

Henri Bendel and the Worlds He Fashioned

Tim Allis

University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press (Sep 24, 2024)

Hardcover \$34.95 (264pp)

978-1-959569-05-3

Tim Allis's fascinating biography of American fashion and retail pioneer Henri Bendel, inventor of the clearance sale, asserts that much of what is taken for granted in modern retail can be attributed to Bendel, whose in-store fashion shows and concepts like mini boutiques and store brands changed the American shopping experience.

Born in Louisiana's Cajun country in 1868, Bendel was the son of a hardworking Jewish immigrant family of merchants. With the help of family connections, Bendel started out in retail in Louisiana and became successful in his own right. In 1894, he married Blanche Lehman and moved to New York to work as a milliner. In 1896, Blanche died in childbirth. Facing a crisis, Bendel decided to remain in New York and went into business for himself. The store that would bear his name until it closed in 2019 was born.

Herein, Bendel is credited for introducing the fashion house of Chanel to the US market while at the same time championing American fashion, laying the groundwork for the store to include designers like Ralph Lauren. But whereas Bendel's business achievements are known, his personal life is more difficult to trace. There is no birth certificate, he never kept a diary, and letters from his family and friends were lost. Allis's interviews with those who knew Bendel fill in the gaps, resulting in a meticulous account of Bendel's life from his beginnings in Louisiana until his death in New York in 1936. The use of apropos magazine illustrations, newspaper clips of Bendel family announcements, and photographs of people and places that mattered to Bendel add further depth to the narrative.

Henri Bendel and the Worlds He Fashioned is a revealing biography of an elusive retail pioneer who changed how Americans shop.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (September / October 2024)

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