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## Review: Has luxury's lap gotten too big?

By Lyn Millner, Special for USA TODAY

Luxury items were once exclusive. The well-heeled wore Gucci loafers. Prada was the province of the wealthy. Fine watches, jewelry, clothes and handbags were painstakingly crafted by independent artisans in small workshops. They sold for kingly sums to the elite.

But that has changed, Dana Thomas asserts in *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster*.

She covers culture and fashion for *Newsweek* in Paris.

Family-owned luxury companies have given way to megacorporations that have turned luxury into a \$157 billion business that offers something for almost everyone.

"Tycoons have stripped away all that has made (luxury) special," Thomas writes.

That is somewhat of an overstatement, as we come to find in the next chapter. Louis Vuitton still makes its trunks the way it has for 150 years. Its steamer bags are made by hand. All the jasmine for Chanel No. 5 comes solely from a fifth-generation farmer in France.

But Thomas' larger point rings true. While luxury brands have preserved their flagships, most have also expanded into midrange (and even low-end) products. Consider Armani's A/X stores. Or T-shirts bearing designer logos.

Thomas tracks this devolution of luxe, often reaching deep into history for context. Modern luxury can be traced to Europe's royal courts.

Thomas supplies colorful biographies of the businessmen and women behind luxury's boom. We see how billionaire Bernard Arnault, CEO of LVMH Moët Hennessy-Louis Vuitton, earned the nickname "the wolf in cashmere." We witness some of Coco Chanel's ruthlessness and learn more about her ties to the Nazis.

The consumers, though, are by far the most interesting characters in *Deluxe*. For instance, a Buddhist monk believes Comme des Garçons clothing has miraculous powers.

Even more engaging are the unintended fans of luxe, such as the Burberry-wearing teenage punks in Britain who haunt malls, intimidating the customers. And the rap stars with a fondness for bling.

Luxury companies have learned to profit from the latter group.

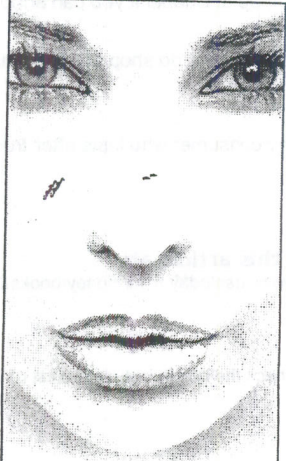
The bread-and-butter customers of midrange luxury are regular folks. And they're the biggest segment of what Thomas calls "the cult of luxury."

Tycoons know how to appeal to them, by promoting what a product stands for, rather than its quality.

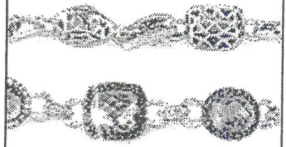
Arnault explains, "It fulfills a fantasy. You feel as if you must buy it, or else you won't be in the moment. You will be left behind."

This is a telling quote about human nature and about the industry's exploitation of it. But Thomas doesn't dig much deeper into it.

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In fact, she begins each chapter with a thought-provoking quote. There's this sentiment from Socrates: "Contentment is natural wealth. Luxury is artificial poverty." But these thoughts are not explored. Too bad, because an examination of the luxury industry begs for questions about our yearning for status and wealth.

Thomas covers the industry itself thoroughly. Her chapter on the connection with celebrities gives an insider perspective on the red-carpet insanity that comes to a head every Oscar season.

Thomas tags along with a private investigator whose job it is to catch knockoff artists. She goes to China, no longer the low-cost labor capital it once was.

"The Chinese are moving into ownership," she writes. In Italy, for instance, "(Chinese) manufacturers hope to take over established brands, set up joint ventures to launch new brands, and distribute Italian labels in China."

She also covers the phenomenon of "fast fashion," inexpensive clothing lines created by top designers and available at stores such as Target and H&M.

Her book adds up to an excellent chronicle of how luxury has come to mean something less than it once did.

"Why shop at Chanel if you can shop at H&M?" asks H&M's marketing director, Jörgen Andersson, near the end of the book.

Those of us who do shop at stores such as H&M and Target take for granted this democratization of luxury. And we may not have much use for this book.

But any consumer who lusts after true luxury — or a marketer trying to evoke that lust — should read it cover to cover.

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