

Reviews

Deluxe:

How Luxury Lost Its Luster

DANA THOMAS. Penguin Press, \$27.95
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N*ewsweek* reporter Thomas skillfully narrates European fashion houses' evolution from exclusive ateliers to marketing juggernauts. Telling the story through characters like the French mogul Bernard Arnault, she details how the perfection of old-time manufacturing, still seen in Hermès handbags, has bowed to sweatshops and wild profits on mediocre merchandise. After a brisk history of luxury, Thomas shows why handbags and perfume are as susceptible to globalization and corporate greed as less rarefied industries. She follows the overarching story, parts of which are familiar, from boardrooms to street markets that unload millions in counterfeit goods, dropping irresistible details like a Japanese monk obsessed with Comme des Garçons. But she's no killjoy. If anything, she's fond of the aristocratic past, snarks at "behemoths that churn out perfume like Kraft makes cheese" and is too credulous of fashionistas' towering egos. Despite her grasp of business machinations, her argument that conglomerates have stolen luxury's soul doesn't entirely wash. As her tales of quotidian vs. ultra luxury make clear, the rich and chic can still distinguish themselves, even when Las Vegas hosts the world's ritziest brands. Thomas might have delved deeper into why fashion labels inspire such mania, beyond "selling dreams," but her curiosity is contagious. (Aug.)