

COLUMNS

The Virgilization of Virgil Abloh

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Virgil Abloh has been Virgilized.

He went from a graphic T-shirt designer in 2012 to a venerated renaissance figure eight years later. He is a DJ, a fashion and furniture designer, an artist, an architect, and *Time* magazine's one of the most influential people in the world. Duchamp is "his lawyer," as he rarely fails to point out, and quotation marks are signs of his ironic detachment.

Mr. Abloh's visual design language crossed arrows and black and yellow stripes - is made for social media and, some claim, stolen from the [Glasgow Airport sign](#). There are more Abloh collaborations that one can count.

The term Virgilization refers to a strategic transformation of an individual into an artist to de-emphasize the commercial nature of their output.

Virgilization is a sub-category of artification that can happen throughout the entire value chain, from conglomerates starting art foundations, buying auction houses, sponsoring exhibitions, to collaborating with artists on product creation, visual merchandising, and retail space.

Before Virgil Abloh, Coco Chanel and Louis Vuitton have been similarly artified.

Through self-fulfilling prophecy if someone is celebrated as an artist, they must be an artist artification gives a person the status of a cultural icon and enriches them with meaningful context and history. It turns their products into works of art filled with a symbolic authority.

Symbolic authority is easiest achieved in traditionally non-commercial settings, such as galleries, museums and art institutions.

MCA Chicago, High Museum of Art, Louvre, [Artsy](#) and Gagosian all welcomed Mr. Abloh once he became the artistic director of menswear at Louis Vuitton.

At Los Angeles' Little Big Man Gallery, he curated a show titled "Coming of Age." To celebrate its da Vinci exhibition, Louvre collaborated with Off-White on T-shirts and hoodies.

"**Figures of Speech**" is a 20-year retrospective of Mr. Abloh's career (he is 39), accompanied with a monograph with "more than 1,800 never-before-seen images pulled from the artist's personal files."

During Paris Fashion week in 2018, Gagosian hosted Mr. Abloh's collaboration with Murakami titled **TECHNICOLOR 2**. For Vitra, Design Miami, and UTA Artist Space in Los Angeles, Mr. Abloh designed furniture.

Artifying designers is an exceedingly cunning corporate strategy.

Pioneered by Chanel, it uses the art exhibition format to turn the founder into a prophet, the brand into a cult, and its products into art.

For example, at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, "Culture Chanel" showed Gabrielle Chanel's life and inspirations. Or, "Chanel No5" at Palais de Tokyo in Paris the famous fragrance was placed within the avant-garde artistic movement of the early 1920s.

With luxury fashion dominated by conglomerates with outsourced production, the sector needed the new symbolic capital.

In the past, luxury's symbolic authority was in the narrative of craftsmanship, provenance, rarity and celebration of artisans a narrative that the vast majority of luxury brands can no longer credibly own.

But brands still need cultural capital to grow, so they turn their products into works of art, enriched with magic and meaning.

The magic and meaning of art creates a rarity of products at scale. It keeps a brand symbolically desirable, and effectively removes the backlash of its growth.

By hiring Mr. Abloh, LVMH ensured that it: a) remains a contemporary and active element of culture, and b) keeps growing.

As a corporate strategy, Virgilization is genius. It amplifies Virgil Abloh's corporate brand, creates unbeatable competitive differentiation, justifies exorbitant pricing, and creates social distinction.

As a cultural act, it is dangerous.

The same strategy that creates a vertical distance against competition, such as \$3,000 Caravaggio-themed handbags or price-per request jewelry, also works to create a vertical distance between those who can afford the bag and those who cannot.

Some years ago, Highsnobiety editorial director Jean DeLeon wrote that "it's entirely possible Pyrex simply bought a bunch of Rugby flannels, slapped PYREX 23' on the back, and re-sold them for an astonishing mark-up of about 700 percent."

In a scathing **review by Frieze**, Mr. Abloh's MCA show was described as a "crass and corporate affair." An exhibition that aims to take a moral stand Black children carrying Louis Vuitton bags or a Rimowa luggage full of toy guns simply has to be able to enforce inclusivity and diversity beyond the aesthetic domain.

Trading with racial equity in the corporate realm is incomparable with acknowledging and honoring race in culture.

Black designers are plenty, and they are still largely invisible. Recently, tales of Mr. Abloh's appropriation became more frequent, and more burning, because of his seeming rip-offs of other Black designers.

Those that make truly original contributions beyond the "three percent" and create widely felt influence, such as Telfar Clemens and Shayne Oliver, struggle to become household names while keeping their creative independence.

Rather than Virgilizing Virgil Abloh, a single person, both luxury fashion and art would do better with funds, accelerators, education, access and opportunities for many.

Back in the 80s in New York, fashion designer **Willi Smith** invited artists, architects, performers and graphic designers to join his project of making art part of daily life. This approach does not square with luxury's artification strategy.

Duchamp said, "Art is either plagiarism or revolution."

Revolution this is not: a few months ago, during protests, Mr. Abloh was under fire for being insufficiently supportive

of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some called his donation "\$50" for its ironic detachment.

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