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## **Meet Our Museum Podcast: Holidays on Display**

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Audio-only Podcast online at: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/thinkfinity/holiday.mp3>

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### ***Codes:***

MR = Matt Ringelstetter

RG = William Lawrence Bird

“ “ =interrupting, pause

[ ] = not speaker's words

MR = No matter what you choose to celebrate the holiday season inspires memories of youth and traditions. Parades such as Macy's in New York and the Tournament of Roses in Pasadena bookend a season marked by lavish displays of decoration and celebration. In this episode, curator William Lawrence Bird will discuss the tradition of American holiday display. We'll not only hear about parades but also the downtown department store displays that were typical in most American cities in the twentieth century. Bird's research was recently featured in an exhibit here at the museum called Holidays on Display and in a book of the same title.

WLB = My name is William Lawrence Bird and I'm a curator in the Division of Political History at the National Museum of American History and I've written a book about holidays and holidays on display. Well, the book is about the display business and people in it who I consider to be artists and when you look at it from the point of view of display as a creative livelihood in this country especially during the hey day of the downtown department store and the local promotional

economy of parades and annual celebrations and commemorative events that called for some kind of an elaborate decoration. And, when you spend any time with this, you quickly realize that Christmas is the one time of year when you as a display person have creative license to just go completely over the top in what would normally be considered to be a reasonable business expense. So, and you know, after the second World War between then and maybe about the mid-sixties a period when I was growing up as a kid it's sort of my effort to sort of pay homage to this kind of over the top holiday display that I remember being able to go downtown with your parents or your grandparents it was sort of an annual treat to see the windows to see the mechanical displays and you sort of see it today in some pockets of pedestrian activity in New York and certainly along State Street in Chicago but that's pretty much my inspiration in doing it and of course looking at in a historic way you can push the development back, of course, way before the beginning of the second World War back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when people began to develop these mechanical displays in store windows.

MR = You mention New York and Chicago as still having some of these downtown public spaces for things like this but outside of that probably a lot of people when they see these kind of things now it's at the mall and they see Santa set up and things like that. How does that compare with these downtown department store displays of the fifties and sixties etc?

WLB = Well in the fifties and sixties what I'm talking about is a retail economy that is on the cusp of sort of suburban expansion that began in the 1950s and was certainly carried out to great effect in the sixties and seventies on up to what we consider now so on one end you have these competitive downtown department stores that began as family operations and they compete they go head to head with each other in the downtown retail core and then you begin to get some suburban expansion where they grow and they have other stores typically that anchor shopping malls and then on the other end of the spectrum you have these big box retail discounters who really don't believe in display certainly not as a business expense and so they don't invest in it and they proclaim that they're not

going to do displays. They build stores that don't have any decorative effects in them at all because it's just really about making things available to the customer at the point of purchase without any kind of impediment. And so you have the mall as sort of like the middle ground between these two economies; one which is lavish display downtown competing and the other is just kind of a bare bones box that some display people would regard as soulless. Actually they've described it that way. But the mall is very different from either of those things because it's usually developed in concert with an anchor store and you don't really have the stores within the mall competing with each other in a way that you would in a traditional downtown retail setting where the stores were all independently owned. When you had stores that were independently owned, they would go way over the top in each one trying to become *the* destination, *the* retail institution, the leading retail institution in a particular town. Now what you get are they may be a leading retail destination but they're part of a chain and to a chain what is one store in a town. It's like a parade float builder from Minnesota explained this to me one time. He said that when he would go to sell the idea of a parade or even decorating a town, he would start off with the bank. He would go into the bank at Manetawa, whatever. He says now, now that's the Bank of America Manetawa branch it's no longer...so they just don't put the money into it the way that they once did. It's sort of the same way with the retail core. You might have say a Macy's or a Boscov's in Pennsylvania whatever you might have. It's hardly competing with anything anymore and so they don't really put as much into it in the way that they used to. And the mall tenants they sort of defer to the person (or) the chain that's managing the mall. They may go over the top and compete with another mall in building a greater Santa Land or something but they pretty much do pretty much what you've come to expect.

MR = Can you describe some of the ways that these stores competed with each other, some of the displays they set up, some of the more lavish and interesting things that you've researched.

WLB = Well one of the classic ones and this was quite early in the 1920's was the retailer, John Wanamaker, whose anchor store was in Philadelphia and he purchased the old Stewart store in New York so he had two stores one in Phil, of course, and it's really still wonderful today as a Macy's but he went head to head with Macy's in New York City and in the early '20s, for example, every day during the Christmas season he would have a parade in the store and it would bring Santa in and install Santa on the throne in the toy department. There are pictures of this with people just having a parade in the store with a band and coming through. Sometimes they had live animal acts but these sort of gradually came to be replaced by mechanical, animated, papier-mache figures which is a separate business in itself. But this was the setting in which the Macy parade developed as an outdoor parade that you see today. Run pretty much for the benefit, by and for their employees that participate in the parade and make it happen as an all volunteer effort so... and after the success of the outdoor parade that really sort of eclipsed anything that anyone was doing in the display world in New York City with the exception of the windows that continue to be a draw for people and really positions those stores as leading retail institutions. Well, let's say in the late 1890s when you have somebody like Frank Baum who before he became famous as a children's author with The Wizard of Oz was the editor of a magazine that was called *The Show Window* in Chicago and he kept tabs on who was doing what in the world of window display and also store interiors and theming, float work, and all that kind of thing. Anything that was shiny and on the surface and lit with colored lights, he was very much into this. And, he was certainly into mechanical displays as things that would stop people and attract attention and pull you into the store past all kinds of tempting stock. So he would give awards to somebody who set up a Santa Land at the back of the store to pull people through the tempting stock to get out to the front of it. That was sort of the idea behind having a Santa parade. As early as 1913, there are accounts that are published in *The Show Window* of, you know, a store in Kentucky or Tennessee or some place what they did to get people to their store to become the destination to become the leading retail institution in their town. They would have a Santa parade. The purpose of which was to announce; the visual

announcement, of the arrival of Christmas and the opening of the holiday shopping season by having a parade and guess where the destination was? It ended at the store and it ended with Santa entering the store and declaring it open for business. It's really not too surprising how this gets going but people had figured this out well before what you think of today as the parade. From the 20s up until recently, it has sort of today it has sort of transcended its original commercial impetus and it has become something that is, in and of itself, has taken on a life of its own. Let's imagine, heaven forbid, that Macy's declared bankruptcy. There would still be a parade in New York City on Thanksgiving just as there is still a parade in Philadelphia that used to be run by Gimble's. It might not be the most elaborate parade of memory but there would still be a need for something that day that looked or at least resembled or paid homage to what was there because it's become so much a part of people's lives that they expect it. I thought if there was just a little bit of that emotional success or pull that I could put into this book it would have succeeded. It would have resonated with people.

MR = What about the actual holiday parades themselves? You mentioned someone specifically Isabella Coleman. Can you talk about who she is and what her role is in this story?

WLB = Yeah. She is a Pasadena, CA housewife and when she was and I mean I say that not as a perjorative but she regarded her display work as purely a volunteer/voluntary kind of community-based effort which I think is the trick, well it's not really a trick, but it's the basis of any ongoing parade's continued success is dependent upon volunteer effort. You have sponsors, but believe me you can't pay for what you see on the street in Pasadena and you certainly can't pay for it to be seen on the street in New Orleans, I mean there are certainly costs involved but Isabella Coleman as a girl grew up decorating floats for Pasadena school floats and parades (schools all get involved in this) and one year she couldn't find a float to ride on and so her parents said why don't you take our hoss and shay; that's a horse and carriage, and make your own float and decorate it. That hadn't occurred to her until they suggested it. So from her parents'

garden she took marigolds and wove them around the wheels and to her amazement she won a prize in the parade. So after that she was never without a float in the Tournament of Roses Parade and as an adult she grew into this kind of a holiday business that maybe took up three or four months of the year. The rest of the time/year she would be a just a, you know, a housewife. It wasn't until the Depression when her banker husband lost his job that she realized the only money in the family checking account was from her float work. She had these tens of thousands of dollars worth of contracts with Conoco Oil with any kind of business enterprise would want one her floats and in terms of her innovative techniques she was her ideal float was low to the ground because people sat in chairs along the parade routes if not sitting on curbs and so her ideal float was something that was very low to the ground sort of like knee level of curb-side spectators and that's pretty much still the way that it is and she hid the driver of these self-propelled floats which were typically built on like an old school bus chassis or something in a cockpit and she used aircraft wheels, tiny wheels, so that the thing looked like it was just hovering above the ground, in other words, floating. The ideal float sort of like a cloud coming downstream. She was one of the first to paste flower petals onto a steel undercarriage and that was one of the reasons that the Tournament of Roses today is an all natural covering, it's a painted undercoating but then the colors are followed out with nuts, seeds, any kind of grass; it has to be a natural cover so it's the floral parade.

MR = So, it sounds like a lot of her ideas and things she came up with are have become what we see in floats in the Rose Bowl the Tournament of Roses Parade today.

WLB = Exactly. I mean she wasn't, well she is a truly innovative person but a lot of things that you see probably would have come up with or without her but she was there at the time and pushing things in a certain direction and there are lots of stories associated with her you know the people who would be the marshalls who come into the parade. Walt Disney when he met her said, "Oh I've wanted to meet you for a long time. I'm a fan." He knew what he was looking at. And she,

kind of, was mildly amused at the attention that she would get but for her it wasn't a business for her. Every extra dime she got, she put back into the product on the street. As floats were being developed, and she always had five or six in the parade, she would get ideas about which ones she thought might win a prize and so extra things would go onto those floats, things would be redirected, resources would be apportioned, you know, you might want to put some orchids, get some of that.

MR = What sparked your interest in this topic; the topic of your book Holidays on Display. Was it personal experiences or ?

WLB = I think it was mostly personal experiences. I was sort of dismayed and disheartened that the museum didn't have anything on it and I began to wonder about it. I mean, display is just such a natural topic for a museum. I mean we do display, we think we do displays and this is the kind of thing that people have an emotional attachment to and certain memories associated with it and so I began to find people that were in the business that I could meet and who would teach me the business. There was and what really sort of pushed me towards it the store that I went to as a boy was Woodward and Lothrop; it's an old time Washington family-owned dept store on F Street. It's now anchored by an H & M clothing store if you're curious about where it is, but they had 13 windows along F Street and turned the corner that was an annual pilgrimage; an annual event. They had a combined daily attendance of passersby that rivaled the combined daily attendance of the Smithsonian Institution during holiday season. When that store went bankrupt in the mid 90s along with Wanamakers in Philadelphia, they were part of that bankruptcy proceeding, they decorated the store one last time for Christmas even though it was only October. It was kind of like a good bye. They had a little flyer that they passed out, a little red flyer, it was a picture of a Christmas tree and on the top was spiked with a jack-o-lantern that said even though it's only October we've decorated for Christmas one last time. I thought that was sort of interesting and the people going through it were saying "Gee, I thought I would go bankrupt before they did." So once the store had closed the

real estate guy who owned the property there's no tenant in the building it's just an empty building with these big plate glass windows that were also empty, he set up a window in the corner. It wasn't a great mechanical display or anything. It was a sleigh and had snow and some trees and some little, as I remember, characters or something and people came to see it. To me this is sort of like cargo-culting. The store isn't there anymore but people are coming to see it. This went on for a couple of years. The store stayed vacant and I kept reading accounts of this phenomenon in the paper and I thought this was really something here. And one of the first people I interviewed had been the vice president for display at the store and he kind of guided me through the business and told me about how he had gotten into it and what made it special for him and that's when I realized the competitive nature of this and how there's an economy that no longer exists in cities but what was once there resulted in this over-the-top kind of festivity that you looked forward to every year and people were still looking forward to it even though the stores had left.

MR = Thanks to William Lawrence Bird for his time. For more information and more pictures check out the book [Holidays on Display](#). For the History Explorer Podcast I'm Matt Ringelstetter. Tune in again next month as we take another look at what goes on behind the scenes here at the National Museum of American History. Podcast made possible by a grant from the Verizon Foundation. Music by Nevada Van der veer and provided by [free-musicarchive.org](http://free-musicarchive.org).