

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF LUXURY

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***Abstract:** Currently defined as the term used for everything that is expensive and difficult to obtain to have a sumptuous life, or everything that is not essential for the development of life, but aims to provide pleasure and comfort, luxury remains one of the concepts with a history that changes with the evolution of humanity. Along with other concepts such as beauty / ugliness, kitsch or decadence, luxury has standards that have changed over time, but have also intersected with the standards of each of the mentioned concepts. This article is a brief analysis of the links between luxury and beauty / ugliness and kitsch.*

***Keywords:** beauty, kitsch, luxury, ugliness*

### **Introduction**

The definition that is most often provided for luxury nowadays refers to everything that is expensive and difficult to obtain to have a sumptuous life, or everything that is not essential for the development of life, but aims to provide pleasure and comfort, luxury remains one of the concepts with a history that changes with the evolution of humanity. Along with other concepts such as beauty / ugliness, kitsch or decadence, luxury has standards that have changed over time, but have also intersected with the standards of each of the mentioned concepts.

As Andrei Pleșu notes in the article "Transition and the avatars of luxury", luxury can be considered a "universal passion", as it exists in all people regardless of the period of time that we take into consideration and regardless of the type of societal organization. No matter how harsh or dictatorial the political regime might be, luxury appears in that social category that comes to experience the "uselessness of ornamentation", but also to appreciate the "usefulness of comfort" (Pleșu 2006), leaving to many the ordeal of satisfying daily needs.

A history of luxury certainly dates back to the beginnings of humankind: the primitive age has its ideal of beauty in women and men

adorned with colored pebbles, shells, small objects carved in wood, to attract attention, to satisfy an acute need to be different from others, a personal pleasure for difference and uniqueness.

As Stéphane Marchand (2001:8) points out in *The Wars of Luxury*, luxury is the fundamental refusal of the human being to limit his life to survival.

Whenever the ideal of feminine or masculine beauty has changed, the perception of luxury has changed as well: in the ancient world, along with body ornaments, gastronomic luxury appears, along with artistic and intellectual luxury, due to the fact that “stoic sobriety, despising the well-being, the refinement, the comforts of all kinds, ends [...] in the voidness of a monastery without religion” (Plesu 2006). Progress is, somehow, “bringing enormous parts of luxury into the territory of necessity” (Plesu 2006). And, indeed, modern society has fully demonstrated this: public baths are deeply despised by Western society, because running water is no longer a luxury but a necessary comfort; gas lamps are expensive antiques, as electricity is a necessity. Cars, for example, are one of the criteria for assessing the ideal of fe/male beauty, just as silicone implants in the fe/male body are used to positively assess the ideal of fe/male beauty.

The paradox of luxury is precisely the fact that everything used to bring comfort and pleasure is both a step towards progress and civilization (in the sense of alignment with the rules set by the Western world and compliance with certain standards), as well as a superfluous element and a sample of waste, without which humankind has managed to survive successfully for thousands of years, an example at hand being the inestimable types and brands of machinery and gadgets designed to make life easier in the comfort of our homes.

The spirit of luxury has radically changed throughout history, and the most recent change taking place in the middle of the twentieth century. Beau Brummel's nineteenth-century dandyism and early twentieth-century Chanel spirit have been replaced by a luxury industry that has led to a veritable war between economic giants. It remains to be discussed to what extent luxury is still an elitist attitude that turns the everyday life into an exceptional life or banality into rarity.

The luxury industry, analyzed by Stéphane Marchand, operates behind a façade discourse that aims at conveying sophistication, delicate affection, subtlety and nuances. As Denis Gombert remarks „le monde du luxe peut vous porter un jour aux nues et vous vouer le lendemain aux gémonies. Contrairement au phénix, l'esprit du luxe ne va pas renaître de ses cendres, il est tombé irrémédiablement dans la marmite diabolique du business.” (in Marchand 2001, 22) (The world of luxury can one day take you to heaven,

and the next day you may be in hell. Unlike the phoenix bird, the spirit of luxury will not be reborn from its own ashes, because it has fallen irretrievably into the pot of business).

### **The universality of luxury**

As we have shown before, all analysts of this concept agree that luxury is a constituent element of any society that exceeds the minimum subsistence threshold, since the surplus of wealth is used for purposes other than purely functional.

Constantin Stamati-Ciurea (2011) states in an essay published in 1895 that „luxul este viciul cel mai atrăgător, cel mai molipsitor, din care se nasc toate calamitățile ce duc la pieire nu numai individualitatea omenirii, ci dărîmă și stinge națiuni întregi. Odată ce omul este molipsit de acest demon al ispitei, el contenește de a fi mulțumit cu aceea ce munca sa îi dă” (luxury is the most attractive, the most contagious vice, that bears all the calamities that lead to the destruction, and it destroys and extinguishes entire nations. Once people are infected by this demon of temptation, they are no longer satisfied with what work may offer). Ciurea only synthesizes the tendency of the nobility holding the monopoly of pleasure and comfort of the time, in the Romania to stigmatize anyone who would have tried to transform luxury objects into objects accessible and necessary for comfort. Thus, he draws attention to the fact that, once luxury products turn into products accessible to the masses, there will be no individuality or originality.

Adrian-Silvan Ionescu (2001) notes how Alexandru Moruzi, ruler of Muntenia, forbade the import of expensive carts, fabrics and headscarves from Vienna in 1796, and how Voda Caragea was summoned by the Ottomans, in 1815, to ban luxury products: “Looking at the daily waste of family fortunes and boyar houses caused by useless luxury and unjust expenses and painfully predicting the extent of the catastrophe, we were negatively impressed. (...) Your highness is to stop these disorders, improprieties, and prejudices by bringing decency, modesty, and temperance, truly saving virtues for the public good and the wealth of your subjects. all in good faith ... “. "The exorbitant luxury of the nobility often competed with the elegance of the ruling family, which was completely unacceptable", concludes Ionescu.

As Dan C. Mihailescu (2002) observes, luxury was seen as a “sign of irresponsible social and playful infantilism, as a blinding waste” that bears the risk of overturning social hierarchy and the good organization of society.

All these fears have been fully confirmed since the advent of mass production of goods in the so-called consumerist era. The luxury industry faces difficulties when delimiting its goods from the consumer goods industry, and these differences will be analyzed later in the article. The difficulty of recognizing the original luxury from the falsified one is the main issue.

The universality of luxury consists not only in the fact that it can be found in any society, regardless of the era, but also in the fact that it has become accessible, adding a question mark as far as the definitions of elitism are concerned.

### **Luxury between desire and marketing**

In my opinion, luxury is characterized by differences from a given norm: there is no absolute luxury, but only a relative one, which responds to a double desire. The first type of desire is the self-projected one, a dream that people must fulfil in order to satisfy a personal ambition to be different. The second type of desire is the desire projected outside the self, towards the others, and it is the aspiration of integration into norms, to be the same with a certain social category that seems to select its members according to wealth and income. If the former type is based on ambition, the latter is based on fear of isolation. The first type can be characterized by the ambition for more, and the second by the fear of too little. The consumer society is based on this second type of desire, while the first type is the basis of the luxury industry.

Luxury brands have adopted the simplest form of marketing which involves the four basic pillars: price + product + distribution + communication. Nowadays, more and more luxury brands prefer to add in the above formula advertising + customer + competition, due to financial reasons being more than obvious. However, this addition may turn luxury products into mediocre consumer goods, because the high price is only one component of a luxury product. In the past, the consumer and the competition were not part of the mentioned formula, due to the fact that luxury products used to be part of the offer and not respond to customers' demands, thus providing the illusion of uniqueness.

Today, the consumer is the key point of the marketing formula for luxury products and services, because luxury means fulfilling a dream through a 'unique' personal experience, adding another factor to the definition of luxury: the expression of individuality.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, luxury was indeed based on the supply market, whereas in the twenty-first century there is undoubtedly

a demand for luxury products. Financially speaking, luxury brands have a low ratio between functional utility and price, whereas the ratio between intangible (emotional) utility and price is high. In other words, these brands possess a desirability that goes beyond their simple functionality and that offers the user, by appropriation, a special status. The same special status allows their owners to sell them at higher prices.

One of the most famous philosophers who expressed his views on commerce and luxury was David Hume who, in his essay *On Commerce* published in 1752, underlined the fact that there are moments when the “riches and luxury of individuals, instead of adding strength to the public, will serve only to thin its armies and diminish its authority among the neighboring nations [...] The ease and convenience of private persons require that these hands should be employed in their service. The one can never be satisfied but at the expense of the other. As the ambition of the sovereign must entrench on the luxury of individuals, so the luxury of individuals must diminish the force and check the ambition of the sovereign”. The individual, he says, can only be satisfied by sacrificing another individual, his expression being “at the expense of the other”. Discussing the connection between luxury and the well-being of a nation, Hume considers that the age of the development of luxury is the happiest time in the life of a people. Hume notes that trade preceded the refinement of household objects, and this led to the development of luxury. “It would then be advantageous, as in camps, to banish all arts and luxury, and by restrictions on equipage and tables make the provisions and forage last longer than if the army were loaded with a number of superfluous retainers. But as these principles are too disinterested and too difficult to support, it is requisite to govern men by other passions and animate them with a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury”. Thus, individuals begin to know the pleasure of luxury and crave for luxury goods for the profit they get from trade which ultimately leads to the development of their community.

### **Some attempts to classify luxury**

From the many attempts to define types of luxury, I have chosen two examples one from Europe and another one from the U.S.A. Firstly, I have chosen in France, because the country is considered synonymous with luxury (the commenter I will quote below, considered the expression "French luxury" as a pleonasm); secondly I have chosen the U.S.A. because in the middle of the twentieth century, in the United States, luxury acquired a new facet, blending harmoniously with kitsch.

Marie Claude-Sicard, in her book *Luxe, mensonges marketing (Luxury, Lies and Marketing)* classifies luxury into three temporal categories:

First, classic luxury - 18th and 19th centuries throughout Europe but especially in France, dominated by the object and the obsession of personal possessions.

Second, modern luxury, the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe, dominated by the creative act and the artistic obsession.

Third, the luxury of the media, which appeared in the early 1970s in the United States and continues to this day in all civilized Western society (USA, Canada, Europe, Russia, developed Asian countries and some African communities), is marked by the obsession of individuality through public possession and recognition. The paradox of rarity applies to this period of luxury: brand owners seek to maximize profits but can never sell them in excess or standardize them because they must remain the subject of dreams and desires and not become ordinary commodities, consumer goods. According to Irina Rodina, “luxury brands must be desired wanted by everyone, but consumed by only a few”.

Media luxury is based on the way information is selected and transmitted, along with a strongly fragmented and individualized approach creating the illusion of a direct personal relationship with the customer-consumer.

American author Pamela Danziger analyzes in her book *Let Them Eat Cake: Marketing Luxury to the Masses* (an analysis that starts from the famous expression of Marie Antoinette with reference to the people who no longer had bread to eat) how the products luxury become common objects through daily use, how they lose the meaning they have at the first purchase. This significance is also lost due to the fact that the feeling of fulfilled desire transforms into a feeling of habit, after a certain period of using the objects.

Danziger believes that luxury has nothing to do with the material work itself or its price but depends entirely on how the product or service relates to the dreams, desires and passions of the luxury consumer. Everything can turn into a luxury product, because consumers are willing to accept new and unexpected definitions of this concept.

Danziger emphasizes the existence of three categories of luxury, each with its own subcategories. The first category is the luxury products (with the subcategories of furniture, antiques, works of art, etc.). The second category is personal luxury (with the subcategories of cars and clothing). The third category is experimental luxury (with the subcategories of luxury travel, beauty treatments, etc.)

The obvious differences between the two approaches to luxury are, in fact, the differences between the two cultures, French and American, the latter tending to treat this issue from the perspective of consumption of goods, while the former has a broader vision, focusing on consumers and their passions or even desires.

### **The seven dimensions of luxury**

An important study on the issue of luxury was published in 2001, in an attempt to define the perception of luxury on a global scale. Dubois, Laurent and Czellar conducted qualitative and quantitative research based on consumer behavior in several regions of Western Europe, the United States and the Asia-Pacific region. In the conclusion of the study, a general definition of luxury was given as a combination of the following seven elements: price, quality, uniqueness or shortage, aesthetics, heritage, personal pleasure and superfluity.

Excellent quality is given by exceptional ingredients, the way the object was worked and the experience of those who produced it.

Price must be very high, although many scholars believe that price does not determine the luxury of an object.

Uniqueness is given by the rarity of the product, the limited number of copies and its restricted distribution to certain geographical areas (as few objects as possible in a certain area), in order to give the illusion of exclusivity.

The aesthetic dimension is given by the sensation produced by the object, or rather by its design, by the color and style that creates its beauty in the eyes of the consumer.

Personal history is given by the ancestral heritage, by tradition and by the passing of the object from one generation to another. Often, personal history is associated with famous brand names, especially in the fashion industry, but not only. The good reputation of a luxury product, transmitted orally, rather than through media advertising and promotional campaigns, makes the consumer feel at ease, due to the personal pleasure they get from it.

The superfluous character derives from its uselessness and non-functionality, but most luxury consumers either ignore it or are not aware of the superfluous size of luxury items. The fact that a consumer can be different, standing out through what is different, makes them choose luxury items rather than taking into account this dimension of uselessness, through the prism of an original image that is preferable to bring the admiration of others.

Personal pleasure created by the luxury item derives from the excellent quality that gives rise to comfort and harmony, in the consumer's view. This

facet of luxury should ideally teach people what good taste means and turn their inner and outer world into a refined one. However, personal pleasure often gives rise to kitsch.

These seven dimensions combine in different proportions, depending on the consumer, so as to satisfy luxury needs. Depending on the proportions obtained, luxury tends towards refinement or kitsch.

## Conclusion

Luxury goods are consumed either for the social recognition or the status of the consumer who wants to create positive impressions in their communities, or for hedonistic purposes, in search of satisfying personal pleasures. The various definitions and classifications of luxury fall into these two extremes: social interaction and, respectively, the emotions and feelings generated by the consumption of luxury products.

Creating the illusion of rarity by controlling the dissemination of luxury information is the latest strategy to meet the consumer's need for uniqueness and exclusivity. The close connection between the purchase of the luxury object and the effect of its possession on the consumer's desire / dream represents the difference between luxury and necessity.

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