

THE HEART OF IT

When a brand shares its passion for craftsmanship, it elevates the pleasure of buying, says Nick Vinson

Much is said and written about the luxury shopping experience today. Brands are now “houses”, stores are “maisons”, bigger and more elaborate than ever, and seen as incomplete if they don't come packaged with site-specific art – one New Bond Street boutique has an eye-popping 23 works. They offer bespoke and made-to-measure services and personal shopping suites, where high-spending or VIP customers can browse behind closed doors.

On one level this all suggests luxury, yet there's something often overlooked in this scenario. For me, part of the joy of acquiring something precious is learning about its unique characteristics: who created or designed it, when and where was it made, what is it made from, and what sets it apart from the rest?

Very few “luxury” sales assistants have ever visited the places where the products they sell have been

produced – and what they do know about the brand, or the products they sell, has sometimes been gleaned from an internal manual or a PowerPoint presentation.

Today's sophisticated consumer is often a connoisseur in more than one area and they want more than an attractive young thing trying to close a sale. I don't really give a fig if the sales assistant thinks it suits me, or if it is their personal favourite. What I want is to tap into a deeper understanding of the product that I can take away with me and recall each time I use it.

Smaller, owner-run businesses can elevate the pleasure of the purchase to something beyond mere commerce. Their passion and knowledge, the extra little bits of information they impart, fire up something of great value, whether it's fashion, interiors or fine food.

I once visited winemaker Alois Lageder in the Alto Adige region of Italy during the Merano Wine

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Festival. Viewing his estate, where the wine rests in casks in the cellars and is serenaded by a Bach concerto as part of an art installation, *Lullaby for Casks and Strings* by Mario Airò, I found myself so charmed by Lageder's passion for wine that it left a lasting impression. I now always keep cases of his wine in the house in his honour.

It was also on a trip to Italy that I visited San Lorenzo silversmiths (think an Italian version of Puiforcat or Georg Jensen), where I met its founder Ciro Cacchione.

San Lorenzo specialises in exquisite objects designed by some of the great 20th-century Italian architect-designers, including Afra & Tobia Scarpa and Lella and Massimo Vignelli.

Not only will Cacchione take the time to explain when, and how, the tableware, decorative items, ornaments and jewellery were created, but as he personally developed the pieces and oversaw

the maestri who produced the work, you get to discover as much of the story as you want.

When shopping for cheese, I still remember asking advice at Neal's Yard Dairy and learning that the counter staff try each and every one of the cheeses they sell each day, so they are fully aware of what they are selling and how the cheeses taste at any given point.

Or a visit to the Michael Hoppen Gallery in Chelsea to look at their art photography where I recall spending time with Michael Hoppen, whose appreciation, passion and knowledge for the work he sells are infectious. Take something home from the gallery and you will have years of pleasure at every view.

That's because an object's worth is comprised of many parts. To fully appreciate the value of something, face-time with someone who cares passionately is the real deal-breaker.

And for me that is where the luxury resides.