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BUSINESS

Henri Bendel Is Closing After 123 Years

By Carleton English



Say goodbye, Bendel girls.

Henri Bendel — the iconic department store known for bringing Coco Chanel to the US and catering to generations of so-called “Bendel Girls” — is shutting its doors after 123 years.

The decision to turn out the lights in January at all 23 of Bendel's swanky stores nationwide — including its landmark flagship at 714 Fifth Avenue — was announced Friday by its parent company L Brands, which also owns Victoria's Secret and Bath & Body Works.

“We have decided to stop operating Bendel to improve company profitability and focus on our larger brands that have greater growth potential,” billionaire Les Wexner, chairman and CEO of L Brands, said in a Friday statement.

Bendel, which opened its doors in New York's Greenwich Village at the end of the 19th century, was founded by Henri Bendel, a women's hat maker from Lafayette, Louisiana.

He moved to New York in 1895 and began catering to the city's elite, making the stores' brown-and-white striped shopping bags and hat boxes a coveted status symbol. In the 1960s, its in-house illustrator was a young artist named Andy Warhol.

Columbus, Ohio-based L Brands, which acquired the brand in 1985, has lately neglected Bendel while it scrambles to fix its flailing Victoria's Secret chain, according to critics.

L Brands “didn't give the brand the true stewardship they needed to,” according to Craig Johnson, president of Customer Growth Partners.

Bendel, which only started opening stores outside of New York City in 2008, announced plans to stop selling clothes in 2009 to focus on accessories and gifts — a move that flummoxed many fashion designers.

In 2014, Bendel's, which had been known for featuring up-and-coming labels like Anna Sui, decided to stop selling outside brands.

“People kept going to Bendel's long after it changed because they remembered the romance of the place,” Faith Hope Consolo of Douglas Elliman told The Post.

But the company's focus on its own private-label accessories and hand-bags “fell flat” — with designs that looked like cheap Michael Kors and Kate Spade knockoffs, said retail consultant Gabriella Santaniello of A-Line Partners.

It once “had a wide range of price points and different brands all wrapped up in a beautiful, iconic location where you just felt special walking in the door,” Santaniello said.

As L Brands expanded Bendel beyond New York and into new cities like Atlanta, Houston, Oak Brook, Ill., and Troy, Mich., it failed to gain traction inside Middle America’s shopping malls.

“The person in the suburbs didn’t have the same attachment to Bendel,” Consolo said.

While the Midtown stretch of Fifth Avenue was once synonymous with fashion and luxury, exclusive boutiques have increasingly moved back downtown.

Meanwhile, big-box brands such as Abercrombie & Fitch, H&M and Uniqlo have invaded Fifth Avenue’s “Miracle Mile” that stretches between Rockefeller Center and the Plaza Hotel.

With Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus opening new stores on the West Side, “the whole geography has changed,” Johnson said. “It’s going to be a little bit of a different world.”