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Klara Arnberg & Orsi Husz

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From the great department store with love: window display and the transfer of commercial knowledge in early twentieth-century Sweden

Klara Arnberg and Orsi Husz

Department of Economic History, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden; Department of Economic History, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This article highlights the transfers and practical uses of the commercial knowledge of window dressing in early twentieth-century Sweden through the analysis of the professional career and family business of Oscar Lundkvist, Swedish display pioneer and former window dresser in chief of the largest and first Swedish department store, *Nordiska Kompaniet*. Building on rich source material including unique written and photographic documents from the Lundkvist family, educational material and trade journals, we show how the innovative and spectacular became ordinary and mundane in retail praxis. We argue that the emergence and professionalization of window display brought with it the dissemination and trivialization of the same practice. By focusing on not only the most conspicuous aspects and cultural meanings of window displays but also on the materials and competences involved, we explain how setting up the displays became an everyday commercial practice and how it was positioned between advertising and retail as well as between the artistic and the commercial.

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Window display; retail; advertising; commercial practices; education; knowledge transfer

In 1932 Oscar Lundkvist, window dresser in chief at Stockholm’s largest department store *Nordiska Kompaniet* (NK), quit his position. He thereby left the renowned store where he had worked since 1903 as the first – and one of the most famous – of this profession in Sweden.1 Lundkvist and his wife, Elvira, who was trained in the art of hand lettering and also had work experience from NK, started their own atelier and school of window display and decoration. Together they ran the firm, commissioned displays, sold supplies, and taught window dressing at its premises in Stockholm. Oscar also made trips around the country to teach shorter courses for groups of local shopkeepers and their staff. In the course of his professional career, he taught thousands of shop assistants and aspiring window dressers. Education for large groups is rarely included in historical accounts of modern consumer culture and retailing, despite its being a key topic in various works on other aspects of modernity.2 Through the story of the Lundkvist family business,
this paper explores the transfer of the commercial knowledge of window dressing in 1930s Sweden.

From rich source material including written and photographic documents from the Lundkvist family, educational material and trade journals, our paper highlights in what way and in what parts the innovative and new became ordinary and mundane knowledge in retail praxis. The analysis thus does not primarily address the birth of modern ideas for how to catch the eye of the consumer but rather examines the mediation, dissemination and materialization of these ideas in the windows of small retailers. How were commercial, aesthetical, and practical norms and knowledge dispersed from the commercial heart of the country to its more distant veins? What kind of education in window dressing was available in 1920s and 1930s Sweden, and how did education for window dressers develop over time? Answering these questions helps us understand how the arts and crafts of window display transformed between the new and old, avant-garde ideas and everyday practices, the big city and the provinces, large-scale modern retailing and small traditional shops. Also, through studying these processes, expertise in window dressing can be situated between the professional fields of advertising and retail trade, between a high-profile creative profession and a low-profile service occupation.

Window display as a commercial practice

Historical research on window display tends to focus on the avant-garde, the new and the spectacular in urban settings, as well as on the influence of modernism. This includes a focus, first, on the turn-of-the-century department store and its ambition to ‘produce desire’ through display, attractions, colour and light; and second, on the new, simpler aesthetics of functionalism, which with the advent of new marketing theories challenged the boundaries between art and commercialism. Although these studies are important for understanding the developments in both consumer culture and retailing, such approaches have some shortcomings. First, they are often limited to the most conspicuous examples and do not analyse the wider distribution of commercial display or the more average shop windows. The so-called modern window displays became a feature in almost every shop in the early twentieth century, even in the most provincial towns in northern Europe, yet this process has mainly been assumed rather than studied or explained. Therefore, insights into how the modernity of displays was redefined and reshaped in the process are to date largely lacking.

Second, conventional accounts are preoccupied with the results rather than the processes; that is, they focus on the completed window displays and of course the role they played in consumer culture and retail environments. This is understandable, as historical sources about window displays predominantly consist of photographs of complete, arranged shop windows. Very often, the windows pictured are those, which were regarded as possible norms for others. However, the ‘backstage’ activities are largely left out, as are the skills and material means involved in the making of the window displays, both the spectacular and less spectacular ones.

These limitations also have an impact on the gendered historiography of new commercial dream worlds. With the scholarly interest focused on the large department stores,
prominent male figures (as well as male window dressers, such as the famous Frank L. Baum) have been ascribed a central role in the creation of ‘a ladies’ paradise’. By focusing on Lundkvist’s family business rather than solely on him, and by concentrating on both the professionalization of window dressing and the dispersion of knowledge to smaller retailers, the gendered history of window displays can be further problematized.

In this paper we treat window dressing as a commercial practice, in order to highlight its everyday aspects. Following Shove, Pantzar & Watson, we assert that this specific commercial practice, like all social practices, involves three main elements: materials, competences and meanings. Materials are things, tools, and tangible items such as charts, stands, mannequins, or the shop window and the windowpane itself. By competences we refer to skills, techniques and know-how, as well as more systemized knowledge. In order to understand the change window dressing underwent as a commercial practice, the ways in which these competences were rendered (through various forms of practical and theoretical education or autodidactism) are key. By meanings we refer to ideas, aspirations, and symbolic meanings.

Both meanings and materials have been included in the conventional historical narrative. Meanings in this case are manifold. The creation of desire and the capturing of the flâneur’s gaze have been eloquently analysed by a range of scholars, starting with the seminal work of Walter Benjamin on the Parisian arcades. The windows, especially those of the large department stores, were central elements in creating the dream worlds of consumption, described by Rosalind Williams, Michael Miller, William Leach and others. The functionalist window too, and its promise of modernity, has been discussed in historical research as well as in contemporary trade literature and popular media. Literary authors as well, such as Theodore Dreiser in the US or Karin Boye in Sweden, described early twentieth-century shop windows as paramount sites of modern consumer desire. The material aspects of window dressing are discussed less often in historical research, although important insights about architectural solutions, lighting technologies and the use of glass in commercial buildings can be gained from scholars of urban modernity and technology. However, the competences involved in the practice of setting up displays, as well as how they were defined and spread and who possessed them, are almost never problematized. Building on theories of practice, we look at how these three elements were combined, and how the connections between them shifted as the practice changed: it became established as a profession, was disseminated, and then even trivialized.

The time scope of our study is about 1900 to 1950. This period was the heyday of window display in Sweden. Figure 1 shows the frequency of the word skyltfönster [shop window/display window] in three of the largest Swedish newspapers after 1880. The graph clearly illustrates wartime dips in the use of the word, but also that the late 1920s and early 1930s experienced an incomparable frequency of it. A closer look reveals that the word was used in various contexts, including ads for vacant commercial premises, articles discussing architecture and acclaiming displays, and complaints about consumer culture or certain shops. However, shop windows and window dressing seem to have been the ‘talk of the town’ in the interwar period, and the trend (apart from the war periods) is a fast upturn from the turn of the century in 1900 until circa 1930 and a slow downturn thereafter, stabilizing in the 1980s and
1990s. While the graph confirms other studies, which have identified the increased interest in window display up to the 1930s, the subsequent downturn has not been discussed. The new millennium has experienced a new downturn, further pointing towards window display having lost its importance – or at least its newsworthiness – in retail trade. Our study of the transfer of commercial knowledge will in fact also contextualize and explain – especially concerning the first half of the century – this striking historical time-boundedness of window display.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first part we introduce the Lundkvists by situating them in the early history of Swedish window display. We also place window display in relation to the fields of retailing and advertising, and discuss its professionalization in general. The focus here is on the meanings and materials of window display. In the second part we concentrate on the competences involved (and their linkages to meanings and materials), and study education in window display in general and the Lundkvist School in particular, including the courses Oscar taught on his teaching trips around Sweden.

**Oscar Lundkvist and the spectacular window displays in early nineteenth-century Sweden**

Oscar Lundkvist was born in the Swedish town of Lund in 1881 as the child of an unmarried maid, and grew up under modest circumstances. As a teenager, he started working for an outfitter [Frithiof Elmqvists herrekipering] in Lund, and by the age of 21 had moved to Malmö and started working at the Swedish Straw and Felt Hat Factory [Svenska Strå & Filthattfabriken] warehouse. He disliked his position, but kept his spirits up with artistic activities – drawing, painting and participating in a theatre group. According to some sources, it was thanks to a colleague that he applied for a job at the newly started NK department store in Stockholm in 1903. According to

![Figure 1. Frequency of the word skyltfönster [shop window/display window] in Dagens Nyheter, Aftonbladet and Svenska Dagbladet 1880–2016. Sources: National Library of Swedish database of digitized newspapers, www.tidningar.kb.se [accessed 2017-08-21].](image-url)
others, it was the director of NK Joseph Sachs himself who – after seeing Lundkvist’s
drawings at the outfitter – offered him the position.\textsuperscript{17} NK was not only the first (and
for a long time the largest) department store in the country; it was also the company
that originally defined the concept of ‘department store’ in Sweden, in other words a
Swedish equivalent to stores such as \textit{Bon Marché} and \textit{Printemps} in Paris or \textit{Selfridges}
in London. In the early years the store was most often referred to as ‘Kompaniet’
(The Company), indicating its uniqueness.\textsuperscript{18}

In his first years at NK, Oscar worked as a sales clerk in the tailoring and outfitting
departments.\textsuperscript{19} One of his tasks was to ‘tidy up the windows’, meaning to clean them,
put them in order, and decorate them. His decorations started becoming more
and more elaborate, and he was soon working full time with window dressing
(see Figure 2). He also used to help ‘tidy up’ the windows of the nearby renowned res-

taurant \textit{Sturehof} in exchange for food and drink. When the department store moved to
its new building on Hamngatan in 1915 (Figure 3), Lundkvist was already in charge of
an entire decoration atelier with about a dozen employees.\textsuperscript{20} One of the new employees
at the department was 19-year-old Elvira Eriksson, an educated lettering artist, who
would later become Oscar’s wife.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{The display man testing a new idea in a miniature window. Portrait of Oscar Lundkvist from an article about the department store Nordiska Kompaniet, ‘NK i julbrådskan’, Dagens Nyheter, December 21, 1919 (Oscars initial was misspelled).}
\end{figure}
Lundkvist is often described as the first professional Swedish window dresser. Before him, there were sometimes German professionals who offered their services to larger Swedish stores such as NK. It was more common, however, that the sales staff or, in smaller shops, the owner him- or herself arranged the windows. Lundkvist came to be intimately connected with the modernization of window display, whereby massed or ‘stocky’ windows were replaced with more spectacular ones. The new ideal in Sweden, as in other countries, was to have a central theme for the window. The display, often depicting a scene with mannequins or some kind of special attraction, was intended to catch the attention of people passing by, not necessarily to demonstrate the entire supply on sale. While the Britons, as Susan Lomax has noted, contrasted their own typical ‘stocky’ or ‘selling’ window displays to the American ‘open’ ones, the same conflict in the Swedish material was described in terms of old-fashioned versus a modern style of display. Lundkvist’s windows for the big department store in the 1910s and 1920s were definitely ‘modern’ by contemporary standards, acclaimed in the daily press and very popular with the Stockholm crowd. Just like the display fashion of the time dictated, Lundkvist’s displays included innovative and unexpected details, such as mechanical moving objects and illusionary tricks (e.g. a teapot constantly pouring tea into a cup), and even live animals. Lundkvist turned the Christmas decorations at NK into a major attraction in the city. It was not only the windows that offered a Christmas spectacle for children and adults alike, but also the store’s interior. The glass-roofed central hall was converted every year into a dream, a fairy-tale scene of gigantic proportions (Figure 4). When asked where he got his ideas, Lundkvist answered: ‘It is from my own head, so to speak’, indicating the artistic creativity of the profession (Figure 2).
Reading Lundkvist’s early statements as well as his later remembrances, it is obvious that in the first years of the twentieth century the practice of window dressing as a specific entity did not yet exist in Swedish retail. Although some windows might have been nicely decorated earlier, there was no such profession and not even such a practice: the meaning of window display had yet to be expressed, the materials invented and produced, and the competences defined and elaborated through trial and error.

However, Lundkvist was not the only pioneer of Swedish window display. While he has been described as the ‘father of Swedish window-dressing technique’, his 17-year-younger colleague Harald Rosenberg is often portrayed in historical accounts of the trade as a groundbreaking innovator in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Lundkvist was an autodidact
and worked his way up from the most basic retail work, whereas Rosenberg, an educated
businessman, developed an artistic and commercial interest in window dressing while
working in a managerial position at a competing department store, Militär Ekiperings
Aktiebolaget (MEA). Rosenberg worked with and had personal friendships with a
number of prominent Swedish functionalist architects.28 The influence of functionalism
on everyday commercial practices was especially important in Sweden. In the aftermath
of the famous 1930 Stockholm Exhibition and the functionalist manifesto of its architects,
commercial display ideals were also reformed, and Rosenberg was an internationally
recognized standard-bearer of this change.29

Even Lundkvist had some international connections and, according to a Swedish trade
publication, his displays even figured in the American trade press.30 He certainly
embraced the spectacular, but was also influenced by the new theories of advertising
and window display. Despite his position and high-profile displays at NK, he always
remained a practical man and thus easily adapted to the functionalistic mind-set of the
1930s. In his later work he often stressed the slogan, also cherished by the functionalists,
that the main purpose of window dressing always had to be to promote and sell products.
People should notice and see the merchandise on sale, not the display itself.31 Nevertheless, contemporary commentators sometimes perceived NK’s windows during the 1920s as examples of the exact opposite approach. Some even suggested that perhaps NK, like other stores, should care more about selling its merchandise and less about displaying it.32 Lundkvist himself, in the 1920s (while still at NK) and 1930s (after having left the department store), published a large number of articles about window display in the Swedish trade press, delivering sharp criticism of both ‘superfluous frills’ [krusiduller] and ‘mediocrity’ in window display. He suggested ‘rational’ and practical solutions in order to create ‘straightforward’ modern windows with ‘rather too few than too many’ goods – while still holding onto the idea of originality.33

From the above it is obvious that the big city department store was innovative, even in
Sweden, in establishing window display as a specific practice. Spectacular arrangements
were important in the beginning to launch the new concept of window display, and originality as an ideal was introduced. The meanings of window display started being expressed and negotiated – but were not fixed. The characteristics of what was constituted modernity in window displays were also quickly changing.

A practice in-between retailing, advertising, art and science

‘The window decorator is at the same time a businessman, a commodity specialist, a
fashion expert, a director, an architect and a drawer, or at least a bit of each,’34 wrote
the contemporary women’s magazine Charme in the mid-1920s. The practice of
window dressing indeed involved several fields of expertise and talent. Called ‘the retailer’s
own advertising’, window display was discussed as part of the new sales techniques, as it
emerged as a recurrent topic in the trade literature of both advertising and retailing.35 Both
these sectors underwent rapid modernization in the interwar period.36 Many new shops
and advertising firms opened, resulting in increased competition during the 1930s,
likely further pushing for intensified modernization and a growing need for commercial
skills.37 According to professional norms of the time, window display should preferably
be coordinated with newspaper advertising. The aesthetics of the shop window were
linked to the printed ad by repeating the same slogans and using the same decorative theme.\textsuperscript{38} There were debates, however, regarding which should come first – the window or the ad. Display experts argued that the design of the display should definitely take priority because, among other things, it had to consider the material limitations of the actual windows.\textsuperscript{39}

Window display was also a creative and artistic craft, and its practitioners combined American marketing theory with functionalist aesthetics in the 1930s. As art historian Anna Dahlgren has emphasized, the influence of rational display strategies based on functionalist ideas came to be more permeated and long-lived in Sweden than in comparable countries.\textsuperscript{40} Architectural historian Bosse Bergman also highlights that the introduction of modernist design contributed to the professionalization and recognition of the artistic skills of the window dresser, at a time when the boundaries between art and commercialism were partly blurred, for example in industry exhibitions.\textsuperscript{41} In our sources, a tension between the artistic and the commercial can be detected. On the one hand, the trade press endorsed the aesthetics and even the artistic originality of windows. The uniqueness of the ‘idea’ seems to have been the most important factor in the eyes of the 1930s display men, including Oscar Lundkvist himself, for creating a successful window. The first chapter of his 1944 handbook on window display is devoted to the topic of ‘Ideas’. Others expressed their indignation at shop windows copying other display ideas, and claimed that this should be treated the same way as artistic plagiarism.\textsuperscript{42}

On the other hand, functionalism in window display reinforced not only the significance of artistic skills but also the importance of a scientific approach, similar to ideas within the advertising business. Contemporary advertising agencies worked almost exclusively with ads for newspapers. Accordingly, window display and advertising were in practice separated, despite the recommendations to align the two. Ad men did not dress or design shop windows. The importance of window display as a marketing tool was nevertheless asserted in the advertising trade press, often within a scientific framing. It was also a topic at the 1933 Nordic Advertising congress, where studies measuring the efficiency of displays by surveying the behaviour of passers-by were presented.\textsuperscript{43} In 1928, for example, advertising expert Harry Ungewitter wrote that the psychology of window display followed the general laws of advertising psychology: the window aimed at first attracting attention, then affecting memory and reason, and finally generating the emotional impact needed for a purchase. Retail trade journals embraced these psychological ideas, and so did Lundkvist.\textsuperscript{44}

The new professionals’ belief in scientific measurability resulted in many statements in the trade press with an underlying legitimizing meaning. Ungewitter, for example, claimed that some stores attracted as much as between 50 and 100 per cent of their customers by means of window display.\textsuperscript{45} German survey studies measuring the effect of specific details in the shop windows were presented in both the retail and advertising trade press. These contained, for example, discussions on the efficiency of price tagging, the use of colours, the importance of the number of goods displayed, and the effect of decorative details.\textsuperscript{46} Another advertising trade journal, \textit{Futurum}, conducted a large empirical survey of several main shopping streets throughout Sweden by measuring the ratio of people stopping at the window, and the ratio of those entering the store among all passers-by.\textsuperscript{47} As Bergman has stressed, these types of surveys found no clear evidence of the efficiency
of modern window dressing as such. Nonetheless, the importance of displays continued to be emphasized in contemporary commercial discourse.\(^{18}\)

**Professionalization of window display in the interwar period**

As we have seen above, the profession of window dressing was defined as a compromise between various commercial and artistic skills and ambitions. Also, the fact that window dressers or display men were relatively new characters on the commercial scene meant that the practice of window dressing was far from self-evident or even similar between different premises. In the display and decoration departments of the big stores like NK, several professional categories with different types of competences could work together – drawers, carpenters, and lettering artists. In contrast, some, often medium-sized, retailers bought window dressing services from specialized companies instead of employing their own window dressers. The smallest shops, however, often had to rely on the aesthetical and practical competences of their own sales clerks. Decorating the windows was, still in the interwar period, often a morning task for the youngest shop assistants. Prefabricated display material and ready-made displays were launched by, and could be purchased from, firms like Lundkvist’s.\(^{49}\)

The material preconditions for professionalization were both technical and architectural. By 1920, electric lightning had replaced older techniques of using gaslight and reflectors in shop windows and inside the shops.\(^{50}\) Lighting was crucial to the success of displays, and this was especially true in Nordic countries with dark and long falls and winters. The technology of manufacturing large windowpanes of plate glass had been around for a few decades, and new shops were now being built with neon-framed, modern glass facades or at least large show windows.\(^{51}\) Thus, the work environment for window dressers, as well as the cityscape for consumers, was changing. Retailers with older shops also started enlarging their windows. Just like Uwe Spiekermann has shown in the German case, the rebuilding of the shop windows seems to have spread from the inner city to the urban outskirts, and from the larger cities to smaller towns.\(^{52}\) In Sweden, both building and rebuilding accelerated when the Consumers’ Cooperative Union [Kooperativa Förbundet, KF] and the Retail Trade Federation [Köpmannaföreningen] set up their own architectural offices (1927 and 1932, respectively), in part for this very purpose.\(^{53}\) It was not going fast enough, however; at least not according to Lundkvist and his colleagues.

The professionalization process involved also adopting ideas from the larger production of commercial knowledge. Living in a small country, Swedish window-dressing pioneers were naturally influenced by international trends. For example, the English window dresser Loughlin M Feery’s *Modern window display: a practical guide for the shopkeeper* was translated in its first year of publication (1922), was published in Swedish, and came out in four additional revised editions throughout the interwar period.\(^{54}\) All updated editions were ‘reviewed and provided with a foreword by Oscar Lundkvist; several photographs of Lundkvist’s own NK windows were included with commentary in these editions. He thus held a prominent position in Swedish window display, not only by means of his own spectacular windows but also because he introduced and adapted international knowledge to the Swedish circumstances. In his foreword in the 1922 edition he stressed how backward Swedish window display was, both internationally and in comparison to
advertising in the press. He also often reviewed (and criticized) the window displays in Stockholm and other Swedish cities as well as abroad, both in private correspondence and in interviews and articles.55

A growing media interest in window display is noticeable in the early 1920s, and was intertwined with the incipient professionalization. For example, one of the largest daily newspapers, Dagens Nyheter (DN), organized competitions in Stockholm every year before Christmas. In 1921, a group of participating artists were assigned a shop window each to decorate. This attracted a ‘colossal flow of spectators’, according to the newspaper itself. The following year, the assignment went to professionals of the theatre stage – not the scenographers, as one might think, but to well-known actors. Professional window dressers protested against letting amateurs – even if they were celebrities – trespass upon their professional territory.56 Further on, the DN window display competition involved windows dressed by real professionals, and Lundkvist’s window for NK was in fact the winner of the 1929 competition.57 Similar competitions between ‘real’ window displayers were organized in other cities both in Sweden and abroad.58

The professionalization process can also be noted in the fact that display men started organizing themselves and publishing trade journals. The earliest publication, Handelsdekoratören [The Retail Decorator], came out with four issues in 1928 by means of the Swedish Federation of Retail Decorators [Sveriges Handels-dekoratörsförbund]. In 1932 an ambitious and internationally oriented journal, Skyltfönstret [Scandinavian Display],59 started, and was published six times a year until 1936. It soon became the official journal of the Swedish Federation of Display Men [Svenska Dekoratörsförbundet], and later for the Scandinavian Society of Display Men [Nordiska Dekoratörsklubben]. This well illustrated publication included debates, presentations of well-known display experts and their work, as well as a range of commented photographs of Scandinavian and foreign (especially German and English) shop windows. In 1935 the review became bilingual, with its main features translated into English. In these periodicals Lundkvist was recurrently mentioned as the ‘nestor’ or ‘father’ of Swedish window display, and later his school was acclaimed. Lundkvist himself, however, wrote for the journal Butikskultur (1932–1951) [Shop Culture], published by the Swedish Retail Trade Federation.60

There is a noteworthy difference between the two contemporary publications Skyltfönstret and Butikskultur. The former focused on the avant-garde of window display, both artistic ideals and the newest theories and trends within marketing and commercial art. The spectacular achievements of individual display men were at the centre of attention, and among its targeted readership the magazine envisioned an international professional elite. The latter (including Lundkvist’s articles) had a more practical take on window display. Butikskultur published useful ideas and tips for special displays, and hands-on advice for creating successful displays even in less modern shop environments: writing with block letters, painting neat signboards, draping textiles, coordinating colours, manufacturing display stands etc. The contrast between the two publications indicates the divide between high and low, artistic and practical-commercial within the same trade. Lundkvist himself, however, is an example of the connections and transfers between these different displaying worlds.

The professional discourse about the state of Swedish display also changed quickly during this dynamic period. Within a decade, the trade literature suggests a shift from statements of backwardness to claims of excellence. In the early 1920s display men,
including Lundkvist, complained about the inferior quality and style of Swedish displays, especially outside the capital. In the 1930s, however, several contemporary experts from both Sweden and neighbouring Nordic countries stressed that the Swedish window displays of the 1930s were rather distinguished in a European context, and definitely pre-eminent in a Nordic comparison. In fact, historical research also asserts the prominence of the 1930s shop windows in Sweden. And in 1935, when Lundkvist visited England to teach a course, a Swedish trade magazine proudly quoted its British counterpart, *Display*: ‘Probably the finest displays in the world to-day have been in Sweden’.

The organizations of display professionals appear not to have been especially active in the 1920s and 1930s, although there are some traces of contacts between them and the retailers’ associations in the trade press. However, in 1943 an elite within the trade formed the Stockholm Society of Retail Decorators [Stockholms Merkantila Dekoratörsklubb]. Only ‘well-known’ professionals were accepted, after a thorough scrutiny of applicants. The list of members from 1948–1949 bears witness to the typical male dominance in contemporary elite professional organizations, with only three women among the 78 names. Window dressers also organized themselves on a larger scale in the late 1940s, both together with advertising professionals in a section within the Association of Swedish Advertisers [Svenska Annonsörers Förening] and independently in an organization called the Federation of Advertising and Display Ateliers [Reklam- och dekoration-sateljéers Förbund].

Already in the 1930s, however, a large number of new firms specialized in window display were founded in Sweden. Foreign firms had advertised in the Swedish retailers’ trade journal since the early 1900s and it was reported in the 1920s that such firms were common in the US. Advertising expert Tom Björklund writes that ateliers for commercial displays were figuratively mushrooming in 1930s Sweden, and a new service business was born. According to him, mere bunglers ran some of the new businesses, although several skilled specialists had also founded new enterprises. Lundkvist’s firm certainly belonged to the latter category.

**The Lundkvists start their own business: materials in focus**

When Oscar Lundkvist left NK in 1931, the store’s house magazine wrote:

> Decorator Lundkvist is leaving NK but by no means the profession. On the contrary, you might say. Now he continues in grand style. Mr Lundkvist has always dreamt of starting his own business and now the dreams are coming true. With the help of his talented wife – she too once employed at NK’s decoration department – and their oldest boys, who will certainly follow in their father’s decorative footsteps, on 1 January he will start his own decoration firm in Stockholm.

Despite the assertion that Lundkvist would continue ‘in grand style’, much of the new firm’s activities concerned the very basic material details of the art of display. Oscar and Elvira, together with a few assistants and with the help of their older children, made and sold all kinds of supply material for window display. For example, they manufactured diverse stands to use in the window as well as so-called eye-catchers [blickfång]: signboards, cardboard figures and such, used for steering the focus and livening up a display. They used new composite materials based on paper, wood and textile. They sold the eye-catchers and the other supplies to shops throughout the country. Oscar
and Elvira’s oldest son, Odd, travelled by car and caravan on sales trips to promote the firm’s own products (Figure 5). Oscar’s experience from the early days in the big store – when he had basically had to invent, and himself make, the material accessories for the displays – came in handy. Remembering his time at NK, in an interview Lundkvist said:

You had to make up all the ideas yourself and manufacture everything from scratch. There was no time to be shiftless. Everything had to be arranged: plates, pieces of cardboard and empty boxes became facilities when arranging the window. Those were the days! No signs of economic recession, full commerce during the day, and working with the windows at night.68

Already when working at NK, Oscar had gotten help from his family in preparing displays: they would cut, glue and paint paper, cardboard and textile pieces at the dinner table at home. They could now market these skills on a larger scale as the company designed, manufactured, and sold display accessories. However, this was just part of their business. Soon, the new firm was consulted by major Swedish and international brands such as Mazetti, AGA (Aktiebolaget Gasaccumulator) and the perfume 4711, as well as the Swedish tobacco monopoly [Tobaksmonopolet]. The Lundkvists produced special displays for these brands as well as occasional displays, for example Christmas windows for larger retailers in Stockholm, such as Ström’s Department Store. They also commissioned the building of exhibitions and sold entire ready-made displays. In an ad from 1937, they offered services as follows: ‘All sorts of modern displays and decorations. Window-display proposals, ready-made decorations etc. Let us compose a proposal for Your display.’69 Moreover, in 1936–1937 the Lundkvist firm also published a quarterly ‘magazine for modern window display’, called Advertising & Decoration [Reklam & Dekoration] – basically a newsletter for customers and students – comprised largely of advertisements.

Figure 5. The company car and caravan in front of the school and atelier, 1937. Oscar and Elvira’s son Odd travelled with a car and a caravan around the country to promote the firm and sell ready-made displays, Odd Lundkvist private collection.
According to correspondence between the spouses, the firm demanded long working hours. Elvira had to work even harder during periods when Oscar was travelling on teaching trips or, as it fact occurred, was ill. Sometimes they also experienced financial worries in relation to the firm.\(^7\) In constant mail correspondence with her husband, and with the help of the staff and their sons, Elvira represented the firm in contacts with customers who ordered window displays and exhibitions.\(^7\) She also shouldered a heavy teaching load at the school they ran parallel to the display atelier.

The use of the display materials now on offer, even if only setting up ready-made displays, still required shop personnel to possess certain skills, techniques and competences. Teaching window display to retail workers, as well as to aspiring display specialists, successively became Oscar and Elvira’s main field of activity.

**Education in window display**

In 1922, Lundkvist gave a speech on ‘Guidelines for rational window display’. He claimed (again) that ‘advertising in shop windows’ was surprisingly backward compared to the advertising in the press. He blamed this, on the one hand, on the out-dated architectural form of the windows – that is, the material preconditions – and on the other, on the lack of schools for window display in Sweden. He maintained that retailers still did not seem to understand the importance of specialized window displays.\(^7\) He thus stressed not only the need for competence in display technique, but also the lacking awareness of such competences within the retail trade.

Perhaps as an answer to the growing public and professional interest in window display, a few schools specializing in sales technique/salesmanship started including window dressing in their curricula in the late 1920s. These schools were small and have left no archival material behind, but their ads appear in newspapers from 1928 onward, showing that window dressing was one of the topics among others such as sales technique (including practical exercises), knowledge of merchandise, and text and drawings for commercial advertisements. The schools also claimed to serve as employment agencies for their pupils, which likely increased the popularity of their courses.\(^7\)

Another way of learning the skills and theories of window dressing was through in-house courses in salesmanship at larger department stores such as NK (which offered such courses to its personnel already beginning in the late 1910s). Sales staff had to understand the basics and the purposes of window display, and the store expected them to use and relate to the actual themes in the windows in their selling work.\(^7\) Also, the Swedish Retail Trade Federation organized various shorter courses for shop assistants and shopkeepers throughout the country and held a two-week instructive course in Stockholm.\(^7\) Here, window dressing was a topic already in the 1920s and was taught by none other than Oscar Lundkvist. But it was only in 1938 that the Retail Trade Federation reorganized its educational activities by creating the Retail Trade Institute [Köpmannainstitutet], an independent school for education in the different fields of retail.\(^7\)

On an international level, by the 1920s specialized schools and in-house courses teaching merchandising skills, including courses in commercial display and design, were already established in countries such as France, Germany and the US.\(^7\) According to Marie-Emanuelle Chessel, French schools specializing in sales training were established by the Paris Chamber of Commerce already in the 1910s, some directed at female students.
(École de haut enseignement commercial pour les jeunes filles, 1916) and others, such as the École technique de la vente (est. 1925), offering education for higher-level employees in retail. These schools were not for all retail employees, however, but seem to have educated a retailing elite, among whom retailers recruited sales teachers to train their own staff. Chessel also notes the reluctance of the great department stores to cooperate with these schools (for either trainee programmes or recruiting personnel). The big stores preferred to have their own in-house education, thereby fostering staff in the spirit of the house (‘esprit-maison’), which is similar to the Swedish department store NK’s ambitions.

In Berlin the prestigious Reimann Schule offered education in different branches of commercial art, including both thorough theoretical and practical training. A window display class started in 1924. The school’s ideas about display education were internationally influential, and a Reimann School was even opened in London. The Reimann Schule in Berlin educated several of the most prominent Swedish display men of the 1930s. One of these, for example, was P. Schandorph, who at only 29 years old started a ‘hyper-modern’ display atelier in Gothenburg in 1936 after having worked abroad and for Swedish retailers for a time. His colleague in Stockholm, Sven Mellberg, chief display man at the department store P.U.B. from 1934, was another former Reimann student.

The Parisian schools had American contacts, for example with the Prince School, started by Lucinda Prince in the early years of the 1900s (School of Salesmanship, later the Prince School of Store Service). Other American schools, training not mainly sales staff but rather professionals of commercial display, were established already around 1900. Historian William Leach mentions schools such as the Pratt Institute, the Cooper Union, and the Parson School of Design as important in the formation of the first generation of professional display managers or display men, terms which were adopted around 1914 by those who had formerly called themselves ‘window trimmers’.

While it is obvious that in the US the formation of a specialized corps of ‘strategists of display’ occurred earlier than in Sweden, it is difficult to compare the educational institutions in different countries. In Sweden as well, there were courses in commercially useful skills before the expansion in the interwar period. Tekniska skolan (School of Technical Arts), today the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, had offered an education in applied industrial art since the mid-nineteenth century. Around 1900, for example, one could study Commercial Art, Poster Painting and Hand Lettering, the last of which was much needed for everyday commercial purposes and especially for displays. Elvira Lundkvist had a diploma in the art of lettering from this school when she applied for a job at the display atelier at NK in 1915. The advertising industry also recruited staff educated from Tekniska skolan, although in 1939 the trade press complained about these individualistic former art students’ inability to adapt to the routines of office work and their poor cooperation skills.

A special kind of education, not mentioned in the international literature on vocational training in sales and display techniques but rather important in Sweden, was that offered by correspondence schools. Correspondence schools were respected and highly successful in Sweden, and could more quickly and effectively than traditional schools satisfy the demand for up-to-date specialized education in a fast-changing commercial world. Also, these courses were easily accessible for students outside the capital and the larger cities. The largest correspondence schools hired experts to write the course letters, but had their own staff of teachers who corrected and commented on the students’ responses.
These schools often cooperated with larger employers and trade associations on internal training programmes. In the 1920s, the oldest and largest Swedish correspondence school, Hermods, started offering a general course for those working in retail trade (Kurs för detaljhandlare) and a course on advertising techniques (Kurs i reklamteknik). By then, correspondence courses in hand-lettering techniques and commercial art were also available.\(^8\)

Both correspondence courses mentioned above, which were reissued several times during the 1930s and 1940s, included only one course letter each (of altogether 12 to 20) on window display. These letters dealt with the very basics. In the earliest courses it was stated that the ‘art of window display is a relatively new phenomenon in the retail business, and therefore not yet fully developed’.\(^9\) The phrase about the shop window being the retailer’s most important means of advertising, often emphasized in the trade press, was echoed. The course letter advised retailers to secure good-sized, modernized windows for their shops when starting their business. Luckily, the letter explained, more and more proprietors were aware of this, and rebuilt their shops to equip them with larger windows than before. Modern packaging, with standardized sizes and tasteful design, also made it easier to achieve elegant displays. The courses gave numerous hands-on tips: keeping the windows clean at all times was essential; crepe paper of American production to cover the background was the best; and, most importantly, it was almost always preferable to display price tags. Another basic principle was to change the window display every seven to ten days – otherwise, it lost its attraction. It is clear that window dressing was not only a matter of creating a selling window, but also of maintaining and recreating it in the right way. Shopkeepers also needed to be aware of the importance of properly installed lighting in the window – the evening hours, when people strolled along the high street, were even more important than daytime from an advertising point of view.\(^10\) The competences thus involved the proper use of materials and an awareness of the purposes – the meanings – of window display.

These course letters are valuable as sources for revealing the content of the 1930s typical education in display. Obviously, the correspondence courses were produced for those who employed or worked with window dressers and occasionally had to arrange or adjust a window themselves – not for those who wanted to have a career within this profession. For this, the course for retailers claimed, one needed several years of practical training.\(^11\) Some aspects of the necessary skills, such as lettering and commercial art, however, could be learnt and practiced merely via correspondence.\(^9\) The course in advertising technique instead stated that window dressing was ‘a particular branch of advertising, which required special studies that should also include retail sales techniques.’\(^\text{93}\) Thus, the educational base of window dressing, just like the professional networks of display experts, was situated between the expert fields of advertising and retail trade.

This quick glance at the educational possibilities in the field shows that, despite the 1920s expansion of organized schooling for people within both retail trade and advertising, when Lundkvist opened his school in 1932 he was certainly one of the pioneers offering this kind of education. The school’s ad claimed that it was ‘Sweden’s only school specializing in window display.’\(^\text{94}\) This might have been the case in 1932, but it seems that the Lundkvist School had a few smaller predecessors.
Oscar Lundkvist’s school for window display: competences and meanings

The Oscar Lundkvist School for Window Display opened in September 1932. As we mentioned above, even if the firm and school used Oscar’s name it was mainly a family business, with Oscar and Elvira working together with their oldest sons. A few years after its start, the school advertised itself as Scandinavia’s largest school of window display (Figure 6). Smaller schools also existed in Norway, Denmark and Finland, but the trade press of the 1930s confirmed the Lundkvists’ claim of being the most important among them.95 An essential marketing argument for the School was Oscar’s experience from the department store NK. He always stated his title as ‘former chief display man [chefsdekoratör] at Nordiska Kompaniet’ in the ads, or when he published articles in trade magazines and gave interviews in the press. The lustre of the great department store over Lundkvist’s work never grew dull.

Figure 6. Ad for Oscar Lundkvist’s School for Advertising and Decoration. Although the word advertising was included in the Company’s name, the profile of both the atelier and the school was exclusively making displays for shops and exhibitions. Advertising however had a more distinguished sound to it. From the Lundkvist firm’s own magazine Reklam & dekoration no. 1 (1936).
The Lundkvist School offered both day and evening courses on its premises in central Stockholm. The full-time day courses ranged from the shortest one-month course to the longest five-month course. The main subjects on the curriculum were:

1. Hand lettering and painting of charts
2. The art of modern decoration
3. Window and exhibition display
4. Poster art

It was a rather expensive training programme, with a cost of 125 SEK for the one-month course and 425 SEK for the five-month course in 1937. The fee did not include the necessary material supplies, which the students could buy from the school at a discounted price. These costs were doubled, at a minimum, if a student needed lodging in Stockholm. As a comparison, in 1937 the average yearly income for sales personnel in retail trade was approximately 2,400 SEK for men and 1,850 SEK for women. There were some possibilities for retail employees to cover at least some of the costs through scholarships, and for some their employer might have paid the fee for a shorter course.

The school had students not only from Sweden but also from neighbouring countries. There are no surviving lists of participants, but among the Lundkvist Papers we found 16 photos of what seem to be whole classes from the period 1933–1937. An average of 30 per cent of the students were women, and their share appears to have increased in the later years. This was likely related to the parallel change in the gendered division of labour in retail, whereby women to a greater extent worked as sales clerks or opened their own shops. This also means that, even though the most famous window dressers as well as the great majority of the members of the window dressers’ professional organization were men, the knowledge and practice of display were not solely masculine. In the pictures, in most cases the students are wearing white gowns – the colour itself can be interpreted as a sign of status and professional identity (Figure 7). Interest seems to have been high, and the Lundkvist School expanded a few years later by incorporating an adjacent apartment. Oscar was often away teaching courses outside the capital, which we will discuss in the next section. In fact, it seems that teaching the arts and crafts of window design to groups around the country took a large share of his time between 1932 and 1938. He started his teaching tours already in 1926, while still working at NK, but continued on a larger scale when operating his own business. After 1938, when the Retail Trade Institute incorporated the Lundkvist School, Oscar’s travelling became less intense. Thereafter, as the principal of the Institute’s department for window display, he was mostly based in Stockholm. Elvira also had a teaching position at the Institute. In 1944, Oscar published the first comprehensive Swedish handbook in window display, which was used in the courses and was described as a ‘standard work’ in the press.
The new Retail Trade Institute had modern premises, with actual-size training windows inside as well as a well-assorted material supply and a library. Course fees could be kept low thanks to state subsidies. About 1,000 daytime students were educated in window display at the Institute between 1938 and 1945; and to this we can add the numerous students attending the Institute’s evening and correspondence courses. The latter course types were intended for sales staff at places so remote that they did not even have the opportunity to participate in the federation’s itinerant courses. Lundkvist retired from the Institute in the late 1950s. By that time, education in window display had become further modernized and formalized, after a dip in the 1940s when private education in window dressing declined. According to a governmental report on commercial education, this decline was caused by economic difficulties and not by a lack of demand. It seems to have been hard to offer such an expensive education (costs for both materials and premises being high) for a fee that was affordable for presumptive students. This description certainly seems to have fit the Lundkvist School.

Around 1950, however, municipal vocational schools also offered courses in window display as part of their training programmes for shop assistants. A feature article in 1949 from the new Stockholm Trade School tells us that its pupils unanimously acclaimed window display as their favourite subject. The school was equipped with large training windows with real glass, as well as a fully furnished shop for training purposes. This vocational secondary education was free to those from Stockholm, and it was also possible to apply for a scholarship to cover one’s living expenses. This is in line with the view

Figure 7. Students at the Lundkvist School 1933, working with displays and eye catchers for grocery windows. This photograph was used for an ad in Skyltfönstret no. 2 (1935).
expressed in the aforementioned governmental report, that school-based education in window display could in fact be seen as a public municipal interest. Not only was it – like any other commercial education – important for the economy; it was also of interest for the street environment, for the refinement or deterioration of the public taste and for consumer guidance.\footnote{109}

Thus, alongside Lundkvist’s career, window display emerged as a specific field of expertise. Its purposes and meanings were discussed and theorized among both advertising and retailing experts, its materials were created and commodified, and the competences, skills and techniques involved were defined and taught, even by municipal schools of commerce.

**Provincializing the art of window display: from specialist expertise to everyday commercial practice**

During his trips around the country in the 1930s, Lundkvist visited 73 different locations in Sweden. His travels in the late 1920s, while still employed at NK and travelling for the account of the Retail Trade Federation, are not documented in detail. He also made a trip to England in 1935 to teach an intensive course in modern window display,\footnote{110} but he mostly travelled to small towns within the country. He returned several times to certain places. The local retail trade associations organized the courses, which could attract up to 100 students from the municipality and neighbouring areas. Sometimes, the courses were accompanied by open lectures the local public could attend.\footnote{111} Thus, it seems that not only retailers but also presumptive consumers were educated. Or, we can also interpret these courses as a way of marketing window display itself including the readymade products and display materials. Even the use of these items demanded some amount of insight into display techniques and composition. Interviewed in the local newspapers, Lundkvist often stressed that the courses were basic and that he encouraged students to refine their skills in a longer window display education.\footnote{112} Our estimate, based on the list of course locations, Lundkvist’s letters and the photographs preserved from some of these courses, is that at least 3,500 students but likely far more than this attended his courses in the provinces between 1932 and 1938. It seems that among these students, just like on the Stockholm premises, women were in the minority, but were still well represented. In the 12 photos of whole classes, of a total of 615 students portrayed at different provincial courses, 196 (32 per cent) were women.\footnote{113}

According to Oscar’s letters to Elvira, teaching was sometimes rather challenging. The courses were housed in whatever premises could hold large groups, such as the Good-Templar Lodge or the gymnasium at the local school. This was of course not ideal; the lighting was often poor, and at times there were not even enough tables and chairs. The pupils – small shopkeepers and more often their assistants or children – were rather inexperienced in the skills involved.\footnote{114}

The breakthrough of modern window display, however, required more fine skills of staff at local retailers as well, Lundkvist stated in one of his lectures. The basics of window dressing included lettering, painting, and making simple sketches. Some knowledge about colours and lighting was useful, as were rudimentary skills in woodwork – not to mention a bit of fantasy and good taste. Being able to do a working sketch of a proposed window display to show one’s manager was a necessary skill. For Christmas decorations, it should preferably be a perspective drawing in colour.\footnote{115} His letters home, however, reveal...
that Lundkvist was not always satisfied with his pupils. He complained to Elvira: ‘I don’t know what to do, they know nothing. It is fine as long as I talk and demonstrate, and if they are lettering in squares. But not even that can they manage.’

At the same time, a local newspaper reported a lively interest in his course, attracting 70 participants. Lundkvist even had to refuse taking on more students when the designated premises simply could not accommodate more.

The biggest undertaking, however, according to Lundkvist, was to match the state-of-the-art knowledge about display with the often obsolete shop windows. This problem recurrently intrigued him. The ideal would of course have been to rebuild all the shop windows according to the specifications described in handbooks: starting only 50 cm from the street line, wide enough (1.5–5 m), a display area, preferably 2 m deep, with a homogenous background and proper lighting, and with spotlights directed inwards. Lundkvist once claimed in jest that he would rebuild the shop windows in the entire medieval town of Visby if he could. Even if old Visby would naturally not be transformed, a general rebuilding of windows was already on its way. Nevertheless, in the mid-1930s the everyday reality of window display was still very far from the ideas and practices established in the large cities and at the big stores. The competences, techniques and skills taught were of less use without the important material precondition – the modernized shop window itself. In 1936, from the small town of Avesta, Lundkvist wrote:

We do too much with our education. When one sees these windows all around here … there is no need for the fine education in window display that we offer. Some lettering and painting techniques, and something about placing the merchandise; fabrics cannot be displayed at all in these peasant windows.

Not even Stockholm saw all its windows modernized. In an article in the trade publication Butikskultur, Lundkvist claimed:

Trade journals writing about window display often make the serious mistake of collecting all their photographic illustrations from the windows of the larger shops and department stores. These windows most often have the size of a living room, and obviously the displays exposed there cannot be used as guidance for those who work with smaller windows. […] During the past month, I have had the opportunity to study and work with about a hundred grocery windows here in Stockholm. These windows lack to a great extent all the prerequisites for a practical and modern product display. They were built some fifty years ago, with the sole purpose of bringing light to the premises.

He wondered at the fact that modern business owners could be satisfied with such ‘primitive solutions’ for their displays, despite witnessing the progress within the field. He did, however, propose some useful ideas for the small and old-fashioned shop windows. Even without major rebuilding the outdated windows could be somewhat modernized with new walls in plywood, but they were still not fit to immediately adopt the typical display style of the modern stores. Lundkvist therefore presented a number of sketches of modern displays for old-fashioned windows, which also likely came in handy in his teaching in the more provincial parts of Sweden. He also offered hands-on tips for how to achieve (at least the illusion of) a modern display in an architecturally ‘outdated’, small shop window or in one not deep enough for proper displays. His advice included the use of goods in modern packaging and never, ever considering displaying fabrics in a small window. Instead, he recommended ready-made eye-catchers and quality display materials for the
background – the kinds his company also manufactured and sold. In these windows one needed proportionally more goods on display than in large, modern windows in order for them not to appear empty, and it was even more important to keep away any and all dust.122

Lundkvist also taught shopkeepers to distinguish between, and use, different kinds of displays: ‘Sales windows’ were aimed directly at making the customer buy the products on display, which were accompanied by a short text and a price tag. ‘Attraction windows’ could be arranged from time to time to enhance the shop’s reputation and capture the attention of consumers, preferably at Christmas and similar occasions. A third version was the ‘brand window’, also called the ‘producer window’, in which only one product or product line was especially advertised. However, Lundkvist warned that certain producers wanted the shops to keep a display for several weeks, which was far from ideal – even though, as was also noted in a trade magazine, brand windows offered a ‘nice’ and easy way for small shops ‘to get some modernism for free’.123 And lastly, only a clearance sale at discount prices could motivate a window with merchandise ‘massed’ into it, but even these ‘clearance windows’ were to be arranged smartly and with clarity.124

These and other norms were recurrently presented in the handbooks and the trade press, and a growing number of shops were built or rebuilt with ‘modern’ windows. Nevertheless, the display landscape could only change by means of either local sales personnel with some ability for display, or ready-made displays. By teaching and selling entire displays, Lundkvist reshaped and mediated, as well as commodified, the knowledge of display from the great department store. The meanings, competences and materials of display were thus brought to the provincial shop’s floor, and the practices of window dressing became part of everyday commercial practices. The visual world of provincial displays, however, was of course not as spectacular as the department store windows, created by innovative and artistically skilled display professionals. The considerable interest in Lundkvist’s courses as well as the recurrent coverage of his visits by local newspapers indicates that he, or rather his teaching and expertise, likely brought a gleam of the new urban commercial modernity to smaller towns and villages.

**Conclusions: trivialization of window display**

We have tried to reconstruct the ways in which the commercial knowledge of displays was shaped, reshaped and, even more importantly, mediated all the way to the smallest shops around the country. This perspective is hitherto missing in historical research on retailing and consumer culture. The knowledge of the art of window display was not only dispersed through trade journals, and by mere inspiration when shopkeepers visited the grand stores; it was also taught in a very concrete way at window-display schools, at itinerant courses, and even by correspondence. Window dressing was located in-between the areas of advertising and retailing, in-between art and commerce, and in-between the fashionable and highbrow and the practical and mundane. The story of the Lundkvists links the spectacular dream worlds of consumption to the mundane workaday world of provincial retailing. By focusing on the competences and not only on the meanings and materials (concepts borrowed from practice theory) which were involved in the practice of window
dressing, we have shown how a process of trivialization followed the spectacular early establishment of window displays.

The professional careers of Oscar and Elvira Lundkvist neatly illustrate the very specific historical chronology of this development. The public attention that shop windows attracted (measured in mentions in the daily press; Figure 1) shows a distinct pattern, which can be made sense of by looking at the history of window displays through the lens of their particular story. Oscar Lundkvist started out at the turn of the last century as a sales clerk, a talented and artistically spirited autodidact, and rose to glory within about 15 years as the display manager of the largest department store in Stockholm. This happened when window display as such became a specific practice. Before that, the cleaning and (rudimentary) arranging of the windows, done by ordinary sales personnel, did not even have a name. In the first decade of the century, when material prerequisites already existed (large window panes, electric light, mannequins) the meanings of window display were defined and expressed by Lundkvist and his peers. In this, they naturally drew inspiration from international forerunners. An upswing in the general interest in window displays in the press of the 1910s and especially the 1920s, marks this period – a period when Lundkvist’s spectacular displays for NK were also acclaimed and reviewed in Swedish newspapers.

The newsworthiness of the show windows was at its peak in the mid-1930s, when Lundkvist started his own firm. By then, a shared meaning of modern window displays, as both a product of original ideas and a prerequisite for successful retailing, was largely accepted. The meanings also influenced the material elements of the practice: retailers started rebuilding their windows for the new kinds of displays. A range of newly established display firms, including the Lundkvists’ firm, produced and sold ready-made decorations, eye-catchers and brand displays and even invented and introduced new display accessories. However, basic competences in how to use the new material accessories, how to adjust the background and the light, or how to set up and when to replace a ready-made display, were now required of small retailers and their staff. The main contribution of this paper is that it highlights the creation and dissemination of these competences and thereby also considers what happened to window dressing as a practice after its modernist zenith in the first part of the 1930s.

The norms of novelty and originality, scientific sales techniques, and refined aesthetics – the meanings of window display – gave birth to new competences and materials. However, as competences and materials were disseminated on a larger scale, the original meanings/norms were reshaped and trivialized, thus contrasting the idea of originality. This seems to have been matched by a downturn in the press’s interest in the topic, already before the wartime drop. In the 1950s, state and municipal interest in commercial education matched another more moderate upturn in the media attention. This also fits into the careers of Oscar and Elvira Lundkvist, who by then were both employed as teachers at one of the largest schools for retail education (which received state subsidies).

Closing in on Lundkvist and his work, and especially our focus on competences, it is obvious that he relied on his wife working for and with him. Window dressing, outside the big stores and the renowned ateliers, was not an exclusively male occupation, even if men dominated. Our material indicates that, on average, almost a third of those who participated in Lundkvist’s courses were women. Certainly, professionalization appears to have entailed masculinization. Men in fact largely dominated in the trade organizations
and among the celebrities of window display. Nevertheless, the parallel trivialization process worked in the opposite direction. Small-scale art and the practice of window display appear to have been feminized, along with the feminization of shop assistant work in general.

The Lundkvists’ story clearly holds aspects of geographical power relations as well, expressed in the contrast between the ‘fine education’ offered and the description of the slow-learning pupils, and between the big department store Lundkvist was associated with and the small shops he visited, with their ‘peasant windows’.

To conclude, the case of the Lundkvists, first, links the spectacular and innovative to the workaday and mundane, and big city retailing to that of smaller towns and villages. Second, as an example it highlights structural changes and the specific historical chronology of window dressing. Third, the Lundkvists also had a more personal impact on the development of window display in Sweden. The structural circumstances of basic demand for prefabricated goods, increasing dispensable incomes, and an upsurge in advertising and selling psychology and new functionalist ideals made room for individual creators like Oscar and Elvira Lundkvist, who could form a business and commercially reiterate and create knowledge. Through their teaching work, they have likely had an impact – at least indirectly – on myriads of commercial display practices around the country.

Notes

1. This work was supported by grants from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ), Vetenskapsrådet, and The Research Foundations of Handelsbanken.

In Swedish, the word dekoratör [literally: decorator] was the most commonly used term both in the early years of the twentieth century and later in the 1930s and 1940s. Oscar Lundkvist himself preferred to say fönsterskyltare’, which is closer to ‘window-display man’. We use the following words as basically synonymous notions: window decorators, window dressers, display men, and display professionals. The latter terms, which have a more modern ring to them, were used in the 1930s by Swedish representatives of the profession when writing in English (e.g. in the trade journal Skyltfönstret).


3. The source material used in this study includes: the Oscar and Elvira Lundkvist Papers (letters, newspaper cuttings, pictures, and various ephemera) and an extensive interview (2015-11-17, by the authors) with Odd Lundkvist, the oldest son of Oscar and Elvira, who worked in the family business in the 1930s; We also use press material (newspapers and trade journals, such as Handels-Dekoratören; Skyltfönstret; Butikskultur), diverse handbooks, and course books in retail and advertising from Hermods Correspondence School (Kungliga biblioteket [National Library of Sweden], Collection of Ephemera) and from Köpmannainstitutet [Retail Trade Institute]. The documents from Oscar Lundkvist’s Atelier and School of Window Display and Decoration are in the family’s possession. We are very grateful to the late Odd Lundkvist (1917–2017) – who even read an early version of this paper – and his family for sharing the documents with us. We especially thank Kerstin Oddsdotter for her help in our communication with her father, Odd.


15. The word in itself has a historically neutral sound in Swedish.


19. Interview with Odd Lundkvist.
20. Two assistants in 1903, 18–20 in 1915, 15 in 1927 and 17 in 1928. Interview with Odd Lundkvist; photo of the decoration staff from 1928; *Charme* no. 8 (1926): 16.
21. Lundkvist was previously married to another colleague at NK, but divorced when he met Elvira.
33. Oscar Lundkvist, ‘Några anvisningar och råd.’, *Butikskultur* no. 7, 1933. His argumentation follows the general discourse of the time held by his colleagues. See, for example, Rosenberg, ‘Våra skyltfönster’
34. ‘Affärsagornas regissörer’ *Charme* [1926], undated cutting, Lundkvist Papers.
38. Lundkvist advocated such a procedure: ‘Because the ad will attract the audience to go to the store and the shop window will further affect them to enter it’ (Lundkvist 1932, quoted in Hermansson, *I persuadörernas verkstad*, 120). See also Lundkvist, *Handbok i skyltning*; Björklund, *Reklamen i svensk marknad*.
42. ‘Décorationskonst och skyltfönsterplagiat’, Skyltfönstrets ekonomi no. 6 (1932): 22.
44. ‘Skyltfönstrets psykologi’, Köpmannen no. 41 (1921): 1; Lundkvist, Handbok i skyltning, 22.
46. ‘Skyltfönstrets psykologi’, Köpmannen no. 41 (1921); Ungewitter, ‘Skyltfönstrets ekonomi’.
48. Bergman, Handelsplats, 106–7. See also Fogelberg, ‘Reklam i 100 fönster’ for a parallel Finnish survey.
55. ‘Skyltfönstret skall sälja varan’, undated newspaper cutting, Lundkvist Papers. Other international books were also translated. See for example Herbert N. Casson, 12 tips for fönserskyltning (Stockholm: Lundkvist förlag, 1938).
56. ‘Skyltningsarbetet är nu i full gång’, DN, December 14, 1922.
59. This was the official English title the journal itself used in the later bilingual issues. As for the other journals, we have translated the titles as literally as possible.
60. The Consumers' Cooperative Union also published a newsletter on window display (Kooperativa Skyltfönstret), but this was a circular for internal use to inform the cooperative shops about central advertising campaigns and centrally designed displays.
62. Dahlgren, ‘The art of display’; Hermansson, I persuadörens verkstad; Lindström, Harald Rosenberg; Björklund, Reklamen i svensk marknad. In its 1939 yearbook, the Swedish
Advertisers Association stressed that Swedish window displayers had a good international reputation. See ‘Reklamrevy’, *Svensk reklam* (1939).


65. See, for example, ad for Berliner Schaufenster Industrie in *Meddelanden från Sverigesминистhandlare saksförbund* no. 8 (1909): 77; ‘Affärsgatornas regissörer’, *Charme* [1926] undated cutting, Lundkvist Papers.


70. The firm experienced bankruptcy in 1940. ‘Konkurser’, DN, May 28, 1940.

71. Interview with Odd Lundkvist and personal communication with Kerstin Oddsdotter; ‘Katalog, Oscar Lundkvist reklam’, 1939, box 7, Lundkvist Papers.


73. Earliest ads in DN, April 23, 1928 by *Stockholms biträdess- och dekoratörska* and *Praktiska Biträdess- & Dekoratörskaolan*. At least one of these schools, Stockholm’s School for Shop Assistants and Window Dressers, co-operated with the above-mentioned Swedish Federation of Retail Decorators. *Handels-Dekoratören* Aug.-Sept, 1928, 62.

naförbunds minnesskrift* (1933): 121.

75. Schenke, ‘Handelsutbildningen’, 119. The courses by The Retail Trade Federation benefitted of state subsidies from 1921 onwards.

76. The Consumers’ Cooperative Union also had a school for shop assistants. See Schenke, ‘Handelsutbildningen’.


79. Husz, *Drömmars värde*, 53. See also Åmossa, *Du är NK!*


83. Leach, ‘Strategists of display’, 102, 110.


85. Interview with Odd Lundkvist and personal communication with Kerstin Oddsdotter.


88. Prospectuses from Hermods Correspondence Institute, Ephemera, Swedish National Library.

92. Such courses were offered by several correspondence schools (Hermods, NKI) from the late 1920s. Later also the Cooperative Federation and the Retail Trade Federation organized correspondence courses in for example sales techniques even including window display and hand lettering for retail employees at places. Schenke, ‘Handelsutbildningen’, 119.
94. Ad in DN, Jan 18, 1934.
95. ‘En svensk dekoratörsskola’, *Skyltfönstret* no. 2 (1934); ‘Oslo dekoratør-fagskole’, ibid. no. 3 (1934); SOU 1955:14, *Handelsutbildningskommitténs betänkanden och förslag* 2, *Yrkesskolornas handelsundervisning m.m.*, (Stockholm: Nordiska bokh. i distr., 1955), 304.
96. The evening courses were cheaper, at 20–30 SEK a month. See *Reklam & Dekoration. Tidskrift för modern fönsterskyltning*. Christmas issue, 1937. See also *Skyltfönstret* no. 3 (1934): 32.
100. In some classes, women even dominated. See red photo album, Oscar and Elvira Lundkvist Papers.
103. Interview with Odd Lundkvist and personal communication with Kerstin Oddsdotter.
104. Reviews among newspaper cuttings, Lundkvist Papers.
106. Schenke, ‘Handelsutbildningen’.
107. SOU 1955:14, 303.
113. This contrasts what Fredriksson (1998:149) writes about window dressers (in 1940s) being an almost exclusive male group in the chain stores of EPA.
115. ‘Skyltfönstren skall hjälpa biträdet att sälja’, *Härjedalen* no. 17 (Feb. 9, 1928).
122. Lundkvist, ‘Skyltning i grunda omoderna fönster’.
123. ‘Om industriskyltningen’, *Skyltfönstret* no. 3 (1934): 26.
124. ‘Skyltfönstren skall hjälpa biträdet att sälja’, *Härjedalen* no. 17 (Feb. 9, 1928).
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Notes on contributors

Klara Arnberg is an Associate Professor at the Department of Economic History at Stockholm University. Her research concerns the economic history of gender and sexuality, especially relating to the business of pornography, printed media development and advertising in the twentieth century. She has also co-edited two volumes on key sources in Swedish gender and sexuality history.

Orsi Husz is an Associate Professor at the Department of Economic History at Uppsala University. She has published historical work within the field of cultural economy, particularly on consumption and consumer culture in the twentieth century (department stores, debates on consumer society, consumer politics), on everyday finances and the cultural meanings of money (lotteries, home economics, consumption of financial services, retail banking, credit cards), and on middle-class identity related to budgets and economic worries.

ORCID

Klara Arnberg http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4807-600X
Orsi Husz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7194-5533