

Space, Efficiency and Service: Luxury and Femininity in the Establishments of J. Lyons & Co (1895 -1935)

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Abstract

This article examines the interrelationship of luxury and femininity in the historical case of J. Lyons & Co. Waitresses working for the company represented the widespread feminization of the West End of London during the Edwardian to inter-war period. Examining the results of a democratized luxury in producing new identities for female employees, waitresses known as ‘nippies’ adorned in black and white uniforms, presented an efficient image of modernity and service for all who visited their restaurants or hotels. The emancipation of women in the retail industries aligned with a new image of luxury became essential components in the construction of modernity at the time. With new service industries forming around mass production and consumption, occupational roles and the acceleration of shopping for goods enabled a culture of desire to emerge. Fashionable identities formed around the most modern pursuits of leisure, enabling women to become partakers and representatives of an urban commodity culture. An image of space, efficiency and service was personified by the modern young women whom Lyons employed. Girls who were neatly dressed in an updated version of servant clothing which by the late twenties was further glamourized by the addition of a stylized cap and collar. Whilst the space of London urbanized, the number of women employed increased. Such an impact created various new industries that women sought to enjoy. An appeal of femininity was capitalized upon by proprietors of restaurants and hotels as a contributor to luxury status and female employment. The article investigates gender – in terms of space, efficiency – as a result of a design culture, and service in line with new luxury architecture. In adopting a (feminist) historical materialist approach, with particular examination of the details of dress and design, this article contributes to the broader debates across both women’s studies and design history, offering a specific account of gender and class in the *commercial* sphere.

Keywords – Femininity, Gender, Interiors, Luxury, Service, Space

By 1915 the company enterprise known as J. Lyons & Co had become a huge success on the high street; a catering firm providing mass luxury in the popular West End of London, that was dually a result of the combination of luxury interiors and efficiency in the servicing of establishments, namely the Lyons Corner Houses, and the Strand and Regent Palace Hotel.¹

Most prominently, the company’s employment of waitresses was a selling point for J. Lyons & Co evident in published literature. The period between 1915 and 1935 reveals how specific luxuries began to flourish after the First World War and into the inter-war years.

¹ Lyon’s emerged from the Salmon and Gluckstein family who were of German-Jewish origin and introduced a café culture to London in the 1890’s.

The paternalistic culture that the company implemented worked in tandem with the emancipation of women and the urban identity of the city. A focus on the waitress and women in the hotel and restaurant allows for an insight into the perception of female identities. As the service industries allowed young working class women to find employment away from domestic service, their war work in factories and other masculine industries also helped them to attain a sense of freedom. This article examines the results of democratized luxury² in producing new identities for female employees, and considers this, in relation to design and interiors. Consequently exploring the relationships that employees had with the company, and roles that formed from women's work in a large-scale establishment in the West End. The article investigates gender in terms of space, efficiency as a result of a design culture, and service in line with new luxury architecture.

Generally, a cosmopolitan culture emerged due to the emancipation and the increase in technology systems for retail and shopping spaces. Therefore to position J. Lyons & Co within this context is an attempt to indicate that as a company they were central to this development in mass production, visual imagery and the presentation of luxury for the mass consumer. Consequently a new luxury became a crucial factor for those employees, notably women, whom Lyon's sought to promote and support. A paternalism was evident and this helped to support single women who lived on site at the Lyons Regent Palace Hotel, where employees enjoyed 'in house' benefits such as free meals and accommodation, sports clubs and weekend excursions.

In my own research it has become evident that the geographical space of the Piccadilly quadrant, where the Regent Palace Hotel was situated, was an active space for women and girls working in the city. Although memories were made by the consenting couples visiting for a pre-theatre lunch or supper, where the pace of service helped to enable a modern sense of luxury. A cosmopolitan dining scene suggests that interpretations of danger and anxiety when discussing late nineteenth and early twentieth century London, may be focused more positively on social responses during the inter-war years. Indeed, It was via

² Restaurants such as Lockhart's and latterly the ABC's entered the retail market in the West End to welcome both men and women. They were rudimentary in comparison to J. Lyons & Co, who had seventeen teashops to their name by 1898. Their house style provided a luxury experience of dining out that was affordable and came with more regulated working hours, better pay and the wider enjoyment of 'leisure time'. See E. D. Rappaport, 2000, p.177

the promotion of public rooms in the restaurants in both the Lyons Corner Houses and Lyons Hotels that the waitress emerged as the emancipated symbol of modernity.

The pre First World War catering industry in London, including many restaurants of European and continental means, employed waiters only. Establishments of Italian and French proprietorship, employing staff of German origin, dominated the market in the West End from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Among London's burgeoning population were a rising number of continental immigrants who brought with them new food cultures. Becoming more of a visible presence in London, their appearance became the subject of widespread interest.³ The Salmon and Gluckstein families of German Jewish origin decided to conceal their European identity in favour of adopting the name of their business partner Joe Lyons for their brand of teashops, the first opening in Piccadilly in 1894.⁴ This enabled the company to establish roots into the retail culture of the West End of London, which was at the centre of their business empire. Products were manufactured from a factory in Greenford, Middlesex and distributed across the capital and into Britain's larger cities. Lyons' acumen for trading derived from their provision of catering at national exhibitions predicated on building a momentum for a popular image of the British Empire.

The Caterer and Hotel-Keepers Gazette proclaimed in 1895:

Cadby Hall, at the rear of Olympia, Kensington is the headquarters of the great catering firm J. Lyons & Co Ltd. At which place they have nearly five acres of land in use for kitchens, bakeries, dairy, offices, stables, storehouses for outdoor catering requirements, and joiners, painters, decorators, electric lighting, engineering and other workshops.⁵

Such a lengthy description of a large-scale enterprise indicates the prowess of the firm and also the establishment of a British reputation. Aligned with the expansion of mass luxury as a result of varying factors including science, technology and changing consumer tastes, a female public had begun to grow an interest in the shopping spaces of the West End and the

³ In her study on dining in late nineteenth and early twentieth century London, Brenda Assael examined the meaning of 'cosmopolitanism' amongst recent authors, introducing a theory of this in relation to transnational, and social political forces. Observing the processes of supply and demand in the catering press, she identifies a globalization of the city leading up to the First World War. See Assael, Brenda, (2013) 'Gastro-Cosmopolitanism and the Restaurant in Late Victorian and Edwardian London', in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 56, Issue 3, pp.681-706

⁴ By the turn of the century thirty-seven Lyons teashops had opened in London and fifteen more opened in Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Bradford by 1909. Lyons teashops soon became an institution: there was hardly a high street in Greater London without one; at one time no fewer than nine traded concurrently in London's Oxford Street alone. P. Bird, 2000, p.63

⁵ *The Caterer and Hotel-keepers' Gazette*, 16 April 1895, p.150

teashops became havens for their patronage. In 1896 Lyons opened the Trocadero restaurant closely followed by the first Lyons Corner House in Coventry Street, Piccadilly in 1909. Their second venture opened on the Strand in 1915, and the final Oxford Street Corner House opened in 1928. The architectural press responded with delight by claiming that: 'Londoners are becoming accustomed to associate that particular kind of terracotta which has a white glazed surface known sometimes as an eggshell glaze, with the useful restaurants of Joseph Lyons and Co.'⁶

The geography of the West End, including its economy, consumption, and brand ideology also meant that the identity of the area as a shopping space was informed by social characteristics. Both male and female employees and consumers were able to negotiate the means by which they operated in the city as the West End was by no means inhabited by one class or one sex, nor can it be understood solely in terms of class and gender conflict. Its history is one of shifting alliances and confrontations between various segments of the urban middle classes and the working class street folk who encroached upon their physical space and urban imagination.⁷ Latterly, the incursions of a noisy mass popular culture were clearly undermining the elite and hushed tone of the site. The introduction of a mass culture emerged from a conglomerate of factors, including new kinds of transport, in the form of the automobile, motor bus and underground train networks which held the key to London's modernity.⁸ It seemed that people from all classes had a distinctive experience of time and space and by interpreting these subjective moments it can be possible to decipher, how class structures and modes of production were manifested historically in terms of changing experiences in time and space.⁹

Central to physical changes in the early twentieth century was a new sense of time measured in terms of labour, and latterly leisure, through the factory system.¹⁰ Where a natural clock of night and day was eradicated in the working environment of mechanical production, in the division of units or shift work. Generally working days, or nights existed in a new socially constructed way. This pattern evolved to represent the Edwardian city as a foundation for growth in terms of a mass luxury experience. Various writers have focused on

⁶ 'The Architects Journal, 13 June 1923, p. 999.

⁷ E. D Rappaport, 2000, p.7

⁸ C. Breward, 2004, p. 101

⁹ S. Kern, 1983, p. 36

¹⁰ See I. Chambers, 1986, for a study of popular culture and social relations in the nineteenth and twentieth century metropolitan experience of the city.

the emancipation of women and identified with this development, especially within gender based, and sexually oriented production and consumption studies. The shifting of gender roles in a modern city meant that femininity came to represent the leisure industries. (Finklestein: 1989, Wolff: 1990, Walkowitz: 1992, Nava: 1996, Rappaport: 2000, Buckley and Fawcett: 2002, Sparke: 2008).

The consequences of managerial masculinity and privacy meant that women would come to symbolise the publicity and public service of the J. Lyon's & Co Company in hotel and restaurant trade literature. Privately the male space and terrain of the inside of restaurants and hotels in Piccadilly were fortified indirectly and discreetly. The company employed men and women between the wars, although women held the largest numbers of a public service team, and this was also mirrored in all Lyons restaurants and establishments. Women's cultural, as opposed to social and political lives, were influenced as much by experiences within the home as by the exterior world of work, particularly their relationship to modernity, which was felt and lived in the most interior and private places.¹¹

The social and cultural changes that characterized modernity between the wars offered both working class and middle class women new opportunities as producers and as consumers of an array of new products for the home and personal use.¹² Modernity and mass leisure was manifest through democratic interior design within the walls of new luxury hotels and restaurants. Commercializing aspects of taste and the transatlantic bourgeoisie for visitors and guests in London, these modern leisure spaces were successful models for various aspects of urban life, functioning as a sort of patterning device, an institution in which people developed expectations and behaviors appropriate to new modes of city living.¹³ Modernity and to be modern, as defined by Marshall Berman 'is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world'¹⁴ an important factor in women's confidence, identity and employment during the inter war period, closely related to advertising and images of capitalism.

¹¹ Light, Alison, *Forever England: Feminism, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars*, (London: Routledge) 1991, p. 10

¹² Buckley, Cheryl & Fawcett, Hilary, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion From the Fin De Siècle to the Present*, (London: I. B Tauris) 2002, p. 86

¹³ Sandoval-Strausz, A. K, *Hotel: An American History*, (London: Yale University Press) 2007, p. 209

¹⁴ See Berman, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, (London: Verso) 1982

Emerging from the servant classes, waitresses were most often single unmarried women who found new opportunities during the inter war period. Women were the preferred source for semi-skilled labour in the factory and presented as the best sales staff in shops and restaurants, finding new ways of living and independence. This was firstly due to their experiences in the First World War through employment, and secondly by the new technological processes which modernized people's lives. The Marxist perspective of mass production correlates with the role of the factory girl, or waitress and further capitalist based professions for women in the early twentieth century. Also represented in Hollywood movies of the 1920's and 1930's, notably those produced and directed by Busby Berkeley. Kaleidoscope images of modern girls symbolized glamorous employment, famously depicted by Ruby Keeler in 42nd Street and emulated by the cinema-going public in a popularized imitation of actresses and dancers. The Lyons waitress was no exception and can be seen modeling for the Lyons Mail magazine (see fig. 1), like shop girls these modern representations of young women became role models for English working class girls.¹⁵

Between the wars, cinema and fashion were aspects of this 'feminised' mass culture, and women's consumption of these remained problematic for feminists throughout the period. To the pre First World War generation including Rebecca West, Cicely Hamilton, Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, it appeared that the public display of fashionable clothes, cosmetics, dancing and the cinema, the pursuit of marriage, and the intense interest in heterosexual sex marked a return to forms of femininity they had fought against in their political and private lives. As the 1930's progressed, they were to be increasingly worried by the Fascist vision for womanhood, articulated by Oswald Mosley 'as different but equal'. Within this context, the older generation of middle-class feminists saw the fashion changes of the 1920's and 1930's as one of a number of reactionary forces which aimed to clearly differentiate men from women along conventional gender lines. However, for many young working-class women, feminism was hardly the issue. Instead, making choices about how to spend their money and choosing which glamorous styles they should buy or make was symbolic of their hard-won economic independence.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Anne Massey, *Hollywood Beyond the Screen: Design and Material Culture*, London: Berg, 2000.

¹⁶ Buckley, Cheryl & Fawcett, Hilary, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion From the Fin De Siècle to the Present*, (London: I. B Tauris) 2002, p. 95

Within this framework of transition from a new feminist perspective of fashioned femininity was the introduction of waitresses employed by J. Lyons & Co. Female employees became known as 'Nippy's', (dictated by the fact that they were efficient, fast paced and ensured good service and turnover in many Lyons establishments). They were featured on the cover of the Lyons Mail journal in September 1928 (fig. 2) the young woman employed by Lyons became a role model for many girls living in London and the regions – the famous girl who worked in a teashop, restaurant or hotel. In 2004 I conducted an oral history study that examined the cultural aspects of women's lives in London during the 1930's. One particular interviewee, Jean Metcalf (born 28th February 1918) began work for Lyons at sixteen years of age in 1934. She claimed that you were taught how to speak, serve, to place an order and hold a tray, they provided her with a home and suggested travel requirements for work. In Jean's opinion they were very farsighted and progressive in the employment of women, as they could be promoted within the company as high as they liked. Jean worked her way up to management level, beginning her *Nippy* training and described the fashionable status of the uniform as follows:

"I liked it – the uniform itself was like no other uniform in the country. You couldn't put the company into disrepute. They looked upon Nippies as a breed apart as waitressing was concerned. A certain calibre, when you work for the company that caters for the royal family."¹⁷

This new style uniform introduced on 1st January 1925, was designed "in house" by Nell Bacon, who sought to endorse waitresses conduct by initiating a training school. Nell had taken employment at the Lyons Piccadilly teashop in 1897 and remained associated with the company for sixty years. She occupied a company flat over the teashop in Streatham High Road and all waitresses had to be trained by her in their duties.¹⁸ Responsible for 10,000 staff she claimed:

"As superintendent, I was able to devote special time to welfare work – I take some pride that we have a happy staff, for happiness leads to efficiency, and it is our job – if you like, our creed – to serve the public efficiently and cheerfully."¹⁹

¹⁷ Personal Interview, November 2004.

¹⁸ See Peter Bird's biography in *The First Food Empire: A History of J. Lyons & Co*, (London: Phillimore) 2000

¹⁹ Buchanan-Taylor, W. *Nell Bacon's Days at Lyon's*, (London: J. Lyon's & Co) 1937.

The uniform itself offered a unique chance for many young women to feel a sense of modern femininity and luxury bound within the design of the in-house garment. The new style uniform would be instantly recognizable and comprised a short black Alpaca dress, with Peter Pan collar and white cuffs. The black dress had two rows of white pearl buttons from neck to waist, secured with red thread in a cross stitch with a white square apron worn at dropped-waist level and secured by hidden buttons. Dark grey or black stockings were required to be worn with black shoes and the ensemble was complete with a mitre-style cap, including an interwoven band to be worn low on the forehead, which incorporated the J. Lyons & Co logo.

These women abided by a number of rules and a strict regime administered by J. Lyons & Co. They were disciplined and could be expected to work at a Royal Garden party, or large-scale exhibition. The Lyons *Nippy* waitress was so popular and well known a figure, that the role of the young free and independent woman in which she could reinvent herself in the city and although femininity came under intense scrutiny between the wars, women's employment signified a peaceful, alternative way forward following the ultimate masculine force of the war. The waitress was a welcoming force for each Lyons establishment, glamorously illustrating Nippy's own brand of chocolates amongst other things and being the face of the tea shops and restaurants (see fig. 3). At the point of modernizing the Lyons catering ethos, many new departments were introduced to inter-relate and determine the in-house priorities of the owners. Displays of Lyons tea, cakes and confectionary in the West End window arrangements of the Lyons Corner Houses helped to promote the brand.

With newly designed interior spaces produced for the comfort of patrons, the uniform of staff would reflect an image of modernity, as seen in fig. 4. Promotional photographs indicated the importance placed upon a highly designed luxurious experience. The image of the female waitress personified a luxury that made the economy hotel and restaurant obtainable to the masses and symbolically represented the efficiency of service that the establishments inhabited. The new Oxford Corner House interiors are remarked upon when the popularity of J. Lyons & Co was at its peak in 1928. Planning for the interior design began as early as 1925 and the interior architect would be able to directly connect with the employees and patrons with his designs. Archive research has revealed that the Art Deco designer Oliver P. Bernard and the company director Isadore Salmon were evidently inventing a popular luxury experience. Further advertising material named the

building *The Wonder House of Lyons* due to a number of factors including the use of glass and steel and various types of marble that were imported from France, Italy, Greece, Switzerland and Ireland. It took Bernard nearly thirty years to develop his idea, which is documented in his diary:

“I have just conceived my best design – in fact it may prove my most brilliant idea – in a scheme for the new Oxford Corner House. This design is to demonstrate that the colours and textures of various marbles can be utilized for pictorial composition; that such things as mountains, trees, lakes, streams and waterfalls may be pictorially composed of marble.”²⁰

The Lyons in house, club magazine were often proud to illustrate the successes of the company and this can be seen in fig. 5 where Oliver Bernard’s mural is shown in the main café. Modern life was characterized in the theatrical nature of the Lyons Corner Houses where a bandstand was included for afternoon tea dances. The Mountview café is featured in an array of publicity material indicating how much the company emphasized service as a designed experience. (see fig. 6) Given that the interwar period was one that witnessed the emergence of American Streamline Moderne and the Parisian Deco style, I have been able to identify how luxury became situated in the public interior. Hotels and restaurants were key public spaces in the mid 1920’s to late 1930’s, as seen in the film *Grand Hotel*, starring Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford.

A characterization of young female workers were played out in front of a wider mass audience and aided the personification of luxury for all. A number of historians established arguments surrounding the new economic issues of space, efficiency and service, including Doreen Massey (1994) and Judy Giles (1995). They concluded that women had previously been excluded from a number of industries, in particular those associated with factory work, and in the tailoring trades. Capitalist production disrupted the existing framework because women were able to emerge as discernable employees and consumers. In general it was perceived that various roles reflected a class structure, and had done so since the 1890’s. Clementina Black (a trade unionist and women’s rights activist) referred to the ‘hideous vernacular’ of the turn of the century factory girls in the East End of London and, like many social investigators and social workers, she favoured the organization of domestic clubs by middle class women in order to tame their ‘exuberance and energy’.²¹ Many philanthropic

²⁰ Personal Diary, Oliver P. Bernard, 17th October 1926

²¹ Lewis, Jane (1984) *Women in England 1870-1950* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf) p. 185

mindful women wanted to help those who were less fortunate and these clubs functioned in a similar capacity to those introduced by the Cadbury family at Bourneville near Birmingham in 1895.

Such clubs that were introduced for women, especially those catering for the West End shopper (see Rappaport) in department stores, and emergent from suffrage groups were a reminder of the circumstances that women faced in the geography of the urban city. The public city celebrated in the enthusiastic descriptions of the dawn of modernism, was a city for men. The male *flâneur* of nineteenth century Paris and London, 'the observer', was in opposition to women, as the 'observed's. However, author's such as David Harvey in the study of modernism, illustrated how modernity was a direct consequence of an 'economic exploration of the relation between the definition, production and experience of space, on the one hand, and modes of production and class formation, on the other.'²² Griselda Pollock's feminist perspective defined this as follows:

A feminist historical materialism does not... substitute gender for class but deciphers the intricate interdependence of class and gender, as well as race, in all forms of historical practice. None the less there is a strategic priority in insisting upon recognition of gender power and of sexuality as historical forces of significance as great as any of the other matrices privileged in Marxism or other forms of social history or cultural analysis... a feminist analysis of the founding conditions of modernism in the gendered and eroticized terrain of the modern city directly challenges an authoritative social historical account which categorically refuses feminism as a necessary corollary.²³

Conclusion

Fashioning a new luxurious form of domestic class identity in the West End, Lyons carefully planned image of women communicated social expectations. Statistics suggest that the move from traditional gender roles were personified by 'attitudes, ideas and beliefs that underpinned domestic service reshaping itself into reformulated concepts of 'service' and employment, both inside and outside the home but always organized around tasks associated with homemaking, comfort and housewifery.'²⁴ The uniform that Lyons produced

²² Massey, Doreen (1994) *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity) p. 235

²³ Pollock, Griselda (1988) *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (Routledge: London) p. 5

²⁴ Giles, Judy, (1995) *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-50* (Basingstoke: Macmillan) p. 136

for their waitresses symbolized the visual aesthetic of the servant class in the upper or middle class home. The image of the waitress was key to this formulation of a new type of luxury that enabled a small section of society to enjoy the public sphere. A fraction of middle class women still had servants in the 1930's, however customers could imagine themselves being able to retain domestic service within the space of Lyons, which marked the dawn of the affordable luxury service industry.

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