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## Flattening of luxury world marked by copying and being, not having

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*Damien Hirst's "For The Love of God"*

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By FORREST CARDAMENIS

SEOUL, South Korea With communication flattening the world, the meaning of "luxury" has shifted, according to a museum director at the Cond Nast International Luxury Conference on April 20.

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Throughout history, luxury has been a term with loaded geographical implications and has connoted the idea of possession. Today, however, luxury is placeless and timeless and has transformed into a mode of being rather than of having.

"Now that luxury has become common almost over night, we might rethink its definition," said Mr. Pijbes, director of the Rijksmuseum. "Of course true luxury is still about value instead of volume, but of course one might argue the best things in life aren't things.

"I would say luxury nowadays is shifting rapidly from having to being. Where it is products or experiences, it has to be unique to the individual," he said. "And above all, it's about value not price, value."

For the love of luxury

Beginning from his experience, Mr. Pijbes states that in 2013, the Rijksmuseum was refurbished to pave a new way of interacting with art. The museum's collection spans millennia and includes paintings and sculptures alongside fashion and objects from both Europe and Asia.

The goal of the new open building and open collection is to promote an open attitude that makes old masters relevant for today. The museum invited contemporary masters from both the East and the West to find artwork to respond to in their own work.

The initiative was successful, with today's artists producing work inspired by old masters of places of origin unlike their own or combining artists from diverse times or places in unlikely ways.



Rembrandt's "The Nightwatch"

In particular, Mr. Pijbes remarked on two significant works. One was Damien Hirst's diamond skull, entitled "For The Love of God," a comment on vanity, possessiveness and luxury and their role in death. The skull, created in 2007, acts in some sense as a postmortem for a purely materialist form of luxury.

On the other end of the spectrum was a work simulating the flooding of Amsterdam, a city that sits below sea level. To experience the work, the consumer must be present, which Mr. Pijbes contrasts with luxury's increasing pervasion.

Centuries ago, goods from the East were brought back to the West for the consumption and use by the elite and royalty. At the time, luxury was an exotic object from afar, restricted in its visibility and accessibility.

Today, that is no longer true. From anywhere in the world, a consumer with an Internet connection can order any product from anywhere and have it in mere days, erasing the location and class barriers that have defined luxury since time immemorial.

"Today luxury is no longer available to a small elite or nobility," Mr. Pijbes said. "It is available to a mass audience throughout Asia as well, the best of the world, and all at the same time."

This democratization of luxury means democratization of influence. The Rijksmuseum has set up a digital hub with high resolution images of its collection, which anybody can access from anywhere for free, using the art however she pleases.

The museum has therefore become a base for recreation and for today's artists and designers.

Asked about the tendency of viewers to take pictures of an artwork rather than focus on it, Mr. Pijbes said that it indicates receptiveness to the experience, but conceded it may not be good for art appreciation. The parallel was made to the fashion world, where those near the front of the runway presentations tend to take pictures rather than looking at and fully appreciating the clothes.

The question this raises is whether the appreciation of luxury wanes with its universality. The trend is currently too young to accurately forecast, but it is also possible that those with a serious interest in art or fashion are not the ones solely taking pictures.

Whatever the case may be, the symptoms indicate that traditional ideas of luxury are eroding. Luxury is no longer bound by place in the same way that it used to be, and brands must open themselves up to the new possibilities this presents.

Repurpose, retell

Some brands have already taken advantage of the new modes of appreciation that widespread access offers.

Last year, Italian fashion label Gucci asked online talents to repurpose its latest print motifs into artwork.

Gucci, under the creative direction of Alessandro Michele, recently launched two new prints, Gucci Blossoms and Gucci Caleido. These prints, floral and geometric patterns respectively, have been adapted to bridge Gucci's heritage and contemporaneity by being overlaid onto the brand's signature double GG design ([see story](#)).

"I think that this whole phenomenon, this Internet has no boundaries anymore, and I'm not afraid of it," Mr. Pijbes said. "Anytime, anywhere, anybody is in touch with our collection. That's our business model.

"Also in China, where we are active on Weibo, and our concept of open content is highly appreciated, I have no fear as I said because I strongly believe as a museum director in the power of authenticity and the power of the real experience," he said. "Real art has the ability to move people, people with open minds in a flat world.

"Art can connect old and new, East and West, and museums, in my opinion, are the gateway. In museums people can connect with art and history, time and beauty; in museums people connect with other people and other cultures and in museums you can connect - and this might be most important - with your own imagination and creativity.

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