Luxes, a clever new exhibition in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD) within the Louvre attempts to define luxury

By Godfrey Deeny - October 14, 2020

What is your definition of luxury? Most people would have a hard time agreeing, and a cleverly eclectic new exhibition in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD) within the Louvre entitled Luxes, which opens Thursday, is an attempt to define, and redefine, the meaning of a common but not so understood term.

When did the idea, or physical examples of it, first appear? Rather remarkably, Luxes' earliest example of luxury dates back over 3,000 years before Christ to an alabaster gypsum vase from the ancient city of Susa in Iran, a culture which also produced an adjacent head of a bull made in dense silver. While from the Romans came the...
culture which also produced an adjacent head of a bull made in dense silver. While from the Romans came the Boscoreale Treasure, recovered from the aftermath of the eruption of Vesuvius. French examples of luxury in Luxes – which has over 100 exhibits - don't start appearing until medieval goblets or a dramatic Adonis wool tapestry dating from 1570 with mythological figures sewn in all their glory in silver thread.

Though the show does happily reach our current era – with Koché football fantasy dresses; Supreme’s bright red check-in wheelie for Rimowa and a splendidly seductive dress by Jacquemus in linen, named La Robe Valérie. One of the sponsors of exhibition, the European Confederation of Flax and Hemp, provided the sturdy linen used as hangings with elegantly phrased program notes placed throughout the exhibition in MAD, a wing of the Louvre on the rue du Rivoli.

“Our goal is to provide visitors the keys to help them understand what luxury can be. I think if you asked many people on the rue de Rivoli what luxury means, they might say a Kelly bag, a Cartier watch or a tapestry. I think this exhibition will help them gain a far wider understanding,” said Olivier Gabet, the director of MAD.

Luxes is the latest step in an idea he first broached with the exhibition ‘10,000 Years of Luxury' staged in the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2019.
Luxes also suggests multiple visions of luxury, using a series of rooms that shows how the concept can change very dramatically from one decade to the next. Take two adjoining spaces. The first features the opulent and rather twee indulgence of Art Deco in the 1910, with designers like Jeanne Lanvin and artists like Arman-Albert Rateau. The second celebrates a radically different French concept, “the strange luxury of nothing,” just 20 years later. With a series of deceptively simple tables, doors and lamps in unassuming materials like straw and marquetry by Jean-Michel Frank shown beside a silk toile robe and little black dress from Vionnet and Chanel, that sum up the honest asceticism of the 1930s succinctly. An idea of understatement also apparent in 17th century menswear, where through the decades, the frock coats of courtiers and kings – like Louis XIII coat when he was still the Dauphin in 1791 - were made increasingly of simplest fabrics, turning away from brocade to fine cottons. And the idea of a “well-cut suit” was born.

The exhibition is also geographically wide-ranging, boasting 800-year-old gold nose rings and ornaments from Colombia; remarkable Ehoto ceremonial swords from 1950s Ivory Coast; 17th-century Italian liturgical objects; a skilfully made celestial sphere from Augsburg in 1663 supported by a bronze Atlas and even a shop window setting for Tiffany done by then-struggling artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Jones, no less. And, to the show’s credit in the midst of marvellous creations by the likes of Karl Lagerfeld, Maria Grazia Chiuri, Helmut Lang, Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga and Yves Saint Laurent, the largest single surface is given over to the great modern Chinese couturier Guo Pei and her majestic and massive golden empress crinoline. Talk about the Rebirth of Excess! – the name of Luxes final section.

In the recent past, luxury has been generally defined in the luxury industry as referring to lux, from the Latin for light. Many senior creatives hold the view that luxury really began in the 15th century with the manufacturing of Venetian mirrors, and the result that individuals began to take far greater care of their appearance as they exited their homes each morning. Luxes effectively douses that idea, by including a delightful bronze mirror from Argos, around which winged cherubs and wild animals dance. It dates from 460 BC.
Luxes suggest a competing vision that luxury comes from *Luxus*, from the Greek for place, suggesting that it is something displaced, disruptive and even faintly barbaric or debauched. The third item in the show is a make-up spoon made of a naked Egyptian lady bearing a decorated urn on her shoulder, dating from the 18th or 19th dynasty, meaning over 3,000 years ago. Instead of gold, the materials of the ancients were as likely to be lapis lazuli, chlorite or serpentine.

“I’d like people to leave Luxes thinking that the idea of luxury is a lot wider ranging and wonderful that they realized when they came in,” smiled the show’s curator, Gabet.

In the last century, luxury became synonymous with travel, a privilege celebrated in this show by rare trucks by Louis Vuitton; Goyard luggage for the Duke of Windsor and a truly beautiful example of a Hispano-Suiza H6, the Spanish auto nicknamed The Queen of the Road. A Hermès bag also appears though that ultimate luxury marque’s piece de resistance is also about motion; a trilogy of pieces - riding helmet, boots and saddle – by artists Antoine Platteau, made of leather and painted cock feathers.

Rather uncannily, Luxes also shows how the best ideas of the Antiquity can look terribly contemporary. How an early 17th-century Edo armoured vest made of passementerie and feathers from Japan can be echoed in a beautiful pair of heels in satin, strass and more feathers from 2008 by Christian Louboutin. Or like a beautiful bracelet in chunky gold, garnet, emerald, sapphire and amethyst, which would not have looked out of place on the wrist of Coco Chanel of Lulu de la Falaise. In fact it comes from the necropolis of Yahmour in 3rd-century Syria.

Luxes – from October 15 to May 2, 2021 in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD) of the Louvre on rue Rivoli