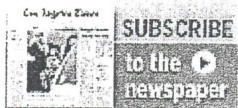




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BOOK REVIEW

'Deluxe' by Dana Thomas

Luxury: no longer reserved for the rich

By Susan Salter Reynolds August 21, 2007

On very special occasions, my grandmother would telephone Plumbridge's on Manhattan's East 63rd Street to order jelly beans. They would arrive in their gorgeous little round packages, passed from gloved hand to gloved hand, like missives from another era. They were, quite simply, the best jelly beans money could buy. Their very presence in the front hall made me feel safe. These jelly beans, handmade using some ancient family recipe, could slow progress, fend off barbarians and weave a cocoon around life as I knew it.

Tradition, craftsmanship, a feeling of well-being, and, yes, price -- all of these are associations with luxury. Today, luxury goods are a \$157-billion industry, with 35 brands responsible for 60% of the business, writes Dana Thomas in "Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster." Many of these brands are family businesses started over a century ago using recipes and designs and materials that have proved their timeless appeal around the world. Many (but not all) of these products could once be afforded only by the very wealthy. Now that more and more people can afford those items, writes Thomas, a cultural and fashion reporter for Newsweek in Paris, is that a good thing? After all, why should only a handful of people be allowed to own status goods like Louis Vuitton bags and Chanel perfume and Christian Louboutin shoes?

"Some applaud the democratization of luxury," writes Thomas, though one clearly has the feeling that she is not one of them. She quotes Vogue editor Anna Wintour: "It means more people are going to get better fashion. And the more people who can have fashion, the better." The result, counters Fred Hayman, the force behind Giorgio Beverly Hills ("the man who introduced modern luxury shopping to Americans") is that luxury has "lost its cachet."

Thomas worries that a focus on profit has affected not just the cachet of luxury but the quality of the goods. "If there is one thing that has changed in luxury in the last thirty years, it is the single-minded focus on profitability," she writes. "In the old days, when luxury brands were privately held companies, owners cared about making a profit but the primary objective in-house was to produce the finest products possible. Since the tycoons have taken over, however, that objective has been replaced by a phenomenon I call the cult of luxury." These tycoons, she claims, "have shifted the focus from what the product is to what it represents."

Thomas interviewed dozens of chief executives, founders and board members of luxury companies for this book. She is particularly fascinated by high-profile, controversial

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figures in the fashion world, like Miuccia Prada (famous for her insouciant lack of interest in business) and Bernard Arnault of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (one of the most glamorous and notorious figures in the luxury/fashion world). Thomas does not conceal her feelings for some of these characters: "Unlike her competitor Donatella Versace, who so obviously came from nothing," she writes of Prada, "her snobbery is in her bones." If anything, Thomas gets a little too wrapped up in their rise and fall from power. The increased importance of confidence in these brands as conveyors of status has meant increased secrecy in the luxury goods industry, making it harder for a reporter to follow threads and get straight answers. Thomas is understandably reluctant to leave her work on the cutting-room floor.

More interesting are her forays into the workrooms and factories where these goods are produced: the Vuitton compound in Asnières-sur-Seine outside Paris (one of 14), where 220 people create the company's hand-sewn bags and special-order items; the gardens in Grasse in the Provence region of France that supply the jasmine and roses for Chanel No. 5; the silk factory in Florence that supplies fabrics for Pucci; the ateliers of old-fashioned craftspeople like Poupie Cadolle (the great-great-granddaughter of the woman who invented the brassiere in 1889 and who now creates custom-made bras that sell for \$800 and up); and the factories in China where the knockoffs are made.

Except of course for the Chinese factories, which, Thomas writes, remind her of university campuses, with their cafeterias and recreation rooms, these are the places where the true culture of luxury is preserved. "Luxury is the possibility to stay close to your customers, and do things that you know they will love," Thomas quotes her "favorite luxury refugee," Christian Louboutin, as saying. "It's about subtlety and details. It's about service. . . . Luxury is not consumerism. It is educating the eyes to see that special quality."

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Deluxe
How Luxury Lost Its Luster

Dana Thomas

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