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Artist collaborations should accentuate what already exists in a brand

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By JOE MCCARTHY

The intersection of contemporary art and luxury has always been hectic with shout-outs and an atmosphere of grandeur, but when the two fields merge through collaborations, can tangible value be gleaned?

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Brands are able to highlight their devotion to craft and innovation by borrowing an artist's aesthetic, but such maneuvers can have the unintentional consequence of downplaying the quality of that brand's own hard-earned aesthetic. Also, commercialization of venerated artists may jeopardize the aura of ultra-exclusivity that has driven art sales at both auctions and fairs to all-time highs.

"Overall, brands should consider an artist or designer to be a collaborator," said Cory Pierce, planning director for global creative agency **ATTIK**, San Francisco. "It's an active, fruitful relationship that results in shared content.

"The brand contributes raw materials in its product and attitude, and an artist can work to take the brand to new places," he said. "It's crucial that the brand is perceived as a collaborator for two reasons. First, the simple application of an artist's name to branded content is likely to be sniffed out by the sophisticated audience the brand is trying to reach.

"They'll know if a brand is just trying to exploit an artist's name to generate visibility. Second, it is crucial that a brand's spirit shines through the collaboration, and the artist is accentuating things that already existed in the brand."

Some flair

Luxury brands look to collaborate with contemporary artists for many reasons. Perhaps most immediately, brands want to remind consumers that they have artistic roots or that designing luxury products requires a level of ingenuity redolent of a talented artist.

Next, an artist's reputation can lend a note of exclusivity to a brand's image, since an artist's output is normally more limited and obscure.

British fashion house Alexander McQueen brought a touch of the art world into its skull scarves to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the iconic accessory.



Alexander McQueen and Damien Hirst scarf

The label selected artist Damien Hirst to design a capsule collection of scarves, which became available for purchase Nov. 15. By partnering with Mr. Hirst, McQueen is equating its scarves with art pieces and piquing collector, and therefore consumer, interest ([see story](#)).

Furthermore, artists can provide a spark for a brand looking to reinvent itself. Consumers may begin to see a brand in a new light following an artist's input and inspiration may be gained to steer a collection in a different direction.



Jeff Koons' original Balloon Venus

For instance, Champagne brand Dom Pérignon used its new Instagram page to show off its collaborative project with artist Jeff Koons as a way to reinvent itself and appeal to younger consumers. The limited-edition Balloon Venus bottle and gift box was unveiled at a brand event during New York Fashion Week after a two-year collaboration ([see story](#)).

Although collaborations at first glance can seem unequivocally beneficial, brands should still approach the subject scrupulously. A brand hunting for a quick jolt of energy may endorse an artist, but if done too hastily or without a fundamental motive, such a move will appear cheap.

Conversely, an artist's reputation can suffer when joining a brand merely for the sake of exposure.

Brands that do team up with an artist should ensure that values align and the occasion furthers some tangible agenda such as reaching a new audience.

"If the client insists on associating with an artist, it's vital that they do so in a way that the association complements each one's brand strategy," said Rob Frankel, branding expert at marketing consultancy firm [Frankel & Anderson](#), Los Angeles.

"In other words, simply slapping an artist's work on to your product may increase sales marginally over the short term, but it won't do anything for either brand over the long haul," he said. "In fact, many artists' value will actually sink as the result of over exposure.

"The most notable example of this kind of failure is Keith Haring. He skyrocketed in value, then plummeted after over-exposure. Even posthumously, his work suffered in loss of monetary and collectible value. If their messages are close, however, there's a small chance it could work, even then, not for long."

Where is the boundary?

Any semantic wall that exists between luxury high fashion and contemporary art shrinks when museums officially honor designers.

For example, soon after a stint in Stockholm, The Brooklyn Museum in New York is now host to the first international exhibition of French haute couture and ready-to-wear fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier Oct. 25 through Feb. 23 that demonstrates the many inspirations that gird a luxury brand.



“The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk” multimedia exhibition traces the designer’s rise and showcases approximately 140 haute couture and prêt-à-porter ensembles. The vast collection of avant-garde works explore the impact that Mr. Gaultier has had on the world of fashion and beyond ([see story](#)).

Luxury hotels consistently play the Medici role for artists to drive exposure without having to worry about the cross-branding that product-centric brands must consider.

Four Seasons Hotel Dublin is tapping into Ireland’s artistic culture by hosting a “Sculpture in Context” event beginning Nov. 5 that will likely pique the interest of art enthusiasts.



“Polygons” by Fionnuala Hanahoe

The national exhibition will feature 35 pieces of art that will range in price from \$200 to \$40,000 from figures such as Limerick figurative artist Mike Duhan. Hosting Sculpture in Context demonstrates that the property is invested in the local and national culture, a move that further authenticates its offers ([see story](#)).

With Art Basel sweeping across Miami Dec. 5 - 8, brands will be keenly attuned to ripples in the art world. ATTIK's Mr. Pierce suggested that if a brand is considering an artist collaboration, it should be treated as a rare endeavor that goes beyond rote brand advocacy.

"It's likely that a collaboration with an established artist can generate visibility for a brand, especially through an integrated effort," Mr. Pierce said.

"However, visibility isn't enough, he said. "A collaboration with an artist should aim to create engaging and worthwhile content, including product collaborations, that give the audience a strong return for their attention.

"If there is a formula that brands can follow, it's finding the right collaborator, focusing their attention on the right aspect of the brand, and letting them create new content over time."

Final Take

Joe McCarthy, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York

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