
OPINIONS - 14 Apr 2010 - by Robert Deutsch

FATTO A MANO: The Seductiveness of Luxury



Dr. Bob Deutsch, founder of the brand consulting firm, [Brain Sells](#), recalls how a chance encounter with a group of elderly Florentine craftsmen helped remind him of what really matters in luxury.

My wife and I are Americans living in the U.S. For the past couple of years we also have had an apartment in Florence, Italy. We went there solely for the beauty of this Renaissance city, its markets, museums, and the way of life. It was a luxurious act on our part, a smart move.

Florence and its ways brought out something in me. When beauty surrounds and even the new exists in the context of the traditional, time elongates and senses are heightened.



Take, as one example, eating out in Florence. All the restaurants are Italian.

There are no Chinese, Greek, Thai or French eateries to speak of. Moreover, the menus in all the Italian restaurants are basically the same. What happens in such a situation is that you begin to notice fine distinctions across the same dish in various restaurants. *Pappa pomodoro*, a thick tomato and bread soup that is a classic of Florentine cuisine, varies slightly in smokiness and texture. Eventually you discern a difference that makes a difference. You sense it and savor the moment. That sensitivity, in turn, begins to permeate other aspects of your perceptual acuity.

One, Spring-like Florence afternoon, a native-born friend and I strolled into *La Vecchia Bettola*, one of the oldest trattorias, for lunch. The food there is *delizioso*, the aromas ignite both taste buds and smile muscles, and everyone is jovial, waiters and customers alike.

As we sat down, something caught my eye. Across the room was a table of eight old men with palpable gleams in their eyes. I pointed to them fleetingly and I asked my friend, who, himself is a well-known Florentine, “Who Are *They?*”

He told me these mostly balding men, some with bulbous facial growths, all with big grins and hefty-sized hands, met weekly at La Vecchia. Each was one of the most renowned craftsmen in Florence: carpenter, ceramicist, frame maker, textile designer, art restorer, jewelry maker, shoemaker, tailor. They were enjoying the usual gigantic portions of blood-rare beefsteak di Florentine and drinking Tuscan wine.

Fatto a mano

When my friend told me he knew these men, I asked if we might join them. I wanted to talk with them about *fatto a mano*, the value of hand-made luxury. After a short discussion, we carried our plates of pasta, *coniglio arrosto*, and Chianti to their table.

After several introductory toasts, I asked how and why they had become craftsmen. Of course, each story was a unique blend of intention, serendipity and the stubbornness that comes with knowing where one’s sole finds vitality.

What was common across all these eight monumental and iconic diners were themes of sensuality, of authenticity, of passion, narratives that result when there is a meeting of what one does and who one is. Of course, there was pride in being part of a continuous line of creativity going back to the Medici. These men not only made luxury, they themselves were luxurious.

The Italian Way

These eight men, half-mockingly, half-lovingly, taught me an important lesson about the Italian way of life, indeed about life itself.

Naively, I told them I was interested in writing an article about the meaning and value of hand-made luxury goods. I said, “So much today is mass-produced and fast-copied on the cheap. Perhaps if I could write about you men and what you do, it would slow by one tic of the clock the demise of the hand-made, the truly artisan.”

They laughed in spontaneous unison. Their first response was, “What can be better than now? We are among friends. We are enjoying our food and wine. We feel good and we are happy.”

One of these men, nicknamed ‘The Terminator’ for having been a ferocious soccer player, added, “Time is on our side.” I asked what he meant. He replied, “The only time is now. In this now ‘the next’ does not exist. The whole of life is right here, right now, in our sight.” Therein lies the undercurrent that is *the essence of luxury: living deep in the guts of the moment with senses fully alive. In that experience there is no time, only sensuality.*

A State of Sensuality

That state of sensuality is the Florentine way of life. Not just in the museums and craftsmen’s studios, but, for example, also in the markets, where proud vendors exhibit their deep-green, just-picked *broccolini* or multiple varieties of prosciutto and pecorino, as if they were art.

In America, I thought of food shopping as a necessary chore. In Florence, being at the market was a joy, somewhere I needed to go because it was one of the happy hi-points of the day, each day.

Even walking from my apartment to the *Mercato San Ambrogio* was an experience to be relished. The textured facades of ancient residential buildings and landmarks such as Brunelleschi’s Duomo dotted my path. Walking was slowed by my frequent looks up, eyeing what was around me. Turtle-like, my neck often protruded to peek into shop windows displaying items such as jewelry, olive oil or underwear. (Even the men’s underwear looked special and was displayed beautifully.)

At the market, where nothing is saran wrapped or mass-produced and everything is local, I paused at almost every stand to appreciate the voluptuousness of the fresh fruits and vegetables, the tubs of *fiocchi di latte*, the bulgingly stuffed ravioli, the whole roasted pig, and the vendors who handled their produce as if they were rare gems. Tastings – *una asagio* — are offered. Salutations are exchanged. I felt being at the market was a personal experience, not a business transaction. I wasn’t there to fill my refrigerator. I was there to fulfill me.

I never hurried. Nobody hurries. I toiled around as if life were a hobby, immersed in and enjoying the moment, without deadlines and no “next” in mind.

In Florence, artisan and layperson both live in a certain relationship to time and sensuality that is truly luxurious.

The particular thing about the artisan is that their life story lives *in* what they create. Who they are and what they make is the real McCoy. When working on an item, the craftsman feels the press of the sensual, the immediate. Eye, hand and heart are in an improvisational dance, creating a one of a kind creation. The craftsman’s products remain true to the idea of the Renaissance, with the accent on the personal, the emphasis on joy.

Luxury Marketers Can Learn



With these products in hand, *the task of luxury marketing is to help*

customers read their own story into the product story, and so expand how customers think about themselves and the world. That expansion is the true meaning of art.

As the luxury market rebounds, and a new meaning of luxury and value emerge, people are beginning a quest for self-authenticity. These feelings are true not only for how people see themselves and the world, but also for what they want from it, including products.

People are becoming more interested in MEANING-SEEKING. Many of them are saying things like, “I must be more selective in what I buy and what I buy into. I want things that will show me my heart.”

There is now a heightened quest for AUTHENTICITY. One woman I interviewed who recently bought a Montblanc fountain pen, said: “I’ve wanted to buy a great fountain pen for as long as I can remember, but never had. Despite the economy, or maybe because of it, I thought I should buy one now. I did and I’m so happy. It feels so sensual, so luxurious in my hand. I think better writing with it. It helps me get down to my deepest thoughts and feelings. I find ‘me’ with this Montblanc in hand.”

Real Luxury is the Experience



That’s the real experience of luxury, no matter what a product’s price. That’s

what people value – an experience that takes them just beyond their present selves. Luxury can provide a venue for customers to recognize and elaborate something latent in themselves that has yet to become manifest.

Listen to another story, this from an artist in who bought a Louis Vuitton handbag: “When I saw it I had to have it, but

at first I didn't buy it. It was too expensive. I went home but I couldn't stop thinking about that bag. So I went back the next day. It made me happy just to look at. It's candy-apple red. My grandmother made me candy apples. That bag gives me an appetite. It's the color of life. It will protect me against solitude, like my pets. And, it's a small bag, I can always carry it with me."

She continued: "There is no meaning or order to the universe or to life, or it's not attainable by humans. This bag seemed unattainable, but I got it. This bag says to me that there is some meaning or order to life. That meaning or order is 'beauty'".

Perhaps the lesson from these voices is that luxury and value, like clothing, must be made to be worn – worn to extend and adorn the self.

Luxury and value is beginning to be more about the experience than simply the product – an experience that makes you feel more authentic, that makes you feel *you are an artisan* of self, with time to sense and express your personal individuality, history and self-expansion.

Luxury might best be defined as an investment in self. That's meaningful consumption that holds value.

I am a case in point. One day, walking over the Arno via a bridge designed by Michelangelo, I was heading off to buy a white truffle that I would shave over bowls of handmade pasta that night. I made an unplanned stop at Loro Piana. I tried on a cashmere sports jacket. I heard my self-reverie. "It feels so delicious and elegant. Even the buttons are beautiful...all the details. The jacket "fits" me – casual but sophisticated, classic but different." When I put it on it made me experience something extra in me.

As the meaning of luxury and value shifts from "Give Me More" to "Being More of Me", luxury marketers may find a consumer palette as ravenous as before the economic collapse...and as hungry as I was at La Vecchia Bettola. Like the craftsman in their studios, luxury marketers have to live in the moment and help their customers do the same.

Bob Deutsch

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