

Luxury under the lens

Luxes | Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

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The title *Luxes* can be translated as ‘Luxuries’, but that suggests this is just a show about opulent objects. There are plenty of those: a field of delicate porcelain flowers made in 1750, a carved-wood pavilion created for the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*, a bespoke Hispano-Suiza car from 1925. But the show’s plural title is more to do with multiple, conflicting views of its subject.

‘Before any luxury takes a physical form, it embodies an idea, a philosophical, anthropological relationship with ourselves and our time,’ says Olivier Gabet, the show’s curator. ‘Although luxury supplements social distinctions, it can also personify the intangible. If I ask 100 people “What is luxury?”, some will say their greatest luxury is time. Others will mention travel or other freedoms. All these perspectives are reflected in the show.’

Analysing luxury is nothing new: the French have argued about what it means for five centuries. During the first two, far from being superficial, luxury was an obligation. It was vital for

signifying rank, royal blood or high position in the church.

Around 1660, Louis XIV began to expand these functions. In less than 50 years, he managed to turn the courtly arts – fine food, furnishings and individual adornment – into busy, highly exploitable industries. The patronage Louis lavished on the luxury trades (combined with the skills of his minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert) helped make France into a modern nation. Colbert, determined that the French would dominate luxury, hired goldsmiths away from Florence and imported weavers from Flanders. He sponsored the royal manufacture of fabrics and porcelain, and founded the French East India Company. In places from Pondicherry to what became Québec, he pursued an aggressive trade in exceptional goods.

All of this is visible in the show. It features more than 300 pieces, most of them what the French call *répères*: landmark items that serve as craft references. They are testaments to education and apprenticeship. Yet, as

the exhibition makes clear, the making of luxuries in France has never been static. Here, luxury’s creation is a dynamic force and it has often led makers to break with craft traditions.

French luxury has always been cosmopolitan and, from the start, its creations were shaped by Egypt, Venice, Syria, Polynesia, China and Japan. Sometimes this involved accruing and studying peerless pieces, like the show’s antiquities and exotic jewels. Other times it meant the imitation or adaptation of new technologies. Foreign makers moving to France were welcomed, too, as the history of haute couture illustrates.

Luxury mogul Pierre Bergé, the man who turned Yves Saint Laurent into ‘YSL’, saw this as central: ‘The strongest point of our luxury culture is its faculty for openness and integration, the fact that we include and integrate other nations while still maintaining a strong French identity. This enables us to better understand ourselves and, at the same time, to expand and renew.’

Luxes abounds in examples of Bergé’s words. Many of the earliest creations on show are imports, such as an outsized nautilus shell from the Pacific – exquisitely carved and mounted with silver-gilt in 1630. Others are contemporary, like the evening gown by Chinese fashion designer Guo Pei. Inspired by one of Napoléon’s favourite uniforms, this 2006 creation needed 5,000 hours of embroidery.

Some works have inspired makers for centuries, such as the lacquer screens made in China’s Hunan province from 1661. French connoisseurs of



Above: *Samsara* evening gown by Guo Pei, 2006. From far left: Pierre Hardy Sneakers, Autumn/Winter, 2014; poster of the Hispano-Suiza car, owned by Adrien Maeght, 1925; folding lacquer screen designed by Armand-Albert Rateau, c. 1925

the 17th century fell in love with their *kuan cai* (‘incised colours’) technique, which they re-named ‘Coromandel’ (the screens had been shipped via India’s Coromandel coast). The free-standing artefacts were coated in layers of bright black lacquer. Deep indentations were scored into these surfaces before being filled with painted scenes in matte pigments. Spiced with gold and touches of mother-of-pearl, the imagery’s flat tones would complement the lacquer’s gloss.

Two centuries on, Coco Chanel collected Coromandel screens and soon inspired other Jazz Age designers, including Armand-Albert Rateau, the Philippe Starck of the 1920s, who designed for clients like Tiffany and European royals. Seven decades later, in 1993, Karl Lagerfeld took over at Maison Chanel. His first collection featured a ‘Coromandel’ suit, reprising the matte-and-gloss scheme in sequined embroidery.

The show’s inclusion of ‘artist-made’ shopping bags (by Sylvie Fleury for Celine) and fur-trimmed sneakers (by Pierre Hardy) pits modern luxuries against such forebears. It’s an implicit critique of global logo culture – both its conventions and its assumptions. Our world of sophisticated images, Gabet suggests, has conflated luxury with novelty. But if we reduce luxury’s function to gauging status, we change its aims and diminish its value. The pleasures it confers also become ephemeral.

The exhibition’s definition of luxury is different. It presents a genealogy designated not by era or geography, but by the singular practice of craft. If this idea embodies consumer dreams, it also aspires to something that cannot be bought. ‘For the French,’ writes philosopher Olivier Assouly, ‘luxury has values that transcend the material ... it personifies our individual powers to rejoice in the world.’ *Cynthia Rose is an arts journalist and broadcaster based in Paris*

