

Jeff Koons X Louis Vuitton: The Emperor's New Bag



Naturally, the Fashionista, not wanting to appear a fool, said: "Isn't it grand! Isn't it fine! Look at the cut, the style, the line! This designer bag is altogether, but altogether it's altogether The most remarkable designer bag that I have ever seen."

Jeff Koons' recent collaboration with Louis Vuitton is hideous. In fact, it is so hideous that the bags and accessories could be used as a pilot suitability test: if they are thought of as attractive the applicant is either colour blind or has severely impaired judgement. Either way, they are not fit to fly.



Jeff Koons X Louis Vuitton, SPEEDY 30 'Da Vinci Bag', 2017

The artist has covered the handbags with images of famous paintings by Old Masters. On each leather item, overlaying the image, is the original artist's name embossed in metallic lettering. The brand's LV logo litters the scene, as does a JK for Jeff Koons. And where the traditional Louis Vuitton bags have a padlock there is instead a bunny-shaped key ring. They are piped, lined and 'handled' with an unsuitable block colour that clashes with the subtle tones of the brushwork. Arm candy they are not. Arm spat-out-boiled-sweet, they are. But, equally, Jeff Koons' collaboration with Louis Vuitton is an unequivocal work of genius.

It is ludicrous to assume that the Louis Vuitton bags, like many art/fashion collaborations, are indicative of an artist selling out. Jeff Koons currently holds the title of highest selling living artist in America; his sculpture *Balloon Dog (Orange)* sold at Christies New York for \$58.4 Million. To put it bluntly, he is a very rich man. In reality, the move fits entirely into his artistic M.O. For an artist who once made a series on the 'Degradation of Luxury' the irony of working with one of the world's most luxurious fashion houses would have been no accident. His *Luxury and Degradation* series was centred thematically on alcohol and items such as crystal decanters and silver ice buckets were translated to stainless-steel. He said that the body of work was "where I warned people not to pursue luxury because it was like the alcoholic falling under the control of alcohol." To borrow the analogy from Koons: anyone that purchases a Louis Vuitton handbag is running the risk of slipping into an alcohol-induced coma. The bags are priced at up to £3,000, and the price tag on a literal tag or 'bag charm' will set you back £370.



Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Orange)*, 1994-2000



Jeff Koons, *Baccarat Crystal Set*, 1986

So why then did Koons collaborate with the luxury goods manufacturer? It can only be as an act of degradation. He has reappropriated both their logo and the Old Master paintings. High art and high fashion, two spoils of society's elite, are on show and yet the appearance is that of a tacky souvenir. One can just imagine herds of women tottering around gallery openings, in both Mayfair and the Upper East Side, with a glass of champagne in one manicured hand and a DA VINCI X JEFF KOONS X LOUIS VUITTON in the other.

Koons is often thought of as the artistic successor of Andy Warhol whose mass-produced work served as a commentary on the consumerism of 1960's America. But Warhol's artistic output was not confined to his Campbell Soup Cans or Brillo Boxes; he was the embodiment of his art and played the role of protagonist in his own artistic narrative. His carefully curated public persona is as quotable as his art is recognisable with interviews and writings littered with gems including: "I am a deeply superficial person" and "Everybody's plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic." This technique of words supporting, instead of explaining, art is employed by Koons when he states "I hope the bags are a symbol of humanism, and about the joy of society and communal life, and about participating in that community."



Jeff Koons X Louis Vuitton, KEEPALL 50 'Manet Bag', 2017

The bags can be a *commentary* on society, but not a *celebration* of its joy. They are made to hang on the arms of the rich, costing a lot of money and no doubt holding a lot of money. But this is the stance he has to take in order for the gravitas of his 'piece' to take hold. He needs consumers to view the bag as a luxury item. Indeed, he has even managed to pull the leather over some critics' eyes. For instance Jonathan Jones, writing for The Guardian, muses that he "can't think of a simpler way to put great art at the forefront of modern minds. This is not a cynical exercise. The hunt painting is not a pop icon – yet – but a serious painting beloved by art connoisseurs. Jeff Koons, for instance."

I have no doubt Koons is a great admirer of the Old Masters, but primarily he is an artist himself. The handbags are not a public service exercise in bringing great art out of the museums like Koons insists. He describes how his role is to shine a light on the history of art: "I see them (*the paintings*) as part of the world and I cannot wait to see them coming down the street or see them in the restaurant." But this collaboration cannot be about furthering Rubens' reach or as Koons states "a continuation of my effort to erase the hierarchy attached to fine art and Old Masters." The word 'Rubens' is embossed across the image and the painting serves as a backdrop to the name. The work is covered and hard to see in its entirety; it is interrupted and 'degraded.' The Old Master is reduced to letters; as much a logo or a brand, as the LV or JK stamped beneath. Koons is commodifying and commercialising the famed artworks, not presenting them for consideration. Instead of becoming an equaliser and an eraser of hierarchy, they are a luxury enjoyed by those at the top. The brand of high art becomes a signifier of the 'one-percent' as the proletariat look on, laughing.



Jeff Koons X Louis Vuitton PALM SPRINGS 'Rubens Backpack', 2017

The reproductions of the Old Master paintings can be compared to the stainless steel used for Koons' balloon sculptures and for his *Luxury and Degradation* series. He describes the steel as "an artificial luxury, a proletarian material. I could have melted it and turned it into pots and pans." He explained that the purpose of stainless steel was "to show people that they should learn to preserve their political and economic power rather than strive for luxury." The polished stainless steel looks expensive but is in fact cheap, just like the images of fine art. The printed reproductions are stand-ins and imitations; they replicate grandeur but are not the real thing. They are accessible and readily available; a proletarian luxury.

Within Fashion's narrative the move is not so profound. In recent years the industry seems to have turned in on itself and become drenched in irony. Perhaps with the culture of social media, and the apparent egotistical way people self-document, there is a move to counteract the smug selfie with sense of humour. From Jeremy Scott's McDonald's Moschino to Christopher Kane's Crocs, proletarian luxury is becoming the new luxury. However, these bags are by an Artist and so, if placed within that history, become something quite different.



Moschino, Autumn/Winter 2014 Marcel Duchamp, 'Fountain', 1917

Like Marcel Duchamp with his urinal a hundred years earlier, Koons is simply taking the piss. Duchamp famously submitted an upturned urinal, signed by his alias R. Mutt, to the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. The work was rejected by the committee as it was not authored by an acclaimed artist. Koons has inverted this idea and taken it one step further. He has essentially collaborated with a fine urinal maker, stamped his name all over it and sold it to the rich for a much-inflated price, leaving them exposed in the process. He has blurred the lines of art and object, but instead of turning the utilitarian to art, it is the bags' utilitarian quality that makes the statement. His moralising narrative may have been believable if this was a project with his previous collaborators, H & M, and the bags were being sold for £50. Yet at the current price it is impossible to separate them from his body of work targeting luxury. It is an evolution of the *Luxury and Degradation* series: he was recreating luxury items as art and now he is recreating art as luxury items.

Furthermore, as fake designer bags flood market stalls across the globe, Koons' statement on luxury takes on another dimension. From Marrakesh to Ilford, reproductions of Koons' reproductions are being sold. One wonders if perhaps, this was the end goal. Do the bags carry both a warning on the pursuit of luxury and an irony centred on authorship, originality and branding. He has offered up a real-fake and in the process sparked the production of fake-fakes.

The chief executive of Louis Vuitton said of the collaboration: "People are going to be upset about the sacred entering the realm of the profane. But we like to do things that can be perceived as politically incorrect. If we are getting flak, we think we are doing something right." And right they are. It is not a wholly cynical exercise from the brand; it is a chance to participate in culture and the history of art. After all, £3,000 for a Jeff Koons is far below the usual asking price. The artist himself considers the market and the commercial value of his work an 'abstraction.' Speaking in 2015 he explained that his motivation was not wealth and luxury: "I haven't achieved my full potential yet. That's what I want to achieve." In 2017, with this collaboration, I believe he has done just that.

As for actually owning a handbag, would I want one? Well...Yes. Just like I would want a ready-made by Duchamp or a Campbell Soup Can by Warhol. They are reactionary pieces on society, the art world and human nature. But would I carry one down the street? No. Like bottles of Buckfast by a park bench, they are the marker of a drunk. Although.... I might be tempted to change my mind if only there was some way to let the public know that I am, in fact, teetotal with irony... #art