

# Aesthetics and Ephemerality:

## OBSERVING AND PRESERVING THE LUXURY BRAND

**Pierre Berthon**  
**Leyland Pitt**  
**Michael Parent**  
**Jean-Paul Berthon**

**T**oday the market for luxury goods and services is booming: from the \$2 Million Bugatti Veyron, through gem encrusted \$700,000 Montblanc pens, to a mere \$10,000 for a bespoke Asprey Christmas cracker. However, luxury is nothing new. During the seventeenth century, luxury was found in extraordinary commodities—rare pearls, crystal, perfumes, and spices from the Caribbean. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the rise of world trade, luxury was the product of great craftsmen—Christian Dior the frock-maker, Louis Vuitton the trunk-maker, James Purdey the gun-maker. More recently in the industrialized world, with the problem of mass production largely solved, luxury increasingly became the brand—carefully crafted symbols, which go beyond the material, beyond the craftsmen to invoke a world of dreams, images, signs, and motifs. Yet luxury as symbol is hardly new. During the Ch'in dynasty, red coral from the Mediterranean was perhaps the greatest symbol of status among Chinese nobility; during the Cultural Revolution, pet dogs were considered symbols of decadent luxury.

Luxury brands are divisive. For some social commentators, they are considered a betrayal of community values; and to others, the antidote to the mundane. Research on luxury brands presents somewhat of a paradox. They are one of the most profitable and fastest-growing brand segments, yet at the same time they are poorly understood and under-investigated.<sup>1</sup> Although there are a number of fairly well established definitions of what a brand is,<sup>2</sup> there is no corresponding delineation of what constitutes a luxury brand. Moreover, there is no clear understanding of their dimensionality, and no rigorous conceptualization of the different types of luxury brands. They are generally treated as homogenous—a luxury brand is a luxury brand. Perhaps it is little wonder that the man-

The authors acknowledge the advice of the two anonymous reviewers who made this a better, and not just a different, paper.