

The Language of Luxury
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Summary by Jasmine Souza

“The Death of Fashion” spurs industry wide dialogues and at the center of them is a struggle to define luxury in the global markets of the 21st century. Luxury brands have become part of common vernacular, exclusivity of ownership has eroded (largely in accessories and fragrances) and Fashion Week runway shows are no longer invite only affairs, if you have an internet connection you can experience the opulence from your couch. However, in spite of all the clamor Dr. Aspelund’s lecture reveals that the meaning of luxury has been fluid for centuries.

Luxury has known many definitions in public forums running the gamut from vulgar sin in the 14th century meandering through varying levels of acceptability from the 17th century through to today. Though its etymology has evolved, the nonverbal language of luxury has always signified elevated status. When ruling classes were faced with the issue of demonstrating power without violence, they turned to luxury. Finery without an utterance conveys control over resources displayed through precious gems and metals, perhaps a touch of ermine. These symbols communicate clearly the haves and have-nots in a way that everyone understands instantly (viscerally even).

Dr. Aspelund’s presentation highlighted driving factors behind the ever changing face of luxury. Social shifts play an enormous part in how luxury is displayed. For instance, when religious authority dwindled and secular values began to dominate, the middle class unencumbered by religious mores demanded their own material distinction. In the mid to late 19th century class struggles shaped prompts that lead to increased subtlety in luxurious habits. William Morris’s call for aesthetic simplicity and Thorstein Veblen’s writings on “conspicuous consumption” highlighted that the motive to consume had more to do with status than material progress had impacted societal views on luxury.

Popular culture and magazines impacted the dissemination of luxury ideals from the late 19th into the 20th century. The definition of luxury became more subjective as the variety of high end products increased. Coco Chanel injected new perspectives on luxury insisting that luxury must be comfortable, introducing fine knit wear, and revolutionizing designer fragrance as an accessible department store treat. As the 20th century wore on the 1960s and 70s saw pop influence at a fevered pitch through the lens of Andy Warhol’s counterculture. Andy Warhol’s coterie spawned an anti-lux brigade of musicians and artists, which ironically enough indulged in the very jet-set life clad in designer clothing that they railed against. The decadence of the 1980s piggy-backed on the jaded stage set by the previous decade, giving rise to designer monograms, empty symbols and facades. Luxury was dominated by image formulation without focusing on substance and quality.

Today the language of luxury is a global phenomenon, brand recognition transcends borders and cultures. More and more people own luxury goods, and an even larger desirous population covet them and worship at their altars (or window displays). Even in climates of economic downturn luxury evolves successfully in order to prevail. The MET Gala often stands as a thermometer for what’s next in the world of luxury. The 2015 theme “Chinese Whispers” intends to generate buzz around the exoticizing and “self-exoticizing” Eastern themes. The Chinese market is among the most quickly expanding markets in the world, and will certainly

have a say in the evolving face of luxury. Luxury, as the lecture proves, transcends rigid definition, it reflects and shapes dynamic cultural symbolism and material consumption and, like fashion, is very much alive.