L. McDougall, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario” ca. 1934. File: Furniture General, Eaton Company Executive Office – Price Spreads 1934, F229-9, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

them are operating at a profit – but is there any reason why, because of their merchandising methods, they should help to ruin the independent retailer?<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, the most unpleasant jab made in the article was true: high overheads meant Eaton's house furnishing business was running at a loss.

### *A Less Than Ideal House Model*

When first installed at the College Street store, both the Ideal Ontario House and Thrift House were associated with specific elements of Eaton's public image. The Ideal Ontario House served as evidence of the store's commitment to promoting Canadian fine furniture and furnishings, while Thrift House promoted the wise use of credit to obtain the comforts and conveniences of a middle class home. With the passage of time, however, the relative effectiveness of the two house models became a matter for debate among Eaton's sales personnel. The firm charged the various house furnishings departments for part of the costs associated with the regular redecoration of these displays; understandably department heads wanted to receive promotional value for their money.

Eaton sales staff had doubts about the Ideal Ontario Home from the beginning. Following the initial interest in the display created by the College Street opening, it became increasingly difficult to demonstrate a profitable return on investment. The timing of its installation could not have been worse in terms of Eaton's plans to develop a market for fine furnishings. Even those well-to-do Torontonians who largely escaped the

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<sup>58</sup> "The Furniture Industry's Greatest Menace – The Departmental Stores," *Furniture World*, 23:4 (May 1933): typescript copy. File: Furniture General, Eaton Company Executive Office – Price Spreads 1934, F229-9, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

effects of the Depression were reluctant to engage in conspicuous consumption during a period of extended economic crisis.

Complaints about the value of the Ideal Ontario Home as a merchandizing device surfaced in the minutes of the internal House Furnishings Committee in February 1932, slightly over a year after the opening of the College Street store.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, management felt that it was imperative to spend the money on redecoration in order to develop the market for fine furnishings. At this point, of course, it was not anticipated that the economic downturn would persist for much longer. As the Depression worsened, however, in-house criticisms of the model house grew more vehement. By 1933, the members of the House Furnishings Committee were seriously considering its demolition. René Cera, now College Street's head of merchandise display, was minuted as being "...in accord with the proposal of finding something to take the place of the Ideal Ontario Home which has ceased to attract due to the fact that its general appearance and layout are subject to slight change only and each time at considerable cost."<sup>60</sup> When the house was in the planning phase, managers had estimated annual costs of \$15,000 to cover redecorating three times a year; this was in addition to the \$10,000 rental charge for the floor space. As profits disappeared it became increasingly difficult to justify this level of expenditure.<sup>61</sup> Store management was not yet prepared to write off the substantial investment in the display, however, so Eaton's interior decorating staff did their best with

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<sup>59</sup> House Furnishings Committee Minutes, February 19, 1932. House Furnishings Office Records, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>60</sup> House Furnishings Committee Minutes, August 8, 1933. House Furnishings Office Records, F229-69, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>61</sup> Memo dated April 29, 1930 from O.D. Vaughan to S.H. Maw. File: Ideal Ontario Home, House Furnishings Office Records, F229-69-22, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

less to give the house a new touch for that year's spring and fall openings. Clearly, though, it was an uphill struggle given the budgetary and physical constraints.

**Ontario Home** shows you how to re-decorate and make the most of the furnishings already in your house

Said Ontario Home's Decorator: "We wish to illustrate that redecorating does not necessarily mean doing everything over, but of making the most of what furnishings are in the house, while introducing new treatments."

To our decorator with us to imagine that there is a lady living in Ontario Home and that she has just come back from Europe. She comes with her an interesting new atmosphere into her home—and Ontario Home redecorates in the result. Much of the furniture is 18th Century English mahogany—our decorator has used it practically throughout the house—but has worked out backgrounds of novelty and individuality for it.

**IN THE LIVINGROOM** the most important changes have been made. We think it shows as it is new and, smaller, as it was. Here double panels have been put in at each corner, the English screen, the French window enlarged, a false doorway put in the south wall, the doorway into the hall made wider by paneling and the piano placed in the alcove created by the English. All this was done to give the room height and balance. The result is a beautifully proportioned room, very smart with grey walls, gold-colored trim, luxuriant rug in white blue, burgundy and brown rich-toned fabrics.

**IN THE DININGROOM**—one old Wedgwood plate brought back from England provided the inspiration for the white figures on the blue walls. Beneath is a red background with a Greek key design in secondary colors.

**THE ENTRANCE HALL**, where paneling was heavily painted black, has been repainted white and into the panel's have been set scenes from a well-known play brought back from France. Very large framed photographs of the room's walls give fresh interest to the main hall—and a model of the yacht is mounted in the great circular window at the top of the stairs.

**IN THE BEDROOMS** new drapings of dainty, freshly painted woodwork, and new wallpaper treatments give new zest with very little redecorating.

**OUR DECORATORS** will be glad to advise on the spring streamlining problems in your home, and to show you how new furnishings treatment can be achieved without too many changes.

ONTARIO HOME—FOURTH FLOOR—EATONS—COLLEGE STREET.

Figure 6.7  
Detail, T. Eaton Company ad, Toronto Globe, March 16, 1935, 22.

The copy in a 1935 advertisement puts a positive spin on a partial redecoration (Fig. 6.7):

We wish to illustrate that redecoration does not necessarily mean doing everything over, but of making the most of what furnishings are in the house, while introducing new treatments.

So our decorator tells us to imagine that there is a lady living in Ontario Home and that she has just come back from Europe. She consults with him on introducing new atmospheres into her house—and Ontario Home redecorated is the result.<sup>62</sup>

While this piecemeal approach may have recognized the realities of the market for expensive house furnishings during the 1930s, it probably detracted from the aura of wealth associated with the Ideal Ontario House. Behind the scenes, members of the House Furnishings Committee continued to point out the display's ineffectiveness. They claimed that the house attracted the same number of visitors, regardless of whether or not it had been recently redecorated. In May 1935 the issue was kicked upstairs for consideration at a directors' meeting. The minutes noted:

Quite a sum of money has been spent on keeping it furnished properly and we have received very little praise and a great deal of criticism of its decoration. We have never yet been able to furnish the house in a manner in which a Fifty Thousand Dollar house should be furnished and people who are in the market for such furnishings get few ideas from looking over this house.<sup>63</sup>

The House Furnishings Committee recommending replacing the Ideal Ontario Home with a much more flexible display “which would be torn down say every two years in the same manner as furnished houses are operated in American Stores, and a complete change offered the public in both interior and exterior design.”<sup>64</sup>

The lame duck status of the house is reflected in the way responsibility for its redecoration changed hands over the years. Originally it was intended to showcase the talents of Eaton's largely male Interior Decorating Service. Later the job was assigned to

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<sup>62</sup> T. Eaton Company ad, *Toronto Globe*, March 16, 1935, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Extract from Minutes of Directors' Meeting, May 7, 1935. File: Ideal Ontario Home, House Furnishings Office Records, F229-69-22, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

Dorothy Marks, a newcomer to the department. The project “would introduce to the public an interior decorator who is decidedly clever and who has an enviable reputation, but who is at present, with us a nonentity, and is relying upon the work handed out to her as a means of becoming acquainted.”<sup>65</sup> Ultimately the task devolved upon Phyllis Stagg of Thrift House, suggesting the model had lost all significance as a means of marketing the individualistic design skills of the Interior Decorating Service. The fact that it had cost \$12,000 to build saved it a little longer but in 1937 it was demolished, proof that in this case Eaton’s senior management had misread the Toronto market.

### *Conclusion*

The comparative case histories of the Ideal Ontario House and Thrift House displays (see Chapter 5) illustrate both the possibilities and limitations of this form of marketing. The ambitious Ideal Ontario House failed as a mechanism for selling fine furniture and was discontinued after seven years, while Thrift House appealed to Toronto consumers for more than two decades. To some degree these contrasting fates were due to economic and cultural circumstances beyond the control of Eaton’s managers. The Ideal Ontario House proved something of an oxymoron as it was out of reach for most Torontonians and undesired by the few who could afford this scale of expenditure. Thrift House, on the other hand, represented a more attainable ideal for the majority of Eaton’s customers during the Depression. As historical geographers Jason Gilliland and Matt Sendbuehler point out, middle and working class would-be homeowners were converging on the idea

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<sup>65</sup> Memo dated February 9, 1934 from S.H. Maw, Interior Decorating Bureau to W.J. Kernohan, House Furnishings Merchandise Office. File: Ideal Ontario Home, House Furnishings Office Records, F229-69-22, T. Eaton Company fonds, Archives of Ontario.

of the small, efficient house as a “new suburban ideal.”<sup>66</sup> By contrast, wealthier customers expected more decorative innovation and individuality than the Ideal Ontario Home – or the Canadian furniture industry – could sustain.

This chapter uses the history of the Ideal Ontario House display to explore Eaton’s relationship with furniture manufacturers during the difficult years of the Depression. When it opened in 1930, the model home featured high-end room ensembles designed to convince wealthy Torontonians that good taste and patriotism could be combined. Eaton’s efforts to promote Canadian products were consistent with the store’s history of support for the “Made in Canada” movement, but these efforts took on more urgency during the Depression when Eaton’s advertising sought to educate its customers about the relationship between buying Canadian goods and national economic recovery. As the findings of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Mass Buying reveal, however, Eaton’s relationship with Ontario’s furniture manufacturers was complicated. The furniture industry relied on Canada’s few big stores for access to large markets and thus was vulnerable when an economic downturn led Eaton’s, among others, to push for lower wholesale prices. At a time of crisis, producers, distributors and consumers could not afford to make the gamble on high quality Canadian furniture represented by the ambitions of the Ideal Ontario House.

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<sup>66</sup> Jason A. Gilliland and Matt Sendbuehler, “ ‘...to produce the highest type of manhood and womanhood’: the Ontario Housing Act, 1919 and a new suburban ideal,” *Urban History Review* 26.2 (March 1998): 42-55.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion: Comparison Shopping

This thesis has argued that Eaton's used house models and room displays, coupled with relevant newspaper advertising, in a program of public pedagogy intended to sell ideas about modern middle class domesticity as well as home furnishings and furniture. The use of pedagogical approaches to marketing reveals corporate aspirations to the status of a respected civic institution worthy of long-term customer loyalty, as well as the sensitivity of store managers to various critiques of big business during the interwar years. At a time when state involvement in consumer and cultural matters was limited, middle class Torontonians were encouraged to acquire aesthetic and financial literacy through interactions with the store. These teachings were not disinterested: Eaton's managers hoped to profit by offering object lessons in appropriate homemaking. While the success of individual displays is debatable, overall they provided opportunities for a dialogue between the store and its customers that, while it took for granted the desirability of a materialistic definition of the good life, also made possible debates about the merits of various ways of achieving the goal of a modern home.

Explorations of the links between Eaton's and other cultural and economic actors in interwar Toronto and beyond help to contextualize the displays. The story of Eaton's efforts to educate both consumers and producers about the history of furniture design through period rooms, lectures, and a partnership with the Royal Ontario Museum demonstrates how the powerful connections first made in the Victorian period between taste, design traditions, and commercial progress continued to be important in the twentieth century. René Cera's House of To-day, while attempting to introduce Parisian

art moderne to a conservative city, followed a similar pattern of using display as object lesson: in this instance showing designs that were self-consciously modern but were also framed as part of an evolutionary narrative of good taste. With Thrift House the store reached out to the bulk of its customers, teaching them that the judicious use of either credit or (preferably) cash could produce a domestic environment that was at once comfortable, tasteful, and affordable. Finally, the Ideal Ontario House sought to convince Eaton's wealthiest patrons that Canadian manufacturers were capable of producing furnishings and furniture of a level of workmanship and design equal to high end imported goods.

The pedagogical thrust of this marketing connects these domestic displays to the discursive practices of other public institutions, such as museums and world fairs, which made up Tony Bennett's exhibitionary complex.<sup>1</sup> It also suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of the history of retail display. Recent historians of the department store have emphasized the spectacular and seductive aspects of consumer culture, elements that were certainly important but that were components of a marketing mix that also included messages about disciplined desire. During the early twentieth century Eaton's was led by managers who had grown up with Victorian values; moreover, throughout the interwar years, they were operating in a climate of uncertainty as the departmental business model that had been so successful in the late nineteenth century was challenged by new retail formats, such as chain stores, and changing consumer buying patterns. This was particularly true in the realm of furniture, a commodity that resisted incorporation into a fashion cycle that demanded frequent change. House models and period rooms enlivened these slow moving goods by putting

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

them in context, and in this sense such displays were arguably spectacles intended to fuel consumer aspirations. As used by Eaton's, however, they were also object lessons in middle class domesticity that sought to direct buying towards the socially sanctioned goal of a modern home defined in material terms.

Reconstructing the life and times of Eaton's house models and period rooms has involved assembling disparate materials found in archives, newspaper advertisements, and other primary sources. As is always the case in every attempt at recovering the past, the results are not definitive. True, Eaton's records contain photographs of some of the model interiors, but these were usually taken when the displays were first introduced. There are sometimes sketches or photographs of subsequent redecoration and reconfiguration in newspaper ads and magazine articles, but the overall visual record of change over time is incomplete. Moving beyond the material artifacts to the motivations underlying their creation required uncovering evidence about the inner workings of store management at different levels of authority. The displays encouraged customers to see their domestic environments as dynamic rather than static; read against the grain, however, they also set limits on self-expression through consumerism by tacitly defining acceptable standards of good taste and wise spending. During the interwar years Eaton's managers embraced the value of disciplined desire as part of their efforts to sell the store as a civic institution.

The most elusive part of the puzzle is the matter of reception. In the absence of direct testimony, it is difficult to discover the actual impact of these materializations of modern domesticity. One indirect source can be found in Eaton's internal debates about the usefulness of the displays in terms of sales. Another, the Scribe's "You Were

Inquiring” column, offers vivid evidence of customers’ interest in interior design, although her correspondents tended to be reformers rather than revolutionaries and asked about ways and means of working within the constraints of their existing possessions to create a pleasing home. As the example of Lucy Maud Montgomery shows, most middle class shoppers were rarely in a position to engage in full-scale redecorating, although they were willing to make smaller changes from time to time.

In many ways, these case studies of Eaton’s displays serve as a pre-history of subsequent developments that have received more attention from researchers. The connection between commercial display and public pedagogy took on new dimensions during World War II and the subsequent years of postwar reconstruction as governments began to intervene more directly in economic, social and cultural matters. In Toronto, as Joy Parr has shown, the tacit partnership between department stores and museums became more explicit through exhibitions shown at the Royal Ontario Museum (1945) and the Toronto Art Gallery (1946).<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in North America and Europe the postwar housing crisis prompted similar collaborations.<sup>3</sup> As mass consumption began to reshape domesticity in the 1950s, communist and capitalist regimes started to deploy competing model house exhibits in an effort to demonstrate the superiority of their respective ideologies. The exhibit that prompted the famous Kitchen Debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev in 1959 was one of a series of soft power

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<sup>2</sup> Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 40-63. See also John B. Collins, “‘Design in Industry’ Exhibition, National Gallery of Canada, 1946: Turning Bombers into Lounge Chairs,” *Material History Bulletin* 27 (Spring 1988): 27-38.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Alexandra Griffith Winton, “‘A Man’s House is his Art’: The Walker Art Center’s *Idea House* project and the marketing of domestic design, 1941-7” *Journal of Design History* 17:4 (2004): 377-96, and a special issue of *The Journal of Architecture* devoted to postwar model homes in Europe. Fredie Floré and Mil de Kooning, guest editors, “Special Issue: Postwar Model Homes,” *The Journal of Architecture* 9:4 (2004): 411-514.

confrontations about standards of living under starkly different economic systems.<sup>4</sup> This was the high point of the model house as an instrument of public pedagogy: its status as a cultural form has since declined in tandem with that of the department store.

Or has it? As Mark Twain may or may not have joked “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.” At the time of writing, a comparison with the marketing practices of IKEA is apposite. In some ways Eaton’s displays during the first half of the twentieth century anticipated the strategies used in the blue and yellow big box stores that now dot cities in Europe, North America and Asia. IKEA, like Eaton’s in the interwar period, sells not only things but also ideas about domesticity. In its displays and its catalogues the Swedish-origin multinational company projects an image of a certain kind of family life. Informality is a keynote, in contrast to the more staid ensembles found at Eaton’s. While the room settings are still aspirational in term of achieving a consistent aesthetic, contrary to the realities faced by many homemakers, they are also potentially available due to their relatively low price, and are thus democratic. IKEA’s marketing suggests the store’s products offer solutions to such twenty-first century middle class concerns as fair trade and sustainability, just as Eaton’s emphasis on good taste, wise spending, and reaffirming the importance of home reflected anxieties surrounding consumerism in the 1920s and 1930s. Fashion and novelty continue to play their part through the constant introduction of new designs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Mid Century Design* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> IKEA’s 2017 Canadian catalogue supports this argument for the company’s use of public pedagogy as a marketing device that constructs a positive corporate image. In addition to the usual illustrations of cheerful interiors fostering sociability it contains extended texts on such subjects as “why good design is democratic,” “food lovers of the future,” “what makes a home a home,” and “what home is for a refugee without one.” IKEA, *IKEA Catalogue 2017* (NP: IKEA, 2017).

There are also, of course, significant differences. The furniture produced by IKEA suits a culture of mobility. As Regina Blaszczyk recently pointed out, it embodies a throwaway ethos that bedevils Western societies at a time when the planet can ill afford the environmental consequences.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Eaton's marketing framed furniture combining good quality and a fair price as an investment that would provide material support for a stable family life over the long term. If stock turnover is the measure of success, Eaton's approach has obvious flaws. If, on the other hand, retailers should consider the broader implications of a frantic cycle of obsolescence, there is virtue in Eaton's notion of disciplined desire. Eaton's marketing reflected the contradictions of a period of transformation from scarcity to abundance: as the internal evidence indicates, the company's senior management was conflicted about the choice between encouraging buying and defending thrift. The very existence of such conflicts provides fruitful ground for future investigations by historians interested in untangling the complex creation story that underlies contemporary consumer culture.

The relative inflexibility of the interwar house models and period rooms displayed at Eaton's materialized a vision of domesticity that sought to reconcile continuity and change: a vision consistent with the conservative modernity described in the work of Alison Light and Penny Sparke.<sup>7</sup> Substantial house models that were redecorated and renovated instead of replaced projected a vision of the good life that connected social stability with the ownership of detached single-family dwellings as opposed to other housing solutions. The perennial popularity of period furniture designs also illustrated a

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<sup>6</sup> Regina Blaszczyk, "Design by IKEA: A Cultural History by Sara Kristoffersson (Review)," *Journal of Design History* 29:2 (May 2016): 209-10.

<sup>7</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Penny Sparke, *As Long as it's Pink: the Sexual Politics of Taste* (2010 edition. Halifax NS: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2010).

pervasive middlebrow conservatism that frustrated attempts at radically rethinking domesticity. Even Eaton's exercise in art moderne design, the House of To-day, housed an imaginary nuclear family and obeyed the established spatial divisions of the middle class home with its separate living and dining room. Critics such as Virginia Wright and Christopher Armstrong have noted interwar Torontonians' reluctance to embrace the modernist aesthetic in the sphere of domestic design.<sup>8</sup> By looking at Eaton's house model and room displays this thesis shows that this reluctance was not mere timidity but instead a different understanding of the meaning of modernity in the domestic context. Future researchers on the history of domestic design in Canada should take this more complex understanding of what modern meant to the interwar homemaker into account.

The role of homemaker was redefined in the early twentieth century in the light of new household technologies and the disappearance of domestic servants. The shift from moral exemplar to efficiency expert had profound implications for the practice of domesticity. During the interwar years discourses of professional homemaking took into account the increasing interdependence of home and market, leading to formal and informal efforts to teach women to be knowledgeable consumers. This thesis contributes to the historical understanding of the specifics of this change by arguing that effective interior decoration using goods available in the marketplace was one of the skills expected of the professional homemaker. As the 'You Were Inquiring' column in Eaton's daily ads indicates, the store presented itself as a valuable source of information about the tools needed to execute this responsibility. The crowds of shoppers drawn to

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Wright, *Modern Furniture in Canada 1920 to 1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 39; Christopher Armstrong, *Making Toronto Modern: Architecture and Design, 1895-1975* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 10-11.

the store's house model and period room displays are further proof of Torontonians' eagerness to learn from Eaton's self-proclaimed expertise.

The thesis has used the idea of public pedagogy (educational processes taking place outside formal institutions of learning) to explain Eaton's cultural role in the interwar years. Adding this educational dimension to the analysis of the store's marketing gives a richer understanding of the ways Eaton's imagined its customers: not simply as credulous shoppers to be seduced, but as purchasing agents desiring reliable information about values and trends. It identifies a previously overlooked cadre of employees working behind the scenes at Eaton's to teach the skills needed to perform modern domesticity. Historians of Canadian department stores have tended to emphasize either the entrepreneurial activities of their founders or the exploitation of their workers. Instead this thesis deals with the experience of mid level cultural mediators such as Edith Macdonald, Phyllis Stagg and René Cera. During the interwar years and beyond, department stores such as Eaton's offered new career opportunities, mainly for men, but also for middle class women. Edith Macdonald used her work as a copywriter to carve out a position as a valued mentor for Eaton's customers. As interior decorators and display managers Phyllis Stagg and René Cera were influential tastemakers during the many years they were employed by the store. Memos between colleagues and the minutes of the house furnishings committee provide rare insights into both planning processes and internal evaluations of the effectiveness of the house models and period rooms. These activities, usually hidden from history, played an important role in fashioning modern consumer culture and incorporating them in the thesis places the department store in a new light.

The rich textual and photographic evidence found in the T. Eaton Company archives made possible the analysis of Eaton's use of displays and advertising in an effort to shape Torontonians' ideas about the materialization of modern domesticity. The textual archives provided documentation of the activities of mid level managers and their attempts to navigate the tensions between promoting sales and teaching disciplined desire. The photographic evidence provided documentation of the physical structure and aesthetic appeal of the displays. Other historians, most notably Cynthia Wright, have drawn on these sources to document the displays, but no one has considered their role in terms of materializing dialogues about the meanings of good taste and wise spending between the store and its customers.<sup>9</sup> The thesis thus contributes to an increasingly sophisticated scholarly interrogation of retail display, exemplified most recently by the essays in *Architectures of Display: Department Stores and Modern Retail* (2018).<sup>10</sup>

Through its exploration of the life histories of Eaton's domestic displays, the thesis has uncovered stories of success and failure. More ambitious projects such as the period rooms, the House of To-day and the Ideal Ontario House did not fully achieve their marketing goals. Thrift House, in contrast, supported ordinary Toronto homemakers in their efforts to create modest comfort. The T. Eaton Company was not a monolith capable of dictating the buying choices of consumers. Instead company managers were involved in complex interactions with their customer base, trying to anticipate trends and find ways of creating demand. By looking behind the scenes at Eaton's various attempts to materialize commodified domesticity it is possible to discern a constant struggle to

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<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Wright, "The Most Prominent Rendezvous of Feminine Toronto': Eaton's College Street and the Organization of Shopping in Toronto, 1920-1950" (Ph.D. diss., OISE, University of Toronto, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Anca I. Lasc, Patricia Lara-Betancourt and Margaret Maile Petty, eds., *Architectures of Display: Department Stores and Modern Retail* (New York: Routledge, 2018). An earlier version of Chapter 5 was published as part of this volume.

shore up the store's cultural authority. Eaton's sold ideas about modern domesticity that Toronto consumers did not necessarily buy.

In her introduction to *Domestic Goods* Joy Parr issued a call for "studies of consumption which are more precisely located in time and in geographical and social space."<sup>11</sup> Middle class domesticity moved into the public realm in Canada during the interwar years as it became the subject of home economic courses, adult education lectures, magazine articles, world's fair exhibits and department store displays. To date, however, Canadian historians of the 1920s and 1930s have not paid much attention to the ways this phenomenon shaped middle class identities during this time. This thesis has explored the meanings of the modern interpenetration of private and public in a specific local and institutional context, enabling a more precise understanding of the middle class values connected with homemaking that were being promoted in interwar Toronto. Gaps remain: future research on the activities of other entities, such as consumer publications, utility companies, and real estate developers would help to round out the story of how middle class identities were codified and communicated through domestic interiors in this period.

Throughout the thesis argues that Tony Bennett's conceptualization of the exhibitionary complex can be connected to educational theorists' ideas about public pedagogy to provide a useful interpretive lens for the analysis of Eaton's displays.<sup>12</sup> Department stores were an integral part of the nineteenth century exhibitionary complex, using spectacular displays of merchandise to dazzle consumers with messages about the material plenty created by mass production and technological **progress**. In the twentieth

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<sup>11</sup> Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

century the nature of department store display changed, moving away from the purely spectacular to focus on more selective presentation methods that taught customers how to combine taste and economy. Torontonians interacted with Eaton's domestic object lessons, viewing a series of proposed environments that conveyed both the promise and the price tag associated with changing standards of living. Behind the scenes the store's middle management negotiated between the demands from upper management for sales and the need to appeal to customers ranging from thrifty homemakers to decorative arts connoisseurs. Close examination of particular examples of the curious practice of building life-sized representations of the private home within the public space of a leading department store makes possible an enriched understanding of the connections between commerce and culture in interwar Toronto.

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