

years, it has steadily increased in prestige as the quality and rarity of its pieces have become established.

By the time Ringling opened his museum to the public in 1932, however, his fortune was in receivership. In one of the more intriguing tales in American business history, Weeks describes how Ringling refused to sign an unattractive contract offered by Madison Square Garden's new management in 1929 for the circus's traditional spring engagement in New York City. The American Circus Corporation, a consortium of five other circuses and the Ringling show's biggest competitor, promptly signed instead. An enraged John Ringling immediately bought the entire American Circus Corporation for \$2 million, in what was then the largest circus deal ever made. Ringling had given his personal guarantee for the note, planning to charter a public corporation and market shares. The October stock market Crash that occurred ten days later ended this plan and ushered in a series of events that led to Ringling's downfall.

The debt-ridden circus was hit hard by the Depression. By the time the museum opened, Ringling's entire estate outside Sarasota was in the hands of creditors. After his death in 1936 at the age of seventy, the estate spent ten years in probate, as his chaotic business affairs were untangled, the circus note refinanced, and state ownership secured for his art collection, museum, and home.

As Weeks tells the story of John Ringling in this carefully researched book, a picture emerges of a complex man composed of equal parts folly and vision, who sought to transcend his image as the "circus king" and to provide an enduring cultural legacy of a far different sort.

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Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture. By William Leach • New York: Pantheon Books, 1993. xvii + 510 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$30.00. ISBN 0394-543-505.

Reviewed by Thomas D. Beal

In *Land of Desire*, William Leach probes how a variety of social and economic institutions transformed American society between 1880 and 1930 "into a society preoccupied with consumption, with comfort and bodily well-being, with luxury, spending, and acquisition" (p. xiii). While detailing the process by which merchants, advertisers, educators, reformers, and pol-

iticians worked together to foster a culture unconnected to family, community, or political democracy, Leach's interpretation provides a wide-ranging assessment of consumer capitalism and its origins. Yet, unlike many recent studies, Leach's work neither praises nor condemns this secular culture, but provides new insight into the ways it gradually became a way of seeing and organizing American society.

Readers of this journal will be interested in Leach's imaginative discussion of how department stores, mail-order houses, chain stores, hotels, and restaurants shaped consumer capitalism. He convincingly argues that business and economic historians have for too long seen this period as a formative one only for the standardization and mass production of goods. Shifting focus from productive capacity to the growth of consumer-oriented institutions, this work provides a fresh perspective on their power to foster economic growth and at the same time to transform society. However, unlike other studies that explore only the abundance of consumer goods, here the evolving business practices and careers of department store owners such as Alexander Stewart, Henry Siegel, Marshall Field, and especially John Wanamaker play intricate roles in this work. Leach demonstrates how department store owners learned to use color, glass, and light along with easy credit and free delivery to entice customers' imaginations and pecuniary desires.

Central to this process was the use of visual enticements by department store owners in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. These merchants built new multi-leveled stores and organized the interiors into commercial wonderlands that both shaped and mirrored the evolving values of middle-class shoppers. Electric lights, mirrors, and brightly lit glass showcases gave stores a carnival-like atmosphere, one that invited customers to interact with displayed goods. Leach also considers how important figures in the popular culture, especially writers, helped map the boundaries of this culture. The writer, traveling salesman, and retailer L. Frank Baum is Leach's most compelling example. Baum's children's stories, like *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), marveled at, celebrated, and shaped this commercial vision of the modern age. Yet, as part of this culture, Baum's interest in merchandising also led him to found, in 1898, the National Association of Window Trimmers and a year later to begin publishing *The Show Window*, the nation's first magazine to describe modern techniques for displaying merchandise. These appealing enticements effectively attracted customers, but many entrepreneurs believed that service was the key to a successful consumer-oriented business. Emphasizing the idea of customer service, stores, hotels, restaurants, and theaters surrounded customers with comfort and luxury, while courteous salespeople, clerks, waiters, and ushers peddled the "good life" to them.

Business leaders did not act alone. They forged relationships with colleges, urban museums, and municipal governments and used those institutions to help establish the new culture. After 1895 and into the new century, schools like the Pratt Institute, the Harvard Business School, the Wharton School, New York University, and the New York School of Fine and Applied

Arts extended their curricula to include classes on display advertising, interior decoration, and product design, allowing them to influence mass-market merchandising. Likewise, curators at urban museums organized special exhibits to showcase the design industries and held regular lectures and seminars that gave industry representatives, salespeople, and store buyers an appreciation of the new commercial aesthetics. Merchants established trade associations, which lobbied municipal governments to establish zoning laws that preserved their ability to construct urban retail districts. Using biographical material on John Wanamaker, Leach explains how the pleasures of consumption were not challenged but accommodated by traditional Christianity. However, the strongest proponents of the "good life" were mind cure groups, like New Thought, Unity, Christian Science, and the Theosophical Society, whose wish-oriented positive thinking associated consumption with personal happiness, as did many contemporary economists.

Between 1920 and 1930 these consumer-side institutions allowed the culture of consumption to take firm root. However, its dominance was solidified by several other factors. In this period a wave of what Leach calls "mergermania" swept over an ever-growing number and type of commercial institutions. Many department stores, food stores, hotels, and restaurants merged and established national chains. Guided by the advice of a new class of broker, each consolidation fostered new practices in management, accounting, marketing, transportation, and credit. Similarly, the period saw the rise of clear links between federal agencies such as the Commerce Department and business. While sponsoring the development of a complex institutional circuitry, corporate business orchestrated the birth of a new culture, one based on desire, acquisition, and consumption.

Based on an extensive body of evidence, *Land of Desire* is a well-written, well-organized, and important work. Leach's interpretation fills an important gap by offering a penetrating analysis of the interplay of business, culture, and society. Occasionally general readers may be overwhelmed by Leach's attention to detail and periodic tangential discussions, but specialists will find his work an interesting and thought-provoking perspective. This engaging interpretation is required reading for business historians interested in the birth and growth of American consumer capitalism.

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