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Luxury diminished

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Carol Herman - Every chapter of Dana Thomas' meticulously researched and elegantly written "Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster" is headed with an epigraph that addresses some aspect of the human fascination and fixation with the fine, the gorgeous, the unattainable.

Most of the chapter headers — smidgens of insight all — contain the word "luxury" itself. We human beings just can't get enough of it, and the likes of Coco Chanel, Socrates, Karl Lagerfeld and Cicero among others offer sayings that perfectly capture the best and worst of our acquisitive selves. Chanel's "Luxury is a necessity that begins where necessity ends" is the kickoff to the book's first chapter, but it is perhaps what Charlie Chaplin says at the head of the last that best captures the spirit of the book in its entirety: "The saddest thing I can imagine is to get used to luxury." That and one might add luxury's democratization. If nearly everyone can own a Vuitton bag, is it still a luxury?

Indeed lamentation hangs over this book like a perfectly tailored sheath.

Since at its core, the book is largely a history of the fashion, cosmetics and handbag industry, the trajectory is thus: Humble beginnings for the enterprising members of the pantheon, including Vuitton, Gucci and Chanel, followed by luxury's heyday, a time running mostly up to the start of World War II, leading inexorably to luxury's death by greed.

The story Ms. Thomas tells is a fascinating one, filled with surprising details, and she tells it well.

Back in the second century B.C., Ms. Thomas writes, "The display of luxury signified one's power and achievements and brought on both scorn and envy. 'Is it a waste or not?' was argued as far back as 700 B.C., Kenneth Lapatin, antiquities curator at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California, told me. The Etruscans wore gold and imported amber from the Baltics and had beautiful engraved gemstones like jasper and carnelian. But it was this love of luxury that led to their downfall, according to social conservatives of the era.

"The Greek aristocrats, Lapatin explained, 'were flashy. They'd wear their gold and their fancy clothing out and would be aped by the masses . . . Faking luxury was considered the ultimate disgrace. According to one ancient tradition, the sculptor Phidius offered to build the statue of Athena in the Parthenon in Athens out of cheap materials — gold-gilded Marble — but the proposal was vetoed by the Athenian assembly. 'Shame! Shame!' its members cried, and insisted on gold and ivory. 'They didn't want to save their money,' Lapatin said. 'They wanted to show it off.'"

And so things are not so different today.

Ms. Thomas begins her survey of the modern appetite for and expression of luxury in a chapter titled "An Industry is Born." She writes, "Marc Jacobs is the most influential creative voice in luxury fashion today. As creative director of Louis Vuitton, the world's largest luxury goods company, Jacobs oversees the studio that in the last decade has produced sumptuous and witty versions of the classic Vuitton monogram handbag — like the denim jacquard one trimmed in chinchilla — that have sold by the millions."

Readers learn that Louis Vuitton is the cornerstone of a publicly traded luxury conglomerate called LMVH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton — or LVMH for short — run by French tycoon Bernard Arnault. We also discover that "Louis Vuitton trunks are still made more or less the same way they were 150 years ago," but the fascinating story is that of Louis Vuitton himself, born in 1821 to a family of farmers and millers in the Jura, a mountainous region at the foot of the Alps in eastern France. His hard work against difficult odds we see again in the histories of the Gucci company, started in 1923 as a small shop in Florence selling luggage, and the roots of Chanel.

Ms. Thomas writes, "Chanel's founder, Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, came from even humbler beginnings than Louis Vuitton. She was born in Sumur in 1883, one of three daughters of a sickly mother and a philandering father who worked as a traveling salesman. After their mother died of tuberculosis when Gabrielle was eleven, their father deposited the girls at an orphanage in the rustic region of Auvergne"

In truth, the mini-biographies that dot the book are its most engaging feature. Business buffs will relish more tales of buyouts, product placement, marketing and globalization. Prada wins points for some of the most audacious marketing moves while Vuitton loses points for its caving into Vichy and the Nazi regime, gestures by the way that cost them nothing in sales.

Sections on perfume have their appeal including the detail that "Back in the early twentieth century, 'every luxury brand hired a nose like a restaurant hired a chef . . . Poiret had a nose who later worked for Patou. Coty had a nose. Lanvin had one who created Arpege.'" Nevertheless in the world of luxury, especially as it started to tilt toward Everywoman, Chanel No. 5 wins. In the story of that scent's success, the book does not disappoint.

But the book begins to change when the villains of mass luxury are identified. Not surprisingly, Hollywood is credited both with promoting luxury and being part of its downfall.

The author writes, "Hollywood has a long and deep relationship with luxury. During the Golden Age, from the 1920s to the early 1960s, when powerful moguls such as Jack Warner and Louis B. Mayer were in charge of the studios and ran them like kingdoms, movies were rich. Characters had posh accents, lived in grand homes, employed staff, dressed extravagantly, and made audiences dream."

On the other hand, it wasn't all roses for those who helped the masses dream, she adds. "Dior was a snob. He ranked living, breathing aristocrats higher aesthetically than their pale imitations on stage and screen."