

SELLING A WOMEN'S DREAM?

THE SUPPLY OF FEMALE FASHION IN EARLY DEPARTMENT STORES: THE CASE OF MILAN (1880s)

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Although it has received a growing amount of attention, the issue of consumption still seems less considered than that of production by business historians. Indeed, economic historians have recently provided several accounts of the rise of a “consumer society” in the Western world (see especially McKenrick, Brewer and Plumb 1982, Brewer and Porter 1993, Fine and Leopold 1993). According to this literature, a modern capitalist consumer culture emerged in the 17th and 18th century in the most advanced European countries. The issue of periodization is however still debated as some studies would anticipate the event to already to the end of the 1500s.

For sure, in European countries such as Great Britain and France by the beginning of the 1800s the change in *what* was bought and *how* it was purchased is clearly evident. Many contemporaries commented (generally in a negative way) the spread of “consumerism” often focusing on one of its most striking aspects, i.e. the transformations in the styles of clothing and in the composition of wardrobes, particularly of those of women (see Jones 1996, p. 30).

Historians agree that in Western Europe by the mid 1800s fashionable clothing had become more widely accessible to consumers, thus losing its previous function of sign of distinction of the aristocratic classes. Not surprisingly, the majority of studies on the consumption of fashion (in the pre-industrial as well as in the post-industrial period) concentrates on the French case. According to Jennifer Jones (1996) in France, by the end of the 1700s there was an increase in the value of women's wardrobes across all social classes suggesting that the middle and lower classes participated at least to some extent to the diffusion of this consumer society. However, the actual contribution of the working classes to this phenomenon is still debated. Just to give an example, Leora Auslander in the same volume suggests that in 19th century France consumer society was made essentially by the bourgeoisie and middling classes, while working people did not have enough money or time to shop (Auslander 1996, p. 81).

Independently from the individual perspectives and distinctive research interests, historians agree that in order to understand the emergence of a modern consumer society it is important to consider not only the kinds of goods consumed but also the channels through which they were diffused. In this respect, since its first appearance in Paris in the first decades of the 1800s the department store has become an emblem of the beginning of an era of democratization of consumption (see, for example, Miller 1981). Department stores have received a lot of attention from historians (as well as from sociologists and scholars of the field of “cultural studies”) who have analyzed this new form of retailing mainly from two different perspectives. Firstly, the department store is seen as evidence and agent of the emergence of mass consumption at the end of the 19th century (Williams 1982). Secondly, the department store is tightly linked with the progressive abandoning of the private sphere by women during the second half of the 1800s. In this latter perspective, the department store is considered as a women’s place *par excellence*. In this respect, the 19th century department store is regarded as a mechanism that contributed to the transformation of shopping in an exclusively (or predominantly) female occupation. Many of the studies that can be ascribed to this category attempt to assess how and to what extent the practice of consumption has been gendered and to evaluate the role of the department store in this process, while at the same time investigating the reasons for which women consumers were depicted as victims of capitalistic enticement rather than simple economic actors (see for example Benson 1986, Abelson 1989, Laermans 1993 and Leach 1993). This literature has contributed to spreading the opinion that starting with the diffusion of department stores in the 1860s shopping became a progressively feminine occupation. Equally widespread is the idea that early department stores built their success on a business strategy consisting largely (or even almost solely) in the allurements of women.

Yet, the number of studies that pursue a detailed investigation of the characteristics of the goods sold by department stores in this period is still quite limited. The impression is that business and economic historians have given for granted that early department stores *really* did what their advertising campaigns, contemporary commentators and critiques said they were doing: i.e. making fashion and fashionable goods (i.e. especially goods made for women or for the household) available to a large mass of consumers (again supposedly mostly women).

This paper shares the belief that department stores represented a retailing revolution both because they widened the amount of goods available on the market and because they contributed to the entrance of a growing number of women in the public sphere (both as consumers and as employees). However, this article will try to analyze in greater depth the effective assortment of goods that were offered to female consumers by the department store. On one side, the essay

analyzes the assortment and price of these goods with the goal of understanding what kind of woman was actually shopping within these “cathedrals of consumption”. On the other side, the paper focuses on the stylistic characteristics of typically female goods in order to determine which image of woman was endorsed by early department stores and what feminine type they were contributing to spread.

These topics are explored by discussing the case of Italy in the last decades of the 19th century based on the information derived by the mail order catalogs of the *Grandi Magazzini “Alle Città d’Italia”* the largest Italian department store (founded in Milan in 1865 by the Bocconi brothers and renamed *La Rinascente* after World War One, with a new managerial direction and property structure). The paper is structured as follows: section 1 provides a snapshot of the economic development of Milan in the mid-19th century. The origins of the Milanese department store and its evolution until the 1880s are discussed in section 2, while the following part analyses the 1882-1883 mail-order catalog. Some provisional conclusions complete the paper.

1. Milan in the 1880s

The second half of the 19th century is the period in which Italy started its industrialization process. While a «first coat of paint» of industrial activity was laid during the decades 1860-1880, the definitive reinforcement of the country’s industrial structure occurred at the turn of the century. In these years there was a growth in the country’s major economic indicators, although it must be stressed that this modernization presented strong regional differences, with industry concentrated in the Northern regions (Zamagni 1993). However, although significant when compared to the earlier situation, the modernization of Italian industry before the 20th century must not be overemphasized, even when taking into account the most developed areas. The majority of firms was still active in largely traditional (although rapidly and deeply evolving) sectors, particularly textiles, moreover maintaining strong links with agricultural activities and, from an organizational point of view, remained largely of an artisan type.

Lombardy, and especially the city of Milan, was one of the chief beneficiaries of this industrial spurt, which almost completely transformed the city into a modern industrial center at the beginning of World War One. The most evident effect of the industrial upsurge was demographic. Between 1859 and 1915 the city’s population nearly trebled (from 232,000 to 658,000), with a particularly strong increase between 1879 and 1889 (from 299,008 to 408,294). This impressive trend was largely fuelled by immigrants who were attracted by the increasing economic prosperity that made

Milan a unique case in the Italian economy. Just to give an idea, between 1859 and 1915 the number of commercial enterprises registered in the city grew more than fourfold (Morris 1993). This modernization process didn't significantly alter the predominant aspects of the traditional urban economy, made of a wide miscellany of tiny labor intensive artisan sweatshops.

This was especially true for the clothing and fashion sector, which was formed of a great amount of very small workshops producing clothes and accessories (gloves, hats, shoes etc.). Commercial guides - published yearly from the 1840s onwards - provide an analytical picture of the very diversified productive urban environment in which all elements of the clothing and textile industry were present and which provided Milan with a well developed and diversified economy of fashion.

The numerical relevance of the clothing and textile related activities is unveiled by the industrial census, carried out on a national level starting from 1881. In this year Milan is depicted as being characterized by a dense network of small and tiny workshops and by the diffusion of domestic workers who produced goods on account of commercial firms. The number of workers in industrial activities was 68,000 of which "only" 27,000 were employed in sectors where large size factories were dominant. A similar number – many of which were women – was labelled as "assigned to clothing". This category included a wide assortment of consumer goods produced to satisfy the demand of fashion and luxury products: silk textiles, velvets, ribbons, voiles, knitwear, trimmings and braids, elastic fibers, wool shawls, embroideries and laces, hats, leather gloves, fur coats, linens and lingerie, clothes and shoes. This productive organization was not properly a heritage of pre-industrial times. On the contrary, domestic work and the prevalence of female workforce signalled the beginning of a modernization process that took advantage of decentralization of production and mechanization. Instead of being wiped away by the factory system, this domestic sweating system had been reinforced by the diffusion of the sewing machine.

2. The first Italian department store: *Grandi Magazzini "Alle Città d'Italia"*

The economic transformations described in the previous section provide the main prerequisites for the emergence of the first Italian department store which was created in 1865, when two brothers – Ferdinando and Luigi Bocconi – opened a textile and clothing shop in one of the most central streets of Milan (Amatori 1989). For sure, their store represented a true novelty for Italian retailing and its growing size witnesses the success of their initiative. In 1877 there was a renewal of the firm which stressed the links with the world capital of fashion: Paris. The French echo was clear in the

choice of the name – *Aux Villes d'Italie* – showing how all activities somehow connected to fashion had to claim some kind of relationship with France.

By the beginning of the 20th century, *Alle città d'Italia* (the Italian version of the name of the firm, that the Bocconi brothers were soon forced to adopt due to the strong anti-French trend of Italian foreign policy) was undoubtedly the largest department store in the country and had branches centrally located in all major Italian cities (Milan, Rome, Genoa, Turin, Palermo, Naples, Venice, Florence and Bologna). The main store however was the Milanese one, which was established in the heart of the city, occupying a wide area beside the Duomo (cathedral).

Similarly to its French counterparts, the Bocconis pursued the idea a low unitary profit compensated by high stock turnover. The lower prices made possible by department stores in comparison with those of traditional shops (in addition to the fact that the free admission system allowed everyone to wander in the departments even if not provided with enough money to purchase anything), have induced historians to talk about department stores as a means of “democratization of fashion”. However, in the case of *Alle Città d'Italia* available sources do not allow to fully confirm such an hypothesis. The analysis of the variation of prices for clothing items and accessories sold through mail order catalogs suggest instead a more mixed picture, with average prices altogether not affordable, or barely affordable, by the classes with lower incomes.

Another characteristic of this modern form of retailing, in this case fully picked up by the Bocconi firm, was the large variety of different products for sale. This was especially striking when compared to traditional shops, that were generally specialized in a limited variety of items.

Information on the productive organization of the Milanese department store at the end of the 1870s is provided by a newspaper article describing *Aux Villes d'Italie* in 1879. While in the initial phases of their business the Bocconi brothers had relied on domestic producers for the manufacturing of goods in a way that was quite similar to the pre-industrial putting-out system, by 1879 the firm had created two production workshops (in Turin and Milan) occupying 900 workers for the production of ready-to-wear dresses (both mens' and womens'). At the same time, each of the branches of *Alle Città d'Italia* occupied some 150 artisan workers who were employed for the production of custom made garments.

Getting back more specifically to the source of this paper, the wide assortment of goods was fully mirrored also in the mail order catalogues, which contributed to spreading the merchandise much farther than the walls of Milanese building.

The adoption of this kind of sales technique was by no means specific to the Bocconi firm, as it was typical of all major 19th century department stores. As a matter of fact, mail-order service was already introduced by the forerunner of the Parisian department store in the first half of the 19th century, the *magasin de nouveautés*. The most important among the “true” French department stores of the second half of the century, the Bon Marché, featured a mail-order service in 1871, and by the end of the century “mailings were massive”. By then, catalogues were sent not only to customers living in Paris or in other French provinces, but a significant amount was mailed abroad, translated in a variety of different languages. The importance of this kind of sales on the overall business of the Bon Marché is remarkable. Already in 1871-72 mail orders accounted for almost 15% of total sales volume, while at the beginning of the 20th century they had increased to more than 17%.¹

Unfortunately there is little information concerning the volume of sales of the Bocconi store in this period. We do know however that in the last decades of the 19th century, the catalog of the Milanese store was published every two months. The 1880 issues were made of roughly 120 pages with more than 300 illustrations and were mailed to approximately 40,000 customers. The previous year the Bocconi firm had established its own typography, with a printing capacity of around 30,000 catalogs. By the beginning of the 1890s, the mail-order department of *Alle Città d'Italia* received 38,000 letters, and shipped more or less 100,000 parcels.

The mail order catalogs of *Alle Città d'Italia* appear very similar to those published contemporarily by their more famous foreign counterparts (such as *Printemps*, *Bon Marché* and *Louvre*). In addition to colorful images of a wide variety of garments and accessories, customers were provided with detailed instructions on how to take one’s measurements and information on how eventually to give merchandise back.

¹ Organization of such a wide business was clearly a complex matter, involving hundreds of employees and workers, each with specific tasks. Some more specific information on this issue is provided by Emile Zola, who published his famous novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Ladies’ Paradise) in 1883 and collected detailed first-hand material for the book between 1881-1882 (i.e. the period we are considering). His notes on Bon Marché are thus an interesting source to fill in the gap concerning mail-order catalogs of *Alle Città d'Italia* and to compare the Milanese store with the more famous French counterpart. According to Zola, in 1881-82 the mail order department of the Bon Marché employed 226 persons (while the overall number of employees was 2500 employees). The volume of letters received in a year could reach 5,000, i.e. 40 kilos. The department featured a rather striking division of labor: some workers opened the envelopes, others read them, classifying them according to the relevant department. Each letter was assigned a number. The department had many boxes, each with a number corresponding to a received letter, in which the ordered items were put (correspondence based on numbers). Having verified that all the ordered merchandise was present, goods were sent first to the packaging and then to the delivery departments. Regrettably, Zola does not provide any information as to the printing of the catalogs (although there was a printing office in the Bon Marché), but he claims that in a single season 340,000 catalogs were distributed in France and 100,000 abroad (printed in different languages). The department store owned elegant horses and carriages for the delivery of items within the city, while the goods ordered in the provinces and abroad were sent by railway.

It is important to stress that sales volumes as those suggested by these figures – even if impressive – however do not necessarily imply that department stores became a selling point of predominantly ready-to-wear dresses. On the contrary, the detailed analysis of the 1882-1883 catalogs shows that the majority of items for sale at *Alle Città d'Italia* were not standard-made but implied a generally significant intervention of tailors to fit individual measurements and custom specifications and requests (type of material to be used, for example).

3. The mail order catalog of *Alle Città d'Italia*

This section analyses the offer proposed by the department stores owned by the Bocconi brothers, examining the style, assortment and prices of the clothes on sale.

The instrument used for this analysis is the 1882-83 autumn and winter album (*l'Album illustrato delle novità Autunno-Inverno 1882-83*). This mail order catalogue was distributed early in the Autumn season to publicize the entire range of goods sold in the store and to present the main fashion novelties.

The Bocconi brothers started to send out illustrated sales catalogues on a bi-monthly basis starting in 1878. The more important issues were those in April, which published the spring and summer trinkets, and October for the autumn and winter ones. The other issues focussed on specific lines, the sales season or special events: March was dedicated to underwear, the December issue to Christmas decorations and toys. The remaining issues were for the “end of season special offers”.

The illustrations in the catalogues were generally preceded by a section explaining the shipping, packing and payment procedures, and eventual system for returning goods. To promote the long-range purchase of clothes made to measure, the catalogue contained the instructions necessary for passing on to the department store the measurements to be used when producing the article of clothing. The parts of the body to be measured, in all about ten, were indicated on a drawing. Each measurement was marked with a letter, which corresponded to a table in which the client had to indicate her or his measurements. In the case of clothing for children, both male and female, there was a higher level of standardisation: in fact it was sufficient to indicate the age, the sleeve length, shoulder width and height of the child.

The catalogue can be considered a sort of virtual shop, which reproduced the elegant atmosphere of the Piazza del Duomo salons with a coloured front cover bearing the new trends in fashion and sober internal pages containing illustrations framed in decorative motifs.

The analysis of the stylistic characteristics of the clothes sold by the Magazzini Bocconi shows that they wanted to appear as up to date as possible with the latest fashion novelties. The language used in the captions beneath the figures in the catalog was full of jargon taken from the fashion glossaries of Paris (and, to a minor extent, London). This clearly revealed the intention of emphasizing a strong link with the French capital, which dictated the trends in female fashion (while London was trendsetter for male fashion). The models reproduced in the catalog were in many ways similar to those published in the most elegant fashion magazines which in those years circulated in Milan among the ladies belonging to the higher social classes.

The frequent special offers – which made it possible to accelerate the rotation of goods, reduce stocking costs and to increase the volume of sales, maintaining unit profit margins – transmitted to the client the unequivocal message that the assortment of merchandise was constantly updated to keep up with the fickle fashion world. At the same time they allowed the department store to attract the attention of those numerous women who were more parsimonious, less demanding, or simply less affluent, but not less sensitive to the fashions of Paris.

The array of the goods on sale included everything necessary for creating a complete outfit. As far as clothes for women were concerned, the assortment ranged from underwear to sets of blouses and skirts, from dresses to coats, from cloaks to the accessories ever present in a female outfit – gloves, hats, umbrellas, handbags, handkerchiefs – finishing with decorative elements such as ribbons, lace, bows and decorations.

Women's clothing

The clothes were not connected to any specific occasion or use. On the contrary, the captions often outlined the adaptability and versatility of the articles for sale, in open contrast with the indications given by the label. Each article of clothing was presented on average in six different versions. They were different in terms of cloth type and design, trimmings and the various combinations that could be matched. Each article was presented in a base version, which could be personalised on request. The personalisation could consist of the use of a different cloth – normally more expensive – from the one presented in the catalogue, the addition of decorations and precious accessories, or the extra care taken in finishing the article. The catalogue offered standard dresses that could be personalised at a supplementary cost, depending on the type of personalisation requested.

The cost of the personalisation varied considerably depending on the type of outfit – male or female – and the type of variation. Personalising an article of female clothing could imply an additional cost of 33% to 25% more than the middle range model – the equivalent of 28 lire for a coat and 59

lire for a complete dress. This depended on whether the personalisation involved the use of a cloth of higher quality or more refined trimmings. Starting from an average price base model, personalising the article one could therefore obtain an item that was more expensive than the most expensive base model, which could in turn be further enriched. In other words, the prices at which the base models were presented in the catalogue underestimate the purchasing power of the potential clients of the Bocconi stores.

Secondly, the incidence on the overall price of an article of female clothing of the surcharge due to the use of a different cloth from the one proposed in the catalogue, was greater than the incidence of the surcharge due to applications and trimmings. The differential – which can be estimated in a few decimal points – probably reflected the price gap existing between every-day cloths and high-quality cloths. However, it can also be considered an indicator of the level of standardization of the production process.

Finally, the analysis of the prices at which the basic models of the various products were put on sale reveals a marked uniformity of distribution between two extremes, represented by the minimum prices, which were the special offers, and the top prices of the luxury products.

Women's accessories

If we narrow our focus to accessories, during the 1880s only a few accoutrements gained undeniable importance in fashionable female dress. As far as shoes and stockings, in these years their primary function was still more practical than decorative. The feet were almost always covered by a long skirt, sometimes shorter in summer. This is mirrored in the assortment of goods for sale. Indeed, the catalog offered a very small selection of socks and stockings. Similarly, handbags and purses were not yet part of an elegant lady's apparel and the mail-order catalog offered few of them. Leather goods were largely confined to travel accessories, such as baggage and trunks. Thus, in the 1880s the major ladies' accessories advertised in the *Alle Città d'Italia's* catalogs were hats, umbrellas, and gloves.

During the 1880s, the catalogs sold readymade decorated hats and plain hat shapes that could be decorated to suit the wearer's fancy. The number of readymade hat models featured in the catalogs grew steadily, from four in autumn-winter of 1882–1883 to about a dozen in later years. Most were particularly suitable for young ladies. This confirms the idea that young people wore ready-to-wear, which cost less than comparable pre-made clothing for grownups, more often than adults. The price of ladies' readymade hats varied. Winter hats were made out of velvet, plush, or felt; while less-expensive summer hats were made out of straw. A plain hood that fastened under the chin with

ribbons cost a mere 12 lira. In contrast, an elaborate elegant model called “Egle,” made from two shades of felt, ornamented with ostrich feathers, and clasped with a patterned scarf, cost 42.75 lira. The prices of summer hats ranged from 10 lira to 50 lira. Another expensive model was the one called “Dolores,” described as “a bizarre hat made from fine plaited straw in new colors with ostrich feathers and long silk ribbons.” As specified in the catalog, this was so enormous that it could not be wrapped in a parcel, but had to be purchased at the store.

The variety of hat shapes, which could be decorated with feathers, velvet bows, shiny buckles, silk ribbons, fake flowers, and fake birds, also sold in the catalog, was much wider than the selection of readymade hats. There were about fifteen to twenty models of basic hat shapes, each with a different style of brim, rim, and cap, for ladies and girls of all ages. Winter shapes cost between 2.75 lira and 11.75 lira, while the summer ones were cheaper, with prices from 0.95 lira and 7.25 lira. The decorations were sold separately and were illustrated on subsequent pages. The ribbons could cost as much as 7.95 lira for a meter of damask that was 20 cm. wide. However, ten of the fourteen ribbon choices cost less than 3.45 lira per meter. There were about fifteen different types of feathers, ranging from those resembling species of the most common birds, which cost less than 1 lira, to those resembling feathers of rare birds such as ostriches, at more than 30 lira. Similarly, the catalog offered ample assortments of fake flower-and-fruit decorations, the most elegant example of which could be bought for less than 5 lira.

A large number of decorative warm-weather umbrellas and parasols were represented in the mail-order catalogs. The assortment of umbrella models, and the corresponding variety of prices, was large. The most refined parasols were made from lace matching the color of the dress, from gauze hemmed in silk, or were covered with flowers and petals to imitate a large flower corolla. The handle, in contrast to the richness of the dome, did not catch the viewer’s attention at first glance. A closer look, however, revealed the handles were very elegant and precious, made out of ivory, tortoise, and rare woods. The catalogs include about 25 to 35 different models of umbrellas with prices ranging from 2 lira to 28 lira. Models varied in terms of height, the kind of handle (which was the most important decorative feature), and the quality of the silk.

Gloves were worn by women of the 1880s for different purposes. Fashion dictated the wearing of colored silk gloves in tone with the evening dress, decorated with open work and embroidery or made out of soft white suede, elbow length, and always with three vertical seams on the back to make them more tapered. Summer gloves were made out of silk or cotton and were always long. The assortment of gloves offered by the department store was composed of a few dozen styles, which differed in terms of length, number of buttons, material and, obviously, varied according to

the season. Missing from the mail-order catalogs were the more elegant models of gloves for eveningwear. On the contrary, short gloves were largely represented. Winter gloves were mainly made out of ordinary wool or leather in suede or glacé finish. Summer gloves instead were mainly woven with Scottish, woolen, or cotton thread. The price of the gloves ranges from 1.60 to 4 lira, but could sometimes cost as much as 6 lira, as did fur-lined leather gloves presented in the autumn-winter catalogs.

The analysis carried out so far highlights contrasting aspects of the commercial strategy employed by the Bocconi brothers' department stores. On the one hand, some quality indicators – in particular sales and the adaptability of clothing and accessories to the different moments of daily life – could lead one to believe that women shopping at the Milanese store, motivated by price and life style, preferred ready-made clothes. On the other hand, if one considers the fact that dresses and accessories could be personalized and the relative cost of the personalisation process, it seems that only women of the upper (or, at least, middle-upper) classes, i.e. those women belonging to families with greater economic possibilities, could afford to shop at *Alle città d'Italia*. For such women the department store represented not only a source of inspiration concerning the latest fashion trends, but also a display of the most innovative production techniques. It seemed that the Bocconis were employing techniques similar to those that in those same years in Paris had brought fame to Charles Frédéric Worth (1825-1895), dressmaker for the leading European aristocratic courts, who produced hand made dresses which he transformed into unique items adding superimposed cloth panels, creating rich drapes, and the applying precious decorations.

So let's try to define who could afford to shop in the Bocconi brothers' department stores. The analysis of family wealth in different professional categories gives us some useful information for answering this question (see Vecchi 2003).

Table 1. Annual accounts of a typical Milanese family* (Italian Lire)

Workman (a)		Man worker in the clothing industry (b)		Woman worker in clothing industry (b)		Bricklayer (c)		Employee (d)	
Total expenditures	1.613,30	Total expenditures	748,25	Total expenditures	638,75	Total expenditures	607,60	Total expenditures	1.649,57
Clothing (total)	255,50	Clothing (total)	182,50	Clothing (total)	91,25	Clothing (total)	216,90	Clothing (total)	244
Clothing	109,50	Clothing	73,00	Clothing	54,75	Clothing	196,40	Clothing	116
Shoes	146,00	Laundry	36,50	Laundry	36,50	Soap, polish	5,50	Shoes	80
						Sewing kit	15,00	Laundry	48

* A family with two parents and four children.

Sources: (a) “Spesa giornaliera della mia famiglia, la moglie con 4 figli” 1878; (b) *Sarti e Sarte*, in «La Lotta», 1880; (c) *Condizione economica e sociale dell’operaio muratore*, in «Il muratore», 1891; (d) *Come vive un impiegato milanese*, in «Il Giornale degli Impiegati», 1893, all quoted in S. Zaninelli, *I consumi a Milano nell’Ottocento*, Roma: Edindustria, 1973, 108-117.

The figures illustrated in the table describe the economic situation of the families of workers and artisans, which at the end of the 19th century represented the majority of the population of Milan. For the family of the average employee - that is to say the worker earning the highest income among the professional categories listed in the table - we have figures for the distribution of overall clothing expenditure: 116 Lire for clothes, 80 Lire for shoes, 48 Lire for laundry. An employee who had bought a complete dress or suit from the Bocconi department stores – both in the basic version costing respectively 59 and 51 Lire, without any personalisation – would have used up almost his entire clothing budget for the year. He would have had enough left to buy a shirt (6,75 Lire) - but putting off the purchase of spare cuffs and collars – a hat (the average price of a female hat was 28 lire and that of a male hat was 10 lire), and any other underwear or clothing for his children. Buying the same goods in the base version would without doubt have helped a more balanced management of the family accounts.

If we turn to consider the purchase of accessories (as distinct from the entire dress), figures in Table 1 show that a Milanese employee could actually not afford to buy the complete top-range assortment of accessories featured in the 1880s catalogs. Assuming that he would buy one item of each (female) accessory for each of the two collections (i.e. Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer), he would end up spending slightly more than 235 lire. This amount would not include any additional costs for personalization. Given that his annual clothing budget for the year was estimated at 116 lire, the purchase of the entire top range of accessories would have been impossible for this kind of customer. Of course, we can imagine that it would have been possible

for a Milanese employee to select one or two out of the top-range accessories proposed in the catalog in the course of the year. However, this would have dramatically reduced the possibility of purchasing other clothing items (a complete dress in the cheapest version in 1882-83 cost 59 lire while a complete suit in the less expensive model cost 51 lire). These figures suggest that a Milanese employee could shop from the mail order catalog of the Bocconi brothers' department store only occasionally, and even then he would have to be careful in selecting an assortment watchfully balancing top level and entry level products.

The picture is indeed different if we consider the less expensive, most basic, models of accessories sold through the mail order catalogs. As in the previous hypothesis, assuming the purchase of one item of each (female) accessory for each of the two collections (i.e. Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer), the total expense would be of almost 25 lire. This amount obviously excluded any possibility of personalizing the accessories (for example, it takes into account the purchase of a hat shape without any fake flowers or feathers, which were instead very fashionable but could also become very expensive). Such an expense was indeed much more limited, and could be easily afforded even by the families with the lowest incomes among the professional categories listed in Table 1. The 54.75 lire annually devoted to the purchase of clothing by a woman worker in the clothing industry (the professional category earning the lowest income according to the table) meant that she could easily afford more than one of the accessories in their simplest and most basic models. Of course, nothing can be said as the typology of accessories that she would chose.

Conclusions

Our analysis seems to shed some doubts on the levels of standardization and “democratization” of fashion which have long been connected to the appearance of department stores. Even if in many ways catalogs can be seen as a means of diffusion of fashion items to a wide audience of potential customers, our research suggests that standardization was not so strong as one could suppose (for example, by considering that prices of all goods are clearly indicated). On the contrary, a careful exam of the catalogs shows that most clothes and accessories had to be accurately personalized and costs were generally quite high. This means that in this phase, *Alle Città d'Italia* for sure did not aim at selling to the lowest social classes (i.e. the widest market segment), even if one of the main principles on which the department store was based was high volume of sales and low unitary profits. In other words, it seems that even if the doors of the department store were surely open to all, most items were not affordable by all (except for specific events, such as the famous “white

sales”, where personalization of items was probably very limited and standardization reached its highest levels).

The analysis also suggests that accouterments were overall affordable to a larger amount of customers compared to the complete outfits that were sold in those same catalogs. Yet, the most elaborate (and thus fashionable) versions of accessories remained out of reach for all but the wealthiest consumers. Given the low quality and the plainness of the basic version accessories featured in the catalogs, much personalization was required in order to make such items truly fashionable and up-to-date to the latest fashion trends. Yet personalization – be it the kind of material used, the type of finishing or the quantity of ornaments - implied a sensible increase of costs thus shedding some doubts as to the extent to which accessories were truly affordable for lower income consumers.

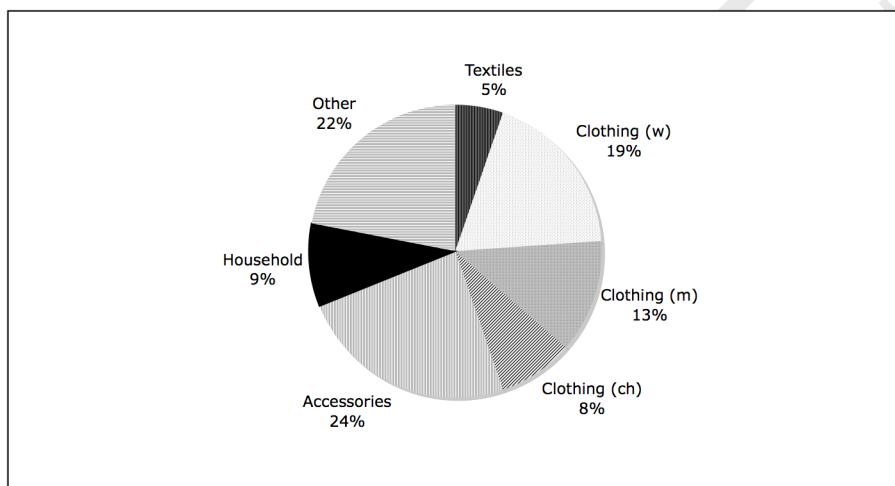
We have seen that personalization was one of the main ingredients in the sales formula of the mail order catalogs of the 1880s. Its centrality suggests that the increasing standardization in the production of fashion accessories (well evident in the decision of the Bocconi brothers to open an internal workshop for the manufacture of umbrellas) in this period is far from implying the massification or homologation of fashion. On the contrary, department stores’ marketing strategies put a strong emphasis on individual taste and individual discretion in shopping for fashion. In other words, standardization does not mean consumer restriction but rather diversification of the offer, which can fulfill the requirements of a wide variety of tastes and economic means. In this respect, accessories play a very important role, in that they provide the possibility of an increased personalization of one’s outfit.

Finally, the analysis of the assortment of goods sold through the pages of the mail order catalog enables us to assess if in this period women represented the major market target of the Bocconi department store. Table 2 shows the amount of space (in terms of number of pages) devoted to each category of products displayed in the catalog. It is important to bear in mind that the distinction between female and male goods has been made only for clothing goods (more specifically for outerwear) while in the case of accessories a single page features items for both women and men. The figures suggest two kinds of observations. Firstly, in this period the Bocconi store was selling mainly clothing and fashionable goods, while households and textiles represented a smaller proportion of the merchandise. Secondly, womenswear occupies a larger amount of space compared to menswear, although the latter’s weigh in the overall assortment of goods featured in the mail order catalog is not significantly smaller compared to that of its female counterpart.

Table 2: Categories of products and amount of pages of mail order catalog (autumn-winter 1882-1883)

Textiles	7
Clothing (outerwear) Women	18
Clothing (outerwear) Men	12
Clothing (outerwear) Children	8
Clothing (outerwear) Total	38
Accessories	23
Household	9
Other	21
Total	98

Figure 1. Amount of pages devoted to types of merchandise (%)



In the end, even if in many ways catalogs can be seen as a means of diffusion of fashion items to a wide audience of potential customers, our research suggests that most clothes and accessories had to be accurately personalized and costs were generally quite high. This means that in this phase, *Alle Città d'Italia* did not aim at selling to the lowest social classes (i.e. the widest market segment), even if one of the main principles on which the department store was based was high volume of sales and low unitary profits. In other words, it seems that even if the doors of the department store were surely open to all, most items were not affordable by all (except for specific events, such as the famous “white sales”, where personalization of items was probably very limited and standardization reached its highest levels).

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