

MARKETING

Understanding the power of luxury's iconic products

January 25, 2021



A "buy less, buy better" attitude combined with consumers' search for values has led to a boom in iconic luxury products. Image credit: Shutterstock

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When I worked at [Cartier](#) in marketing, friends of mine would ask me, "Is there really an important marketing department there as they seem to be selling the same products?"

Today, still, I am being asked how the brand can be so successful while seemingly selling the same product ranges for decades. Well, maybe that is precisely the point.

Opening the *New York Times* style section last Sunday, you saw a sober Cartier ad with packshots of the [Just Un Clou](#), Trinity and Love jewelry ranges, as well as the Ballon Bleu, Tank, Panthre and Santos watch ranges. All but two were already resounding successes 15 years ago. Of course, some have benefited from slight design adjustments, but not all.

Last summer, Cartier [relaunched the Pasha watch range](#), which again, was very successful. Newcomers to the brand likely thought it was incredibly slick and innovative a rare round watch for the brand.

Older nostalgic folks such as me were also enthused to see this model from the 80s get a facelift.

Cartier's CEO explained the fascination of historic icons by citing writer Italo Calvino on an essay on why read the classics: "The first time we encounter a classic is not really a first time. It feels familiar because it was part of our collective imagination beforehand. We know the hero and the story, we have heard the melody somewhere, even if we don't remember when. Conversely, when we rediscover it the second time, it is a new first time."

As Cartier icons go, so goes the 2.55 leather bag and the little black dress at Chanel, bar suit from Dior, Burberry trench, Herms Birkin bag, and Gucci loafers or Bamboo bags.

As I develop in an entire chapter of *Future Luxe*, size matters. And under COVID-19 conditions, consumers have moved to a ["buy less, buy better" attitude](#) and they are going to the bigger brands Louis Vuitton for bags, Rolex for watches and, yes, Cartier, for jewelry but more importantly, the icons within those brands.

Shoppers are **still weary of health matters** as the pandemic has entered a dangerous new phase and purchases are focused on the essentials, not the "nice to haves."

Interestingly, this also comes at a time, when last year, many brands struggled with inventory issues, as a majority of stores were shut in the spring, and decided to cut orders on seasonal, whimsical products and focus volumes on so-called evergreen or carryover items.

Many companies noted that "signature products" those carrying more **obvious logos** outperformed in handbags and **"iconic products"** (the equivalent in watches and jewelry: no big fat logo but design a differentiator) also doing well. Some wondered how logos could outperform in a pandemic: it was not logos per se it was the classics, the icons, the core products.

Innovation is key in luxury and we certainly do not want to go back to the era of ubiquity that was a headwind for some brands seven or eight years ago. At the same time, **first-time purchasers** are drawn to the classics.

As the world re-opens hopefully later this year, it is likely icons will continue to outperform as the sector is still driven in many cases by first-time purchasers.

The game to please both newcomers and loyal consumers is thus to re-interpret icons on a very regular basis see the endless **versions of the Chanel jacket** season after season so newcomers are thrilled, but repeat purchasers remain entertained.

It is not a surprise that when a new designer takes over at a brand, she or he immediately focuses on "revisiting the brand's archives." It is not a sign of weakness, complacency or lacking ideas it is about continuing to write a legacy. And if you can come up with one icon of your own, that will just add another pillar to the brand temple you are building.

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