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## The Meaning of Luxury

By Elizabeth Paton

10-12 minutes

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The Louvre Abu Dhabi has drawn on the last 10,000 years for an exhibition that examines the evolving — and often conflicting — interpretations of the word.





Credit...Katarina Premfors for The New York Times

## ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — What does the word luxury [actually mean?](#)

Is it ostentatious spending on trend-driven whims like handbags and lipsticks, or investing in unique pieces associated with a specific place or period? Is it a concept rooted in product or experience? An ever-changing social construct? Or today, in a frantic world cluttered with objects, screens and logos, is it [time itself?](#)

At the [Louvre Abu Dhabi](#), a new exhibition tries to chart some of the conflicting — and often still-evolving — interpretations of luxury that have emerged over 10 millenniums. The show, "[10,000 Years of Luxury](#)," was produced in partnership with the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and curated by that museum's director, [Olivier Gabet](#).

Running through Feb. 18, it explores the changing relationship between beauty and value across civilizations through 350 objects, grouping treasures around what Mr. Gabet described as "influential turning points" in how societies have used and thought about luxury.

Any visitor expecting a single definition, however, will likely be disappointed, despite a dazzling haul of 18th-century French silver soup tureens and third-century Syrian bracelets, 15th-century Venetian velvet fragments with an Ottoman print and a silk satin ball gown and coat designed by Christian Dior.

"No concrete definition for luxury is offered by this show and that is very deliberate," Mr. Gabet said in an interview late last month, held in an elegant meeting room above the new exhibition. "Instead, our intention is to make visitors continually explore and reassess accepted wisdom around what luxury represents by showing them varying interpretations across the ages. It is about helping them develop their own ideas."

According to Mr. Gabet, the thematic and chronological frameworks devised for the show, such as "Luxury at Court" and "Luxuriant Nature," also offer an important — and independent — point of view in the current global conversation around the concept.

"Many of the world's most powerful and best-known brands have a lot to say about luxury and its relationship with global arts and culture, and have invested heavily in museum shows, site preservation and education projects to make sure they are heard," Mr. Gabet said, alluding to the [fashion and jewelry houses using blockbuster museum exhibitions](#) and restoration funding as part of their marketing arsenal.



Image



Credit...Katarina Premfors for The New York Times

"With our exhibition," he continued, "we wanted to show that cultural institutions also have notable — and potentially different — opinions to share."

Of course, the money to showcase those ideas still has to come from somewhere.

In this case, the exhibition is sponsored by Tryano, which describes itself as the only luxury shopping mall in Abu Dhabi. And it is housed under the vast latticed dome of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a dazzling multimillion-dollar effort by the United Arab Emirates, opened in 2017 as part of the [cultural and architectural arms race](#) raging in the Gulf.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, “10,000 Years” begins with its immediate surroundings, where a hunger for identity and status in lands transformed by oil wealth has — within a generation — led to billion-dollar spending sprees on [some of the world’s most valuable art works](#). And the very first item on display is a single pink pearl, found on an island off the coast of Abu Dhabi in 2017 and said by archaeologists to be, at almost 8,000 years old, the oldest known natural pearl in the world.

Smaller than a marble, it is significant regionally because pearl gathering was a foundation of the Emirati economy for centuries, and more broadly because trading on and around ideas of ubiquity and exclusivity played a part in forging the earliest of civilizations.

Most of the galleries are shrouded in darkness, with spotlights on objects and the commentary, creating a sense of cocooned discombobulation in which a viewer can slowly mull ideas. A section dedicated to the ancient world presents early treasures, like the 2,000-year-old silver [Boscoreale Treasure](#) tableware found near Pompeii, next to combs, earrings and spice jars, illustrating how amassing objects in jewel boxes and tombs developed early ideas around value.

It also lays out tensions then related to luxury that still hold weight today: from how luxurious adornment of the body or home conflicted with the old Roman republican emphasis on frugality to how Greek philosophers pondered as early as the second century B.C. whether luxury fueled vanity and greed — and therefore could be bad for the soul.

And there is a focus on how major trade routes fueled cross-cultural influences and curiosity around new luxury aesthetics, materials and objects, from the Silk Road to the West and East India companies. One example? A pair of striking blue-, white- and terra cotta-colored earthenware vases from Delft in the early 1700s — designed in a Chinese pagoda style and meant to rival imported Chinese porcelain — to display tulips, the flower that prompted a mania in Europe during the 17th century.

Image

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Later, after a standout room dedicated to Asia, filled with a Chinese gilded enamel on copper statue of the mythical creature called a qilin, silk jackets and a headdress of kingfisher feathers as well as Japanese earthenware reflecting the values of [wabi-sabi](#), or simple beauty rooted in transience and imperfection, it becomes increasingly impossible to underestimate the impact of those countries on Western fashion and furniture design.

The show really takes it up a notch when documenting one of the most important changes in luxury’s evolution: How the industrial revolution of the 19th century — and with it, the rise of new and aspirational social classes — ushered in an age of mass production for precious objects; it was a time where rarity was still valued, but merchandising, branding and reaching new clients became increasingly influential, too. Rather than simply standing out from the crowd, luxury spending became associated with fitting in.

In the largest hall of the more than 15,000-square-foot exhibition that is “10,000 Years,” Paris is presented as the great center of European — and eventually global — luxury, from its department stores to its master craftsmen, with events like the [Paris World Fair in 1878](#) fueling a new vision of luxury, with lasting effects on the businesses still active today.

Image

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At its center is a 19th-century orange silk dress with white feathers created by [Charles Frederick Worth](#), the English-born, Paris-based designer considered by many to be the father of the modern haute couture business. And further on, much like the women’s emancipation movement progressed in the West in the 19th and 20th century, so, too, does the prominence of women’s fashion in the show — and female designers — from a little black dress in lace by [Coco Chanel](#) to the simple signature handkerchief dress of [Madeleine Vionnet](#).

The penultimate room features dozens of looks, from gowns to a sneaker, by many of the most famous names and dominant luxury brands in operation today, cataloging the growing creative tension in luxury

between simplicity and excess, and the commercial spending power of modern women. There are few logos, however (bar the LV Monogram pattern seen at one stage on a 1920s Louis Vuitton steamer trunk). And, glaringly, there is no focus on the modern global luxury moneymaking machine, or on the social media and celebrity endorsement-driven hype that increasingly powers it.

Image

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Instead, the exhibition puts its emphasis on one-of-a-kind works that showcase human creativity — and allude to where luxury might go next.

"At a time when we have explored virtually all means of material expression, definitions of luxury continue to evolve and mean many different things to different people," Mr. Gabet said. "But for me, the common thread to be maintained around the idea is rarity." His view was that, in an increasingly metropolitan world with dwindling natural resources, [sustainability and ecology](#) would likely come to define notions of luxury. And at a time when the environmental footprint of the luxury business is all the industry can talk about, one senses he might be right.

And given the growing clout of the so-called experiential economy, estimated by the market research company [Euromonitor to be worth \\$8.2 trillion by 2028](#), it is of little wonder that the last work generates the most transient and meditative note of the show.

An hourglass, designed by the [artist Marc Newson](#), sits in front of a vast window overlooking a vista of the sparkling Arabian Sea, in a bright white room washed in sunlight. Visitors, having been dazzled by the craftsmanship and vision of mankind across 10 millenniums, face a reminder that time — constantly slipping through one's fingers — and space are becoming the greatest luxuries of them all.

Image

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Also on view is a new and temporary art installation, called "Unidentified Scented Object," devised by the jewelry maison Cartier and constructed on a floating platform on one of the water channels that lap at the whitewashed museum steps: Inside a glass cube, a cloud of perfume appears to be suspended in midair. The fragile ecosystem is preserved by a variety of sensors, and only one person at a time can climb the spiral stairs and sample the layer upon layer of fragrant notes over several minutes.

Millennials, now the most dominant global consumer class, are increasingly opting to spend their money on desirable experiences over desirable objects. Would this appeal to most of them? Likely not. Still, it is an intriguing taste of the sort of futuristic and sensory-driven experiences possible when you have both time (and money) are on your side.

"Shopping for luxury has become a lingua franca in today's world, seemingly around us wherever we are, be it in shopping malls or airports," Mr. Gabet said. "But people are looking beyond that chapter. We are all hungry to see what comes next."