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Defining luxury

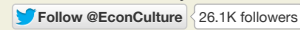
Not just about the money

Apr 29th 2015, 14:26 BY P.W.



About Prospero

Named after the hero of Shakespeare's "The Tempest", this blog provides literary insight and cultural commentary from our correspondents



"WHAT is Luxury?", a new exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, might be expected to offer a parade of glitzy, big-brand merchandise: "It" bags, low-slung sports cars and diamonds. It has a few products by famous names and a few lavish antiques (an 18th-century gem-encrusted snuff box is pictured), but such pieces make cameo appearances in a show whose surprising focus is the works of contemporary artists, craftsmen and designers.

Their preoccupations range widely. Dominic Wilcox, for example, takes something very ordinary—a flat stone picked up on the shore—and transforms it. His charming "Luxury Skimming Stone" (2009) is covered in 24-carat gold leaf and comes with a custom-made leather pouch, though Mr Wilcox fancies that one day its owner will find the perfect lake and send it skimming away. The splendid Golden Fleece Hat (2009) of Giovanni Corvaja

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could not be more different in conception. Mr Corvaja spent a decade devising a way to make gold wire fine enough to fashion into fur and then worked for 2,500 hours to use it to create a tsar's crown seemingly fringed by sable. Away from the gold, the designers at Studio Swine make a strikingly attractive, Art Deco-inspired dressing-table suite decorated with human hair embedded in resin, in a surreal play on the worldwide trade in hair extensions.

The exhibition, a collaboration with the Craft Council, grew out of research done by two curators, Jana Scholze and Leanne Wierzba. When they asked people for their definitions of luxury, initial responses were a predictable litany of costly goods marketed by global brands. But when encouraged to be more reflective, people came up with answers such as space, freedom, innovation, privacy and—most often—time. These were the concepts that became the show's organising principle, which is both good news and bad. It is heartening to hear that money is not the only desired luxury. But the show's attempt to fit its exhibits into conceptual categories does not work. The strategy fails, though the makers do not.

The show's heart is "Creating Luxury", a large room whose centre is filled by Philippe Malouin's "Time Elapsed" (2011). This floor-to-ceiling installation, a take on an hourglass, is a sophisticated, Heath Robinson contraption. As its brass cones circulate slowly, a fine stream of sand pours from the lowest to produce an intricate pattern on the platform below. Although the installation takes up a lot of space it is not the only compelling object in the room. The walls are inset with illuminated vitrines with two or three creations juxtaposed in each. One houses a magnificent, 17th-century church vestment in lace and silk, a Perpetual Calendar watch by Vacheron Constantin (2007) and a demonstration model by the same firm that is ten times the normal size (2014). Another vitrine displays a laser-cut couture coat by Iris van Herpen (2013), Paulo Goldstein's artfully held together "Repair is Beautiful" director's chair (2013) and "Stuff of Memory" (2010, ongoing), by Simone ten Hompel, which is an assortment of unusable eating implements. The different labels on each showcase—"Precision", "Passion", "In-essential"—muddle rather than clarify; they could be switched around with meaning neither lost nor gained. Yet in combining old with new, and painstakingly hand-crafted work with items made using sophisticated technology, the vitrines still provide a fresh context for individual pieces.

The entire show is populated with precisely executed, passionately conceived objects that will not protect anyone from the rain, feed a family or cure the sick. But they do inspire, provoke and elicit a smile—qualities that may render them rather closer to necessities than the visitor first thinks.

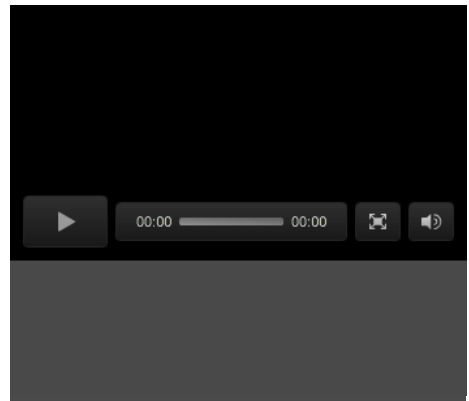
"What is Luxury?" is at the Victoria & Albert Museum, in London, until September 27th 2015

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