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The new luxe

THE EXCLUSIVE IS EVER MORE ELUSIVE - BUT WE KNOW THE WAYS, IF YOU HAVE THE MEANS...

Global luxury goods sales were up 14 per cent in the first six months of this year and are expected to have topped \$230bn by year-end, a bounce back to pre-9/11 figures. The Gucci group, for one, saw sales up 20 per cent between January and June. And all the luxury goods giants seem to be opening stores beyond the traditional fashion capitals, as new territories are exploited. It's all making for very rich gravy.

Yet there is unease. It's not just that a massive terrorist assault or crash in property prices or any other economic or geo-political malevolence could upset the teak, fur-lined apple cart. Or that the business of fine things is always subject to spikes and sharp dips. But more that the most sophisticated consumer is developing a different concept of luxury; their objects of desire have become intangible. The very idea of luxury is being contested, while business for luxury goods makers is increasingly coming from the big, fat base of the taste pyramid. Of course, there is money to be made there, with the Russians (see W*94) and the lunching ladies who simply must get their compacts and Vertus into the latest handbag. Never mind the heaving masses who have acquired a taste for cashmere, decent wine and 'designer' furniture and are trading up into luxe as if their lives depended on it.

Amex Centurion has been trying to get at the nub of this problem, interviewing a 'Futures 100' panel of creative and business brains for their take on what luxury really does mean right now. The panel includes Giorgio Armani, Heston Blumenthal, Alexander McQueen, Ian Schrager, Patrizia Moroso, Tomas Maier, Marc Newson and Marcel Wanders. And all this insight has been boiled down and beefed up by the London-based prediction agency, The Future Laboratory.

Giorgio Armani, for one, offers a sharp take on the existential crisis in the world of luxury goods: 'The most defining change in the last couple of years has been the move towards personalisation and customisation, which is a direct consequence of the massification of luxury. The notion that everyone around the world would be carrying a so-called 'luxury bag of the season', to the extent that several women could arrive at the same party with the same bag, has devalued the sense of luxury. The reaction has been an increasing desire for true luxury.' But what is true luxury? There is more to this than the rush for the bespoke and the limited edition, although this is indeed luxury's big story of the moment.

The report suggests that what we might call the Moscow model of luxury consumption is but



gauche baby steps. This stage it calls Acquisitive Luxury: conspicuous consumption at its most conspicuous, designed only to impress on others just how much cash you have at your disposal.

The next stage is Inquisitive Luxury. This is where savvy and discretion enter the picture, where a certain connoisseurship and taste for the bespoke join the party. An understanding, as the report suggests, of why an 18-year-old single malt is better than a 12-year-old. Or the inner workings of a bespoke suit and how a shoulder can sit just so. It is at this stage that we start to look for quality and exclusivity in all things, from socks to salt, audio equipment to olive oil.

A third stage the report calls Authoritative Luxury. By now, the consumer has left whim, fancy, fad and fashion behind. They are utterly confident in their own taste and expertise. They have become collectors and archivists, true taste-makers perhaps. They invest in ancient valve amps and architectural drawings. These are the people currently developing the market for 'design as art' (see W*91).

You can see an attempt to cater to such an element in many of the new fashion flagships. 'Increasingly, stores will be run like ateliers,' says the report, 'with art and fashion sitting side by side and fashion designers regarded as dealers or sourcers.' It cites Paul Smith's London »

Up-and-coming

THE NEW GALLERY GHETTO GIVING TORONTO ART AND SOUL

It seems unlikely that Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health seeded the regeneration that's going on around it - in the area known as West Queen West (with Queen Street West, or QSW, at its pumping heart) - but affordable rents, good studio and exhibition space, an artistic community of long standing and some under-appreciated architecture have been key draws. West Queen West has now emerged as Toronto's gallery ghetto.

There is still no shortage of used appliance stores and car washes, but they're joined by arty eateries such as Beaver Café (1192 QSW, tel: 1.416 537 2768) and Swan (892 QSW, tel: 1.416 532 0452). At cult chip shop Chippy's (at 893), you'll see local artists and musicians and day-release mental patients and struggle to guess who's who. But the area has moved beyond boho. A number of major loft developments set to open next year foretell a boom proper.

At The Beaconsfield (1154, QSW, tel: 1.416 516 2550) locals discuss property over butternut squash soup. It's the done thing. After building up an appetite at Type Books (883 QSW, tel: 1.416 336 8973) and having a drink at Camera Bar (1028 QSW, tel: 1.416 530 0011), filmmaker Atom Egoyan's cinephile lounge. The savviest Torontonians also tangle at Unit (1198 QSW, tel: 1.416 537 6646), The Gladstone Hotel (1214 QSW, tel: 1.416 531 4635) and The Drake Hotel (1150 QSW, tel: 1.416 531 5042) and often end up being very sociable at The Social (1100 QSW, tel: 1.416 532 4474).
Antoinette Di Michele





Curiosity Shop as an example of this trend. We are, as Dutch designer Hella Jongerius has it, in the market for narratives. The stories behind products are the luxuries.'

However, the report suggests, the most sophisticated consumers have progressed even beyond this stage into the rarefied realm of Meditative Luxury: 'This is where luxury moves away from the product and into the realm of experience. Consumers at this level realise that what matters is fulfilment, and seek it increasingly through learning new skills and engaging with culture or politics on a personal level.' Says Patrizia Moroso of Moroso: 'The concept of luxury is not tangible or material; you can understand it if you have the consciousness but you cannot simply buy it.'

Established ideas of what luxury is are toppling in many areas. Le Fooding, a movement among French chefs, is a rejection of the Michelin star system and all it presumes about what fine dining is. Followers are throwing away their stars, dropping prices and rethinking the dining experience. It is an effort to strip away years of accrued crud and pretension to get back to the essentials.

Experience is the new luxury buzz word. 'It has gone beyond service to doing something that gives you the highest and best experience,' says hotelier Ian Schrager. This requires highly trained and motivated staff at all levels, who have been given the power to act on their own initiative. We are yet to be convinced that this is really happening. But we live in hope.

Engagement is another key factor in the new luxury; rather than passive consumption, people are after a pro-active stake in a creative process. Hence the emergence of so-called 'co-creation' schemes. So runs the blurb: 'Co-creation

Luxury's new buzz words are experience and engagement

enables a group of like-minded people to create a product, service or even a community that is free from the normal rules of commerce, because it is driven by their passion and shaped by their choices.' One such group of the like-minded, The Ladybank Company of Distillers, is investing in a run-down Scottish mill and converting it into a top-end, small batch whisky distillery. The scheme asks members not for a simple financial drop, but that they invest time and money in developing ideas for how the distillery should be run. They can get involved in the whisky-making process, and the distillery will also function as a members' retreat. It is business as plaything and pastime, nice business, interesting business, luxury business. It's the chance to develop your own luxury product.

It is also clear that conscience is going to play an increasingly important role in luxury purchases. Says Lady Bamford, owner of British company Daylesford Organic, 'People are asking more questions and the choices they make are intelligent. They want to know where products come from, whether they come from cheap labour.' The modish demand for a clear(ish) conscience is affecting the luxury travel market, too, with the rise of what is being called Cause Related Tourism. 'Eco-luxe is a naff phrase,' acknowledges Glen Donovan of exclusive travel agency Earth, 'but it sums up the combination of good design with natural materials in a really

quiet environment. In other words, it's about neither guilt nor gilt.'

The report is so far so good, if a little fuzzy round the edges. But it doesn't leave matters there. It goes on to suggest that we – or at least the elite band of super-consumers, the sharp point on the taste triangle – are entering an even more advanced consumer age, Enlightened Luxury. In this phase, states the report, 'the lessons learnt at each previous stage – the value of money, discernment, a desire to learn and collect and appreciation of the intangible – distill into a singular state. Here, the emphasis is on only ever buying one of something – even if it means waiting for the best, the most luxurious, the most perfect.' Hmm. It's a stretch. And an attempt to tidy up what is not a tidy picture.

But what it might get at is how much the idea of luxury is now up for grabs, how worn out and threadbare existing notions of exclusivity, quality and style are. No one is an innocent consumer any more and the weight of meaning attached to luxury might be forcing it to crash under its own weight. 'Luxury is now more hidden,' says Dutch designer Marcel Wanders, 'disguised under a blanket of innovation, intention and meaning. Before, it was just about spending money; now, it's about content, meaning and excitement. What defines luxury is the ability to know and decide.' But decisions, decisions, decisions, there's a problem. Luxe has become a universal promise, a contradiction in terms.

The last words go to Zowie Broach and Brian Kirby of British fashion label Boudicca. 'Luxury is an experience that may cost, but it is about history, recommendation and association. This is where the value lies. Luxury items are the spoils of a journey of exploration – the finest souvenirs of our civilisation.' That works for us. ✪

Frequent flyers

THE BIG HITS IN OUR BEST-LOVED STORES AROUND THE WORLD

Heidi Klein, London:

'Dominica' bikini

Sharing a frustration at being unable to find sexy swimwear and travel accessories when they needed them, Heidi Gosman and Penny Klein created Heidi Klein in 2002, Notting Hill's one-stop bikini and bikini-wax pre-beach pit stop. In August this year they opened Heidi Klein NYC on the Upper East Side. A hit in London right now is the 'Dominica', a brown or blue polka dot bikini, with a flattering halter-neck top. £139, from Heidi Klein, 174 Westbourne Grove, London W11, tel: 44.20 7243 5665, www.heidiklein.com

Cacao Sampaka, Madrid:

Dried Fruit and Nuts Collection

This concept chocolate store and café, created by confectionery masters Ramon Morató and Quim Capdevila, is frequented by those who know their cocoa. Currently melting the resolve of its regulars is the beautifully boxed Dried Fruit and Nuts Collection, featuring confections with pistachios, pine nuts, almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts and sesame seeds. Our carry-on is choc-ful of boxes. €7.50 for a box of 16, from Cacao Sampaka, Calle Orellana 4, Madrid, tel: 34.91 319 5840, www.cacaosampaka.com

Design Post Köln, Köln:

'Smock' armchair

Köln's design exhibition space, in the grounds of an old post office distribution centre, attracted 40,000 visitors when it opened in January and Patricia Urquiola's playful 'Smock' armchair continues to please the crowds. It features a removable leather cover, easily mistakable for a pair of giant knickers, set over a steel frame standing on a central tube, like a wine glass. €1,975, by Patricia Urquiola, for Moroso, from Design Post Köln, Deutz-Mülheimer Strasse 22a, Köln, tel: 49.221 69 06 50, www.designpostkoeln.de

Our favourite is... Culti, Milan: fragrance diffuser

Culti sells everything from food to furniture, lighting to living rooms, but the object of desire for design-savvy Milanese is its new fragrance diffuser. With a permanent vaporiser system, its steamed rattan roots work with the perfume to effect a gradual but continuous release of fragrance. With a maple cap and a smart wooden container, the diffuser is available in 11 scents, such as tea and chocolate. Air has never been so stylish. From £45, by Culti, Corso Venezia 53, Milan, tel: 39.02 780 637, www.culti.it Emma Moore

