

# 1

---

## THE EDUCATION OF HENRY DREYFUSS

Manhattan was the center of Henry Dreyfuss's early life, and the map in figure 1.1 has pins that mark important places mentioned below (table 1.1). Dreyfuss was born October 2, 1904, and lived at several locations in the Manhattan neighborhood above 110th Street known as Harlem, which at that time had a prominent Jewish population (map pins 2–4). His paternal grandfather, Moritz, a German immigrant, had established a business, M. Dreyfuss & Son, on West Twenty-Third Street (map pin 12), supplying fabrics to the theatrical and costuming trade. Moritz's son, Louis (Henry's father), was employed there, although he worked as a tailor elsewhere, as well. Henry's father and grandfather both died when the boy was only eleven, so he subsequently ran errands, delivered suits, and painted signs to help support the family.<sup>1</sup> In his childhood, young Dreyfuss was thus immersed in the world of theater and an attendant wide range of materials used in set construction and costume fabrication. This immersion would serve him well as he embarked on stage set design and later projects.

Dreyfuss attended local public schools for the elementary grades. Common wisdom in the city dictated that if you had money and brains, you went to Columbia, and if you had brains but no money, you went to City College. So it was natural for Dreyfuss to enroll in Townsend Harris High School, a preparatory school for City College that was colocated on the college's Harlem campus, not far from his home (map pins 1, 3).

After a year at Townsend Harris, however, Dreyfuss left in a huff over his art grades on the New York State Regents exam; his teacher had given him a perfect grade, but the Regents marked it down. To his surprise, this sympathetic teacher made arrangements for a scholarship so Dreyfuss could finish his high school education at the private Ethical Culture School (map pin 6). The school was operated by the Society for Ethical Culture, a secular organization whose title is self-explanatory. Among other things, the school was

---

1. Flinchum, *Henry Dreyfuss, Industrial Designer: The Man in the Brown Suit*, 22.

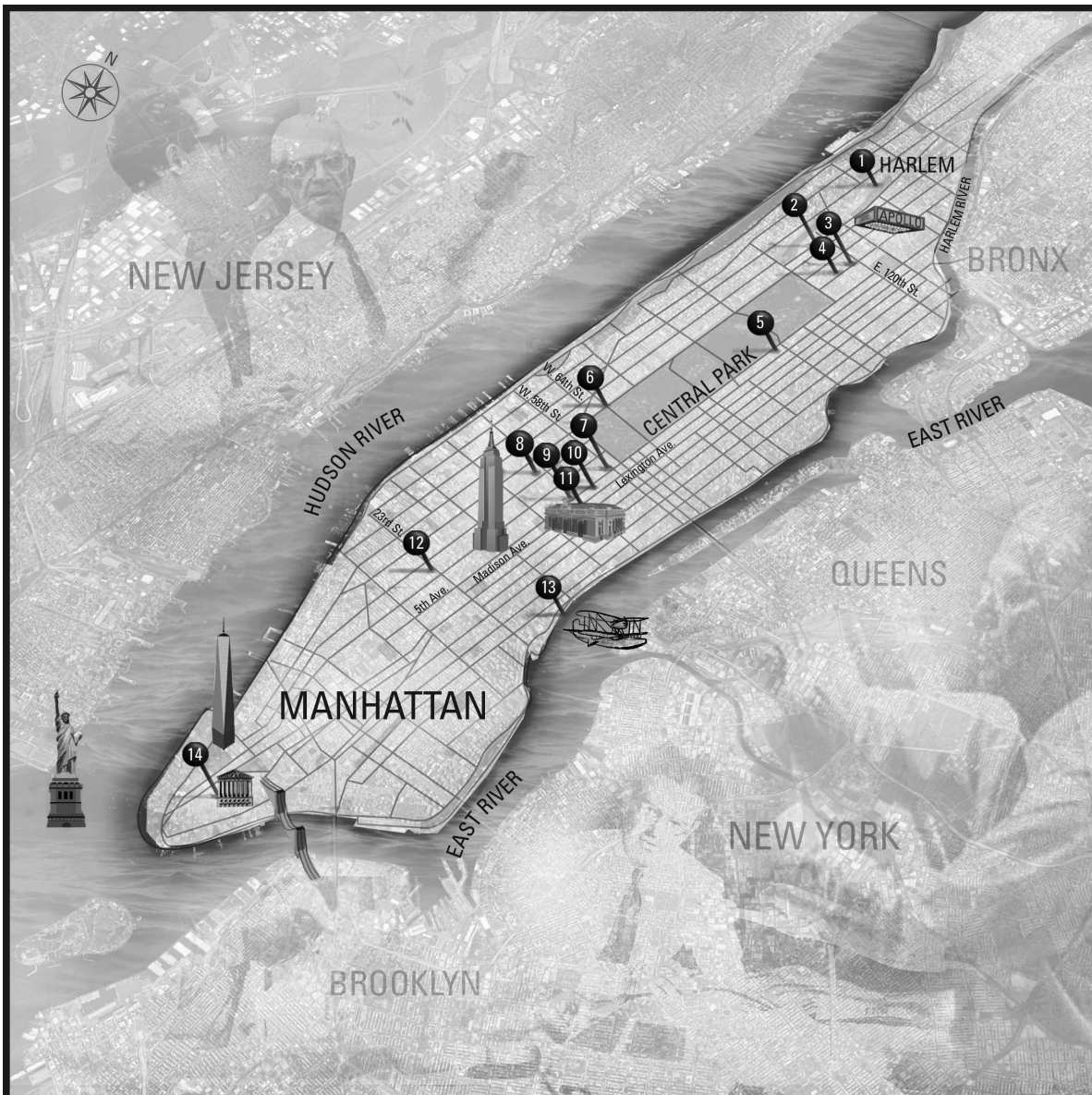


Figure 1.1. Map of Manhattan with locations identified in the text and table 1.1.

a melting pot for children of wealth and those of more modest means, and it had a full prevocational arts curriculum that appealed to Dreyfuss. His attendance at this school would have a profound impact on his life and his design firm, largely because of the actions of another teacher. Dreyfuss attended the Ethical Culture School from September 1920 until June 1922.

During that time, Emma Mueden was his English teacher and the school's dean of girls. She was also in charge of all school plays and pageants, which were considered an integral part of the students' education. These productions, referred to as festivals,

Table 1.1. Significant Locations in Manhattan

Pin 1	Townsend Harris High School 1907–1929
Pin 2	Louis and Elsie Dreyfuss family residence 1910–1914
Pin 3	Elsie Dreyfuss family residence 1918–1921
Pin 4	Louis and Elsie Dreyfuss family residence 1914–1918
Pin 5	Marcus and Esther Marks family residence
Pin 6	Ethical Culture School
Pin 7	Henry Dreyfuss office 1948–1969
Pin 8	Henry Dreyfuss office 1928–1929
Pin 9	Henry Dreyfuss office 1929–1938
Pin 10	Henry Dreyfuss office 1938–1948
Pin 11	New York Central System headquarters
Pin 12	M. Dreyfuss & Son fabric store
Pin 13	Loening Aircraft plant
Pin 14	Cities Service Petroleum Company headquarters



Figure 1.2. Ethical Culture School, Sixty-Fourth Street and Central Park West, Manhattan, 2008. (Courtesy of Jim Henderson via Wikimedia Commons.)

involved most of the student body. Mueden chose Dreyfuss to be the student responsible for festival settings and costumes during his two years at the school, perhaps because of his family's experience in the costume business and his personal interest. Mueden would later play another important role in Dreyfuss's life, as described below.

After high school, another scholarship awaited Dreyfuss, again made available through the munificence of the Society for Ethical Culture.<sup>2</sup> This scholarship allowed Dreyfuss to study with Norman Bel Geddes, who was then making his mark on the theater and teaching a course in theatrical design at his New York studio. After finishing the class, Dreyfuss stayed on as one of many assistants to Geddes. Following the 1925 art deco exhibition in Paris, American industry seemed to awaken to the concept of design, and Geddes had his foot in both theater and product design (figure 1.3).<sup>3</sup> Dreyfuss would start out in the theater and then transition to industrial design, so the apprenticeship under Geddes was invaluable.

Geddes, who criticized fellow designers Walter Dorwin Teague, Jr. and Raymond Loewy, found no fault with Dreyfuss. He liked him: "I think he is honest, straight from the shoulder, there's nothing phony about him, he's square—just a good human being."<sup>4</sup> Dreyfuss was more forthcoming in his praise for Geddes. In an obituary in 1958, Dreyfuss characterized Geddes as the modern counterpart of the fifteenth-century master craftsman.<sup>5</sup> Dreyfuss further pointed out that Geddes was a master of stage lighting, a skill that rubbed off on Dreyfuss and played a big role in his designs.

---

2. Atherton, "Henry Dreyfuss Designer," 5.

3. As humorous as it seems, Dreyfuss had a contract in 1940 with the National Biscuit Company for the design of "biscuits, packages, etc."

4. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925–1939*, 56.

5. Dunne, Seldes, and Dreyfuss, "Norman Bel Geddes (1893–1958)," 51.





Figure 1.3. Kemp Starrett cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine, December 10, 1932. (Courtesy of Kemp Starrett/The New Yorker Collection/Cartoon Bank.)