

EVENTS/CAUSES

Definition of luxury is investigated, questioned in V&A exhibit

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Crown dating to 1760 from Portugal on display in the Victoria & Albert "What is Luxury?" exhibit

By SARAH JONES

The Victoria & Albert Museum in London is prompting consumers to question the meaning of luxury with a new exhibit.

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"What is Luxury?" displays more than 100 objects meant to investigate the understanding of luxury within physical, theoretical and sociological constructs. Luxury has traditionally stood for craftsmanship and design, but this will make consumers stop to think what it will look like in the future.

"This is the third in a series of joint V&A and Crafts Council exhibitions," said Leanne Wierzba, co-curator of the exhibit. "Luxury has always been an important subject for and within conversations about crafts and continues to be so. After presenting in the previous shows contemporary practice in an extended understanding of craft and a celebration of making in the broadest sense, it seemed valuable to engage with craft more conceptually using 'luxury' as a lens.

"There are two broad topics related to luxury that are considered in the exhibition," she said. "First, we look at the role of craft within the creation of luxury. Here the focus is on

the incredible investment in time that is required to make exceptional objects, including time spent researching and developing requisite skills, as well as hours spent actually making.

"Secondly, we look at the relationship of luxury both to the individual and to larger economic, social and ecological systems. Here we focus on speculative projects by contemporary designers."

Conversation piece

What is Luxury? opens with items that are considered luxurious due to the time, skill and craftsmanship that went into their formation. Included are an Hermès Talaris saddle, which uses traditional leather work combined with an innovative construction and an haute couture dress by Iris van Herpen featuring laser-cut details.



Indian Howdah dating to around 1840

To comment on the amount of time dedicated to perfecting this artform, central to the room is Philippe Malouin's spirograph for Lobmeyr, titled "Time Elapsed," which drops sand in patterns as it rotates.

A second group of objects juxtaposes vocabulary associated with luxury alongside pieces made by those with a high level of expertise, for instance a meticulously tailored suit by contemporary designer Carol Christian Poell or artist Chung Hae-Cho's bowls, which are constructed out of many layers of lacquer.

Turning toward the luxury of time itself, on display will be a toolkit designed to inspire the user to wander, including a watch with no dial and a compass that moves to random directions.



Time for Yourself by Marcin Rusak, concept in collaboration with Iona Inglesby

Luxury is often defined by its materials, so the exhibit explores this understanding with “Hair Highway” by Studio Swine, a series of furniture crafted out of human hair set in resin. Giving a different cultural context for our relationship with gold is “A Comprehensive Atlas of Gold Fictions” by Aram Mooradian, who made a number of everyday objects out of the metal and engraved them with personal anecdotes from the local community in Australia where it was mined.

Stepping outside of the physical comprehension of luxury, fictional scenarios will be posed, such as a DNA vending machine, which will make the viewer ponder issues such as privacy. Henrik Nieratschker’s “The Boltham Legacy” paints a narrative of a billionaire who sends bacteria to space to mine valuable resources on other planets, questioning the luxury of having special access to supplies.



DNA Vending Machine by Gabriel Barcia-Colombo

"The word 'luxury' has endured years of disagreements seeking to confirm a global definition," said Rebecca Miller, CEO of [Miller & Company](#), New York. "Marketing in the past 20-plus years has done a disservice to the definition by encouraging mid to lower

market businesses to piggyback on the term to elevate a brand's perception.

"The luxury industry has undergone intense change with a plethora of product flooding the market, much claiming to be luxury goods," she said. "A similar argument persists between the definitions of quality versus luxury.

"Some argue quality is becoming the more important word, as it appears to be objectionably quantifiable where the word luxury has shifted for some consumers to a more subjective definition. The 100 products on exhibit capture the breadth of consumer's definitions of luxury and will support the architecture of conversations around the question the exhibit strives to address 'What is Luxury.'"

What is Luxury? opened April 25, and will run through Sept. 27. The free exhibit sponsored by Northacre is being put on in collaboration with the Crafts Council.

"The V&A is known for being innovative and as an early adapter," Ms. Miller said. "It began promoting the idea of wide art education through the museum's collections and later as the first museum in Britain to present a rock concert, an innovative approach to bring young people to the museum which has proven to be a hallmark.

"For these reasons, they are an ideal institution to tackle the complex and seemingly indefinable topic of 'What is Luxury?' she said. "They have the ability to creatively move through uncharted waters bringing inventiveness to all age groups, creating an experience that raises questions to a 'thinking person's' attention—those who enjoy the exercise of discovery and learning."

Online, the V&A created a game for consumers to test their own luxury skills. From inlaying jewels on a crown to rearranging a chaise made out of bone, digital tasks communicate the painstaking process behind various luxury items.



Screenshot of V&A online feature

When the consumer finishes a project, it tells them how much time they took, driving the message home.

"With this exhibition, we have focused on the work of makers whose own investment of time, skill and resources in the production of luxury goods exists somewhat outside of the logic of global capitalism, in that it is not motivated by the pursuit of profit but rather a

passion for perfecting skills, materials and innovation," The V&A's Ms. Wierzba said. "We also challenge the pervasive identification of luxury as this global branded context and as something that can only be acquired at great expense.

"The most common response we have received to the questions 'What is luxury?' is 'time,'" she said. "For many people, luxury has little to do with a logo handbag."

Changing meaning

This exhibit may send visitors down a path of exploration they have already begun.

The luxury sector is continuing to evolve with the majority of affluent consumers recognizing that the definition of luxury is not what it was five years ago, according to a new report by Martini Media.

As consumers' tastes have changed from exclusive or status-oriented products to an interest in rare experiences, the Internet has been a driving factor in how these individuals make decisions regarding purchases and bookings. Marketers have invested heavily in digital marketing to account for this trend and to provide consumers with content geared toward ensuring informative purchases ([see story](#)).

For luxury brands, this exhibit may serve as inspiration for their own evolution in luxury.

Since its founding in 1837, Hermès has had to adapt to changing times, requiring a balance of modernity with tradition, according to the brand's CEO at the Condé Nast International Luxury Conference April 22.

Helping it remain a presence over the years has been Hermès' willingness to embrace new methods of communication and adapt its existing craftsmanship when working with what materials are available. As technology evolves, luxury brands must take the lead in a way which maintains their core values and aesthetic ([see story](#)).

"Luxury today has taken on many forms," Ms. Miller said. "How consumers relate to and self define luxury is shaped by income, culture, desires and values. Once a more refined set of classically accepted attributes, luxury has become personal leaving a wide disparity for brands and marketers to fulfill.

"No longer is luxury limited to the rare or unique. Luxury goods are most easily identified by the traditional values like craftsmanship to help define them," she said. "They are an investment of time and money from the maker to the consumer. The fifth generation Dumas, pooh-poohed the term 'luxury,' disliking its arrogance, its hint of decadence. He preferred the word 'refinement.'

"A cornerstone of quality is the details: the refinement of raw materials used, the skilled hand of man, the integrity of design, the very essence of luxury goods. Marketing must be careful to accurately communicate and educate consumers on the differences of product quality to support the artisans who create such beauty to ensure their survival for future generations to enjoy."

Final Take

Sarah Jones, staff reporter on Luxury Daily, New York

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