

**Transformational Retailing and the Emergence of a Modern Brand:
Liberty of London, 1875-1900**

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Abstract

This article considers the role of a transformational retail setting in the development of an iconic brand identity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The focus of this research is Liberty of London. Through experiential engagement and augmented admission, Liberty created a retail environment that challenged existing practices. Coupled with the development of a brand identity enhanced through authoritative advocacy and consumers' allegorical encounters with the firm's core brand message, Liberty achieved the symbolic substantiation of a distinct taste regime through the market-mediation of authenticity. We discuss how brand representation in a transformational retail setting in the metropolitan market of the late nineteenth century legitimized and structured consumer expectations in a context of growing middle class demand for merchandise with enhanced aesthetic qualities and associated lifestyle values.

Introduction

Our research focusses on the retailing and branding activities of Liberty of London, 1875-1900. During this time, the firm passed through a period of rapid evolution and established aesthetic product values that rapidly gained an international reputation and lucrative market. Indeed, by the end of the 1880s, the firm had opened an international retail operation in the fashionable Avenue de l'Opera, in Paris.¹ So influential were the design values of the firm, and its products so iconic, that by the early twentieth century, the term 'Liberty' had come to represent a distinct style in its own right in both domestic and international markets. For example, '*Stile Liberty*' was the term popularly adopted in the Italian market to describe *Art Nouveau* designs.²

Liberty was a retail and brand phenomenon that emerged in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The firm's marketing practices are contextualised by an emergent middle class market and retail pioneering practices that stand in a line of innovation from Wedgwood's late eighteenth century showrooms to Selfridge's early twentieth century department store.³ Although Liberty began as a retailer of Oriental merchandise, the firm very quickly developed a strong brand through innovative product development. The resultant symbiotic relationship between its retail operation and its brand is the focus of this article. By the beginning of the twentieth century Liberty may be classified as a department store with respect to its physical appearance and merchandise range; however, it also manifested characteristics of a specialist retailer with a distinct brand identity. Its retail operation in Regent Street provided market legitimisation; while its brand values facilitated commercial development beyond the retail environment. British retailing has been characterised as uninventive and conservative before the arrival of Selfridge's American innovations.⁴ Liberty illustrates the danger of such an interpretation. This article discusses the combination of retail-marketing practices adopted by Liberty both in-store and beyond the store.

Liberty: Oriental Warehouse to International Brand

Arthur Lasenby Liberty opened his retail operation at 218a Regent Street, London, in 1875. Located in half a unit of space at a prestigious shopping location, Liberty's retail activity was devoted initially to the sale of Japanese merchandise. In this, Liberty was part of a retailing phenomenon of the age. Japanese goods had become popular in western markets as Japan opened up to international trade in the late 1850s. Enthusiasm for Japanese wares created a market opportunity for enterprising retailers in the 1860s and 1870s. Therefore, Liberty's initial commercial initiative should be seen in context. It was part of a marketplace phenomenon

driven by consumer interest in Oriental goods. Indeed, other firms were importing and retailing their Japanese merchandise some years before Liberty opened his own retail operation. For example, Hewett's was advertising a 'Japanese and Chinese Warehouse' as early as December 1859: 'Japan and the Japanese. – Just imported, some very interesting SPECIMENS of LACQUERED WARE, consisting of work, eggshell cups, covers, and saucers, Japanese jars, &c'.⁵ Initially operating out of 18 Fenchurch Street and the Baker Street Bazaar, London, Hewett's business prospered in the early and mid-1860s. In 1864, the firm operating as W. Hewett & Co. moved away from its Fenchurch Street location, choosing instead to carry on its retail business at two locations in London '32, King William-street, London Bridge' and 'Baker-street Bazaar', and through an out of town branch operation at 'No. 41, East-street, Brighton'.⁶ It was not only London and its environs that witnessed this interest in the Orient; provincial retailing also embraced an enthusiasm for Japanese goods and culture. In 1873, Alexander Corder started selling Japanese textiles to meet such a market need in Sunderland, in the North-East of England, opening what he called an 'Eastern Bazaar' in 1884 and renaming it the 'Mikado Bazaar' in 1885.⁷

Likewise, Arthur Lasenby Liberty had had previous experience retailing Oriental merchandise when working for the firm of Farmer and Rogers. They had opened an Oriental Warehouse in 1863: selling 'an immense variety of Curious and Useful Chinese and Japanese Articles'.⁸ Located at 179 Regent Street, Farmer and Rogers' Oriental Warehouse gave Liberty the opportunity to develop an understanding of the trade in Oriental merchandise and a deep appreciation of the aesthetic values prized by the firm's discerning customers.⁹ As Baldry notes in *The Art Journal* in 1900, 'Here he [Arthur Lasenby Liberty] laid the foundation of that expert knowledge of Eastern art which has since stood him in good stead'.¹⁰

What made Liberty unique in this market environment was a willingness to take this wave of enthusiasm for Japanese goods beyond a simple buying and selling relationship. Using his understanding of the essential values recognised by artists that patronised Farmer and Rogers' Oriental warehouse in the 1860s and 1870s, and his own retail operation in the late 1870s, Liberty combined an enthusiasm for traditional production and the aesthetic values embodied in the unsullied artefacts of early Japanese production methods with retailing, marketing and production initiatives. This created a set of design values that were new and distinct, thereby facilitating the development of a merchandise range that could be branded in a way that the market had not yet seen. From a retailing perspective, the initial stage in this process occurred between 1875 - when the first Liberty store opened in London - and the opening of the firm's

international store in Paris in 1889. Opening a retail operation in London to sell Japanese goods to a cosmopolitan London consumer required a particular set of commercial skills: an understanding of sourcing opportunities, building a merchandise range that would appeal to consumers keen to acquire cosmopolitan artefacts and the management of a retail environment that would attract them to the shop. In contrast, opening a store in Paris required another commercial asset: a brand, with distinct associations and values. The transition from a firm engaged in the business of being a retail importer of goods to a firm that was able to retail a strong brand in the leading fashionable consumer market of the day – Paris – required an enhanced set of marketing skills and a clear brand identity. This transition represented the difference between other businesses that merely resold Oriental merchandise and Liberty's store where a distinct taste regime was formulated and marketed.

The transition from reseller of Oriental goods to a firm with an internationally recognised brand identity was facilitated by the intellectual influence of the Aesthetic Movement. Oriental production methods reflected the tenets of the Aesthetic Movement with its emphasis on craft-based methods of production. Arthur Lasenby Liberty had been exposed to this movement and its leading figures through his management of Farmer and Rogers' Oriental warehouse. The writings and work of influential figures such as Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris encouraged Liberty to expand his merchandise range, so that by the 1880s the firm was no longer dependent on Japanese merchandise but was importing goods from across the Orient and encouraging production of goods in England based on traditional methods. This fusion of ideas was very much at the heart of the Liberty brand narrative that Arthur Lasenby Liberty was keen to publicise. An article, part of a series covering 'Pioneers of Commerce' in British industry, in *The Citizen* in December 1898, illustrates this:

Why he [Arthur Lasenby Liberty] asked himself, should not Eastern methods be applied to certain Western manufactures in order to improve their artistic qualities, their colourings and designs? In constant contact with cultured people ... Mr. Liberty had an opportunity of exchanging views with some of the leading artists of the day.¹¹

Liberty was always generous in crediting influential figures, acknowledging their contribution to his thinking, particularly their role in the early days of his firm's development, and this has certainly become part of the Liberty narrative. However, it was not a short-lived influence. Letters survive from Edward Burne-Jones written in the late 1890s that show that the influence of such individuals continued long after the opening of the first store. Further, they show an active intellectual dialogue between Edward Burne-Jones and Arthur Lasenby Liberty. On 28

February 1898, Burne-Jones writes, ‘I return with thanks the reports of your lectures in Japan which you were good enough to send me, and am much obliged to you for your long & careful reply to my letter last month’.¹² The Aesthetic Movement with its roots in the teachings of John Ruskin and its response to the mass produced products of the industrial revolution provided a philosophical basis for Liberty’s commercial vision. As Stankiewicz notes ‘Aestheticism was not viewed simply as a means to the material improvement of society; spiritual benefits were to be accrued by those who learned how to respond to aesthetic beauty.’¹³ It was the twin themes of craft-based Oriental production and an intellectualised domestic rejection of scientific industrialism that distinguished Liberty from his competitors and led to the creation of a distinct brand identity.

The importance of production methods and the embedding of craft-based production techniques in the design values of the firm were essential to the development of this distinct brand identity. In the 1880s and 1890s, Liberty engaged in a process of change that saw the firm move from a position where it was concerned with the retailing of cosmopolitan authenticity to one where, in response to market conditions, it mediated the authentic through its own production and design processes. This lay at the heart of the firm’s brand proposition. Here we conceptualize market-mediated authenticity as a process that mediates consumers’ desire for objective authenticity through their market derived existential engagement with place and time. Liberty provided consumers with access to market-mediated authenticity through its engagement with both the cosmopolitan, as represented by the Orient, and the design values of ‘lost’, craft-based, production methods. This process pre-selected, filtered and curated for the needs of a nascent class of aspirant consumer, thereby laying the material groundwork for the ideological operation of market-mediated authenticity. Authenticity is linked intrinsically to place.¹⁴ Therefore, fundamental to the mediation of authenticity is the entrepreneurial use of space in the marketplace.

The Liberty brand derived considerable legitimacy from its location in Regent Street. The development of a retail operation at the geographical heart of cosmopolitan and metropolitan London consumer society contributed fundamentally to the success of the brand. Liberty’s retail operation quickly expanded from his ‘half shop’ at 218a Regent Street to encompass the whole of the retail unit. In due course, the adjoining property of 216 was added along with other premises at 142-144 and 148-152 Regent Street. The former location (216-218) was known as East India House and the latter (142-144 and 148-152 with its connecting access) as Chatham House. By the end of the century, the former was listed in street directories as selling

‘dress fabrics & jewellery’, and the latter as specialising in ‘carpets, curtains & furnishing fabrics’, ‘art furniture’ and accommodating an ‘oriental bazaar’.¹⁵ East India House and Chatham House, both located on the east side of Regent Street expanded in the same way as large contemporary department stores.¹⁶ Adjoining properties were incorporated into the physically expanding business. This in itself gave the new establishment considerable presence in the marketplace, occupying as it did multiple units rather than simply a single unit. Additionally, the retail location of Regent Street, a purpose built commercial thoroughfare with a long history of cosmopolitan retail activity, added further legitimacy to both the retail offering and the firm’s wider identity.¹⁷

A considerable amount of material has been produced over the years on Liberty’s contribution to the development of design, whether through books or exhibitions.¹⁸ However, relatively little academic consideration has been given to the firm’s commercial development *per se*.¹⁹ In this article, we consider the marketing practices of the firm. In particular, we focus on the relationship between the development of Liberty’s retailing operation and its brand. We do this by exploring the contribution Arthur Lasenby Liberty and his firm made to the development of modern retailing, branding and marketing practices through transformational places of retail consumption, the socio-cultural legitimisation of brand identity, and consumers’ socio-personal engagement with a taste regime.

Transformational Places of Consumption

Liberty’s early development illustrates the symbiotic relationship between a transformational retail environment and the emergence of a distinct taste regime. Taste regimes are normative discursive systems that connect aesthetics to consumption practice by organising and structuring consumers’ aesthetic values in such a way as to facilitate a shared consumer lifestyle.²⁰ In order for the retail setting to enable the development of a taste regime, it must simultaneously challenge and reinforce the ordering of the marketplace. It must reorient the consumer away from previously accepted practices and supplant them with new practices. Liberty from its inception achieved this through what we term ‘experiential engagement’, in which the transformational retail setting restructures customers’ expectations. In this Liberty broke down the compartmentalised or departmentalised merchandise divisions to be found in other contemporary retail outlets, and as a consequence emphasised thematic consistency, thereby teleoaffectively structuring consumers’ understanding of the taste regime.²¹

Even in the initially cramped environment of the first store - indeed perhaps enhanced by the closeness of the space into which exoticism of the East was packed - Liberty challenged visitors' expectations. A year after the shop was opened, the celebrated architect Edward W. Godwin visited the store and was enthused by the 'enchanted cave' which he discovered there.²² He found 'No. 218 Regent Street is from front to back and top to bottom literally crammed with objects of oriental manufacture'. Another visitor echoes the ambience of the 'enchanted cave' five years later. He found the expanded premises not only crammed with the merchandise of Japan but a range of items 'from the countries east of Egypt and the Levant'. But most of all, he found in the interior of the shop an escapism in such places as the 'cashmere-hung staircase' where 'we have little difficulty in imagining ourselves far away, in Damascus or Bagdad, in one of those dreamy, interminable bazaars'.²³

In this transformational form, the store was an incarnation of the Orient. The visitor could experience the cosmopolitan interactivity of travel through passive consumption. Liberty was particularly keen to ensure visitors had a sense of an authentic cosmopolitan retail experience. In 1875, when the store first opened, there were three employees, one of whom was a Japanese shop assistant.²⁴ Later, as the store grew, female employees dressed in Japanese, as well as Circassienne, Indian and Turkish costumes, for special events.²⁵ In this, Liberty not only furnished but also populated his Damascene bazaar. There was a theatricality embedded in how the store was presented to the public. One employee, reminiscing about the early days of the store, provides an example of the theatrical pretence employed. On one floor in order to create an illusion of space and distance, a mirror was 'cunningly draped with "Art" muslins, then in vogue, to give an apparent reality to something that did not exist' it was an 'artifice far-sightedly introduced by the Founder to give the effect of an extra spaciousness to the then premises'.²⁶

The juxtaposition of Oriental merchandise created an ambience, which challenged the senses and reordered preconceptions of taste. The shop's calculated disordering served to order a new taste regime, and it did so for a public that went far beyond the cognoscenti of privileged aesthetes who gave voice to a fundamental dissatisfaction with the industrialised production standards of the mid-century marketplace. Liberty's commercial skill lay in expanding the market for Oriental items and putting those items within reach of a wider public. We characterise this process as one of 'augmented admission' where Liberty's vision of design values inspired by the Orient was made available to an emerging middle class, whose emergent self-identity made them willing to embrace a new and more meaningful regime of consumption

than that offered by other affordable commercial operations. In using the term ‘augmented admission’ we suggest two mutually supporting processes at work. One corresponds with the expansion of the market; where a wider number of consumers are brought into contact with the aesthetic values of the taste regime. The other corresponds to a self-defining membership of aficionados; who, by embracing the taste regime, create a community defined by identifiable consumption behaviours.

Liberty successfully combined the exclusivity of an aspirational brand with affordability. The firm’s retail experience facilitated consumers’ experiential exposure to the exclusive, while its pricing structure provided the reassurance of take-home affordability. While some items were prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of customers, other items were priced at a point that was accessible to the aspiring middle class. For example, in the early 1880s “North Persian Rugs” were priced between 110 shillings at the higher end to 12 shillings and sixpence at the lower end.²⁷ Silk became a fabric closely associated with Liberty’s merchandise offering. In the early 1880s, the firm maintained a range of price points to ensure both exclusivity and accessibility: imported items such as Corah silk ‘from 17/6 to 30/0 per piece of 7 yards, 34 inches wide’ and Tusore silk ‘from 21/0 to 42/0 per piece of 10 yards, 34 inches wide’.²⁸ While its range of Umritza items ‘Manufactured specially for Messrs. Liberty and Co., from pure Indian wool’ retailed at staggered price points: ‘17/6, 21/0, 25/0, and 30/0 per piece of 9 yards, 27 inches wide’.²⁹ As one of Liberty’s employees remarked, years later: ‘articles were found of real artistic merit, while ridiculously cheap’.³⁰

Newspaper based messages played a role in communicating the core values of the brand by placing examples of Liberty merchandise before the public. This was achieved through direct advertising by the firm and indirect advertising by retail agents: additionally, it was also achieved through the publicity provided by fashion columns. In direct advertising, Liberty emphasised value. In the *Birmingham Daily Post* on the first of August 1888, the firm highlighted the accessibility and quality of its merchandise through the breadth of prices: ‘Karashma Woven Muslins’ ranged ‘from 1s to 7s 6d per Yard’.³¹ There were aspirational items and affordable items, all from the same source. Advertising took Liberty’s message beyond the metropolitan market, which in turn was supported by agencies established by the firm. These agencies emphasised the local attainability of Liberty merchandise, while at the same time emphasising the cosmopolitanism and metropolitanism of the firm’s primary location.

However, advertising was only one means by which Liberty communicated its brand values. Unlike contemporary manufacturing and retail firms that primarily relied on advertising to generate sales of their products, Liberty pursued a communication strategy at the heart of which was the use of publicity.³² This publicity was part of, and contributed to, a wider conversation about the brand. For example, the brand attracted attention in the public domain, through syndicated newspaper columns. These syndicated newspaper columns appeared in provincial newspapers and provided advice on fashionable styles and influenced consumers' understanding of metropolitan tastes. Written under assumed names, and purporting to originate from London, these columns frequently referred to Liberty products in the reporting of fashion trends or social events. For example, a fashionable wedding at the Brompton Oratory in 1888 included 'six bridesmaids all dressed in coral pink gowns of soft Liberty silk'.³³ While three years later at the Henley Regatta, boats were 'draped with pale amber Liberty silk'.³⁴ Legitimation of this kind in newspaper articles was fundamental to a wider market's admission to Liberty's taste regime. This attention placed Liberty in a luxury context, while the firm's pricing structure provided accessibility to an aspirational brand for a wider market by placing the brand at the forefront of changing consumer taste. As one contemporary journalist described it, 'his [Arthur Lasenby Liberty's] insight into the needs of the moment ... began in an idea of supplying something which the public were only just ready to accept'.³⁵

Socio-cultural Legitimation

While Liberty's retail operations were fundamental to the development of a distinct and transformative brand identity, wider socio-culturally embedded activities were instrumental in moving Liberty from being yet another West End retailer to being a transformative brand. Customers were brought to the store through a process of non-commercial legitimation that we term here as 'authoritative advocacy', and non-commercial cultural engagement which we describe here as 'allegorical encounters'.

Authoritative advocacy was achieved through influential figures: externally or internally associated with the firm. They facilitated the communication of the brand's core vision within the socio-cultural environment in a non-commercial manner. They advocated core brand values, through extolling the virtue of Oriental designs or craft-based production techniques. Arthur Lasenby Liberty was a prime mover in this process, as a natural communicator his lectures to the Society of Arts in 1890 and 1900 are good examples of authoritative advocacy. Their intellectual purpose was to advocate the values of craft-based design and suggest how

such production methods stood at odds with the design values of mass production. The more commercialised sub-text was that Liberty was leading a crusade against the loss of traditional production techniques, and by implication, this philosophy was embedded in the brand he had established: in this message, the brand spoke to a higher order of concerns that transcended the purely commercial. In 1890, speaking to the Society of Arts on the subject of 'The Industrial Arts and Manufactories of Japan', he observed, 'the inventions of science, though benefiting material prosperity, had tended to obscure and lead astray our national art instinct'.³⁶ He contrasted this domestic experience with traditional Japanese production methods, which had survived over two centuries of isolation from external influence between the 1630s and the 1850s: 'this voluntary withdrawal of a civilised people from contact with the rest of the world ... fostered and nursed individuality in a manner impossible under any other conceivable circumstances'.³⁷

Additionally, authoritative advocacy was provided by others within the firm, and through association with prominent individuals outside the firm. For example, from an internal perspective, at the end of the 1890s the firm took an increasing interest in British traditional design and production techniques. John Llewelyn who joined the board of directors in 1898, was an advocate of this development. He took a leading role in the development of the firm's Cymric and Tudric designs, which were based on Celtic and 'English Renaissance' motifs and styles.³⁸ This increasing engagement with domestic traditions drew on a wider aesthetic conversation. Liberty's taste regime derived authority from the reforming aesthetic spirit of the age, with its emphasis on traditional production techniques it drew on the principles of social and economic reform espoused by Ruskin. It recognized the individual fulfilment and dignity of labour derived from craft-based production. Liberty was in direct contact with a community of artistic reformists such as William Morris, Oscar Wilde and Edward Burne-Jones.³⁹ In a letter from Sir Edward Burne-Jones to Arthur Lasenby Liberty, Burne-Jones expresses his concerns with Japan's abandonment of design principles and production practices that had initially so attracted the English aesthetes. He notes: 'I think you will agree with me that the last 20 or 30 years during which Oriental manufacturers have become so "fashionable" in Europe, the standard of quality has been seriously lowered'.⁴⁰ It was through such contact that Liberty drew on the advocacy of those prominent individuals who shared a common mission. As one employee later noted, 'The lectures and writings of Ruskin, the wallpapers and glass painting of William Morris' created a philosophical basis on which Liberty built a commercial operation with broad market appeal.⁴¹

In discussing the importance of Arthur Lasenby Liberty's advocacy of the firm and its associated aesthetic values, it is necessary to evaluate critically his commitment to the values he espoused. Was his advocacy merely that of the opportunistic retail salesman who had fallen upon a commercially attractive concept, or was his commitment more deeply embedded in his own core beliefs? Undoubtedly, Liberty was a retail salesman, his success at Farmer and Rogers and his subsequent success with his own business suggests someone who saw a gap in the market and sought to fill it. In this, he resembles the classic retail entrepreneur of the department store age. However, it is also very easy to see Liberty as someone who was engaged genuinely with the value system that underpinned his brand narrative. In 1889, he took time away from the business to travel to Japan to see for himself the place that had been so important in the establishment of his firm and the craft-based culture that had fundamentally influenced its design principles. While in Japan, he gave a speech that was reported in the London press: 'The object of Mr. Liberty, who has done so much to foster and popularize Japanese art in England, was to impress on Japanese artists the importance of preserving their individuality, and of not allowing their own exquisite art to be debased by the servile imitation of European models.'⁴² Illustrating his personal engagement with the culture that had influenced his business activities, Liberty later privately published a collection of his wife's photographs of Japanese cultural artefacts taken during their visit to Japan and provided supporting text.⁴³ In the 1890s, he became interested in indigenous British design and was to give another presentation to the Society of Arts on the subject of English furniture and its development in 1900.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, Liberty commercialised the ideas he had heard the Aesthetes discuss in the Oriental department at Farmer and Rogers and made a considerable fortune in the process; in this, he was the consummate retailer. However, a man who was deeply attracted to the intellectualism of the aesthetic movement and genuinely committed to authentic production processes is discernible as well. This made his authoritative advocacy especially convincing to contemporaries.

'Mr. Lasenby Liberty, of London, recently delivered in the buildings of the Bijitsu Kiokai at Sakuragaoka, Uyeno, Tokyo, an interesting lecture on Japanese art. There was a large audience both of Japanese and foreigners, and the lecture was listened to with much appreciation.'⁴⁵

The aesthetic elite, from whom he had derived much artistic understanding provided Liberty's taste regime with philosophical integrity. Such authoritative discourse enabled Liberty through his distinctive merchandise, with its particular production values, to construct within the

environment of his retail operation a marketplace oasis for consumers that offered respite from the alienating forces of scientific industrialism by providing a craft-based taste regime. The design values of the Orient, and subsequently domestic craft values, embedded within a wider intellectual movement provided the authoritative advocacy that Liberty required to build an iconic brand.

However, for it to be effective this ‘authoritative advocacy’ also required articulation at a more fundamental – if not subliminal - level, in order to support and nurture the practice of augmented admission. Consumers’ ‘allegorical encounters’ with the brand provided this. Allegorical encounters provided experiences where consumers came upon explicitly non-commercial, external contexts in which the brand was embedded. For example, using a characteristic practice of the time, living exhibitions external to the firm’s retail commercial space provided an opportunity for public engagement with other cultures and other times. Such allegorical encounters spoke to the ideological foundations and core values of Liberty’s taste regime. Occurring away from Liberty’s store, in locations where commercial motives could be softened, they represented ‘sponsored’ access to the places from which Liberty’s goods and design motifs originated through reconstructed encounters.

From its early days, Liberty used exhibitions to create interest in other cultures. For example, in 1879, building on the firm’s close association with the trade in Japanese merchandise, the firm put-on an exhibition featuring what was described as a Japanese Village.⁴⁶ In Argyll Street, close to Liberty’s store, the display included ‘Japanese Works of Art and a complete Japanese house’.⁴⁷ Likewise, the firm supported public exhibitions such as that held in 1886 at the Albert Palace, Battersea. Liberty took on the role of sending an employee to India to recruit artisans such as spinners, printers, jewellers and inlaid wood workers, and to collect material for the exhibition.⁴⁸ Charitable occasions were also an opportunity to embed brand values in a public or semi-public space. Lady Aberdeen hosted a bazaar at 27, Grosvenor Square on the 5th of April 1889 for charitable purposes. Held in her Indian music room, the bazaar was ‘arranged by Messrs. Liberty, of Regent-street, to recall as far as possible memories of the brilliant scenes depicted in the Arabian Nights’.⁴⁹ Further sponsorship of public educational activities included the Art Needlework School in South Kensington, and the Aquarium in Westminster.⁵⁰

Through these wider, non-commercial, social activities, the firm embedded its brand values within a wider public experience. The firm took its core message beyond a confined

commercial location and presented its associated values in a tangible form in spaces designed to meet the wider educational and entertainment experiences to the communities and social contexts in which they were located. This tangible and theatrical representation was taken literally when Liberty provided costumes for the theatre for such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*.⁵¹

'Authoritative advocacy' and 'allegorical encounters' within a socio-cultural milieu facilitated wider acceptance of the brand and 'augmented admission' to the retail setting. Through this process, consumers encountered the symbolic meaning of the brand in its wider socio-cultural context.

Socio-personal Engagement

From merely importing authentic objects in the mid-1870s, the firm developed a distinct design identity of its own through the 1880s and 1890s. The Liberty style challenged accepted practice and in-turn provided a new way of thinking about everyday commercial design. The firm, in its promotional material, provided an aspiring middle class with templates of room designs. For example, the *Liberty Handbook of Sketches* published when Liberty was fully embracing indigenous historically based design influences and moving away from Oriental designs provided design configurations for domestic rooms.⁵² In such ways, Liberty sought to educate the firm's customer base and extol the virtues of its distinctive design regime.

Liberty entered the consumer's socio-personal space in a way that allowed the consumer to engage with a symbolic revolution in taste and design. Visitors to the 'Liberty' home encountered something new that reflected on the taste and sensibilities of the homeowner. Taken to extremes, such a taste regime did attract ridicule. George du Maurier's 'Felicitous Quotations' cartoon published in *Punch* in the mid-1890s illustrates the extremes to which Liberty's taste regime could be taken (du Maurier, 1894). Depicting a room overly furnished in Liberty style, with the lady of the house dressed also in Liberty fabrics, the cartoon humorously captures the way in which newly converted consumers could take Liberty's taste regime to unquestioning extremes. As one of Liberty's employees later observed, the cartoon 'is, of course, an absurd travesty of a Liberty boudoir of the period' however as 'old habitués will recognise ... it is not entirely an invention'.⁵³

In their homes, Liberty's customers were able to incorporate excitement and meaning: 'People found that an ugly Victorian room ... which could boast nothing more than an intense

respectability could be made comparatively interesting and brightened at a very small outlay'.⁵⁴ Within their domestic environment, adherents to Liberty's taste regime were able to realise the taste regime's values. This we term 'symbolic substantiation', where the physical manifestation of a teleoaffective structure is made real through consumers' engagement with a taste regime in a socio-personal space. This was not possible while Liberty merely retailed imported artefacts; however, with the development of distinct design and production values the market-mediated authenticity of the Liberty brand facilitated this process.

In this brand development process of the 1880s and 1890s, cosmopolitan authenticity was replaced incrementally by an authenticity that was mediated within the market. Consumers' are drawn toward authenticity by a desire for the genuine in a market where dominant production methods have moved away from consumers' perceptions of the real.⁵⁵ Interest in Oriental, particularly Japanese products, in the mid-nineteenth century illustrates this market need for the authentic. Consumers seek out the genuine, where authentic production is artisanal in nature and created from traditional materials using traditional production methods that are recognizable across generations.⁵⁶ However, artisanal craft methods incur a high labour cost, and artisanal materials are by their very nature a scarce and valued commodity. The truly authentic is available to the few, rather than the many. Through the advocacy of traditional production techniques and by associating these with the brand values of the firm, Liberty was able to augment admission to the brand's taste regime by appealing to a larger market group and through experiential engagement teleoaffectively structure the symbolic substantiation of the brand. In this Liberty anticipates understanding of brand authenticity within the modern marketplace, where it may be understood on a number of different levels. It may be defined objectively with reference to the physical materials used and processes of production, or with reference to subjective values stemming from consumers' perceptions of authenticity.⁵⁷ From the consumer perspective, it may exist on an existential level: achieved through a consumer's engagement with a "liminal process of activities".⁵⁸ From a firm perspective, modern brand authenticity may be associated with a downplaying of commercial motives and the emplacing the authentication process within a shared value system.⁵⁹ In this, authenticity is 'a fluid concept that can be negotiated';⁶⁰ where production for the mass market requires commodification and social construction in order to facilitate meaning.⁶¹

Liberty came to represent a movement in its own right. Its products were symbolic of a shift in consumer taste and aspirations. Liberty merchandise substantiated this shift in aspirational consumption. Indeed, the consuming public adopted the name of 'Liberty' to describe a more

general style, one that went beyond the output of the firm itself. As Arthur Lasenby Liberty noted when being interviewed in 1913, 'I have become a 'mere adjective''.⁶² Setting it apart from its competitors, Liberty design values encapsulated aesthetic production ideals: where craft values were embedded symbolically in production techniques and design principles. Liberty's far-reaching influence defined the firm's commercial and social contribution; through the accessibility to design principles it provided a new wave of aspirant consumers.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis shows Liberty to be a late nineteenth century retailer engaged in providing an emerging consumer base with a distinct brand identity defined by a taste regime and presented within a transformational retail setting. This transformational retail setting was achieved through 'augmented admission' and 'experiential engagement'. In the wider socio-cultural context, it was supported by 'authoritative advocacy' and 'allegorical encounters'. For the consumer, in their socio-personal environment, Liberty's market-mediated brand authenticity provided 'symbolic substantiation' of the taste regime. These five themes relate to a broader context of change in the commercial environment that was driven by the growth of an aspirant middle class. Liberty was part of a wider process of change; however, Liberty, through its retail operation, was at the forefront of challenging and changing the commercial environment. It achieved this through the pursuit and presentation of craft-based design values to an expanding consumer base: 'augmented admission' within a retail context of 'experiential engagement'.

Liberty's retailing activities provided a marketplace oasis designed to reanimate, revive and repair consumers' faith in the market. Through the imaginative and creative evocation of context (market of origin), Liberty's taste regime challenged industrialised production value systems. Liberty's marketplace oasis facilitated the presentation of the firm's brand values and its encompassing taste regime. It provided an iconic place of consumption. Liberty represented an alternative to the scientific industrialism of the early nineteenth century, a message it articulated outside the store through 'authoritative advocacy' and 'allegorical encounters'. Initially, Liberty articulated this message through the retailing of imported Oriental merchandise. In this, there was an attempt to access cosmopolitan craft-based production values and present these in contrast to scientific rationalist production methods associated with domestic production. Later, however, as a consequence of an increasing industrialisation of Oriental production processes, Liberty sought to embed original craft-based production

methods in domestic production activity. In this, Liberty achieved the ‘symbolic substantiation’ of a taste regime through the synthesis of cosmopolitan authenticity and the rediscovery of domestic design values. Therefore, during the initial phase of Liberty’s development (1875-80), the firm’s commercial activities were defined by the presentation of a cosmopolitan ideal, through the buying and retailing of goods representing Japan’s authentic craft-based production methods. It was through ‘authoritative advocacy’ and ‘allegorical encounters’ that the cosmopolitan consumer was pulled into a world of authentic values. Here authoritative figures such as Arthur Lasenby Liberty, presented the value system of the aesthetic movement through craft-based authenticity, while ‘allegorical encounters’ allowed the consumer to experience cosmopolitan otherness through staged representations of Oriental markets of origin. Later, Liberty’s development (1880-1899) is characterised increasingly by a distinct brand identity. Certainly, one that drew heavily on the firm’s origins as a retailer of Oriental merchandise, but increasingly a retailer engaged in the setting of production values; thereby, making its merchandise available to a much wider consumer market. In this, Liberty achieves ‘augmented admission’, embracing consumers within an authentic experience to which they had not previously had access.

Our analysis reveals Liberty as a late nineteenth century retailer engaged in providing an emerging middle class consumer with market-mediated authenticity as represented by excursions in both space and time: from Orientally preserved creative techniques to rediscovered indigenous craft values. ‘Authoritative advocacy’, ‘allegorical encounters’ and ‘experiential engagement’ drew the consumer away from the rational, productivist, scientific industrialism of mass consumption to a market-mediated authenticity defined within a taste regime accessible to a growing aspirant middle class. Thus, Liberty’s taste regime was activated through the firm’s contextualised interaction with the consumer in the socio-cultural sphere (represented by aesthetic discourse and popular cultural activities), through the service-scape (represented by a marketplace oasis), and the consumer’s socio-personal space (represented by the consumer’s domestic environment). During the 1880s and 1890s, Liberty engaged in a process of augmented admission as it increasingly synthesised the market’s need for mediated authenticity: providing aspirant consumers with access to an ‘authentic’ experience that would otherwise be denied them intellectually and financially.

Within the retail environment, this ‘augmented admission’ was supported through ‘experiential engagement’, so that within the store, the taste regime was substantiated. With the firm’s primary store located in Regent Street, London, this ‘experiential engagement’ both legitimated

the established system that had long existed within this location of cosmopolitan consumption, and challenged the system through its aesthetically subversive taste regime. As noted in the introduction, Liberty stands in a line of retail innovations from Wedgwood's late eighteenth century showrooms to Selfridge's early twentieth century department store. There are similarities and differences between Wedgwood's retail presentation of his manufactories and Liberty's presentation of his brand. Wedgwood, certainly sought to create 'experiential engagement', his showrooms in London were designed to present his goods in an innovative and creative form. As McKendrick notes 'He planned to have a great display of his wares set out in services as for a meal' and 'he wanted space for more exciting methods of display' where merchandise was regularly moved around to create interest.⁶³ However, Josiah Wedgwood actively sought to avoid 'augmented admission'. When seeking a location for his London showrooms 'Pall Mall was thought to be too accessible to the common folk' and when they were established elsewhere 'steps were taken to make the London showrooms attractive 'to the ladies', and to keep the common folk out'.⁶⁴ The prices of his 'useful ware was more expensive than those of his rivals.'⁶⁵ Likewise, for Wedgwood's exhibitions and shows 'admittance was by ticket only' to ensure attendance by the Nobility and Gentry.⁶⁶ The wider 'allegorical encounters' used by Liberty were at odds with the exclusivity of Wedgwood who, in correspondence, showed that he was fully aware of the value of 'scarcity' in creating interest from his customers.⁶⁷ Indeed, Wedgwood's much praised use of travelling salesmen in many ways epitomises the fundamental difference between Wedgwood and Liberty. Liberty's marketing practices were built around 'authoritative advocacy' and the creation of pull factors in the market, rather than the push factors of the travelling salesmen. Both Wedgwood and Liberty were important innovators, and both used marketing techniques to increase recognition for their merchandise, but they were also operating in different socio-economic contexts. Liberty was seeking to connect his taste regime with a broad and growing customer base. Wedgwood sought to appeal to a much narrower market segment. In this, Liberty prefigures the wider market excitement associated with later retail operations such as Selfridges.⁶⁸ In the first decade of the twentieth century, London department stores attracted criticism for their lacklustre approach to innovation and change.⁶⁹ Selfridge, challenged this by introducing both market facing and managerial innovations into his London department store and in this transferred retail innovations that he had helped to develop during his years with Marshall Field in Chicago.⁷⁰ However, such innovations were not built around a merchandise range with distinct and associated brand values such as that offered by Liberty. It was the combined use of a transformational retail setting and the establishment of a distinct brand identity with its

associated taste regime that underpinned Liberty's contribution to the emergence of modern branding practices.

The creation of a strong Liberty brand is emphasised by its popularity in international markets and the establishment of an international store in Paris on the Avenue de l'Opera where it intersects with the Place de l'Opera.⁷¹ Liberty's store at this fashionable location was the result of interest in 'Les créations de la Maison "Liberty"' evident at the Paris Exhibition of 1889: 'Liberty was pulled into the market through an experience of local consumer demand; it was a proactive recognition of international retail opportunities.'⁷² Liberty's store in Paris was an early example of British international retail expansion. This internationalisation was possible because 'It possessed firm-specific advantages predicated on a strong retail brand'.⁷³ It was the cosmopolitan Parisian market's demand for products associated with Liberty's taste regime that stimulated the firm's international retail expansion. In Paris, Liberty's operation was strengthened as it built on its thematic representation of its brand values, so that in the early twentieth century, at Liberty's second store location on the Boulevard des Capucines, the store 'was designed to be an experience: 'its vast mirror ornamented with gilt studs at the junctures of the glass gives an effect of considerable perspective and the whole setting has just the requisite intimacy and comparative seclusion'.⁷⁴

By the end of the century, the Liberty brand and associated taste regime had superseded the firm's cosmopolitan trade in Oriental artefacts. The brand, with its distinguishing design values, had become the primary foundation of a merchandise range that represented the 'symbolic substantiation' of the firm's taste regime. Essential to any taste regime is the understanding consumers acquire through engagement with the brand. George du Maurier's (1894) satirical depiction of the excesses that this could lead to is in itself evidence of the clear understanding that adherents to the taste regime - and those less convinced by it - had of the Liberty brand and its associated values.

Conclusion

Liberty's taste regime rejected the dehumanising qualities of scientific industrialism, while simultaneously recognising the shortcomings of artisanal production in its purest form. While the former increased market participation, the latter was essentially elitist and excluded an emerging and aspirational middle class market. These conditions provided an opportunity to build brand values through market-mediated authenticity. Through this mediation process, Liberty was able to develop a distinct brand identity underpinned by authenticated design

principles. Liberty's values, derived as they were from the mid-century aesthetic movement, combined craft-based methods with higher levels of production and productivity. This enfranchised a new consumer market and embedded Liberty's taste regime in both the national and international consciousness.

At the heart of Liberty's taste regime was a transformational retail experience, where the aesthetic of the brand was presented in such a way as to create existential engagement. Located in one of London's more fashionable retailing districts, Liberty's constantly developing retail presentation of its goods appealed to its newly enfranchised consumers. Inviting consumers into the Oriental marketplace oasis of the 1870s and carrying them through to a taste regime of the 1880s and 1890s, this retail environment encapsulated and conveyed the core and evolving messages associated with the Liberty brand. When Liberty opened its Parisian retail operation on the fashionable Avenue de l'Opera in 1889, the inter-relationship between brand identity and retail experience was reinforced within that cosmopolitan milieu. International demand for the brand was creating global export opportunities. Through a fashionable and cosmopolitan Parisian retail location, the brand gained further market presence. As with its London retail operation, the legitimization of location reinforced the values associated with a distinct brand identity creating experiential engagement for the consumer and long-term commercial sustainability for the firm.

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- ¹³ Stankiewicz, MA., ‘From the aesthetic movement to the arts and crafts movement’, *Studies in Art Education*, 33, 3 (1992): 165-173, page 1.
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¹⁹ Liberty has attracted limited attention from a retail or business history perspective. An exception is Alison Adburgham’s short history of the firm, which was written for the firm to mark its centenary in 1975: Adburgham, A. *Liberty’s A Biography of a Shop*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975. She covers the personal, business and design history of Liberty in her valuable book. She also considers Liberty within her wider ranging consideration of nineteenth century retailing: Adburgham, A. *Shops and Shopping 1800-1914*: George Allen and Unwin, 1964. More recently, the internationalisation of Liberty’s retail operation has been considered from a business history perspective: Doherty, AM. and Alexander, N., (2015) ‘Liberty in Paris: International retailing, 1889-1932’, *Business History*, 57, 4 (2015): 485-511.

²⁰ Arsel, Z. and Bean, J., ‘Taste Regimes and Market-Mediated Practice’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39, 5 (2013): 899-917.

²¹ See: Arsel, Z. and Bean, J., ‘Taste Regimes and Market-Mediated Practice’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39, 5 (2013): 899-917, page 901. In relation to the type of context discussed here, they define a teleoaffective structure as ‘the brand specific values, meanings, and myths that the participants experience, enact, and cocreate.’

²² Godwin, E.W., ‘A Japanese Warehouse’, *The Architect*, 23 December, (1876): 363, a-b.

²³ Coming Events, quoted in Liberty, (1881). *Eastern Art, Catalogue of Merchandise*, (1881). page 17. CWAC, Liberty Archive: 1932/174.

²⁴ Judd, W., ‘A Few Early Recollections’, *The “Liberty” Lamp*, I, 2, March, (1925): 4-5,

²⁵ Flood, J., ‘Old Friends’, *The “Liberty” Lamp*, I, 4, May, (1925): 8.

²⁶ Roberts, Mr., ‘A ‘Reflection’ of February, 1887: Old Friends No. 3’, *The “Liberty” Lamp*, I, 3, (1925): 1-2.

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²⁸ Liberty, *Eastern Art, Catalogue of Merchandise*, (1881), page 118. CWAC, Liberty Archive: 1932/174.

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³⁰ BETA, ‘Felicitous Quotations’, *The Liberty Lamp*, 3, 12, (1928): 136-137.

³¹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, Birmingham, England, 1, August (1888): 1f.

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³⁴ Specially Contributed ‘The Ladies’ Column’, *The Leeds Times*, July 25 (1891): 2e.

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³⁶ Liberty, A.L., ‘The Industrial Arts and Manufactories of Japan’, *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 1, 959, XXXVIII (1890): 673-686, page 684.

³⁷ Liberty, A.L., ‘The Industrial Arts and Manufactories of Japan’, *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 1, 959, XXXVIII (1890): 673-686, page 676.

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