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What Is Luxury?: The Rebirth of a Concept in the Early Modern World

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ABSTRACT Luxury is one of the key words of our time, driving a multimillion dollar global industry, and used ubiquitously to describe exclusive objects and aspirational lifestyles. However, defining the concept in concrete terms is more elusive and problematic. Part of the definitional problem lies in the longer history and use of this concept. This article looks at luxury's *longue durée*, and aims to clarify some common misunderstandings around its use. It reminds us that, in its origins, luxury was not a term to describe consumption by elites, but one used to denigrate the consumer practices of newly emerging wealthy classes. It argues for four key phases in the development of the concept: the ancient world, the early modern period, the eighteenth century, and the late twentieth

century. In particular it focuses on early modern Italy as a crucial period and place in luxury's defining moments, yet one that is often overlooked. It was the Italians who were the first to revive the ancient use of luxury as a term of denigration for the aspirational consumption of non-elites, and it was also the Italians who were the first to invent a new word in the vernacular to describe this consumption – *lusso*, or luxury. Luxury as word, concept, and practice is a contingent historical product which evoked and continues to evoke ambivalent and strong emotions in every period.

KEYWORDS: luxury, *luxuria*, magnificence, pomp, lust, sumptuary law

> Definition is not everything, but everything involves definition.
>
> Jan Aart Scholte

Defining luxury is not an idle academic exercise. The Luxury Goods industry has become a Leviathan of the twenty-first century with no sign of appeasement. In 2012, the worldwide Luxury Goods market was valued at 212 billion euros, which represents a growth of 175 percent since 1995. Moreover, this industry is remarkably impervious to financial crises. Although there was a perceptible decline in the industry in the two years of the Global Financial Crisis (from 170 billion in 2007 down to 153 billion in 2009), there was rapid recovery the following year, with a rise to a value of 173 billion in 2010 (Statista: The Statistics Portal n.d.). Clearly many livelihoods around the world depend upon, derive from, or contribute to, this enormous global industry of luxury.

But if luxury is one of the key words of our time, it is also one of the most elusive to define, with paradoxes at its core. Luxury at its most elemental is defined by the non-essential; goods or even simply experiences that are superfluous to need. And yet the engine of luxury that fuels its associated industries requires that superfluous desires are transformed into pressing needs. Moreover, luxury is a concept which requires *objective* expression, but which depends upon *subjective* perception. However, due to its subjective perception, luxury's objective expression is in constant flux. This year's luxury soon becomes last year's necessity, or even base commodity. As Berry expresses it: "A luxury is not something static, it is dynamic; it is subject to development as the desires, and necessarily attendant beliefs, are met and then fuelled with further qualitative modifications or refinements" (Berry 1994: 18).

The importance of luxury in the modern world, and yet its elusiveness as a concept, is reflected in the timeliness of an exhibition

in the world's premier museum of material culture, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which poses the question *What Is Luxury?* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, April 25–September 27, 2015). Though few might be able to define the word with precision, modern luxury immediately conjures up an evocative collection of adjectives, all highlighted in the exhibition. Luxury is defined against the essential, and hence the exhibition's use of *Non-Essential* as a core organizational adjective. If luxury goods are non-essential goods, then, so the exhibition argues, it follows that they also evoke notions of *Preciousness*, *Opulence*, and *Rarity*, and involve *Innovation*, the *Extraordinary*, *Precision*, *Expertise*, *Skill*, and a substantial *Investment*, the latter often justified on the grounds of these goods' *Legacy*. Its non-essential nature means that luxury is also insulated by notions of *Exclusivity*, *Privacy*, and *Access*. The constant desire among the buying faithful for luxury goods, and the profits to be derived therefrom, also raise issues of *Authenticity* and of *Resources*, and bring up the issue of *Legacy* once more but this time perhaps in the context of sustainability. Above all luxury evokes strong subjective emotions, expressed in the exhibition's use of the terms *Passion*, *Pleasure*, and *Fantasy* (terms courtesy of Jana Scholze, Bill Sherman, and Leanne Wierzba of the V&A).

If these are notions conjured up by modern luxury, how recognizable are they across time and space? Is luxury an immutable concept simply waiting to be manifested?

Any attempt to answer the question "What Is Luxury?" needs to take account of the concept's *longue durée.* This article argues that this long history involves at least four key definitional moments: the ancient world, the early modern, the eighteenth century, and the late

Figure 1
Printing letters forming the word "LUXUS". Photo: Image Broker/REX.

twentieth century. Each of these periods saw crucial interventions in the concept's surprising career trajectory from despised object of denigration to exclusive object of universal desire and celebration, which now finds itself the subject of an exhibition.

Of these four definitional periods, it is the eighteenth century that has received the most sustained scholarly focus and attention, and with good reason. This period's burgeoning economy and industrialization, what Maxine Berg has termed an unparalleled "product revolution," provided the background for the emergence of the so-called luxury debates (Berg 2005: 5). Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), Daniel Defoe's *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728), and David Hume's "Of Luxury" (1752) are just a few of the many contemporary essays written on the topic. As Berg has argued in her superb overview of this period's debates and the scholarship devoted to them, the eighteenth century saw a key shift in luxury discourses from the moral to the economic realm, resulting in what she describes as "new luxury" (Berg 2005: 33ff.). Many other scholars have written on this period (see, for example, Berg and Eger 2002; Berg and Clifford 1999; Brewer and Porter 1993; Fairchilds 1993; McKendrick *et al*. 1982; Pomeranz 2000; de Vries 1974, 2008). It is not the intention of this article to attempt any further interventions in this intimidating body of luxury scholarship focusing on the eighteenth century. Nor will it attempt any survey of Luxury's most recent iterations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This article focuses instead on what I have delineated above as the second stage of Luxury's definitional career, in the early modern period. This stage is usually overlooked or barely acknowledged in broader histories of the concept (Berry 1994; Sekora 1977), or of its later articulation in enlightenment Italy (Wahnbaeck 2004). It argues that the recognizably modern phenomenon of luxury, and the complex economic, moral, social, political, and ethical dilemmas it raised, appeared for the first time in the Western world since antiquity, not in eighteenth-century Britain, Paris, or the Netherlands, but in early modern Italy. Too often, modern notions of luxury have been applied anachronistically back onto discussions of the early modern, with confusing results. By taking time to unravel and analyze the complex history of the concept of luxury in the early modern, this article aims to contribute to our understandings of it in the modern world. As Jan Scholte reminds us: "A muddled or misguided core concept compromises our overall comprehension of the problem. In contrast, a sharp and revealing definition promotes insightful, interesting, and empowering knowledge …" (Scholte 2002: 3).

In the Western tradition, luxury's origins lie in the ancient world. The word itself was first used by the Romans. This is perhaps not surprising. For if luxury requires expense upon the non-essential, you need a substantial section of society living beyond subsistence to practice and experience it; luxury requires wealth as a precondition for its expression. But for the Romans the concept of luxury was

not one twinned to *exclusivity*, a key term for the V&A exhibition. Nor was it necessarily about *preciousness*, or *rarity*. From its very beginnings luxury was used by exclusive Roman elites not to describe themselves, but as a term of denigration for the expenditures and lifestyles of non-elites. Their words *luxuria*, and *luxuries*, were derived forms of *luxor*. These three forms of the word luxury were used interchangeably in many contexts to indicate "extravagance," "profusion," "riotous living," and "excess" (Lewis and Short 1958: s.v. "luxuria").

The Romans made a clear distinction between types of expenditure. *Luxuria* was contrasted with another word, *magnificentia*, "magnificence," which was in turn related to *splendor*, "splendor." Here the Romans appropriated Greek arguments, elaborated by Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle, amongst others, whereby magnificence

Figure 2
Gold and jeweled crown, *c*. 1750, Portugal Museum no: LOAN:GILBERT.69:1-2008. The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

(*megaloprépeia*) denoted the sanctioned, lauded, and public use of wealth by elites for the greater good (Aristotle 1955, Book 4, IV, 2, 1122a 23; see also the discussion in Guerzoni 1999: 332–78; Howard 2012). Through the virtues of magnificence and splendor, elites were not just entitled, but positively encouraged, to use wealth in public projects, usually buildings. Such magnificent expenditure was used to promote and secure societal elites, political structures, and also worship of the divine. Magnificence, then, rather than ancient Luxury could readily adopt the V&A's adjectives of *investment*, *precision*, *preciousness*, *rarity*, *skill*, *innovation*, *expertise*, *privacy*, and privileged *access* with the desire to leave a *legacy*.

Luxuria on the other hand, was deemed a vice, not a virtue. It was used by Romans to characterize the behaviors of decadent elites in decline, who had abandoned the Roman virtues of old, and those of the newly rich on the rise, who imperiled those virtues still further. Amongst the most vocal critics of *luxuria* was Marcus Porcius Cato the Elder who railed against its practice as a transgression against reason, a subversion of the natural order, a vice which would bring ruin not just to the individuals who practiced it, but to whole societies, states, and civilizations.

And there luxury lay. Resplendent. A vice of indulgent excess. Cato would certainly have been in accord with the V&A's adjectives for luxury of *passion*, *pleasure*, and *opulence*, but he would not have approved.

With the fall of imperial Rome and the slow decline that followed, by the early Middle Ages in Europe, few enjoyed the wealth required to practice luxury. Ruling elites and the Church, however, could always and everywhere invoke notions of magnificence, and their expenditure on private and public projects continued unabated. The practice of luxury by non-elites, however, fell by the wayside. Luxury as the Romans had understood the term, as word and practice, simply ceased to be. Reflective of this, the Latin word *luxor* does not appear in dictionaries of medieval Latin. Only one form of the Latin remained in use, that of *luxuria* (Du Fresne du Cange *et al*. 1840–50: s.v. "luxuria"). However, now it was used exclusively and singularly to indicate one principal bodily vice of excess and extravagance, that of Lust. According to Niermeyer, *luxuria* appeared with this particular meaning of lust in later Latin, from *c*. 200 CE to 500 CE (Niermeyer 1984: s.v. "luxuria"). Nowhere in the Middle Ages was the word *luxuria* used in any sense other than lust, and this remained true of its various vernacular equivalents, which appeared from the late thirteenth century onwards (e.g. *lussuria* in Italian, *lussure* in French, *luxurie* in Middle English).

All Christians in this period were very familiar, both visually and textually, with the word *luxuria* as lust. As one of the so-called Seven Deadly Sins, it is central to explications of the perils facing the Catholic faithful in their quest for salvation. *Luxuria*/Lust was most often gendered as female. This in itself is not surprising, given

Figure 3
Printing letters forming the word "LUXURY." Photo: Image Broker/REX.

that the vices and the virtues are always gendered female. But for the subsequent history of luxury and desire this is important, and could have been an interesting addition to the V&A's lineup of key terms. Woman was depicted as the source of Original Sin, a sin whose origin lay in woman's inability to regulate her own desires, and who thereby tempted man to follow those same desires. Excessive appetites and woman are, therefore, linked from the Garden of Eden onwards, with the serpent itself often gendered female (see, for example, Michelangelo's depiction on the Sistine Chapel ceiling). *Luxuria*/Lust as woman has various iconographical attributes throughout the Middle Ages, none of them flattering: a pig, a goat, a mirror (see e.g. the depiction of *luxuria* as a woman with a mirror lying on a wild boar in Sassetta, "St Francis in Glory," Berenson Collection, Villa I Tatti, Florence).

The ancient Roman use of *luxuria* to mean luxury, and the medieval use of this same Latin word to mean lust, has led to many confused modern analyses of the word and its image in medieval times. Repeatedly the word *luxuria* in medieval texts has been mistranslated in our own day as luxury, even when what is described is clearly and overtly lust. This is not to say, however, that the two notions are completely at odds with one another. Unregulated and excessive desire are involved in both concepts – one for sex, and one for things. Nonetheless, lust is not luxury.

Beginning in the thirteenth century, however, a new group of non-elite practitioners of consumption started to emerge in Europe, principally in Italy. This new group involved a network of participants from merchant traders, moneylenders, middlemen, artisanal craftsmen, textile workers, tailors, tanners, dyers, and so on. With the

expansion of trade and a growth in personal wealth, for the first time in many centuries the wider populace began to have access to goods normally reserved for magnificent elites; anyone with money could buy the new goods. Elites now had to confront a populace able to imitate their lifestyles. Their response was a sharp condemnation of such novel display, which they, perhaps unsurprisingly, cast as improper, immoral, and often illegal. It was in this context that, over the following two centuries, these elites reinforced the ancient concept of *magnificentia* with a Christian bulwark, and gradually re-envisioned the ancient concept of *luxuria.* Finally, in the fifteenth century, they coined a new word in the vernacular, a neologism – *lusso*, luxury. By so doing, I would argue that the Italians were the first Europeans of the early modern world to devise a vernacular word for luxury.

The rebirth of the concept of luxury, however, was a protracted one, nor was there a clear trajectory to its arrival. One of the first responses to the new consumption was the passage of legislation to regulate its practice, the so-called sumptuary laws. More than 300 of these laws were enacted across the Italian peninsula in the period 1200–1500, both in Latin and increasingly in the vernacular (for a broad survey of these laws, see Kovesi Killerby 2002). These laws, controlling aspects of consumption and expenditure in Italy in minute detail, were a distinguishing feature of European, and especially Italian, social and political life at a time when the new goods and their attendant trade networks and local manufactures were being established. The laws restricted expenditure on certain goods, and regulated practices and expenses at weddings, funerals, banquets, and christenings, and other occasions of ritualistic life and display. Sumptuary laws reveal a range of complex and often ambivalent attitudes to the new goods and practices in the period. But, although in later commentaries on these laws scholars refer constantly to their preoccupation with "luxury," in fact, on examination, the word *luxuria* in either its ancient Roman meaning, or even in its medieval sense of lust, is completely absent from sumptuary laws. The Italians legislated variously against "*sumptus*" (expense or cost), "*vanitas*" (vanity), "*pompa*" (pomp or display), "*le spese inutili*" (useless expenditures), "*vana ambizione*" (vain ambition), and "*costoso ornamento*" (costly ornament) – but not against *luxuria*/luxury.

Preachers and theologians were also increasingly preoccupied with expenditure and the appropriate uses of wealth. Here, as in ancient Rome, theologians made a clear distinction between expenditure by elites and that of their aspirational followers. Several theologians reworked the ancient idea of *magnificentia* into a potent Christian virtue at the service of the ruling classes, and as a virtue that could assist in worship of the divine. As Peter Howard has demonstrated, Italian preachers articulated the Magnificent Man as the golden mean between the *pavicus* or stingy man on the one hand, and the man guilty of *consumptio*, or wasteful squandering,

on the other. San Antonino (1389–1459), Archbishop of Florence from 1446, even spiritualized magnificence such that a poor man could be magnificent by intention, he just lacked the material circumstances to bring it about. Magnificence was as much a state of mind, then, as it was one of expenditure and practice (Howard 2008; see also Green 1990; King 1975).

Other preachers focused primarily on those guilty of *consumptio*, wasteful squandering. Here, very often *luxuria* in its sense of lust was brought into play as a consequence of *consumptio*. Many preachers linked expense and ornamentation, especially in clothing, to excessive bodily appetites and to the generation of lustful desire. For them it was a sinful practice, which they associated most strongly with women. Thomas Aquinas had already warned in his *Summa* that outward apparel was not devoid of sin if worn to entice others to bodily desire (Aquinas 1920, Part 2.2, Q. 169, Art. 1 and 2). This linking of clothing with lustful desire and women was taken up by San Bernardino of Siena, and also by the Sienese friar Mariani who wrote that "the ornamentation of women is either harmless, or sinful to a venial or mortal degree, according to the lust it is intended to generate" (cited in Paton 1992: 327–8). This linking of lust and women in relation to expense on clothing was also present in the occasional name for the Florentine magistracy for the enforcement of sumptuary laws, the so-called "Ufficiali dell'onestà" – the Officials on Honesty.

Throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, and into the early fifteenth centuries, expenditure by new consumers on new kinds of goods, especially clothing, was seen as vain, as wasteful expense, as a new vice which could both derive from, and lead to, *luxuria* as lust. But luxury had yet to be articulated.

In the mid-fifteenth century, however, a Florentine humanist was sufficiently incensed by the excessive expenditure of new men to create a vernacular term to describe it. The word was *luxo – lusso*. As I have discussed elsewhere, *lusso* was first coined in 1441 by the Florentine priest, humanist, and poet, Leonardo Dati (1408–1472) (Kovesi 2013: 236–42, esp. 239ff.). On October 22 of that year Dati participated in a famous poetry contest, the *Certame coronario*, organized by his close friend Leon Battista Alberti. This competition took place in front of a distinguished and learned audience in the cathedral of Florence, and was designed to demonstrate that the vernacular Tuscan language could be as expressive as Latin. According to the competition's terms, all entries had to be in the vernacular, and on a single theme, that of true friendship (*de vera amicitia*) (Gorni 1972; Kent 2009: esp. 17–25, 27, 31–2, 66, 93, 106, 169, 213, 218).

Dati's entry was in the form of a tripartite drama, or *scena.* The third part of his *scena* was spoken by the figure of Friendship herself. Friendship describes her successive failed efforts to find a welcome with six different types of person. The second of the "types" that she describes is the rich. Significantly, though, she does not mean

the rich with inherited money, the established elites whose wealth entitled them to expressions of magnificence. Rather she refers to the rich "che la Fortuna ha rilevato ricchi" – those whom Fortune has raised to riches – in other words, the new rich. When Friendship approaches these clearly undeserving rich, she has to beat a hasty retreat. As she says:

> But my thought, defeated, fails
> because foolish Pomp, bursting with pride,
> together with revolting Luxury,
> were there inside.
>
> Ma 'l mio pensiero, nichilato, manca,
> perché l'insulsa e tumida adstitrice
> Pompa, et insieme stomacoso Luxo
> stavano dentro. (Leonardo Dati, III, lines 41–4 in
> Bertolini 1993: 341–81)

This verse of Dati's is, then, a critical moment in the rebirth of the ancient concept of Luxury, and seemingly its first articulation in any language's vernacular. There is nothing enticing about the concept in Dati's revisioning, however. He twins his neologism with a strongly emotive adjective – *stomacoso* – a word which Bertolini suggests should be understood as *stomachevole*, or revolting (Bertolini 1993: 368–9). This is not an adjective included in the V&A lineup, but it is one that would have found sympathy with Cato.

It is hard to tell, however, how quickly Dati's new word entered popular usage. Certainly its birth had maximum exposure. The *Certame* took place in front of a large audience, and the judges' controversial decision not to award the coveted prize of a silver laurel wreath, meant that contestants received more publicity for their work than might otherwise have been the case. In particular, the opinion of many was that Dati's *Scena* was the best contribution of the competition, and people reportedly hurried in the succeeding days to collect the various contributions of the contest together. But even if it might have started to appear in popular, spoken usage, the word *lusso* did not immediately appear in many other written works. In the fifteenth century, only two other obscure poems that I know of, neither of them dated precisely, mention the word *lusso* (Castiglion Fiorentino 2003; Battifolle 1975).

In the early sixteenth century, however, *lusso* received a considerable boost when it was used by one of the most popular and widely read authors of the day, Baldassare Castiglione, in *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*), written over several years from 1508, and published for the first time by the Aldine Press in 1528, and soon translated into six languages and transmitted across Europe (Burke 1996). Book Four of *The Courtier* takes as its theme the virtues that the ideal Prince should possess. In a passage

remarkably redolent of Marcus Porcius Cato, one of the interlocutors, Ottaviano Fregoso, declares that, amongst other things, the Prince should take care to

> … moderate all superfluities, for through errors committed in these matters, though they may seem trivial, cities often come to ruin. Wherefore it is right that the prince should set a limit upon the too sumptuous houses of private citizens, upon banquets, upon the excessive dowries of women, upon their luxury and display of jewels and dress, which is but augmentation of folly on their part …
>
> … tempera tutte le superfluità; perché spesso per gli errori che si fanno in queste cose, benché paiano piccolo, le città vanno in ruina; però è ragionevole che 'l principe ponga metà ai troppo suntuosi edifici dei private, ai convivii, alle doti eccessive delle donne, al lusso, della lor pazzia … (Castiglione 1528: Book 4, Chapter 41. Translation by Singleton 1959: 325)

Lusso for Castiglione is clearly a concept congruent with the moral framework of the ancient Romans and of Christian theologians. It is presented as a vice of private, non-elite citizens, who need moral regulation by their superiors (in this case their Prince), and it is again a vice linked to women.

Lusso otherwise seemingly only appears in one other scholarly work of the sixteenth century. Bernardo Davanzati (1529–1606) used the word in his translation of the *Annali* e *Storie* of Tacitus, written between 1579 and 1600. Here *lusso* is still not used in a flattering light and is presented as masquerading as magnificence. Davanzati writes of a young man in Edessa as follows: "The young man was not wise, and thinking that being a king consisted in living with great luxury, amused himself/stayed many days in the land of Edessa" ("Il giovane non accorto, e stimante che l'esser re stesse nel vivere con gran lusso, trattenne molti dì nella terra di Edessa") (Davanzati 1835: 222).

Whether or not *lusso* had come into general written use by the beginning of the seventeenth century is difficult to determine. The exclusive academy founded in 1583 to preserve the purity of the Italian language, the Accademia della Crusca, did not give *lusso* an entry in the first edition of its dictionary, the *Vocabolario della lingua italiana* of 1612, nor in its second edition (1623), or third edition (1691).

Dictionaries are, of course, literary constructs in themselves whose compilers act as gatekeepers, deciding which words make it or not. A dictionary can only ever be indicative of usage, rather than definitive. Although Dati, Castiglione, and Davanzati were all authors of impeccable scholarly credentials, perhaps the academicians felt that the neologistic nature of *lusso*, and its lack of an uninterrupted etymological pedigree should exclude it from the *Vocabolario.*

There is other evidence, however, that *lusso* was in wider use, at least by the beginning of the seventeenth century. One member of the Accademia della Crusca, Alessandro Tassoni, wrote a pamphlet to his fellow academicians shortly after the *Vocabolario*'s publication. His pamphlet was highly critical of the new dictionary for failing to include numerous words, amongst which he listed *lusso*, a word which he claimed was in common use. Tassoni was reportedly outraged when, in the second edition of the *Vocabolario*, *lusso* had still not made the grade (Cortelazzo and Zolli 1983: s.v. "lusso").

If *lusso* as a written vernacular word in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is not readily found other than in Dati, Castiglione, and Davanzati, what about the fate of the Latin word *luxuria*? The period's increased acquaintance with classical texts seems finally to have brought about a re-envisioning of the Latin word *luxuria* itself back to that of its original Latin meanings. In several important humanist treatises of the fifteenth century *luxuria* reappears, not as lust, but once more as a vice of excessive consumption. In a scale where *magnificentia* is the mean, and *avaritia* (or avarice) its deficiency, *luxuria* is depicted by these humanists as the excess, a state to be avoided. Seemingly the first use of *luxuria* in this sense is by Leon Battista Alberti. In Book 9 of his Ten Books on Architecture (*Decem Libri de Re Aedificatoria)* composed between 1443 and 1452, Alberti argues that it was preferable that "the houses of the wealthy were wanting in things that might contribute to their ornament, than have the more modest and thrifty accuse them of luxury [*luxuriem*] in any way" (Alberti 1966: 781, cited by Lindow 2007: 67, fn. 117, using the translation of Ryewert *et al*. 1991).

Similarly, the prominent humanist cleric Timoteo Maffei, argues in his dialogue "On the Magnificence of Cosimo de' Medici of Florence against his Detractors" (1454/6) that, rather than being accused of "a certain luxury" (*luxuriam*) men such as Cosimo de' Medici have "the fragrance of Magnificence" about their persons [*Quin Magnificentiam redolent* …] (Howard 2012: 127, 141; see also Fraser Jenkins 1970). Giovanni Pontano in his treatise *De Splendore* (1498) also uses this notion of luxury as the excess from a mean of magnificence. Pontano understood splendor as concerned "with the ornament of the household, the care of the person, and with furnishings, and in the display of different things." However, he warned: "In this type of expenditure … one should always seek the mean that is that which is measured, 'mediocritas'. … Certainly the just measure should be called splendour, its excess, luxury, and its defect, baseness" (Pontano 1965: 224; translation by Welch 2002: 222).

Luxury for these scholarly humanist writers was now a clearly defined concept, grounded in their readings of ancient texts, and reinforced by their Christian paradigm. All of them understood what the Romans had meant by *luxuria*, and none of them used the concept with approbation. But their endeavors to lock luxury into an Aristotelian paradigm of the Golden Mean in which it represented

the extreme of consumptive behavior against a norm of magnificence, and a deficiency of avarice, was really one of the last gasps in a centuries' old endeavor to stop its progress. Luxury and those who practiced it could not be stopped, and certainly not simply by academic denigrations of their behavior. Luxury was a many-headed beast. Try and constrain it, and it simply re-emerged elsewhere, with different and further heads.

The reality on the ground was, of course, more complex. And this is suggested in another text of the period in which the concepts of magnificence and luxury – so strictly separated by the Romans and by their humanist imitators – are brought together in a celebratory description of lavish display at a prominent wedding. In January 1491, celebrations began for two of the most magnificent weddings seen in Italy. This was the double wedding of two lineages, that of the Sforza and the Este families. In the first, Ludovico Sforza (Regent of Milan), married Beatrice d'Este. And in the second, Beatrice's brother, Alfonso d'Este, married Ludovico's niece, Anna Sforza. These were not Dati's undeserving rich. These were not Castiglione's unrestrained private citizens, or Davanzati's foolish man trying to act like a King. These were members of two families whose access to the trappings of magnificence would be unquestioned. Leonardo da Vinci orchestrated the wedding. In the many pages of his History that Tristano Calco devotes to this extraordinary marriage alliance, unsurprisingly the word "magnificence" is employed. But, when he comes to describe the ceremony on February 9 of Anna Sforza and Alfonso d'Este, presided over by Antonio Arcimboldo, the Archbishop of the city, a very unusual description is used by Calco. Two hundred of the top nobles of Italy and their wives wore gowns of silver and gold cloth to the ceremony and "truth to tell," he writes, you could not be considered "honestly and well attired" if you did not possess four or five changes of clothes "of equal luxury" [Verùm nec honestum iam ornatum putamus, quen non quinquies posses, aut quarter saltem, pari luxu variare] (Calco and Puricelli 1644: 92). These are people of a class normally described as magnificent; not aspirational consumers. And yet *luxu* is the word Calco chooses. Gone is Dati's adjective "stomacoso" – revolting – and instead is used the adjective "honestum" – honest.

This description does not mean that luxury had freed itself completely from the stigma of its illegitimate bad birth. But it does indicate that consumption was becoming so widespread and diffuse, that containing it within neat sociopolitical moral constraints was increasingly difficult. Luxury was finally emerging as something approximating our modern understandings and usages of the term.

The forceful effects of the release of this Leviathan onto the stage of History is clearly expressed in the figures cited at the beginning of this article as to the staggering worth of the present-day Luxury Goods industries. For a deeper appreciation of this exhibition at the V&A and its aims, the longer and broader context of this concept of

Luxury is necessary. Luxury as word, concept, and practice, was not a preexisting phenomenon. It was, and continues to be, in all three respects, a contingent historical product. It was in early modern Italy that luxury emerged as a core idea in the conceptualization of consumption for the first time since antiquity. In early modern Italy three key things happened in the longer history of the concept of Luxury. First the word itself was both revived in its classical Latin usage, with the full weight of classical and Christian moral censure upon it. Second, for the first time in Western Europe, a vernacular word was invented for this same concept – *lusso*, again with pejorative connotations. And finally, more than a few examples emerge which indicate that the positive associations of magnificence had started to be overlaid upon classical conceptions of luxury. Luxury at last was beginning to resemble something that viewers of the V&A exhibition would recognize.

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