

In the club

From trainers to toilet paper, 'luxury' products have become ubiquitous to the point of devaluation. Finally, however, luxury's underlying principles of rarity, exclusivity and insider knowledge are resurfacing, writes MATILDA BATTERSBY

Photography by VICTORIA LING victorialing.com

Alexandra Jefford

Alexandra Jefford's jewellery is a Bauhaus-influenced treat of oversized gem stones, geometric shapes, interesting use of negative space and unusual materials. The Geneva-born designer trained at world-class British art school Central St Martins and worked as an artist until 2002, when she began making jewellery. Each piece is a unique combination of twisted gold, shining sapphires, multicoloured tourmalines and pavé diamonds. They are reminiscent of Art Deco style, but with a rebellious punk-era abandon. These sculptural items would be just as suited to a plinth in an art gallery as to being worn; Jay Jopling offered Jefford his White Cube gallery to showcase her collection a few years ago. Prices start at around €5,000. Jefford's recent 'O' font series is a typographer's dream, featuring rings inspired by typeface renderings of the vowel.

alexandrajefford.com



It may look like any other lightweight jacket, perfect for a Mediterranean winter. But this is no ordinary garment. Its price of €3,000 suggests it was spun in gold but in fact it's made from a fabric that is even rarer, woven from the fibres of lotus flower stems grown in floating orchards around Lake Inle in Myanmar. The material is so delicate and time-consuming to weave that only enough for 20 such jackets is produced annually. The company responsible is Loro Piana, an Italian textile firm with an annual turnover of around €500m which specialises in rare and exclusive fabrics, which are made up into otherwise normal-looking clothes that are soft, breathable and hardwearing. Loro Piana garments are the ultimate choice for high-net-worth individuals who don't wish to shout about their money but want to invest in the best.

'There is now a new consumer with experience in wealth – and I don't mean "old money" – who is looking for something more and who finds pleasure less in showing off as in the quality and rarity of what they buy,' says Sergio Loro Piana, joint CEO of the family business. 'We never put a logo on anything. For those who are in the club, the product is recognisable enough, even if it's invisible to others.'

This rare club is something that seekers of true luxury will have a hard time finding in the pages of magazines or on television. This is because the luxury market has become very large and ill-defined. Mainstream advertising tells consumers to buy luxury handbags, trainers and toilet roll, but they are not actually very luxurious, even by a conservative definition of the word. The concept of luxury has been blurred by marketing, resulting in the use of crass and jargonistic distinctions such as deluxe, hyper-luxury and masstige – that conglomeration of the words 'mass' and 'prestige' that indicates the oxymoronic problem arising from the idea that luxury should somehow be available to all. Despite the hefty price tag, if the thousand-dollar phone you've just bought is available in every big city around the world, your perception of its luxuriousness will inevitably be dented. Interbrand might class Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Chanel as the leading luxury brands because they have a global reach and appeal and are popular among celebrities. But the scale and fame of such operations is precisely the problem.

This leads to the extended branding of very high-end products to lower-end ones targeting middle-class consumers. Smaller items such as key chains or purses may be stamped with the covetable label, but often don't display any artistry, integrity or uniqueness. Such products fulfil consumer ideas of 'trading up' but deliver only a pastiche of what the label represents.

EB Meyrowitz

If you want a pair of glasses hand-made from the highest quality acetate, water buffalo horn or shell, then take a trip to EB Meyrowitz. Upfront about not wanting publicity or too many people to know about them, EB Meyrowitz thrives on word-of-mouth clientele who have been devoted to their specs all their lives. These bespoke glasses, modest and unflashy, are lightweight and beautifully made. The water buffalo horn absorbs oil from the wearer's face, changing colour to become unique over time. They are bereft of logos or flashy emblems.

ebmeyrowitz.co.uk



Manni

Italian oil producer Manni has infused extra virgin olive oil with the earthy yet floral taste of white truffles to create an elite ingredient. The discerning truffle lover will have to commit: Manni White Truffle Extra Virgin Olive Oil is only available as a bulk order of 60 bottles, which at £60 for 60ml means a bill for £3,600 before delivery. The oil is produced from rare Olivastra Seggianese olives using Manni's 'live oil' method, so that the oils leave the press 'intact and alive' before being poured into bottles made of a patented glass which blocks 99.9% of UV rays. The small size of bottles is to ensure oxidation and deterioration of the oil is minimised once the stopper is removed.

manni.biz





Francis Kurkdjian

Perfumer Francis Kurkdjian promises to 'bottle emotion' and his fragrances offer the ultimate in luxurious *sillage de parfum* (the scent that wafts behind the wearer). Kurkdjian uses only the very best ingredients and his custom scents can be commissioned from around €80,000. The packaging is relatively sedate for a product commanding such vast sums; the small glass bottles are simple and would not look out of place in an apothecary. Kurkdjian was just 25 when he signed his first fragrance for Jean Paul Gaultier in 1995 and he opened his own workshop for bespoke perfumes in 2001. He welcomes 'crazy ideas' and no ingredient is off the list. Cheaper versions of Kurkdjian's signature scents can be found in department stores around the world but the bespoke fragrances are available exclusively from Maison Francis Kurkdjian, Paris.

franciskurkdjian.com

Key brands such as Loro Piana operate at the very top of the upper echelons of the luxury market. Such companies adopt an almost anti-publicity policy because word of mouth is their most important tool. PR firms are hired to make sure what is being purveyed won't be worn by the latest celebrity clotheshorse or seen in trashy gossip rags. They will instead target outlets such as the Robb Report, How To Spend It magazine in the Financial Times and websites such as A Small World and Quintessentially; publications which cater to a very specific demographic.

'Exclusivity is a way of maintaining brand focus for carefully crafted, expensive items,' says Angela Rumsey, senior business editor of online trend analyst WGSN. 'But you also need to consider the fact that some brands would not even want to be seen in the press and are so small that they would not want, or could not afford, to advertise or promote themselves anyway.' Rumsey calls this a return to 'stealth wealth and quiet luxury' because, while such companies emphasise brand identity, branding and logos are not part of their strategy. This is partly a response to the vulgar, label-focused culture of the last two decades and it also harks back to old school elitism. Only those in the know will recognise the impressive progeny of what you're wearing, driving or drinking as there will be no visible trademarks.

This niche market is underpinned by levels of wealth so high that they are immune to economic turmoil. The Luxury Institute's August Wealth Report recorded that, aside from a small sales tumble in late 2008 and early 2009, percentage gains in luxury stores have run into double digits for most of the past two years.

Stealth luxury is not a new concept. In fact, it is a very old one. Quietly seeking out rare goods has always been a means for the wealthiest to express their status. The approach supersedes celebrity and money, even. It is not about finding the most expensive item, it is about finding the best – although the two often go hand in hand. The ultimate appeal of luxury is some kind of superiority, after all.

Rarity and prohibitive expense will only increase the appeal of such items, as Jean-Noël Kapferer and Vincent Bastien explain in the Journal of Brand Management. 'To live in luxury you have to be above others, not be "reasonable", in both senses of the word. A reasonable price is a price that appeals to reason, and therefore to comparison. Luxury is "superlative", not "comparative". By increasing prices, you lose the bad customers, but now you suddenly become dazzlingly attractive to people who would previously not have given you a second glance.' ●



Peter Ting

For the hound that has everything there are pet bowls by master ceramicist Peter Ting. While it seems abhorrent to imagine doling out dog food in these hand-painted ceramic dishes, complete with burnished gold, they are perfect for seriously pampered pooches. The bowls retail at around €1,700 each and their shiny finish is achieved by firing them up to six times to achieve maximum colour vibrancy. The gold detailing is 22 carat. Ting's range is a beautifully deconstructed mishmash of the classic Royal Crown Derby Imari pattern, so it overlaps, rejoins and echoes a more conventional design history in contemporary way. While Rover might not appreciate the design impact, it will stop your home from looking a dog's dinner.