



Exploring SHOP WINDOW Displays

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Recommended for Grades 7-8

In a world saturated by visual images, aesthetic experience can be encountered almost anywhere. It seems that everything that appeals to the sense of sight can be considered in an artistic and aesthetic realm and analyzed. The very different sites of everyday culture may simultaneously offer immense visual pleasure and enable viewers to construct their own identities and self-concepts by providing them with a wide range of sources and cultural options (Duncum, 1999). Using visual resources from everyday life in art lessons, therefore, can enrich students' knowledge about the creation of visual images, artifacts, and sites, and develop their critical understanding about the cultural impact of these images and their effects on people's lives.

Objectives

This Instructional Resource examines shop window displays because they are a ubiquitous part of students' visual culture and they have a clear purpose and often imply a narrative content that may be both "predictable and ever-differently inventive in its specifics" (Vallance, 2009, p. 36). The photographic images in this instructional resource present displays at Selfridges' department store in London. I chose these windows because they place high-end fashion into a vaguely season-appropriate, arty *mise-en-scène* while provoking looking and promoting merchandise. Therefore, they can facilitate the study of window displays in art lessons.

Throughout window displays analysis and artmaking activities, 5th and 6th grade students will:

- develop an understanding of the function of shop window displays in relation to economic and cultural and factors
- examine and reflect on the visual pleasures they seek and derive when looking at shop window displays
- explore the ways they might use them to construct knowledge
- use imagination and creative thinking in the design of their own shop window displays to effectively communicate merchandise and excite visual senses and emotions
- create a shop window display utilizing the basic elements of art and principles of design²

above

Detail from 'Statuesque' Window Displays,
Selfridges department store, London.



Shop Window Displays

Shop window displays combine products and messages in order to attract viewers' attention. Attractive shop windows that promote certain items, announce sales, or welcome a season invite passersby to stop, look at, desire, enter, and buy. The goods are not just arranged neatly and orderly. Their arrangement depends on composition with regard to color schemes, materials, cultural or seasonal themes, harmony, balance, variety, and effective details to convey meaning. Shop window displays may be perceived as free exhibitions of beautiful and fashionable objects that enable viewers to exercise their taste as these visual culture examples embody principles of good design and communicate style and meaningful content.

As a mix of art, fashion, design, and marketing, commercial displays in store windows are similar to advertising in the sense that they help consumers to create and maintain in their minds the overall image and identity of the retailer (Park, Jaworski, & Macinnis, 1986). According to Sen, Block, and Chandram (2002), the different elements of a shop window reveal information related to store itself—for instance, the store's brands, styles, prices, and quality of the merchandise. Therefore, when looking at shop windows consumers search for clues about retailers' merchandise and promotional activities, and for examples of the latest fashions and trends.

Shop window displays are designed purposefully to produce emotional effects in order to increase sales. Looking at them involves desire and immediacy or, in other words, a hedonistic consumption. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) define *hedonistic consumption* as the consumer behavior that relates to the multisensory and emotional experience of products and goods. This type of experience offers fun, enjoyment, and pleasure to the consumer and is associated with the acts of looking at, gazing, or staring at a shop window rather than through the act of shopping. Extraordinary, exciting, fascinating, and intriguing

shop window displays may invite repeated contemplation, be a talking point for an entire community, and become memories of aesthetically satisfying moments for viewers. Designers of shop window displays become increasingly creative as they work to continuously engage potential customers and passersby with memorable, multidimensional sensory experiences while also encouraging sales and economic gain for the store. Especially in large department stores, designers create visually appealing displays that look more like art installations or fantastic scenes from a movie rather than simple functional presentations of the selected goods sold inside.

Shop Window Display Designers

Shop window designers, also known as visual merchandisers, are responsible for creating window and in-store displays. They may study graphic design, fashion design, fashion sales, fashion management, fashion merchandising, retail management, or other related fields in preparation for their work. Individual designers and visual merchandising teams' typical activities involve conducting research into international fashion shows, design weeks, graduate shows, art fairs, and art exhibitions to discover lifestyle concepts and trends. Their work also includes sketching designs and experimenting with source materials such as lighting and accessories, as well as dressing mannequins, installing and dismantling displays, preparing windows for promotional events, and working closely with fashion directors and buyers. Sarah McCullough, who is the concept manager of Selfridges's visual merchandising team ("A Window on Selfridges," 2009), explains that designing a shop window display is a long process that can last from a few months to up to a year. According to McCullough, the 12 members of her team collaborate throughout the different stages of the creation of a shop window display from setting the initial concept to the placing and installation of the display.

Creative Windows: 'Statuesque'

In February 2009 Selfridges department store launched the 'Statuesque' theme for its window displays (see Figures 1 and 2). Inspired by ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, the designers used a limited color palette, mostly white with metallic accents, to attract the eye and enhance viewer enjoyment. According to Sarah McCullough, the main idea of this project originated from the prevalence of sculpture in the community at that point in time ("A Window on Selfridges," 2009). This manifested in exhibitions such as 'Statuephilia' held at The British Museum, October 2008 through January 2009. This particular exhibition aimed to connect sculpture throughout history with diverse cultures and emphasize its significance across the ages by showing contemporary artworks together with ancient Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, and Indian sculptural works. Clearly, this exhibition influenced Selfridges's window display design team. They placed mannequins dressed in white chiffon and silk with

layers of draperies alongside two-dimensional paper cut-outs resembling ancient columns and sculptures. Mannequins dressed with clothes made by famous designers such as Alexander McQueen, Vivienne Westwood, and Stella McCartney functioned as a reference to the contemporary culture while paper-made statuettes influenced by the representations from the Parthenon frieze operated as a reference to the past. Lighting was used to facilitate sensory and tactile interaction between the consumer and the product. That is why the mannequins hold a light bulb that illuminates their dresses. Altogether these particular window displays presented a visual metaphor that alluded to real events and to the idea that sculpture may give people the illusion of solidity and eternity. This is in part related to the fact that many ancient statues were discovered and conserved, as compared to paintings that were often lost to natural or human destruction. Similarly, fashion—though potentially superficial, self-referential, transitory, and ephemeral—is everlasting as it incorporates the notions of style, trendiness, and taste, and is a kind of communal art through which cultures examine, debate, and manifest notions of beauty.

Figures 1 and 2. 'Statuesque' Window Displays, Selfridges department store, London. Photographs taken by Martha Christopoulou. Used with permission.



Instructional Strategies

1. Looking and Responding

Ask students to describe the shop window displays shown in Figures 1 and 2 and then to respond to the following questions.

- What is the function of a shop window display?
- How does a shopping window contribute to the economic gain of a store?
- What predominant colors did the designers use in these window displays?
- Why did they use this particular color for these displays?
- What effects do the different values of the same color create?
- What different materials were used?
- What is the center of interest and how do the designers direct our eye there?
- How is lighting used in these window displays?
- Do these displays create a sense of harmony, balance, or repetition? If so, how?
- Why do you think the name ‘Statuesque’ was chosen for these displays? What are the ideas suggested here?
- What community events do these displays reference?
- Do the window displays seem easy to understand, or is there air of mystery about them? Why?

Creative Windows: ‘Wacky Races’

It is apparent that designers of window displays seek inspiration from various sources to create a cohesive and powerful visual narrative. In another example, the ‘Wacky Races’ window displays were launched by Selfridges to welcome spring 2008 (see Figures 3 and 4). Mannequins sitting on, using, or placed next to bizarre airplanes, bicycles, mechanical horses, and automobiles are ready for racing. This is emphasized by the fact that they are wearing Vespa helmets. To stimulate visual response and alter viewers’ emotional states, designers dressed mannequins in extremely colorful clothes. The bright yellows, blues, reds, pinks, and oranges and the multicolored light fabrics give the sense that summer is quickly approaching. So, everyone should hurry to renew their own wardrobes for the coming season. The odd and innovative design of the racing vehicles attracts the eye and highlights the famous fashion designers’ individuality, originality, and creativity being worn by the mannequins. At the same time they function as a metaphor of the idea that fashion is always about new trends and fads. The background is covered with sketches of the vehicles, bringing to mind fashion sketches. As they show some of the steps of the creation process they remind viewers how complicated it is to design a piece of clothing. The overall concept and design of the ‘Wacky Races’ window displays was most likely influenced by an animated TV series called ‘Wacky Races’³ broadcast on the American CBS television network between September 1968 and January 1969. The characters of the series rode unusual vehicles,

2. Imagination

Ask individual students to choose potential products for selling. Then instruct them to imagine creating a window display for these products. Discuss color schemes, materials, cultural or seasonal themes, and effective details they would use to convey meaning. Ask several students to describe their imagined displays. Suggest that if they were to relate their work to a recent cultural event in their own city or town that it may be designed differently. Ask students to brainstorm and list present or past community or cultural events and then imagine creating a second window display that would relate to one of these events.

3. Artmaking

Invite students to draw or paint their second imagined shop window display, adding as much detail as possible. Ask them to find an innovative title for it that will direct attention to the event that inspired its design.

such as a boat-shaped car, a car/plane, a wagon made of logs, etc., and tried to win the title of the ‘World’s Wackiest Racer.’

Instructional Strategies

1. Looking and Responding

- Ask students to describe the shop window displays shown in Figures 3 and 4 and then respond to the following questions.
- What is the theme of these shop window displays?
- What fashion trends from spring-summer 2008 can you identify in these displays?
- Compared to the ‘Statuesque’ theme, what are the main differences here in the use of color and style?
- What have the designers chosen to include in these displays? Why?
- What are the body positions of the mannequins? What do these poses convey?
- How is a sense of variety, unity, emphasis, and harmony created?
- How do these displays make you feel? What creates these effects?
- What is the main meaning, function, and mood of these displays?
- What do you think inspired the designers of these displays?
- Do you think that these window displays can increase sales? Why or why not?

Figures 3 and 4. ‘Wacky Races’ Window Displays, Selfridges department store, London. Photographs taken by Martha Christopoulou. Used with permission.

2. Imagination

Invite students to work in groups and to look at books, magazines, artworks, and television programs of their choice in order to identify and list possible themes for a seasonal window display. Ask the students to write down their ideas and then read them to the class.

3. Artmaking

Invite students to take digital photographs of shop window displays in their own community. After analyzing these in class ask them to create a photo gallery using computer software. Ask students to look again at the photo gallery in order to seek inspiration. Invite them to collect materials and objects from their own home or school environments, such as toys and dolls. Then ask the students to work in groups in order to use these materials in the creation of their own small window display.

Creative Windows: 'Pantomime'

For the Winter Holiday Season 2009 Selfridges department store launched a 'Pantomime' theme for its shop window displays (see Figures 5 and 6). These flamboyant festive displays were inspired by the English tradition of pantomime (popular short form: panto), a musical-theatrical show mostly performed during the Winter Holiday season. The major conventions of English pantomime include the characters of Principal Boy and Dame roles, the animal costume roles, the incorporation of song, dance, buffoonery, cross-dressing (male characters played by women and vice-versa), audience participation, and storylines based on well-known children's stories, like *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Aladdin*, and *Little Red Riding Hood* (Taylor, 2007). Selfridges's designers used some of these conventions to create 'Pantomime' displays and transform the store windows into a theatrical stage. Not only did they dress the mannequins as pantomime dames with huge capes and costumes, but they also designed them to look like men dressed up as women. The female mannequins' faces were made to appear manly with lots of angles and heavy make-up. They also make reference to iconic scenes from children's stories. In the images we see the evil stepmother from *Snow White* asking 'Who is the fairest?' and see Cinderella sitting on a huge pumpkin. The domination of the color red, the velvet drapery in the background suggesting theatre curtains, and the animal figures support the main theme of each scene and give the illusion of watching pantomime performance. These scenes successfully create a visual storytelling that reminds viewers of the approaching festive holiday season and generates an amusing and exhilarating atmosphere.

Instructional Strategies

1. Looking and Responding

Ask students to look at the shop window displays shown in Figures 5 and 6 and then respond to the following questions.

- What are these displays about?
- How did the designers manipulate space in terms of arranging mannequins and objects?
- In which season of the year were 'Pantomime' displays launched?
- What is the mood of these window displays?
- What are their main characteristics?

- What do you think inspired the designers of these displays?
- What are the main conventions of pantomime incorporated into these displays?
- Is the purpose of these displays consistent with the theme, materials, and colors used? Explain.
- Do you think viewers of these displays could learn anything from them? Explain.
- Which details of these displays emphasize the Winter Holiday season?
- What kinds of emotions are provoked by these displays?
- Do you think these displays can influence viewers' decision to buy products? What kinds and why?
- Comparing these displays to 'Statuesque' and 'Wacky Races' which do you think are more visually pleasurable and/or memorable? Explain.
- Looking again at the 'Statuesque,' 'Wacky Races,' and 'Pantomime' displays, what can you say about Selfridges department store regarding the brands, styles, prices, and quality of the merchandise?

2. Imagination

Invite students to work in pairs and conduct cultural research in order to identify and list their own community rituals, customs, and habits around the Winter Holiday season. Ask them to present their findings in the classroom. Discuss which of these rituals, customs, and habits could be used as a theme for a shop window display.

3. Artmaking

Invite students to work in small groups to create temporary life-sized displays based on or inspired by these rituals and customs using themselves as mannequins. They can bring clothes from home and fabrics to wear and use objects found at school such as chairs, tables, and books to create their own displays. Ask the students to take photographs of their own final works and then work together as an entire class to create a catalogue of images documenting these new displays.

Figures 5 and 6. 'Pantomime' Window Displays, Selfridges department store, London. Photographs taken by Martha Christopoulou. Used with permission.



Evaluation

Student learning can be evaluated on the basis of (1) the quality of their responses to the discussion questions, (2) their ability to elaborate upon the responses of others, (3) their ability to cooperate with others, and (4) their artworks. Students should demonstrate what they have learned about the design of shop window displays in relation to economic and cultural and factors. They should also demonstrate their understanding and skillful use of the elements of art and principles of design and their abilities to think creatively and articulate and communicate their thoughts through the artmaking activities.

Conclusion

Shop window displays have a ubiquitous presence in students' lives and offer intriguing viewing pleasure. As art curriculum content, therefore, shop window displays provide opportunities for teachers to capitalize on students' knowledge about the function of these displays and consumer practices. Moreover, shop window displays provide a rich source of opportunities for students to generate and extend their ideas, apply imagination, enhance their creativity and work collaboratively.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Photographic images of shop windows taken by the author are used with full permission of Selfridges Department Store.

ENDNOTES

¹ Selfridges & Co is a chain of high-end department stores in the UK that sell products including clothing, footwear, accessories, furniture, home appliances, electronics, toiletries, cosmetics, jewelry, toys, and sporting goods.

² The elements of art suggested for use in this Instructional Resource are space, color, and value. The principles of design suggested are balance, harmony, variety, emphasis, unity, repetition (rhythm), and functionality.

³ Wacky Races: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wacky_Races and www.hotink.com/wacky/