

Lester Gaba: Soap Carver, Mannequin Designer, and Visual Merchandising Critic, and Educator

Natalie Zainea & Michael Mamp

Central Michigan University

Keywords: Lester Gaba, visual merchandising, soap carving, mannequins

The purpose of this research is to document the relatively unknown history of Lester Gaba who was an influential soap carver, mannequin designer, visual merchandising critic, and educator based in New York City from approximately 1932 to 1987.¹ Gaba was born in 1907 and raised in Hannibal, Missouri, where he spent much of his childhood at his parent’s general store drawing.² At the age of ten he participated in a soap sculpting contest, which inspired him to initially pursue a career as a specialty soap sculptor (Figure 1).³ His passions would lead him to Chicago in 1930 where he studied art.⁴

In our attempt to document Gaba’s history and accomplishments we utilized objects as evidence, and primary source material retrieved from digital databases of publications such as *Women’s Wear Daily* (WWD), the *New York Times*, and *Life* magazine. Primary sources such as examples of extant soap figurines and other ephemera including Gaba’s mother’s scrapbook were made accessible for this research by Nora

Creason, a Hannibal, Missouri resident, local historian, and collector who documents the



Figure 1: Photograph of Lester Gaba carving soap from his mother’s scrapbook. Courtesy of the collection of Nora Creason.

accomplishments of notable Hannibal natives.⁵

In Chicago, Gaba worked as a delivery boy for a department store and did freelance work designing posters that agencies.⁶ While Gaba designed posters, he also continued sculpting soap. His early soap sculpture prototypes were carved out of ordinary bars of Ivory.⁷ Eventually, soap sculpting became his primary occupation where he achieved the most success with the design of soap for children. Gaba’s soap sculpting work of the period was widely advertised in various print media outlets, and by



Figure 2: Extant examples of Gaba’s soap figurines from the 1930’s. Courtesy of the collection of Nora Creason.

1932 he had relocated to New York City.⁸ He created Shirley Temple soaps, and holiday themed varieties. However, Gaba became known as the “Michelangelo of the Bathtub” when he created soap figurines based upon characters from the popular depression-era cartoon *Scrappy*.⁹ As a leading soap sculptor of the 1930s, Gaba also wrote a book entitled *Soap Carving, Cinderella of Sculpture* in 1939, which provided tips and techniques for the novice or home soap carver.¹⁰ Several extant examples of Gaba’s work survive from this period held in the collection of Nora Creason in Hannibal, Missouri (Figure 2).

While Gaba was known as a designer of soap figurines, he also gained notoriety for his creation of a mannequin named Cynthia in 1932 (Figure 3).¹¹ She was originally designed for Sak’s Fifth Avenue, and was modeled after a woman by the name of Cynthia Wells.¹² Publicity stills created the illusion that Cynthia went everywhere with Gaba. As such, she was photographed sitting on the couch in his apartment, reading a book, or listening to a record like a real person. In 1937, Cynthia was featured in a fourteen-page article in *Life* magazine, and in 1938, at her peak, she was featured in a Hollywood movie starring Joan Bennett and Jack Benny entitled *Artists and Models Abroad*.¹³ Photographs of Cynthia were taken at leading fashion retailers of the time like Saks Fifth Avenue and even at fashion shows of designers like milliner Lily Daché.¹⁴ Cynthia even became a familiar face at parties and popular New York City night clubs like El Morocco and the Stork Club.¹⁵



Figure 3: Photograph of Gaba’s mannequin, Cynthia, ca. 1937. Courtesy of the collection of Nora Creason.

Cynthia influenced the creation of Gaba Girls who were life-sized, carved-soap mannequins modeled after well-known New York socialites for the display windows of Best & Co. department store.¹⁶ Women posed for Gaba in his studio and he sculpted life-size versions of each out of clay, from which a mold was developed and then used to produce mannequins.¹⁷ Gaba Girls were much lighter than traditional mannequins that had previously been made from materials such as wax.¹⁸ The Gaba Girls also had more life-like features such as distinct eyes and lips, imbuing each with their own personality.¹⁹ It is unclear what happened to Cynthia; in one interview, Gaba stated that he took Cynthia to a friend’s attic where she was left to sit and collect dust.²⁰ The rest of the Gaba Girls remain unaccounted for today. However, the Gaba Girls with their life-like characteristics solidified Gaba as a pioneer in the field of modern mannequin design.²¹

The creation of Cynthia contributed largely to Gaba’s fame, and subsequently he became a columnist for WWD. From 1941-1967, Gaba wrote a weekly column titled “Lester Gaba Looks at Display,” where he reported on and critiqued window displays of stores throughout New York City. In his twenty-six year career at WWD he wrote over 1,100 columns that provide a narrative record of window displays presented at every major retailer in New York City during this time

including Bergdorf Goodman, Sak's Fifth Avenue, Macy's, Bonwit Teller, and Henri Bendel, just to name a few.²² In addition to his column for WWD, Gaba also taught visual merchandising at the Laboratory Institute of Merchandising in New York City and wrote one of the first seminal textbooks dedicated to visual merchandising entitled, "*The Art of Window Display*."²³

Lester Gaba passed away in 1987 at the age of 80.²⁴ His impact on the history of mannequin design and visual merchandising is significant. His work as a columnist for WWD left an extensive narrative record of window display in mid twentieth century New York City. Until now his story remained relatively unknown, and the aim of this research is to shed light upon and document the contributions of this interesting and multi-faceted man.

-
- 1 “Lester Gaba, Mannequin Artist,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1987, 18.
 - 2 “Hannibal-2019.” Hannibal. Accessed September 24, 2019, <https://www.hannibal2019.com/events-1/lester-gaba-exhibit>.
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 “Lester Gaba.”
 - 5 Nora Creason, Email to author, February 3, 2020.
 - 6 Ibid.
 - 7 Mark Griffin, *Hundred or More Hidden Things: The Life and Films of Vincente Minnelli* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2010).
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 Harry McCracken, “Lester Gaba, Michelangelo of the Bathtub,” Scrapyland, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.scrapyland.com/blog/2012/10/27/lester-gaba-michelangeloof-the-bathtub/>.
 - 10 Lester Gaba, *Soap Carving: Cinderella of Sculpture* (New York: Studio Publications, 1940).
 - 11 “Lester Gaba.”
 - 12 Mitchell Johnson, “Mannequin Pixie Dream Girl,” 99% Invisible, November 26, 2019, <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/mannequin-pixie-dream-girl/>.
 - 13 *Artists and Models Abroad*. Directed by Mitchell Leisen. Los Angeles: Paramount Studios, 1938.
 - 14 Alfred Eisenstaedt, “Life Goes to a Party with a New York Cafe' Socialite Named Cynthia,” *Life Magazine*, December 13, 1937.
 - 15 Ibid.
 - 16 “Lester Gaba.”
 - 17 Johnson, “Mannequin Pixie Dream Girl.”
 - 18 William Leach, *Land of Desire Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
 - 19 Johnson, “Mannequin Pixie Dream Girl.”
 - 20 Ibid.
 - 21 Gay Talese, “The New Look in Mannequins,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1960, SM33.
 - 22 See Gaba’s column: “Lester Gaba Looks at Display.” *Women’s Wear Daily*, from 1941-1967. Our evaluation of Gaba’s work for WWD is ongoing as a digital database search revealed 1,122 results ranging from 1934-1987.
 - 23 Lester Gaba, *The Art of Window Display* (New York: Studio Publications in association with Crowell, 1952).
 - 24 “Lester Gaba.”