

LUXURY, LIES AND MARKETING

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION
OF THE LUXURY BRAND



MARIE-CLAUDE SICARD

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Shattering the Illusions of the
Luxury Brand

By Marie-Claude Sicard
Translated by Trevor Cribben Merrill

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INTRODUCTION

The book you've just opened is not a marketing book of the kind you're perhaps accustomed to reading.

Rest assured, you'll find lots of information, numerous luxury brands, and tables and charts, as well as an analytical method—but that's not all. You'll also find anecdotes and reflections about the history of luxury, a digression by way of linguistics to help define the concept, other digressions via sociology and art history, and comparisons among the various forms of luxury, past and present. And all of this so thoroughly mixed together that if you're a hardcore marketing fanatic, honesty compels me to warn you that you'll be frustrated.

Why fly in the face of all the rules of business literature in this way?

First of all because there are already many excellent marketing textbooks devoted to luxury. What's the point of restating what everybody else has said? The only justification for another book on the subject is that this one offers another point of view and speaks in a different tone.

Secondly because I don't believe in the compartmentalization of disciplines or in the existence or validity of "pure" marketing, assuming that such a beast even exists. Marketing is nothing without the whole range of social sciences to which it belongs.

Above all, I think that, when talking about luxury, interdisciplinarity is not only enlightening but unavoidable. One can master the marketing of beer or sneakers and be unaware of the history of beer or sports and their major political, social, and economic aspects. One should be in sync with the immediate needs of the market. In luxury, this is impossible.

Managers looking for rapid results, or students enrolled in one of the innumerable training seminars on luxury marketing that have sprouted up like mushrooms over the last few years in every corner of the globe—all of them are on the wrong path when they seek recipes for success that are instantly profitable and applicable to the problems they're facing or their professional projects. Lacking a real culture of luxury, they condemn themselves to understanding

only the surface, and, more precisely, those facets of the surface they're able to imitate. Of course, imitation is a stage that one has to go through when learning about a subject, but it cannot be the basis for a brand strategy, in luxury or anywhere else. For if a brand is fundamentally a difference, in luxury it's a difference raised to the power of two. Either differentiation is scrupulously respected, or else you leave brand logic behind.

Anyone who tries to imitate the way such and such a Swiss watchmaking brand does business, for example, hoping to rapidly achieve the same success, is going to run afoul of the reality principle. Following a given business model or marketing strategy to the letter won't do much good. To attain the same level of quality and acquire the same reputation, you would have to have a lot of money, hire the best specialists, and, above all, have a lot of time on your hands. Assuming that all these conditions were met, you'd still be far from the goal: you might as well try to fashion a tree out of a trunk and some branches. You might be able to make a convincing replica of a tree, but no matter how good an imitation the tree is, if it doesn't have roots it's not a tree. The first storm that comes along will knock it down, and storms are a constant in the highly turbulent luxury sector.

The roots of Swiss watchmaking cannot be imitated. They are too old, too deep, and, above all, they are religious, as is the case whenever you dig down into the deepest layers of luxury.¹

The proof? It's not to be found in any marketing textbook, but in the history of Geneva.

Paradoxically, it was by banning luxury in the 16th century that Calvin jumpstarted an industry that still dominates the world stage today. Until then the city was home to a few highly regarded silversmiths; but the influx of Protestant refugees who had come from all over Europe to escape persecution, combined with the severity of the new laws introduced by Calvin, resulted in the artisan silversmiths converting to a business that was less ostentatious but more in sync with the era, namely clockmaking.

Calvinist Geneva was, like its founder, obsessed with time, time which belongs only to God, and to whom it must therefore be entirely devoted. How to avoid losing or wasting it? By making it possible for everyone to watch it going by. Clocks were installed all over the city, so the hour and length of the church services and sermons could

no longer be ignored. Calvin had, in effect, invented punctuality, extending into the public sphere an organization of time that, until then, was strictly observed only in monasteries and convents.²

Best of all, even as he presided over the creation of the Swiss clockmaking industry, Calvin promoted its export. The new austerity imposed by the reformer resulted in the enacting of sumptuary laws which, while they didn't prevent anyone in Geneva from making velvet, silk cloth, beautiful books, and high-priced jewels and clocks, forbade the citizens of Geneva from using or displaying them. All these luxury products were thus exported throughout Europe. Switzerland's reputation was made, and it has endured.

So you might think that it is within the reach of any audacious entrepreneur with a lot of money and knowledge of marketing methods to reproduce the success of Swiss clock- and watchmaking on the other side of the world. But you would be wrong. That entrepreneur would reproduce nothing but the surface appearance. And connoisseurs ready to spend millions of dollars for certain watches aren't going to pay for appearances, but only for reality, albeit an invisible one: four centuries of tradition, know-how, excellence, and innovation. It's immaterial, it's authentic, and thus inimitable. At a pinch one might be able to buy it by buying out some brand or other, but the price would be much higher than the sum of its material assets, factories, workshops, boutiques, and raw materials. The alternative is to start one's own brand, and to be patient, conscientious, hardworking, and inventive. Then one can hope to become part of the very exclusive Breguet, Patek Philippe, and Vacheron Constantin circle one day, even though they'll still be centuries ahead in a business where time is literally money. And one more thing: the only possible shortcut is to be part of the harem: the most recent ultra-top-of-the-line watchmaking brands (Richard Mille, Roger Dubuis, F. P. Journe) were all launched by Swiss makers. And when new talents emerge in the sector, like the Russian Konstantin Chaykin, where do they go to earn their stripes? To Switzerland, notably to Baselworld, the famous world watchmaking convention, or else they enter the Académie Horlogère des Créateurs Indépendants (Horological Academy of Independent Creators) in Zurich.

Marketing can do nothing against a force of such ancient provenance. It can neither create it out of whole cloth nor counteract it

nor get it back on track during a rough period such as the crisis in the 1970s. It was by reviving its traditions and not by using any sort of artifice that Swiss watchmaking regained its dominance in terms of innovation and quality, which are the only means of gaining access to luxury in a sector where excellence cannot be imitated. Without the help of history, we would seek in vain to understand how to achieve such success, and marketing all on its own would have a very hard time reproducing it.

* * *

The title of this book was inspired by the hypocritical reluctance of luxury brands—especially French ones—to talk about marketing. They turned up their noses at the word, or pretended that their advertisements had absolutely nothing in common with those used to vaunt the merits of a tube of toothpaste or a box of cereal. Such was their level of refinement that it elevated them far above the abject depths of mass consumption, and if they absolutely had to pronounce the horrible word “marketing,” they hastened to specify that luxury used a rarefied version, custom-designed for brands that steered well clear of the shopping center and supermarket underworld.

Yes, but here’s the catch: it was a big lie, and very easy to expose as such. One proof was the rapid ascension of main-street marketing professionals in the corporate hierarchies of luxury groups, and the swiftness with which they applied to Gucci or Vuitton what they had learned at Procter or Unilever. Soon rewarded for its services, good old marketing made its official entry into the royal court that, until then, had feigned to ignore its existence. There followed a frenzy of related activities: colloquia, polls, economic editorials, seminars, specialized PR firms, university diplomas and certificates, marketing textbooks. It was open season on luxury brands.

Alas, the hunt soon proved a disappointment, and all this frantic activity couldn’t hide the fact that, at bottom, luxury marketing was just plain old marketing, but with its hair brushed and its tie on straight.

Then, amidst the praise and congratulations with which the luxury microcosm was deluding itself, there was a sudden bang, like a gunshot: the success of a book less concerned with flattering

luxury brands than with raising a number of sore points for the public's benefit. First published in 2007, *Deluxe* had a French subtitle that was even more explicit than the English original: *Comment les marques ont tué le luxe (How Brands Have Killed Luxury)*.³ The message was clear and the arguments were well supported: in the name of profit, not to say cupidity, brands have compromised their integrity, and the lawsuits they've filed against counterfeiting should be directed instead at those brands' own fraudulent version of luxury.

Written in the form of an investigative report by a journalist from *Newsweek*, the book dispenses neither lessons nor advice: it merely details the results of a long, American-style investigation, without any deference to a milieu that the author, Dana Thomas, knows well and refrains from criticizing with undue harshness, though she doesn't pull her punches either. Where, except in the United States, could one say freely that a pair of Prada poplin cotton pants bought at a high price (500 dollars) were so badly sewn that no sooner had they been put on than the hem came undone, the pockets ripped, and the rear stitching split in two as soon as you moved? Where else would you hear a former designer explain that this was due to the poor quality of the thread used for the stitches—thread that's cheaper, but easily breaks? And admit that, in ten years, the global level of the brand's quality has significantly declined?

Not in France, in any event. Go to one of the most prominent jewelers in the Place Vendôme and ask to have three very simple gold rings slightly enlarged, and you'll be told it's technically impossible unless you cough up the price you paid for them originally. Take them to a local jeweler who does what you ask without the slightest difficulty and at no charge, then tell the aforementioned prominent jeweler in the Place Vendôme about the misadventure: the only apology you'll receive is the threat of a lawsuit if you ever make what happened public.⁴ Or else ask Ferragamo to clean a pair of pumps on which a rain shower left a stain, and you'll hear this priceless rejoinder: "But Madame, they've been worn!"

Examples of this kind are so numerous that I could have written a book with nothing but the avalanche of similar anecdotes gathered in the course of conducting the little inquiry I'll be talking about later on. Dana Thomas is right: brands have killed luxury, or, in any event, badly damaged it. Why? Because they have fallen

prey to a kind of marketing which, although it pretends to float high above the vicissitudes of ordinary commerce, nonetheless indulges in the same excesses as when working with breakfast cereals or toothpaste, and with the same results: desensitization, promotional and advertising oversaturation, cost reduction, and a race to the bottom in terms of quality. But it also generates earnings far greater than those of mass-market brands, and that's all that's asked of it by most conglomerates and luxury houses since they began the headlong chase for profits in the 1980s.

All this confirms an observation that's been looming on the horizon ever since this book was first conceived: luxury brands differ from others only in degree, not in essence. Just as a Chinese restaurant is a restaurant before being Chinese (or Greek, or Mexican), a luxury brand is first and foremost a brand before being a luxury brand. As such, it's a creature and a creation of industry, since even if brands have existed since the origins of commerce (a star-shaped incision on the neck of an Etruscan amphora for example), the major brands, in our sense of the word, were born with the explosion of the industrial era in the 19th century. They're thus all in the same mold: mass production in factories, at low cost, distributed on a large scale, and sold to as big a customer base as possible with the help of aggressive techniques that use every tool and media possible—the press, radio, television, and posters, to which today are added mobile phones, video, and tablets.

The lie of marketing is to make us believe that this description doesn't apply to luxury brands, which (above all in Italy and France), in the artisanal tradition, and domestically, using the most precious materials, supposedly manufacture unique, or at the very least rare, pieces of an extremely high quality (and thus very expensive), destined for the "happy few" for whom, in a small number of elegant boutiques, a suave reception and exclusive services await.

This description is not false, but it no longer applies except to a very small number of cases, which are now the exception to the rule. Today the rule is instead to multiply the number of standardized sales points, in shopping malls, airports, and major thoroughfares, where mass-produced products supported by enormous advertising campaigns are offered to the public at prices carefully calculated to appear just out of reach. Brand-name glasses, perfumes, scarves, watches, purses, and belts can be found in identical copies all over

the world, sometimes even in self-service dispensers. Industrial logic is at work here just as it is elsewhere, and today the economic press isn't mistaken when it speaks of the luxury *industry*.

Is it possible today to escape this contradiction? Do we really have the luxury industry and luxury marketing on the one hand, and, on the other, the venerable age and authenticity they are lacking? Here true luxury, there false luxury? Which was killed off by the brands Dana Thomas talks about: true or false luxury? For if she was right to have deflated the balloon behind which so many "luxury" brands were hiding shopkeepers' methods, what her argument is lacking is a clear and precise definition of luxury. What serves as her touchstone is not Luxury with a capital "L"—which doesn't exist in the absolute, and we'll see why—but one definition of luxury, which is left unspoken, as if everyone were too familiar with it for it to be necessary to be mentioned. All the same, what goes without saying goes even better when said, and this implicit definition, used as a yardstick for judging what is and is not luxury, is, in reality, a vision of things that, while it may not be slanted, is at the least subjective, born in Europe sometime in the 16th century, and adopted just about everywhere else all the way down to the present.

In the widest sense, it's European luxury. In the narrowest sense, French luxury.

I am convinced that this definition is much too narrow to account for phenomena as complex as luxury and the commercial practices that accompany it. It excludes too many other cultures, too many other luxuries, which may be forgotten or unknown but are neither less legitimate nor less dazzling. And these other luxuries are multiple sources of inspiration that can open up a whole range of possibilities for companies and marketing, one that's much wider than it appears at first glance.

* * *

How do you resist the pleasure of thinking you're the king of the world, when everyone is hastening to crown you? France is luxury's chosen land, and the French are supposedly in the best position to talk about luxury—this is the most widely held opinion. As I am French, and, moreover, Parisian, and familiar with luxury,

I am supposedly *automatically* in the best of all possible positions for defining luxury. To affirm the opposite would, as the old expression goes, be to bite the hand that feeds me.

Except that I don't like that hand.

French culture and *savoir-vivre* are universally admired, above all where luxury is concerned. Fine. But if you are absolutely determined to think that the culture reached its zenith with 17th-century classicism (a biased opinion, but one that continues to find adherents),⁵ then it must be recalled that all ostentation is anathema to that form of classicism, which is found, well before Versailles, in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. The concern for *guiding one's reason well*, for being rigorous, coherent, impartial, for resisting all excess, all passions, and expressing oneself clearly—that's the classical ideal.

I consider myself a guardian of that ideal and of a culture that could be called luxurious, inasmuch as it is priceless, because it couldn't be bought with all the gold in the world. Though I don't think it superior to any other, I am thus extremely loyal to it. I have a Cartesian mindset, and when I apply it to the notion of luxury, it obliges me to proceed as with everything else: that is to say, to *accept nothing as true* so long as I have not carefully examined it.

That is why, to the surprise of my listeners during lectures (notably in the United States and Asia), I always begin by wiping the slate clean of everything I think I know. When I tackled the question of luxury brands, I thus suspended my judgment and chose not to take for granted what everyone was saying around me, namely that French luxury is the oldest and most dazzling star in the Luxury galaxy, the one around which all the planets orbit and from which they receive the light they are lacking.

Am I exaggerating?

Hardly. When I undertook to establish a list of statements concerning luxury in books, interviews, newspaper and magazine articles, and conference presentations, here is a summary of what I found:⁶

- Luxury is French in its essence;
- it comes from the Latin *lux*, meaning “light”;
- it is of aristocratic origin;

- it goes back to the 18th century and has never faltered since then;
- it dominates the world, which recognizes its absolute supremacy;
- everything that isn't French isn't true luxury, in the best-case scenario it's "high-end." In the worst-case scenario, it's just marketing;
- true luxury has no need for marketing;
- or else, it requires a specific kind of marketing, which expresses luxury's superiority and thus is incommensurable with marketing in all other sectors.

Part of this book is devoted to showing that these articles of faith—and some others besides—are false. No point in adding that this demonstration didn't earn me any friends, but freeing oneself from universal approval is fairly liberating, once one offers proof that one is serious. It is a question of intellectual hygiene: you have to know how to maintain a good distance from what you're observing, close enough to see it distinctly, far enough not to feel any pressure.

And pressure, both direct and indirect, is liberally applied when you take aim at luxury brands. That said, the resistance they mount to criticism is entirely comprehensible. They have at their disposal numerous tactics to repel and parry it,⁷ which range from pure and simple contempt to organized countermeasures, tactics which are effective but narrowly corporatist, and which often resemble a kind of blackmail: for the media, for consulting firms, for authors, for academics (whose livelihood sometimes depends on a private sponsor whom it is better not to displease), the message is clear. Either you sing our praises, or you are excluded from the harem, and for the media the threat bears the full weight of advertising contracts without which radio, television, and the Internet would long since be dead.

I was lucky that I didn't have to fear such threats, because neither my career, nor my peace of mind depends on the pleasure or displeasure I may cause to luxury groups or brands. Provided I cannot be suspected of conniving with them and provided I explain why I don't believe in their definition of luxury, one may find my positions irritating, but not intellectually unfounded.

This independence—another luxury, one of the most precious there is—combined with the suspicion that the official line was too comforting to be credible, induced me to conduct my own inquiry, whose outcome confirmed the intuition that distance was necessary for gaining a clear vantage point.

I polled everyone I could find, young people and not so young people, city dwellers and countryfolk, French and non-French, very low and very high earners. Relentlessly, I asked them all the same question: what is luxury for you? My point of view was that famous chefs are not the only ones to know about good food, which also belongs to the people who eat it.

First observation: everybody has an opinion about the question and answers it obligingly, even enthusiastically, no matter what their qualifications. It's a well-known fact that luxury arouses interest; it seduces, moves, and even enthuses some people. I met people who were wary of it, others who worshiped it like a god or who criticized it severely, but I met almost no one who was indifferent to it. And research confirms this, for luxury has been a hotly debated topic in all societies, as the history of sumptuary laws shows.

Second observation: three-quarters of the responses (out of a total of about three hundred people) converge on a single definition: luxury is the freedom to do what one wants, where and when one wants to do it. Only afterwards did people add that it takes money to accomplish this. But not a fortune, just enough to enjoy that freedom. In other words *luxury is not commercial luxury*: only luxury vendors can make you think otherwise, and the more they try, the more they stray from the heart of what the word luxury means. Luxury is not embodied *first and foremost* in an object that can be purchased (except, obviously, for the most meager incomes); rather, it's a state of being, a way of living in harmony with one's deepest desires, which go well beyond the acquisition of a possession or of a few moments of luxury, even when these are included. Descartes already said this: common sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world. Nobody seriously thinks that luxury is a pair of Louboutins, a Rolex watch, or dinner at Noma. These are moments or objects of luxury, but "true luxury" floats high above them, in the sphere of values without a price tag.

Third observation, which is a corollary of the preceding one: the human dimension is paramount, and it is often mishandled in the public's interactions with luxury houses. Many people, without my having to ask, told me about an awkward experience they'd had, often related to the way they had been received and treated. Their favorite expression? It came up so often that I'll cite it as is: "They looked at me like I was a piece of shit." They all said more or less the same thing: while some luxury products are of very high quality and while their presentation is very refined, the welcome and the service you receive are sometimes unworthy of their reputation. "The highest form of luxury is politeness," somebody told me, "because it is becoming so rare. I don't know who those people think they are, but you can't be polite when you think you're superior to others." And they added: "maybe I wasn't dressed up to the standards of those people, but they didn't have to look down on me just because I was in a t-shirt and sneakers. Do you want to know what luxury is for me? Well, it starts with the freedom not to be judged based on appearances."

In the 1970s, Gucci earned itself a magazine article entitled "The rudest store in New York," for the way its customers were treated in its American boutiques.⁸ It seems that there are more and more candidates today for this dubious title. And it is certain that the masses of Asian and Russian *consumers*, who, for the moment, are immune to mistreatment, will quickly give way to a new generation of consumers who have become *customers*, and who will be better informed and more demanding because accustomed to being increasingly well-treated by the commercial system in its entirety. When they cross the threshold of a luxury house, why should they put up with a brutal regression in customer service, when it's getting better everywhere else? Why should they accept that when a watch they bought with a lifetime guarantee stops working they are asked an exorbitant price for repairs? Why should they believe that a wall of perfume bottles in the noisy, overpopulated aisles of a cosmetic supermarket is luxury? Or even that it's luxury to wait half an hour in the rain for the right to enter a store? Why should they want to visit practically empty boutiques where three T-shirts hanging from a rope occupy the center of a concrete wall as wide as a freeway, with the suspicious gazes of the bouncers positioned at the entrance playing

over them the whole time? And why should they pay the price of a television for one of these T-shirts?

They won't put up with this indefinitely. The little poll that I've been talking about obviously has no statistical value, but it's an instructive "sampling" of public opinion. It confirms that the chasm between luxury as presented by brands and as seen by the public is widening. Of course, the feedback I gathered has to be contextualized: bad experiences leave more traces than good or neutral ones, and they are related with greater vehemence. One would also have to be very naïve to think that luxury can be reduced to the spectacle offered by the most well-known brands. What we see in magazines and on billboards is just the tip of the luxury iceberg, the golden fringe of a thick curtain behind which amateurs, tradespeople, and various other operators are at work, all of them unknown to the public.

* * *

It remains for me to explain why certain questions that I am often asked about luxury brands will not be dealt with here.

The principle reason is that nobody possesses universal knowledge anymore, even about the subject that he or she knows the best, even if you reduce that field of expertise to a bare minimum—an operation which, incidentally, is very dangerous, like any reductionist undertaking. I know that in some cultures it is expected that an expert or a professor be able to answer any and all questions. In Abu Dhabi, my first students looked at me in bewilderment when I explained to them that the most honest answer is sometimes, "I don't know, I'm going to find out." They saw this as an admission of ignorance that was incompatible with professorial or professional authority. I see it as the only tenable position in the face of a mass of information that now greatly exceeds the storage capacity of any one human's memory. The hour of triumph for Montaigne's aphorism is here at last: a well-made brain is better than a chock-full one.

As a result, here is what you will not find in this book:

First of all I don't talk much about the Internet, social networks, and luxury brand websites. Why? Because the web and social networks are constantly evolving, and everyone is now following

that evolution in real time. I'm also familiar with it, because I'm observing it closely. I have done in-depth studies, covering a precise time period, on the digital landscape at Gucci, Chanel, Vuitton, and all their competitors. But no sooner have you summarized your conclusions than the landscape has changed. Time T is in perpetual transition, and the book format is less suited to it than is a memoir, a magazine article, or, better still, a blog. A book is better adapted to long and in-depth investigations whose results have some chance of remaining stable, and this is what I have tried to do by digging into the notion of luxury in search of its most universal and lasting layer. Down there, where I've been digging around, time goes by very slowly, or even not at all. On the surface, on the other hand, it goes by very fast. What's happening there is no less important, but it is so volatile that if I tried to write it down the content of the book would already be obsolete before the ink dried on the page.

You can get a good idea of what's going on currently on the Internet with luxury and other brands by ... going on the Internet. Nor is there any lack of books, or book chapters that keep track of websites and activity on the social networks and draw all sorts of useful and interesting conclusions. For example, you can see a doubling of marketing strategies which, on the one hand, continue to use traditional media for publicity stunts (Brad Pitt for Chanel No. 5) or blockbusters (the J'adore spot for Dior), and, on the other, create brand content intended specifically for a given community on the social networks on a daily basis. I refer readers who would like to know more about these subjects to the articles in books that describe these trends.

Still more unusual is my decision to use few facts and figures. But here too the reason is simple. On the one hand, I am not going to venture onto economic terrain which is circumscribed, checked, and scrutinized by large numbers of people who are more qualified than me and whose work is available to anyone interested in it. On the other hand, in keeping with the precautions taken above, so long as the word luxury has not been given a well-defined meaning and perimeter, quantification is neither possible nor reliable. When dealing with luxury brands nothing is obvious, for although a small number of them don't pose any problems (Rolls-Royce is luxury, nobody would deny this), for other brands the answer is much less clear. Should Coach be included in the luxury universe? The brand itself

will say yes, of course, especially given the efforts it has recently made to achieve this aim. Analysts will observe that Coach's prices are much lower than those of Hermès, which for many is the yardstick in the leather goods sector. But is price enough to define luxury? And Mulberry, which is more expensive than Coach but less so than Hermès—is it luxury? And what about Tissot, Max Mara, or Shu Uemura? Depending on whether the answer is yes or no, the sector's figures vary, and they also vary from one country to the next, or depending on whether such and such a sector is included or not (can a ketchup brand be a luxury brand?).

As we can see, the debate can go on and on, and indeed the facts and figures vary with the criteria adopted by such and such an organization, to the point that it becomes difficult to count on them, except in huge quantities, or to trace deep trends. As soon as you tackle things from a qualitative point of view, data and numbers start to look like quicksand where it would be very risky to venture. They don't help define luxury—on the contrary, they make the task harder.

And so I have not relied on them to help me map out the terrain, because my objective is precisely what financial analysts are not interested in: their goal is to quantify, mine is to begin by qualifying what will later be quantified; to define what we're talking about, namely the concept of luxury on the one hand, and the notion of brand on the other;⁹ and only then to address the question of luxury brands and how they are marketed.

By the same token I am not addressing a question that has recently come to the fore, the question of how luxury brands respond to environmental and ethical concerns, which has become a hot-button issue in the West. The question is important, and it is interesting, but once again, I don't claim to know everything. What's more, the answers to this question are just being formulated, and are sometimes still in their infancy. They may change the configuration of luxury brands and luxury marketing, but they will not have a profound effect on what luxury is, and this is the point of departure for what I am doing here. So I'll leave the task of exploring them to other specialists.

Those are the themes I will not speak about, in virtue of a conviction that I would like to reformulate here as clearly as possible before getting to the heart of my subject.

I do not in the least believe that luxury is a sector apart, a market that does not obey the same laws as other markets, necessitating a kind of marketing incommensurable with toothbrush or fruit juice marketing. I think that it's a sector that cuts across all markets, and that no market escapes it, not even the seemingly trivial tire market: Bridgestone, Firestone, and Goodyear stock "luxury tires," and, according to the specialists, there is even such a thing as a luxury tire valve. And so on and so forth in all sectors. I challenge anyone to cite one that could not be pulled into the luxury market, though, granted, in some cases the marketers might have to yank awfully hard.

I'm not just talking about the sort of insolent behavior that goes on at Chanel, which occasionally amuses itself by sticking its logo on a bunch of bocce balls, which it neither manufactured nor, of course, invented (for a mere 3000 euros). No, I mean to argue that luxury is always in flux, that it rises and falls with the waves and the currents of economic and social life, and that it would be hard to find a single object, a single product, a single brand that could not, one day or another, be transformed into a "luxury" object, product, or brand. Such is the mission of luxury marketing, and the tools it uses can be terrifyingly effective. But they are not infallible, and without the public's consent—herein lies the true novelty—they are impotent. The current infatuation of the inhabitants of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) with luxury brands cannot hide the fact that these very inhabitants, once their initiation into luxury is complete (and it will quickly be completed), will possess a weapon that nobody before them ever had: the Internet.

To use a formula that's famous in information and communication theory, it's not so much the content of what luxury brands are saying on the Internet that should hold our attention, as what people are or will soon be doing with that content. Like it or not, luxury marketing will have to come to grips with these reconfigurations, and sometimes with calls for change that cannot be ignored with impunity. But luxury marketing will only be able to understand and respond to them if it thinks about the profound meaning of luxury, and not just about the stakes of commercial luxury.

Luxury brands are not *all* that luxury is. Consumers are profoundly attached to the idea of luxury, and even when that

attachment appears purely superficial and materialist, it is universal, because luxury is an anthropological given well before it is a form of commercial activity. Far from being gratuitous and superfluous, the enterprise of examining and attempting to understand the concept of luxury is not unrelated to marketing. Because it is marketing and its acolytes—the media, the PR firms, advertising—who stand accused of having sold luxury out and led it astray, and it won't be long before the public lets marketing know this. We're already starting to hear that luxury is anything but the image that brands offer of it. It is difficult, in these conditions, to imagine long-term strategies that would not integrate the unconscious beliefs and demands of a public whose expectations are increasingly high.

But after all, in luxury as elsewhere, this is the operating principle of marketing, perhaps even its *raison d'être*. For if it continues to grow and multiply in spite of all the crises and all the critiques that it regularly faces, isn't this because of its capacity for constantly reinventing itself under pressure from its best enemy and ally: the public?

Doing Away with Some Received Ideas

ARE WE SURE WE KNOW WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to open a book or read an article about luxury without happening upon the same commonplaces, made up of a few of the following words:

Dream	Perfection	Sublime
Magic	Taste	Mysterious
Myth	Rarity	Amazement
Eternity	Genius	Culture
Emotion	Marvels	Spell
Fairy	Art	Exception

I have nothing in particular against any of these words, but as soon as you start combining them and applying them to luxury, I grow suspicious. These words exhale vapors that are supposedly poetic but that in reality are as harmful for thought as were the clichés of David Hamilton for the art of photography in the 1970s.

We're going to attempt the feat of avoiding them here, as best we can, for it's not an easy enterprise. But since luxury loves French culture, to which I am also very attached, I'm going to turn to what's most profound—and in my eyes also most precious—about French culture. What's most luxurious, in a sense, for if luxury is priceless, the most priceless thing of all is that which nobody in the world can buy: a culture, and, by extension, a language and a way of thinking, which are inseparable from each other.

The French language, which is known to be rich and precise, is perfect for expressing an idea that 17th-century French classicism summed up in a well-known formula: “A thought well-conceived is clearly expressed/And in the right words is easily dressed” (*Ce qui se conçoit bien s’exprime clairement/Et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément*) Boileau, *L’Art Poétique*, 1674. Before any words are spoken, then, one must think as clearly as possible, and this reflection establishes the reference points of the subject under consideration and does away with confusions, lies, and prejudices.

It is out of loyalty to this tradition, and, in a way, out of concern for intellectual hygiene, that I am setting aside the evanescent vocabulary mentioned above. It’s impossible to define anything with words as nebulous as “spell,” “genius,” “taste,” and “sublime.” These words are so much quicksand on which it’s impossible to build anything.

A more methodical and fertile approach consists—before turning to luxury brands—in defining what is meant by *brand* (this was the aim of my previous book, *Brand Revolution*), and what is meant by *luxury*, without, if possible, falling into any traps. Now there is a trap that is waiting to snare me here, that of believing that I should know better than anyone, since I’m French and was born in the country of luxury. This is the moment to remember that, in order to *rightly conduct one’s reason*, as Descartes asked of us,¹ we must begin by never accepting something as true until we have carefully verified that it is. And we must do this without regard for the consensus of public opinion about it, the prestige of those who uphold it, or the personal advantages we might hope to derive from whatever it is.

It happens that the first article of faith one encounters when dealing with luxury is the idea of French hegemony.

It is thus this article of faith that we must examine as closely and scrupulously as possible. As it’s very old, we’ll have to go a long way back in history to verify whether or not it’s well founded. And because the French are its most effective and zealous proponents, we’ll also have to dismantle the propaganda machine. This is a tall order, and the best we can do here is to outline it. But it offers the advantage of decontaminating the ground on which, later on, we’ll construct a definition of luxury that’s more suitable, more precise, and, above all, more operational than usual.

FRENCH LUXURY: AN EGO AS BIG AS THE RITZ

To get some idea of the incredible impudence that the French display when speaking about luxury, let's proceed by means of comparison.

You know what the word "art" means. Your ideas about art may be precise or they may be vague, but on the whole the names and images that are associated with it are fairly familiar to you. Perhaps you'll think, for example, of Botticelli's *Primavera*, a Degas dancer, Picasso's dove, or Kandinsky's *Blue Rider*. Perhaps also of Romanesque churches, the Guggenheim Museum—in New York or in Bilbao—or the *Venus de Milo*, or a Calder mobile.

So what would you say if someone asserted out of the blue that art, the only real, true art, has nothing to do with any of that, and that art is—and is exclusively, as everyone knows—the art of the Momoyama period in Japan?²

You would surely be astonished, skeptical, even indignant. Even supposing that you knew what the person was talking about, and unless you happened to be precisely a fanatic of the Momoyama period, you wouldn't believe it. True, Japanese art and its history are extremely rich, but why should they and they alone represent art as a whole? And why this period rather than some other one?

The line one most often hears in France, and that everyone repeats, is that luxury, the one and only luxury, is the one the French invented in the era of the Sun King, shared with the world in the 18th century, and have perpetuated to the present day—as if nothing had happened before, nothing after, and nothing elsewhere; as if the French were the legitimate and uncontested owners of the notion of luxury, and as if the entire world had no choice but to measure itself against this standard and submit to it, in the past and also today.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Although my saying so may offend national pride, the French are neither the inventors nor the owners of the notion of luxury, whatever the specialists, the professionals, and even the academics may say. One hoped for a little more intellectual rigor from the latter, but no: blinded by the brilliance of a milieu endowed with a prestige the university has mostly lost, academics are more likely to look indulgently upon luxury than they are to subject it to a critical analysis.

And yet any historian will tell you that French luxury neither came first nor is superior. The contrary position can only be

defended at the cost of distortions—distortions that may be touching when inspired by fine feeling, and possibly understandable in an economic war where all's fair, especially bluffs, but which, in both cases, are deceptive.

To state that luxury has been French for more than three centuries is to cut up space and time with a magnifying glass and crooked scissors. The only thing that can be said with any certainty is that *trade in certain products* of French luxury expanded considerably in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, before meeting with strong competition—notably from the English—in the following century, then enjoyed a resurgence in the 20th. But luxury goes beyond French and even European borders, covering an area so vast that it goes back to prehistoric times and extends into the most deserted corners of the planet.

The only thing we can say without fear of being mistaken is that the 17th and, above all, the 18th centuries in France were a pinnacle in the history of luxury—but not the only one, and not the most sumptuous in a long history: Europe, Italy, Spain, England, and Flanders also experienced “golden ages.” It is also true that French high fashion, leather goods, perfumery, and wine moved to center stage over the 20th century. But the 20th century is over, France no longer has a monopoly on high fashion, its perfumery faces ever increasing competition, and in many sectors France is even losing ground: in porcelain, for example, or in shoemaking, or in watchmaking, where the Swiss prevail. In the automobile sector, the luxury brands are English, German, and Italian. In hi-fi and home cinema, they're Danish (Bang & Olufsen), American (Bose), and German (Loewe). Even French wines, apart from champagne, are starting to lose their supremacy, which has never been universal.³ And when an American magazine devotes a long article to the most celebrated chefs in the world, it cites David Chang,⁴ Jamie Oliver, and Ferran Adrià. If the French weren't all transfixed by the ecstatic contemplation of their dazzling national ego, they would have noticed a long time ago.

A NEGLECTED HISTORY

Oddly enough, few people take any interest in the history of luxury. Entire books are written on the subject without any allusion to its

origins, as if luxury were, by nature, immune to any examination of its genealogy. Even in France, where there should be keen interest, the last major study on the topic goes back to the end of the 19th century.⁵ Since then numerous monographs on table settings, wine, fashion, jewelry, decoration, gastronomy, and various brands have appeared in every sector. But there hasn't been much of anything about the history of luxury, and nothing that makes it possible to look at the phenomenon from a new angle.

First of all, this is because the definition of luxury is a problem, one that has never been solved. Today, as in 1864, it could be written that:

This word applies to purely relative things, whose elements are very complex and elude exact and scientific definition. Thus have the economists of the last two centuries and even those of our own time discussed in depth the advantages and disadvantages of luxury without being able to arrive at a definitive and satisfying formulation.⁶

The second reason why nobody takes much interest in the history of luxury is that nobody is really concerned about checking to see whether the history of luxury, as we think we know it, might actually be a legend. How was this legend created, and what kind of historical reality does it possess? We can reconstitute it by observing how the French tell themselves the story of luxury, and this without regard not only for truth, but also for mere good sense. The French literature on luxury abounds in peremptory declarations, such as: "Of French origin, luxury emerged in the 18th century,"⁷ or: "Luxury has always existed, ever since the 17th century, in fact,"⁸ which, you'll admit, makes an awfully short "always."

But let's take them at their word, let's not even stray (at least for the moment) from their own history and borders: it's blatantly obvious that such notions are absurd. So there wasn't any luxury in France before the 17th century? You might think so from reading what people are saying, without even mentioning the Renaissance. As for going back still further—pointless: the question is dismissed by stating *ex abrupto* that "the European middle ages, if you don't include cathedrals and castles, wasn't a very luxurious era."⁹ You even read that the Middle Ages, "the era of Western obscurity, swept away the luxurious products of Antiquity."¹⁰

Oh really? And yet you don't have to have a doctorate in medieval history to be doubtful of such statements. Just recall the tapestries called *The Lady with the Unicorn* or the marvelous miniatures that adorn the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*: the banquet tables covered in golden cups and damask tablecloths, the people in sumptuous costumes lined with fur and adorned with jewels. Think too of the gothic chests studded with precious gems, of the sculpted ivory, of the finely chiseled weapons and armor, of the long trains and the frills and ruffles of the feminine garments.¹¹ Think of the parties where the number of dishes was exceeded only by the richness of the place settings, to the point that Juvénal des Ursins, the Archbishop of Reims, declared in 1468: "There's almost nobody in France who doesn't want to eat from silver dishes." The palace of Jacques Coeur, in Bourges, is of a rare architectural refinement, and to perform its function the roof of the Hospices de Beaune, built by Nicolas Rolin at the time of Charles VII, had no need of the splendid patterns in which it is covered. This was indeed luxury. Have we forgotten that the oldest French chef, and one of the most famous, Taillevent, officiated at the table of Philippe VI and then at that of Charles V, in the 14th century? And that he served them various meats seasoned with extremely rare spices that cost what was then a fortune, accompanied by dumplings wrapped in gold leaves?

Not only can one go back up the path of French luxury much farther than one usually does, but one must do so, all the way to the Middle Ages and even beyond. For well before the Middle Ages in Europe there were the Celts, the Vikings, and the Visigoths. In each of these cultures, which we're quite wrong to keep calling "barbarian," there were luxury objects of extraordinary richness and elegance, although the population lived well below what today we call the poverty line. And it wasn't only the religions of such cultures that drew on the resources of an extremely refined craftsmanship: the jewels of Scythian art, the mastery of *cloisonné* enamel displayed by the Saxons, the famous crown studded with precious gems donned by Charlemagne, the no less famous Ardagh Chalice, and the miniatures in the *Book of Kells*, the 8th-century Irish masterpiece—all testify against the nonchalance with which, in France, everything before the Renaissance is expelled from the domain of luxury.

ON THE ART OF DENYING ONE'S MOTHER

If you heed what the “specialists” have to say on the subject, there’s hardly any mention of the Renaissance either—or else just lip service—nor of the considerable role that it played in the birth of French luxury. This is not to say that anyone denies it an influence that is too obvious to be challenged, but, rather, that it’s often passed over in silence, which is at the very least paradoxical when you see how the luxury crowd venerates everything that resembles noble titles, the most enviable of which are obviously the most ancient.

The label “dating *at least* from the Renaissance” would provide such titles to any trade likely to boast of them, and luxury houses would have no trouble demonstrating that many French arts were already flourishing in that era. Yet they prefer to lop a century off their age rather than appear as the heirs of the Renaissance. Why, when they could claim such an illustrious lineage, do they deprive themselves of it? If their desire for age is so strong (and it is, to judge by the care with which they display their birthdates), why stop at Louis XIV? Why not climb another rung on the ladder of time and prestige, if it is decreed that prestige is directly proportional to age?

Because the Renaissance is first and foremost Italian. Of course, there were the Loire châteaux, but unless you imagine that they burst forth spontaneously, one must give back to Italy that which does not belong to François I. From architecture to glasswork, from jewelry to table manners, from sculpture to poetry, and from weaving to painting by way of fashion, everything that adorned and brightened the French 16th century was imported from Italy. If the origin of luxury were to be situated in France, one would have to grant transalpine genius a preeminence that the French, in this area, are unwilling to share with anyone—which explains their evasive discretion about this sumptuous era, whose brilliance cannot be directly attributed to them. When you claim to descend directly from the Sun King, it’s not in your best interest to let the genealogists go through your family papers and unearth a foreign ancestor, illustrious though he or she may have been.

Nor is it in one’s interest to show that it’s not just you but the whole family that inherited the genius of luxury from someone else, in this case the whole European family. For the Renaissance

fueled, inspired, and infiltrated minds and tastes from one end of the Old Continent to the other. Each Renaissance hotbed was a crossroads teeming with intellectual currents, artistic influences, and all kinds of wealth. Welcomed in the south by the Portuguese and the Spanish, in the north by the Dutch, these currents flowed just about everywhere ... except in France. There, no bounty flowed in from South America or the Indies, and there wasn't even a naval or merchant fleet to support territorial conquests or commercial activities, which, in any event, were treated with contempt. The country imported frugally, but didn't export luxury products, as Colbert himself reports in his *Public Testament*, published in The Hague in 1694: "If foreigners must have our money, let it be only for that which [is not produced] in the kingdom, like spices that must be sought far away or bought from the Dutch." And he added: "As for all the rest, we must do without it, and may luxury not tempt us into making a mistake so detrimental to the State." An economic mistake, in this case, but also a moral one. It is often forgotten that Colbert's policies were born of a surprising blend of strategy and personal conviction. Colbert was a minister who, even as he served Louis XIV's megalomania, thought—and he wasn't the only one—that "luxury and vanity have such a hold on everyone that all of France is disfigured by it."

We must therefore seriously reconsider the history of luxury, and enlarge it in time and space. From the beginning of the Renaissance in the 15th century we see it not emerging (it already existed) but spreading all over the south and north of Western Europe. Even on this relatively small scale it was immediately cosmopolitan, as the era's numerous and sumptuous portraits of kings and important personages testify. All of them, beginning with the portrait of Elizabeth I, bear the mark of multiple influences—Spanish, Italian, French, English. And the trade in luxury goods also quickly became international, as can be seen (among other places) in the history of fashion. It was Spain, and, to a lesser extent, Italy, which, in the 16th century, imposed their style and innovations—the ruff, the corset, and high-heeled shoes—across Europe.

Once you go back in time a little and enlarge the viewfinder, it becomes abundantly clear that the birth of luxury cannot be attributed exclusively to a single reign, even one as glorious as Louis XIV's, or to a single country. It would be simpler to do so, but it

would be false and quite unfair to all the other actors who have contributed to luxury, whether they were as famous as the Medici or as anonymous as the madder-root merchants who walked the streets of the Middle Ages to provide Turkish and Persian weavers with the dye that they alone used in making what were already considered, in the 16th century, to be “the best carpets in the world.”¹²

GOING BACK STILL FURTHER

If we continue our trip back in time and space, it becomes clear that luxury eludes all attempts at appropriation. The roots of the phenomenon must be sought on a planetary scale, and by going much further back than the Renaissance or the Middle Ages. They must also be sought by discarding the myth of a luxury whose origin, possession, and legitimate usage are supposedly limited to a narrow window of time and space and an equally narrow social, economic, and cultural sphere. No, in reality it’s an atemporal, aspatial, and multipolar phenomenon, traces and evidence of which are everywhere once you break through the ancient carapace of received ideas. It is time to acknowledge our debt to every society and every civilization, including China, India, the Americas, and even Africa.

To Africa? Really?

Yes, really, because if you’re looking for the roots of luxury not on the surface but in the deepest layers of human behavior, you have to take Africa into account, granting it neither more nor less importance than other civilizations, even if there are fewer written traces there than elsewhere. Recent work has shown that the African Middle Ages, far from being dark and abject, witnessed several “golden ages” in which Africa was a nerve center of world trade. The continent’s reputation extended all the way to Europe and even to China, and all sorts of rare, sought-after commodities such as gold, salt, amber, and precious woods and metals were exchanged there.¹³

One has to admit that today Africa appears to be far from wanting or being able to revive this rich past, and that it has other problems on its hands. So let’s spin the globe a little until we come to the border between Africa and Asia—the Middle East—which, as unstable and turbulent as it looks to us at the moment, was also a

hotbed of untold riches, and of a luxury that dazzled the travelers of the ancient world. Mesopotamia, Persia, and Arabia had attained summits of refinement well before the century of Pericles, as testified by vestiges of the kingdom of Saba or the reign of Solomon, which are mentioned in the Old Testament. So true is this that the Western collective unconscious bears the memory of these ancient kingdoms to this day, by way of that well-established Greek and Roman conviction that luxury was in a sense Oriental by nature.

The first person to have directly experienced this was Alexander the Great, whose military expeditions led him into Persia, to Babylonia, and all the way to northern India. The splendor of the Oriental courts and the debauchery that took place there soon triumphed over the frugality and virile ardor of the Greek armies. Alexander himself, seduced by (among other things) Darius's sumptuous royal tent, adopted the local customs and sunk little by little into a life of pleasures that many hold responsible for putting an end to his adventures. The chroniclers tell us that military victories gave way to a moral rout, with the result that the Greek and then Roman fascination with Asian luxury was accompanied by stern condemnation, for it now appeared dangerous because of its capacity for diminishing and even paralyzing the strength of body and mind. Even doubly dangerous, because it was foreign and threatened, in the long run, to conquer, perhaps even destroy, the collective identity and integrity of those who surrendered to it.

We may think that today we're light years from passing such judgments on luxury, which appear so absurd to us. And yet, this vision of Oriental luxury perverting the virtues and mores of the West by imposing corrupt tastes—isn't it also our own, as we witness, fascinated but disapproving, the resurgence of a spectacular form of luxury in Dubai, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi? Or when we dismiss Indian luxury as kitsch and deem Chinese luxury vulgar?

Without this historical perspective, luxury professionals (especially in the BRIC countries) can neither understand nor combat the prejudices that are thwarting their expansion in the West.

So let it thus be known: in all eras and all over the world there have been luxury goods and services, whose traces are found in the most ancient tombs in the form of jewels and votive and funerary objects. Some civilizations, notably in India and China, produced them on a grand scale while the Mediterranean world was still in a deep slumber.

Let's go still further: even in prehistoric times there were luxury objects. If you consider that even a boomerang, for example, is an object that didn't need any sort of decoration to perform its function perfectly, you have to acknowledge that when you find beautifully decorated boomerangs, they're luxury boomerangs.¹⁴ As for the oldest jewels discovered to date, in South Africa, they are supposedly almost 100,000 years old.

It's quite simple: there was luxury, and true luxury, all over and in all eras, even the most distant ones, quite simply because luxury is inseparable from any society, even fledgling, primitive societies. Nothing authorizes us to state that an 18th-century Bohemian crystal vase is a more luxurious object than a gold-encrusted silver pitcher in the form of a winged ibex—a masterpiece of Persian art dating from the 5th century BC¹⁵—or that the pitcher is, in turn, any more luxurious than the sculpted bronze axe heads of the Chang dynasty in China, 1500 years before our era.

Luxury is universal. It is naturally produced by all tribes, societies, and civilizations that surpass the subsistence threshold and can use their surplus wealth for purposes other than purely functional ones, and whether it takes the form of a bear claw necklace or of a Harry Winston diamond necklace doesn't change a thing. In certain eras, for political, economic, or cultural reasons, such and such a society or country may temporarily become a more active and influential center of luxury than the rest, but to come to the conclusion that because of this they have a monopoly on luxury is a ridiculous, perhaps even a scandalous, leap.

Now that we've clarified this, it's easier to sense the insidious and unconscious contempt that oozes from declarations such as: "Arab civilization is luxurious in its way." In its way? But that way is the Alhambra in Granada, the Great Mosque of Córdoba, the Alcázar of Seville! It's the way of the blue mosaic cupolas of the Isfahan mosques, and also of the Taj Mahal! It's the way of Persian miniatures, of highly refined ceramics, carpets, and jewels, not to speak of the musical tradition. And have we forgotten the debt that all perfumes owe to Arabia, well before owing anything at all to Messrs. Farina, Houbigant, or Guerlain? Serge Lutens, at least, hasn't forgotten:¹⁶

Perfumery was born and developed in the Muslim world. It was the Arabs who, out of taste and pleasure, gave us the appreciation for perfume. Like herbs and spices, perfumes only arrived in Europe with the

Crusades. [...] It's an immense culture, and it's been around forever, from Andalusia, from illustrious and refined men like Ziriab the Magnificent, who came to Cordoba from Baghdad. What a fabulous gift!

And if you consider that artisanship prepares the way for luxury, then wherever there were high-quality artisanal traditions, there was fertile ground for luxury to take root, with neither more nor less legitimacy than anywhere else.

THE ORIGIN OF EUROPEAN LUXURY: COURT SOCIETY

Obviously, when you put it in such a wide context, European luxury resembles a shooting star in a sky where many stars more ancient and brighter than it are shining. This doesn't take away any of its brilliance, but it does make it possible to relativize its pretensions.

We can also put it in its rightful place by distinguishing between what belongs to luxury in the largest sense and to commercial luxury in the narrow sense. For the French, the two are the same: "Luxury does not have a life outside luxury houses and brands."¹⁷ Yes it does, and fortunately, too! Who would seriously think of saying "New Balance" or "Callaway" when asked what sports are? There must be a clear distinction drawn between luxury in general and commercial luxury in particular, as it has emerged in the West over the last thirty years or so. You can't say—because it's ridiculously false—that the former is of essentially French or European extraction and essence. But what you can say is that *commercial* luxury, as we conceive it today, is indeed—in part—of French origin, and aristocratic in spirit.

But aristocratic *in spirit* only, and only partially. For, in reality, things are more subtle. They can be presented in the following way: the mother of French-style luxury is court society, its father is commerce at the dawn of the industrial era in the 19th century. One is noble, the other bourgeois. The first is older than the second, which hasn't prevented them from engendering some extremely fruitful activity and establishing the principles by which the whole sector functions: principles that many still adhere to today.

Let's first take the mother of commercial luxury, court society.¹⁸ It is as old as our monarchical systems, but historians are in agreement that court society was slowly refined over the centuries

and reached its zenith in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although it was never one of a kind—think of the court of Henry VIII or Elizabeth I in England, those of Christina of Sweden or the Empress Catherine the Great in Russia, of the Habsburgs in Spain, not to mention the papacy—it is certain that the organization of the French court exerted a great deal of influence on its neighbors.

Why should luxury be regarded first and foremost as the heir of court society? First, for an obvious reason: court society commissioned an enormous number of luxury goods. Not necessarily the most or the biggest orders, because for a long time the Catholic Church was as big a customer—if not bigger—than the monarchy, the nobility, and the upper bourgeoisie put together.

But, above all, the zenith of court society corresponds to the moment when luxury had the richest and most concentrated meaning. Through a grouping of quite visible (for they were made to be displayed) signs and objects, luxury condensed a whole series of values to which the era's society attached the greatest importance, and which continue to resonate even today.

In the court of Louis XIV, luxury was not a sign of wealth—it had a far more significant value: it made it possible to distinguish certain people and to justify their eminent position in society. At the very top, a single man reigned beneath God's watchful eye. The nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the people occupied the stages beneath him. Convinced of the original inequality of conditions, everyone had a place fixed by birth and accepted it for one and only one reason: the aristocratic reason,¹⁹ which stipulated that atop the scale was an elite made up of men who had distinguished themselves as the most valiant warriors, and as the most loyal and reliable. Thus it was right that they should possess more land, more goods, and more wealth than everyone else. And more prestige.

This social hierarchy was supposed to be blatantly obvious, just as today we distinguish a policeman or a priest by certain signs so as to be able to spot them easily. For an aristocrat, failing to display one's rank could even be as dangerous as adopting noble airs would be for a member of the bourgeoisie. In both cases, there was a subversion of the order established by royal, and thus divine, authority. The position one occupied on the social ladder had to be indicated unequivocally—today we would say that the people of that era had no choice but to publicly “own” their rank.

At best a maximum of visibility was thus imposed: whether rich or not (and more often than not, it wasn't very) the nobility had to show that it was noble. Spending wasn't a choice, it was an obligation. We might think that this mentality has long since disappeared, we who think it natural, even endearing, that the most fortunate among us wear blue jeans just like everyone else. But, in luxury, the traces of a morality of spending that comes down to us directly from the reign of Louis XIV are alive and well. It's that morality which causes Karl Lagerfeld to say: "I detest rich people who don't spend their money."²⁰ It's impossible not to hear in this an echo of the following anecdote, recounted by critic and historian Henri Taine:²¹ the Duc de Richelieu gives a purse full of gold to his son and assigns him the mission of spending it. A few days later the son comes back with the purse intact. In his presence, the father immediately throws the purse out the window, to teach him to live according to his rank. "To be noble," writes the historian Georges Duby, "is to waste, it's the obligation to stand out, it is to be condemned—or else lose one's status—to luxury and spending."²²

Old Regime society was thus based on the marking and maintenance of distance between social categories. As in the army, everyone had to display their rank, and that's what luxury was for, much more than it was for showing off one's wealth.²³ It was, from the beginning, ostentatious, not in the pejorative sense that the word has taken on since, but in the sense of showing others, by one's appearance and behavior, the rank one occupied in the social hierarchy.

So true is this that throughout European history, as long as the monarchic system prevailed, there was a succession of sumptuary laws, which regulated the consumption or display of luxury objects. For despite the rigidity of these heavily hierarchized societies, what has been called the dynamic of the West was at work,²⁴ and regularly triggered social, economic, and intellectual spurts that threatened the established order. To maintain it, and because that order had to be made visible to as many people as possible, luxury was reserved for the few, and forbidden to the rest.

Nearly all ancient civilizations produced such laws: those of ancient Rome and Japan, for example, are known to us.²⁵ It is known also that Venice, very early on, set up *provveditori delle pompe* to ensure that the sumptuary laws were obeyed in patrician

families. The first sumptuary law in modern times was enacted in England in 1336, which is as good a proof as any that our vision of the Middle Ages as a period without luxury is false. This law required, for example, that a meal include no more than two courses, and that each of these courses include no more than two dishes “without sauce.” In 1336 an English knight wasn’t allowed to wear gold fabrics or ermine or clothing adorned with jewels. Nobody but the royal family could wear imported fabrics.

In France, a 1664 edict declared that “there is no more certain cause of ruin for a state than the excesses of unregulated luxury,” and it has been demonstrated that, in the 18th century, while economic protectionism may explain some of the sumptuary laws, their most important function was to maintain the “distinction of ranks.”²⁶ Since luxury signaled and signified the nobility’s superiority, nobles *had to* make the widest and most visible use of it possible, whether they wanted to or not, and whether or not it was within their means—which explains how many families were ruined, the passion for gambling that enabled some to compensate for the absence or meagerness of their incomes, and why the aristocracy was constantly in debt.

AND ON THE PATERNAL SIDE?

If the mother of French luxury is court society, its father is younger: commercial trade as it emerged in Europe at the beginning of the industrial era, under the auspices of the mercantile bourgeoisie—in other words, over the course of the 19th century. Just by looking at the Colbert Committee’s list of members one is struck by the fact that at least half of the brands cited first saw the light of day in the 19th century. Here are a few of those names, which you hear as perfect representatives of French luxury:

Laurent-Perrier: 1812

Puiforcat: 1820

Mauboussin: 1827

Guerlain: 1828

Christofle: 1830

Hermès: 1837

Krug: 1843

Hédiard: 1854

Louis Vuitton: 1854

Boucheron: 1858

Bernardaud: 1863

Ercuis: 1867

S. T. Dupont: 1872

Daum: 1875

We can add other names with birthdates that are officially older but which in reality saw their activities expand in the same period: Mellerio dits Meller, which displays 1613 as its date of birth, acknowledges frankly that in reality “it was only at the beginning of the 19th century that they came onto the scene in Paris,” in 1815, on the Rue de la Paix. Baccarat was born in 1764, but the crystal production that made it famous truly began in 1816. And Veuve Clicquot (in English: “Widow Clicquot”) only became such in 1805, when Madame Clicquot lost her husband before setting out to conquer the Russian market that was to do so much for the brand’s renown. This, incidentally, is also true of many other champagne houses, which were created back in the 18th century but whose actual commercial expansion occurred in the early 19th.

Finally, we mustn’t forget some of the Rlichemont group brands: Cartier (1847), Lancel (1876), Baume & Mercier (1830), Jaeger-LeCoultre (1833), nor the innumerable luxury houses that flourished in the 19th century and have since disappeared: Gellé, Molinard, Lubin, Pinaud, Pivert, Houbigant, for example, in perfumery. The same holds true for most well-known English luxury brands (Burberry, John Lobb, Smythson, Penhaligon’s) as well as the more discreet brands, for the Spanish Loewe, and for the Italians Rubelli and Bulgari.

Thus, commercial luxury only really starts to take off in Europe sometime in the 19th century. And many of its habits were forged in that period, then handed down unchanged to the present. It is

true that throughout the 18th century the influence of the bourgeoisie and of a few major merchants was on the rise, but this was nothing in comparison with what happened a century later.

What are the traits that characterize commercial luxury as it developed in that era, and as it was perpetuated until at least the end of the 20th century?

First, an expansion of its clientele, which still included the aristocracy of Europe and sometimes of more distant regions too (America, Asia, India), but also extended to the upper and middle bourgeoisie.

Next, intensifying commercial exchanges thanks to the development of communications as well as to the vogue for fairs and expositions that sprang up just about everywhere (the first was in London in 1851), where luxury houses solidified their prestige thanks to the numerous prizes they were awarded.

Finally, a change in the meaning of luxury: little by little it lost its function as a “calling card” for a specific social class, which was required to make a display of luxury within a restrictive hierarchy. The vise loosened its grip. In the 19th century luxury was still a sign of individual superiority but that superiority was no longer necessarily linked to how old one’s name or title was: it was increasingly the result of success in business. In other words, luxury was no longer inherited, but could be acquired with money. It was still the prerogative of a part of the aristocracy, but also became that of fledgling capitalism. And, above all, it was no longer linked to merit.

As a result, the very conception of luxury was transformed. The change started at the end of the 18th century, when the *Encyclopédie* defined it as “the usage made of riches and industry for procuring an agreeable existence for oneself.” In other words, luxury was becoming bourgeois. It was no longer just an aggressive display of splendor, it was becoming cozy and plush, tending toward well-being, the “modern conveniences,” and the art of living; soon it would integrate the notion of comfort,²⁷ a word that was unknown in its current meaning before the middle of the 19th century.

Commercial luxury is thus not the direct descendant of court society: it results from mixing with the rapid emergence of what has been called big capital and the mercantile bourgeoisie. Though the mother of luxury is about noble displays, its father is new commerce. Might this not be an unsuitable match, and the origin of

the collapse of aristocratic luxury into a bourgeois, not to mention petty bourgeois, demi-luxury, which, in the 19th century, sees the proliferation of imitation and facsimiles,²⁸ thanks to innovations like silver-plated metal, which made Christofle's fortune? Ordinarily, nobility and business don't mix. The second is slave to the first, and never raises itself up to the nobility except to serve it. And for good reason, as we've seen in the Introduction: nobles are forbidden from engaging in commercial activity,²⁹ otherwise they "derogate," and waive their noble privileges. This is why, despite the resemblances they bear to our modern fashion designers and perfumers, the suppliers of the Old Regime court, Rose Bertin, Hippolyte Leroy, or Fargeon, remained in the shadow of their princely clients: there, too, the hierarchy of social positions could not be transgressed. A noble is always above a bourgeois and far above a shopkeeper or a supplier, even ones who are highly regarded.

And then, over the course of the 19th century, shopkeepers and suppliers are emancipated. All of a sudden they're well established, they're doing advertising, and customers are banging down their doors, crowding into their stores. Once, they were called to Versailles or summoned to the Parisian mansions of the aristocracy.³⁰ Suddenly, the current starts to flow in the other direction; the aristocrats come to them. Once, they set up shop within convenient range of their customers. Suddenly, the customers are the ones rushing to the Place Vendôme, the Rue de la Paix, and the Rue Saint-Honoré.

One man embodies this reversal all by himself: Charles Frederick Worth. He is ordinarily presented as the inventor of high fashion, and it is true that he was at the origin of a certain number of innovations that prefigured the way the big Parisian houses function. For example, he was the one who invented "doubles," the ancestors of models tasked with presenting dresses to clients. He was the one who imagined offering ready-made dresses (instead of waiting for orders and fulfilling them). He invented the "designer label" by having his name woven on the labels sewn inside the clothes. In a way he became the first true "creator" and even imposed his views on the Empress Eugenie,³¹ prefiguring the tyranny exercised by his successors on generations of women in France and throughout the world.

But, above all, Worth is the pivotal point of a reversal of power whose full extent has yet to be appreciated, and which explains,

in large part, the mentality and attitude of luxury people all over Europe and now the world: the supplier becomes the king. Not only was Worth welcomed at the court, not only did he frequently meet all the royals, but he also received them. He sometimes went to visit them, but they also sometimes went to the trouble of visiting his salons. Instead of satisfying their slightest desires, he anticipated and provoked them. Instead of being at the mercy of their whims, they were at the mercy of his. He was the master of elegance instead of being its instrument. The embodiment of commercial luxury, he seized power and wielded it over his customers. Like him, saddlers, perfumers, crystal makers, jewelers, and luggage makers would all reverse the relationship with their clientele and, having been servants, become masters.

The symbolic outcome of this reversal of power can be seen clearly today: in court society, the suppliers were at the service of the aristocrats. Later, and right up to today, the aristocrats put themselves at the service of the suppliers, as proved by the number of aristocratic elements floating around in the luxury world, especially in high fashion—look at Chanel’s models in the 1960s, or the ladies with multiple titles hired to preside over what, significantly, are called the “salons” in fashion and jewelry luxury houses.

This complete role reversal is behind the fiction that the luxury market is a supply market and not a demand market. This is a fiction because no luxury house could survive if it wasn’t paying heed to the desires of its customers and didn’t know how to satisfy them just as well as the mass-market brands, which go to such lengths to monitor the expectations of their consumers. Hermès would be dead or dying if it hadn’t diversified its operations to include leather accessories, and then scarves, neckties, watches, and perfumes, and if it hadn’t finally—in the 1980s—headed in the direction it did, which was such a success. Cartier had a good sense of how minds were changing when it launched its *Musts* line in 1972—an exemplary case of marketing if ever there was one. And Chanel’s *Allure* perfume, like most of its competitors, enjoyed the benefits of every market study and opinion poll necessary before its launch. But shush! You have to do it without saying a word if you want to keep intact the myth of intuitive, noble, and inspired luxury, in which creation surges forth spontaneously and must therefore take place at a safe distance from the baser instincts of the market.

Is this absurd? Yes, and even insulting to the plain good sense that Descartes affirmed was “the most evenly distributed thing in the world.” And yet this good sense must be lacking in many people in the luxury business, and (let’s be fair) in an even greater number of their customers.

LUXURY’S QUEST FOR MEANING

What are the chances for survival, in today’s world, of a very elitist conception of luxury, so different from the one in which it was born?

They’re not slim. As long as what Thorstein Veblen called more than a century ago in what is now a classic phrase, “conspicuous consumption,” continues to exist,³² European luxury will maintain all or some of its allure.

Look at what’s happening at Dior, where the aristocratic ideology continues to work its magic. Not only has it retained the Louis XVI armchairs and the metalwork at Dior salons on the Avenue Montaigne, and in some advertisements, and the website, but if, behind the aristocratic mythology, we detect something other than a taste for period décor, if that mythology still has a religious dimension, then that dimension is easy to read in the name of what today is the house’s most visible perfume (J’adore, “I adore/worship”), to which the reply in the past would have been: one only worships God. From ostentation to veneration—the circuit is complete.

But it is complete without reference to a higher plane, that is to say without deriving its value from the moral superiority which, in the monarchic system, justified the elevated rank occupied by certain people and their right, as well as their duty, to signify this by displays of luxury. The reign of Louis XIV is at once a zenith and a tipping point, the point at which a luxury of plenitude begins to slide toward a luxury of emptiness. A luxury of plenitude is one that corresponds to a society where visible wealth is a sign of moral wealth, of a preeminence owed to the possessor of the supreme value in court society: honor. The luxury of emptiness isn’t based on any personal quality but rather solely on the vicissitudes of fortune, the taste for pleasure, and the desire to show off.

Initially, luxurious garments, dwellings, and equipages signaled someone worthy of being noticed, and thus justly endowed with some form of power. Emptied of this initial meaning, luxury

sooner or later becomes the sign of another form of power, one without moral or cultural value, a mere external sign of wealth. And when that sign becomes too obviously what it is and nothing more, European luxury reacts badly. Take this portrait of a man who attains luxury solely by means of the power of money, seen through the eyes of someone at Chanel:

Slumped on the plush off-white sofa of a boutique, an obese creature with the air of a Caucasian peasant, wearing a Nike baseball cap, giant, filthy sneakers—but made by a top brand—a Havana cigar in his mouth, his shirt stretched tight by the immense quantity of dollar bills that are bursting the seams of his wallet. G. Prévost, *Voyage au pays du luxe* (Paris, Le Cherche-Midi, 2001)

European luxury needs meaning. It used to derive meaning from a social system in which appearances signified being. What does it become in a world where being and appearances have split apart, where the aristocratic ideology no longer has any currency? What does it become in a democracy?

Let's forget even the differences in political systems and observe the total reversal of values that has led, the sociologists tell us, to the triumph of the individual.³³ European luxury was formed in an era when the individual didn't count. Only rank was important. So true is this that at the court of Louis XIV, a marquis stood and took off his hat when a lackey spoke to him if that lackey was a duke's or a prince's: the lackey represented a rank superior to his. The private person was nothing. Today, it's the opposite. What does a luxury forged on the "nothing-individual" become in a society organized around the "individual-king"?

That luxury falls back on another rationality—which is also another ideology: economic rationality. It trades the unconscious heritage of court society for that of yesterday's industrial societies and today's digital-media societies. It forgets about political power because it has a substitute form of power, which is economic. Whence the duality of luxury discourse: whenever it's criticized for being what it is, arrogant and very—even too—ostentatious, since the prevailing ideology can't justify this, it falls back on economic justifications.

For the moment these justifications are based on French luxury's dominance in the world. But that dominance has never been and

still isn't absolute. Increasingly, powerful competitors are battling it with success. Others will emerge in the future, with a different sort of luxury.

What is French luxury's answer to this threat? It can be summarized thus: "*What others do isn't luxury. We are the only true arbiters of luxury.*"

The least that can be said is that this answer is the poorest one imaginable.

FALSE ANCESTORS

The most widespread piece of foolishness in the world of luxury consists in stating that the word comes from the Latin *lux* and means "light." Marketing people are the most zealous proponents of this etymological fantasy, but buying into it is tantamount to tripping over one's own feet—the etymology is false.

Luxury has nothing to do with *lux*, light, but with an old Indo-European radical, *lug-*, which gave us the Latin *luxatio*, the ancestor of the French "*luxation*" (in English, "dislocation," though the verb "luxate" is used in a medical context).³⁴ Nothing could be easier to verify, so why continue to spread a false etymology? Because even though it's false—*especially* for this reason—it's good for something.

What it's good for is justifying a certain vision of luxury. Etymology, we know, is the unconscious of language, and just as an individual's origins go a long way toward explaining his story or character, those of a word say a great deal about the societies that use it, and about both their prejudices and their beliefs.

Our ways of thinking are guided, most often without our being aware of it, by a very distant meaning whose traces are still visible and revealing, provided we take the trouble to look for them. This is the case for the word "luxury," and doubly so, for its origins, as they are usually talked about, are not only false—they have been falsified. Just as there is identify theft, here there is meaning theft. Who committed the crime? When, and why?

We can respond to the latter question with the classic answer from police investigations: when there's identity theft, it must have been in someone's interest. Find the beneficiary and you'll also find out when and why the imposture took place.

When: the 17th century. Why: the birth of French luxury, soon to be brought to the baptismal font by Louis XIV. It's obviously not by pure chance that the word and the thing appear at the same time. In the modern sense, the word luxury appears in the 17th century, which is sometimes called the century of Louis XIV, otherwise known as the Sun King.³⁵

That light, and especially that which comes from the sun, should be a metaphor of celestial power is shown by numerous Indo-European myths: think of the place that light occupies in ancient Egypt, for example. That it played a leading role in the symbolism with which Louis XIV surrounded himself, and which shone over all court society, is also a well-known fact.

THE LIMPING DEVIL

And yet, it is not to light, but, almost conversely, to the notion of mourning or of pain, that luxury must be attached, such that in its most profound, its most universal, meaning, it has absolutely nothing to do with Louis XIV.

It is indeed thought that the Indo-European root *lug-*, which means "to break," first gave the Latin *lugere*, "to lament, to be in mourning," from which is derived the French adjective *lugubre* (in English: dark, gloomy, lugubrious). The violent demonstrations of grief that accompany funerary rituals would explain why a verb meaning "to break, to dislocate, to disconnect" was used to refer to them. From this same verb a bifurcation occurred, leading to the noun *luxatio*, "disconnection, displacement," and the adjective *luxus*, "misaligned, out of whack."³⁶ It is this adjective that later came to mean "excess in lifestyle, splendor, abundance."

Luxury is thus a deviation, a swerve, a gap. It moves in a crooked, angular fashion, taking long strides. It's hard to follow. It doesn't walk in a straight line, it runs in a zigzag, too fast, and on the diagonal. It limps. But we want to follow it, to run after it, because it is tempting, seductive, alluring, bewitching. It is, thus, a devil. It is, quite literally, the lame or limping devil, *The Devil upon Two Sticks*, as Lesage's comic novel (published in 1707) is known in English: "I'm the one who brought luxury, debauchery, gambling, and alchemy into the world. I am the inventor of merry-go-rounds,

of dance, music, and comedy, and of all the new fashions in France. In a word, I am Asmodeus, nicknamed the Limping Devil.”

This is a dangerous patronage,³⁷ first of all because Asmodeus belongs to the demonic cohort led by the eminently ambiguous figure Lucifer, who is at once the bringer of light and the king of shadows. And luxury bears his colors, if one observes its predilection for black and gold, or white and black, which are often superimposed on the packaging of perfumes, on monogrammed handbags, and on the signage of certain boutiques.

It is also a dangerous patronage because the devil is he who disunites (from the Greek *dia-bolos*). Luxury, too, separates: those who venerate it from those who condemn it, the rich from the poor, the profane from the initiated, the privileged from the rest.

And it is dangerous for another reason: because it represents everything that is troubling to the conscience, everything that leads us astray, everything that disturbs us. First and foremost, of course, the libido.

The path from luxury to lust is a well-trodden one, and has been for a very long time, like a shortcut across a field of wild grass. This is, in fact, the very first meaning of the word luxury (in Latin: *luxuria*): a *luxuriant* vegetation that grows in all directions, in profusion, prodigally. Next it was applied to animals, then to human beings, to designate an overflowing, excessive ardor. And, by means of excess, a connection was made with the notion of luxury. In French, a decoration can be luxuriant, and, if it is not sublimated, the libido can be “luxurious” (“*luxurieuse*”). It is not sublimated in advertisements labeled “porn chic.” It is in an image of Opium, the Yves Saint Laurent perfume, in which the naked body of Sophie Dahl, in 2000, caused a scandal that was sufficiently resounding for the poster to be censored in the UK. Lambasted by feminist critics at the time, attentive observers recognized in the images—beyond the allusions to Van Dongen and Baudelaire—an echo of Italian mannerism, its cold sensuality and its taste for the *linea serpentina*, which we admire, for example, in the paintings of Bronzino.

Except that, in the case of Opium, a luxury brand, the image was obviously diabolical: white skin of an almost luminous pallor, but ... against a black background. Behind Asmodeus, Lucifer’s silhouette can always be glimpsed.

LUXURY IS ALWAYS A SWERVE

So, luxury does not come from *lux*, light, but from *luxus*, deviation, excess. In the beginning it's a disarticulation, an elongation, which produces, as we've seen from the word's history, a disconnection, a dislocation.

It is thus a swerve—the sort of swerve that a horse makes when it jumps to one side or trots sideways (*luxurians equus*).

There is no exact English equivalent of the French word *écart*, which I am translating as swerve, but which could also be translated as “gap,” “margin,” or “discrepancy.” I'll continue to use swerve, since the word is the foundation of my entire thought process. But to try to convey an understanding of the true wealth of its significations, I can give a few examples.

An *écart* is the distance that separates two objects (for example, the required distance between two plates on the tables of a fine restaurant), or two ideas (there is an *écart* between authority and authoritarianism), or two practices (there is an *écart* between Neapolitan pizza and Gordon Ramsay's white truffle pizza). It can be the difference between the real temperature, as measured by a thermometer, and the apparent temperature, which is modified by the wind-chill index. Or else *écart* can mean a behavioral swerve, a deviation with respect to the norms of good conduct, a form of misbehavior.

An *écart* is thus at once a distance, a difference, a deviation, a swerve, an interval, and a distancing. It's everything that was contained in germ in the root *lug-*, then in *luxus*, and which is found today in *luxury*.

A first consequence: if luxury is a swerve, it is positioned with respect to a norm, a rule, a law. Now laws, rules, and norms change from society to society and era to era. Luxury is thus always relative. That is why it is impossible to define it without situating it in time and space. All attempts to try to define it in the abstract prove to be vain. All attempts at distinguishing between “true” and “false” luxury fail. There is nothing but relative luxury. To gain purchase on the concept, we must have the humility to recognize that we'll never arrive at anything but provisional and partial truths.

This is a position that French luxury has trouble accepting. This can be seen from the fact that many publications on the subject

simply avoid defining luxury, going on for pages without specifying exactly what it is they're talking about, as if it went without saying, or as if everybody knew intuitively what the word means—or as if there was but a single meaning, known to all and for all eternity.

But actually it doesn't go without saying: nothing could be more subjective. Today, every individual has his or her own idea of what luxury is. Every society has produced its own luxury, according to principles and values that are not those of its neighbors or its predecessors. It is thus impossible to address the subject of luxury without embarking on at least a minimal historical and sociological exploration.

And, by historical explanation, I don't mean the history of each luxury brand: in France "storytelling" is all the rage, making people believe that the history of luxury can be reduced to a few famous personages, inspired founders of companies so well conceived that they endure 150–200 years after their inception, objects of a cult of personality which, like a time bomb, continues to explode around these "creators" even today.

That is not how history is made, but it is often how the history of luxury is presented, especially in France: as a volley of absolutely irreproducible successes, due to some extraordinary men (and a few women). It is easy to see where this distortion comes from: the courtier's ideal was individual heroism. His descendant in the economic realm, the captain of industry, also likes to pose as the hero of modern times, who deserves all the credit for the exploits he accomplishes.

But we know, to the contrary, that the history of mentalities, of political regimes, and of social systems offers a much better explanation for the current positions and particular aspects of the luxury sector, in France and abroad. The fact is that this history sheds a very different light on the heroic gesture of the first *maisons de luxe*, the first luxury houses. It does not minimize individual talent, but it places it in a context where the realization of this talent becomes possible, which would not have been the case a century earlier, nor, perhaps, a century later. What must be concluded from the sudden emergence of so many luxury houses in the 19th century, and then in the 20th, in France and all over Europe? That Europeans are more gifted than anyone else? That luxury is their domain? No, rather that the conditions of production, distribution,

and consumption of luxury objects worked in the Europeans' favor at that specific moment of their economic and social history.

THE THREE “SWERVES” OF LUXURY

Luxury is always relative—so be it. It is always subjective—okay. But then the only possible attitude with regard to it is not to wriggle out of the difficulty of defining it, but to choose a position, an analytical vantage point, and to clearly acknowledge it.

Mine is based on the history of the word's meaning, as given by its etymology. I went into this in detail above, and I'll sum it up here: from the beginning, all the way up until now, what the word luxury fundamentally denotes is an “*écart*,” which in English can best be rendered as a *swerve*.

My conviction is that this notion of a swerve is the one that best and most completely encompasses what can be observed in the commercial luxury sector. It explains how the concept of luxury was formed in Europe, before spreading elsewhere. It also explains how this concept continues to function today.

The swerve can occur in three directions:

- upward;
- laterally;
- downward.

The upward swerve is the direct descendant of court society, where the rule of the luxury game was to indicate the distance that separated the nobility from the populace. The same rule applied within the nobility itself among different titles, each being required by etiquette to adopt a usage of luxury befitting its rank: two lace flounces and not three according to whether one is a duchess or a marquise, such and such a height for a count's wig, and a different one for a baron's, red heels only for the most exalted nobles, and so on. The gap between a count and a viscount may seem small, but it must be maintained, expressed, and made visible, otherwise the whole aristocratic order is undermined. For what is an order that is not respected?

Whenever a luxury brand uses words like “extraordinary,” “sublime,” “unique,” and “rare”—which is to say all the time—it

practices an upward swerve, an echo of a system of thought in which whatever is above, and one of a kind, has greater value than what is found below.

This is the same when one uses a religious vocabulary: luxury's insistence on speaking of its "soul" is the most visible sign of this. The way in which the press describes haute couture fashion shows is equally revealing: it is never a question of anything but ceremony, ritual, liturgy, and high masses. Certain ancient and religiously maintained or renovated locations become "temples," like Hermès in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Gucci in Rome, on the Via Condotti, Ferragamo in Florence, and Fortnum & Mason in London. Some flagship stores are like "cathedrals," if we're to believe the press clippings. And every great brand has its "Bible" in the form of one or more catalogs or coffee-table books on glossy paper.

And the same holds true when one claims kinship, or even equal status, with art, which is supposed to occupy an elevated position—even the most elevated—in the hierarchy of human productions. Couturiers, jewelers, perfumers, and glassmakers are frequently presented as artists. Some are treated as such, for example when works by Yves Saint Laurent, Armani, and Alexander McQueen are shown at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or by Van Cleef & Arpels at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York, or at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. The word "genius" is the one that is most often used to designate the "creators"—in particular those from haute couture houses. The latter never deny themselves an opportunity for drawing inspiration from painting, as was the case with Yves Saint Laurent and his Mondrian dresses, or the evening coats that featured embroidered motifs borrowed from Picasso, Braque, and Van Gogh. Bulgari made his reputation by borrowing from Greco-Roman art, and Buccellati did the same by borrowing from the Renaissance. The glassmaker Daum declares: "Art is the ultimate luxury," a phrase that could be the tagline of most luxury brands.

The same thing applies, finally, when French luxury is presented as an instrument of distinction, in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu has given to this word:³⁸ once again, it is a matter of making an upward swerve by presenting luxury as a social attribute that denotes more taste, more refinement, and more elegance than that displayed by people who lack it.

Now for the **lateral swerve**, which is observed when luxury claims not superiority but difference.

The difference is always a difference in form, first in the literal sense, the form of objects. The ultimate difference is the unique piece. Here we find traces of luxury's penchant—French luxury's in particular—for the world of art, in which each work, by definition, is unique and derives all its value from this fact. And, more exactly, for that moment in art history (the 19th century and its romantic ideal) that places great emphasis on uniqueness—which isn't the case, for example, of the Renaissance, during which studios found it quite natural to produce several copies of the same painting.

This explains the mythology of custom-made objects, which is particularly striking in high fashion (but which also exists elsewhere): a custom-made dress is, by definition, unique, or at least unique several times over, according to the small number of clients who have ordered it. There was an era—and in certain milieus it remains the case—in which two women *could not* wear the same model of dress without exposing themselves to public ridicule. The maintenance of difference, and of the most visible difference, by means of the unique piece, persists even now and costs a very hefty sum.

Creativity and creation play a fundamental role in this regard: they are asked to create a gap, a distance. The search for a new form is a way of creating distance and goes against the popular taste for immediate understanding of the spectacles offered by consumer society.³⁹ Luxury makes systematic use of this distancing operation: boutiques at the door of which you must ring to be admitted, guards at store entrances, salespeople in impeccable uniforms, with their insistent politeness, shop windows and interiors made to be admired but not touched, and, of course, the products themselves. Not only is it forbidden to pick them up in one's hands, but sometimes one simply can't understand them. This was the great advantage of some of John Galliano's collections for Dior: the *vulgus pecum* didn't understand anything, which made it possible to present his collections as works of genius, since genius, as we know, is always misunderstood. And so journalists, buyers, and clients all fell into the trap of formal distance, the distance which creates the greatest possible gap with respect to traditional

norms of elegance and good taste. The creator's talent (genuine in this case) is not in the least at stake in these instances, only his capacity for standing out.

But the lateral swerve can also be a refusal to play the traditional luxury game, while embodying luxury in one's category of products, as we see with Apple. There is undeniable creativity here, and beauty too, and the prices put the brand at the high end of the new technology sector. Yet Apple is very minimalist in its advertising, and deliberately accessible to a large number of clients, through the ergonomic design of its products, first of all, and even through its pricing, which gives the richest consumers the freedom to buy many more Apple products than they need. The media had a field day with the case of Karl Lagerfeld, who, in the days when having just one was still rare, supposedly had 70 iPods.

The refusal to play the luxury game while occupying a foreground position is also visible in the case of Prada, for example, and not only in its approach to clothing or in the iconoclastic interviews given by its female designer. The desire to stand out is obvious in the architecture of its stores, which have been christened "epicenters," as well as in certain initiatives calculated to disconcert the public, like the installation of a fake boutique in the middle of the desert, in Texas, in 2005.

Finally, a luxury brand can make a lateral swerve by adopting an approach that is deliberately different from that of its competitors. This has clearly been the case for several years with Mauboussin, which is skilled at pulling off unprecedented commercial operations in the world of luxury jewelry. The brand's pedigree is impeccable, but since 2007 it has gone off in a direction that is taking it far from its origins. It has literally taken to the streets, for example by advertising in the subway (the posters are displayed symbolically on its website's home page) or by opening a boutique, as is the case on the Champs-Élysées, wedged between a fast-food restaurant and a Benetton. Such a provocation could amount to a dangerous example of the downward, rather than the lateral, swerve, were it not for the occasional touches of eccentric humor that appear in some of the advertising campaigns.⁴⁰ Even though some products shamelessly display their price (a watch for less than 400 euros), the brand's image is not (or not yet) damaged. The halo effect that extends from luxury craft jewelry (yesterday)

to commercial jewelry (today) continues to work in its favor, and so long as the quality of the most reasonably priced products and the look of the boutiques aren't questioned, the brand's sidestep won't draw criticism. Thus, Mauboussin has amassed a capital of sympathy, modernity, and dynamism that many of its peers can only envy.

The downward swerve, finally, occurs when luxury is associated with some sort of transgressive behavior: an obscenity, a misdemeanor, an indecency. Here, it is the moral—or amoral—dimension of luxury that is under scrutiny, and we know that this is an accusation as old as luxury itself.

There is, of course, the question of pricing. When he gave his three stars back to the famous Michelin Guide, Alain Senderens confessed to being aware that his prices “had become indecent” and that a “juxtaposition of expensive dishes, such as a sea bass with a spoonful of caviar on top, is a great luxury, to be sure, but requires neither talent nor creativity.” This is an echo of very ancient quarrels that the media and public opinion regularly revisit, and in vain. For the reality principle forces us to admit that if there is, on the one hand, a restaurateur who offers a truffle omelet for 1000 euros (a real example) and, on the other hand, a client ready to pay this sum, the latter action may be absurd, but, technically, there can be no objection to it in a liberal economic context. If there are people willing to pay 1490 dollars for a dog bowl,⁴¹ so much the better for its manufacturer (Goyard). With regard to those whom such a sum could protect from cold and hunger for quite some time, yes, it's indecent, and history offers several examples of societies which, one fine day, decided to put a stop to such things. But we are not, it seems to me, on the eve of a new revolution, and the question posed by such excesses is, for the moment, instead: is there a clientele out there ready to believe, merely because of the extravagant price, that a dog bowl is a luxury object, or is this just a media stunt intended to consolidate Goyard's position and image in the world of luxury?

But after all, you'll say, the prices of luxury objects have always been extravagant without anyone raising an eyebrow, persuaded as we are that they were justified by the rarity of the raw materials and, above all, by the extreme quality of the workmanship. Yes, but now this illusion is being punctured from all sides. There have been numerous inquiries whose results are discussed in public,

in books, on the Internet;⁴² even in major tabloid newspapers like the *Sunday Mirror*,⁴³ which published a detailed report relating how the most prestigious Italian brands employ an underpaid Chinese workforce. When one discovers that a pair of Italian shoes sold for 900 pounds in Great Britain was probably made by Chinese immigrants paid 3 euros per hour to work in third-world conditions, then yes, the price of luxury reaches heights that public opinion finds indecent.

However, the question of price is perhaps the tree that hides the wood: it's the most visible excess, but it is perhaps not the worst. In the moral order, we know that money can lead to all sorts of excesses, to all sorts of corruption. The "bling" phenomenon, a bastardized form of luxury, offers forceful testimony of this. But there are other misbehaviors that can be observed, other transgressions, notably those that take us out of our human state and bring us down to the level of animals, inciting us to liberate those instincts that civilization encourages us to overcome, or at least to control. The presence of certain animals associated with luxury brands is a sublimated or, shall we say, "noble," but significant, expression of this tendency: the Cartier panther, the Hermès horse, the Rolex falcon.⁴⁴ The inverse of this theme is offered by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, with his famous pigs tattooed with the Vuitton monogram.

Another example of this dangerous alliance of luxury and the animalistic is its propensity to push us toward several cardinal sins, including gluttony and lust (in French: "*luxure*"). Where gluttony is concerned, the result is periodic and, on the whole, inoffensive pairings, such as Audemars Piguet with strawberries and chocolate for an advertising campaign dedicated to its Millenary collection.

But the most spectacular aspect of the downward swerve remains, even today, and despite the revolution in mores and behaviors, the recurrent tendency of luxury to rub shoulders with the theme of lust, even if that means descending into what is known as "porn chic." Contrary to what we may think, this is not a recent phenomenon, as testified by the lubricious frescos in the bordellos of Pompeii, but the media's power of dissemination has resulted in its assuming wider proportions and greater visibility than ever before. Luxury and lust have the same root, as we have seen: both contain the idea of excess, both are swerves away from the norm

of ordinary behavior—sexual or otherwise. In both cases, there is a turning away from the straight and narrow path, a taking of liberties with respect to the rules of life observed by your average human being.

But amorous desire is, after all, nothing but an offspring of desire in the largest sense, and luxury is, by definition, a tempter. It is a well-known fact that our era is obsessed with sex—which, let it be noted, is evidence that we're not as liberated as we think—and this can lead to all sorts of excesses. It's hard to see, for example, what an Yves Saint Laurent perfume called *Paris* hoped to gain by exchanging its previous postcard images, which were fairly unremarkable, it is true, for the no less banal image of a naked woman sitting on a chair, unless it hoped to show that it subscribed to the fantasies of the era, or to those of its short-lived artistic director, Tom Ford. We saw the same thing, the same stylist, and the same fantasies, not long afterward, with the perfume *Nu* (“naked”) and, for men, *M7*, accompanied by a full-monty striptease that greatly increased the perfume's notoriety, which, however, rapidly dissipated once the visual reinforcement disappeared. Also in the Tom Ford era, the image of a female pubis, waxed in the form of a G and unveiled by a man's hand (known by the name “Public Enemy”) also triggered, to Gucci's benefit and at its expense, an advertising scandal. But because luxury is a swerve, so long as nudity is transgressive it is logical that some brands use it, even at the expense of what is called good taste, or perhaps for this very reason: in order to re-create a distance from the norm. It is also logical that brands aspiring to enter the exclusive precincts of luxury, like Dolce & Gabbana, should start using it the way one uses a password, while taking the provocation to new levels, like all overly zealous apprentices. Yet another scandal occurred, and much condemnation was leveled at images used by the brand evoking gang rape.

In any event, it is pointless to worry about porn chic's excesses: the system is self-regulating. Since luxury is a deviation from the norm, once porn chic becomes the norm, luxury swerves away from it yet again. This is what we have recently seen with the ebb in inflammatory images. This state of affairs will last until the compass needle points toward the pole of decency once more, whereupon luxury, as it always does, will work to shake things up by heading in the opposite direction.

Beyond the spectacular case of the alliance between luxury and lust, which remains, in many people's minds, a product of our lowest instincts, another form of depravity illustrates luxury's tendency to swerve in a downward direction: the moral depravity that it encourages. We've had occasion earlier to recall how frequent a theme this has been in public debates since antiquity. It would be wrong to think that the subject has been closed since the well-known clash between Voltaire and Rousseau or Bernard Mandeville's famous *Fable of the Bees*. The debate continues even today, and entire volumes are written about luxury by contemporary authors who make no secret of their dislike, their concern, and their disapproval: this is true of Robert Frank's book, which makes luxury out to be an illness (*Luxury Fever*), with a subtitle explicitly intended to point up its excesses.⁴⁵ In the name of morality and political economy, he repeatedly draws parallels between the excesses of some and the needs of others when he evokes the duel between yacht-lovers Aristotle Onassis and Stavros Niarchos—the latter having insisted on his *Atlantis* being 50 feet longer than Onassis's *Christina*—and he adds: "Wouldn't it have been better for both boats to be a little shorter and for the money saved to have gone, for example, to provide school lunches for under-privileged children?"

It is true that there can be something indecent about luxury. Its mere presence is an insult to all the have-nots, which explains the unease elicited by the "Luxury Hobos" fashion show at Dior in January 2000, which was just as scandalous as the New Look in 1947, with the famous Tailleur Bar, which took 40 meters of cloth to put together. This was a veritable affront for the housewives of the Rue Lepic, who, not long before, had endured severe restrictions due to World War II, and who, it is said, threw themselves, scissors in hand, on the Dior-clad fashion models who had imprudently ventured into the Butte Montmartre neighborhood for a photo shoot.

The prices charged by luxury brands are sometimes extravagant: a pair of shorts made of spongy cloth—the kind people used to wear thirty years ago in gym class—is worth at most a few euros. In 2002, Chanel was selling them for 320 euros (about 430 dollars). Even at half the cost, nothing can justify such a price, not the raw materials, not the style, not some artisanal craftsmanship, still less

an original “design.” Here, the swerve from the norm is maximal and, yes, shocking, not for moral reasons, but because it is an insult to good sense, epitomizing “insolent luxury” divested of all value apart from that of wearing a certain label. There is no cause for complaint, then, about counterfeits: when a luxury brand copies a banal product, like gym shorts, the banal product has no qualms about—and no difficulty—copying it in return, and that’s exactly what the luxury brand deserves. The professionals themselves acknowledge this: “If showing off, artifice, and provocation get the upper hand on what’s simple and true, then prices become obscene.”⁴⁶

This is the sort of luxury that exposes itself to criticism, when, like a skittish horse, it makes one swerve too many times, and, moreover, is on a downward swerve: a swerve toward the forgetting of the most elementary values and of their hierarchy, which places the survival of the many above the pleasure of the few. “Luxury? It’s an overrated concept that has no value whatsoever in an era in which poverty and war are rampant,” said Giorgio Armani while introducing his new men’s collection for Emporio, inspired by workers’ clothing, in early 2002. “I want to make young people understand that it is absurd to prostitute oneself or to steal in order to buy a brand-name purse. People who spend half their salary to buy an article of clothing are idiots,” said Miuccia Prada, going still further.⁴⁷

Of course, it is easy for us to remind them that they are themselves among the leading world players in the luxury sector, and that the idiots in question are the ones who keep their bank accounts in a healthy state. But such bursts of indignation are nonetheless indicative of the downward swerves that luxury is capable of executing. It is inevitable that from time to time these swerves should trigger some healthy—and generally futile—protestations.

International Luxury: The Clash of Cultures

TWO VISIONS OF LUXURY

A few years ago, while compiling a study commissioned by the J. Walter Thompson agency on the evolution of international luxury, I had occasion to study numerous luxury brands, both French and foreign. Before beginning the study, I was still in the grip of a very hexagonal vision of things: I was convinced, as many people still are, that there was no luxury but French luxury.

That study began to change my opinion. It was based on the analysis of exhaustive documentation and also of several focus groups, in the course of which I heard remarks that, little by little, got me thinking. I heard people from all social categories saying things that it would have been easy for me to dismiss with a wave of the hand as being “false.” Indeed, those remarks went against the grain of what was being said and repeated all around me. True, a nice car or a diamond necklace were luxury items in the eyes of these customers, but a good wine or nice lipstick were also, and so were values and intangible goods like time, space, calm, and even health. Among brands considered luxury brands they included Chanel, Hermès, and Dior, but also Max Mara, Miele, Lancôme, Chivas, Calvin Klein, and Ralph Lauren. Prada and Gucci were also a part of the luxury universe for them. Apparently, they didn’t share the scornful point of view that many professionals in the French luxury industry adopt with regard to Italo-American brands.

That’s when I started to take a closer look at what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic. There, the borders of luxury were much less well defined, and, above all, its structures seemed

different. How could we in Paris continue to think that those borders and structures were less valid than ours?

It was time to examine them without prejudice. At the time, it was said that 50 percent of profits worldwide in luxury were made by French companies. So, the remaining 50 percent were made by others: why should those others be seen as wrong, and the French as right?

It had to be possible to put these two main visions of luxury side by side so as to gain a better understanding of their differences—a more profitable and healthier exercise than the one which consists of blindly assuming some kind of superiority and discrediting what goes on elsewhere.

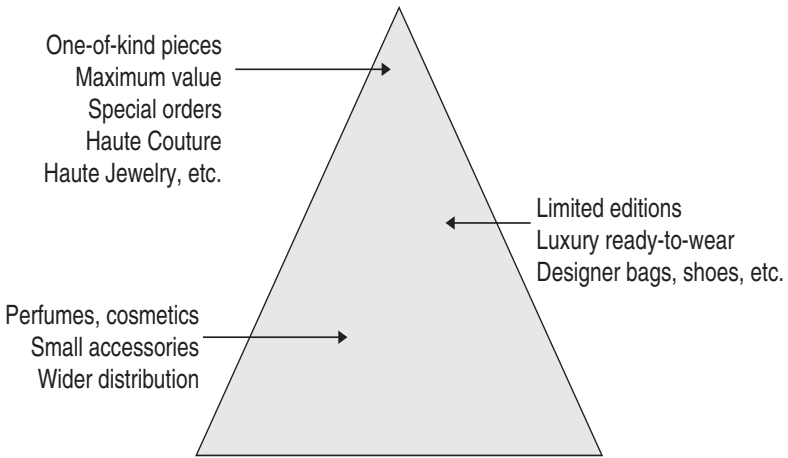
Putting all national chauvinism aside, I observed that there are indeed two coexisting models of luxury, and that we don't have to choose one or the other.

THE PYRAMID

Historically speaking, the first of the two models to dominate the world of luxury is European. It wasn't born in France, but it blossomed there with dazzling success in the 18th century, the century of Enlightenment. From there, its influence radiated across Europe, carried everywhere by the same aristocratic elites, within a system of privileges and relational constraints very close to the court system of ancient kings (see Figure 1).

The system is pyramidal in the sense that everything is placed on different levels beneath the supreme function, which is occupied by a single person. The hierarchy of titles and roles is precise. The maximum amount of power is found at the very top of the pyramid. It is, by definition, a kingly power: it is absolute, violent, capricious, and has no other justification than the king's divine right or "*bon plaisir*," to use the phrase by which the Sun King, like his predecessors, signed a good many of his decrees. Nobody dreamt of contesting that power, for to do so was to foment rebellion, which was a crime of *lèse-majesté*. Rare are the courtiers who took the risk, for this crime was punished by death, or at the very least by destitution and banishment, so that, in general, all preferred to take part in the king's game and "pay him court."

FIGURE 1 | The Pyramid



Applied to luxury, the analogy is striking. The first great fashion designer, Worth—an Englishman, let it be mentioned in passing—was quickly crowned “king of elegance.” At the same moment, Cartier prided himself on the title “jeweler of kings, king of jewelers,” while Charles Lewis Tiffany was “the king of diamonds,” a title that Harry Winston would later claim belonged rightly to him. The Moser glassworks in the Czech Republic was quickly given the nickname “glass of kings, king of glass.” A bit later, Paul Poiret was thought of as the “prince of fashion,” and took the role so seriously that he got completely caught up in it at the parties and masked balls of which he was the architect. By the same token, Chanel was long thought of as the “Empress” before playing the role of Queen Mother of fashion in a kingdom where, in the 1950s, Christian Dior was the reigning king and Yves Saint Laurent the crown prince, and later crowned as “last emperor of high fashion” upon his exit.¹ Valentino inherited the same title in an article in the *New Yorker* in 2012.

The royal metaphor is still valid today, even if the court of high fashion has shrunk like the magic piece of shagreen in Honoré de Balzac’s *Peau de chagrin*. What remains of it still respects the same etiquette: submission to the supreme power, intrigues, jealousies,

sudden favors, unexpected disgraces, and not the slightest hint of a rebellion. Just try to suggest that ranking Galliano, of Dior, among the greatest contemporary artists might have been a stretch, and you'll have a vague idea of the power of the court system that still governs this little world.

At the summit of the luxury pyramid (Figure 1) there is a "creator," which is even better than a king. And it is in the name of creation that the whole system functions: emanating from on high, creation is gradually distributed toward the bottom of the pyramid, becoming increasingly diluted as it passes from level to level, all the way to the base. At the top, one-of-a-kind pieces: haute couture dresses, custom-made silver or gold objects, crystal chandeliers, rare vintages, special-order leather goods. Just below, limited editions: luxury *prêt-à-porter*, limited edition glass, porcelain, and silverware, leather, and furs. Another step down we have products with a slightly wider distribution, such as accessories and tableware, and still farther down, the most readily available products: perfumes, cosmetics, and small accessories such as keyrings, glass cases, pens.

This hierarchized approach to creation and prestige also corresponds to pricing: the highest-priced goods at the top, the most affordable at the bottom. The scale can go from 20 dollars for lipstick to several hundreds of thousands for an evening gown, a piece of custom-made silver, or a car. But the 20 dollars for the lipstick represents two or three times more than an identical product not signed by a luxury brand: the base of the pyramid never goes all the way down to the cheapest market prices.

The pyramid is a closed shape: everything inside it is affected, to a greater or lesser degree, by the creative grace that flows from its summit. An example? A mere elastic adorned with two plastic balls, the kind little girls wear to hold their ponytails in place, has a factory price of no more than five euro cents. Make it Chanel, and it can be sold for 192 euros, or about 250 dollars.²

When markups this extravagant are possible, it's easy to understand why gaining access to the luxury world is so desirable. Just as gaining access to the royal court is no mean accomplishment, so getting into the pyramidal system is not something one does simply because one wants or needs to. Those who belong to it keep careful watch over all means of entry, and they award access infrequently,

and with a severe air. Stationed on the threshold, some publicly hand out free passes: “Chanel is true luxury,” declared Pierre Bergé to the press. “Céline is not.”³

So as to have the right to gain access to the pyramidal system, one is obliged to brandish one’s birthdate like a noble title. Who cares if the Saint-Louis glassworks is not the brand one thinks of as being the most well known or the most prestigious—it has something better, and doesn’t hesitate to show it off: the date 1586 is very legibly etched under its name on the bags, wrappings, and documents produced by the company. Conversely, the birthdate is rarely highlighted at Dior, for example. Is there some disadvantage in being born in 1946? Not at all, and yet there is a lack of ancientness, that is to say, of prestige. Is an ancient birthdate a guarantee of longevity? Not in the least. Worth was the first great fashion designer, but this distinction couldn’t ensure that his name would live on. Does it guarantee better quality or greater beauty? Not that either. Saint-Louis products are neither more nor less beautiful than Waterford or Moser products, and if you prefer one over the other, that’s merely a matter of personal taste. But in the pyramidal system, Saint-Louis’s greater age automatically confers great prestige, just as in the French royal court the oldest names were the most respected, whatever the real qualities of those to whom they belonged. Being old isn’t a mere fact, it is a virtue in and of itself, which is proof that what we’re dealing with is an ideology.

We should note that the pyramid can be found in almost identical form outside France, provided that the brand is an old one: it nicely explains, for example, a gradation that goes from key chains to high-end jewelry at Tiffany (1837) or from lavish dinner sets to Christmas decorations at Wedgwood (1759) and Waterford (1783).

Obviously, in this system where age is what counts, usurpers are no joking matter. None is allowed access to the pyramid, they’re even violently hounded and banished for “not being luxury.” That’s one of the reasons why American and Italian brands are snubbed by their French counterparts. Not only are they more recent, but they often try to pretend that they’re something they’re not. Ralph Lauren, for example, via advertisements and through its shops, creates a WASP-type world that Lauren himself didn’t come from.

Another example is Gucci, which, as everyone knows, was born in 1921, but was seized by feverish desire for nobility that caused it to present itself quite suddenly, in the 1960s, as a “saddler for 500 years,”⁴ and to invent imaginary heraldic crests as well as a logo that initially portrayed a humble hotel porter laden with luggage—an allusion to founder Guccio Gucci’s first job at the Savoy in London—but soon metamorphosed into a dashing knight in arms. Or take Mellerio, which, it is true, has been around in France for a long time, but whose activity as a high-end jeweler didn’t begin until the 18th century, although its “official” birthdate is 1613.

Such “creativity” is the source not only of the many sarcasms which the French regularly heap upon the Italo-American fashion houses, but, at a deeper level, of a fierce quarrel over the question of legitimacy. In the pyramidal system, modeled on court society, this is a crucial question, and, in fact, French brands are just about the only ones to judge their counterparts based on the criterion of legitimacy. Basically, their position is simple: they possess legitimacy, the others don’t. Chanel is authorized to speak of luxury and to embody it, but not Armani, not Narciso Rodriguez or Hugo Boss.

Age—and this is why the pyramidal system grants it the value it does—guarantees legitimacy, just as an ancient and well-known family tree gave access to the nobility under the Old Regime. Of course, it was also possible to buy an office that gave the right to use a title, but the only means of becoming noble that was truly respectable and respected was to win one’s nobility on the battlefield through bravery, boldness, and exploits. This is how Christian Dior earned his new “King of Fashion” title in a single, memorable day, February 12, 1947, with the dazzling success of the New Look. This is also how Yves Saint Laurent followed in his footsteps ten years later with a single collection, at the age of 21. And thus was orchestrated the arrival of Galliano in 1999, also at Dior.

But these are exceptions: today’s battles are more often fabricated than they are authentic, and true feats are becoming ever rarer. How long has it been since we’ve witnessed the birth of a major French luxury brand? It can’t happen, and it is less and less able to happen, because legitimacy in France is tied to age and if you don’t appear legitimate, you’re excluded from the pyramid or relegated to its lower rungs.

Just as luxury is a closed milieu, the pyramid is a closed system, and closed systems are always threatened by sclerosis. They leave no other choice to luxury brands but to be outside the system and thus excluded, or inside it, that is to say, closed inside a hierarchical system in which everyone's position is fixed in advance.

Thus, the only solution for young brands is to get as far away as possible from the pyramid—to put an ocean between them and it, for example.

THE GALAXY

In the 1970s a new generation of luxury brands appeared in the United States: Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan.⁵ The title of “luxury brand” was immediately denied them by the French brands, but not by the American public, for which, thirty years later, luxury is still embodied in these same names, to which have recently been added a little group of brands, frequently of Italian origin: Armani, Versace, Gucci, Prada, Ferragamo, Trussardi, Bulgari.

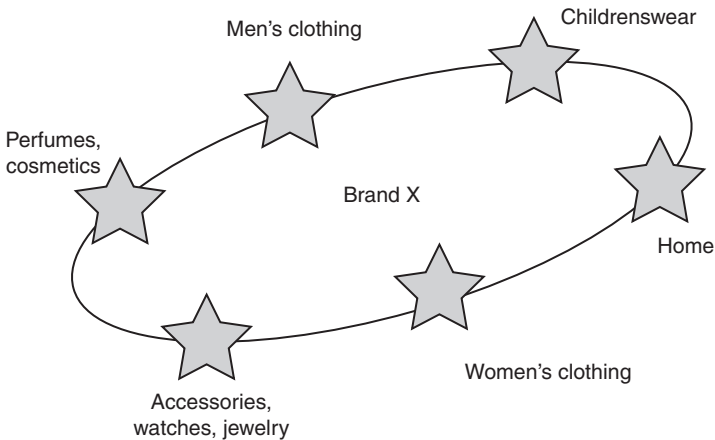
Must we decide who is right and who is wrong in this quarrel? Yes. But how? By listening to the clients who purchase luxury, which will also afford the opportunity for some useful clarification about what a brand is.

Why, indeed, should we think that only those who *produce* luxury are entitled to decide what is and isn't luxury? An object for sale is the object of a transaction between maker and buyer. The agreement of both is necessary for it to exist as merchandise.

The customer's opinion is thus just as important as the maker's pronouncements. If the public considers Ralph Lauren or Armani luxury brands and if, given this, it is inclined to buy such and such a perfume or such and such an article of clothing at prices it knows to be far higher than their real cost, there's no objection to be made: Armani is a luxury brand and Ralph Lauren is too, whether Paris likes it or not.

Let's say it even more clearly: a brand works in the same way whether it sells chewing gum, cars, or shaving cream, and whether it belongs to the luxury world or to that of mass consumption. Its owner, from a legal vantage point, is the company: Van Cleef & Arpels belongs to the Richefont group, just as Dove belongs to Unilever.

FIGURE 2 | The Galaxy



But the brand is not the company, and their objectives are not the same. The brand lives only with the assent of the public, which decides whether it lives or dies even though it doesn't possess legal ownership. Fundamentally, a brand is a coproduction, a co-ownership. If one of the two parties decides not to support it, the other can't keep it alive for very long. American consumers enabled Donna Karan and its more affordable offshoot, DKNY, to triumph. But if LVMH, which bought them, continues to keep these brands under a bushel, they'll cease to develop, and too bad for those who like them. Conversely, when the public wants nothing to do with a brand, they can block its success, no matter what sums are spent, no matter what efforts are made by the company to revive it, a fact illustrated by Lancel, which, despite the Richemont group's efforts, is failing to emerge from the middle of the pack, or by Bally, unable to command the status of a high-end fashion brand. The moral of the story: the company's will is not enough for its brands to earn public recognition as luxury brands, and the French edicts denying American brands the right to be called "luxury" are not only ridiculous, they also reveal an inability to escape pyramidal logic.

So, a new generation of luxury brands appeared in the United States in the 1970s. How were these brands organized? Like a galaxy (see figure 2).

In a new pattern in which the hierarchical levels between the various creations of each brand were much less well defined than in France, Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Donna Karan offered *prêt-à-porter* that was considered as highly creative and of very good quality by the press all over the world, although opposed in style to Parisian creations in every respect. But the gap in price and style between their most expensive clothing and their more widely distributed *prêt-à-porter* (for example between Donna Karan and DKNY) was much less than between a custom-made dress from Saint Laurent Haute Couture and a *prêt-à-porter* skirt suit by Saint Laurent Rive Gauche.

By the same token, American luxury brands quickly expanded in all directions, but in such a way that creativity didn't seem to weaken at the edges, far from the nerve center, as is typical for brands with a pyramidal approach. Many French brands, licensing certain products, allow linens, underwear, and accessories to proliferate at the bottom of the pyramid, so that it's hard to say what, aside from the name, connects these increasingly ordinary products to the prestigious house whose signature they bear. Nothing of the sort in the United States, where, for example, the care Ralph Lauren devotes to orchestrating *all* of his products made it natural for there to emerge a "home" line, whose launch was accompanied by an advertising campaign as polished as if it had been a perfume. A move that damaged Pierre Cardin's image because it stemmed from too obviously commercial sensibilities—the launch of a collection of paint canisters—only enriched Ralph Lauren's, because home and décor were, from the beginning, an integral part of the concept and the universe developed by the brand, as shown by the flagship store on Madison Avenue, and the many other stores with the same name that followed.

In other words, American luxury brands treat all their components with care, instead of focusing their attention on only a part of the whole. Their approach is more egalitarian: they don't impose brutal hierarchies separating what is and isn't worthy of interest in their activity. The value of the brand is the same wherever the brand finds expression, whether it's a matter of women's or men's *prêt-à-porter*, home or children's lines, or perfumes and cosmetics. There may be certain disparities, the spotlight shining more brightly on a certain line of products, but all of them have their day in the sun;

none is left in the shadows and expected to go on invisibly making money.

This is how the pyramid image, which accounts for the hierarchizing of brand value such as it is conceived and practiced in France and in Europe, is being supplanted by a much flatter and less hierarchized model, which resembles a galaxy (Figure 2) comprised of a number of orbiting planets: the perfume planet, the home goods planet, the *prêt-à-porter* planet, and so forth.

In the galaxy, unlike in the pyramid, there is no superiority, but only one planet's chronological priority with respect to others. In other words, here age is not a virtue and confers no privileges.

In the pyramid, everything starts from the top and from one product: an article of clothing, a piece of gold or silver or crystal, perfume, handworked leather. In the galaxy, everything starts at the center, with the world vision of a "designer" (and not a "creator"). Ralph Lauren puts it clearly: "Parisian designers make clothing. I write a story. The clothing is important, but it is only part of the story."⁶ And whether or not one subscribes to Ralph Lauren's vision of the world, one must grant him the merit of being coherent, whereas in the pyramid structure there is disparity between high and low—value is concentrated on top and diluted at the bottom—and sometimes even incoherence, when one thinks of the kitchen aprons licensed by prestigious Parisian houses for the Japanese market, which could be found everywhere in Japan in the 1990s.

In the pyramid structure, everything converges toward the top, where the creativity and craftsmanship takes place. As for the galaxy structure, it is centrifugal: it can expand with the appearance of new planets.

The pyramid structure is exclusive: the only choice is between the inside and the outside. The galaxy structure is inclusive, its contours are blurrier and more mobile, and it integrates heterogeneous elements more easily.

The pyramid structure makes brand diversification more hazardous, because the starting point of the brand is a product. Even a brand as prestigious as Veuve Clicquot cannot launch just any product (its orange rubber rain boots for example) without raising questions about the legitimacy of it going outside its territory.

The galaxy structure's point of departure is a territory: for example, the Ralph Lauren lifestyle. If this lifestyle involves the habit of playing certain sports rather than others, it is logical that part of the brand should develop under the name Polo, and even that it should sell tennis balls, whereas this would seem more incongruous coming from Rolex, despite its long-standing association with great sports figures, including those in the world of tennis. But the Swiss brand, faithful to its own identity, does not play the diversification game, a game that Chanel, on the other hand, has no qualms about playing; for example, by deciding to sell a set of bocce balls (1235 euros, or about 1600 dollars)—bocce being a sport, or at least an activity, so removed from the brand's universe that its inclusion can only be justified in the name of unapologetic snobbery.

TWO MODELS, TWO SOCIETIES

The pyramid and the ideal of nobility on the one hand, the galaxy and the democratic ideal on the other: this obviously isn't due to mere chance. The old European societies have not truly detached themselves from the structures and belief systems that prevailed here for so long and which show up even under the new exterior of their various republics. Meanwhile, from its origins—or nearly—the history of the United States is that of a democracy unsullied by a monarchic past.

There is nothing surprising in this. Luxury, after all, is just the reflection of the societies that produce it. Which raises a very simple question: if European luxury, apart from its economic dimension, was, first of all, essentially a symbolic instrument that served to mark the supremacy of a social class which was itself linked to a particular political system, what remains of that social function and those politics of luxury today? It hardly exists anymore. Politically speaking, as soon as you're living in a democracy, any behavior that aims to justify the superiority of one social class over another loses its meaning. Socially speaking, it's another matter: statements of inequality obviously live on in the ostentatious displays of luxury. But it can be said that the social pyramid that was supposed to represent the world order desired by God—an order

that the king was charged with maintaining—has, two centuries later, eroded considerably. Something of it remains; there are still haves and have-nots, people with power and people who have less of it, but the social order is no longer surmounted by a nobility spending its fortunes on clothes, carriages, and parties intended as conclusive proof of its superiority.

The only function that is officially granted to luxury today—granted, and even admired—is economic: it creates jobs and wealth. But to reduce luxury to this economic dimension, or even to its financial one, is to remain blind to its true power, which is symbolic. This symbolic power, it is true, no longer has the same political function as it used to, but luxury still serves to support the game of social segregation, even when the game is considered “politically incorrect,” in the West but also in China, where social networks sternly condemned the display of Rolex watches and Vuitton purses at the Chinese Communist Party Congress. If luxury was nothing more than another business activity, like the bronze trade or the market for dairy products, it wouldn’t arouse any passion, any condemnation, or any debate. But it arouses a lot of all of those things, and it always has.

Economists, whether they liked it or not, were thus obliged to take stock of this phenomenon, and marketing professionals soon followed. This explains the way their remarks are perpetually sawing back and forth between the rational and the irrational: on the one hand, luxury is a dream, and, on the other, it’s a matter of profit. For the profits to be big, the dream has to cost a lot. For it to cost a lot, it must be provided with sources of real value, such as the know-how and artistry of its craftsmen whose exquisite workmanship justifies a higher price. And yet no matter how much you pay a craftsman or a workman, it doesn’t justify the price of some objects.

The result is that the chief source of value for luxury products is symbolic. We will come back to the power and content of this symbolism later on. For now let us conclude with the observation that it’s a symbolism that is, consciously or unconsciously, shot through with the memory of a time when luxury had a deep, almost sacred meaning, within a political, social, and cultural structure whose representatives may have disappeared, but whose memory lives on.

THE CLASSICAL AND THE BAROQUE

A little more than two centuries have gone by on both sides of the Atlantic since the Age of Enlightenment. But what a difference in trajectory and mentality! In the United States, democracy was almost immediately adopted, and it has endured. In France, it took another eighty years before it took hold for good with the Third Republic, in 1870. In other words, it took an emperor, three kings, and a second emperor before the country could come out of mourning for the monarchic system. And democracy still isn't everyone's cup of tea.

In the United States, it's a different story. History is shorter; there wasn't any court, or any king, except the British one in colonial times—and he had neither the time nor the desire to export his habits and customs to the other side of the Atlantic. No court life, no luxury, apart from what is invented as the country develops: in other words, American luxury is the luxury deployed by the bourgeoisie once it takes root and gets rich. That bourgeoisie is predominantly Protestant.

Max Weber was the first to note the role that Protestantism played in the development of American capitalism. We know that Protestantism, at least in theory, preaches austerity, simplicity, modest spending, and the benefits of work. That it tends to have a preference for a stark lack of ornamentation. And, finally, that it dislikes ostentation, pomp, and splendor.

But it has nothing against a certain luxury, provided it can be combined with a taste for sobriety. For Europeans and Asians, sober luxury is hard to conceive of: they are the descendants of a society in which luxury *was supposed* to be visible, not to say gaudy, for it was only on this condition that it could fulfill its role of social marker. Besides, many old European kingdoms were Catholic for a long time, and accustomed to expressing their faith by every possible aesthetic excess, nothing being too beautiful for the glory of God.

In Protestant culture, the opposite is true. It follows that when a Protestant culture produces luxury, it's an upside-down luxury: simple, discreet, and uncluttered. But it's luxury all the same, as can be seen, for example, from the novels of Henry James.

And in our era?

Well, some American brands like Ralph Lauren—or Americanized, like Armani—are an illustration of this phenomenon, at least in their *prêt-à-porter* lines. If we look with an open mind at what Narciso Rodriguez or Giorgio Armani are offering, for example, what do we see? Few colors, nothing frou-frou or chichi, never any outlandish clothing in the service of unbridled creativity—and very little gold. It’s a minimalist approach. The clothes are functional, often strict and neutral, even when they are made from luxuriant fabrics, which they often are, on condition that it not be noticeable. It’s the reverse of Chanel, Valentino, and McQueen: no virtuosity, nothing that arouses sighs of ecstasy or cries of amazement. Nor is there anything that evokes the past, no *fin de siècle* touches, no corsets or whalebone collars. It’s the liturgy of the present age, the celebration of modernity.

Modernity—there, I’ve said it. So as to avoid misunderstandings, we should be clear on what it means.

Something is modern when it is opposed to the old, the antique, and the classical. There have been quarrels between the ancients and the moderns in every era, because modernity is constantly redefined as we move forward in time. For people of the 13th century, gothic was modern. And when time moves forward faster and faster, vocabulary has a hard time keeping up. Which is why, for lack of a better understanding of our era’s accelerated changes, we speak of postmodernity.

How can we avoid getting lost?

Perhaps by taking inspiration from the temporal divisions used in art history. In Western art history, the great revolution of modernity comes toward the last third of the 19th century, starting with the Impressionists. And the most radical moment of rupture comes a little later, at the beginning of the 20th century, with Bauhaus, Cubism, and abstract art. This is the era of *less is more* and of the sudden overturning of all aesthetic habits and conventions.

In France, Chanel is a fairly good example of the modern rupture, especially in contrast to her great rival, Poiret, who was himself already quite revolutionary. But Poiret, while removing the corsets of the *belle époque*, kept the skirts bound, and, above all, didn’t radically break with the mainstream tradition of French luxury, which was to dazzle by any and all possible means: shimmering cloth, pleats, *bouillonnes*, gold or silver lamé, furs, embroidery,

lace, jewelry, and ornaments of all sorts. The form of feminine dress had changed, but not the materials.

Stylistically, the rupture introduced by Chanel was much more radical, because it affected at once the form, the colors, and the materials: straight, angular forms, masculine lines, neutral colors, jerseys, tweeds, “shabby” fabrics, and an absence of flourishes. Clothing became not so much finery as a deeper expression of a new relationship with the body. It was no longer an object to be admired in and of itself, for its inventiveness and virtuosity, but rather the extension of a new lifestyle. As new as they may have been, Paul Poiret’s extravagant costumes would not have been completely incomprehensible to an elegant lady of Louis XIV’s court, whereas the “malnourished little telegraphist” body type promoted by Chanel and mocked by Poiret would have been literally unimaginable.

The same was true, at about the same time, for all the decorative arts, as shown by the 1925 Exposition in Paris, but also for architecture. All over, the old was brutally and suddenly swept away. Indeed, this is always the case when the pendulum of style swings in a new direction: periods of aesthetic overload, such as the baroque, proceed through long accumulations and slow metamorphoses, while periods of aesthetic cleansing abruptly wipe the slate clean: the first are reformist, the second, revolutionary. Art Deco was radically modern.

If we stick to luxury in clothing, Armani is modern in the sense that Chanel was in the 1920s: because he works with “less” and not with “more.” At Dior, Galliano worked with “more”: he added on, he overloaded, he accumulated. The one subtracts, the other adds. The one shows, the other hides. The one cites and ceaselessly revisits the past or areas beyond fashion, the other practices a pure and simple evacuation of the past. It’s the opposition of two styles, the contrast of two forms of luxury, the one hollowed out, the other filled in.

Such is the latest version of a well-known stylistic clash between the two major poles of art history that are the classical and the baroque, and, from this vantage point, we have to change all the labels: Chanel in the 1920s, Balenciaga in the 1950s, and Armani today—all classical, even when they’re perceived as being “modern,” because they streamline and lighten forms, limit the range of colors, and simplify materials. Worth, Poiret, Christian

Dior, and two of the latter's successors, Gianfranco Ferré and John Galliano, were, on the contrary, baroque. Le Corbusier was classical, Gaudi baroque. The Louvre pyramid is classical, the Bilbao Guggenheim is baroque.

In general, European luxury tends toward the baroque, as we see in Italy, France, and Spain. For the historical reasons mentioned above, it likes to strike the eye by every possible means, arouse emotions, and celebrate sensuality. American luxury, which is perceived as more "modern," is in reality classical, that is to say more cerebral and conceptual, less ostentatious and unbridled, less organic, less sensual.

There's no case for judging whether one brand is better or worse than another based merely on its belonging to either the classical or baroque aesthetic, not to mention the brands that occupy intermediary (but not always in a fully deliberate and conscious way) positions between one pole and the other. Of course, everyone has the right to prefer the classical or the baroque, or some combination of the two. But it cannot be said that one is "better" or "more beautiful" or "is worth more" than the other.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

The years to come will see American luxury face an inevitable crisis. One should never ask how old the captain is, and yet it is impossible not to observe that Messrs. Klein, Lauren, de la Renta, and Armani, as well as Madame Karan and Madame Herrera, are no longer in the first bloom of youth. We wish them long and happy lives, but the moment of transition will soon come around, whether we like it or not, and, in the world of luxury—above all, when you pride yourself on being a "creator"—it's an extremely dangerous time. So long as the brand's founder is at the helm, so long as he keeps the ship on course, he ensures some form of coherence, of which he himself is the sole guarantee. But the founder, by definition, is not eternal.

American luxury brands born in the 1970s will soon come to this decisive turning point. European brands have an advantage over them in that they have been facing the problem for much longer. Not that they have always successfully solved it, but at least

they have experienced—sometimes repeatedly—the thorny problems surrounding the transition of power and the management of change.

The question that is going to be posed to American brands is, therefore, not what they should do to last, but how they can keep developing even as they evolve. How can they be both the same brand and a new brand?

Nobody today knows the answer to that question. Nor can anybody say what the future of luxury will be, which places its managers in the difficult position of having to make important decisions in a doubly uncertain situation.

For example, the same phenomenon is starting to occur in luxury that we've been observing elsewhere for at least twenty years: where once the market looked like a diamond resting on its point, now it looks like an hourglass. In other words, the middle of the market is shrinking while the lower and very high ends are growing. Which means that, at the high end, prices keep going up, while, at the bottom, the number of fairly affordable "luxury" brands gets bigger every day.

At the highest end of the market, the purchase of yachts, private jets, estates, and works of art is increasing along with the growing number of new—and often young—Russian, Brazilian, American, and Chinese millionaires and billionaires eager to possess the most extraordinary things that luxury can offer (like the identical copies of the Château de Maisons-Laffitte and the Cheops Pyramid built for private property holders in China). The great craftsman jewelers have been witnesses to this flowering of new fortunes: they had long faces ten years ago, but they're back in the swing of things now with the success of their most expensive and extravagant pieces. Boucheron, Harry Winston, Cartier, Bulgari, Van Cleef & Arpels—all are now selling, in less than three months, custom-made pieces worth up to five or six million dollars to a foreign clientele for whom money is no object. Some analysts have suggested giving the name "Über Premium" to this trend, which in reality isn't a trend at all: there has always been luxury that was beyond the means of 99.9 percent of the population, even if the number of people who can afford it is greater today.

The same phenomenon is occurring at the bottom of the scale, and it has been observed and analyzed by, among others, the

authors of *Trading Up* for the American market,⁷ even if the examples they give concern mass-consumer brands—Victoria’s Secret and Starbucks—or more selective but not exorbitant ones—like Whirlpool, BMW, or Callaway golf clubs. Once again, it’s not that luxury has been “democratized” (the BMW Luxury 5 Series, which goes for between 40,000 and 60,000 euros, is not exactly what you would call a democratic vehicle), but rather that a greater number of people are acquiring increased buying power in China, Brazil, Russia, and India.

These new clients share the ability to buy products and services that are a little (Starbucks) or a good deal (Callaway) more expensive than the lowest price in each category: the price gap, here as elsewhere, signals a luxury purchase. A little gap means a little luxury, but a luxury nonetheless for anyone who distinguishes between a bitter espresso gulped down while standing at the bar of a noisy bistro (1.50) and a Frappuccino at Starbucks (4.50), where you can relax in a simple but modern atmosphere, in clean, pleasant surroundings, with soul music playing in the background. And here, too, let’s not hear any cries of protest: if the Starbucks customer thinks his or her Frappuccino is a luxury, it is one, because luxury is always relative to the resources and tastes of each individual, and this is true for every social class. For those who have their Blue Mountain delivered to their homes, where it is prepared with an Icelandic spring water before being served by a butler in white gloves, a ten-euro coffee at the Ritz bar is not a luxury, it’s a petty bourgeois amusement. Starbucks is representative of the upward expansion of luxury, starting with a very common consumer product, which is within everyone’s reach but where real connoisseurship isn’t well known to the general public, a path that Nespresso also followed in its own way, by other means.

To remain on the subject of luxury’s expansion from the low to the high end, aside from purchases starting at a million euros, which we addressed earlier, there is, at a more modest and less restrictive level, the example of tourism (Club Med has recently discovered that “the trident’s genetic code has its roots in luxury,” which enables it to raise its prices but constitutes a radical change in identity), or of the cosmetics sector, whose brands have recently started competing to see which can have the highest prices (250 to 1000

dollars or more for a skin cream). The result: brands that are still in the middle bracket have a hard time maintaining their position.

All observers of consumer trends confirm that customers are going to extremes, in both directions at once. They indulge in a fine restaurant, but spend the night in a motel. They buy a Vuitton purse but they wear it with Gap jeans. They try the latest Gucci perfume, but use a sunscreen from the Neutrogena line. This trend has lasted for almost twenty years and is only becoming more pronounced, as can be seen at once from luxury's good health (all countries and sectors included) and the emergence of the low-cost phenomenon: the same customers are ensuring the success of both.

If you had the same budget fifty years ago, you gradually worked your way up to luxury purchases (car, clothing, leisure activities, household appliances, and so on). Today, the same budget is distributed in a much more heterogeneous way, with impulse purchases that randomly work in favor of luxury brands, but without entailing the same loyalty as before. There is every reason to believe that the same will be true in the future, and that the unpredictability and volatility of luxury purchases will only increase. This isn't necessarily good news for luxury brands, which will encounter the same difficulties as mass-consumer brands. Nothing could be more logical: there was no way they could follow their example and borrow their methods without exposing themselves to the same risks and the same dangers.

WHEN THE EROSION OF THE INDUSTRIAL MODEL REACHES LUXURY BRANDS

From the day people started talking about "the luxury industry," it was inevitable that under the cover of lofty speeches about tradition, absolute respect for quality, and the grandeur of craftsmanship, the wolf would be admitted to the sheep's fold, wrapped in the garments of marketing. And indeed it rushed in on the heels of managers who had come from the mass market, notably at Procter & Gamble and Unilever, and who were recruited in great numbers by the French luxury houses, even by Hermès. For the most part, the transplant was a success, at least at first. But it's possible that this initial period is now drawing to a close. We're

just beginning to realize that the operation had its dangers, and side effects are appearing: the uniformity of retail outlets, relentless advertising, in-your-face logos, diversification without rhyme or reason, standardization. It is hard to imagine why the same thing that ended up wearying or annoying a good portion of the Western public when it was a question of Pampers or Coke wouldn't have the same effect in the case of luxury.

That weariness and that annoyance are indeed there. They're coming to the surface even in media outlets as serious as *Time*,⁸ which seems to have no qualms about echoing doubts that would at one time have been unthinkable, such as "Who adores Dior?" Answer: Russian prostitutes (no taste, but lots of money). After conducting an investigation, the magazine found it hard to believe that anyone but a Pamela Anderson or a Paris Hilton could have any desire to buy certain items: shoes, purses, scarves, T-shirts. While haute couture remains beyond reproach, what's found in stores is deemed "absolute trash," "shit," and "horrors." The only explanation put forward for this divorce between couture and everything else is that the sale of *prêt-à-porter*, perfumes, cosmetics, and accessories finances the creative impulses of Dior's artistic director (at the time John Galliano). The true explanation, however, appears between the lines: these products, which are unworthy of a brand like Dior, weren't intended for the English, but for "tourists." True enough: in Europe, the UK isn't LVMH's priority, and, for that matter, neither is France—instead, the brand's decision makers claim, it's Italy.⁹ Let's take this reasoning a step further: in reality, all of this "luxury" bric-a-brac is intended for the enormous numbers of Russian, American, Brazilian, and, above all, Chinese "new money," who lack the fashion savvy and sophistication of Europeans. The big logos, the gold plating, and the rhinestones that can be found in Europe on some luxury products are emerging market leftovers.

But there is a very good chance that the luxury brands that have been relying excessively on marketing will soon begin to set the bar a bit higher, at least the ones that want to maintain an image that is prestigious enough to justify the extremely high prices. Some of them have already realized that it just isn't possible to stretch a brand in so many directions that you end up slapping a label on any old product, merely because the name is reputable. What profit can

Ferrari hope to gain from putting its name on computers that make the experts laugh? By the same token, other brands will realize, sooner or later, that choosing “the” model or “the” star of the hour is a facile solution that has been used to death, from the high end of the market all the way down to the bottom of the commercial scale. Besides, those stars, little and big, have a tendency to want to eat at every available trough, such that in the end everything gets mixed together. When Kate Moss is posing for Rimmel, but also for Dior, Chanel, Burberry, Liu Jo, and Yves Saint Laurent, Rimmel stands to gain the most. Claudia Schiffer can’t very well brandish both L’Oréal’s flag and that of Ebel watches without people wondering whether or not the latter is a luxury brand.

This example makes it possible for me to draw attention to another driving force in the erosion of the industrial model, which is, by definition, based on the mass reproduction of identical consumer goods. As if this in itself weren’t already dangerous enough to raise questions about the viability of extending the model to the luxury sector, marketing makes things worse by falling into the trap of imitation. Whereas brand logic is, as the word brand suggests, a logic of difference and divisions, luxury marketing spends its time borrowing the methods of one brand so as to apply them to another one. The result? Luxury brands, like consumer brands, all use exactly the same recipes at the same time: the same advertisements (with a star if possible, otherwise there is an attempt to fabricate one), the same public relations campaigns, the same race to open flagship stores on the same major thoroughfares, the same press clippings (as overblown as they are vague), the same public donations to charities (Hermès is no exception to the rule), the same recourse to limited editions and waiting lists. The products even copy one another’s names: Chanel sells a variety of its Coco perfume called Coco Mademoiselle, Dior follows up with Miss Dior, which becomes Miss Dior Chérie. No sooner has one brand taken the initiative than its competitors adopt the same strategy: every luxury hotel now has its own concierge service, ready to satisfy customers’ slightest whim at any hour of the day or night. Vertu has one too, and so does American Express, not to mention the many other brands and the private concierge services that aren’t linked to any store brand. A luxury hotel, like the Peninsula in Hong Kong, uses a fleet of Rolls-Royces. The brand-new hotels in the Emirates follow its example. At great expense,

another hotel installs foldaway television screens in all its rooms. Its competitors hasten to do the same.

What ensues, in the luxury sector just like everywhere else, is a blurring of distinctions that luxury brands have no better luck reversing than does anyone else,¹⁰ and which is in the process of undermining them from within. A brand is a difference: the day it sells off that difference, it puts its value in jeopardy. If it truly existed, luxury marketing would protect brands against the ravages of imitation—for the moment, it is far from doing so.

The industrial model and its enforcer, marketing, have done luxury a favor in many respects, but they also have their limits and dangers. The most intelligent luxury brands will be the first to realize this and to reverse course while there is still time.

INVISIBLE LUXURY

To leave the industrial model behind is to distance oneself from a concept that focuses on creating impact and visibility and to work, instead, on discretion and confidentiality.

From this point of view, the opening of the Vuitton store on the Champs-Élysées is a great example of a publicity stunt: an accomplishment in the race to be the biggest and best which impressed a lot of gawking passersby but dissimulated the true hunt for luxury big game, which takes place in the shadows, and with weapons much more powerful than little wallets for 500 dollars.

In 2004, after a long period of construction brought to the attention of all by two enormous tarpaulins in the form of suitcases hiding the worksite, the grand opening took place amid much pomp and circumstance, accompanied by a high-wattage press campaign. Was there anything there worth the public coming out in masses to see? Not necessarily, but the masses came, as shown by the long lines stretched herd-like out along the sidewalk. How long will it take them to realize that standing around for half an hour in the cold and rain in order to get permission to go into a store, whatever it is, isn't luxury? The same amount of time it will take them, no doubt, to realize that when everyone comes out of the subway with an LV (or any other logo) purse, luxury might actually consist in not displaying one. The Visa Infinite card, which offers its holders

a “personal secretary, 24/7, anywhere in the world,” says it clearly: “True power doesn’t show itself.”

Many players in the luxury game have already begun to concentrate on this intersection between exclusivity and personalization: the airlines that are fighting for the first class market or that are opening private terminals, as in Frankfurt. The perfume makers who are offering custom-made fragrances, like Francis Kurkdjian. American Express, with its Platinum and Centurion cards, both of which include a “concierge service,” and which cannot be procured (or so it’s said) except by invitation. The membership at some fitness centers and nightclubs in New York is even more expensive. The “Ultimate Ski Pass” offered by the Aspen Skiing Company costs 25,000 dollars—the price of the pleasure of skiing on virgin slopes, before the ski lifts open to the public. Vuitton has opened numerous private salons: in Tokyo, the brand opened its Celux Club, at whose doors one must prove one’s credentials and have a well-furnished wallet in order to enjoy a very “privileged” shopping experience or participate in various events (meet and greets with artists, premiers, and so forth). This is the proof (if any were needed) that the rank and file waiting at the doors on the Champs-Élysées is deluded if it thinks that it’s gaining access to a temple of luxury—but since it knows no other kind, it can easily be made to think so.

The “true” temples of luxury are invisible, and some of them are even ephemeral. What the public sees in the media is a pantomime: everything happens behind the scenes, far from the public’s prying eyes. Just as it always has.

But, like always, the majority is going to want what the rich and powerful possess, and invisible luxury will be the next recipe for success. It already is for both little and big players in the luxury markets who are withdrawing to confidential addresses, constructing rarefied retail outlets, and ever more limited editions. Their addresses do not appear in the newspapers and magazines. They are given out with caution, and only on a personal recommendation. Well, up to a certain point, at least.

NEW BRANDS ON THE HORIZON?

If *trade* in luxury goods goes all the way back to the first exchanges between Europe and the Far East, at least ten or twenty years

have already elapsed since Western luxury *brands* established a foothold in China, and the trend is becoming more pronounced. Everybody wants to sell luxury to the Chinese, a tiny fraction of whom—a fraction that is, however, numerically significant and constantly growing—wants nothing more than to buy what the West is selling.

Nobody, on the other hand, seriously imagines that the opposite might be true, and that the Chinese might start selling luxury products to the West in turn. And yet this is what inevitably will happen, and the question isn't whether they will do it, but when.

To answer that question, it can first be observed that, in terms of production, and contrary, yet again, to received ideas on the subject, Chinese products are fully capable of withstanding comparison with even the most demanding Western criteria of quality, and this in numerous areas. The major European and American pharmaceutical companies, for example, whose manufacturing standards are draconian, are already having numerous medications manufactured in China, without experiencing any more difficulties than they face at home. The same is true in naval construction and electronics—sectors in which quality control is no less drastic.

But it is thought that a huge leap would still be necessary for China to be able to produce luxury objects.

This is true, but only in part. Already, many Western luxury brands manufacture some parts of their wrapping or packaging in China, even products like silver-plated dinnerware, which are then repatriated and sold at high prices in Europe. And as far as the thorny question of counterfeiting goes, quite apart from all economic, legal, and moral considerations, it's worth noting that some counterfeit products are now of such good quality that the top specialists are fooled.¹¹

The Chinese already know, or will learn sooner or later, how to make absolutely everything that the Western world manufactures, including luxury products. First of all because they are no less clever and skilled than anyone else, and then because they've taken the measure of exchanging the right for major Western brands to operate on Chinese soil for the right to gain access to their techniques so as to be able to put them to good use later on: we're already seeing this in many areas, including the automobile sector. Moreover, there are already Chinese luxury brands, some national,

like Kweichow Moutai and Wuliangye,¹² Rosewood, which we'll return to later, and the Yongzheng Tailor Shop; others international, like Shanghai Tang, Tai Ping Carpets, and the jeweler Qeelin.¹³

The European luxury brands that think they are protected by dint of possessing a unique, ancestral *savoir-faire* will probably be the first ones to lose their illusions. While it is true that Chinese artisanal *savoir-faire*, which is extremely varied and sophisticated, still hasn't recovered from the clean sweep of the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese students are already taking classes at Western schools of design or crafts (jewelry-making, fashion, leather goods), and many of them intend to go back to their home country armed with skills every bit as good as those of their European and American classmates. They'll put those skills to work for Chinese companies, which is perfectly justifiable and legitimate. The same goes for every Chinese student who receives training in management, finance, marketing and accounting.

For the moment, blinded as we are by everything that has to do with fashion, we think that only very widely distributed brands can be threatened by Chinese textiles, but not fashion or luxury ready-to-wear, and still less the other sectors of what *we* call luxury, like decorative household goods and gastronomy. *Our* luxury seems to us to be safe from competition, because it was born in the cradle of an ancient and venerable artisanal tradition.

It is true that the Chinese were cut off from their cultural heritage by recent history, and that this has left deep traces in collective consciousness: for a whole generation of young Chinese, craftsmanship is associated with the idea of poverty, of the old peasant class. It has nothing to do with luxury, which, in their eyes, is, for the moment, Western and modern. This disqualification of manual trades in China is aggravated by problems of shortage of raw materials, problems that are harder to get around today than they used to be. A Chinese luxury brand like Rosewood, which is known for its remarkable rosewood furniture, is dependent on an extremely rare raw material, since it takes 500 years for the trunks to harden enough for them to be worked on.¹⁴ Even if a few hundred of these trees were planted today, they couldn't be used for another half-millennium. And the ones that already exist are on the list of protected species. This is just one example, but it's not the only one, of the difficulties faced by Chinese brands which, like their Western

counterparts, want to capitalize on the authenticity of their *savoir-faire* and production.

But things are going to change rapidly. Chinese national pride was given a boost by the 2008 Olympic Games and by the 2010 Universal Exposition in Shanghai. When those who have learned abroad about the prestigious past that China has inherited return to their country, many complexes will be cured, and a few may experience the desire to explore and revive ancient knowledge and craft. Benchmarking will do the rest: all they'll have to do is imitate the European model of luxury to reverse Marco Polo's journey and beat us at our own game: the game of age, refinement, and a certain aristocratic conception of luxury, which the Chinese have known much longer than we have. That's what made Shanghai Tang's recovery possible, the company having been taken on by the Richemont group after some questionable management threatened to prevent the young brand (1994) from even getting off the ground. Tai Ping Carpets met with the same turbulence: in both cases the arrival of Western managers made it possible to raise the bar. As for Qeelin, which came into existence in 2004, a Franco-European partnership is presiding over its international expansion. And other partnerships have already been established, like that between Hermès and the brand Shang Xia, of which the French group is the majority shareholder, but which is run by a Chinese team whose mission is to make use of "superior Chinese materials and *savoir-faire*."

If the Chinese will have no trouble rivaling us in the long run where *products* are concerned, it will be a little more difficult for them to incorporate the mechanisms of *brand* construction and functioning. We've noted that classical luxury starts with a product: modern luxury from a concept. It is almost always possible to understand how a product is made, and to copy it: it is less possible to understand a concept, because it's no longer tools, materials, and techniques that are at stake, but ways of thinking. What's more, the very concept of brand cannot be reduced to its material dimension. In luxury, above all, the symbolic dimension is fundamental. It follows from all this that a development of unequal speed takes place with luxury products and some services on the one hand, and, on the other, the construction of strong, attractive Chinese brands on the international market. For, on these markets, which are older

and more mature, brands can't just be reduced to the name, the packaging, and the advertising of the products they sign.

It is thus a very good bet that it won't be long before the Chinese luxury market is manufacturing handbags every bit as high quality as Vuitton's or Gucci's. And the same will hold in all other sectors. Already, imports of Chinese porcelain surpass exports of French brands, without there being any doubts as to its quality, as the President of the Confederation of Tableware acknowledged in 2009: "Contrary to what is often thought, Chinese manufacturing is about more than just low-end products." After all, what could be more logical? Porcelain comes from China, as testified by the word that denotes it in English, *china*. And there is at least one category of Chinese brands that has already taken hold all over the world: service brands, notably in the hospitality industry, like the Mandarin Oriental or the Shangri-La, prestigious names that are already well known to the wealthiest travelers, and which could serve as an example for all Chinese vendors who are still having trouble mastering the codes of luxury.

But as far as constructing a *brand* of Chinese luxury products goes, that will probably take more time. Not because a luxury brand must necessarily be an old brand—that sort of reasoning is for dotards who have never heard of Lexus or Richard Mille—but rather because a strong brand, in luxury as in any other sector, is based on shared imaginary worlds and shared cultural roots. That is what enabled Ralph Lauren to create his empire in just thirty years.

China will have to wait for a new generation of entrepreneurs to take the reins, a generation that is more attuned to Western luxury than is the current one. But this new generation is already on the move, and it won't take thirty years to assert itself. It's already easy to see how, in less than ten years, the Chinese mentality about luxury has changed: it used to be completely bound up with demonstrating social success, but is now becoming a way of expressing a more independent, even a more self-centered, personality than in the past, as illustrated by the revolutionary idea—which is catching on among young people—of spending money for oneself before (or even instead of) handing it over to less well-off parents. Or even the suspicion, which is beginning to emerge among some Chinese customers, that "bling" is for new money and parvenus,

whereas “true” luxury, to the contrary, can be recognized by its greater refinement and discretion.

One thing seems almost certain: this new generation which will be capable, in the not-too-distant future, of constructing Chinese luxury brands, will have been educated abroad. It will initiate an offensive whose full extent, not to mention exact timing, is impossible to predict. Indeed, there are many unknowns where the future of China is concerned: the risk of serious economic and political disturbances in the years to come, which threaten not only the country’s inner stability but also its international alliances. However, even if these disturbances manage to slow down or delay the country’s economic expansion, it is very unlikely that they will stop it altogether, nor that luxury will be excluded, as it was under the Maoist regime. The Chinese themselves do not foresee this. In May 2010, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated that China would become the biggest luxury market in the five years to come, with predicted profits of 14.6 billion dollars. France may think it’s the center of the luxury cosmos, but it could be that a Copernican revolution is in the offing, and that in the future the French will be orbiting around the Middle Kingdom, rather than vice versa.¹⁵

How Luxury Brands Work

BEING (OR NOT) A LUXURY BRAND

I have often been privy to conversations about how to tell whether Calvin Klein, Versace, Donna Karan, Armani, or Ralph Lauren are or are not luxury brands. Invariably in Paris the discussion ended immediately with a scornful “no.” Once, after I cited one of the numerous American studies that placed these brands in the “luxury” category, I was greeted with this reply: “Don’t tell me you’re going to listen to what a bunch of Midwestern rednecks have to say!”

The same point of view results in someone writing the following about Tom Ford: “The Texan lacks the mixture of refinement and passion characteristic of European culture. He doesn’t understand nuance: Gucci has a look, Saint Laurent a soul. The same approach won’t work with both.” Or else: “Calvin Klein is underwear, jeans, perfume, even dishes, but it’s not luxury, just a bunch of marketing.”¹

This question has to be dealt with right out of the gate, not for the pleasure of fanning the flames of a polemic, but because it is crucial in *this* economic sector more than in any other.

Why? Because “the brand is the relevant unit of analysis in the luxury industry.” This is the conclusion arrived at by an interesting study conducted by the CERNA (Centre d’Economie Industrielle de l’école des Mines de Paris) and commissioned by the Ministry of French Industry and the Colbert Committee,² which began, as would any serious study on the subject, with an inquiry about the definition of luxury. It concluded: “Any attempt at substantially defining luxury products or the luxury industry no doubt captures certain characteristics of these products or this industry, but is ineffective at precisely defining their boundaries.”

How to escape this difficulty? By the most twisted sort of logic. According to this study, luxury is defined by ... the list of French luxury brands! The Colbert Committee's financing of the study had not been in vain, and one can imagine that the conclusions suited it perfectly, since almost twenty years later there is still nothing on its website that defines luxury other than a list of the "houses" of which it is comprised.

Where is the incisive spirit of clarity and the balanced logic of which France is so very proud? What was the validity of a study that was persuaded a priori that the boundaries of French luxury could be reduced to French brands or even to just some of them? As if luxury could only be appreciated from within a place sealed off from the rest of the world, without any objective reference point. Or as if it were a sector where one gains admission only by being elected or sponsored, a sort of jockey club or freemasonry, which the uninitiated only speak nonsense about, without any authorization. This amounts to saying that only professional athletes are qualified to say what is and isn't a sport, or that the only possible definition of painting consists in drawing up a list of artists with membership in the Guild of Saint-Luc at Anvers in the 16th century.

Let's take away from this self-indulgent study the only thing worth taking away from it: yes, a brand is indeed "the relevant unit of analysis in the luxury industry," or, rather, that is what it has become in the last thirty years, ever since the famous Marlboro Friday in 1993, when finance started taking over the world of brands, for worse and for better. Before this period, this wasn't the case, and there's no way of telling if this change will last. But here and now, one thing is certain: when you say "luxury" today, you hear "brand," but so long as we refuse to define what luxury is, saying "luxury brand" is saying nothing. Worse still, it means exposing oneself to the discredit attached to everything that is called "deluxe." When marketing uses this kind of label, you know that wherever the word "luxury" is, the thing is sure to be elsewhere.

DEFINING LUXURY: INSUFFICIENT CRITERIA

What are the criteria by which we customarily recognize luxury, but that aren't sufficient to define it? How does one recognize a luxury

brand? The following criteria are often cited: rarity, price, invention, sense of detail, history, age, quality, and brand symbolism.

If you take a closer look, these are at once true and insufficient.

First, *rarity*. Everybody agrees: luxury is rare, it's not to be found on every street corner, you have to deserve it, wait for it—several months for a Kelly bag from Hermès in Paris, and several years in Japan. Several weeks for an haute couture dress if you count the fittings. Five months for a Vertu telephone. A year (at least) for a pair of Shang Xia pumps. Three hundred and fifty days for an Omas pen. A year for a Porsche Boxster in the United States. Two years for the Rolex Cosmograph Daytona. And when you know that it takes two days for two full-time workers at Bottega Veneta to produce a woven-leather shoulder bag, the quantity of bags produced can't be very high.

Obviously, rarity is organized and culminates in the one-of-a-kind piece.³ What remains of haute couture continues to feature this attribute, but, of course, it also exists in all trades, where luxury houses often speak of their specially commissioned pieces of silver, jewelry, leather, or crystal.

But is it only luxury that's rare? No, of course not. A printed book from the early days of the printing press can also be rare or even one of a kind, but it's not a luxury object. Lucy and Toumai, our ancestors discovered by paleontologists, are the only fossils of their kind in the world, and as such they are extremely precious—but they aren't luxury objects either.

Price is another one of these criteria: the more expensive it is, it's said, the more luxurious it is. It's true that a yacht, a mansion, or a private jet are not within everyone's reach: these are the most expensive luxury objects, with the exception of a few extraordinary jewels. And yet you can get something that's even more expensive without it, for all that, being luxury: a little trip into space, for example. Two or three individuals—billionaires, obviously—have already done it. And yet it wasn't luxury in either their eyes or ours. Why? Because nobody considers being locked in a space capsule and forced to go through the required preliminary training a luxury.

You often hear about the “most expensive dress in the world” (to date, a dress created by English designer Debbie Wingham, covered in black diamonds and priced at 5.7 million dollars) or the “most expensive mobile phone in the world” (the GoldVish,

decked with 100 carats of diamonds and going for 1.3 million dollars). Even taking into account that their beauty is a matter of taste, and that everyone's taste is different, can it be said that these are luxury products? If so, all you have to do is cover an object in gold or diamonds and the least expensive car in the world is transformed into an ultra-luxurious set of wheels under the name Tata Nano Gold Plus, weighed down with 80 kilograms of gold and studded with 4.3 million precious gems. Push this reasoning far enough, and you come to the strange conclusion that a solid gold toilet seat (there is at least one out there, custom-made for a Chinese billionaire) should be considered a luxury object. That's what the Chinese billionaire thinks, and he has every right in the world to do so. Few in the West would be of the same opinion, whether billionaires or not. Even in China, there is the growing suspicion that luxury isn't what costs the most. Price is just one of its components.

This enables us, by contrast, to highlight an important dimension of luxury: sensuality. A bottle of Château d'Yquem "is neither exorbitantly priced nor is it one of a kind, but the bottle, the color, the label, the focus required to appreciate it, the symbolism, the sun-infused sugars, the taste on the palate, all of these sensations bespeak luxury."⁴ However rare the object money makes it possible to acquire, if it doesn't provide a sensorial experience, if it brings no pleasure to the senses, it's not luxury.

The most expensive things in the world thus are not necessarily luxury. Conversely, many things that cost nothing or almost nothing can be considered as luxury by those who are dreaming about them: a *vin santo* and some *cantuccini* in the shade of an arbor in Tuscany, a trip on the ocean on a beautiful day, a Maurizio Pollini recital at Carnegie Hall, a day's hiking near Mont Blanc—the list could go on indefinitely depending on each person's dreams and pleasures.

In other words, a high price, in and of itself, is not sufficient to define luxury—and Paul Smith won't tell you otherwise. For him, luxury could be "fresh, chilly air," "silence," or even "a day without any bad news or pollution."

What about *invention*? Many professionals think that luxury's essence is its capacity for ceaselessly creating and innovating. And many brands illustrate this, even outside of fashion and leather goods where creativity is a *sine qua non* for survival, if not success. The craftsman jewelry and watchmaking sector, for

example, not only invents new techniques (the unique size of the stones in Wallace Chan jewelry), but also new materials: Tiffany's Rubedo alloy, and the gold and ceramic alloy by Hublot, which is a great specialist in unexpected combinations of titanium, Kevlar, natural rubber, and carbon.

But this creativity, this mania for innovation, is found in most economic sectors, and is just as costly there as it is in luxury. It is said that it takes several years (five at Rolex) and millions of euros for a clockmaker or a jeweler to create a new watch or a new piece of jewelry: going by this, the automobile or food sector are more creative, because it takes them less time to launch new models and products. Creation and innovation have become the norm in all sectors. For some, such as ready-to-wear, they are vital, and there's no need to be in the luxury business to know this. For a long time fashion has no longer worked from the top down. Although it still happens that a designer will launch an idea that everyone then takes up, it's no longer the rule: fashion now comes from everywhere, from Tokyo and Rio just as much as from Paris, and from rock concerts and football stadiums as well as from the designer's desk.

Thus, invention is not the hallmark of luxury.

And what about refinement, the *sense of detail*? It's true that in luxury it is manifest. The soundtrack that discreetly accompanies the eye-catching window displays on the corner of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré at Hermès, is one small example of this among thousands of others. Or else the care with which things like leather watch bracelets and other items to which one usually doesn't pay much attention are manufactured, also at Hermès.

Other examples? The smelling strips adorned with a tiny drawing depicting the arcades of the Palais-Royal on which are written, in ink and by hand, the name of the perfume you've just been given a whiff of in Shiseido salons in Paris. Yet another? The "*Bonjour, madame,*" spoken in French to all the female customers in Lancôme stores around the world. As Bernard Arnault often says, citing an American saying, "retail is detail." And, he adds, this is particularly true in luxury.

But is luxury the only place where this level of detail can be found? No, of course not, it's being cultivated in all commercial sectors, even in the mid-range. At COS,⁵ the clothes are folded in tissue paper and slipped into a carefully designed bag. At Grand

Optical, while an optician is working on your pair of glasses, a hostess offers you coffee, tea, or a cool drink, and brings it to you a few moments later on a little tray, along with some macaroons. At Renault, when your new car is delivered (for the high-end models), you're given flowers and you get a telephone call each time you go to the shop to ensure that the repairs, the reception, and the service met with your satisfaction.

As for the *history* and the founding gesture at the origin of most luxury houses, this isn't unique to luxury either. So true is this that one has the choice among innumerable examples from the mass market. Let's take one at random: Michelin, born in 1899. Founding gesture: replacing solid bicycle tires by rubber tires. Another: Levi's, born in 1860, inventor of the blue jean. Yet another: Schweppes, born in 1783, and which was almost a luxury brand. Its founder, a German, had initially gone to Geneva to make his fortune as a jeweler—but he invented a process for making mineral water effervescent and launched his own business, inventing the soft drink 100 years before Coca-Cola.

To tell the truth, the history of brands—of *all* brands, whether luxury brands or not—is a long series of founding gestures,⁶ and there is no reason to think that the inventor of cornflakes (Kellogg) is any less worthy of merit or interest than that of silver-plated metal (Christofle).

The same holds true where *age* is concerned: it isn't unique to luxury brands either, as we've just seen from the birthdates of the brands mentioned above—and there are many others. In the food sector alone, to cite just a few examples: Maille (1747), Maggi (1830), Liebig (1803), Nestlé (1865), Twinings (1706), and Lindt (1845).

Non-French luxury brands are themselves just as old if not older than French luxury brands: Fortnum & Mason was born in London in 1707, well before Fauchon or Hédiard; Wedgwood was born in 1759 and the crystal maker Waterford dates from 1783. The Italian glassmaker Salviati was born in 1859, Shiseido in 1872, Penhaligon's in 1870, Rubelli in 1858, Loewe in 1846, Tiffany in 1837, and the English jeweler Asprey in 1781. The oldest porcelain manufacturer is German and was founded in 1710 in Meissen—the famous Saxe porcelain. The Danieli is a good deal older than the Ritz in Paris or the Savoy in London: not only does the building date from the 15th century, but it was already active as a hotel

at the beginning of the 19th century, while the Savoy didn't open until 1889, the Ritz in 1898. And the winner of the age battle isn't a European brand but a Japanese one: Hoshi Ryokan, founded in 1717, and run by the same family for 46 generations.

Nor is *quality* the exclusive property of luxury brands, as Ikea says ("Getting quality is no longer a luxury"—an advertisement for a 350-dollar mattress with a 25-year guarantee—and, indeed, when one is familiar with the manufacturing standards imposed by the Swedish giant, it is a product of excellent quality). It is true that in luxury particularly close attention is paid to quality and that you have to have experienced the difference between a tailor-made Charvet shirt and any old mass-produced shirt to realize just how great it can be. It would be ridiculous, just because some people aren't attuned to it, to deny that luxury products are often of a quality far superior to that of other products in the same category. But it would be no less ridiculous to claim that only luxury products are of excellent quality. The level of quality is very high at Toyota, L'Oréal, and Nestlé, even if it derives from procedures different from those at Gucci or Rolex.

Finally, there remains the *symbolism* or the *imaginary*, a dimension of luxury brands so powerful that some commentators think it is the most important factor in calculating their value, and say, for example, that "90% of the value of Hermès stock is contained in the six letters of its name, and only 10% in its workshops, raw materials, and tangible assets."⁷ And what are the six letters of its name if not a distillation of its imaginary? The brand continually works new variations on this theme, variations which are particularly visible in its perfume advertisements. The film made for the launch of Voyage was a perfect example: almost no human presence, no description, no text, just symbols: a white dove and a galloping horse, the two brought together in the final image to evoke Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology to which another god of travel, recognizable by his winged sandals, also belongs: Hermes.

And yet, the imaginary is not in and of itself the hallmark of luxury brands either. Mass-market brands also have powerful imaginaries. Can it be said that Nestlé's imaginary has less value than Asprey's? Certainly not. Its imaginary is concentrated in the image of the nest, the child, and the mother-provider—one of the most powerful images out there. Coca-Cola's imaginary keeps the brand

on top of the rankings of the most expensive brands (and not companies) in the world, and is worth four times Vuitton's.⁸ And let's talk some more about Marlboro's imaginary, which remains as evocative as ever, even if anti-tobacco legislation has restricted its ability to express itself. Has anyone wondered where its power comes from? It's not purely the poetry of the American West and its wide open spaces, nor the universal power of the "western" movie genre, which made them universally popular. It's due to the resurgence, via the cowboy figure, of another founding figure in the Western imaginary of the last three millennia: the figure that Greek mythology distilled in the myth of the hero, the demi-god capable of superhuman feats, like those accomplished by Hercules, later by the Knights of the Round Table and other popular heroes—in the epic American story, that of the cowboy who faces off against nature in its rawest state and symbolically overcomes it by taming wild horses.

We must specify what is meant by the imaginary. For anthropology, the imaginary is what structures the imagination and makes it possible for a brand to resonate with the collective unconscious, provided the brand understands the subtle ways in which the imaginary functions, and never uses it in an overly literal way. When well understood, it's a powerful source of leverage which, precisely because it is situated at the anthropological level, applies to all eras and all societies, and thus, with respect to what interests us here, to all brands, both Western and Eastern.

There are luxury brands that don't have an imaginary—having (or having had) a name is not enough, just look at Rochas or Lancôme—and mass-market brands that have a very solid imaginary. Levi's has a much stronger and more structured imaginary, even when it isn't being activated. The Guy Laroche perfume Fidji was endowed with an extraordinarily rich imaginary ("Woman is an island, Fidji is her perfume") until a fatal error of interpretation caused it to lose all its evocative power. Cartier had only to draw on its imaginary to invent the voyage of the panther in its film *L'Odyssée*. After some questionable forays into trashiness in the early 2000s threatened to pull it down from its luxury pedestal, Dior picked itself back up by playing on the Hollywood imaginary with the Lady Dior saga and the final films for J'adore perfume.

But all by itself that Hollywood imaginary would not have been enough to bring Dior back into the luxury fold: too many

mass-market brands use it too. The operation was successful because (among other reasons) it also used another imaginary, one that's peculiar to luxury: the imaginary of high places, which, as we've seen, enables an upward swerve. In the case of Lady Dior, this was done via the place chosen for each episode of the saga: the inevitable Eiffel Tower, the summit of the London Eye, the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai. The same strategy is behind the Vuitton hot air balloon flying over the Louvre, the omnipresence of the sky for Hermès perfumes, and the sky where the panther from Cartier's *L'Odyssée* is flying.

All major brands—whether luxury brands or not—have an imaginary, which is yet another piece of evidence that luxury brands differ from their neighbors in degree but not in essence. But here as elsewhere we start having the suspicion that our difficulty in defining what a luxury brand is may be due to our excessive focus on the word “luxury” and our lack of attention to the word “brand.” Perhaps we should think of luxury as an economic sector that's a bit fuzzier and harder to pin down than others, but in which, neither more nor less than elsewhere, there are simply strong brands and others that are less so: the difference between them residing in their respect or ignorance of brand logic, which naturally includes marketing albeit in the context of a wider, more global vision.

ONE LUXURY, OR THREE LUXURIES?

There are several ways of categorizing luxury, but they usually end up raising more questions than they answer. For example: separating “high end” from “premium,” “premium” from “über-premium,” and so on and so forth. This results in a lot of acrobatics from luxury professionals, for example at Vertu, where it is predicted that the years to come will see the emergence of “premium, superior premium, luxury, and hyperluxury.”⁹ How far will this hairsplitting go? Is Prada a luxury brand? Yes, some say, just go look at the stores and the prices. No, say others, it's a high-end brand, just look at the products and the advertising. But where is the border between what is luxury and what isn't?

You sometimes hear that if there is very high-quality artisanal craftsmanship, then it's luxury. But, according to this rule, Lacoste

is not a luxury brand, nor Lancôme. And yet both are part of the Colbert Committee, the bastion of French luxury. And several other members of the committee don't undertake any artisanal activity either, or else only in their showcase pieces. As for the criterion of price, when applied to Lacoste it hardly makes things any clearer: a Lacoste shirt may be the most expensive polo shirt, but that doesn't mean it's in any way unaffordable.

So, how can we find our bearings? Is Clarins high end or luxury? And what about Max Mara, Audi, Miele, Tissot? Every time you try to resolve the question, it pops up again a bit farther on. When a brand wants to gain entry to the luxury category, at what point can it be sure of having succeeded? What signals must it send? Because to be "true" luxury, for example in the world of fashion, you have to be grouped with the designers of high-fashion and custom-made clothing, not with the "creators" and ready-to-wear. But isn't Jean Paul Gaultier both a creator and a fashion designer? True, but while his fashion design calls on studios and their traditional work methods, his ready-to-wear is manufactured industrially. So it's not luxury, it's just high end—more or less. But does that mean that Givenchy's, Armani's, and Dior's ready-to-wear isn't luxury either?

You can see that it's easy to become disoriented, and the border becomes fuzzier and fuzzier the closer you get to it. Maybe this means it's in nobody's interest to look at it too closely.

To tell the truth, nothing is more useful to the luxury industry than the blurry aura that surrounds the concept of luxury. This confusion, capitalized on masterfully by public relations, advertising, and merchandising, makes it possible for the luxury industry's profits to leap to record heights every year.¹⁰

Why not try another, more historical approach? It's obvious that the problem for European luxury consists in thinking of American (or Italo-American) brands as being luxury. But it's not only a question of geography: they're also the brands that emerged most recently. Isn't there too much tension between a conception of luxury that's still openly anchored in the past (in Europe) and another, different conception, without traditions, and almost without a past, but deliberately fashioned with the means available to it in its own era?

Let's try for a moment to forget the prejudice that has it that possessing a history confers superiority on the possessor. What do we see in the history of the luxury trade once we get past the long period (it goes all the way back to the most ancient antiquity) in which luxury was in the hands of myriad artisans and traders spread out in almost all the major urban centers, from the north to the south and the east to the west of Europe?

What we see happening first in Europe and in France among other places, over the 19th century, is the emergence of a *classical luxury dominated by objects*.¹¹ In this era the "house" ensures a very high level of manufacturing, without necessarily priding itself on revolutionizing fashion or launching one trend after another. The rhythms of fashion—above all of clothing fashion—are still slow, as the case of Worth demonstrates. Originally, Hermès manufactured harnesses, then saddles, in the purest equestrian tradition. Even today, the brand keeps its distance from the cycles of fashion for the most part. Of course, luxury retailers offer clothing, furniture, porcelain, and silver according to shifting tastes, and the rhythms of consumption accelerate, but what takes precedence is the beauty of the object and the reputation of the "house."

Beginning in the 1920s, still in Europe, there appears a *modern luxury dominated by creators*. Worth was its precursor, Poiret took up where he left off, Chanel was to be the incarnation of modern luxury, and the great French designers were to follow the same path en masse. This is the period in which the ability to innovate starts to be divinized and the mere fact of producing something new becomes a value in itself, the most sought after of all. Luxury objects may be "shabby" (Chanel's jersey cloth or costume jewelry, or later Saint Laurent's blue jeans or safari jacket), but they always have to bear the signature of a creator whose lifestyle, tastes, and whims are reported in detail by the press, which makes them into objects of veneration. Taste, especially "good" taste, is now eclipsed by the novelty of the object, which derives all its value from the creative gesture that brought it to life.

Then, in or around the 1970s, in the United States, there emerges a *contemporary luxury dominated by the media*. Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein are its first exponents, and they are soon followed by Donna Karan and the Americanized Italians, Armani and Versace first and foremost, and later by the rebirth of Gucci and Prada,

and the rise of Dolce & Gabbana. Luxury objects become props for large-scale, multidirectional public relations campaigns, with advertising—though considerable—sometimes representing only the tip of the iceberg. Those objects can be sumptuous (think of some of Versace’s evening gowns) or, if not “shabby,” at least sober (the perfume *Eternity*), the important thing being the global universe in which an object is inserted by means of direct or indirect media intervention. The creator continues to play a very important role, but what the media broadcasts, above all, is his or her vision of the world, either through advertising (Ralph Lauren) or in the form of a “philosophy,” which may be implicit (Armani) or explicit (Tom Ford at Gucci), such as it is manifested in products, retail outlets, and pronouncements in the press.

However, this new generation was born more than forty years ago, and, luxury being what it is, that is to say, a swerve, it was inevitable that a new wave should emerge, one that is quick to distinguish itself from hypervisible luxury by coming back to a much more confidential, but extremely selective, approach. This is the case with Vertu, a young luxury brand (only just 15, and already resold), which chose discretion, high standards, and a paradoxical sobriety despite the diamonds and precious gems incrustated in some models. This enables it to treat its elders with insolent nonchalance: “[Louis Vuitton, Hermès]—those brands turn out luxury on a massive scale. Vertu is positioned above all of that. Not in luxury, but in hyperluxury.”¹² Nobody can know what will become of Vertu, but one thing is certain: other brands are already following this new path.

	Birthdate	Principle
Classical Luxury	18th and especially 19th centuries Europe	The object predominates Model: Hermès
Modern Luxury	Early 20th century Europe, United States	The creator predominates Model: Chanel
Contemporary Luxury	1970s United States	The media dominates Model: Ralph Lauren

One can be born in 1932 (the era of modern luxury) and behave like a classical brand: this was the case with Harry Winston. One can be born in 1985 (the contemporary period) and be a modern luxury brand: this was the case with Christian Lacroix. One can be born with modern luxury and behave like contemporary luxury brands: this was the case with Dior. But it is difficult to be a brand of classical origin and to behave like contemporary luxury: Hermès, Cartier, and Loewe are definitely of the present era, but they don't indulge in media saturation like Gucci, Vuitton, or Dior, and they don't ask advertising or merchandising to create a specific world for them, like Ralph Lauren. In these houses, the luxury object (a bottle of perfume, a purse, a piece of jewelry) maintains its preeminence, and though creators have a place, they occupy it with discretion, not in the front row. Sometimes, the public doesn't even know their names.

There are, naturally, many exceptions, slippages, and mixtures among these three kinds of luxury. Some brands can belong at once to classical luxury (for the oldest ones), modern luxury, and contemporary luxury. But that shouldn't take anything away from the most recent brands, which, neither more nor less than their elders, play to the hilt the game their era allows them to play. Cartier owes a good deal of its current status to the fact that it was able to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by the Second Empire. Today, Ralph Lauren does the same thing with the means the 20th and 21st centuries have put at his disposal. Obviously, these are no longer the same means as before. The contexts have changed but, in each era, the art consists in using them with as much skill as possible. If skill consists in understanding the context so well that one can use it to one's advantage with complete success, then Ralph Lauren deserves just as much credit as Chanel did yesterday, and as Cartier the day before yesterday. He doesn't have their historical depth, but neither did Chanel or Cartier when they were starting out. And even the predictions stating that neither Armani nor Ralph Lauren will survive their creators shouldn't discredit them: first of all because nobody knows whether this is true; and then because longevity is often as much the result of luck as of intention; and, finally, because the prestige of Worth, Poiret, and Schiaparelli isn't in the least diminished because of their lack of successors. What they all have in common is that they belonged fully to their era and

met with dazzling success. It can't be denied that the same holds true for contemporary luxury brands.

In fact, the three luxuries—classical, modern, and contemporary—are like three superimposed strata, which are sometimes observable at the same time and sometimes isolated. The thickness varies from case to case, the limit between two strata isn't always clear because sediments tend to intermix, but they come one after the other like the Oligocene, the Miocene, and the Pliocene. And geologists don't mull over the question of whether the Oligocene is “better” than the other two, or whether the Pliocene is of a quality superior or inferior to that of its predecessors. They are more interested in identifying them, in the way they interact and interfere with one another, in their location, and in the slippage that sometimes occurs between them. They don't award points based on their admiration or scorn for one stratum as opposed to another.

That is the most reasonable position that can be adopted when observing the different historical strata of luxury.

A BRAND IS AN IMPRESSION

Now that we've set the boundaries of luxury, it remains to ensure that we are in agreement about what precisely a luxury *brand* is.

There are many ways to define a brand, the least controversial but also the least satisfying being the official definitions, like the one provided by the American Association of Marketing, or this one from the World Trade Organization: “A brand is a sign serving to distinguish the products and services of one company from those of another.” It's plain that such definitions are so dry—even if they're not false—that they drain the word of all its richness. Fendi or Dom Pérignon, Rolex or La Prairie, are much, much more than that.

And it is precisely in order to grasp the full richness of the word *brand* that I have suggested a different approach.¹³

My point of departure is simple: it consists in taking the word “brand” in its largest and richest sense, and then, instead of proceeding by means of successive eliminations until it has been reduced to its meager and cold technical meaning, to proceed by reduction, but in the gastronomical sense of the term. In cooking,

a reduction is an operation that consists in starting with chicken broth, for example, and then reducing it at low heat until you get chicken concentrate. The initial volume has shrunk but all the aromas are there and the taste has been accentuated a great deal.

This operation is easier to execute in French because we use the word “*marque*” (“mark,” but also “brand”) both in everyday life (a mark left by a coffee cup on the table) and to speak about commercial “marks” (brands). Let’s take advantage of this homonymy to show what interesting conclusions it enables us to arrive at in marketing.

In the most common sense of the word, a *marque*, so the dictionary tells us, is “a material sign, a print or impression left on a thing to distinguish it, so as to be able to recognize it, or as a reference point.” By the same token, it can be said that a commercial “mark,” a brand, is an impression or a print left by a company in the consumer’s mind. The impression can be old or new, deep or shallow, legible or illegible, but it is always the result of all the actions taken by a company to reach out to, seduce, and persuade its clients.

What distinguishes this sort of impression from a footprint or a handprint is that in this case the impression is made in the consumer’s mind—an infinitely more complex and volatile substance than sand, earth, wood, stone, or snow. This obliges us to know a lot about the brain, if we want to understand how the impression is formed, how it loses its shape, and how it can be kept up.

Marketing has no answers for these questions. Nor does classical psychology or sociology. They must be sought in cognitive science, where there is still a lot of debate over them in spite of several major advances, and in communication theory, which is more immediately usable.

A synthesis of fifty years of research in communication theory tells us that *every* instance of communication involves seven components. This is as true for a mother alone with her child as it is for a politician making a speech, two countries at war, a transaction in a Marrakesh bazaar, an interaction between doctor and patient, two friends on a fishing trip—the list can be as long and varied as the number of human relationships. The same rule thus applies for a brand, if we consider it globally as an instance of communication that is established, via multiple channels, between a company and the public it is supposed to reach.

Let's recall that the word "communication" is used here in a much larger sense than usual: it has nothing to do with what companies classify under the heading "communication"—namely advertising, public relations, press relations, promotion, event planning, sponsorship, charitable giving, and so forth. It denotes, in the widest sense, human communication.

What are the seven rules of all communication?

1. There is no communication without a physical context.
2. There is no communication outside of time.
3. There is no communication outside of space.
4. There is no communication without respect for (or transgression of) certain norms.
5. There is no communication without a goal, a project.
6. No communication can occur without the concerned parties adopting certain positions.
7. No communication can occur without the concerned parties establishing certain relationships.

THE FINGERPRINT METHOD

Once these seven components have been established, the fingerprint method consists of linking them together in the form of an interconnected circle, whose form resembles that of a rose window (Figure 3).¹⁴ Why? First of all because none of the components is any more important than the others: all are equally involved in the construction of the brand. They must thus be depicted as equidistant from one another, which is possible only by arranging them around the edge of a circle.

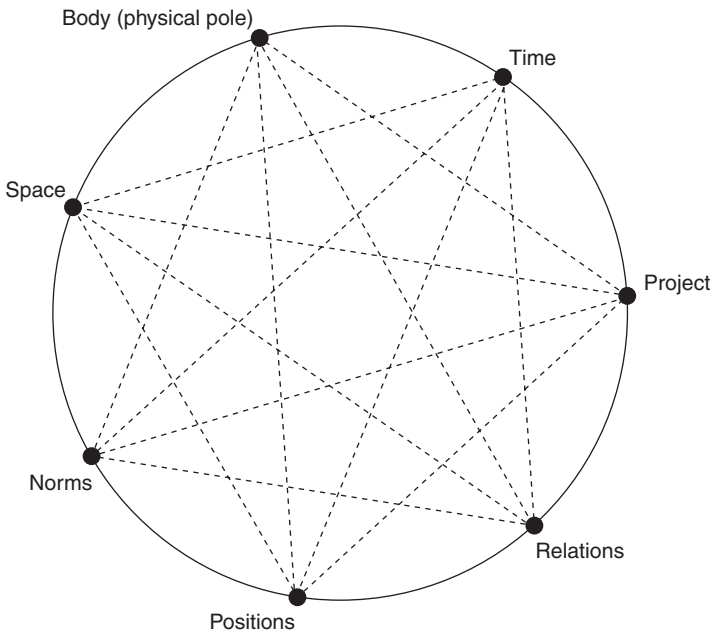
And then because a brand is a whole, a system in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and each element is linked to all the others. No action can be considered in isolation: that's what we mean when we emphasize the internal coherence necessary to brands. A new Estée Lauder perfume can and must be independent, but it cannot be disconnected from the rest: it's a

system within a larger system, which encompasses it and gives it meaning. This makes our task more complicated, but brands are living systems, and living systems can only develop by becoming increasingly complex. Thus the name, the ingredients, the bottle, the packaging, the typography, and, naturally, the advertising campaign for the new perfume, just like its website or Facebook page, will have to be coherent not only with respect to one another, but also with respect to the entire world of the mother brand.

The fingerprint method makes it possible to check this coherence. It makes it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of brands. It makes it possible to analyze their content. Like a fingerprint, it yields a specific design for each brand, one that links the two or three (or more) most relevant poles of the rose figure together for the brand identity in question.

The approach undertaken here will consist in using the fingerprint method to analyze luxury brands, in accordance with the

FIGURE 3 | The Brand Fingerprint



position adopted from the very beginning of this book: when you observe how it works at a profound level and not superficially it is clear that a brand is a brand, whether it's a luxury brand or not, and whatever its size or sector of activity. In all cases brands obey the logic of systemic communication. It follows that the differences between luxury brands and other brands are, again, differences of degree and not of essence.

Now let's examine each of the seven poles and see how they can help us to analyze luxury brands and manage their identity.

The Physical or Body Pole

Let's first of all recall this pole's basic principle: there is no communication without a physical medium. The Physical Pole is the brand's body. What is it made up of? Of everything that, in a concrete way, represents the brand in the eyes of its consumers:

- The product, its shape, its scent, its tactile and auditory qualities;
- its packaging;
- its name;
- its logo;
- its price;
- its wrapping;
- its in-store advertising;
- its in-house graphics manual;
- its website;
- its Facebook page;
- its Twitter account;
- and so forth.

It's a matter of identifying, often with the help of semiological or qualitative studies, which of these various elements has the most impact on how such and such a brand is perceived: it might be

the Nike swoosh, Michelin's Bibendum, the little green tree in the Origins logo, or the Starbucks cups, which are recognizable even when there isn't a Starbucks in sight.

But the Physical Pole isn't limited to logos. It can be represented by a color (orange for Hermès, green for Rolex, a particular blue for Tiffany), a shape (the Mandarin Oriental's fan, Ralph Lauren's stirrup), a material (fur in the case of Fendi, leather in that of Loewe), a specific smell (Thierry Mugler's "Angel"), an emblem (Kenzo's poppy, the Cartier panther, the Bulgari snake), a pattern (Burberry plaid, Prada and its red ribbon, the four-lobed design of Van Cleef & Arpels's Alhambra jewelry). Sometimes, it's something concrete but invisible: the steel stem invented by Salvatore Ferragamo and slid into the arch support of Ferragamo shoes to ensure that the foot doesn't slide too far forward, or the acoustics of the Patek Philippe escapement mechanism.

In luxury, the importance of visual markers and their nuances can be taken quite far: "We could have conceived of bigger, more capacious models, but we would have been straying far from the roots of Girard-Perregaux," said the brand's CEO while presenting a new line of watches in Miami in 2012. "The color of crocodile skin yielded the color Ebano, which is the identity of Bottega Venata, just as a certain shade of red is the identity of Hermès," said Tomas Maier.

In a general way, in luxury the product is of great—not to say paramount—importance: the Chanel suit (and everything that goes with it), Hermès handbags, Rolex watches, Baccarat crystal, Tiffany engagement rings, and so on.

But if we take a closer look we discover that things are not quite so simple. The product is preponderant in classical luxury, of which it is the center of gravity. This is no longer quite true in contemporary luxury. Indeed, in moving from one to the other a gradual shift occurs from what comes before the product to what comes after. Before the product is made, above all in classical luxury, great emphasis is placed on raw materials, on their quality and richness: one might even say that everything luxurious about classical luxury is already right there. And there is also great emphasis placed on the way those raw materials are fashioned, on the quality of manufacture. Once the product has been made, in modern luxury but, above all, in contemporary luxury, it is essentially the

finished product and its environment (the boutique, the advertising campaign, the media context: who conceived it, who wears it, and so on) that are highlighted.

In classical luxury there is disproportionate emphasis on the pre-product: the materials and the work done to shape them into the product. Indeed, classical luxury often involves *rare or expensive raw materials*. Crystal isn't rare, but it is more expensive than glass because of its specific qualities. Diamonds are rarer—although not as rare as we are led to believe. Leather is common, but very high-quality leather is rare. Silk isn't rare, but its tailoring sometimes is. Cashmere isn't as rare as it once was, but the cashmere you find at H&M has nothing in common with the cashmere used by luxury houses: it is neither gathered, nor spun, nor woven in the same way, and the appearance as well as the durability of the low-end finished product bears no comparison to luxury cashmere.

The way products are made is also characterized—in classical and modern luxury—by the *extremely high quality of manufacture*. The eternal question of whether artisanal craftsmanship is synonymous with better quality is not one we have to settle here: the only thing we must observe is the systematic attempt to highlight artisanal craftsmanship, a cultural trait that distinguishes European luxury from its international competitors, especially the American ones. Apart from France, this valorization of craftsmanship is particularly present in Italy, where brands like Buccellati and Fendi boast that their gold, silver, leather, and fur are the result of the very highest level of fine craftsmanship.

It is possible for a classical luxury brand not to use rare or expensive raw materials, but in such cases the brand will emphasize the quality of its craftsmanship. Puiforcat launched a line of steel silverware, a material that's neither rare nor expensive nor innovative, and that is much less noble than silver-plated metal. And so the brand takes care to underscore how hard it is to work with steel, the 44 steps necessary to make a single piece of silverware, the quantity of products discarded because of flaws—all of which, in the final analysis, results in a price higher than that for silver-plated metal, and makes it possible for the brand to speak of "luxury steel." Patek Philippe could offer confirmation: one of its watches was recently sold for close to two million dollars at auction in Monaco. Why did it fetch such a price? The 54 pieces of

this extraordinary watch were made from steel, an extremely rare technical feat. Another steel, christened “316 L,” and supposedly hypoallergenic, is used in the manufacture of Vertu telephones.

In reality, while the raw materials used in luxury can be extremely precious, like sapphires, or as humble as a glass bead (or even a fishing line, as Ferragamo reports was used by Salvatore in some of his creations), while they can remain close to their natural origins, like wine, or emerge from sophisticated weaving machines, as is the case with some silk cloth, they are never raw and untreated. This is a good measure of the specificity of European luxury, and French luxury in particular, with respect, for example, to other equally old and equally remarkable artisanal traditions with a different mindset, as in Japanese luxury. In Japan a master potter feels that he has attained perfection when his bowl reflects the perfect gesture that brought it into being, even though the result may seem simple and even rustic because it shows the clay from which it was made, sometimes in its raw state.

In Europe and in France, even if artisan craftsmen are revered, none of them is a superstar. The craftsman disappears behind his or her work. The treasure isn't him but the object he makes. And that object is always refined, that is to say subjected to numerous operations that erase its original aspect more and more completely beneath the traces of *a virtuosity that must itself be visible*. Otherwise, it's not luxury, or at least not classical luxury. A mere white porcelain plate won't qualify as luxury, even if it is perfectly round and the material it is made from is perfectly smooth: it must be decorated, by hand if possible. And it's even better if there's a little gold.

It might be said that classical luxury can be recognized by the very elaborate workmanship to which it subjects the raw materials and by the high standards it applies to those materials: one illustration of this is the legend that Rolls-Royce and Hermès went so far as to have their own herds raised so as to be sure of getting the best-quality skins, free of the slightest scratch or flaw.

The dream that underlies this absolute precedence given to the product, to the visibly perfect object, is that of the *feat of prowess* or *exploit*, which, as we have already said, plays an essential role as the foundation of aristocratic ideology. Here Thorstein Veblen, as he often does when analyzing phenomena linked to luxury, shows where this dream of prowess comes from. He explains, at

the beginning of his analysis of the origins of what he calls the “leisure class,” the class that doesn’t work:

The institution of leisure class is the outgrowth of an early discrimination between employments, according to which some employments are worthy and others unworthy. Under this ancient distinction the worthy employments are those which may be classed as exploit; unworthy are those necessary everyday employments into which no appreciable element of exploit enters.

This is where our discontent with the round, white plate comes from: such an object suggests too clearly its humble function; it hasn’t been ennobled by an exploit, a feat of technical prowess. But if it had been made by hand, we wouldn’t notice. This also explains the paradoxical value of the imperceptible imperfections (in the stitches of a purse or a glass crystal) that are the sign of human intervention. A plate pattern traced by computer on high-quality porcelain has less value than the same porcelain, adorned with the same design, but with some minute irregularities in the gold stenciling.

Classical luxury is the reign of manual trades. They retain such prestige that even contemporary luxury brands sometimes claim them as their own: introducing his Mombasa purse, Tom Ford (for Yves Saint Laurent, and not for Gucci—the nuance is important) emphasized the fact that the handle included a deer horn, and that each one was thus unique. One notes the same trend in the press release for a Saint Laurent Rive Gauche line of accessories, which expresses the hope that “one will feel that each piece of this collection, each strip of leather, every shoe, was made by hand.”

But for modern and contemporary luxury the product is not an end in itself, it’s an object around which an advertising campaign can be constructed. It may still result from a feat of technical prowess (as some of Alexander McQueen’s clothing demonstrates), but in general it is an object whose meaning and value are best measured when it is integrated into a whole, and not isolated like a work of art. That is why advertising and the media, the dramatization of products, and press relations are so important here: because they make it possible for the finished product to be incorporated into a whole that gives it meaning.

A black roll-neck sweater wouldn't have much meaning by itself if it was photographed alone in the middle of a page: you wouldn't be able to see that it is cashmere. And yet it's a luxurious object. But to signify this, classical luxury is spontaneously inclined to explain what sort of cashmere thread was used, where it comes from, how it was dyed, how the sweater was put together, why it will last longer than any other, and so on. The value of the object is in the object itself. Modern or contemporary luxury, for its part, prefers to dramatize the same sweater, either in a sleek, minimalist advertisement, or in an editorial or on a website that will associate it with a silhouette, a face, other articles of clothing, an atmosphere, or a game. Its value does not derive solely from itself: it is furnished by the context and by the network of relationships established between the object and what surrounds it.

Must it be concluded that the modern luxury object, by itself, has less value? That's what proponents of classical luxury think, because they place all this value in the manufacture of the object. For them, a crystal vase is beautiful *in and of itself*, as if it contained a rare substance. And it is even more beautiful if it contains the traces of some very elaborate craftsmanship. Then it will be given a setting worthy of it: a wrapping, a storefront display, a boutique. But the object's "beauty" comes before everything else.

Whereas, for modern and, above all, for contemporary luxury, what is *around* the vase *also* gives it meaning and value. An article of clothing isn't seen in isolation, it participates in the construction of a global image. It's not a soloist, like classical luxury: it belongs to an orchestra. The group counts for more than each of its members. The whole takes precedence over the individual parts. And it's that whole which is luxurious, not each of the elements that make it up, beginning with the products. François-Henri Pinault has said this clearly with regard to the development strategy of the PPR group in watchmaking: "Basing legitimacy on the product rather than on the brand's universe seems to me more time-consuming, more expensive, and more complicated."¹⁵ Paul Smith is of the same opinion, and he proves it in the way he conceives his stores: "Today, you have to think beyond the article of clothing and create a universe."¹⁶

Nowhere is this strategy more apparent than in a Ralph Lauren boutique: here you're buying a global vision, an entire world,

rather than a striped shirt. People know it's a made-up world, just as they know that the images they see at the movies are just images. But instead of watching a spectacle on the big screen, they buy the experience of spending a few moments in surroundings that evoke a specific WASP lifestyle. And quarrels about authenticity have no place here. Many European luxury houses also create a certain kind of *stylish* décor, which is not necessarily one from the 18th century. Ralph Lauren is fully aware of his role as the theatrical director who stages a reinvented past or a reinvented elsewhere in which his customers are immersed for a few moments. He takes fiction as far as it will go. As in the baroque theater, you no longer know where you are, in a store or a private mansion. Yet are the visitors just paying for a lot of hot air? No, they're buying the pleasures of the illusion, just like at the theater. Why should creating an escapist daydream be regarded, on principle, as something completely without value, when, also on principle, creating a travel case is valuable? The proof that it really is luxury is that once they're there, people are ready to pay a lot more for a striped shirt than it's really worth—and they know it. But they buy it in the same way that tourists come back from Paris with a little Eiffel Tower: as a souvenir of a place and a moment in time that they like to remember.

The Ralph Lauren example startles French luxury professionals, and that's why it's interesting: the contrast between the two conceptions, classical and contemporary luxury, couldn't be any clearer. The first is situated *upstream* from the object (in its raw materials, the way it is crafted) and *in* the object itself. The second is also situated in the object (some contemporary luxury products are worthy of being admired in and of themselves) but, above all, *downstream*, in the staging, the dramatization. And by staging, I mean more than just a nice setting, which is what many boutiques are all about. I am thinking rather of an expressive space that might be the store (in which case it's much more than a showroom or a salesroom—it's a living space and a theater, like certain Prada boutiques), or else the media-verse, or the web-verse.

Here the dematerialization of luxury is at work: the Physical Pole of contemporary luxury is no longer just the raw materials and craftsmanship, as in classical luxury, it's the finished object in its dramatic context, which arouses desire not on its own but because it belongs to a whole.¹⁷

Remaining within the Physical Pole, a word about the price of luxury brands: there's no point in holding forth here about the prices being extremely high, nor about the reasons, true or false, good or bad, for their being this way. The fact is that luxury brands, much more than mass-market brands, benefit from what is called "representation income" or "brand income," and that they produce in their clients a "willingness to pay" (WTP) that far exceeds what is observed elsewhere: though it varies from case to case, this WTP is said to amount to as much as twenty times (or more) the retail factory price of the marketed object. The WTP is linked both to the perceived quality of the luxury product and to the power of the representations associated with it.

Let us recall the reversal that Thorstein Veblen analyzed so well more than a century ago:¹⁸ while at first the value of an object is what gives it its price, in the end it's the price that often gives it its value. Were it not for the price at which certain objects are sold, he says, we would find them neither beautiful nor desirable. The observation still holds true today, and, of course, opens the door to all kinds of abuses, the most extreme being the famous "willingness to pay," which is maintained by pure snobbery in spite of sometimes dubious objective or aesthetic qualities.

Summary

At the Physical Pole, what characterizes luxury brands is the extreme emphasis placed on how products are *made*. This emphasis is especially visible in classical luxury, still visible for modern luxury, and then it fades as we arrive at contemporary luxury.

It's definitely a matter of maximal emphasis, but not of overestimation. When you explain how a Hermès bag was made, you're not overestimating—the craftsmanship truly is exceptional. But it's highlighted to the extreme, which you don't see in contemporary luxury, and which never happens for mass-market products. Miele washing machines have an extremely good reputation, but nobody bothers to explain how they're manufactured. Barilla is a good pasta brand, but its advertising has never shown the process of selecting flours, their arrival at the factory, the machines at work, and the tests or the

packaging techniques. You assume that it's all seen to very rigorously, but it's not made a central theme of the brand's discourse.

Conversely, modern and, particularly, contemporary luxury act like mass-market brands when featuring products whose "before" (creation and manufacture) is less emphasized than the "after" (the staging and theater of advertising): this is true of Dior, for example, in the past with the saddle bag, and now with Lady Dior, which is rarely presented alone in all its majesty, as an object whose form, material, and craftsmanship could be admired, but, rather, is always included in an increasingly artful dramatic context.

The Temporal Pole

It is impossible to communicate without positioning oneself in time. Brands are no exception to the rule, and this is doubly true of luxury brands, if only because it takes them time to become brands.

This being the case, they have the choice between:

- the past;
- the present;
- the future;
- timelessness.

Mass-market brands are divided just about evenly among the first three categories and generally ignore the last one. Luxury brands, above all, European ones, do the reverse: they prefer to occupy the fourth category rather than the first three, with the exception of some, which utilize the past.

Obviously we have to nuance these remarks.

Classical luxury is, by definition, the most drawn to the past, for the good reason that it has one. Bentley and Breitling collaborated on an advertisement that states loud and clear: "The greatest luxury in life is time." Classical luxury often resides at its historical address, the one where it was born long ago: this is the case with Hermès, Cartier, Tiffany, and, in Rome, Gucci. Classical luxury keeps archives, which are invaluable for those who ascend to the

position of designer, like Alber Elbaz at Lanvin or Raf Simons at Dior. Sometimes, classical luxury maintains a museum where the house's masterpieces and collections are displayed; this museum is often kept separate from the boutique.

Or else a luxury brand can valorize the passage of time to show that, far from constituting a loss, time past can increase a good's value. Girard-Perregaux thus launched an advertising campaign in which the same painting by Gauguin figured twice over. Under the first reproduction were the words: "Sold to pay for a sea voyage, 1892." Under the second: "2006, 40 million euros." The two images, accompanied by a photograph of a watch and the brand name, were given the tagline: "Wait." Here we have the theme of the luxury product considered as heritage, a theme that Patek Philippe uses too, placing emphasis on the transmission of possessions from generation to generation.

It sometimes happens that certain luxury or contemporary luxury brands invent a past for themselves that never actually existed: we've seen how Gucci attempted to reconstitute a fictitious 500-year history even though the brand was born in 1921. We've also seen Tod's evoking Hollywood stars like Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn, with black and white archival photographs dating from well before the invention of Tod's. We see the jeweler De Grisogono, born on the banks of Lake Léman in 1995, with all the trappings of an ancient brand, starting with a coat of arms topped with a crown, borrowed from who knows what historical fiction. Viktor & Rolf, for their part, have chosen an old-fashioned wax seal, and their website homepage image is an imposing double stair, the same as on Cartier's site, except that it's white instead of red, while their "house" also presents itself as a private mansion with a "grand ballroom" and a "library."

On the whole, however, modern and contemporary luxury brands are primarily interested in being part of the present, rather than in recalling a true or false past, and far more than they are in evoking a future that nobody is interested in, at least not in luxury (except for Cardin when he started out, a strategy that quickly gave way to a policy of rampant licensing). Rare are the old brands like Baume & Mercier (1830) who seek to immerse themselves in the present, unless they shift that present toward a timeless present, as in the "Life is about moments" campaign.

In classical luxury, whether masked or openly celebrated, the past legitimizes the present. In modern and contemporary luxury, the present draws its legitimacy from within itself.

Apart from Ralph Lauren (in his stores), the major American and Italo-American brands sweep the slate of the past clean, except when they need to go back to square one after a period of excess. Today, Gucci is no longer trying to fabricate a fake genealogy going back to the Middle Ages, but, in order to put the Tom Ford era behind it, the brand is going back to its traditions as a great producer of leather goods, in advertising campaigns in which the workshop plays the starring role. These campaigns are entitled “Forever Now” and they coincide with the “Artisan Corner” operation, which sends artisans into the brand’s store locations to demonstrate their *savoir-faire* to clients.¹⁹ But Dolce & Gabbana (except for its periodic recourse to Sicilian imagery) or Giorgio Armani don’t claim to belong to any particular heritage, true or false, and are in perfect harmony with their era. Nowhere in the boutiques or advertising campaigns, except in a subtle way at Versace (the Medusa head, the Greek friezes), is there any allusion to the past. The French can think this reflects a lack of culture all they want. Or it can be looked on as a different philosophy of life, recalling that, as Jean-Paul Sartre said, the only way to achieve immortality is to be fully immersed in one’s own era.

Ah, immortality! Of course, one dares not use the word too often—timelessness is the preferred way of putting it. And it’s a word that’s used and abused in the luxury world. This is true for contemporary luxury: someone trying to sell an American luxury brand will often say of an article of clothing that it’s an “instant classic,” which is a way of saying that it’s going to escape the ephemeral swings of fashion. It’s equally true of modern luxury: the Saint Laurent safari jacket and dinner jacket were also *instant classics*. And, of course, it’s even truer of classical luxury in the strict sense, which likes to announce the fact that it’s transcending time, like Jaeger-LeCoultre, which seeks to “turn its back on time,” or Hermès (“A Hermès watch has all the time in the world,” a tagline accompanied by the famous horse-drawn carriage, driven by a coachman). Or else Taittinger champagne, whose slogan proclaims: “The Taittinger moment—make it last an eternity.” Or Patek Philippe, which states that it has “never made a quartz watch

and never will,” or that “something truly precious holds its beauty forever.”

If true eternity is lacking, a very old birthdate will do, and no classical luxury brand can do without one. Boucheron’s tagline for a press release (for a watch) is its name followed by the words: “Jeweler since 1872.” Saint-Louis doesn’t let anyone forget that its glassworks has existed “since 1586,” just a hair younger than Gosset champagne (1584). A brand of watches that isn’t very well known to the general public declares: “We have no idea what the life expectancy of an IWC watch is. Then again, we’ve only been around for 137 years,” and that’s its quality guarantee. Elsewhere, it’s the products whose longevity is vaunted, which comes down to the same thing. Baccarat has been making its Harcourt service for 150 years: it’s said to be timeless because it has seen eras come and go without falling out of fashion. Cartier has been selling its Trinity ring since 1924: it is supposedly “timeless.” Chanel No. 5 (more than 80 years old) also portrays itself as “timeless,” as does Guerlain’s Shalimar (76).

Corollary: “True luxury has nothing to do with fashion—it’s eternal.”²⁰ That, at least, is classical luxury’s point of view: “When you speak to him about fashion, the president of Hermès, the great-great-great-grandson of the founder, takes a men’s briefcase from under his desk—one of the brand’s oldest models—and reminds you that it’s still the number one selling model in Japan.”²¹

This is an attitude shared by Giorgio Armani (“True luxury lasts over time and disregards fashion”), unlike those who charge headlong into the present. And who sometimes end up making compromises, like Chanel, which found a way to create innumerable variations on the famous tweed suit and its accessories, in such a way as to keep one foot in tradition and the other in a constantly shifting modern world—as shown by the brand’s “ephemeral” cosmetics products or its lines of accessories.

The ephemeral has its limits, however: many brands get around them by reissuing old models (the Audrey slipper at Ferragamo, certain logo-embossed purses at Dior or Vuitton). And they must all respect the necessity for lengthy production times, which can only be decreased at the cost of diminished quality, whether that means making a brooch using the meticulous “mystery set” technique at Van Cleef & Arpels, embroidering a set of bed linen with

gold thread at Pratesi, or allowing for the ten or twenty years necessary for a bottle of Château d'Yquem to mature.

For the be-all and end-all where classical luxury is concerned is, of course, patina, the trace left by the passage of time—and its reverse, the horror for what's new. Never would a dandy worthy of the name wear shoes without having them “broken in” by his valet beforehand. It's merely logical, then, for a shoemaker like Lattanzi, to age his custom-made shoes, which are obviously handmade, by plunging them into a maturation vat for six months. If time is luxury, then the luxury business had to find a way of selling time, and at the highest possible price.

Summary

With regard to time, there is a clear break between classical luxury brands and modern and contemporary brands. This break corresponds historically to the radical break, during the 1920s, in art in general—and thus in the applied arts, of which the luxury trades are a part—with modern art.

Classical luxury is anchored in its past, even when it doesn't make a big deal of this. Its age is constantly—although discreetly, most of the time—mentioned or recalled. Some of its brands, above all the wines and alcohols, trumpet their adherence to the most ancient traditions, as do images of artisans working in leather goods, jewelry, fashion, crystal-making, and silversmithing, even when those artisans no longer play any actual role in manufacturing the products.

By contrast, contemporary luxury loudly proclaims its modernity by a radical break with the past and a resolute determination to be of the present. Nonetheless, it also tends toward a certain form of timelessness, not through its products (which are generally of the fashionable variety) but through its advertising, which is often stripped of any sort of temporal sign (uninterrupted backgrounds and “abstract” landscapes like deserts or beaches).

Midway between the two, modern luxury—for example, Laliq or Puiforcat—proclaim their attachment to artisanship descended directly from the most ancient traditions and also engage in historical citation, but regularly reinsert themselves in the present moment by

means of original creations (Lalique's jewelry, steel at Puiforcat) and, in certain cases, relatively audacious advertising.

Relative to time, then, a line of force separates classical luxury brands from the rest: the former explicitly aims for timelessness, whereas modern and contemporary luxury brands seek instead to be as completely in sync as possible with their era and the present moment. Not that classical luxury doesn't know how to be of its own era: it succeeds in this, most of the time, but, for it, the present is a transitional place between the past and the eternity to which it aspires, whereas contemporary luxury aims at nothing but harmony with the present, without being weighed down by history, without consideration for the future, and without pretensions to immortality. This is what young brands do. It is also a character trait that brings them closer to mass-market brands.

The Spatial Pole

Communication is impossible without a spatial context. In the case of luxury brands, that space can be real (birthplace, factory location, studio location, store location, promotional sites) or imaginary, that is to say constructed by advertising or social media, or by both at once: for example when Fendi organizes a fashion show on the Great Wall of China.

A real space that is accorded special value by classical luxury brands is the birthplace. There's no need to belabor the point, we know how much emphasis luxury brands—unlike mass-market brands—place on their roots in a given country (the “Made in Italy” notice is a part of the PPR group's strategy, while “Made in England” is highlighted by Vertu) or city. This is the case with Paris, of course, which is sometimes deliberately capitalized on, as with YSL's perfumes (Rive Gauche, Paris, Parisienne), but also with London, Milan, Florence, and Rome. It's the case too with Geneva, in a more discreet and extremely elitist way, with the very rare and highly coveted “Geneva Seal,” awarded to a handful of ultra-high-end “haute horlogerie” watchmaking brands.

Birthplace is thus of capital importance, but so are the places into which the brand expands: luxury brands make spectacular efforts to fit into the new territories where they have established themselves. The proliferation of flagship stores and the way they keep getting bigger and bigger is now exceeding the constraints imposed by real estate along the major avenues, like Fifth Avenue in New York, where the only things capable of expressing the brand's ambitions are the building façades and interior decoration. Not content with having pieces shown in museum exhibits, some brands are constructing buildings that can rival the museums themselves in architectural audacity—this is the case with Prada in Tokyo and Vuitton in Singapore.

One of the spaces that best represents classical and (at least in part) modern luxury is at once real and imaginary, the place that provides luxury with the most added value possible: the *workshop*—but also, depending on the trade, the cellar, the studio, or the mill (avoiding the word “factory”). In any event, it's the place where the “mystery” of creation and the “miracle” of artisan craftsmanship take place. When a documentary film is made about Yves Saint Laurent, it doesn't focus on fashion shows but, rather, on the designer at work in his workshop. Photographs that illustrate books about the great designers very often show their studios, their salons, their sketches, and their work with models, almost never their stores. And, from time to time, the brands with the greatest propensity to go overboard on advertising feel obliged to make a spectacle out of the “workshop tour,” even if that means they'll get their wrists slapped when the stratagem is too obvious. Gucci played this card, cleverly showing an authentic period photo, but, at the same moment, Vuitton was obliged to withdraw an advertising campaign amid accusations by the ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) of advertising fraud,²² since the brand was unable to give precise information about the degree to which manual labor truly figured in the manufacture of its products.

This is because while everyone has stores, not everyone has workshops where craftsmen work by hand with leather, silk, crystal, and precious metals. In the race to be the biggest, started by contemporary luxury with its “boutiques,” which hardly deserve to be designated by a term that implies small size and an intimate feel, classical luxury doesn't necessarily emerge the winner.

Thus, it has a special affection for its backrooms and for everything of this nature, because they are unique. The stores where you can buy champagne and high-quality wine are too various, and often too open to selling whatever people will buy, to be invested with much value. There is therefore a preference for showing vineyards, wine cellars, and storehouses, or for providing guided tours of the “châteaux” of the Bordeaux region. It’s better to go backstage than to be on stage.

Moreover, and it’s said plainly in the world of classical luxury: “The workshop is at the heart of our strategy.”²³ Let’s note in passing that it’s also the place where you won’t be bothered by customers, where one can surrender oneself completely to the passion for luxury objects (dresses, jewels, carafes, purses) and for work well done, so lovingly done, indeed, that at any moment it could become an end in itself. Of course, this doesn’t prevent classical luxury in the least from keeping up its sales points, generally in a style that is itself classic and privileges hushed atmospheres, wood, leather, velvet, wall hangings, soft armchairs, and private salons. Unless, of course, it opts instead for large open spaces that are easy to get around in, much like a museum, where you can go right up to the jewels displayed in immense glass cases, as at the historic Tiffany’s in New York.

Tiffany, which, from the vantage point of age, belongs to classical luxury, has made strategic and stylistic choices that, at present, bring it closer to modern or contemporary luxury, for which the most important space is (logically) not so much the workshop as the *boutique*, which “plays a key role.”²⁴ The main difference with respect to workshops is that boutiques are—in principle—a place where you come into contact with customers, whereas workshops are places of retreat—more secret, more intimate. Contemporary luxury doesn’t have any workshops, the factories that produce it don’t offer anything worthy of being seen. It thus focuses all of its efforts on the “boutique” or store. One is tempted to say that it is less afraid of coming into contact with customers, but it can’t be said that it seeks this contact out, either. The guards positioned at the store entrances are just as much a barrier to entry as the high prices. And the boutiques themselves are not very welcoming: they’re often big, cold, and angular. One senses that they’re obeying a “concept.” Theory or ideas come before

well-being, the architect's choices matter more than the visitor's enjoyment.

In these immense spaces, merely by the play of proportion and contrast, the products are reduced to very little, all the more so because there isn't much on the display racks and shelves. Even the customers feel small. They're not always welcomed, nor are they guided: their freedom of movement is respected (too much?). And so they wander, a little bit lost, through these half-empty churches or chapels.

But given that luxury requires a display of power, the only visible power remaining to contemporary luxury brands—with the products often too minimalist to constitute a display of power themselves—is the square-footage and volume occupied. Consequently, the race to be the biggest. And, of course, location is everything. Consequently, the race to have the best address, and the skyrocketing real estate prices.

Another tendency of the Spatial Pole in modern and contemporary luxury is minimalism. This is only logical: by going against the grain of classical luxury, with its rich and ornate décors, contemporary luxury gradually streamlines itself until only smooth walls, flat surfaces, extremely simplified lines, and increasingly neutral colors are permitted. The result is décors that are as bare and abstract as a skeleton—and the same skeleton for everyone.

This conception of space is at the opposite pole from classical luxury, but it may nonetheless constitute another form of luxury. In a consumer society where people and things are bunched together and stacked up into a veritable urban chaos, luxury, by contrast, may indeed be well-lit, wide open spaces, lots of room, and emptiness, and the impression of serenity and lightness they provide. True, it's a form of luxury that's less sensual and less warm than the cluttered living rooms of classical luxury, but one that some may prefer precisely on this account.

Luxury also has another space at its disposal: the media sphere, which is where people are. When a luxury brand is publicly adopted or worn by a star, a leading man or woman, or any sort of public figure, it gets a kind of exposure that it would be harder, or even impossible (without paying), to acquire with the product alone. Fashion, cosmetics, leather goods, and accessories are the first and the best served by the media sphere. Jewelry too, if you

think about the frantic one-upmanship that the top jewelers engage in for the Cannes festival or the Oscar ceremony in Hollywood.

Finally, virtual space, cyberspace: the Internet.

Luxury brands have long objected to occupying cyberspace, but in just a few years they've more than caught up with the curve. Almost all of them, today, are present on the web, and some even have several websites. It would be futile to try to draw up a list, because no sooner has a site opened its virtual doors to the denizens of the Internet than it is transformed into a new version of itself. One can do no more than point out the most stable current trends in the choices made by luxury brands when they venture onto the web.

And, oddly enough, not all of them play the digital game—far from it.

First of all, many of them preserve the much-vaunted luxury “codes” that consumers have learned to recognize by dint of seeing them used in the press, in store displays, in posters, and on purses and packaging. Notably, the use of classic fonts with serifs, sometimes in italics, in color or on a black background (Gucci, Bulgari) or black on white (Dior), which makes for very sober, even static homepages. Otherwise, as is only logical, it's the brand's colors that prevail: red for Cartier, gray (in part) at Dior, white and black for Chanel. It's equally logical for the identifying marks of each brand to turn up: the Burberry plaid, Dior's cannage pattern, the floral motifs and butterflies of Van Cleef & Arpels, the Vuitton monogram as a background image. More surprisingly, even the web is swarming with various signs borrowed from the aristocratic ethos, such as birthdates (Prada, Loewe), crowns (Rolex, Prada), heraldic crests (Burberry, Prada), interiors suggesting castles and royal residences, with Louis XVI medallions (Dior), columns, gold moldings, crystal chandeliers, and red velvet (Cartier), monumental Imperial staircases inviting the visitor to mount toward the heavens (Cartier, Viktor & Rolf), salons, boudoirs, and libraries, often with classical music playing in the background (Cartier, Dior Joaillerie).

The immense importance accorded to elite culture jumps right out at you: Buccellati's site can be flipped through like an art book, house “Bibles” are displayed (Cartier, Gucci) or can even be

consulted (Prada), Viktor & Rolf's library is spread out for all to see, and with a click you can take a look at some archival volumes. The most emblematic case remains that of Mellerio dits Meller, whose site suggests a manuscript, as if it were the reproduction of some ancient scroll confirming that we are indeed in "the oldest house of jewelry in the world."

In sum, most luxury brands have overcome their initial disapproval and even anxiety with regard to the web, but only so as to enter a second phase in which they refuse to let go of the reassuring safety railing of tradition and remain blind to the fact that on the Internet the rules of the game are no longer the same as in a nice brochure on glossy paper. At a pinch, they agree to make the web into a space for displaying what they call their "universe," but they don't really do all they could to convey their vision, apart from a slideshow evoking their history (Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels). As for online shopping, it is either nonexistent (Cartier, Chanel), or else has a merely symbolic presence (Bottega Veneta). When it does exist, it rarely leads to the possibility of actually buying anything: the products are either unavailable or are available only in very small quantities, and they're not always accompanied by a video or even a complete and precise description. And still less by reviews from other clients. Aside from Dior—accessories—and Vuitton and Hermès—a part of their collections—very little is done to incentivize the act of purchasing.

Above all, the collaborative dimension, which is the very essence of internet logic, is practically absent from luxury sites. None of them offer a forum. Vuitton has opened its site to visitors, but only in the context of a contest between young video makers,²⁵ not to give customers a voice. Except for Burberry, which displays a gallery of photos sent by website visitors (on condition they're wearing the brand's clothing), no dialog whatsoever is possible. You can sign up for a newsletter, but nothing more. The communication continues to happen in one direction only, from the brand to web surfers, never the other way around.

In short, aside from three or four exceptions that we'll come back to later, luxury brands have yet to come of age digitally. This new space frightens them less than before, but they continue to fear it, and sometimes even to disdain it.

Summary

The Spatial Pole is used differently by classical, modern, and contemporary luxury brands. All three have more or less selective distribution networks, but, symbolically, it can be said that the most representative space of classical luxury is the workshop. For modern and contemporary luxury, it's the "boutique" (a generic term in luxury, even when it denotes fairly vast spaces), but also the advertising and media sphere. As for the virtual space of the web, it's starting to be occupied by luxury brands, but with great disparities.

A trait common to all these brands, with regard to their use of space, is that they make use of it more as a means of demonstration than to engage in any real interaction with their customers. For classical luxury it's a demonstration of savoir-faire, for modern luxury, of creativity, and for contemporary luxury, of influence: we're dealing with a logic of display and distancing, not of exchange. Nothing reveals more about the difficulty in communicating that, more or less, consciously affects the luxury sector, despite all of its attempts at so-called "communication," which generally only go in one direction. This can be seen clearly in the virtual space, where even the least hesitant and the most innovative brands continue to monopolize the stage, rejecting the sort of interactivity that is, however, the very hallmark of internet logic.

The Norms Pole

It is impossible to communicate without referring to the norms that prevail in the surrounding environment. These norms are extremely diverse. Some have the strength of laws, others are purely conventional; some are universal, others local; some are written or explicit, others are not. In every case, there are only three possible choices:

- one respects the norms;
- one transgresses them;
- or one creates new ones.

In the universe of popular, mass-market brands, there are brands that are respectful of the norms (detergents and housecleaning

products obey the social norm of cleanliness); brands that rebel against the norms (the VW beetle, for example, when it proclaimed “Think small” in the United States, a country where big cars are the norm); and brands that create new norms (Gap, which opened up a third way between being “overdressed” and “underdressed” in American clothing, Apple by promoting the idea that everyone should have a computer, Swatch with watches that can be collected like T-shirts, The Body Shop by refusing to submit to the tyranny of advertising norms in the “Love Your Body” campaign).

The same holds true in the luxury brand universe. But here, one must pay close attention to spot the prevailing norms, customs, and rules, for it’s a sector that, more than any other, is swarming with unwritten norms.

They can be found at various levels of visibility. On the surface, for example, there is a rule that applies to all brands: you never mess with your logo. Each brand has its reference manual for everything concerning visual identity, and the guidelines are to be strictly obeyed. All the power of a truly major brand like Hermès is necessary to enable the separation of two logo elements, the carriage and the coachman, notably on the website, without giving the impression of something other than a playfully poetic game. Nonetheless, Hermès remains faithful to its identity as a brand that respects norms. On the other hand, when Lacoste reinterprets its crocodile in limited editions so that it appears not green but yellow, red, blue, with stripes, plaid, or driving a scooter, the break with norms is blatant. Does this benefit Lacoste by making it look like an audacious brand? Or does breaking the rule just create confusion, not to mention opening the door for the imaginative flights of counterfeiters?

Another visible infraction of the norm is that of Paul Smith, a designer who remains indifferent to fashion trends, a businessman with no interest in the stock market, a luxury brand on the margins of luxury, but which doesn’t follow the rules. Here, there are neither sumptuous displays nor austere purity, but rather fantasy, kitsch, a prevailing mixture of genres that holds sway in the clothing collections and in the brand’s stores, each different from the rest, according to the country where it is located. The brand’s development might very well have led it more visibly in the direction of luxury, and there was no lack of offers of financial support,

but Paul Smith, who is more or less one of a kind, isn't fascinated by luxury, and his definition of it is, besides, utterly personal. Thus, he doesn't follow the norms, even while respecting the foremost among them—namely quality. Otherwise, everything comes down to the spur of the moment. Which may be a form of luxury that's much more subtle than buying a new Rolls-Royce every year—unless, of course, it's just a way of respecting another norm, this one cultural: the eccentricity ascribed to the English, and systematically associated with the Paul Smith brand.

Another norm that isn't written anywhere, but that the concerned parties are always affirming, is the one stating that the norm in luxury is French. Result: any luxury brand which, in spite of its impeccable pedigree, doesn't respect French codes of luxury will be decreed out of bounds. Tiffany, which is sometimes presented as the anti-Place Vendôme, is snubbed by its Parisian counterparts. This is because the brand has never respected any of the norms of French craftsman jewelry, neither in the style of its pieces nor in that of its boutiques, and still less by featuring the artists who affix their names to some of its creations. In the Place Vendôme, the norm has it that the artist should remain in the shadows.

The norms I am speaking about here are not laws but cultural conventions. Nobody is free to break the law, whereas one can choose to follow a norm, or not. Brands can thus follow one path or the other, and in doing so affirm or modify their identity, signal their belonging to the circle of initiates, or, instead, their desire to break away from it.

And all of this takes place, of course, without reference to any written rule, since it's not a question of respecting a law (the identification of a diamond using the Kimberley Process Certification) or a technical constraint (the size of a precious gem), but only of submitting—or not—to “what's done” in such and such a trade, such and such a luxury house. And, of doing so in an unspoken, tacit way.

For, in luxury, the norm of *implicitness* prevails. Without being taught by anyone, you are supposed to know the customs, the rules of the game, the passwords. Mutual understanding is written between the lines, using a code-like vocabulary full of the sort of handy words that make it possible to remain vague: magic, mystery, marvel, charm, fairy, dream, secret, prodigy. This level of

language (the level of press releases, advertising brochures, and interviews) is a distant echo, not to mention the spiritual descendant, of the worldly superficiality so highly prized in the salons of Enlightenment France. If you ask for clarifications about luxury, which everyone seems to know intimately, you'll get an evasive answer. You'll be told that it's a matter of good taste, of instinct, of intuition, that it's the sort of thing you sense. "Taste is only good if it's impossible to describe," says Andrée Putman.²⁶ As for luxury itself, as we've already had occasion to note, nobody hazards a definition, or else they give multiple definitions, which amounts to the same thing. Someone says, "There is no definition of luxury, but it can be recognized without fail by the ingredients which make it up,"²⁷ without listing those ingredients. Someone else acknowledges honestly, "Attempting to define what is or is not a luxury product is like taking a shot in the dark. Luxury is like a potluck dinner: everyone finds what he himself has brought there."²⁸ A third person confirms this: "The definition of luxury is very subjective."²⁹ An article on the subject begins with the following words: "Luxury cannot be explained, it can only be lived, happily, like a sort of elegant bliss."³⁰ Everyone seems to agree: you can come up with a lot of pretty phrases to talk about luxury, but you can't put your finger on it.

It's true that luxury is difficult to pin down, as we've already said: it's a world that changes with individuals, eras, and prejudices, that's constantly evolving (yesterday's luxuries are today's commodities), and that remains unstable by nature, since it satisfies desires, not needs.

But given that the exercise is a difficult one, are we obliged to conclude that it is impossible? Certainly not, unless we are willing to respect another unwritten norm about which Pierre Bourdieu has written some particularly enlightening pages, with regard to what he calls the 'ideology of natural taste'.³¹ This ideology consists in thinking that there is a "natural" way of approaching works of art (or, by extension, objects of a similar ilk, such as luxury objects) as opposed to a "learned" way. Only the first is thought to be correct. Here we have the unconscious perpetuation of the quarrel between the "learned" and the "worldly" in the 17th century. The worldly men of the court claimed to have an unerring and instinctive sense for everything to do with art—painting, literature, music, architecture. The learned, on the other hand, were scholars who had

acquired their knowledge through arduous study. The two groups had a radically different relationship to culture: spontaneous—or supposedly so—for the first, considered and studious for the second. The courtiers had nothing but scorn for bookish knowledge, because they lacked it, and, inversely, the learned, who were qualified as “pedants,” had nothing but scorn for the ignorance of the courtiers. Molière used this quarrel as the basis for many delightful scenes in his comedies.

The opposition is still valid today, and it can be detected even in the way professionals are molded. They are taught about management, administration, and marketing, but they learn very little about the culture of luxury and its history, except when being initiated into certain specific jobs. And even then it’s only in the form of visits to studios and boutiques, in other words almost as a form of entertainment, and never in a theoretical way. In virtue of what unwritten norm? The one that assumes that culture and taste cannot be acquired: they are supposed to be innate, “natural,” and irreducible to rational or learned discourses constructed from the outside by study and reflection. This is probably the origin of the feeble intellectual expectations in luxury circles: it’s an unwitting copy of the repugnance displayed by the “worldly” and the aristocratic with regard to knowledge that bears traces of acquisition, thus, of effort and work. Take this description of the *homo luxus*, the person who works in the luxury world: “He’s a musician, he’s cultivated [...] he’s a man of culture, he draws, he paints, he loves the arts, never misses a gallery exhibit, an opera, a major concert, a museum [...] he understands colors, form, style.”³² And, a little farther on: “Nobody is in a better position than *homo luxus* to speak about anything and everything.” The expression goes straight back to the 17th-century ideal of the “*honnête homme*,” the well-rounded courtier capable, as the Chevalier de Méré, himself a courtier, put it, “of talking about anything, provided that his manner of speaking didn’t betray any deliberate study.”

Two other norms, which are easier to identify, reign in the luxury universe, and especially in classical luxury: first the norm of **quality** and then **respect for tradition**—what Veblen calls veneration of the archaic. We need not linger over the first (quality), as it is well known: when a certain vintage of a great Bordeaux wine is withdrawn from sale because the harvest has been mediocre, when

Baccarat breaks all glasses that have the slightest defect, even defects invisible to an untrained eye, we are obviously in a world where the norms of quality are exceptional.

As for the norm of respect for tradition, most classical and modern luxury houses proclaim their adhesion to and practice of it, even when they only go back a few decades. Galliano's extravagances at Dior were part of a tradition of scandal that Christian Dior inaugurated with the New Look. Rolex emphasizes the care with which the brand respects and meticulously reproduces the gestures of watchmaking tradition. When it comes to the traditions of handcrafted jewelry, Harry Winston gives no quarter to his counterparts in the Place Vendôme.

And, naturally, there is also respect for the norm of *craftsmanship*. In classical luxury there is great emphasis placed on the perpetuation of ancestral practices: the cutter bent over a crystal glass, the leatherworker or the jewelry maker, the winegrower, the watchmaker. It makes no difference that the watches, silver place settings, embroidery, and some brand-name purses are now made in ultramodern factories or workshops on the other side of the world: the myth of "handmade" and "homemade" remains as powerful as ever. Today, champagne bottles are machine-made, but in several major champagne houses, tours of the cellars give the impression that they're still made by hand, like they were in the old days. Is the touch of a human hand superior in any way to that of a machine in this case? Not in the least. But the legend has the last word.

In any event, of the three possibilities it has to choose from—respecting, transgressing, or creating norms—classical luxury generally prefers respect. Which doesn't mean that it is not creative, obviously, but that, when it is creative, it prefers to extend its own traditions, as with the graphic designers chosen by Vuitton to work on its logo, rather than break away in an entirely new direction. The instances of radical breaks with tradition are infrequent, which is logical: a luxury house that breaks with the norm or creates a new one, whether in the manufacturing process or in sales techniques, does so just as it's starting out, or soon afterwards, when it has nothing to lose and everything to gain from changing some of the rules of the game. It was at the beginning that Yves Saint Laurent gave himself permission to make certain bold moves, both in clothing (tuxedos for women, high-fashion blue jeans) and advertising

(posing nude for Rive Gauche Hommes), inscribing the transgression in the brand's "genes," as proved a bit later on by the launch of Opium. But the more time goes by, the less a brand is tempted to imperil the prestige, success, and standing it has acquired through its innovations. And so, in general, it will prefer velvet revolutions. That was the solution adopted in the 1980s by Hermès, which enacted changes that involved some products as well as the image, but didn't radically alter the way the brand functioned, and didn't cause it to plunge overnight into outlandish modernity. Cartier's introduction of Must enlarged its customer base but didn't entail the complete reconfiguration of the company or its activities. By the same token Vuitton launched its ready-to-wear line, adding another feather to its cap but without in any way changing caps. Tiffany has regularly recruited new designers without turning away from its heritage. The same thing holds for Bulgari.

Classical luxury obviously cannot both rely on its heritage, a notion that it considers the most precious of all, and risk unwisely damaging or even destroying it with hazardous maneuvers—which is exactly what ruptures, metamorphoses, and innovations always are. This view most often leads classical luxury to respect norms and traditions rather than to transgress them or invent new ones.

But there is yet another reason for this tendency, perhaps the most fundamental reason, which is that classical luxury has a tendency to consider *itself* as the norm in the profession. In which case, why would it change? It changes norms so little that it even goes so far as to codify them in institutional structures: the École Van Cleef & Arpels, the École Ritz Escoffier, the Scuola di Pelletteria opened in Vicenza by Bottega Veneta. To award diplomas (some of which are recognized by state governments) or hand out awards, like the Rolex Awards, is obviously to position oneself as the supreme arbiter of excellence.

The unwritten norms of European luxury are made up of a strong attachment to artisanal traditions, the cult of the well-made product, of work with raw materials, and of a preference for visible luxury, for lack of another word to designate what is sometimes called—pejoratively—ostentatious luxury.

If we reverse, word for word, the above definition, we get the norms of modern and, above all, contemporary luxury, which, by definition, break with the norms of classical luxury.

While the latter privileges artisanal traditions, modern and contemporary luxury generally embrace their industrial character. Apart from unexpected and fleeting fads, they don't worship the idea of "handmade": provided an article of clothing isn't cut across the grain of the fabric some seams can be sewn better by machine. They also don't worship natural materials: synthetic and technological materials interest them just as much, and dyed concrete appeals to them just as much as raw wood. This wood isn't systematically worked, sculpted, waxed, and gilded, nor is the crystal cut, the porcelain decorated, the silk embroidered. An article of clothing can be cut just as well with a laser as with scissors. And the richness of the fabric doesn't have to jump out at you: it's better if it can accomplish unprecedented feats like filter UV rays, warm you up when it's cold, cool you down when it's hot, conserve the memory of body contours, or emit a pleasant scent.

While modern luxury sometimes remains quite sophisticated, contemporary luxury, as a general rule, breaks with ostentation. Apart from Versace, which temporarily revived an opulent and spectacular Latin tradition, Gucci, Armani, and Ralph Lauren offer clothing that is generally sober, even where evening gowns are concerned. Obviously, they too subscribe to an ideology, one by which elegance is a question of look rather than wardrobe, beauty an accord between form and function, and not an exercise in technical virtuosity.

Among moderns and contemporaries, then, only the baroque designers still respect the norm of technical prowess: Galliano, in offering a robe in stretch tulle covered in embroidered crocodile skin, Jean Paul Gaultier, with a pullover made of a long spiral of mink. Or even, in his own fashion, Richard Mille, a character just as eccentric and whimsical as Richard Branson, who doesn't tremble before the most difficult technical challenges, not even the challenge of creating a tourbillon watch weighing just 20 grams, strap included, and able to withstand the most violent shocks.³³

In terms of *advertising*, the norm for classical luxury is an unadorned image of the product, as close up as possible ("in majesty," as they say—even the technical vocabulary is meaningful), without anything that could potentially be distracting. This is the case in jewelry and watches; Chanel, Harry Winston, and Jaeger-LeCoultre often adopt this principle, with minute variations in background

color or placement of the signature. As the recipe is extremely simple and very economical, it has obviously been adopted by many other brands, which are unaware of the fact that their name alone is not enough to earn them membership in the luxury world.

To avoid this difficulty, another norm of luxury advertising—classical, modern, or contemporary—is the use of a decorative element (flowers, leaves, and shells at Van Cleef & Arpels, in conformity with the house's stylistic heritage), or, more often, a model's face, either known or unknown—there are innumerable examples of this, from Baccarat to Estée Lauder, Bulgari to Kenzo, Nina Ricci to Pomellato. Examples of brands that create specific worlds (Hermès) or tell a story (Chanel No. 5) are extremely rare. Paradoxically, it can be concluded that the advertising norm for luxury brands is a certain lack, even an impoverishment, which is due to a reciprocal imitation that goes against the very principle of differentiation—and yet differentiation is precisely the basis of all brand logic.

By comparison, there is not the least doubt that major consumer brands have norms of advertising quality that are infinitely superior, formally speaking (the quality and creativity of the photography and the image) but also in terms of content (scripts, actors, animations, décors, direction). However the Internet is changing the game, if only because of the lower costs to create and maintain a site, and a far wider, although partly random, impact. But creative freedom can be deployed much more freely on the Internet, and can even help shift a brand's image and identity with a power and speed that the delayed reaction times and large scale of advertising campaigns used to slow down considerably. The poetic imagination displayed on Hermès's current website offers an excellent demonstration of this, as does the modernist look adopted by Prada's site, or the looks—as varied as they are carefully crafted—of Vuitton's websites.

Summary

Classical luxury is—logically—more attached than any other to very high norms of quality, to the respect of artisanal traditions, to craftsmanship, and to technical exploits. These are essentially the norms

involved in the “before” of the products, in the process of creating them. But modern luxury also respects those norms: it can be said of Chanel or Dior that they work (this holds true at least where haute couture is concerned) with respect for tradition, that they seek feats of technical prowess, and that they impose very high standards of quality. From this vantage point, the two luxuries are very similar. They part ways in another respect, as we’ve seen: the cult of personality surrounding the creator, which is much more visible in modern luxury than at Hermès or Patek Philippe.

Classical luxury is more likely than the two others to think that it alone embodies the luxury norm—that is, “true” luxury—which explains its scrupulous respect for the norms it has forged over time. The general attitude of respect for norms—above all, norms of manufacture—although it also exists in modern luxury, has not prevented classical luxury from creating very noticeable stylistic ruptures (Chanel, Grès, Schiaparelli, Balenciaga, Dior, Saint Laurent).

Contemporary luxury, for its part, breaks instead with technical norms (manufacturing procedures) and stylistic ones (less ostentatious objects). But it maintains what, on the whole, is a curious respect for the advertising norm that dictates that luxury brands all communicate in more or less the same way. Today the Internet is giving it new freedom, but it is already riddled with implicit norms (the commercial site/brand universe split, newsletters, iPhone apps, links to Facebook and Twitter, and so forth), which luxury brands hardly seem inclined to flout.

The Positions Pole

It is impossible to communicate without consciously or unconsciously adopting a certain position with respect to one’s interlocutors—in this case, one’s customers. The analysis of this position must proceed in two stages.

First stage: in all communication, the interlocutors choose either to state their identity (“I am ...”), to first settle on the other’s identity (“You are ...”), or to start from common ground (“We are ...”).

Next, the dialog can begin with the agreement or disagreement of each party about these respective positions, and continue with

possible (re)negotiations. In the life of brands, as in life as a whole, these positions are not fixed (if they were, there wouldn't be any possible strategies), but they have to last for a fairly long time, around three to five years, otherwise the brand's identity becomes blurred and causes confusion among the public, generally to the advantage of a competing brand that is perceived to be clearer and more stable.

In the luxury universe, one quickly realizes that brands have a tendency to privilege two of these positions, and to neglect the third.

It is, of course, the affirmative position that luxury brands prefer, the one that enables them to say simply, or arrogantly: (I am) "Poiray, jeweler," or "Mauboussin, craftsman jeweler," or "Breguet, the innovator," or to define themselves, as Patek Philippe does, as a "family-owned watch manufacturer." It is very easy and tempting to slip from the "I am" position to "I am the only one to do this or that," and, from there, to "I am the best," an implicit declaration made by all luxury brands—or sometimes an explicit one, notably in the champagne business.

In the second instance, luxury brands sometimes adopt the "You are" position by describing their real or dream clientele: Breitling does this ("Instruments for professionals") as does IWC ("official supplier to men," and its many variations).

But one searches in vain for examples of luxury brands that initiate communication in the "We are ..." register. It's easy to understand why: feeling superior to others doesn't foster any sort of egalitarian sentiment. This also explains in advance something that will become clear later on, when we discuss the Relations Pole: the distance, even the coldness, of those relations. Not that the two poles are redundant, for their contents are very different. But let me say it once again: the fingerprint method is based on the idea that a brand is a living system in which each of the seven poles is linked to all the others. Thus they are all complementary, and it is perfectly logical that the absence of the "We are" position corresponds in the Relations Pole to the absence of connections with others. It should be noted besides that the same logic explains why, in the Norms Pole, the image of the island and of insularity is so present in luxury brands: there too the theme of isolation appears in another form, and thus the theme of the gap, the swerve, is worked through in all its dimensions.

A position of superiority, distant relations, imaginary isolation—everything in luxury works to solidify the idea that it is a sector completely apart, which justifies it escaping from any sort of judgment, criticism, or comparison. There is no lack of irony in this when one considers that luxury is a cross-cutting sector that no more exists by itself than waves exist without the ocean.

The second stage of analysis in the Positions Pole: the positions can be either symmetrical or complementary. Symmetrical: two tennis players at the same skill level, two employees at the same hierarchical level. Complementary: a teacher and his or her pupils, a guide with a group of tourists, a mother with her child.

It isn't preferable to adopt a symmetrical rather than a complementary position, or the reverse. What's important is that the two parties are in agreement about the position that each has adopted. So long as the pupils recognize the teacher's authority or the child that of its parents, all is well. When Apple launches the iMac by saying to those who buy it: "Plug and play," Apple puts itself in the position of an adult offering a toy to a child, and that suits its customers, who like the product's playful side, its ease of use, and the idea that a computer is made for having fun as much as for doing work. In terms of transactional analysis, one might say that with each new product launch—iPod, iPhone, iPad—Apple is in a "parental" position, while its customers are in the "child's" position. Each side is in agreement as to the other's position. By contrast (sticking with computers) IBM could never address its customers in the same way and, instead, adopts an adult to adult position, that is to say, one that is symmetrical and not complementary.

Complementary positions are the most frequent. They *always* assume the objective superiority (or not) of one of the two parties with respect to the other. The problems begin when that superiority is challenged or weakened.

How does all this apply to luxury?

Its history and, especially for classical and modern luxury, its ideology of noble origins make it logical for luxury to adopt a position of superiority. When people recognize that superiority, they don't question it. One might be tempted to think that we have a case of stable complementarity on our hands.

But, although we are indeed in a complementary position (luxury possesses a *savoir-faire* that its customers recognize, admire, and are inclined to acquire for themselves), that position is less stable than it used to be. Classical and modern luxury, for example, aimed for absolute superiority, but their superiority today is merely relative in the eyes of everyone who acknowledges that there are other forms of luxury, including the contemporary luxury brands like Armani, Ferragamo, Ralph Lauren, Bulgari, Gucci, and Hugo Boss.

What are classical and modern luxury doing about this?

For the moment they are standing firm in their position of superiority. The self-assured gaze of the models who look down on you—or don't look at you at all—in Prada advertisements is one proof among others. The same gaze plays scornfully over you in some Estée Lauder, Miu Miu, and Chloé ads: just take a look at the position of the models' faces and eyes. Their gaze often seems to be straight on, when in reality it is just a little bit higher than that.

Contemporary luxury senses that a position of superiority is difficult to maintain in the long term—especially when that superiority becomes less visible, both technically (the making of products) and stylistically (they're less ostentatious).

Result: it gives the impression that it prefers a symmetrical position. It doesn't try as hard to impose its authority, doesn't come off as the keeper of a tradition or *savoir-faire* that nobody else possesses and that supposedly gives it an advantage over its customers. Or, if it does have an advantage, it disguises this beneath an apparent equality, which is clear even in the "presentation of self" (in the sense of Erving Goffman) of some of its leaders. Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana are often in jeans, Giorgio Armani in a T-shirt. Donna Karan wears a M size, like many women, and unlike fashion runway models. And, just like her counterparts, she doesn't pose as an inspired artist: she once said that she creates her collections by looking through her wardrobe just like everyone else, twice a year, and designing what she needs or wants. This is behavior that mirrors her clientele's behavior, a position of symmetry rather than complementarity.

Contemporary luxury, more so than other kinds of luxury, realizes that consumers have changed. They can no longer be addressed as if they were uninitiated outsiders. Or rather, it must be acknowledged that if the teacher has done good work, one day the students

will know just as much, possibly even more, than he or she does—and may hold different opinions. This is exactly what is happening, especially with classical luxury, as demonstrated by the protestations voiced in the little poll that I spoke of in the Introduction. The positions were stable and complementary, up to the point where customers, by dint of being “educated” by the luxury houses, no longer needed lessons and were no longer willing to be treated as ignorant or undisciplined schoolchildren. It’s being observed everywhere that consumers are increasingly adult, increasingly knowledgeable, and increasingly demanding. Luxury cannot allow itself to be the last sector to understand this and react accordingly.

But, since it is impossible for luxury to abandon its position of superiority, it must change the nature and content of that superiority by giving it another meaning. Instead of being superior as a master with respect to an apprentice, it becomes superior in the way a storyteller is with respect to the audience.

People love to be told stories: nobody has understood this better than Americans, and nobody has done a better job than they have making a whole industry out of storytelling. And, all things being equal, the entertainment industry is much more powerful than the luxury industry in terms of international impact and profits. No surprise, then, that it is contemporary luxury, which is to say American or Americanized luxury, that has best absorbed the lessons of entertainment and show business while developing the art of storytelling. This is particularly glaring in the luxury hotel business, and it is obvious for the same reasons at Ralph Lauren, particularly at its flagship store on Madison Avenue. But it is also true for Dolce & Gabbana, which often tells stories of brazen seduction or, more recently, of Sicily and Sicilian-ness; for Burberry and its English variations; or for certain Las Vegas-themed hotels like the Bellagio.

Classical luxury also knows how to tell stories: Hermès’s fairy-tale advertisements follow one after the other, like the stories told by Scheherazade (which the brand’s store displays recall), without ever repeating themselves. Vuitton occasionally speaks to us of Snow White and of Cinderella. This is a good way of positioning oneself from time to time as a storyteller, and of maintaining a complementary position with respect to the audience, rather than holding over its head a superiority that, on principle, the latter is increasingly unwilling to accept.

Summary

Luxury has a marked preference for stable complementary positions and, whether classical or modern, it always wants to occupy a position of superiority. It is pushed to this by its “natural” elitism, its conviction that it works with the best techniques and artisans, produces the most beautiful objects—in short, that it attains perfection, or at least gets awfully close.

What we have, then, is a dominant position that assumes an authority recognized by those on whom it is exercised, who find themselves in a submissive position. This dominant–submissive couple inverts the usual relationship in which the customer is king; here, the vendor is the king, or more precisely the maker, as the emphasis is much more frequently and deliberately placed on the manufacture of luxury objects than on the sales stage.

This imbalance in positions can only function and last if each party gets what it wants out of it and acknowledges the other's position. Up till now, that is what has happened, but certain signs foretell a possible challenge to the business transaction as it currently stands in so-called “accessible” luxury. In the future, consumers, who have become more and more savvy, demanding, and who now have the Internet as a weapon, could have less tolerance for some of the behaviors of luxury brands, when those behaviors too obviously clash with the image of very high-quality products or with the forms of human interaction with which these consumers are most at ease.

The Projects Pole

It is impossible to communicate without having a project, a goal, an intention. The project isn't always acknowledged up front, it's not always conscious, but it is always there. It's true for individuals, it's true for companies, and it's true for brands.

Indeed, brands are very open about this. Air France, which is an associate member of the Colbert Committee, is quite explicit: its project is to “Make the sky the most beautiful place on earth.” For Lancôme, the project was to “Believe in beauty.” For Kenzo, hoping for “the world to remain beautiful.”

The projects and ambitions of luxury brands are not always explicit. Sometimes, you have to seek them out, deduce them from what can be observed. Sometimes, it's all in vain: there isn't any project aside from existing, being there, and, if possible, lasting. Or else the project is to sell, and, better still, to make a profit, or even to reward the shareholder. But the company isn't the brand, and the former's project cannot be the same as the latter's.

What is the project of luxury and of its brands?

It is multifaceted and sometimes clearly laid out. If the Colbert Committee is to be believed, for example, French luxury has three goals: to create, to excel, and to amaze. Of course, this committee doesn't represent all French luxury houses, but it does represent a proportion that's significant enough for us to assume that the three verbs sum up the whole sector's mindset, at least in France. And, as French luxury is an oft-imitated model, its project is adopted as is or almost as is by others, explicitly or implicitly.

Leading off this threefold project is the verb create. It's clear that it's a matter of fighting against the temptation to rest on one's laurels, but it's also a way of emphasizing what is fundamental about classical luxury, namely beautiful objects.

The *aesthetic intention* clearly differentiates luxury products from mass-market consumer goods. Not that the latter are necessarily ugly—this is far from being the case, as many products are very aesthetically pleasing and some are even displayed in major contemporary art museums. But apart from the products that are the result of a concerted effort to achieve high-quality design, mass-market products do not seek, first and foremost, to be beautiful.

Luxury objects, on the other hand, have always sought to achieve this. Whether they manage to do so or not is another story, but, in general, luxury aims for beauty. That is why it more often holds forth on the subject: Baccarat declares that “beauty is not reasonable,” in keeping with a 17th-century attitude that luxury and its excesses were not beholden to logic—especially to economic logic. And Mauboussin states that “beauty is where it is least expected,” adopting the principle of a swerve from the norm which, as we have seen, is at the very heart of luxury.

Still more glaring is commercial luxury's overwhelming tendency to flirt with art and the world of artists. Indeed, numerous

high-fashion designers think of themselves as artists, like John Galliano; Bernard Arnault said of him that he “bordered on truly artistic creation,” a border soon crossed when, asked about the shocking nature of some Dior fashion shows, he added: “The great artists, the real ones, have always surprised us. Take 20th century painters, take the great musicians: Stravinsky was booed. At first they are criticized because they surprise us.”³⁴ And it doesn’t stop at fashion design: the press, for example, has called Pierre Hermé the “Picasso of pastry” and has gone right ahead and compared him to Mozart. Geniuses are everywhere among the “creators.” The word has been so overused that, to tell the truth, it has lost much of its prestige, but it is symptomatic of the luxury universe, where artistic references are the rule. The numerous foundations out there (think of Cartier’s Foundation for Contemporary Art) bear witness to this, as does the charitable giving by such companies as LVMH and Gucci, as do the locations chosen for certain fashion shows (Chanel at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, and the Beaux-Arts in Paris).

The desire to create thus goes well beyond mere innovation: it claims to have an authentic artistic intention.

The project that consists in “excelling” is also at the heart of classical luxury: from this vantage point we have already seen the importance accorded to the quest for *feats of technical prowess*. Industry publications provide examples of this all year long and in all areas, like the glass slippers that Christian Louboutin imagined in 2012 as a spin on the famous Cinderella story. And as every feat deserves its reward, Rolex seeks to crown its winners by using both its logo and the crown motif in its tagline (“A crown for every achievement”) and by handing out the Rolex Awards, which seek to support “those who are trying to change the world.”

As for “amazing,” it’s a project that goes back both to the myth of light (*lux*—it’s a question of bedazzlement), and to pleurably saturating the senses. Luxury always seeks to give aesthetic experiences, and thus also emotional ones (the Greek *aisthêtês* means “he who feels”), which is why a few years back the Colbert Committee organized a major exhibition entitled “The Theater of the Senses.” Luxury—above all, classical and modern luxury (contemporary luxury is often more cerebral)—seeks to awaken all the five senses

by any and all means, seeking without respite to trigger an experience of sensory exaltation:

The pleasure of the senses is born in part from contact with fine materials. Leather, cashmere, silk, linen, silver, crystal, gold, precious woods, fine alcohols, perfumes, and many other materials are all products that our senses appreciate and recognize, although what we say about them never manages to account completely for the emotions they arouse.³⁵

The *quest to please the senses* really is specific to luxury: the ultrarich South African who was the first to take a trip in space on board a space capsule fulfilled a dream, but it wasn't a luxury dream. Why not? Because the idea of being squeezed into a heavy space suit and locked for several days straight in a cramped space with nothing to eat but freeze-dried wafers, all of this in conditions of extreme discomfort, could possibly be associated with the spirit of adventure, but not with the spirit of luxury. For the same reason, aficionados affirm that while Ferrari may be a legendary brand, it's not a luxury brand because it was never made to be comfortable. And we know that, ever since the 19th century, luxury and comfort have been an inseparable pair.³⁶

Contemporary luxury's aim is also to create, but not to amaze and astound (visual bedazzlement is not its objective) nor to hand down *savoir-faire*: not because it is lacking in *savoir-faire*, but because it is aware that its *savoir-faire* is not made up of the patient repetition of identical gestures, that it is constantly and rapidly evolving with the accelerating technical progress in fashion, architecture, and the media, not to mention the digital universe.

Contemporary luxury does not necessarily seek to arouse pleasure or emotions. Sensations, yes—but that's not the same thing—and even reflections about our lifestyles, our relationship to our bodies, environment, and sexuality.

It also seeks to sell, and this is a point that clearly distinguishes it from classical luxury. The latter also has commercial ambitions, but doesn't own up to them and will never concede that such and such a model of plate or glass, or such and such a purse, was conceived so as to make a profit. When profits pour in, it's always a surprise, the result of a happy piece of luck, never (if we are to

believe what is said) as the result of calculation or as the fulfillment of an ambition.

Contemporary luxury is neither so modest nor so repressed. It talks matter-of-factly about money. Commercial success doesn't come *in addition* to the recognition of quality, it is the only undeniable proof of the latter. There is no hidden or misunderstood genius in contemporary luxury: if nobody's buying, it's not genius.

Creation, excellence, amazement, emotions, sensations—all of these enter into the projects of luxury brands in various ways.

But they also have another project which obeys the norm of implicitness mentioned earlier. Indeed, it is never stated explicitly, maybe it is even unconscious for some brands: it is a matter of creating something entirely different from objects—an entire world.

Because it is implicit and, in some cases, unconscious, this project should not be sought in brochures, websites, or the works devoted to such and such a house or such and such a creator. It comes out into the open in a stray comment during an interview, in a statement, or in advertising images, in short, whenever the imaginary speaks.³⁷

In luxury, what does the imaginary express?

First of all, a fascination for the *past* which affects even contemporary brands—just think of Ralph Lauren, and not only of its re-creations of the WASP atmosphere, but also of the charitable activity that resulted in its spending 13 million dollars in 1998 to restore a historical flag owned—but in very poor condition—by the Smithsonian National Museum. Or else think of Versace, which borrowed its emblem (a Medusa head) and many visual motifs, especially for its decoration lines, from “a decorative Italian style mostly derived from an eclectic historicism of the late 19th century.”³⁸ Even Prada is no exception to the rule, with its two logos displaying a coat of arms and the date 1913. Not to speak of the intensive, perhaps even immoderate, thematic use of the past by classical luxury brands. Veblen has said all there is to say on this subject.³⁹

But even this is not what is most profound and most specific about luxury imagery and symbolism.

Three themes are especially remarkable.

The first two must be treated together, for, despite appearances, they belong to the same symbolic category: *the eye and the hand*.

Both are associated with the artisan or with his avatars, and are supposedly infallible. At Dior, it was said that John Galliano had the “absolute eye,”⁴⁰ as did Harry Winston, who, when still a teenager, so the legend goes, was able to distinguish a genuine emerald amid a pile of costume jewelry in a window display. In Ralph Lauren’s case, the “eye of the master” is said to be “everywhere,” even in the littlest touches—the shoelace holes of a pair of dress shoes, a bouquet of flowers, the angle from which a publicity photo is shot. And no book or website devoted to a classical luxury brand would be complete without at least one image of a hand sewing, engraving, molding, painting, gilding, or simply picking a flower, caressing a piece of leather, or holding a bottle.⁴¹ Hermès devoted an exhibit and an entire advertising campaign to the hand theme: both the artisan’s hand (it was threading a needle and was wearing a thimble) and the client’s (it was clad in an orange leather glove). The campaign was extended with another ad, about gestures (“Gesture and Speech”). On its site, Rolex, like most luxury watchmakers, shows photos of an artisan watchmaker’s hands, clad in white gloves, hard at work. Bentley does the same thing.

It matters little whether a luxury house resorts to artisan craftsmanship in reality, or to what degree they do so. What is striking is the frequency of the words and images evoking the eye and the hand in luxury brands’ discourse and, thus, in the way they imagine themselves. Behind the eye and the hand, and beyond their apparent meaning, lies the same symbolism of supreme power. In numerous traditions, the eye is a divine symbol—the “eye of the world,” in other words Buddha, or the solar eye of the Egyptians, or, again, the Masonic symbol. As for the hand, it is also a sacred emblem that expresses domination, for example in the laying on of hands in the Christian liturgy or in the badge of royalty that was the “hand of justice” in the Middle Ages. With the eye and the hand we find a thematic treatment of supremacy that European, and especially French, luxury have been constantly developing from their origins, for the historical reasons mentioned in the first part of this book. In the absence of these reasons, the eye and the hand are less present in the imaginary of contemporary luxury brands.

The third remarkable theme in the luxury imaginary is that of *insularity*, and thus of the *sacred*, by means of a symbolic detour

that circumvents religion and draws on the deepest anthropological dimension of luxury. For we are too quickly blinded by the astronomical prices, the excesses, and the mad caprices of luxury: behind this glittering façade there is something besides money, beauty, and vanity. Luxury has always been connected to the sacred, because its founding act, as can be seen from the obvious kinship between the two words, is the sacrifice of possessions (animals, food, flowers, jewels) that the oldest human populations on record presented to their gods. By definition, only populations who had already managed to surpass the subsistence threshold could make such sacrifices, and their gesture expressed the belief that this excess or surplus of goods, at least in part, should be given back to the gods and supreme powers to whom it was owed, whatever name was given to the principle of transcendence. Thus sacralized, these possessions acquired an extraordinary dimension associated with power, whether temporal or spiritual. We still see this everywhere in luxury, beneath the coats of varnish that often make us think that luxury is something superficial. And not only in its most visible manifestations but also in its invisible foundations, in the different forms it has taken here and there, according to each society's religion. Even when one seeks to keep to a purely economic approach, given that there is no such thing as an economy that isn't cultural, and given that the cultural domain cannot be abstracted from religion (even if it's only a secular religion), one has no choice but to acknowledge that there is no explanation for the differences in luxury practice from place to place other than the very profound religious foundations that, without our realizing it, structure every society. Even the most materialistic societies can't escape this. Of course, there are technical, economic and political reasons for the emergence of luxury in China today, or for the fact that there aren't any luxury brands in Germany outside of the automobile sector. But the reason for this is cultural, and thus religious: Confucianism on the one hand, Protestantism on the other.⁴² This is clear from what some brands say: "What characterizes American jewelry is above all the country's values: rigor, ethics, transparency, the refusal of elitism," says Tiffany.⁴³

Going even deeper than specific religions, we find everything that comes under the anthropological heading, with universal symbols that are found in their original state or modified in various

ways in numerous worship practices all over the world. The cross, the sphere, the door, the ladder, the sword—the list is long. Quite logically, these symbols abound in the universe of luxury.

Hermès reigns at the summit of French-style luxury, so how do the higher-ups at company headquarters in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré define the brand? “Like Japan, Hermès is an island.”⁴⁴ This sums up in a single striking formula how numerous luxury houses feel: they are a little world unto themselves, a universe apart, at a distance from the rest, with their own laws, history, and language (the words “world” and “universe” often come up, notably on their websites). Now distance, the “*écart*,” as we have seen, is what constitutes luxury. When you’re at a distance from others there is no possible comparison, you become your own reference point: “Hermès is not different from others—others are different from us.”⁴⁵ Here the reluctance on luxury’s part to acknowledge that it has competitors reaches its logical extreme:⁴⁶ competition is born of the comparison between neighboring realities, and an island doesn’t have any neighbors.⁴⁷ On an island one-of-a-kind values, principles, and lifestyles are developed. Nothing could suit luxury better, since luxury’s collective strategy consists in producing the unique, the incomparable, and the exceptional.

But the island image goes still further: in all societies and from the most ancient times, in Ireland, Cambodia, India, Japan, and in ancient Greece, it is a symbol of the spiritual center. Innumerable legends tell of perilous imaginary journeys, at the end of which one reaches enchanted islands (often white islands) where not only great wealth and abundance but also wisdom, perfection, knowledge, and immortality reign—the very virtues to which luxury aspires (in our discussion of the Temporal Pole we saw how luxury privileges timelessness). On these islands a “creative” god is worshiped and one meets with sages, druids, and priestesses, as in a temple or sanctuary. Like these places, the island’s contours are often delimited, frequently in the form of a circle:⁴⁸ the island is a closed world, a magical enclosure, for “what makes a place sacred above all is its closed-off nature.”⁴⁹ Luxury offers a thousand illustrations of the tendency toward self-closure. It was for this reason that the Printemps department store in Paris when it devoted an entire department to luxury, launched an advertising campaign entitled “Luxury, open up!” The request was in vain, for

nothing is more representative of the luxury universe than another campaign, for the Ritz hotel, which I saw a few years ago in the American press, showing only an extreme close-up of a finely wrought bronze lock. Closed, of course.

The eye, the hand, the island: the message is clear. The underlying aim of luxury, whether classical, modern, or contemporary, is the same: to construct a closed universe over which it has full power to realize its ideal. A world at a distance from ordinary concerns where the beautiful and (why not?) the just and the good are brought together in the highest degree of concentration. “You enter Hermès to enter ‘eternity’.”⁵⁰ In sum, a philosophical dream, something like a utopia.⁵¹

Finally, let’s note that the cult of creative personality owes a lot, perhaps everything, to this myth of absolute sovereignty, of which it is an avatar, and which is illustrated by the eye, the hand, and the island. This is most apparent in the world of fashion, and for modern and contemporary luxury brands. At Fendi, Hermès, and Asprey, the product is king. But at Gucci, it was Tom Ford. At Lanvin, it is (for the moment) Alber Elbaz. At Ralph Lauren, it’s Ralph Lauren, just as at Prada it’s Miuccia Prada. You have to know these houses from the inside to have an idea of just how extreme, not to say absurd, the cult of personality can get, with newspapers and television fanning the flames. It’s not any different from the cult of personality enjoyed by monarchs in the past, which goes to show that the same logic is at work: the logic of pure—or almost pure—arbitrariness, the logic of “*bon plaisir*” or “absolute fiat” granted to the kings of Europe which excluded all explanation and all justification. The only difference is that in traditional societies the monarchs derived their power from God, whereas the “creators,” as their name suggests, are supposed to derive their creative power from within themselves. Just as luxury brands are islands, that is to say places of spiritual and sacred power, so “creators” are the gods that engender and reign over them.

The cult of the creative personality must not be confused with the propensity of brands for using well-known personalities for their own ends. This propensity is undeniable and, for certain brands, constitutes a veritable strategy, as at Armani, for example, which is known for having deliberately “worked” Hollywood.⁵²

But this is not a phenomenon that's unique to luxury, since it affects all areas of consumption: the desire to buy always passes via an intermediary, who may be known (Catherine Deneuve for L'Oréal shampoo) or unknown (the actress brandishing a tube of cleaning product beneath the approving eye of Mr Clean). Both play the role of the mediator which every individual needs in order to desire any sort of object or possession, be it ordinary or luxurious—incapable as we are of desiring it by ourselves. This is the principle of “mimetic desire” masterfully analyzed by René Girard.⁵³

To conclude, what we can say about the imaginary of luxury brands is that everything possible is done to escape the dictatorship of the customer, to the point of overturning it in favor of luxury's own dictatorship. Luxury's imaginary realm is essentially about sovereignty and power, power exercised in a space set apart (the island), inaccessible to the uninitiated, and governed by a divine power (the “creator”), who reigns there as an absolute master (the eye, the hand). The least that can be said is that this imaginary schema is by nature not very compatible with commercial enterprises, and, more profoundly, that it collides frontally with the logic of human communication.

Summary

Classical and modern luxury could adopt the Colbert Committee's motto as their own: their project on the whole is indeed to create, to excel, and to amaze—and they often succeed in doing this.

Contemporary luxury also aims to create, but it is less concerned with technical excellence, even though it is capable of displaying such excellence on occasion. And it seeks less to amaze than to impress. Finally, and more clearly than its predecessors, it also wants to sell.

But luxury also has another underlying project, one that's unacknowledged and that can be spotted only by examining its imagery and symbolism: the aim of creating a world apart, a tailor-made universe where its power can be freely exercised—a power of influence, a power of attraction, and, on an even deeper level, a spiritual power.

The Relations Pole

It is impossible to communicate with others without establishing a certain type of relationship, and it is impossible for this relationship to be neutral. As soon as we come into contact with someone or something, we “color” the experience in a positive or negative light.

Every communicative phenomenon is consciously or unconsciously given an affective coloring. There are never any perfectly neutral exchanges between human beings, whether we’re talking about professional, personal, or commercial exchanges. The ideal of objectivity is nothing but a fantasy, once human beings come into the picture. Only machines communicate among themselves without effect—and it’s actually false to say that they communicate: they exchange information. As for people, for better or worse they cannot do without emotions. They can try to control them when it’s necessary, but they cannot eliminate them.

In the case of luxury, this observation has paradoxical consequences. From a commercial point of view, a brand obviously cannot allow itself to play on the whole scale of emotions: only the “positive” emotional spectrum is possible. Once the relationship starts to cool off, to become distant or even just indifferent, the brand is in danger.

But not in luxury, where there is a curious bifurcation between the quest for emotion via the product and its environment, and a certain distance with regard to the customer.

First of all, the quest for emotion: of all economic sectors, luxury (above all classical and modern luxury) is the one that plays on our emotions the most. “Emotion” must be the word that comes up most often in its vocabulary, along with “dream,” perhaps. There isn’t a single book on the subject—apart from scholarly books, but, as we’ve seen, they are excluded from luxury houses’ field of vision—that doesn’t give it pride of place.

What kind of emotion are we dealing with? Principally admiration—the admiration that is implicit in the project of “amazement” that we discussed above. But a kind of admiration that can be felt physically: there are women who claimed to weep at such and such an Yves Saint Laurent runway show, and they were sincere. James Twitchell evokes a passage from *The Great Gatsby* in which Daisy

starts sobbing at the sight of a mountain of shirts, each more beautiful than the last, that *Gatsby* is unfolding, throwing in the air, and piling up in front of her.⁵⁴ There are surely other reasons why Daisy starts crying at that particular moment, but what is important is the reaction, the physical emotion that is apparently triggered by the sight and the accumulation of luxury objects. The author links this emotion with another well-known syndrome, the Stendhal syndrome, which afflicts some visitors to Italian museums and triggers heart palpitations and dizziness in front of the paintings.

It's an interesting analogy: it unveils yet again the kinship that unites luxury and art. And it is true, as we've seen, that there is an aesthetic intention behind most luxury objects. There is a leap, not to say an immense chasm, from this, to talking about Leonardo da Vinci every time a designer picks up his scissors; but it is undeniable that designers, jewelers, or glassmakers have the intention of creating "beautiful" objects. It matters little whether that intention meets with the public's approval or not: even if the finished object appears ugly to some, and this can happen, the aesthetic intention is there, and it is an integral part of the luxury object. Now, what is aesthetics? The science or the feeling of the beautiful, yes—on condition that we remember that the word, which is of Greek origin, comes from the verb "to feel." The idea is to make the person who is looking at something beautiful experience a feeling. Aesthetics means triggering an emotion, a feeling, some kind of turmoil, a shock.

Do only luxury objects trigger emotions? No, of course not. But it is their acknowledged aim, their project, whereas the emotion that, for example, a humble piece of pottery or ethnic jewelry might trigger has other sources: the person who made them wasn't seeking to arouse that emotion.

Does only classical luxury trigger emotions? No, that's not true either. Aficionados of Richard Mille watches, a brand born in 1999, have a tremor in their voices when they explain how they chose one or another of his models. Aficionados of Ferragamo recount, with a sort of devotion, the Florentine shoemaker's saga, while devotees of Poiray (born in 1972) are no less enthusiastic.

But classical and modern luxury, without really daring to come right out and say it, think that the emotions that they trigger are of superior quality, because they are nourished by culture

and traditions. Indeed, one of these emotions is nostalgia for the ancient traditions and gestures of artistic trades that we know are threatened by extinction.

However, the quest for emotion, especially in classical luxury, is accompanied by paradoxical behaviors. For emotion brings people closer, connects them, unites them—whereas classical luxury always keeps its distance. Whatever its seduction tactics may be, it maintains a rather solemn and serious air. One shouldn't joke about such a precious heritage, about immemorial traditions and very high-quality craftsmanship. Humor and classical luxury don't go well together. It's true that humor assumes a critical gaze, and luxury won't tolerate that.

Modern luxury, for its part, is sometimes serious and sometimes playful. When it wants to be humorous, it plays with the product and its environment: this, for example, is the case with certain particularly wild high-fashion collections, or of some—no less wild—advertising or editorial images, which are presented as “funny.” Vuitton, as well as Marc Jacobs, have made a specialty out of this.

Just like classical luxury, contemporary luxury can be serious. It sometimes partially plays the humor card (Nespresso's George Clooney campaign in Europe is an example of this), but its relations with the consumer are often rather cold. This is essentially due to the often empty décor in which they take place, but also to the spartan quality of the packaging and store displays, as well as the minimalism of some of the products. As for the emotion—admiration, amazement, nostalgia for origins—that so utterly dominates classical and modern luxury, it is, as has been said, less apparent in contemporary luxury. Not that it doesn't exist, but, on the one hand, it's less demonstrative, and, on the other, it's more diluted, more diffuse, because it is not entirely concentrated in the encounter with an object. It is born instead of a feeling of harmony with the universe in which the object has been placed, whether this universe is the context of a boutique or an advertising image.

By comparison with contemporary luxury, which produces tempered emotions and rather cold relations, can't we at least say of classical luxury that it produces warmer and more sensual relations? Yes, in appearance—but they are nevertheless distant, which is what gives them their eminently contradictory character. The softer appearance of the stores, the plushness of the carpets, the

sensuality of leathers and woods, the low lighting—all of this is opposed by the stiff welcome, the formality of behavior, and the constant and oppressive impression of being under surveillance.

What is really going on?

What is really going on is that the fundamental relationship of luxury brands with their customers is established under the paradoxical sign of difficult accessibility.⁵⁵ For instead of seeking the largest possible distribution, luxury brands restrict distribution, or pretend to do so. Instead of going toward the customer (except of course in hyper-luxury), they oblige the customer to come toward the luxury products. And once the customer gets close, they don't make his or her task easy.

This phenomenon can be confirmed in all the dimensions of luxury brands, not only in store displays. The information concerning these various dimensions is rare and highly filtered. It's a secret world where transparency is frowned upon. Except for the companies traded on the stock exchange, figures are given with an eyedropper or not at all, and they can't always be checked. Generally speaking, there's a policy of what is known as "foggy accounting practices."

Another example: mass-market consumer brands are increasingly developing what's called industrial tourism, which consists of opening factory doors to show the public how products are made. Luxury brands are less hospitable. The doors of their workshops open up a crack sometimes, as was the case during the visiting days organized by Vuitton at some of its workshops in 2011 and 2013. Generally, the doors of their factories are rarely opened for the public. Some of the workshops are purely for show, intended to maintain the illusion of manual labor while most of the production is done in the factory—this isn't so much holding back information as active disinformation. But other workshops remain quite simply inaccessible, sometimes for security reasons, sometimes to protect manufacturing secrets, and, in a general way, out of pure and simple reluctance or inability to communicate. There is an utter and acknowledged contradiction between the glorification of the work from which a product derives most of its value and the reluctance to show or explain that work. Most of the time, luxury has to be taken at its word when it states that it possesses the best manufacturing methods. This is information to which the public

doesn't have access, and is true for contemporary brands and for older brands, for European brands and American brands.

Luxury boutiques are no less difficult to access. Some are quite simply closed: you have to ring the doorbell to be admitted. Others are situated on the second floor, without any window displays, and one must be invited to gain admission. Others limit the number of visitors, creating long lines on the sidewalk. Sometimes security guards who are anything but affable are positioned at the entrance, which hardly makes the prospect of going inside inviting. Almost all of them are conceived to intimidate your average customer, which they manage to do without difficulty, either by being empty or by being overly full. Empty: the sales points of some contemporary luxury brands, which take the ideal of minimalism to an extreme such that even the customer feels like an unwanted addition to the décor, or lack thereof. Full (too full): certain stores that suffocate the customer with an abundance of woods, velvets, gilt frames, paintings, and flowers. And there are always salespeople who come between you and the product. Luxury is right to boast of doing this, since the salesperson *adds* something and participates in the pleasure of the purchase—at Hédiard, for example, by explaining where a certain pepper comes from, or how it was harvested or should be used, the food that it best complements, and so forth—but it's also one more obstacle that has to be surmounted to get to the product. Access is neither free nor direct. Studies have recently shown that the principal cause of online shopping's success is the desire to avoid all contact with the sales personnel in luxury boutiques,⁵⁶ and Clinique has capitalized on this by launching the Experience Bar, a self-service sales space tested at Bloomingdale's where customers are free to test all the brand's products without having to deal with salespeople, except when making their purchases.

The products themselves are hard to attain: there are few of them, they're produced in limited series or else as single, unique pieces, and you sometimes have to wait for them for months or even years. Moreover, mediators also help make luxury brands inaccessible: I'm borrowing the word from René Girard and his analyses of "triangular desire," which were discussed above. These mediators are represented by all the celebrities who embody the brand, even if only for one evening. The list is endless: the personalities to whom

Harry Winston lends jewels for a show-business ceremony in the United States (preferably the Oscars), the “dream team” assembled by L’Oréal at the Cannes Film Festival, Nicole Kidman for Omega and Chanel, Brad Pitt for Tag Heuer, and so on and so forth. As we’ve said: there is no intrinsic difference between Monica Bellucci embodying Dior cosmetics and the anonymous actress who eats Kellogg’s cornflakes in a television spot: the mechanism is exactly the same, it’s the mechanism of mimetic desire. The only thing that sticks out is that the distance between the public and Monica Bellucci is greater than the one between the public and the Kellogg’s actress. The whole task of luxury consists in working with this gap, in maintaining the greatest possible distance by choosing mediators who are themselves inaccessible by the mere fact of their celebrity, if not of their talent.

Another obstacle thwarts access to luxury brands and products, but it’s more subtle: cultural baggage. It’s lacking in many managers for reasons already mentioned, but it is also lacking in many customers. The cultural filter isn’t written down or made visible anywhere, but it is no less effective for all that and keeps a part of the public at a distance. It is based at once on basic cultural knowledge and on luxury culture, which makes a double social filter. This filter is a major factor in the “willingness to pay” discussed above, by injecting added value into an object which, without the cultural reference, would lose some of its allure. In order to fully appreciate a form as simple as that of the Trinity ring by Cartier, for example, you must know its history, its birthdate, the legend of Cocteau and Radiguet, the references to orthodox liturgy, and you have to ascribe a great deal of importance to all of that. Otherwise, all you see are three gold rings whose price is incomprehensible.

By the same token, a young couple putting together their wedding registry might deem Haviland’s famous table service decorated with Empress Eugenie parma violets “mediocre”; a model of Christofle tableware whose form, borrowed from the Renaissance, they don’t understand, “ugly”; and another model by Puiforcat, unable to make the connection between the simplicity of its lines and Art Deco style, “cafeteria-looking.”

Modern and contemporary luxury brands, for their part, interpose another cultural (and thus social) filter: the media. Without reading a certain number of magazines, without familiarity with

advertising, without the tabloid press, some products would be utterly deprived of meaning: Bottega Veneta's braided leather, for example. Part of the public wouldn't understand what was so interesting about it were it not for articles in the press explaining its origin and the way it's made, and keeping up its reputation. In the eyes of someone who had never read such articles, it could look like an extravagance lacking both interest and beauty. The objective value of black nylon Prada bags is extremely modest: its commercial value was entirely built up by the media—more precisely by a certain type of media, with which one must be familiar to acquire the knowledge of fashion and luxury without which a nylon backpack is nothing more than a nylon backpack.

And this is even truer on the Internet for the luxury sites that have succeeded in reversing the logic of the web to their advantage. This logic dictates—at least that's what is taught in seminars devoted to presenting information on the web—that, on the Internet, communication should be hierarchized in inverted pyramidal form: at the top, the essential and the immediately accessible. And, as you go down, what's less and less important. But, at Chanel,⁵⁷ and at Prada,⁵⁸ the true gems are found in the deepest layers of the site, not on the surface. At Dior, you can find them on the site dedicated to the Lady Dior saga, with films of high cinematographic quality and mysterious scripts, especially when David Lynch is the man behind the camera. At Vuitton, you have to go looking for exclusive, original creations of high artistic value in places other than on the main website,⁵⁹ and without always being very clearly guided. As for Hermès, it's an even more surprising case. Just as, as the slogan says, “a Hermès watch has all the time in the world,” so must one have a great deal of time on one's hands to enter a labyrinthine website that seeks to discourage hurried web surfers just as surely as the brand's stores seek to discourage the uninitiated. Despite its almost childlike graphics, it's a site for the initiated. Not only does it offer random itineraries, surprises, astonishing encounters, and revelations, but the navigational system itself expresses the brand's deep symbolism, namely the voyage.⁶⁰ This is a coded message, accessible only to those who are intimately familiar with the brand, whether or not they buy its products. Others will still appreciate the poetic whimsy of the site and its originality. There is nothing solemn or straitlaced about it: Hermès obeys neither the structures

of the web nor the codes of luxury, only its own (Hermès orange, the pocket square, the gift ribbon, the saddle stitch—all are there, but in a discreet way) while displaying a light touch unprecedented in a sector that usually takes itself very seriously indeed. At the same time, the commercial aspect of the site is not forgotten: links to the shopping site make it occasionally possible to turn to the act of buying. On the web, Hermès offers the best of “regular” luxury, Vuitton the best of “secular” luxury.⁶¹ Both work with the voyage theme, but it is not on the surface, for all to see, with suitcases and steamer trunks, that the essential is said or suggested: with Hermès it’s on a deep level, and with Vuitton it’s done laterally. In both cases, the web user must expend some effort to gain access to what the brand is offering in terms of true luxury—a luxury of meaning and wit. This effort creates a relationship of personal investment with the brand, which inspires something like the recognition owed to a patron or benefactor. Only a few luxury brands are capable of establishing this kind of relationship, which is unknown in the mass consumption sector.

To get a good understanding of what is at stake in the Relations Pole, the following rule must be recalled: all communication involves two aspects, *relation* and *content*, such that the first encompasses the second.

What do we see in luxury? A lot of focus on the content (the luxury object), a lot of distant relations (inaccessibility). A zoom in, and, at the same time, a zoom out: it’s a recipe guaranteed to give you blurred vision.

If relation encompasses content, it gives meaning to the content and not the reverse. Let’s beware: that means that the luxury object doesn’t have any meaning, or has little meaning by itself—it only acquires meaning in the relationship by which we enter into contact with it. In this sense, classical luxury, which is concentrated entirely on the object and is less intent on working on its relationships with customers, goes against the grain of communication logic. Contemporary luxury respects it a bit more, rebalancing relation and content by granting them the same importance, or even inverting them: this is what Ralph Lauren did with his stores. When you walk through them you receive a message that gives the products a meaning that they don’t always have on their own. This is particularly apparent when, by comparison, you go into a

Ralph Lauren outlet: since the décor is rudimentary, the products are reduced to what they are, sweaters, ties, striped shirts like you find anywhere, mere cloth pants. In a Ralph Lauren outlet store—and despite the lower than usual prices—only the memory of the brand’s universe, assuming it is sufficiently memorable, can work in favor of the products. Ralph Lauren works essentially on the customer’s relationship to the brand, the relationship you must pass through, like a wall of images, before reaching the products that the images have transformed.

Conversely, to attain a Kelly bag (the content), one must go through an obstacle course (the relation) during which you have to expend a lot of effort—go out, negotiate with the salesperson, wait for a long time, pay a lot of money—which places the consumer almost in the position of an applicant. At Hermès, this “relationship” has meaning because the brand is so strong that it transforms it into a sort of initiatory quest leading to the Holy Grail, or almost. But there are many cases in which you have to expend the same amount of effort without receiving the same reward, in which the relationship is sacrificed solely for the product’s benefit. And since the product is enveloped in the relationship, if the relationship is sacrificed, the product suffers. And that’s how you find yourself in front of a mere crystal vase (the content), gnawed at by the suspicion that, but for its name and price, there wouldn’t be anything extraordinary about it. In that case, why buy it?

A final point must be examined where the Relations Pole is concerned: the *alternative between play and ritual*. Indeed, all communication has the choice between one or the other formulae.

What happens in luxury?

There are examples of rituals: Rolex’s advertising campaigns, for example, which change little over the years, introducing either the product in close-up or portraits of the artistic and athletic celebrities associated with Rolex.

There are examples of play (not only in the playful but also in the mechanical sense) when an established code is subverted: for example, when Yves Saint Laurent abandons the rich imaginary world of his Opium or Paris perfumes for fashionable advertising photos that are aesthetically very bland.

However, as a general rule, there are many more examples of ritual than of play in luxury. Is this because of luxury’s secret ties

to the sacred? Or its conservative tendencies, which are even visible in contemporary luxury? Whatever the cause, rituals are legion, beginning with the fashion show ritual, in high fashion and in ready-to-wear, but also in cosmetics, ever since Estée Lauder had the idea of transposing the seasonal collection concept to makeup in the 1960s. Estée Lauder is itself a very ritualized brand whose advertising language displays great stability as well as certain hieratic tendencies.

It isn't preferable to be playful rather than ritualistic, or the reverse, but it is good to alternate play and ritual phases so as to avoid falling into a rut. Luxury brands, however, have a tendency to establish rituals and then to remain stuck in them. For example, they rarely change "concepts," as if their identity were so fragile that it wouldn't be able to take a real transformation. They are often content to change in little ways: new décor here, a new product there, but always the same public relations campaigns, the same charitable donations, and rarely any spectacular innovations. Things change little, or very hesitantly; immobility, rather than movement, is the rule. Or, to be more precise, movement is ritualized: change occurs within a framework that doesn't change. Change happens because it has to, because the ritual is to change: in which case, play would consist in not changing—obviously not an option, since it's practically suicidal.

Chanel is a good example of a luxury brand that manages to change without changing, that is to say, to wager both on play and on ritual, alternating from era to era. In the 1980s, the brand did quite a lot of playing, especially in the publicity game, which consisted of "spectacularizing" its fashion shows with the highest-profile supermodels, the wildest music, the most improbable outfits, the most extravagant accessories. Ten years later, it had gone in the opposite direction, giving up these big displays and returning to intimate presentations in legendary spots like the Ritz or the Rue Cambon. And throughout the entire period, variations on the famous skirt suit continued, season after season: the skirt suit is part of the ritual, the variations are the play. Since then, the scale has been tipping in the other direction, toward shows with lots of pomp and circumstance. At Chanel, play has been ritualized.

Ritual works in favor of order, says Georges Balandier.⁶² It imposes conformity on a certain portrayal of the world and fits

into the dominant cultural conventions. It requires belief. This is exactly the case with luxury, which is conservative in its essence. So conservative, in fact, that it leaves little room for new brands to emerge, and when one arrives—De Grisogono, for example—it immediately adopts the dominant classical codes, which is to say the prevailing rituals.

The underlying logic of this state of affairs is understandable: ritual is reassuring, whereas play stands out and is sometimes upsetting. Moreover, leaders have a tendency to embrace ritual: by doing the same thing, they aim for the same success. Only a new arrival might possibly gain from adopting a strategy of play. In other markets there often isn't any other choice, as when Apple appeared on the scene in the IT sector. But, in luxury, the weight of habits is such that adopting the current ritual often prevails: it is very difficult to escape it when entering—for example—the world of fashion or design.

Contemporary luxury has also been reproducing the same formula for the last thirty years: it disrupted the conventions at the beginning and introduced some play into the ritual of classical and modern luxury, but once it had established new conventions, they didn't budge, and those who—like Ferragamo—have joined contemporary luxury adopt those conventions in turn without changing a thing. This is a sign that they will eventually be threatened with fossilization and that, sooner or later, a new playfulness will wreak havoc with this very (too) well-oiled ritual.

Summary

The Relations Pole, in luxury, displays certain characteristic traits: first and foremost among them the quest for a strong emotional relationship, created initially by the products and then by their environment.

But this quest for emotion is paradoxically accompanied by a deliberate distancing: luxury runs both hot and cold. Even if it doesn't knowingly seek inaccessibility, it still gives the impression of being inaccessible: everything seems to be out of reach or difficult to attain—the information, the boutiques, the products, and, of course, the prices.

Let's also note that in luxury, and, above all, in classical luxury, instead of the relationship encompassing the content and giving it

meaning, the content (the product) is frequently put out there on its own. The relationship with the consumer, which should serve as an intermediary with the products, is given a very conventional and rather distant tenor—when it is paid any attention at all. In other words, while the richest customers are fawned over, the rest must go to a lot of effort to gain access to the products that interest them.

A final point: luxury, instead of alternating between play and ritual as in all communication, has a tendency to throw itself off balance by using a lot more ritual than play. Its conservative tendencies come to the fore rather clearly here, and are visible even in contemporary luxury, foretelling, in the short term, a swing of the pendulum in the other direction, toward play—that is to say, toward the emergence of new formulae and new codes, in the absence of which luxury will risk becoming stodgy and predictable.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Can we get a glimpse of the direction luxury will take in the future?

The attempt, as we've already seen above, is extremely perilous. The most we can do is outline a few sketchy reflections, in light of what is already observable, using the seven poles of the fingerprint method.

With regard to the first, the *Physical Pole*, let us recall that, for classical and modern luxury, it is embodied in the luxury object itself and its environment and, for contemporary luxury, in the object as highlighted by the media. The evolution from one to the other bears the mark of a certain dematerialization of luxury. Will this trend continue? In part, probably: in addition to the *objects* themselves, we'll witness—we're already witnessing—the increasing development of luxury *services*.

Tomorrow's luxury will be less material, and the trend is already well underway in the West. That certainly doesn't mean that there will be less luxury commerce, but that the nature of that commerce will shift, in part, from objects to services—all the services capable of offering the citizens of the third millennium what they aspire to and are lacking. And rather than one more set of wine glasses or one more coat: it's what they're dreaming about—time,

particularly quality time, swaths of time in which to do what one wishes. Space, and space where something interesting, surprising, and diverting is going on. Well-being, order, harmony—all things that assume some kind of physical framework, but that are based on agreeable human relations. Simplicity, too, and on this issue we should believe what Tom Ford has to say: “Things that are complicated aren’t luxurious. An article of clothing that’s difficult to put on or take off isn’t luxury. Luxury, in the years to come, is going to become simpler.”⁶³

Simpler, and even radically different. For going a step higher on Maslow’s pyramid, transposed here from the hierarchy of needs to that of desires, we start seeing unprecedented illustrations of luxury’s dematerialization. We know that at the summit of the pyramid the quest for material possessions gives way to another quest, one for personal fulfillment. A bank focused on managing private estates drew the logical conclusion from this:⁶⁴ it chose to illustrate its advertising campaign with the image of a hiker who has reached the summit of a mountain. Under the image, the legend reads: “Luxury is no longer experienced in the same way.”

This may be where classical luxury will have to make up the most time, or where it will have the most trouble adjusting to its customers’ new range of demands. Hermès sensed that this was the case and gave up on a planned alliance in the tourism sector because it was difficult to ensure quality of services on a par with Hermès’s reputation. This is the same difficulty encountered by the after-sales service of a major jeweler on the Rue de la Paix and by the ready-to-wear boutique of a major fashion designer on the Avenue Montaigne, if I am to believe the inquiry cited in the Introduction.

One thing is sure, in any event: to the artisan’s craft (classical luxury), the creator’s craft (modern luxury), and the image maker’s craft (contemporary luxury) we will inevitably have to add the service provider’s craft, which already exists in the restaurant and hotel industries.

As far as the *Temporal Pole* is concerned, we have seen that classical and contemporary luxury are opposed, in that the former’s present derives its legitimacy from the past, while the latter’s present derives its legitimacy from itself, and from a radical break with the past.

It is possible that a reconciliation of the two will characterize the luxury of the future. Here again, Ralph Lauren's case offers a pretty good idea of what the enterprise might look like. Indeed, it can almost be qualified as postmodern in the sense architecture gives to the word. A good example of postmodern architecture is when a contemporary building, instead of displaying a "classically" modern covering of glass, flat façades, gray concrete, and rectilinear forms, plays with an older vocabulary and mixes genres: columns, pediments, pilasters, and ellipses, in a mishmash where historical allusions and the play of colors and materials are unabashedly deployed. Contrary to its classical and modern elders, postmodern architecture isn't worried about lasting, it just wants to present a playful décor that can be taken down like a film set and replaced by another.

What has Ralph Lauren done? Exactly the same thing. The décor of his stores has never claimed to be authentic: authenticity isn't a postmodern value. Besides, the clothing sold in his boutiques doesn't ape the past, it proudly proclaims its modernity. Here we're in a theatrical or cinematic set. On the other side of the door, in the street, there are cars, and behind the counter there are computers. It's just a game—and nothing more than a game, but life-sized and carefully crafted down to the last detail—that consists of reconstituting an old décor as we imagine it today. The past and the present blend together, and it's the mixture of the two that visitors appreciate.

It is possible that tomorrow's luxury—even contemporary luxury, which sometimes takes a radical approach to emptying space of all historical signs—will embrace the kinds of temporal mixtures that give visitors the twofold pleasure of an unapologetic present and a recomposed past.

As for the third pole, the *Spatial Pole*, it will definitely play a crucial role, precisely because it is what makes the brand's self-dramatization possible.

But these brands will probably have to face a new challenge: the challenge of personalizing sales points. Here classical luxury will be ahead of the game, inasmuch as it won't have fallen into the trap of wholesale uniformization. Luxury houses that have struggled against impersonality will make out better than those which, in the name of sacrosanct and sometimes dangerous "consistency," have gone in the direction of overly standardized sales points. Inside

those sales points, the products themselves will have to signal that the space where they're displayed is unique.

For what is at stake here is a criterion for judging luxury that is becoming dulled: its exclusivity. In all the polls conducted on the perception of luxury, you hear it said again and again that what characterizes luxury is that it produces unique objects. The public has completely internalized what luxury has to say about this subject. And it recites its lesson very well: the archetype of the luxury object is unique because it is handmade and produced in very small quantities, sometimes only a single copy. This is no longer true, except for a vanishingly small number of pieces, which are increasingly expensive and out of reach, but the myth persists.

To keep it alive luxury's spaces would have to avoid all looking alike. You would have to have the impression—or at least the illusion—that the product being purchased really is exclusive. But when you see that all the boutiques are the same, right down to the bouquets of flowers, in Rome, New York, and Tokyo, you don't have that impression at all.

The luxury space of the future will thus probably (and this is already the case for some) be made up of places that have become unique once more because of their décor and selection. They can't remain the same all over the world unless they're counting on a local clientele that doesn't make comparisons with what's going on in other countries. If their clientele is truly international, it will become increasingly weary of finding the same displays and the same décors wherever it goes. And the system of industrial standardization, which is at work behind this uniformity, will become so obvious that luxury will risk gradually losing its luxurious—that is to say, its exclusive—quality.

The fourth pole: the *Norms Pole*. It is impossible by definition to guess what the norms of tomorrow's luxury will be like, and there is a simple reason for this. We have seen that there are only three possibilities: respect for the norm, transgression of the norm, creation of a new norm. To tell the truth, there are only two, because transgressing a norm often means creating a new one. By transgressing the codes of classical luxury, contemporary luxury paved the way for a new kind of luxury.

As long as one is only dealing with two or three generations of customers, the pattern of swerves from the norm is easy to

anticipate. It was logical that an ostentatious form of luxury should supplant an interiorized, almost invisible luxury. It was equally logical that a luxury of artisanal origin should be supplanted by industrial luxury, even if the latter doesn't advertise its industrial nature. But who can say what will come after industrial luxury? And after the swing of the pendulum that positioned contemporary luxury at opposite poles from classical luxury, are we going to come back to an ostentatious kind of luxury? Should we imagine a seesaw movement, alternating between the two poles, or the coexistence of the two?

I'm inclined to opt for the second solution, given that there is no sign on the horizon of any economic model radically different from our own, that seems to be taking hold all over the planet. Certain areas of the world (the richest Arab countries) and some consumer profiles (the new Russian, Chinese, Indian, and Brazilian millionaires) seem more drawn to ostentatious luxury, while others (in Europe and the United States) prefer a more sober kind of luxury.

In these conditions, only a market research study would be capable of mapping out the broad outlines of the luxury profile of the future: by definition, if there are new norms, they are undetectable. Until Apple, in IT, introduced the idea of individual computers for everyone, the norm was computers for professional use. Until Armani, at the high end of the market, and Gap, for the mass market, provided another option, people in the United States dressed either too formally or too informally. Until Nike and Reebok came along, nobody wore sneakers out on the town. But five years before the emergence of Apple, Gap, and Nike, nobody would have been able to see them coming. By definition, the emergence of a new norm is unpredictable. All that we can say is that when two strong tendencies are in opposition, there usually follows a period of reconciliation, or at least of more or less peaceful coexistence between them.

The *Positions Pole* is also very hard to imagine. However, we know that positions will be either symmetrical or complementary or a combination of the two.

Classical luxury adopts a posture of superiority—which is to say complementary—and we've seen that it's a superiority that's "legitimized" by the age of the traditions it upholds. Contemporary luxury displays a blend of symmetrical (presenting itself as a reflection of its customers by adopting a modern attitude) and

complementary positions (adopting the codes of classical luxury and keeping consumers at a distance with—among other things—the way its stores are conceived). But it displays a certain imbalance, in the sense that its position of superiority isn't built on anything but itself, whereas classical luxury's superiority, however one feels about it, is based on a generally accepted value—tradition. You can reject tradition, fight against it—which is what contemporary luxury does—on condition that you replace it with another strong value—and this contemporary luxury does not do.

One hypothesis concerning the type of position that tomorrow's luxury may adopt is that it will want to satisfy a need that's increasingly manifest among consumers: the desire to be told beautiful stories. That desire can be seen all over the place, even in the humblest products—eggs, for example. There's nothing about eggs that seems particularly likely to inspire the imagination. But if someone tells you that they come from chickens raised in the open air, chickens that feed on grain which is scattered in the barnyard, in the old-fashioned way, you listen to the story, you see the egg in a new light, and you agree to pay more for it.⁶⁵

The classical luxury houses, in particular the European ones, are ahead of the game in this respect. They can back up the stories they tell—at least, those brands that can really keep doing what they say they're doing and work by hand, at least partially, using ancestral methods. Or the ones that rely on an ancient industrial tradition, like makers of porcelain and crystal. Marvelous stories abound in these houses—just think of the adventures of Veuve Clicquot or Charles Heidsieck—and it is easy to use them, provided one gets over one's prudishness and agrees to tell them with up-to-date methods, as Hennessy has done. Many sectors are aware that they're already caught up willy-nilly in the logic of entertainment and storytelling. This logic is also very likely to take hold in luxury, which will, nevertheless, remain free to apply it according to its own rules.

The Projects Pole, where the luxury of tomorrow is concerned, is just as hard to predict as the others, but one thing is sure: innovation will have to occur, and not just product innovation.

We've already seen that services will probably occupy an increasingly important position: this is where brands will have to use their imaginations and—yes—listen to their customers.

Classical luxury is not exactly thrilled by this prospect, nor is modern luxury, as both are convinced that listening to the customer is good for mass-market products but not for the luxury universe. Both claim—just like Bernard Arnault in each and every interview—that market studies aren't really good for much at all and can, at most, be used as a safeguard to make sure everything fits together in a product launch for a new perfume, for example—that is to say, precisely in cases where luxury comes closest to the mass-consumer market.

It is quite true that no test can ever say if such and such a project will be successful or not—but this is just as true in the mass market as in luxury. Nor can any study reveal what the consumer wants, because, as Terence Conran often says, people don't know what they want until someone offers it to them. What this means is that we shouldn't ask more of classic qualitative studies than they can give—but they can give a lot: neither Giorgio Armani (perfumes) nor Chanel (the launch of Allure) can say otherwise. But there are different ways of making use of studies. Generally speaking, in luxury and elsewhere, they're used very badly: the ones who commission them don't attend the focus groups, don't hear what their customers are saying, lend only half an ear to the conclusions, and take away only what suits them. No surprise, then, that these studies are treated dismissively.

Of course, nobody can tell a creator what he (or she) should invent. If he is trying to be in harmony with his era, he'll know instinctively what to do. If this is not the case, this means he's developing a style, and he doesn't need advice for this either. Yves Saint Laurent was instinctively modern before becoming classical, and he never needed to conduct any opinion polls. But when you're thinking about what services to invent rather than working on an article of clothing or an object it's quite a different matter. We have seen that, in all probability, services are an area of exploration for the luxury of the future. And to conduct this exploration tools will be needed. Forecast studies are there for just such purposes. They're not (or not only) qualitative studies based on group meetings but reasoned analyses of what can be expected in the near future. They don't replace reflecting and innovating, they just serve as a trampoline for the imagination. Let's wager that tomorrow's luxury won't have the same misgivings about them as its

predecessors did, and that it will use them as a means of carrying out its plans for innovation.

As for the seventh pole, the *Relations Pole*, it may be the one to undergo the greatest number of changes.

Let's remember what relations are like for classical and contemporary luxury: for the first, they're paradoxical, hot and cold. Hot: the sensuality of the objects, which bear the trace of the maker's hand, and the sensuality of the stores (even modern luxury boutiques often give pride of place to wood, cloth, soft lighting). Cold: the arrogance of the salespeople, the doorbells and security guards that prevent direct access to the boutiques, the high prices. Nonetheless, what predominates is the quest for emotion, whether admiration, amazement, nostalgia, or aesthetic feeling.

For contemporary luxury, the cold sensation predominates, as we've seen. Relations produce serenity rather than ecstasy, they're more global and don't stem exclusively from contemplation of an object.

What can be deduced from this for the relational pole of tomorrow's luxury?

That, by definition, it too will have to solve the proximity-distance equation—in other words, the problem of the “*écart*,” the swerve. The solution found by classical luxury of the French type wouldn't be bad, with its twofold hot-cold makeup, if ways of thinking in luxury circles enable the sales personnel to better adjust their attitude toward the customers. The little inquiry I undertook when preparing to write this book, which I said something about in the Introduction, shows that this isn't yet the case. Of course, I'm not confusing what I did with a formal study, but I'm still impressed by the number of grievances I heard—several of them concerning the same jeweler on the Rue de la Paix. The problem may be limited to France: the impression one gets from frequenting a given brand's store in Paris may be completely different from the one gained by the same brand in Tokyo, where the locally recruited personnel conform to a tradition of politeness and an infinitely more civilized way of interacting with customers. Unfortunately, it's not only in luxury that you encounter this kind of problem—but if there's one sector where it's even less tolerable than it would be elsewhere, it's definitely the luxury sector.

Apart from the thorny question of relations in the luxury universe there is also the question of personalization. It's a profound trend and there's no reason to believe that it's going to weaken any time soon. It can be done via the product, of course, which is the easiest method: you can get your initials engraved on a Baccarat vase, on the leather of a Loewe briefcase, or you can have the pattern of your choice on the back of a Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso watch. You can also ask that the engineer who assembled a special order for you at Vertu sign the requested telephone by hand with an electronic pencil. Or you can even request that Jean-Claude Biver himself sign your Hublot watch's five-year guarantee.

But personalization has even more meaning when it concerns a person rather than an object. Receiving a telephone call from the Gucci salesperson who took care of you and who tells you about private sales or invites you to a cocktail party for the new collection is a kind of personalization that's simple, well understood, and within the reach of many brands today. The day the phone call announces the arrival of a purse that goes perfectly with the outfit that you bought two years earlier will be even better. There's nothing magic about it—it's just a question of handling customer files. The examples are almost infinitely various, and little by little they're trickling down from the fashion houses to most luxury brands.

Finally, a last point: the relational system of tomorrow's luxury will probably aim at more authenticity. In the West, the excesses of marketing will soon reach their limits, not only in terms of quantity (advertising blitzes belong to the prehistory of marketing), but also in terms of quality and content.

It will no longer be possible to try to convince people that such and such a luxury brand is still using artisanal methods if we learn via social networks that a silver cutlery set given as a wedding gift was made in a Chinese factory and not in the UK or Germany. Casting a veil of silence over one's real manufacturing methods, and tracing on this veil a deceptive story about craftsmen using ancestral methods, is one of those sleight-of-hand tricks whose days are numbered because certain customers desire authenticity. This desire can push them to pay more when they're sure they're being told the truth, but if they have cause for doubt—and some luxury houses give them cause for doubt without even realizing it—they abstain from buying. And when they abstain, they do so for a long time. Everyone

knows that there is nothing more difficult than bringing back a disappointed customer—or, worse still, one who feels deceived.

THE SLIDER CONSOLE

We could content ourselves with examining a given brand and looking at each of its seven poles. However, we wouldn't end up with anything but rather flat descriptions without much operational use, in the sense that they would scarcely enable us to know how and where to act to improve the brand's performance. What's more, would we have a clearer idea of whether we were dealing with a luxury brand or not?

For example, is Clinique a luxury brand? In focus groups the answers to this question are all over the place. For some, yes, without a doubt. Others aren't so sure, and the variety of responses doesn't correlate with the nationality, age, or purchasing power of the respondents. If we look at the seven poles of the fingerprint method, they don't really tell us a whole lot more, because from the outside you get the impression that:

- At the Physical Pole, there is not excessive emphasis placed on the way products are made: the manufacturing quality is guaranteed, but the raw materials are neither rare nor expensive. On the other hand, the products play a leading role: they're all you see in the advertisements.
- At the Temporal Pole, there aren't any roots in the past: the brand floats in an "abstract" present that verges on atemporality.
- At the Spatial Pole, the quality of the product staging is inconsistent: everything depends on the place where you buy, on whether it's a big, noisy, crowded store, a more intimate perfume boutique, or a website, and so forth. The brand's space isn't concentrated in a unique, specific place, it's dispersed, disparate. The subtext, of course, is the very specific image evoking a clinic that is a part of that space.
- At the Norms Pole, the quality norm is obviously respected, and, in accord with contemporary luxury, the advertising norm of minimalism is taken to extremes. The prestige norm, on the other hand, isn't very apparent.

- At the Positions Pole, there is no claim of superiority, except perhaps in the assertion of quasi-medical competency implied by the name “Clinique” and the advertising approach that consists of showing the raw product so close up and in such a minimalist way that it seems to be self-contained and self-sufficient.
- At the Projects Pole, the threefold aim of luxury (to create, to excel, to amaze) doesn’t apply to Clinique—which is logical for a contemporary brand. The aim of efficiency and innovation suits it better, but images of sovereignty are absent (unless you think the brand’s regal nature is expressed by the majestic presentation of the products in its advertising).
- Finally, at the Relations Pole, we find the chilliness that characterizes contemporary luxury, as well as the propensity for ritual (which is extremely visible in the advertisements, as they never stray from an immutable script) rather than play (Clinique is anything but a playful brand), but there is neither emotion nor inaccessibility. And all of this is consistent with the image of the clinic.

So it’s impossible in Clinique’s case to decide whether or not it’s a luxury brand. The answers are contradictory and, without going ahead and conducting a study on the spot, we can’t come to any conclusions: we would have to know a lot more about the way the brand is perceived in various countries.

Or else we need a more flexible and adjustable system than the mere enumeration of the seven poles of a luxury brand.

What to do?

This may be the moment to recall what was said in the first part of this book: *luxury is a swerve, a gap*, and it presumes distance. There must be a way of measuring that swerve, that distance, for the seven poles above.

A slider console would make it possible to do so. Applied to each of the seven poles, it would be possible to tell just how big a swerve the brand accomplishes. If the distance is minimal, it’s not luxury. If it’s big, it’s high end. If it’s maximal, it’s luxury.

For example, for the first of the seven poles, the mere fact of using expensive or rare raw materials (like cashmere) isn’t enough to make a brand a luxury brand if the design and the manufacturing quality and “staging” aren’t up to standard. You can find

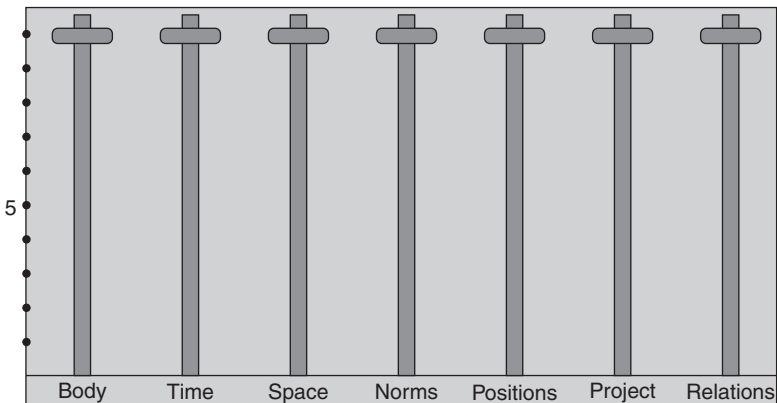
cashmere sweaters at any old department store, but they're not luxury products, just products that are more expensive than their counterparts and thought to have greater prestige, but not very good quality (the sweaters in question are hung on plastic hangers or put on shelves where everyone touches them as they go by, the cut is off, the finishing touches too, the range of colors is very limited, they're not well assembled, and they also pull as quickly if not more quickly than ordinary or synthetic wool).

A slider at the Physical Pole would make it possible to confirm this at once. The average department store slider would remain at the bottom of the console. The slider of Pringle or another good cashmere brand would immediately rise much higher.

Here's the slider console for Cartier (Figure 4): the distance is maximal, each slider is pushed up as high as it can go.

Would we have ended up with exactly the same pattern for the Cartier Must series when it was launched in the 1970s? It's unlikely. The sliders of the Physical Pole (because of the simpler way the products were made) and the Relations Pole in particular would descend. Gold is not an extremely rare or an extremely expensive raw material, the manufacturing quality of the Must series obviously isn't at the same level as that of craftsman jewelry, nor are the price levels, and the quality of the product's staging, as well as of the human interaction (the Relations Pole) depends

FIGURE 4 | Slider Console for Cartier



on the sales point: the same product isn't highlighted in the same way in a Cartier boutique as it is in a jewelry store in the provinces, even if that store is an authorized retailer.

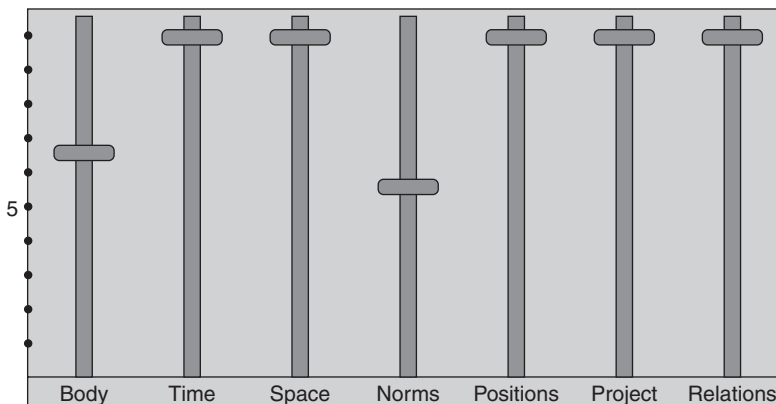
RALPH LAUREN: A LUXURY BRAND?

Using the slider console it becomes possible to answer the question: is Ralph Lauren a luxury brand?

Let's underscore once again that the answer must be sought not by comparison with its French competitors (which don't define themselves as such, because, from their point of view, they alone embody luxury and don't have any rivals except within their own "family") but in the public eye. What's more, as the public is international and diverse, the context of the answer has to be specified every time, because it will change and is only valid within a particular space and at a particular time. In this case, let's say that the answer holds in a European context at the beginning of the 21st century (see Figure 5).

- At the Physical Pole, the way the products are made is at a level similar to that of ready-to-wear brands that emerged from European high fashion, like Balenciaga or Burberry (we're

FIGURE 5 | Slider Console for Ralph Lauren



talking about Ralph Lauren not Polo): the materials and the manufacturing are of good but not exceptional quality.

- At the Spatial Pole, whether one likes the décor or not, a Ralph Lauren boutique is more “dramatic,” more heavily “staged” than a Balenciaga or Burberry boutique: there is greater attention to merchandising.
- At the Temporal Pole, we see two character traits that are specific to classical luxury: ancient roots (even if they’re fictional) and an aspiration to timelessness (Ralph Lauren has partially lost his image as a creator of fashion in the strict sense).
- At the Norms Pole, things are foggier: the quality norm is respected but isn’t taken as far as it can go, nor does it give rise to any feats of technical prowess or claims of adherence to artisanal traditions. The norm of ostentatiousness isn’t very visible in the products, with a few exceptions: the advertising norm doesn’t respect the minimalism typical of contemporary luxury. As for the prestige norm, it is respected but isn’t pushed to the max, at least not in Europe.
- At the Positions Pole, there is a position of superiority due to the more or less implicit evocation of WASP culture, which has been present in the brand’s background from the beginning.
- At the Projects Pole, Ralph Lauren has the same aims as modern and contemporary luxury (creating, lasting, selling) but, where the brand’s imagery and symbolism are concerned, even though there isn’t anything as explicit as the eye, hand, or island, the ambition to dominate and reign is clear: Ralph Lauren has created a world all his own, an extremely coherent universe in which the brand reigns supreme with its own vocabulary, codes, and symbols.
- Finally, at the Relations Pole, there is, in fact, a quest for emotion at the same time as distance. And ritual has precedence over play, or rather ritual within the game of historical reconstruction.

The conclusion? Ralph Lauren is indeed a luxury brand. The seven sliders are not all at the maximum setting, but they are all above the middle. The fact that the imaginary of Ralph Lauren is constructed through advertising and merchandising rather than through history

is of little importance: that imaginary, that symbolism, exists, it is strong, and it has meaning, which is all that counts in the public's eyes.

Obviously, the slider console changes over time. The intent to be creative (Projects Pole) was stronger in the past, when Ralph Lauren was referred to in the press as a "creator," and his ready-to-wear was the height of fashion. This is slightly less true today.

By the same token, the slider console varies within a single brand depending on where it is applied. Just as the slider console for the Must series can't be superimposed on Cartier's console, Polo's slider console isn't the same as Ralph Lauren's, nor is Opium's the same as the Yves Saint Laurent brand's as a whole, or No. 5's the same as Chanel's. The launch of CK One by Calvin Klein as well as the development of jeans and underwear caused all the sliders to descend (CK One's symbolism was powerful, but it wasn't luxury symbolism), whereas the brand's high-end ready-to-wear was, for a time, and, for some people, remains, part of the luxury universe.

Finally, it goes without saying that classical luxury, while it includes some brands whose sliders are all pushed to the maximum (Hermès is a good example), also includes many for which this isn't the case. Caron is a luxury brand whose sliders are positioned fairly low. Its status has been weakened by this, compared with the era when Narcisse Noir was one of the best creations in French perfumery. And the same disparities can be found in contemporary luxury: the sliders of a brand like Elie Saab don't have anything like the same configuration as those of Donna Karan.

In other words, the slider console doesn't favor one kind of luxury over another. It is transversal and can be applied whenever one wants to know if one is dealing with a luxury brand or not.

When the seven sliders are all as high as they can go, this indicates an ultra luxurious luxury brand.

When at least four of the seven sliders are as high as they can be, or when the seven sliders are above the middle, it's a luxury brand. Giorgio Armani is a luxury brand, as is Pomellato, although their configurations (the position of the sliders) don't resemble each other in the least.

Further, how can the slider console be used when one is in an unstable position or under threat, or when one is seeking to enter the "luxury" category?

If the first slider (the emphasis on the making of the products, at the Physical Pole) doesn't rise very high, the Positions or Projects sliders, which govern imagery and symbolism, can be activated—this is what perfume and cosmetics brands often do. If the brand is relatively accessible (Relations Pole, slider at the bottom), the brand can focus on the Norms Pole and work on the quality norm, the norm of ostentatiousness, and the prestige norm, making the corresponding slider go up.

The general principle of the slider console is flexibility, mobility: its positions can be continually modified. Its other advantage is that, just like luxury itself, the positions are relative to one another, on the one hand, and, on the other, relative to the average positions in a given category of products. As for how this average is established, one thing is certain: it cannot be determined from within the luxury trade, but rather from the vantage point of customers observing luxury from the outside. Those customers must thus be questioned to determine the average, and to realize that it can be as variable and prone to fluctuation as are their perceptions.

THE SUMMARY OF SUMMARIES

We can now respond point by point to the question of how one recognizes—or how one becomes—a luxury brand, revisiting each of the seven poles of the fingerprint method.

- At the Physical Pole the products play a dominant role, and the way they are made (rare or expensive raw materials and/or very high quality of handiwork/manufacture) is emphasized whenever possible.
- At the Temporal Pole luxury has a tendency to privilege timelessness, and classical luxury tends, besides, to anchor itself in the past.
- At the Spatial Pole there are various symbolic places (the workshop for classical and modern luxury, boutiques for everyone, and public, advertising, and digital space for contemporary luxury), but what they have in common is that they are all display spaces rather than spaces for human interaction.

- At the Norms Pole, there is the norm of implicitness (the “magic” of luxury cannot be explained), that of technical prowess, which guarantees a very high level of quality, the norm of ostentation, especially for classical luxury (classical luxury must be visible), and the norm of prestige for all kinds of luxury.
- At the Positions Pole, classical and modern luxury privilege positions of superiority, whereas contemporary luxury occasionally tends toward symmetrical positions. The establishment of ritual takes precedence over the tendency to play.
- At the Projects Pole, there is technical excellence, the quest to endure, but, above all, creation: explicitly, the creation of objects that possess a strong aesthetic intention; implicitly, the creation of a utopia, a world endowed with everything the human condition is lacking: perfection, immortality.
- At the Relations Pole, classical and modern luxury engage in a contradictory practice of arousing emotion while remaining inaccessible, whereas contemporary luxury tends toward a range of cool or chilly relations.

And to verify that these are indeed characteristics of luxury brands, nothing is more effective than comparing them with the characteristics of a mass-market consumer brand, for example Gap.

- Gap products also occupy an essential place in the brand’s life, but the way they are made (raw materials, manufacture) is not emphasized.
- Gap does not aim for timelessness: though it doesn’t take the route of the creators, the brand is embedded in the trends of fashion, in the present moment, and in a certain lifestyle.
- Gap stores are not spaces for displaying but spaces for selling. They are all over the place and easy to find, you go in and walk around freely. The products are within reach of the customers. The salespeople are selected to resemble them as much as possible and thus to make interaction with them easier.
- Gap cannot congratulate itself on any feats of technical prowess. The level of quality is average. The products are minimalist

and non-ostentatious. Buying them doesn't confer any prestige. There is no implicit "magic" in the brand, no unspoken charm that is supposed to explain the attraction it exerts.

- Gap's posture isn't a position of superiority but rather of symmetry: the brand offers products that everyone can wear on a daily basis and holds a faithful mirror up to the consumer as he or she is in reality, not an image of what the consumer could aspire to become.
- Gap's project is functional: it consists in offering a simple and comfortable wardrobe for everyone. It seeks neither to excel, nor to amaze, nor to create an ideal, utopian world, where mankind could attain perfection and immortality. This doesn't prevent it from promoting dress habits that indicate a certain kind of "philosophy."
- Gap's relations with its customers are direct. The brand is very accessible, whether in terms of price, products, or sales points. It may generate some kind of attachment, but it doesn't seek to arouse emotion.

The same exercise could be done—with some changes in detail—for all sorts of mass-market brands. Apart from a few minor differences, the same line of demarcation would emerge: there is thus every reason for believing that the characteristics enumerated earlier are indeed the ones that define luxury brands.

THE BRAND VALUE LADDER

In all sectors there exists an imaginary ladder of brand values, which is present in consumers' minds and which doesn't necessarily correspond to the scale of quality, prestige, and prices—even if it often does. Otherwise, luxury brands would always find themselves at the top of the ladder, whatever the sector under consideration.

But this isn't the case. Atop the ladder of car brands, for example, one is liable to find the Ferrari Testarossa, but also the Volkswagen Beetle in its vintage version. The top of the ladder is occupied by cult brands, and a cult brand isn't necessarily a luxury brand: Abercrombie & Fitch is one, for example, at least for the time being.⁶⁶ Conversely, a luxury brand doesn't automatically

become a cult brand, which is to say recognized as such by people who will never buy it.

From the customer's point of view, a brand's name and venerable age are not absolute values. Customers evaluate brands—all categories of brand, without distinction—according to other criteria, which, to simplify matters, can be reduced to two: notoriety and identity. I specify identity rather than image, because identity contains the notion of image but goes beyond it in depth and complexity.

Based on this observation, which is the result of attending dozens of meetings and focus groups where I saw all kinds of people in all sectors rank brands by order of preference, we can imagine the following ladder, which reads from bottom to top:

Cult Brand	Transcends all categories
Universal Brand	Universally embodies the category
Aspirational Brand	Helps the consumer to construct a more flattering self-image
Major Reference Brand	Constitutes a reference with respect to which other brands in the same category position themselves
Basic Brand	Identifies the product category to which it belongs

Considering all sectors, we can give examples of these brands, rung by rung:

Cult Brand	Chanel, Swatch
Universal Brand	Sony, Kodak, Levi's
Aspirational Brand	Max Mara, Audi
Major Reference Brand	Aveeno, Philadelphia
Basic Brand	Arrowhead, Weleda

Arrowhead spring water and Weleda cosmetics are basic brands because consumers know that they're a bottled water brand and a cosmetics brand but they don't know anything else much about them. Aveeno and Philadelphia are brands with a great deal of

notoriety in their respective sectors, recognized as major reference brands by consumers and by their competitors. Max Mara and Audi offer ready-to-wear or cars that the consumer aspires to purchase because these brands have a favorable image that will supposedly benefit them. Sony is synonymous with hi-fi and Levi's with blue jeans for just about everyone, even for people who don't buy them. As for Chanel or Swatch, they're cult brands for their loyal customers, that is to say the object of a kind of veneration that cannot be explained merely by the quality of their products. Cult brands are easy to spot: they are the ones that trigger irrational behaviors, behaviors that are usually reserved for political causes or religious convictions. We've yet to see anyone die for a brand, thank heavens, but we've seen tens of thousands march for Coca-Cola in 1985, when New Coke was launched, and we've seen people crying and putting flowers and candles in front of Apple stores when Steve Jobs died, and we remember that many Japanese high school girls in the 1990s were willing to prostitute themselves in order to buy Vuitton purses. All of these brands, and others, can be the object of a veneration that is expressed by various sacrifices and a psychological investment typical of cult phenomena. The sacrifices can be brief or lasting, and luxury has no monopoly over them.

Quite obviously it's better to be a major reference brand than a basic brand, an aspirational brand than a major reference brand, and so on. At the very bottom of the ladder (especially in our day and age), it's better to be a basic brand than nothing at all, in other words than to belong to the category of *commodities*, those products without an identity and with limited exchange value—no-name jeans, pots and pans sold at the open-air market, a pair of socks in a mail-order catalog.

Are the same categories valid in luxury?

Yes, of course. In luxury you also find the five categories of brand, for example by digging through the members of the Altgamma Foundation:⁶⁷

Cult Brand	Ferrari
Universal Brand	Gucci
Aspirational Brand	Ferragamo
Major Reference Brand	La Perla
Basic Brand	illy

Of course, a brand that's aspirational for one person will be a major reference brand for someone else—the positions vary with the country, the targeted consumer, and the era. As a general rule, luxury brands all claim to belong to the cult brand category. Goyard wants everyone to know that it's achieved cult status, but you can't declare yourself a cult brand, you become one despite yourself, as an unexpected bonus. To state that you are one authoritatively, even with good reasons for doing so, sounds like some sort of marketing strategy, which is a good thing when aiming for a new audience, but less good and less effective with regard to the most knowledgeable consumers.

You have to climb all the rungs to reach the top of the ladder: it can be done fast or slowly, but you can't skip a rung. Hermès began as a basic brand, one among the hundreds of saddlers that were proliferating in Paris at the beginning of the 19th century, and it took it some time to become a major reference brand. It was still a major reference brand in the 1930s, and at first only became an aspirational brand for a tiny fraction of the Parisian bourgeoisie, before expanding its customer base and becoming a cult brand.

I'd like to note a trait peculiar to the aspirational brand stage. There are two possibilities: the status brand and the banner brand.

The status brand is the one you gravitate toward when looking for a personal value upgrade. The banner brand tends instead to bring together consumers who adhere to certain collective values.

In the progression on the brand value ladder there is thus a bifurcation:

Cult Brand	
Universal Brand	
Aspirational Brand: Status Brand	Aspirational Brand: Banner Brand
Major Reference Brand	
Basic Brand	

Going back to the case of Gap: having emerged from the *commodities* category in the days of hippies and “flower power,” it was at first a basic brand and then a major reference brand in the distribution of blue jeans. In 1983, Gap decided to become the “Coca-Cola of

clothing” and didn’t skimp when it came to funding this ambition. It was a question of moving up a rung: the goal was to be achieved by following the itinerary on the right of the table and becoming a banner brand. This is a path that the brand didn’t have occasion to follow in Europe, where it arrived later, once it had already been transformed. But this transformation was accomplished in the name of values new to American ready-to-wear, which traditionally was split between sportswear and overly formal clothing. Gap waged a battle in favor of another way of dressing, in sync with the casual American mindset, but nevertheless chic in its very simplicity, a good balance between over- and underdressed. A whole series of advertising campaigns celebrated the new vision of laid-back, pared-down elegance, with celebrities—Ray Charles first and foremost among them—posing in simple white button-downs or immaculate T-shirts. A few years later, Gap was a universal brand, and it very nearly became a cult brand.

In luxury, things don’t happen quite like this. Contemporary luxury has a fairly easy time choosing between being a status brand and a banner brand. Status brand: Armani. Banner brand: Ralph Lauren. The latter’s WASP saga would be the best evidence of this, if there wasn’t already another, even more convincing proof: the donations that helped restore a historic American flag held at the Smithsonian National Museum.

However, each of these brands can lay claim to being both a status and a banner brand; this is a fusion that’s even more visible in classical luxury, where all brands claim to be status brands—they enhance the status of their buyers—and, at the same time, banner brands, in the sense that they all represent the defense of national values and traditions that it would be criminal not to seek to preserve at all costs. So not only does one gain personal prestige by buying a French (or English, or Italian) luxury item, but it’s almost a duty to do so if you want to protect vanishing artisanal practices. Here, status brand and banner brand are one and the same.

GOING UP AND DOWN

Moving up the ladder is the natural ambition of all brands, but staying put at the very top is impossible in the long run. The advantage

of going as high as possible, though, is that you're protected from falling back into the depths of the rankings if you hit a rough patch. But you're only protected up to a certain point.

Luxury brands demonstrate that this is so, just as other brands do. As long as they survive, the higher they go, the more likely it is that they will encounter turbulence or even go into free fall. But once again, there are no universal laws. Versace was briefly, if not a cult brand, at least a universal one. It remains a strongly aspirational brand, without falling back down—at least not yet—to the level of a major reference brand. Halston, on the other hand, which, for a while, was a very aspirational and almost universal brand, at least where its customer base was concerned, hasn't been either of these things for a long time, and is no longer even a major reference brand, except for those who are familiar with the history of fashion.

For all brands, and in all sectors, the question is the same: how can we climb up the value ladder? And, once we're up there, how can we be sure to stay? And given that it's impossible to remain there in the long run, how can we make it through rough patches, even periods of regression?

The long lifespan of classical luxury houses shouldn't lead us to believe that their history is one of immediate and constant triumph. Many of them—think of Valentino, Gucci, Château Margaux—oscillated back and forth between periods of success and periods of downturn, inactivity, and even turbulence. These didn't necessarily imperil their future, but today it's a different story, because competition has intensified and the frantic scramble for profits means that nobody can afford to be caught napping.

What should a brand do when it realizes that it's not where it needs to be on the brand value ladder to meet its objectives?

It should use the fingerprint method and analyze the position of its sliders on the seven poles outlined above. In all probability, one or more of them will not have been pushed as far as they could be. By activating them one can give the brand a boost and make it climb or re-climb the value ladder.

If, for example, the aesthetic intention (Projects Pole) is unnoticeable, it should be reactivated by focusing the brand's efforts on that particular point, just as Piper-Heidsieck did when commissioning Jean Paul Gaultier to create the red fishnet covering

for some of its bottles of champagne. Or Baccarat by soliciting the aid of creators like Andrée Putman and Ettore Sottsass.

Calling on a designer is a good way of injecting vitality back into a brand when its creativity seems to be slumbering. It makes it possible to push the sliders back up, and thus to move up a few notches on the brand value ladder. The one drawback is that everyone uses the same recipe, so its impact and effectiveness diminish as more and more brands jump on the bandwagon.

But, generally speaking, to conclude, the maneuver *always* consists in pushing up one or several of the seven sliders.

Which, when you're asked the question "How does one become a luxury brand?" amounts to saying: "By opening up a gap," (or creating an *'écart'*), in accordance with the founding principle of luxury as outlined in this book.

MARKETING AND LUXURY: THE BIG MISUNDERSTANDING

Marketing is the big bad wolf of classical luxury. Either you never encounter it or it causes fear. "If the management of a luxury house is handed over to marketing specialists, the day rapidly comes when everything stops," says Anne-Claire Taittinger-Bonnemaison, at Baccarat.⁶⁸ The result? If what people are saying is to be believed, nobody does marketing, or else they do it in such special ways that it's no longer exactly marketing. Besides, nobody even wants to speak the word out loud, and when they do it's with disdain.

But of course luxury brands do marketing, and fortunately for them! Marketing is nothing other than the rationalization of commercial practices. It's quite simply business, one of the oldest activities there is. Millions of merchants the world over have done business without having to learn marketing. And, naturally, luxury is among those merchants.

In 1921, nobody in France was talking about marketing yet: the word itself had only existed for three or four decades, and only in the United States. However, in Paris an extraordinary marketing operation was already taking place, before the word even existed for the French. It was signed Chanel, and it was the launch of No. 5. There is enough archival information for us to be able to reconstruct what happened with precision. Let's take

the four elements of the marketing mix: they were all used with great care and coherence. The product itself benefited from three advantages: an entirely new formula with an aldehyde base; a revolutionary name, since it made no attempt at poetry, something all perfumes did at the time, but contented itself with the Chanel name and a coolly enigmatic number; and a bottle that, with its sleek lines, also broke with the convoluted shapes of the perfumes then in fashion. Distribution was so selective that at first only a few lucky individuals received a bottle of the perfume as a gift—it was literally *priceless*—a bottle that for some time afterwards could only be purchased at 31 Rue Cambon in Paris. At first the only advertising was done by word of mouth (today we'd say “buzz marketing”).

“But it's never been done!” protested Ernest Beaux, the “nose” recruited by Gabrielle Chanel to create No. 5.

“Exactly,” she replied, “it will distinguish us from the others,”⁶⁹ showing that she understood the basis of brand logic perfectly, before everyone else.

Not only did Chanel already have a perfect mastery of marketing, but her brand logic was applied with rigor and soon extended to all of the signs that had become Chanel's distinctive traits: white camellias, the Byzantine cross, long pearl necklaces, the sailor hat, the tweed skirt suit, the silk blouse, velvet bows, black-tipped pumps.⁷⁰ And what were the millions later spent on supporting No. 5 if not what we'd call marketing expenses today? And the new range of colors authorized by Coco Chanel for clothing destined for the American market—what was this if not paying attention to the customers and adjusting to their desires, the same strategy recently applied by Armani, with the same intelligence and the same success?

At Hermès, where it's often repeated: “We don't do marketing,” what do you call what happened in the 1980s, when the brand underwent its great transformation, if not marketing, and good marketing? It was marketing that made and continues to maintain the success of the famous square silk scarf.⁷¹ Marketing, too, made the Kelly bag into a cult object, and the campaign had to be carried out very skillfully for its status as a very conventional bourgeois emblem to be forgotten and for it to be suddenly looked on with amorous eyes once more, without consideration for its form or function. Which is anything but functional, as anyone who

has tried to open it with one hand—the other one occupied by an umbrella or a dog leash—can attest.

Didn't it also take the help of some especially skillful marketing for Vuitton to recover the luster that it had, if not lost, at least allowed to fade over the years? And to convince generations of clients to pay dearly for a brown, rubberized fabric that doesn't have much going for it aesthetically, adorned, what's more, with initials that aren't even theirs? The most recent stars of the luxury universe are less apologetic in this regard than most of their elders: Pierre Hermé, whom the press quickly declared the "Mozart of pastry," unabashedly admits that he owes a good portion of his stunning success to having hired "someone with a marketing and PR background."⁷² How many of his peers—chefs, designers, decorators, stylists, directors—do the same without saying so, letting everyone think their success is due to talent alone?

Now, if by marketing one means only "advertising," then yes, not everyone does it in the luxury world—at least not in a classic form. But word of mouth, which is supposed to be the most powerful form of advertising in the world, is extremely active in these trades, where it does a better job than advertising of satisfying certain clients' need for confidentiality and exclusivity. And the absence of advertising doesn't in the least signify the absence of marketing. Just look at the distinction that American analysts make among the following three markets:

- scream market;
- song market;
- silent market.

The distinction is utterly useful and relevant, because it makes it possible to place under the same "luxury" heading brand behaviors—and thus kinds of marketing—that, in reality, are very different from one another.

The brands that are the loudest in terms of communication, the ones that put the most effort into their advertising campaigns and even behave like veritable bulldozers, belong to the scream market. As LVMH is the number one buyer of advertising in the world in the luxury domain, it gets preferential rates that enable Vuitton and

Dior, among others, to occupy the front ranks of the scream market, along with Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel, Ralph Lauren, Prada, and others.

The song market is the sphere of action chosen by brands like Baccarat and Burberry, that is to say old European brands involved in a permanent or recent revolutionary shift toward modernity, and which devote a great deal of energy to mapping out their terrain of communication in the largest sense (and not just in the sense of advertising). They sing rather than scream. The melody counts more than the strength of the voice. The theme of the song is always the same, and you can usually make it out beneath the variety of orchestrations: crystal for Baccarat, the trench coat for Burberry, taken up in turn by all the instruments in the orchestra.

As for the silent market, it's more difficult to pinpoint by definition, since it keeps quiet and works in the shadows rather than in the spotlight. It doesn't do advertising, or only does a very little, it doesn't sing its own praises or trumpet its successes, but the connoisseurs hear about it anyway. The brands in the silent market aren't terribly famous but they're very prestigious: this is true of Odier, Ercuis, and Massaro in Paris, of Frette, Pratesi, and Agnona in Italy, of Denyse Schmidt quilts in the United States, of Salon champagne and Morgan automobiles, and many others.

Some brands hesitate between two markets: the jeweler Buccellati, for example, which is very well known in Italy, belonged to the silent market everywhere else before its timid incursions into the song market. It has since become silent once more.

The reign of hardcore marketing is typical of the scream market. It means that no element of the marketing mix is left to chance—even if we're led to believe that the product is the result of the spontaneous intuition and genius of a "creator." It's in the scream market that the marketing budgets are the biggest, that pretests, tests, and post-tests are conducted, that market studies are done by the thousands—and that the most lies are told, behind a façade whose entire purpose is to deny that any marketing is going on at all; this is what Jacques Helleu does at Chanel. When speaking about the launch of one of the latest advertising films for No. 5, he was heard to dismiss—with a straight face—any suggestion of a "marketing operation," and spoke only of "creation," even as an immense file of press clippings yielded an avalanche of facts and

figures about the cost and the media strategy of the famous TV and movie spot in which the perfume in question benefited from Nicole Kidman's presence, as well as from reliance on some of the most vilified marketing techniques, namely subliminal advertising (freeze frames show that the streets of the town the star is escaping from are lined with buildings bearing the Chanel name or logo).

In the song market, and even more so in the silent market, things are obviously different. Some companies have sizeable budgets, others don't—but the ones who do don't necessarily meet with more success than the ones who don't, if you acknowledge that profits aren't the sole measure of success, and that reputation, image, and the achievement of objectives should also be taken into consideration. From this vantage point, Mellerio is "worth" just as much as Cartier; Buccellati just as much as Van Cleef & Arpels: they don't have the same goals, but the only thing that counts is that they meet them, whatever they may be—except when one is a prisoner of a purely quantitative vision of things, which, if there was any sense of coherence, wouldn't be the case in luxury.

A PARADOXICAL FORM OF MARKETING?

Many authors have attempted to flatter luxury's desires, and to demonstrate that it relied on a specific kind of marketing unlike any other.

Upon examination, it appears that marketing is increasingly hard-pressed to claim any sort of specificity, and one wonders whether it wouldn't be better to say that, in luxury, just like everywhere else, there's simply good and bad marketing.

Luxury is a sector apart, everyone agrees that this is so. But the advice and the marketing techniques that are applied to it are the same as in all the other sectors. The marketing mix offers the same framework to Hermès as it does to Volkswagen. With a few exceptions, luxury brands work according to the same principles as mass-market brands: like the latter, they are formed of the couple (product + imaginary). The content of the imaginary is different, as we've seen, but its existence isn't the sole property of luxury. Let's recall once again that some very popular mass-market brands

also possess extremely old and powerful imagery and symbolism, such as Ivory soap (1879), which, well beyond the anecdote about how it was invented, sinks its roots in fertile historic and religious ground. Nothing like Dior, you say? To the contrary, the mechanism is exactly the same—only the content is different.

It's a fact that the distribution of luxury is unique and paradoxical. Luxury as a whole is a sector. Some experts even explain that, despite the process of democratization that is bringing it closer and closer to the mass-consumer market, the sector maintains certain original characteristics, which can be expressed in the form of five paradoxes:⁷³

The paradox of demand: "Once fueled by the ordinary consumption of exceptional people, today luxury is fueled by the exceptional consumption of ordinary people." Whereas in the mass market, customer satisfaction usually entails brand loyalty, this supposedly isn't the case in luxury, where the dream destroys itself through the purchase of the dream product.

The product paradox: in classical marketing, the product answers a consumer's need, which is identified with the help of market research (the self-cleaning oven). In luxury, "the creator always has the initiative."

The price paradox: for everyday consumer products, the price is fixed according to costs and the competition. In luxury, these two constraints are weaker, and "imaginary" value takes precedence.

The distribution paradox: in mass-market consumption, the number of sales points where a product can be purchased is an advantage sought by all brands. The reverse is true in the luxury domain, where an essential element of a product's value is its rarity.

The communication paradox: mass-market consumer products hardly arouse dreams of ownership by themselves, they need to be wrapped up in a beautiful advertisement to sell. In luxury, the reverse is true: "all you have to do is recall the product's existence, without a lot of bells and whistles."

These remarks should be nuanced, however, noting that:

The assertion that, once consumed, the desire for a luxury product peters out is hasty to say the least. "Many people have probably dreamed of spending a night in a palatial hotel or of visiting the Edenic islands of the Pacific. But just because they realize their

dream one day doesn't mean that, even if they're very satisfied, they'll necessarily want to go back."⁷⁴ Even if this were true (and having done both, my personal experience tells me it's not), the idea that "in luxury, satisfaction doesn't automatically create loyalty" must be tempered by the observation that nowhere is it the case that satisfaction automatically creates fidelity, in luxury or anywhere else. This can be seen from the excitement surrounding the techniques and methods for cultivating loyalty that have exploded over the last few years, which is proof that everyone is facing the same pressing dilemma. Alas, losing satisfied customers isn't only a problem for luxury.

It's true that mass consumption proceeds by asking what customers want and then offering products and services likely to satisfy them, and that the same approach doesn't apply to luxury. But this is because luxury satisfies desires, not needs. And although people know how to identify their needs (hunger, thirst, heat, cool, sleep, and so on) they are always vaguer where their desires are concerned. First and foremost among those desires, the desire for novelty is typical of modern times, which, for this reason, praises "creators" to the skies, especially designers who are seen as free from any form of commercial constraint.

This is an illusion. There is no difference between a designer sketching the outline of a coat and an engineer working for a household appliance company who is inventing a new vacuum cleaner model. The former works intuitively, the other follows a list of specifications, but the first has often unconsciously absorbed the equivalent of a list of specifications, and the result is the same: making people want to change dresses or vacuum cleaners, guessing what they'll like, inducing people to buy, satisfying the desire for novelty, stimulating the drive to consume. Creative intuition, the capacity for ambushing and anticipating the customer's desire, simply looks more methodical in one case and more spontaneous in the other, but, once again, this can be deceptive: many creators, designers, and the like, are very consciously on the lookout for what will seduce their customers because they know their clientele, whereas some industrial designers would have a hard time explaining what led them to propose such and such a new shape, which has nothing to do with what customers want explicitly, and yet pleases them nonetheless.

The price of luxury products has nothing to do with their factory retail price—this is a fact—and it can't be calculated—or can't always be calculated—by the cost of the raw materials, even recalling the case of Patou's Joy, which billed itself as "the most expensive perfume in the world," in large part because of its high concentration of rose and jasmine essences, which are supposedly very costly. The cost of labor in Europe is also an argument that's often put forward to "justify" high prices—keeping quiet about the fact that the labor is often outsourced. It's nevertheless true that prices in luxury are indeed calculated based on an "imaginary"—and thus by definition nonrational, which doesn't mean fictional—value attached to the brand or products. But the idea that these prices aren't determined by the competition is becoming less and less true as that competition intensifies. If you believe that luxury is being democratized, you have to acknowledge the limits of the process: when you're not dealing with a collector who can stuff several dozen purses in her closets, buying a handbag from a very big luxury brand happens only once in a while, and there is such a vast choice: Chanel, Gucci, Dior, Hermès, Ferragamo, Yves Saint Laurent, Céline, and Fendi. It's not mere chance that there's talk today of the "purse wars" or the "watch wars" in luxury just as one talks about "cola wars" or "hamburger wars": it's proof that the logic of competition has taken over this sector as it has the others, and that the difference between luxury and the mass market is diminishing more and more.

Luxury advertising is indeed often content with showing the products, and this is supposedly justified "because the products themselves are symbolic and pregnant with meaning." But, as Bernard Arnault says, "showing a photo of the product and the brand name isn't enough, the advertising has to express the brand's universe." That said, in luxury the products never exist "by themselves," and the absence of theatrical bells and whistles *is* a kind of theater all its own, a "regal presentation" by which the product declares that it needs nothing aside from its name to justify its existence. What is paradoxical about luxury advertising is the frequent coexistence of a rich name and a "poor" image: bland photography, poor object visibility (especially in ready-to-wear), interchangeable layouts. But it must be specified that the big names in luxury rarely commit these blunders, which are usually the stuff

of little or emerging brands, which either don't have the means to conceive of more sophisticated visual universes or think they are entering the "luxury" category by borrowing its codes. They are mistaken in this: it takes a lot of time, money, and work to create and maintain a brand's imaginary, its symbolism. Not everyone can simply photograph a watch on a white background, even if it's covered in diamonds, and slap a name on it, and think that will suffice: such shortcuts are only possible once the brand's capital has been amassed, not before.

DOWN WITH LUXURY MARKETING?

Everyone seems to agree that luxury marketing is a welter of contradictions. And indeed that's the least that can be said.

The first of such contradictions is perhaps the most surprising: when you don't let yourself be deafened by the blaring trumpets of what, in the end, is a rather small number of advertisers, you notice that luxury marketing is gravely lacking in many areas.

Lacking in financial means for lots of houses, which have trouble freeing up significant marketing budgets or refuse to do so. Lacking in reflection, as you soon realize when you attend the lectures and seminars regularly organized on the subject, where congratulations and compliments are more frequently exchanged than ideas. Lacking in methods, which, most of the time, are imported from mass-consumer marketing.

Where does this deficit come from? Luxury claims to offer the best. Why isn't it equally demanding where its own internal methods are concerned? Partly because classical marketing has trouble approaching luxury with the same ease as other sectors like the automobile, tourism, and food sectors. Its quantitative methods can be applied without difficulty in those areas, whereas in luxury qualitative approaches are also—are above all—necessary. You have to be able to deal with the imaginary, with emotions, with irrationality, all domains that are hard to grasp for a discipline that fantasizes about being considered a science. Marketing, for example, still thinks that the imaginary is the opposite of the real, that it's the reign of fiction and pure subjectivity—and because it champions "scientific objectivity" it feels uncomfortable in a

sector where creative randomness, affectivity, intuition, and emotion seem to prevail. This explains its endless hesitations in dealing with a sector that it sees as completely different from the rest, and that thus requires specific solutions which it can't seem to offer.

The second contradiction complements the first: luxury itself forbids marketing to adopt the objectivity it champions. It only tolerates a submissive, respectful kind of marketing. Critical distance isn't permitted. It's willing for marketing to come into the fold, but only as a provider at its orders, rather than as a partner or teammate. No way is it going to let itself get pushed around or questioned, never mind have its authority challenged. You have to be on its side or give up the right to speak. The proof? "The luxury amateur's truth is to love absolutely," declares Alain Dominique Perrin, former CEO of Cartier. While there's no such thing as an "absolute" in the eyes of an analyst, luxury brands continue to behave like feudal lords: you must swear fealty and serve them, or else you're the enemy. No surprise that such a limited choice discourages many marketing specialists, who adhere to and practice a more rigorous approach.

Third and last contradiction: luxury marketing, when it exists, tends to deny its own existence. The best illustration of this is probably LVMH, which tries to separate itself from "those who only try to do marketing," especially "American-style marketing," which "is without interest," even as it hires specialists from this same brand of hard-core marketing, specialists from multinationals expert in these Anglo-Saxon techniques—starting with the good old-fashioned advertising blitz. All of this while admitting that it has an "advanced marketing laboratory" that "keeps up with the trends that are emerging in various markets" and observes "what competitors are doing the world over."⁷⁵ Which is, quite simply, benchmarking, as done in all the marketing divisions on the planet, in all sectors, including those with mass distribution.

Marketing was born with the industrial era: it's one of that era's most active and effective spearheads. Where does the scorn displayed toward it come from, even as it's used with success? And what about everyone's attempts to uphold the conviction—or perhaps the illusion—that luxury is a sector apart, where the laws of ordinary marketing don't apply because luxury has its own laws?

From the original contradiction: from maintaining an aristocratic logic amidst a democratic society, and an artisanal logic amidst an

industrialized society. Which wouldn't be either serious or incomprehensible if these forms of coexistence didn't go along with claims for artisanal logic's superiority over industrial logic, and aristocratic values over democratic values. It's this supposed superiority that is the cause of the contradiction that so many European brands can't get out of, and which prevents them from expressing themselves freely. How many of them display religious attachment for artisan craftsmanship while, at the same time, having all or part of their products made in factories on the other side of the world? How many are able to recognize publicly that some objects and some articles of clothing can be made just as well by machine as by hand, and sometimes better?

The attachment to artisanal tradition is highly respectable, except when it goes with the conviction that this tradition is superior to any other. The reverse conviction would be just as false: innovation isn't a priori superior to tradition. Machines don't always do a better job than hands. The industrial isn't superior to the artisanal, nor the artisanal to the industrial: they both have their area of excellence. What a deliverance it will be when everyone feels free to recognize the other's merits, instead of glorifying the hand and hiding the machine!

And what a liberation it will be for luxury marketing when, ceasing to unconsciously adopt the sector's prejudices, it also renounces any sort of superiority and acknowledges that the true difference isn't between luxury marketing and "ordinary" marketing but between good and bad marketing, in luxury as elsewhere.

Conclusion

Do you remember what a syllogism is?

The oldest and the best known is still the following:

All men are mortal
Socrates is a man
Thus Socrates is mortal.

This model for reasoning, which was established by Aristotle, has been immensely successful and has given rise to numerous variations. I'm going to apply the same reasoning method here. And since we're talking about marketing, I'm borrowing the first premise from Seth Godin:¹

All marketers are liars
Brands are entrusted to marketers
Thus luxury brands are liars.

What kind of lies are we talking about? All the ones we had occasion to examine in the first part of this book, foremost among them the absolute supremacy of French luxury. I'll say it for the last time: yes, French luxury is particularly dazzling, and has been for a long time. It remains so today, as its market share and reputation attest. But it isn't the only kind of luxury, and it wasn't the first, and its triumph was never absolute. In the 18th century English luxury was already competing with it in a very serious way, even in areas where we still think only Paris set the tone, like fashion. Take this testimony—chosen from among many others—by the Marquise de La Tour du Pin: “It was then the custom for women to travel in very elegant riding costumes [...]. The costume, including the hat, had to be delivered from London, because the rage for English fashions was then at its height.”²

The Anglomania of the 18th century is well known, and it went far beyond a commercial fad: from Voltaire's *English Letters* to the vogue for English gardens by way of political, economic, and philosophical influences, England shone brightly, and luxury flourished freely there in a social life every bit as sophisticated as in France, as many aristocratic émigrés fleeing from the Revolution who chose London observed (and already knew).

In the following century, English luxury had nothing to begrudge its French counterpart, and may even have surpassed it. Industry was born in England, and factories sprang up faster there than anywhere else. English perfumers dominated the market during the beginning of the 19th century. Already at the time—and for many customers around the world, it's still the case today—English silver was the most highly regarded of all, as was English porcelain. All over Europe people continued to follow English fashions, whose fabrics were especially sought after for everyday and leisure wear. Worth, the founder of French high fashion, was English, as was the model of the eternal dandy, Beau Brummell. The English way of life—particularly life in the country and the taste for travel—was admired by all, and the adjective “fashionable” was the criterion of judgment in all European languages. As for interior decoration, especially inventions related to comfort like plumbing, nothing could match what was being done in England. European luxury in the 19th century was just as much English as French—perhaps even more so.³

And there were many other centers of luxury in Europe: Bohemia and Italy for glasswork, for example, which French crystal makers started out copying before taking their own path. Germany for porcelain. Flanders for fabric. Italy for lace, brocade, and velvet. Russia for jewelry and silversmiths.

One last time, let's step back and take a look at the European context, starting in the Renaissance. In this theater at the height of its activity, French luxury plays a major role, yes, but it is one of a numerous and talented troupe without which it would not exist. In the luxury trade, there's no such thing as a one-man show. And if we take another step back in time and space, we see an entire constellation of actors and authors appearing and disappearing on the luxury stage, all over the world, during the last 10,000 years.

Now let's take a look at the other big lie: luxury brands don't do marketing, they're too far above the others for this sort of thing.

This is, of course, nonsense, but it can be said that luxury marketing, which has been infected with the aristocratic ideology, now thinks of itself as the aristocrat branch of a not-so-illustrious family tree whose other branch, which is unfortunately much longer and more crowded (mass-market marketing), is known more for its vulgarity than for its good manners. Unable to change its surname, luxury pretends that it doesn't obey the laws of marketing, but rather the anti-laws of a non-marketing which has yet to be baptized and thus does not have a name.

It's enough to make you laugh. The leading luxury group in the world, LVMH, is also the leading investor in advertising, and many of its managers were lured away from multinationals like Procter & Gamble with the explicit mission of transferring the methods of mass consumption to the luxury universe, with great success.

These are lies, then, and one wonders how to make sense of this denial of reality. Who displays the greatest contempt for marketing, and most vigorously denies having recourse to its services? Chanel, Vuitton, Hermès, and Dior: the brands that owe marketing everything—their current triumph, their prestige, their strength. And they have owed these things to marketing for a long time, for although France never had a monopoly over the production of luxury goods, it quickly caught on to the art of public relations, advertising, and self-promotion; in short, everything that we place under the heading of marketing today. And it first applied this art to the luxury business.

There is no shortage of proof, and inventory was recently taken of it in a book that exudes an immoderate love for France.⁴ As love is blind, we can forgive its author for being more generous with the object of his affection than strict accuracy would dictate. No, the French did not invent style and fashion: first the Italians and then the Spanish imposed *their* style on the French court as early as the 16th century. No, you can't assert that Louis XIV discovered the importance of *décor*, unless you cross out the history of the papacy. No, the first elaborate feminine hairdos didn't appear in France: in ancient Roman statuary, in the portraits of Piero di Cosimo and Bronzino, there are already many examples. High heels were imported to France by Catherine de Medici, the history of gastronomy does not begin with Varenne, and as for claiming that champagne is a French masterpiece, you can do it, but you

have to tie yourself up into some pretty painful knots. All wine is naturally bubbly. What Dom Pérignon did was rationalize what everyone now calls the “*méthode champenoise*.” And he would never have managed it without the English, who invented chaptalization, wine corks made of cork, and a kind of glass sturdy enough for fermentation—before then it caused bottles to frequently explode.

But the latter examples will enable us to answer an important question.

What is specific about French luxury?

All other things being equal, the convergence of two skills: the art of metamorphosis, and the art of communication.

Once more, a comparison with Japanese culture proves revealing. In Japan, the simplest material (clay) in its purest, least elaborate form (a bowl) can attain the summit of perfection. In France, perfection is only achieved if the raw material has been subjected to a series of transformations that are as visible as they are virtuosic, and, if possible, costly. Luxury consists in embellishing, ornamenting, enriching, in never being satisfied with what is found in a natural state. Wine is naturally bubbly, but we invent ways of combining various vintages to improve the taste, and we submit it to a double fermentation process for an even more satisfying result on the palate. Wood is bent, sculpted, painted, inlaid, and gilded until what would otherwise have been nothing but a mere chest of drawers is transformed into a work of art. Glass, silk, lace, leather, porcelain, silver—none of them was invented in France, but there they were embellished, beautified, metamorphosed. The material disappeared behind the endless play of colors and forms.

Elsewhere, luxury can be in the nakedness, the sparseness, or the excellence of a product whose value is contained entirely within itself: the very highest-quality linen, neither dyed, nor embroidered, nor printed, for a bedspread; the best white truffles, finely sliced on the simplest of plates, without any garnish. In France, truffle (usually black) is incorporated into all sorts of prepared foods (foie gras, scrambled eggs, fatted chickens), and the most desirable bedding is made from cotton satin or silk rather than raw linen. There is no luxury without refinement, provided that the refinement is clearly visible, that human hands have added or subtracted something, transformed nature into culture.

Transformed, perhaps, but to what end? To give value to what is supposed to have no or little value. And while we're going back to the century of Louis XIV, let's not forget that in those days Catholicism held the human condition in rather low esteem. Neither the body nor the world was worth much in and of itself. They were raw materials to be sculpted for the greater glory of God, or (which comes down to just about the same thing) for that of the king. This was the most profound motivation, one that was hidden beneath a more concrete one: finding money to fill the coffers of the state. English mercantilism would give Colbert a miraculous source of inspiration, which he would redirect toward a form of commerce that was more compatible with the political ambitions and the tastes of the Sun King: the trade in luxury goods.

But it's not enough to transform pumpkins into carriages—you have to get credit for doing so as well. With a little willpower, you can always make something. Knowing how to make it, and making it well—you can learn that. But making something known—that's new. Louis XIV, who was always his own best PR person, had proclaimed himself “the greatest king in the world.” By creating and carefully grooming their image as kings of luxury, the French conquered territory that nobody was looking to acquire at the time. It was marketing before there was a word for it, and good marketing too: the launch of the *Mercurie Galant*, the first newspaper devoted to court and city gossip, cultural and worldly events, and fashion and accessories; “Dolls of France” sent throughout Europe to disseminate Parisian taste; fashion engravings distributed in sets by shopkeepers; and even a bit of celebrity marketing, with aristocratic ladies depicted performing their ablutions or in their boudoirs, wearing the latest fashions.

With such talent, and displayed at such a young age, it's no wonder that French luxury still occupies such an important position in the world today. It's following in the footsteps of its ancestors, who devised a kind of marketing that was inventive, self-aware, terribly effective, and perfectly suited to its era.

Why repudiate such ancestors, such talent, and withdraw into a posture of denial? Out of pure, simple, and banal snobbery?

Of course, snobbery, in its coarsest form, infiltrates luxury milieus neither more nor less than other ones. It's simply deployed with more naïveté, that's all. But unless you want to be suspected

of the same flaws you accuse others of, you can't wave the word snobbery around as if it were a condemnation capable of putting an end to the debate. Condemning something doesn't explain anything.

When one wants to draw inspiration from a model, and French-style luxury is one, one must first understand its contradictions, or else fall into the same errors without the same excuses for doing so. What is there behind French snobbery that would explain its origin and persistence, but that wouldn't explain it if it were merely imitated by other brands, in other cultures? A history as unique and illuminating as that of Geneva's clockmaking trade, which I mentioned in the Introduction.

The contempt for marketing in France in general and in luxury in particular is just the contemporary version of a deeper and older contempt for everything resembling commercial activity. And that contempt is most visible in luxury because it is anchored in an aristocratic ideology.

Indeed, under the Old Regime it was forbidden for the French nobility to engage in any sort of work whatsoever—above all, commercial activity, like banking, because of the disgrace associated with handling money. In reality, frequent exceptions were made, but they involved the liberal arts (work of an intellectual nature) rather than the so-called mechanical arts, namely those that require the usage of hands (craftsmanship) or machines. A noble who violated these laws had much to lose: first his titles, but also important tax exemptions. They were thus strictly obeyed. They were relaxed later only to allow maritime trade, bulk commerce, and the “arts of fire,” which involve working with metal, glass, and porcelain.

The aristocracy thus found itself involved in the art of making tableware (porcelain, crystal, silver) and creating décors (mirrors, carpeting, furniture), and also in the personal use of those items, which we call the “art of living,” “*l'art de vivre*.” But not in-between the two, not in the exchange of luxury goods, for a solid, threefold reason: retail sales was forbidden, as were earning money and working for someone else. A noble could only serve the king or the state. If he served anyone else, especially a bourgeoisie or a member of the populace (as is the case when one is a shopkeeper), he would lose his title. Servitude was prohibited, and severely punished.

Even today, something of that old mentality remains. France may be a democracy, but it is still deeply ingrained with the monarchic system that predominated throughout its history. Nothing could be more understandable: it has been a republic for less than two centuries, while it was a kingdom for more than 1500 years. You can't erase such a past in a few decades. In the French unconscious, serving someone else is to be that someone's inferior, and even more so in luxury, where everyone has a tendency to think they're an aristocrat. Here, snobbery is reinforced by the memory of an age when no shopkeeper could be noble in either the technical or moral sense.

The Brazilian, Russian, or Chinese entrepreneur who decides to buy or launch a luxury brand and to develop it after the French model, whose exterior alone is visible to him or her, could be tempted to think that snubbing one's customers is an integral part of the luxury game. He (or she) would be wrong. French snobbery is integral to a commercial system rooted in a one-of-a-kind culture. Not superior to other cultures, but radically different: the English nobility, for example, did not face the same prohibition concerning commercial activities. The contempt for commerce in France has old roots and, though there is no excuse for it, a meaning.

But anyone who confuses it with a marketing recipe is likely to be cruelly disillusioned. When snobbery goes hand in hand with excellent qualities, as is sometimes the case with French luxury, you can ignore it and admire only the qualities. When it is just a pose, it goes back to being a meaningless, empty void.

Luxury marketing is marketing that doesn't fall into this trap, and, whatever the cynics may think, this is a moral question more than it is a technical one.

* * *

One might think that things change so fast and that the vagaries of business life shuffle the deck so thoroughly that, from one edition to the next of this book, a new hand has to be dealt every time.

It's true that the global economic crisis triggered in autumn 2008 by the subprime mortgage meltdown in the United States impacted the luxury sector just as it did everything else. But there have been other such crises in the past and there will be more in the future,

whether financial, political, or health-related, like the so-called SARS outbreak in 2002 and 2003, which had a brief but crippling effect on the luxury market. There's nothing new under the sun: economic life is a series of ups and downs, and none of its surprises is quite like any of the others: the "lipstick index" from the early 2000s was already inapplicable by decade's end.⁵ True, the luxury giants hit some major turbulence in terms of their financial results, the battlefield was strewn with the dead and wounded, and brands met with various fates. Yet the expansion of luxury brands, accelerated by globalization, has continued without any major hitches (technological, for example), and, for the moment, shows no signs of slowing down.

That slowdown and those hitches will come sooner or later, but nobody can say when or why they will happen. In the meantime, the spectacle continues and luxury marketing, in the redefined version of itself that emerged thirty years ago, isn't losing any momentum. The sector looks much the same as ever, though it has grown in volume because of a massive influx of Asian customers, with diverse forms of consumption; certain countries leading the charge (China), and others falling back (Europe); some preferring ostentatious luxury, others a more low-key one. Further, everywhere you see the same acrobatics and the same ambiguous push and pull between rarity and distribution, tradition and modernity, entry-level prices (yes, even in luxury) and stratospheric ones. The press revels in these ups and downs but although it may look like there's a great deal of hustle and bustle, the truth of the matter is that this is the day-to-day experience of the media circus. The headlines and the gossip columns rarely provide the sort of information necessary to understand profound shifts in the market or society.

And yet there have been deep shifts: one that had been underway for some time already, and another that burst forth like a jack-in-the-box. The first concerns changes in mentality, and the second the arrival of luxury brands on the Internet—and both are linked to the thorny question of the democratization of luxury, which is itself tied to the way luxury's centers of gravity are shifting in today's world.

First, let's look at the changes in mentality. They occur via long, slow shifts that are impossible to grasp when you see time as year-long chunks. However, here as elsewhere, things are happening

more quickly than they used to. In the last ten years we've seen perceptions of luxury change and, above all, vary, as they expand into a number of countries where, until now, they only had meaning for a tiny minority of the population. And suddenly our idiosyncrasies stand out much more clearly: we Europeans are still living under the illusion that we will always be the legitimate guardians of the notion of luxury.

This illusion is reinforced by the incontestable fact that the largest luxury groups today are European. But you'd have to be very naïve to think that others won't emerge in the years to come. Above all, we should recall that the life of brands shouldn't be confused with that of luxury companies or conglomerates. They're both connected and distinct. Gucci Group certainly has control over Bottega Veneta's fate,⁶ but the Bottega Veneta brand existed before it became part of PPR, and could be purchased or sold tomorrow by other groups or investment funds without the public batting an eyelid. In the public's eyes, what's important is Bottega Veneta, not knowing who's pulling the strings. Another way of arriving at this observation is to recall that although companies are the legal owners of the brand, in reality they cannot decide its fate alone. The public need only give the thumbs-up or the thumbs-down and, just like in the ancient Roman arena, control brands' fates. This is as true in luxury (Roederer experienced this firsthand with American rappers) as it is in the mass market (Timberland met with identical problems, but in the reverse direction, when the brand, which clung to its lumberjack roots, was adopted by New York yuppies).

Of course, luxury brands ferociously deny that their fate depends on the public, just as they refuse to talk about marketing while hiring the top specialists in a discipline that is devoted precisely to conducting market research and keeping a close eye on consumers. This doesn't stop them from pouring a lot of money into that research and close observation, which enables them to track shifts in habits and mentality.

Just what have they learned about shifts in mentality?

That perceptions of luxury have expanded and changed in proportion as luxury brands penetrated new markets and aroused the interest of new population groups.

In Europe, and partially in the US, the most striking phenomenon has been a certain dematerialization of luxury. In half a

century, the image of luxury has shifted from the concrete (a yacht, diamonds, a fur coat) to the impalpable (pure air, silence, well-being). More recently, things have shifted a little. Recent studies, for example, show that in Europe, the French continue to have a vision of luxury that's noticeably different from that of their neighbors and sometimes very contradictory. Though they are prompt to declare themselves the sons and daughters of the Luxury Empire, as we've seen, they enjoy luxury less than Europeans or Americans.⁷ And—this may explain the contradiction—they have a much more conservative attitude toward luxury: for them, it is very closely associated with status. They are also the only ones to accord great importance to the history of brands, to their artisanal *savoir-faire* and heritage—perhaps because they think they're only ones to possess these things. And yet, for all that, in all Europe they are the ones who accord the least importance to ... the quality of luxury products. Fifty-nine percent of British people think that quality authenticates a luxury brand, as do 49 percent of Germans, 43 percent of Spaniards, 39 percent of Italians, and only 30 percent of French people.⁸ What do the latter associate luxury with, then? With a high price and its ability to make one fantasize about it: a criterion that they emphasize far more than their neighbors, and that they place ahead of the criterion of quality. In short, seen by the French, luxury must be expensive, venerable, make you daydream, and confer prestige along with its acquisition.

So long as general opinion continues to grant French luxury the preeminence it enjoys today, and make it a model or even an ideal, this Versailles-like vision of luxury will last. It is majestic, imposing, and a bit heavy when you look at 17th-century statuary, painting, and furniture, and though it gets a little lighter in the following century, it remains just as haughty. This is Power Luxury.

In parallel, and sometimes in the same countries, another approach to luxury is emerging, one that's less formal and more hedonistic, lighter: Dream Luxury. Here the notion of individual pleasure prevails over the quest for social status. Luxury is less a trophy than a personal reward that one gives oneself on small and grand occasions, in line with one's own tastes rather than other people's or those dictated by the media. It's no longer about accumulating precious gems, yachts, race cars, and big logos, all things that let you

show that you're rich. Rather, it's about accumulating the moments or experiences that you consider luxurious, accompanied or not by purchases of luxury products.

In this case brands play another role: one that's generally more discreet and confidential. They underwrite a pleasure rather than an investment, and who cares whether they have a prestigious past or not. And yet, for all that, if one wants to go by price, they easily rival the Power Luxury brands: the cruises offered by the Six Stars cruise company, with a tour of the world in 124 days and 28 countries, cost 1.5 million dollars for 2 people (including, of course, unlimited caviar and champagne, transfers by Rolls-Royce and private jet, and so on). Or else tailor-made individual expeditions up and down the coast from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, with technical support teams, mechanics, guides, cooks, butlers, and chambermaids, leaving to chance only those intangibles necessary to maintain the illusion of adventure.

One is tempted to say that this kind of luxury is on a crash course with European-style luxury, but, in reality, Power Luxury and Dream Luxury already rub shoulders and overlap just about everywhere in the world.

Will one of the two carry the day? Or will another form of luxury appear in one of the emerging countries like Russia, China, or India?

The most likely scenario is that these various approaches will coexist and even blend together. The long European tradition of luxury trades being lovingly handed down from generation to generation will not disappear. At a minimum, their business will be kept alive by the special orders and extravagances that the ultrarich will be able to buy at full price.

But the real profits will be made elsewhere, in Plated Luxury, on the gigantic scale of the middle classes, who will be sold, under the name "luxury," what the ingenuous 19th century referred to candidly as "demi-luxury,"⁹ but which contemporary industry strives to pass off as the genuine article, thanks to an increase in new product lines and, above all, massive investments in advertising.

When people talk about the democratization of luxury, they're talking about that kind of luxury: the noisiest and the most visible, the one you find everywhere, driven by celebrity marketing, and transmitted via social networks, tabloids, fashion gossip, and reality shows.

But is Plated Luxury really luxury? For those who associate luxury with what is expensive (the Lykan Hypersport, with diamond-encrusted taillights, only seven in existence, with a 3.4 million dollar price tag) or rare (climbing Mount Everest), the answer is obviously no. For those who sacrifice two months of salary in order to buy a Ralph Lauren purse or their Christmas bonus to purchase the latest iPad, the answer is obviously yes.

And so we come back to our initial observation, which everyone should be able to agree on: as luxury is by definition a swerve, a gap, an *écart*, it is always relative to each individual's desire and purchasing power. We must acknowledge, however, that falling back on relativity is often an easy way out, a sleight-of-hand trick for escaping a thorny or confusing debate. It would thus have been quite wrong of me to use this approach if I hadn't had solid reasons for doing so and numerous examples to back it up. I have discussed them in detail throughout this book.

But I acknowledge that although the notion of a swerve accounts nicely for luxury's double nature—stable at bottom but unstable in its various incarnations—it's nonetheless a bit tricky and its application requires a great deal of dexterity. The success of luxury brands proves that it's possible, but it also proves that their efforts to democratize sometimes reach an outer limit and, in the long run, risk coming back to bite them. If they concentrate too much on mining the "affordable luxury" vein, it will run out. In which case, brands will have killed the hen that laid golden eggs.

How can they keep it alive? Must they give up on the idea of "democratization," as well as on the term itself, so as to seek another way of dividing up luxury brands, without deceiving themselves as to their real intentions or triggering unjust criticism? Power Luxury can be too heavy, and Dream Luxury too light. Plated Luxury is too much smoke and mirrors. How can *all* forms of luxury recover their luster, which they risk losing once and for all because brands are impoverishing and overusing the very notion of luxury?

One solution could be to move from the slippery terrain of business to one of the most stable of luxury's anchors: the sacred. Let's recall yet again that, as has been verified many times over, luxury is intrinsically connected to the sacred, which, because we associate it with religion, permeates our societies all the more when we think we have expelled it. Instead of democratization we should instead speak

of luxury's desacralization when talking about strategies employed by some luxury brands for placing less expensive, less sophisticated, and more affordable, but nonetheless manifestly desirable, product lines at the disposal of customers.

An interesting distinction could then be made between secular and regular luxury. We know that there exists a so-called secular clergy (the one that lives in the world among the laity) and a regular clergy (which belongs to a religious order). By the same token, we could distinguish between regular luxury brands, which scrupulously obey the traditions and rules of their trade, and secular brands, which go with the flow of the times, adopting the rhythms, fashions, and techniques of the present. There can even be brands that are successively or simultaneously both regular and secular—this is the case with Mauboussin, which was once “regular” in its craftsman jewelry business, but today is “secular” when putting up advertising posters in the subway showing a watch for less than 400 euros. This is also the case with modern but very ritualized brands like Shu Uemura, or with those that, on the contrary, continuously undermine the codes and language of luxury, as if they had nothing to do with them. Chanel is a good example, but every eventuality is imaginable: an ultracontemporary brand like Prada can opt for a certain idealism, notably in the intellectual or aesthetic department, while an older brand like Vuitton can play the card of a self-conscious materialism, with the possibility that the two brands will switch places over time or their respective geographical migrations. The two orders, the temporal and the spiritual, can develop in such a way that neither overshadows the other, and the same brand can adapt what it says to the audience it's addressing, rich or poor, believers or atheists.

After all, doesn't everyone have the right to go into any church they please? And wouldn't luxury draw strength from behaving like a religion in which we all more or less believe—or that, at the very least, we all practice?

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Pascal Morand, *Les religions et le luxe* (IFM-Éditions du Regard, 2012).
2. Max Engammare, *L'Ordre du Temps: L'invention de la ponctualité à Genève au XVIème siècle* (Librairie Droz, 2004).
3. D. Thomas, *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster* (Penguin Books, 2007).
4. For those who are curious, the author has in her possession the delightful exchange of letters to which this incident gave rise.
5. J. DeJean, *How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* (Free Press, 2005).
6. The first French edition contained many precise references, which I'm not including here because there's no room to do so exhaustively. They have grown exponentially in number, and they are too French-specific for an international publication.
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9. This is the subject of *Brand Revolution: Rethinking Brand Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

I DOING AWAY WITH SOME RECEIVED IDEAS

1. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637).
2. The 16th–17th centuries—a period characterized by the end of the samurai, the expansion of a mercantile bourgeoisie open to Western influences, the construction of enormous castles, and artisanship dominated by ceramics, and by lacquer, gold-, and silversmithing.
3. In his *Memoirs*, Casanova cites the wines of Cyprus, Spain (Peralta, Xérès, Pedro Ximénes), and Italy (Orvieto, Scopolò) alongside French wines.
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5. Henri Baudrillart, *Histoire du luxe privé et public depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'à nos jours*, 4 vols (Hachette, 1880).
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8. Marseille, *Le Luxe en France du siècle des Lumières à nos jours*.
9. In the *Que Sais-je?* (Presses Universitaires de France) collection, for example.

10. S. Richou and M. Lombard, *Le Luxe dans tous ses états* (Economica, 2000).
11. See, for example, Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434).
12. R. Chencier, *Madder Red: A History of Luxury and Trade, Plants, Dyes, & Pigments in World Commerce & Art* (Curzon, Caucasus World, 2000).
13. F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar, *Le rhinocéros d'or: Histoires du Moyen-Age africain* (Alma, 2012).
14. The boomerang in question can be seen at the Musée de la Préhistoire in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (a comfortable suburb to the west of Paris).
15. Louvre Museum and Berlin Museum.
16. Artistic director of perfumes at Dior and then at Shiseido, and later a creator of perfumes under his own name.
17. Christian Blanckaert, *Les Chemins du luxe* (Grasset, 1996).
18. Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Pantheon, 1983).
19. From the Greek *aristos*, the best, the excellent, and *kratos*, authority.
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21. Henri Taine, *Les Origines, Ancien Régime*, cited in Elias, *Court Society*.
22. Georges Duby, *Hommes et structures au Moyen Âge* (Mouton, 1973).
23. "In our modern societies, luxury still tends to bring out the inequality of social rank," *Dictionnaire de l'économie politique*.
24. Norbert Elias, *La Dynamique de l'Occident* (Calmann-Lévy, 1975).
25. Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
26. R. Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire* (The Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 1989).
27. Jean-Pierre Goubert, *Du luxe au confort* (Berlin, 1988).
28. Philippe Perrot, *Le Luxe, une richesse entre faste et confort, XVIIIème–XIXème siècle* (Le Seuil, 1995), and Patrick Verley, "Essor et déclin des industries du luxe et du demi-luxe au XIXème siècle," in Marseille (ed.), *Le Luxe en France du siècle des Lumières à nos jours*.
29. Unless it's in bulk, at the highest level, or in the "arts of fire": ceramics, metallurgy, glassblowing, etc.
30. See Natacha Coquery, *L'Hôtel aristocratique, le marché du luxe à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998).
31. Didier Grumbach, *Histoires de la mode* (Le Seuil, 1993).
32. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Dover Thrift Editions, 1994).
33. See, for example, Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ère du vide* (Gallimard, 1983).
34. "Une notion ambiguë in 'Qu'est-ce que le luxe?'" *La Lettre de la Rue Saint-Guillaume* 121 (2001).
35. It is tempting to present it as the century of Enlightenment, as well, which English and American historians view as beginning around 1660. In France, however, the expression is reserved for the 18th century: the end of Louis XIV's reign having been darkened by a period of political, economic, and religious regression. None of the traits by which the era of Enlightenment is defined today (the emergence of science, the beginning of political resistance, progress in the idea of tolerance, among others) appears in France before the death of Louis XIV, in 1715.
36. *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (LeRobert, 1993).

37. When asked "If luxury were an animal, it would be ...", most people choose a wild animal, often a wild beast or a jungle cat (cat, black panther, lion, jaguar, tiger, cheetah, leopard).
38. P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984).
39. Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
40. The July 2009 campaign played with the image of the French Revolution ("Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—hey, what about Love?") and, with a complicit wink ("Come on in, we'll let you eat cake!"), announced promotional discounts of 17.89%.
41. *Vogue USA*, November 2005.
42. Among a hundred other examples, see the exchanges about a Bulgari watch (Carbon Gold model) on the forum *depiedencap.com*, on which users explained why it was very overpriced.
43. "Designer labels' sweatshop scandal," *Sunday Mirror*, December 2nd, 2007.
44. The "Fearless Luxury" campaign, 2009.
45. R. H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (Free Press, 1999).
46. Blanckaert, *Les Chemins du luxe*.
47. *La Repubblica*, April 2002.

2 INTERNATIONAL LUXURY: THE CLASH OF CULTURES

1. Laurence Benaïm, *Yves Saint Laurent* (Grasset, 2002).
2. *Printemps*, 2002.
3. *CB News*, December 1997.
4. Forden, *House of Gucci*, pp. 24, 66.
5. I could also cite Carolina Herrera and Oscar de la Renta, but their ambition didn't extend to inventing a lifestyle, still less a "philosophy," and was generally limited to collections of clothing and accessories.
6. *Vogue*, French edition, November 2002.
7. M. J. Silverstein and N. Fiske, *Trading Up: The New American Luxury* (Portfolio Hardcover, 2003).
8. *Time*, July 31st, 2005.
9. AFP bulletin, January 21st, 2010.
10. M.-C. Sicard, *Les ressorts cachés du désir* (Village Mondial, 2005).
11. S. McCartney, *The Fake Factor: Why We Love Brands But Buy Fakes* (Marshall Cavendish, 2005).
12. Two so-called "white alcohols," which are highly prized in China for cultural, social, and political reasons.
13. Thanks to Sau Yan Joyce Tse for her research into the conditions necessary for the emergence of an international Chinese luxury brand (2010).
14. A group of Rosewood furniture pieces inspired by the Ming and Qing dynasties, using ancient essences and having required 7 master furniture craftsmen to work by hand for 120 days, was acquired by the Chinese National Museum of Peking in 2007 (a first).
15. *Le Figaro*, October 30th, 2005.

3 HOW LUXURY BRANDS WORK

1. S. Marchand, *Les Guerres du luxe* (Fayard, 2001).
2. Centre d'économie industrielle de l'école des Mines (Paris).
3. Marc de Ferrière Le Vayer, "L'industrie du luxe existe-t-elle?" in *Le Luxe, du siècle des Lumières à nos jours*, ed. S. Marchand.
4. *Les Échos*, December 2001.
5. For "Collection of Style," a brand launched by H&M at the "higher end" of the spectrum (paired-down boutiques; higher but affordable prices; more classic clothing; less fashion-conscious and better cut).
6. Jean Watin-Augouard, *Histoires de marques* (Eyrolles, 2006).
7. Marchand, *Les Guerres du luxe*.
8. Classement Interbrand, 2005.
9. Marchand, *Les Guerres du luxe*.
10. Marchand, *Les Guerres du luxe*.
11. Here the word "classical" should be understood in its historical meaning, in opposition to the word "modern" (and not, as before, in its stylistic sense, when it is opposed to the idea of the "baroque").
12. lenouveleconomiste.fr; October 2012.
13. Sicard, *Brand Revolution*.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Le Figaro*, August 31st, 2012.
16. *Capital*, November–December 2012.
17. G. Deleuze, "D comme désir," in *L'Abécédaire*, DVD (Éditions du Montparnasse, 2004).
18. "The motive of our preferences is in the imputation of an excellence intrinsic to a more costly and less convenient article," cited in Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*.
19. Spring 2010.
20. Blanckaert, *Les Chemins du luxe*.
21. *Les Guerres du luxe*.
22. Advertising Standards Authority (Great Britain), spring 2010.
23. Blanckaert, *Les Chemins du luxe*.
24. Bernard Arnault, *La Passion créative* (Plon, 2000).
25. journeysawards.com.
26. *L'Officiel*, September 2002.
27. Blanckaert, *Les Chemins du luxe*.
28. Richou and Lombard, *Le Luxe dans tous ses états*.
29. *Que Sais-je?*
30. *Le Figaro*, October 22nd, 2002.
31. Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
32. Blanckaert, *Les Chemins du luxe*.
33. Model RR027, conceived for tennis champion Rafael Nadal in 2010.
34. Arnault, *La Passion créative*.
35. Thierry Bucaille, general director of Hermès International, public lecture, March 23rd, 1998.
36. Perrot, *Le Luxe, une richesse entre faste et confort*.

37. The imaginary is an anthropological concept defined as the set of values, symbols, images, and dreams of a particular group or entity.
38. Bruno Remaury, *Le luxe: essais sur la fabrique de l'ostentation* (IFM-Éditions du Regard, 2005).
39. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.
40. Sidney Toledano, webdeluxe.com.
41. This is the case at vuitton.com, in the heading devoted to the new jewelry line—jewelry being a trade where the brand has no legitimacy; the gap is filled by an abundance of images and commentary highlighting artisans' hands (sometimes just the fingers) and the designer's (Lorenz Bäumer's) eye.
42. Morand, *Les religions et le luxe*.
43. *Le Figaro*, March 2012.
44. Interview in *Technikart*, February 2002.
45. *Ibid.*
46. "I am not sure that in this business we are really competitors. We are competitors when we're making deals, but not in terms of customers." Arnault, *La Passion créative*.
47. "I don't look at what others are doing," Jean-Louis Dumas-Hermès, cited in Marchand, *Les Guerres du luxe*.
48. The circle theme frequently appears in commentaries on luxury—see, for example, the three circles of luxury in *Le Luxe, Que Sais-Je?* series (Presses Universitaires de France).
49. Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*.
50. Blanckaert, *Les Chemins du luxe*.
51. Recall that Thomas More's novel, written in 1516 and entitled *Utopia*, takes place on an island.
52. Teri Agins, *The End of Fashion* (Quill, 2000).
53. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
54. James Twitchell, *Living It Up* (Simon & Schuster, 2003).
55. "What makes it luxury is the difficulty of procuring an object," Didier Grumbach, lecture, March 23rd, 1998.
56. Study by Altagamma, 2011.
57. For example, a black and white spot by Karl Lagerfeld, *Paris—Shanghai: A Fantasy, The Trip that Coco Chanel Only Made in Her Dreams*, which is inaccessible to anyone unfamiliar with the designer's life, the recent history of China, or that of the Duchess of Windsor.
58. If you go through the site's archives, under the fragrances category, you can watch a very enigmatic film by Ridley Scott, entitled *Thunder Perfect Mind*.
59. Like journeysawards.com, welovestephenpourse.com, or the musical composition commissioned from A. Oulabbib for the opening of a Vuitton store in Ulan Bator (Mongolia), louisvuitton.com/resonance.
60. This is a recurrent theme in luxury, and isn't just for leather goods brands, as it can be found at Chanel, for example for No. 5, either in the form of flight and escape (Nicole Kidman) or in the form of exploration (Audrey Tautou). This is only logical: luxury's founding principle, namely the swerve, underwrites this theme.

61. These terms refer to the difference between “regular” clergy, who live in a monastery, and “secular” clergy, who live in the world, among the laity.
62. Georges Balandier, *Le Désordre* (Fayard, 1988).
63. *L'Express*, April 2002.
64. Crédit Agricole Banque Privée, France, 2012.
65. Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson, *Marketing Aesthetics: The Strategic Management of Brands, Identity and Image* (Free Press, 1997).
66. An international map of countries where spikes in Nutella consumption were recorded revealed that they didn't always correspond to places where Nutella was on sale but rather to places where there was a high concentration of Europeans. Many blogs attest that this “cult” has many followers of all ages throughout the world.
67. Perrin, *Les Métiers du luxe*.
68. *Madame Figaro*, March 2012.
69. Henry Gidel, *Coco Chanel* (Flammarion, 2000).
70. Jean-Marie Floch, *Identités visuelles* (PUF, 1995).
71. “The square silk scarf has been the object of a scientific marketing strategy since 1979,” cited in “The Hermès square silk scarf,” in Marseille (ed.), *Le Luxe en France du siècle des Lumières à nos jours*.
72. *Madame Figaro*, February 2002.
73. For example in *L'Art du marketing* (Village Mondial, 1999).
74. Dubois, *ibid*.
75. Arnault, *La Passion créative*.

CONCLUSION

1. S. Godin, *All Marketers Are Liars* (Penguin Books, 2005).
2. *Mémoires, 1778–1815* (Mercure de France, 1979).
3. Perrot, *Le Luxe, une richesse entre faste et confort*.
4. Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style* (Free Press, 2006).
5. A term coined by the CEO of Estée Lauder: the claim being that in a recession, the worse the economic situation became, the more the volume of lipstick sales would increase.
6. The luxury division of PPR.
7. World Luxury Tracking study, Ipsos, 2007.
8. “Europeans and their opinion of the luxury industry,” TNS-Sofres study, 2009.
9. Perrot, *Le Luxe, une richesse entre faste et confort*.

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