



Crafting Luxury

CRAFTSMANSHIP,
MANUFACTURE,
TECHNOLOGY AND THE
RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

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Preface:

The Hand of the Maker

Crafting Luxury takes an independent view of the global luxury market, its idiosyncratic definitions and its constantly changing position in defining products and services.

The authors – a designer of product and jewellery, a brand strategist and a fashion designer, an architect, and a sociologist and specialist in business management – are practitioners and academics. Their approach to dissecting the complex world of luxury brings distinct viewpoints to the debate, offering different perspectives, thoughts and interpretations of luxury. While their voices might, by the nature of their expertise, sometimes present a different tone, it is the merging of that expertise and knowledge that gives deep understanding and nuance to the convictions they share and that shape the book.

The authors do not see craft as the starting point in the design and creation of luxury, but as a continuum. The act of making is present at every phase, from concept to the presentation of merchandise in stores or online. How a product is made defines whether or not it could be considered a luxury good. The hand of the maker is ever present, whether or not one has direct knowledge of that maker.

Purveyors of luxury goods, whether they are independent artisans or multinational conglomerates, understand that the crafting of luxury is the defining feature of each product showcased to an audience. Some customers may be quite discerning, seeking out luxury and capable of making judgements about quality and pricing. Others rely on information provided by the artisan or the brand to make their decision.

While the individual artisan selling his or her creations has a more direct relationship to the product they create and with the consumer to whom it is sold, in larger establishments the process by which luxury goods are crafted is less direct. In the largest firms, the customer relies on messages communicated through merchandising and marketing, and through his or her interaction with salespersons.

The location of the store, its architectural features, the arrangement of merchandise within the store, the website, messages communicated by the brand about its heritage and identity and indeed, statements made about the quality and craftsmanship of products and their prices – all contribute to the knowledge a customer has, as well as to his or her opinions about the value of the brand's products. It is often taken for granted that the brand is a purveyor of luxury goods and that the products are well made, unique in their design features and created from the highest quality materials.

Still, this knowledge could recede into the background of a consumer's consciousness or not even be a consideration on which they dwell or think of at all. The shopper's knowledge could merely stem from the associations he or she has of the brand and what that brand's universe represents. A luxury customer absorbs information about the quality of the goods they consider buying. Perhaps an influencer played an important role, or the brand's marketing messaging resonated with them.

Our image of ourselves is frequently caught up in what we wear, or drive, the items we surround ourselves with, where we live or vacation, the gifts we bestow on others. Everything resonates. As such, thinking about and shopping for luxury products is an emotional experience. What is in the mind of that person as he or she decides to explore or shop at that particular establishment? Probably the sensations evoked as they walk into a store or visit a website and have an experience defined as exceptional and worthy of the luxury designation.

The way goods are displayed and handled by the salesperson, the fact that the price is not mentioned or obscured – all these convey the message that the product has been carefully made. Some brands go so far as to blatantly misrepresent the process by which products are crafted. An advertisement, for instance, could show a contemplative artisan sewing a handbag by hand in a workshop when in fact anonymous workers make them in factories at a rapid rate.

Others take for granted that merchandise is hand crafted. The 'Made In...' label confers on it a heritage and alludes to it being constructed according to practices that have not changed, or at least which uphold certain standards. Even those referred to as mass-market luxury brands rely on consumers making these associations and not making others. The worst association a consumer can make is to align that brand with mass marketed methods, and with marketing strategies aimed at obscuring the true nature of the products. This is a conclusion brands do not want, and many luxury businesses are built around leading the consumer away from making such judgements.

This work concludes with a number of pointers for future research and for readers to reflect upon. In the Final Thoughts chapter, key aspects are identified that are inextricably related to the luxury world and its creation.

The first one is the impact of the luxury industry on the planet and how people with ethical and sustainable perspectives perceive this.

Second, the role of technology in the creation and consumption of luxury is discussed highlighting the discrepancy between aspirations, promises – and reality and perception.

Third, a reflection on the fluid notion of luxury underpins how difficult it is to categorize with a fixed definition. It is, instead, an idea influenced by a number of factors – including financial, societal, and political, as well as a complex system of trends.

The changing nature of physical spaces and their digital extensions, where luxury products are experienced and sold, is discussed, concluding that the dichotomy of the physical and virtual is far from resolved, with a growing number of attempts by many luxury brands to offer exciting as well as disappointing experiences.

Some of the case studies analysed in this book pave the way for a promising direction, one where customers are part of the creation of the luxury process. Customers who are deeply involved in the luxury experience are likely to share more personal data, a development luxury companies benefit from and try to cultivate. But this does pose questions on the privacy and ethics of this kind of surveillance, questioning the extent to which customers are aware of the ways in which their personal information is used.

While some sections and chapters may have started out as the work of one author, each writer has brought his or her perspective to bear on the entire book, discussing it, writing and rewriting it collaboratively. In this way, the book can be called a collaborative project, representing collective thinking on the matter of luxury in all its manifestations.

The aim of the Final Thoughts chapter is to highlight these salient points to the reader in the hope that future work and discussions will continue to scrutinize the important questions raised.