

Opulence and Luxury

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Abstract

This paper describes luxury and explains how this term is interpreted in society and the fashion industry. Luxury was very important during the Rococo period as people portrayed their wealth owning different luxurious items including historic paintings, expensive jewelry, etc. Because luxury is everywhere and it is not the same as it used to be before when it was only accessible to rich people, its exclusivity is rapidly fading away. Two well-known haute couture fashion designers, Zuhair Murad, and Christian Lacroix involve luxuriousness in their collections, yet in two different ways. Christian Lacroix offers luxury through extravagant maximalist styles. On the other hand, Zuhair Murad lends himself to inconspicuous consumption by offering exclusivity and uniquely made couture styles.

During the Rococo period, an opulent lifestyle became highly desired by everyone in which luxury was highly manifested. Many designers wanted to offer their clientele this luxuriousness in their collection through opting for maximalist styles. One of these designers is Christian Lacroix. However, lately, the term luxury has evolved as consumer behavior has changed. Luxury is now everywhere and in every social class, which makes it not exclusive anymore. This has caused many designers in the luxury market such as Zuhair Murad, to lend themselves to inconspicuous consumption, in which luxury consumers do not necessarily overtly display wealth and status by using luxury, but instead, are wearing his uniquely made gowns with premium prices to differentiate themselves among others.

It is almost impossible to come to one conclusion as to what luxury is. According to McNeil and Riello (2016), “Luxury is contingent: it depends on what society assumes to be ‘beyond’ the expected”. This practically means that there are more interpretations of the term luxury than one can imagine. However, in the book *Luxury: A Brief History*, Mcneil and Riello give two different approaches as to what they believe luxury is. The first one is that “luxury is about the extraordinary that which goes beyond the everyday, affordable, and the mundane (McNeil & Riello, 2016)”. On the other hand, luxury has to do with “uplifting both spiritually and materially (McNeil & Riello, 2016)”.

Today, luxury and what it entails is very different from what it was decades ago.

Opulence was experienced during the Rococo period. During this artistic period, an extravagantly luxurious lifestyle was developed among the high-class society. According to Fiore (2019), “this time is exemplified by fashion, furniture, and *objets d’art* so ridiculously opulent that they seem to explain the proletarian revolution with a single glance”. Such vanities

facilitated people with pleasure and status. Not only were the elite accustomed to luxurious things, but also for them, having power meant owning luxurious objects such as historic paintings (Fiore, 2019). In this period, many rich people's rooms would offer a mindblowing sensory experience (Fiore, 2019). For example, "walls were covered in carved paneling or expensive textiles; gleaming mirrors that frame marble mantelpieces and reflect curving, gilded-bronze chandeliers, and porcelain vases; and matching sets of silk-upholstered chairs, each designed for specialized leisurely activity (Fiore, 2019)". In addition to that, decorative art was manifested during this period and an ethos of "more is better" was projected.

During this same decade, a fashion designer that elaborated maximalist fashion was Christian Lacroix. Like in the Rococo period, Lacroix opted for extravagance, which is one of the things that made him stand out among designers. Lacroix not only designed pieces using unusual colors and materials, creating luxurious looks, but he also brought back touches of history, theatre, and folklore, infusing them with sophistication and elegance ("History of Christian", 2019). Lacroix would also choose exuberance over simplicity. In addition to that, "His couture work, with all of its handwork, is more refined and has an opulent, regal dignity (Givhan, 1999)".

One designer in the fashion industry known for his luxurious and beautiful dresses is Zuhair Murad. For Murad, luxury means "exclusiveness, premium quality material, and exclusive distribution (Scarborough, 2018)". That is exactly what he offers his clients in his haute couture house. What makes him a luxury designer is his sophisticated styles made with expensive materials and offered at a premium price range. According to Scarborough (2018), Murad makes his dresses from the finest of fabrics. Many of his evening gowns have millions of

sparkly crystals or covered with sequins (“Gorgeous Oriental”, 2018). Murad loves using other kinds of embroidery on his gowns, including lace, and beads, to make them more interesting (“Gorgeous Oriental”, 2018). He also takes luxurious embellishments to the finest detail (“Gorgeous Oriental”, 2018). That is why his dresses have such high prices. For example, a wedding gown could go up to 20,000 (“Zuhair Murad Couture”, 2019).

In order to maintain his garments exclusive and with a sense of luxury, his team makes sure that no couture design has been sold to more than one client (Scarborough, 2018). However, these luxurious garments require a lot of work. The amount of work put into making one of Zuhair Murad’s luxurious dresses is mind-blowing. Like in any other haute couture house, dedication is really important. Furthermore, the process of creating a Zuhair Murad’s dress is very long and requires a lot of hours. For example, it takes a minimum of 300 hours just designing, beading and producing a simple dress and over 1,000 hours hand embroidering, tailoring, and designing a couture dress (Scarborough, 2018).

One of the reasons for Murad’s success in the luxury market is “his painstaking attention to detail, and ceaseless pursuit of silhouettes that flatter the female form (Scarborough, 2018)”. Murad always strives to implement perfection during the whole process of creating a gown. He considers each garment the result of a long process that creates the ultimate experience in refinement and elegance (Scarborough, 2018). His collections consist of a mixture of a modern twist and ancient heritage, which is the House’s signature (Scarborough, 2018). His designs and gowns have become well-known around the world. Many of Murad’s collections are distributed in major cities in the US, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Monaco, France, China, and Singapore through a retail network of leading high-end department stores (Scarborough, 2018).

Because luxuriousness has changed dramatically throughout the year, inconspicuous consumption has rapidly increased. Zuhair Murad lends himself to inconspicuous consumption by facilitating his dresses and gowns to many social classes. Although his luxurious gowns are still offered at a premium price, many in the middle and lower-income classes are opting for his designs. For example, while many rich people avoid paying so much for a luxurious wedding gown, lower or middle-class people opt for an extremely expensive wedding gown to show it off on their wedding day. Furthermore, because his luxury brand has also gone mass-market, the traditional consumer of luxury fashion are opting for more uniquely styles or personalized gowns. As previously stated in this essay, Murad makes sure his couture designs are only sold to one client. This is to keep a sense of exclusivity in the luxury market (Scarborough, 2018).

In conclusion, although during the Rococo period, portraying luxury was a symbol of wealth and power, nowadays the whole concept of luxury has changed. This is because luxury items are now available and used by anyone. While designers in luxury markets such as Christian Lacroix wanted to offer luxury through maximalist styles, other designers such as Zuhair Murad wanted to focus on and offer exclusivity and uniquely made couture styles among the elite. This is to differentiate themselves from those wearing luxury. This is called inconspicuous consumption.

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