

STRATEGY

Design's role in luxury: Luxury Memo special report

December 12, 2017



Luxury brands today pull inspiration from all over. Image credit: H. Moser

By DANNY PARISI

Luxury has always prided itself on exquisite designs. But in an era where marketers are constantly pressured to innovate and create new products, how can they continuously come up with compelling designs that retain the all-important brand identity?

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This is one of the central questions for brands today from a design perspective. Customers are always searching for something new, something novel, but at the same time, they desire the brand to retain a consistent identity that is recognizable and iconic.

"Now more than ever, with the inundation of pop-up ads, social media feeds [and] print and television advertising, there's a constant dull buzz of advertising hoopla vying for our attention," said Stephanie Tisch, art director at **Seraph**, Miami, FL. "Today's consumption of content is truly unprecedented, making our time more valuable than ever.

"More than a trend, I'm thrilled to finally see the philosophy of simplicity becoming more widely adopted in design and communication," she said. "I believe consumers and, subsequently, brands are returning to the values of simplicity and minimalism.

"With so many choices, affluent consumers in particular are becoming more discerning choosing high quality and less quantity. In my own design practice, I strongly encourage clients to distill messaging to only the most essential."

Top 5 trends in luxury design

- Innovation versus continuity
 - As brands continue to diversify and expand the types of designs they come up with for an increasingly varied array of goods, they will have to find a way to make each design unique and new without making them feel disconnected from the brand's history. For luxury brands with decades of heritage behind them, this is especially important.

- Tech inspiration
 - Technology has infused every aspect of our lives, and the clean minimalist designs championed by the likes of Apple and Google have become major design influences on products outside of consumer electronics. From watches to accessories, the influence from technology can be felt across the luxury business.
- Eclectic tastes
 - Consumers today have eclectic tastes. With the rise of the Internet and a plethora of content and options available at all times, young consumers are inundated with new ideas, aesthetics and options for expressing their individuality. This leads them to demand goods with a similarly unique and eclectic design sensibility.
- Art and design
 - For many luxury brands, their products are not just products of design, but works of art in themselves. This can be seen from the number of exhibitions and private museums that show the designs of various luxury brands, from watches to handbags to purses, with the idea that they can be appreciated as aesthetic objects and not just as a consumer good. This idea is cultivated by the brands themselves.
- Emphasis on craftsmanship
 - In an effort to highlight the uniqueness and the care put into their designs, many luxury brands are beginning to open up their design process and show consumers the entire journey the product takes, from idea to design to physical object. This can be an effective tactic for customers who want to have a personal connection with the things they buy and know exactly where they came from.

Change versus continuity

The big question for luxury brands and design concerns how they can maintain a consistent, authentic identity while still innovating.

This could take the form of recurring, iconic details or similar silhouettes that are then embellished with new ideas as time goes on.

Often, brands will take certain iconic design elements from one type of product and transfer them to something else, for example, taking a fashion sensibility and applying it to furniture.

Italian fashion label Moschino took its edgy aesthetic into the home furnishings category with oversized recreations of its products.

For its limited-edition furniture capsule, Moschino creative director Jeremy Scott teamed with Italian home furnishings house Gufram. The Moschino x Gufram collection launched April 4 during the annual design show Salone del Mobile in Milan ([see story](#)).

Another common option is to take a classic design and update it for a modern look.



Moschino x Gufram limited-edition furniture collection. Image credit: Moschino

French couturier Schiaparelli reissued an astrology-themed jacket designed by house founder Elsa Schiaparelli in 1938 using a modern silhouette.

The original jacket was designed by Ms. Schiaparelli as part of her Astrological collection. Creative director Bertrand Guyon updated the jacket for today's consumer, but replicated the piece's signature space motifs such as the sun, moon, stars and the 12 zodiac symbols ([see story](#)).

Lexus did something similar with its fifth-generation LS flagship sedan, which was designed to embody Japanese culture and the new generation of the automotive industry.

The new longer and lower vehicle design was unveiled at the 2017 North American International Auto Show in January. With a coupe-like silhouette, Lexus hopes to convey a rebirth of its flagship as if it is re-launching its entire brand ([see story](#)).

Similarly, Berluti designed a capsule collection featuring some of its iconic mens shoes, but for women.

Included in the Women's Capsule Collection are five of Berluti's iconic shoe styles. The footwear styles have been slightly tweaked to be lighter and more feminine, but keep Berluti's signature aesthetic.

Berluti has included the lace-up Alessandro, the Andy loafer, the Classic Sicilia slip-on, a classic Chelsea boot and a new style, a Contrast Oxford. The brand suggests women sport the styles in the capsule with a skirt, tailored trousers or jeans ([see story](#)).

By doing this, Berluti has instantly created something new and unique that maintains the brand's DNA and does not sacrifice its integrity.

This trend does not exist solely for fashion, it extends to retail as well.



Berluti's Women's Capsule Collection

Changes in the retail world are forcing brands to focus on how they relate their story, according to panelists at the *Financial Times* 'Business of Luxury Summit on May 24.

Alterations to the runway format, anniversary celebrations by new brands and even the revolving door of creative directors are all related to houses needing to find effective ways of telling stories in a newly altered retail environment. With the rise of digital now impacting commercial real estate, the new world of luxury has found questions of heritage and communication manifest themselves in far-reaching ways ([see story](#)).

"Luxury brands that have been successful at innovation have also been honing in on their brand code or brand DNA for years sometimes over 100 years," said [Thomai Serdari](#), a professor of luxury business marketing at New York University, New York. "Younger brands should initially focus on developing a code with which they feel comfortable and one that can also evolve with time.

"Empirical research focused on luxury products and their design shows that changes have to be subtle but they have to occur every couple of years for products to retain their contemporary look and feel," she said "This means that first a luxury brand should develop a specific vocabulary and use it to develop products that reinforce its story. Innovation does not need to be radical.

"When luxury house Boucheron experimented with 3D printing to create a platinum necklace, designed by Marc Newson, more than 10 years ago, the market had not adopted 3D printing yet and the untrained eye would have not been able to tell the difference between that necklace and a traditionally crafted one. Innovation keeps things relevant but does not need to shock the client."

Design inspirations

Modern design in the luxury world takes influence from a number of different sources.

Obviously, the history of fashion and luxury is a major factor in many designs today. Luxury brands are often also heritage brands, meaning that they carry the weight of their history in every new design.

One aspect of luxury that can help inject new ideas into design work is to take inspiration from other luxury sectors in a different category, such as a fashion brand making a piece inspired by a furniture brand.

A good example of this was when Swiss watchmaker Parmigiani Fleurier, in celebration of French automaker Bugatti's new \$3 million model, released its own high-performance product, the Bugatti Type 390 watch, to coincide with the release of the new vehicle.

Bugatti's Chiron is the latest supercar from the auto manufacturer and comes with an impressive list of specs. Parmigiani is hoping to capture the attention of some of Bugatti's enthusiastic customers by releasing a commemorative watch that is meant to act as a companion to the car itself ([see story](#)).



The Bugatti Type 390 is modeled after the Bugatti Chiron. Image credit: Parmigiani Fleurier

Another major inspiration for many luxury brands is the art world.

French apparel and accessories house Louis Vuitton merged the worlds of fashion and art in a collection that takes inspiration from some of the most recognizable paintings.

Artist Jeff Koons is translating his series of "Gazing Ball" artworks, which give a new perspective on masterworks, into a capsule of handbags, scarves and accessories for the fashion label. Aligning with art is one way for brands to add value and novelty to their designs, turning garments and accessories into collector's items ([see story](#)).

In addition to fine art, popular culture can also serve as an inspiration for luxury designs, such as the HBO television series "Game of Thrones" did for Delvaux.



Still from Nic Courdy's animation featuring Delvaux's Black Beauty handbag. Image courtesy of Delvaux

The Belgian leather goods maker put an emphasis on its savoir-faire this holiday season with a collection that takes its cues from fantasy.

For its first Couture Exclusive Collection, the label based its designs on imagined narratives featuring characters that feature in many mythical realms, such as the knight and the enchantress. While produced as limited-editions, the haute handbags' launch enables Delvaux to showcase its broader craftsmanship capabilities during the important

holiday season ([see story](#)).

Tech

In today's world, it is impossible to talk about design without talking about one of the most influential design houses of the era: Apple.

Since the debut of the iPod, Apple's particular brand of aesthetics has dominated not just tech and Web design, but has influenced designs from across the business world.

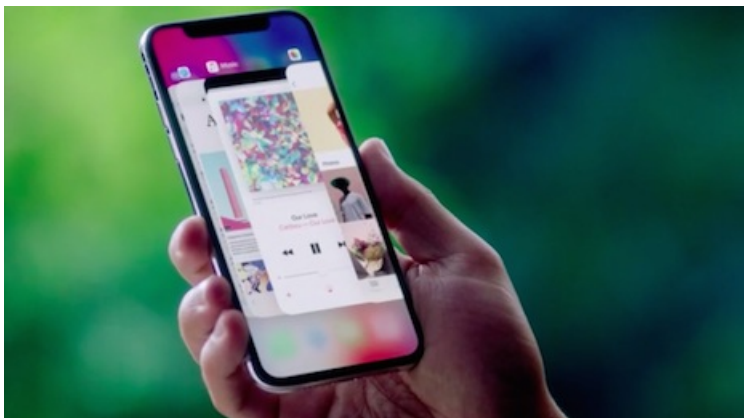
Apple's futuristic minimalism, which has arguably been co-opted by Google as well, was not invented by the company, but was most definitely popularized by it.

"Apple is a textbook case of a company that has not only invaded our lives but is also shaping our lives for the better," NYU's Ms. Serdari said. "Its aesthetic has trickled down to other products and brands that are not necessarily associated with Apple.

"The point is that minimalism and a reductivist approach to design, first introduced by Apple in a mass scale, has invaded many areas of our lives," she said. "Beyond Apple, it is the digital/technospace that has deeply influenced the way we read signs and receive cues from our environment.

"It has also impacted our gestures. This means that design is very powerful. When successful, design takes over multiple aspects of everyday life, usually for the better."

The number of products, both inside and outside of tech, that make use of Apple's clean lines, minimal presentation and stark colors is a testament to the tech giant's influence in the design world.



The iPhone X. Image credit: Apple

Some of the inspiration taken from Apple by luxury brands is amicable in nature.

For instance, London hotel Claridge's tapped two of its long-time friends to decorate its Christmas tree last year.

Apple chief design officer Sir Jony Ive and his friend, industrial designer Marc Newson, brought their own styles to the iconic tree, following in the footsteps of brands such as Lanvin and Dolce & Gabbana. Positioned in the lobby, the tree typically attracts an audience beyond the hotel's guests, as Londoners and visitors to the British capital come to Claridge's to kick off the holiday season ([see story](#)).

Others, however, are more antagonistic, such as Swiss watchmaker H. Moser & Cie debuting a new timepiece with a strikingly familiar design that is seemingly a direct send-up of the Apple Watch.

The Swiss Alp Watch Zzzz is almost a direct copy of the Apple Watch with one key difference: it is entirely analog. Communications for the timepiece makes the comparison almost explicit, suggesting that H. Moser is having some fun at the expense of the tech-obsessed while reinforcing the superiority of its high-end watches ([see story](#)).

But despite acting as a sort of jab at Apple, H. Moser's faux-Apple-Watch is still a design that is clearly heavily inspired by Apple's take on the timepiece.

Apple itself has also signaled a willingness to enter the luxury world.



The Swiss Alp Watch Zzzz. Image credit: H. Moser

Apple's event on Sept. 12 showed that the consumer electronics maker is continuing to be a threat to luxury, with both a new ultra-premium model of iPhone and the announcement that Apple Watch has surpassed Rolex as the most-popular timepiece in the world.

The new iPhone model is significantly more powerful with a host of new features and designs and a price point that seems targeted towards a more luxury crowd. Along with its triumph over traditional watchmakers such as Rolex, luxury brands should be wary of Apple's growing influence with the ultra-rich ([see story](#)).

Additionally, Apple is the second top watchmaker in the world, right behind Rolex, showing that luxury consumers have equal passion for both luxury products and Apple's tech offerings, which suggests that luxury brands are not wrong to take inspiration from the tech giant.

"Oh Apple, thank you for helping other brands learn the lesson that less is always more," Seraph's Ms. Tisch said.

"Steve Jobs was a disciple of the Zen philosophy fastidiously eliminating the superfluous and non-essential in all-things-Apple from the design of the products themselves, to the packaging, to marketing messages," she said.

Design and art

The worlds of art and luxury have always had an overlap.

For one, the massive prices that fine art fetches at auctions ensures that only the type of people who can afford luxury goods are buying them. In that sense, the main thing shared between art and luxury is the customer base.

But the two often overlap in design as well. This relationship has been played off by many luxury brands, who intentionally position their designs as either inspired by art or worthy of being considered art in and of themselves.

For example, British fashion label Burberry took its partnership with artist Danny Sangra to its stores.

Following collaborations on an augmented reality application and a social media art series, Mr. Sangra is now bringing his doodles to Burberry's boutiques, starting with its SoHo store in New York. Fashion and art are often in communication with each other, with each elevating the other ([see story](#)).



Danny Sangra for Burberry. Image courtesy of Burberry

This collaboration between a living artist and a luxury designer shows the vibrant connection between the two worlds. But many luxury brands are also inspired to collaborate on designs with artists who have long since passed.

The creative relationship between French couturier Elsa Schiaparelli and surrealist Salvador Dal was the subject of a new exhibition at The Dal Museum in St. Petersburg, FL.

Opened Oct. 18, the "Dal & Schiaparelli" exhibition was the first dedicated to the creative relationship and works of Ms. Schiaparelli and Mr. Dal, who were close friends and collaborators. Presented in collaboration with The Dal Museum and Schiaparelli Paris, the exhibition features haute couture gowns and accessories, paintings, drawings and other objects by the avant-garde couturier and artist ([see story](#)).

Other brands have taken a different route to incorporating art and luxury, placing their own luxury designs into a museum context, elevating the designs into works of art themselves. This often happens with heritage brands, whose older designs have both aesthetic value and historical relevance.

For instance, on Avenue Marceau in Paris, and in Marrakech, Morocco, on the aptly named Rue Yves Saint Laurent, the Saint Laurent Paris brand has opened two of the former residences of designer Yves Saint Laurent to the public.

These two museums are dedicated to the life's work of Yves Saint Laurent, and will offer visitors an intimate look at his workspaces, sketches and inspirations on hallowed fashion ground ([see story](#)).

Similarly, Christian Dior recounted the influence of its founding designer's childhood home in Granville, Normandy, France in a museum exhibition.

"Christian Dior and Granville: The Source of a Legend" opened at the Christian Dior Museum in Granville on April 8 and was featured at the museum until Sept. 24. The exhibition is part of the brand's ongoing 70th anniversary celebrations ([see story](#)).



Musee Yves Saint Laurent Paris Open House Day, Oct. 1, 2017. Image credit: Muse Yves Saint Laurent Paris

Other museum exhibits focus less on a single brand and more on a luxury category as a whole.

London's Victoria & Albert Museum will host a new series featuring works and artifacts from one of the most luxurious industries in history: luxury ocean liners.

The "Ocean Liners: Speed & Style" exhibit, opening Feb. 3, 2018, will feature objects from ocean liners and artifacts recovered from sinking ships, with many of the pieces of jewelry on display being created by luxury brands that remain in operation nearly a century later in many cases. The Victoria & Albert's exhibit will also display one of the largest, intact fragments from the Titanic's first class lounge ([see story](#)).

Craftsmanship

One strategy that brands have employed to highlight their designs is to place more of an emphasis on the work of their craftsmen.

In many marketing efforts, brands have opened the doors to where their products are created, showcasing the design and crafting processes that go into each product.

By doing this, brands are not only giving some much needed attention to the workers who actually make the goods and who are often neglected in favor of the big name designers who oversee the project, but also showcasing the

care and work that goes into the realization of those designs.

For example, U.S. fashion brand John Varvatos is forging a connection between the brand's American values and the long tradition of Italian leather craftsmanship in a line of handmade apparel and footwear.

The Artisan Experience collection is being promoted through a short film that explores the painstaking, hand-crafted process of creating a pair of John Varvatos shoes in Italy. By juxtaposing the two influences on the collection's designs, John Varvatos is hoping to create a global product that appeals to customers on both sides of the Atlantic ([see story](#)).

Similarly, British fashion house Thomas Pink took consumers inside the workshop where its shirts are made in a second short video.



Thomas Pink's "Meet the Shirtmakers" campaign. Image credit: Thomas Pink

This film gives a voice to the artisans at Smyth and Gibson in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, who share their stories and perspectives. One worker talks about his four-decade career in the industry, while another shares that the workshop employs multiple sets of siblings, contributing to the overall feeling of family at the factory ([see story](#)).

Celebrating the artisans that actually make the designs has proven to be an effective way to highlight the uniqueness and importance of those designs.

Italian apparel and accessories house Canali is taking inspiration from the art world to immerse consumers in the craftsmanship behind its creations.

"The Gallery" presents Canali products in a virtual space indicative of a museum, inviting consumers to explore the making of its garments in greater detail. Canali has recently been reinventing the craftsmanship film, finding new ways of telling its production story to a digital audience ([see story](#)).

Designing ends

Design is in an invaluable part of the luxury world.

An elegant and noteworthy design is what sets a luxury good apart from the pack and tapping into not only new ways to create interesting designs, but also new ways to highlight and market those designs has become key to surviving in the luxury business today.

From taking inspiration from Apple to working across sectors for hybrid designs, from embracing luxury as art to putting consumer's attention on the craftsmen who realize designs, luxury brands have found numerous ways to make design a key part of their strategy.

Best practices for design

- Stephanie Tisch, art director at Seraph
 - "While art can be enormously broad and sometimes elusive to define, in this case I use it to mean the unique quirks and creative expression that make a brand singularly original. Don't hone off the irregular edges that make your voice unique. Celebrate and amplify them. Don't be a wandering generality. Be a meaningful specific. Which takes us to 'meaningful.'"
 - "It's been said, 'people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it.' People buy purpose. They vote with their dollars. A brand I love and commend for the deeply meaningful, purpose-driven expression is [Cora](#).

Aside from their exceptionally sophisticated packaging for women sick of feminine clichés, this passionate company not only creates organic tampons yes, feminine products, who knew the luxury market could extend to such an historically taboo subject? but exists to empower women by donating feminine products to girls in countries worldwide where there's little or no accessibility. Cora is an outstanding example of a business where passion meets purpose and the sincerity of their voice oozes from every touch point of their marketing. Bravo, Cora. Let us all learn from your eloquent example."

- Thomai Serdari, professor of luxury business marketing at NYU
 - "The best way to remain ahead of the curve is to look outside one's industry. For example, a fashion company should be studying what is happening in product design or architecture. This will impact not just the form of the new collection but possibly its structure and perhaps even its production process. Innovation stems from interdisciplinary thinking, not from a singular one."
 - "Additionally, luxury brands should spend substantial time redefining their essence, especially if they have been in the market for a long time. If they are relatively young, they should spend time developing their essence and making sure the concept behind the brand is universal these are concepts that speak to everyone and therefore make the brand successful. When a brand's essence is well defined, designers have an easier time responding to it with peripheral concepts that keep things fresh, innovative and surprising. Consumers don't want to be bored, and they certainly don't want to be taught lessons. Give them excitement and they will keep coming back."

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