

COUNTRY & TOWN HOUSE

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

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**A New
LUXURY**
*there's not
It' bag in sight*

**DONNA
AIR**

*Model
mother*

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spots to
abroad

**The Art of
Innocence**
*Your children like
you've never seen
them before*

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Fashion and
interiors for
small folk



TELL ME A STORY

The face of luxury has changed: it's no longer acceptable to follow celebrity fads – true luxury comes from heritage, craftsmanship and a wonderful backstory, says JULIA ROBSON

This February, the runways of London Fashion Week exploded in a dazzling spectacle of rich colour, elaborate handiwork and techy fabrications. Burberry added a hippie patchwork of embroidery and peacock feathers with Gujarati mirrors to a cape and Christopher Kane put a Gustav Klimt-like print of entwined lovers on a strappy dress pieced together like an elaborate puzzle.

But this was neither a decorative arts revival nor the new Belle Époque. There was nothing retro about Mary Katrantzou's bodice tops inspired by moulded car roof interiors worn with glossy leather embossed skirts; or Erdem Moralioglu's fraying brocade frocks inspired by Visconti heroines, with their trailing threads bonded onto felty, industrial fabrics. The crafty aesthetic juxtaposed against clean lines and wearable silhouettes, jolted you from the past very much into the present.

Having done a lot of head scratching, it's become clear that London's creatives were merely attempting to answer the question that's been dogging popular culture for some time: what is luxury in the 21st century? And, if you remove the traditional trappings of opulence – those that denote social status, wealth, taste and power – how do you capture, as Kane put in his catwalk show notes, 'the desirability of desire'?

Take top end handbag designer, Anya Hindmarch's latest 'it' bag, a tiny clutch designed to resemble a screwed-up crisp packet, and now the most sought-after accessory on the red carpet. It has a price tag of £900 but is it really luxury? I mean, really?

In April, a joint venture between the V&A and the Crafts Council attempts to explore this



very modern conundrum in an exhibition entitled, candidly, *What is Luxury?* This strangely wonderful, emporium-type show will feature a mind-boggling collection of contemporary design and craftsmanship, alongside equally fascinating conceptual ideas, challenging old, new and future predictions of what we aspire to most.

Thought-provoking exhibits include American artist Gabriel Barcia-Colombo's DNA Vending Machine, which contains pre-packaged DNA samples, and poses the question of privacy and ownership of one's own DNA becoming the ultimate luxury.

There's also a diamond created in a lab from armadillo road kill rather than pressure-cooked within the earth's crust over thousands of years. The carbon core, although identical to, say, Amal Clooney's seven-carat £500,000 engagement ring, challenges perceptions and poses questions arising from exploitation of mineworkers, environmental damage, dwindling resources etc.

And there are exquisite hair slides by Studio Swine, reminiscent of ones

you might see on granny's dressing table – but made from human hair, one of the few natural resources, which increases along with the world's population.

Sciatica sufferers might enjoy Joris Laarman's 'bone' furniture, which was developed using software that uses the same principles as bone growth to determine its form.

'We felt the question, "what is luxury?" was very much in the air,' explains the co-curator of the V&A show, Leanne Wierzbka. 'Being a public museum we couldn't merely speculate for the few, or those on a certain budget.'

'Luxury is a spectrum. It can be as humble as an apple or a cup of tea,' agrees the show's other co-curator, Jana Scholze, curator of Contemporary Furniture and Product Design at the V&A.

And, for this reason, rather than showcase luxury brands, which Scholze explains 'felt strangely done' (although I note an Hermès saddle has snuck in here), the V&A has focused on the terminology of 'what is' and 'what if', placing objects around the question.

What links disparate objects are narratives, which educate not just on time-honoured craft and expertise, but also the downside of man's pursuit of luxury. Indeed, what feels most modern is the notion of 'conscionable' luxury; a movement already embedded and growing within the high-end luxury community.

Jeweller Alice Cicolini, who specialises in handmade gems and enamels crafted in India, sold through London's trendy Dover Street Market and Colette in Paris, believes the intimate dialogue between gem wearer and craftsman (referred to as 'the secret'), after a period of being silenced is becoming more audible. 'It's always easier to talk "how many carats?" rather than the true value on craftsmanship,' says Cicolini.

The power of the internet, which has made luxury accessible to the masses, is also under scrutiny. 'I think the digital era has been good but now people want to touch and interact with the artist or designer,' believes fine jeweller Marsha Varrow, who was one of the first to sell directly online to the customer but now sells only platinum, limited edition and one-off pieces. 'The term "luxury" has been so overused. It's lost its true meaning.'

David Wolfe, creative director of The Doneger Group, one of the world's premier fashion forecasting and trend intelligence companies, based in New York City, is even more controversial; this time about celebrity culture, which has arguably brought luxury into ill-repute.

'The Kardashians are losing their influence,' he dares. 'The idea of going into a shop and buying something you've had nothing to do with just because it's luxury or a celebrity wears it is so old-fashioned. Luxury items are not about mindless self-indulgence but the ownership of items and gadgets that afford one the valuable luxury of time saved.'

London Craft Week co-founder, Guy Salter, a former CEO of Asprey – Britain's oldest luxury purveyors – is seeing a rise in what he calls the 'discerning shopper'. 'For



Bone chaise, positive mould and chair by Joris Laarman, 2006



Combs, Hair Highway, Studio Swine, 2014

Alice Cicolini



Are the Kardashians losing their influence?

Marsha Varrow

'The Kardashians are losing their influence,' says David Wolfe. 'The idea of going into a shop and buying something you've had nothing to do with just because it's luxury or a celebrity wears it is so old-fashioned. Luxury items are not about mindless self-indulgence but the ownership of items and gadgets that afford one the valuable luxury of time saved.'

some time I've felt the actual winners and losers in the luxury market were decided not by how much wealth was around the world but by the sophistication of the consumers and how they spent that wealth. 'The Chinese are getting fed up with brands they see everywhere and are choosing ones they feel are able to demonstrate the quality of making and materials.'

Luxury writer Tim Jackson says, 'A lot of things changed after the Lehman Brothers' crash of 2008. The



No. 1 Palace Street, pictured to the right of Buckingham Palace

'Our clients range from family-owned, 100-year-old companies like tailors Anderson & Sheppard, to Troubadour, a leather goods company set up by two frighteningly young American guys who worked in corporate finance and couldn't find a decent bag, so jumped in a car and spent the best part of year travelling around Italy to find the best Italian artisans to work with them on one,' says Massey.

A whopping 7,000 sq/ft (out of 10,000 sq/ft dedicated to facilities for residents) of No 1 Palace Street, the property next door to Buckingham Palace, which on its completion in 2017, is cited as being the most desirable property in the Capital, is devoted to a wellness centre befitting a five-star hotel. Niccolò Barattieri di San Pietro, CEO of Northacre,

the landmark residential giants behind No. 1 Palace Street, cites 'state-of-the-art technology and security' as priorities with his UHNW clients.

This mirrors Kanye West's Prombron Iron Diamond armoured cars (he's got two), which cost \$1.2m each. In the style of Aristotle Onassis' bar stools on his luxury yacht, the bespoke interiors are fashioned from the foreskin of a whale penis.

'Luxury is still about refinement. It shows you've put in time and passion,' says London-based Chinese-born designer, Huishan Zhang, whose Swarovski-crystal encrusted AW15/16 collection was inspired by a Chinese empress going hunting within the Forbidden City (and you can't get more luxurious than that).

The final word from PR guru, Massey, perhaps speaks for us all when he says, 'For someone who spends most of his life on a plane, my definition of luxury has to be having time to spend with my wife and children.' ■

What is Luxury? From 25 April to 27 September 2015. vam.ac.uk/whatisluxury; #whatisluxury

biggest impact was the shift in wealth from developed to developing countries [Brazil, Russia, India, China]. Pre-2000 you had 45 per cent of all luxury goods globally being bought by Japanese consumers. Today the single biggest group is the Chinese.'

Of the 199,234 Ultra High Net Worth individuals known as UHNW), whose net worth is £20m, only 19 per cent come from inherited wealth. And here we get into 'extreme' luxury.

'The UHNW want a story behind their goods,' says Nicola Jones, director of Decorum Est., the Kings Road company specialising in super luxurious interiors. Markets like the Middle East, Russia and China, which people mistakenly think are just after big brands, have cottoned on to craftsmanship,' she says.

What happens next lies with the younger generation, the millennials (those born in '80s and '90s, now aged between 18 and 34). 'It could go either way,' believes Cicolini, by not asking "how much is it worth?" but more, "do I like it? Do I have an emotional attachment to it?"

'The notion of youth is important but cultural spending is more significant,' believes Tim Jackson, who cites the luxury art market – valued at £60bn, the luxury clothing sector, by contrast, is \$400,000m – as being one to watch.

According to James Massey, CEO of The Massey Partnership, a public relations company specialising in top tier brands and destinations, ranging from Breitling and Gieves & Hawkes to Shangri La at the Shard and The Scarlett eco-hotel in Cornwall, luxury continues to evolve as a result of super-rich global tourists. The buzzword being 'experience'.



Huishan Zhang



Kanye West's Prombron Iron Diamond armoured car



Troubadour



Anderson & Sheppard