

Dorothy Shaver (1893-1959)

The First Lady of Retailing

“Tall, slender, and dressed in a tailored black suit.” Career woman Dorothy Shaver’s elegant good looks often elicited such comments from journalists and peers alike. But Shaver, president of Lord & Taylor from 1945 to 1959, was more than a testimony to American style. Known as the “First Lady of Retailing,” she was among an elite group of women who held top management positions in major American corporations during the postwar era.

Born in the small Arkansas town of Center Point in 1893, Shaver, a judge’s daughter, attended the University of Arkansas and the University of Chicago. In the early 1920s, after working briefly as a schoolteacher, Shaver and her sister Elsie, an artist, followed thousands of other ambitious young men and women who flocked to New York City in search of jobs, if not fame and fortune. For this small-town girl, the move to Manhattan was a transforming experience.

New York City was an exciting place in the 1920s. Besides Harlem’s jazz scene, the city was a thriving commercial hub and the home to the nation’s largest and most prestigious retailers. Shortly after their arrival, Dorothy and Elsie Shaver broached the world of retailing, setting up a small workshop that made handmade dolls for local stores. The whimsical Little Shavers designed by Elsie and modeled after the highly popular Kewpie dolls were stocked by Lord & Taylor, an upscale department store on Fifth Avenue between the Empire State Building and the New York Public Library. The dolls became the rage, and young women carried the Little Shavers as mascots on the streets of Manhattan. The enormous popularity of the Little Shavers attracted the attention of Lord & Taylor’s president, Samuel Rayburn, who hired Dorothy Shaver to work on his staff. The move proved to be a savvy decision.

During the 1920s, Shaver contributed to the development of Lord & Taylor in several ways. After reorganizing the store’s comparison shopping department in 1924, she established its bureau of Fashion and Decoration in 1925. As director of this division, Shaver strove to upgrade Lord & Taylor’s image as a retailer of women’s clothing. Shaver’s impressive accomplishments led to her election to the store’s board of directors in 1927. The small-town girl from Arkansas was fast becoming indispensable to big-time retailing in New York.

Building on the excitement surrounding the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris, Shaver made a bold move that would alter the course of American fashion and design. In 1928, with Rayburn’s support, Shaver mounted a spin-off show at Lord & Taylor -- the Exposition of Modern French Decorative Art. The exhibition showcased the latest furnishings and household accessories made by French companies in the new style. Alongside the furnishings were paintings by *avant garde* French artists such as Picasso, Bracque, Utrillo, and Derain. A sensational hit, the French exhibit at Lord & Taylor attracted the attention of the media and encouraged retailers to take modernism seriously.

Delighted with the success, but concerned that the established reputation of European designers gave them prominence over American designers, Shaver spent the next few years revising her approach to design by emphasizing a distinctively American aesthetic. She launched an advocacy

effort that would earn her national recognition in the design world. In 1928, she founded the Contempra Group of International Arts, whose member designers judiciously sought to create better products. For Lord & Taylor, this group designed dresses, bags, scarves, suits, blouses, and hats. The next year, Shaver formalized her commitment to American design when she hired established designers such as Neysa McNein, Ralph Burtin, and Katherine Sturgis to create fabrics with American themes for Lord & Taylor. These projects met favor with the public, and Shaver earned a big promotion in 1931, when she was named Lord & Taylor's vice president in charge of style, publicity, and advertising.

Shaver again stunned the fashion world in 1932, when she created a program known as "The American Look," to promote the work of American designers. This bold move challenged the status quo and the historical reliance on European fashion leadership. For decades, Paris had been the style capital of the world, and the city's couture houses (high-end dressmaking shops) set fashion trends around the world. Shaver understood that even spin-offs of haute couture held little appeal to American women, whose busy lifestyles and tight budgets set them apart from wealthy European shoppers. She also knew that New York was home to countless art school graduates who needed work.

The American Look established Shaver as a department store executive with vision and foresight. At a time when most retailers looked askance at emerging American dress designers, Shaver put them on a pedestal and promoted their work with fanfare. Between 1932 and 1939, the American Look program introduced more than sixty young designers, including Adrian, Clare Potter, Joyce, Merry Hull, Nettie Rosenstein, and Lilly Dache. The clothing lines they designed for Lord & Taylor were tailored to American lifestyles: moderately priced, well-constructed, and suited to casual living. Shaver, who was promoted to first vice president, extended her support for the American Look with the establishment of the Lord & Taylor Design Awards in 1937 as "a public declaration of the faith in American creative endeavor."

Under Shaver's auspices, Lord & Taylor continued to promote the American Look with fervor. During World War II, Shaver refined her formula for success. In 1942, the War Department appointed her to the position of general merchandising consultant with the Office of the Quartermaster General. When the Paris couture houses debuted their postwar collections, Shaver responded with a show of support for the American Look. By the mid-1940s, the name Dorothy Shaver was virtually synonymous with the American Look.

During the first two decades of her career, Shaver had risen from an entry-level position at Lord & Taylor to a position as one of the department store's top decision makers. She accomplished this at a moment when few women in retailing climbed beyond the ranks of buyer, stylist, or merchandise manager. Over the next two decades, Shaver tested her mettle on larger projects, rising to the top of the retailing trade.

In 1945, Lord & Taylor's board elected Shaver to succeed Walter Hoving as the store's president. Shaver's appointment took the retailing world by storm. One trade magazine described her promotion as a "breath-taking first for Fifth Avenue." As a woman executive, Shaver had no equals in American retailing. Other women in top management directed firms owned by their families, often owing their positions of power to the absence of a male heir. Shaver, in contrast, had truly

climbed the corporate ladder. In a fitting tribute, the Associated Press named her the outstanding woman in business for 1946 and 1947.

At the helm of Lord & Taylor, Shaver led the department store through an impressive period of expansion. During her fourteen years as president, Lord & Taylor expanded its suburban operations, opening its first stores outside Manhattan. Between 1949 and 1959, Shaver oversaw the development of stores in Scarsdale, New York; Milburn, New Jersey; West Hartford, Connecticut; Bala-Cynwd, Pennsylvania; Garden City, Long Island, New York; and Washington, DC. The new Lord & Taylor stores were located in the suburbs, which grew by leaps and bounds in the postwar era.

On Fifth Avenue, Lord & Taylor's windows became a showcase for Shaver's ideas about what merchandising could achieve. She banished clutter and emphasized simplicity. Dramatic window displays included a holiday tableaux featuring an artistic arrangement of Christmas tree ornaments but no merchandise. In her effort to attract shoppers, Shaver left no stone unturned. A window display featuring perfume attracted lunchtime crowds by pumping a mist of fine scents into the air outside the store with a specially designed atomizer. Unique merchandising techniques like these increased both store recognition and sales.

As Lord & Taylor's president, Shaver's public profile grew, and she became a much-in-demand speaker, volunteer, and philanthropist. She was among the founders of the Museum of Costume Art, which in 1944 became the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her wartime experience infused her with a commitment to volunteerism, and in 1950, Shaver led the apparel industry in a fund-raising campaign for the Red Cross. She also served as chairwoman of the National Research Council's Advisory Committee to the Quartermaster General on Women's Military Clothing. In this capacity, she collaborated with New York designer Hattie Carnegie to update military women's uniforms, employing the same principles of utility, durability, and comfort that lay at the heart of the American Look.

Shaver's role in public life was acknowledged by numerous organizations. She received the Cross of Chevalier from the French Legion of Honor, the Star of Solidarity from the Italian Republic, the 1954 Brotherhood award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the First Annual Award from the N.Y. Dress Designers, the 1950 Award for Eminent Achievement from the American Women's Association, the Horatio Alger Award from the American Schools and Colleges Association, and the Award of Achievement from the Advertising Club of Washington. She also held honorary doctorates from Bates, Lafayette, Russell Sage, and Wheaton Colleges, and from Syracuse and New York Universities.

Shaver died in Kingston, New York, in 1959 after a stroke. She was survived by her sister Elsie, with whom she had shared an apartment in Manhattan. During Dorothy's lifetime, Elsie kept detailed files on her sister's public life, accumulating a rich archive of newspaper clippings, speeches, and photographs. *The Dorothy Shaver Papers, ca. 1922-1959*, are now housed in the Archives Center at the National Museum of American History.