

From the shop window to the museum: the relationship between a brand and its heritage

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If we consider when the big French luxury brands in fashion, accessories and perfume were established, we realise that over half (and not the minor ones) were set up before the fifties. The brands in the luxury product sector are among the oldest, their pre-eminent position in their sector having obviously contributed to their longevity. As a result, these are brands that are brimming with age and heritage, heritage that is the source of their legitimacy – and doubtless one of their specific qualities – as well as being a constituent of their sales offer. In other words, the history of a luxury brand is of course first of all a strategic and stylistic reservoir (used to greater or lesser effect by certain brands, but that is not the issue) while also constituting that which they put on show (for consumption). This second point leads us to the following question: what are the visual and narrative ways in which the heritage of a brand is put to use in the global strategy of the brand offer – from the products themselves to advertising and point of sale? We can list five which are all forms of the eruption of the past in the present of the brand:

1. The brand refers back to the context of its era, that is to say it explicitly displays elements that are not directly linked to the heritage of the brand but that hark back to another time meant to evoke (or describe)

its origin. This strategy was quite common in the seventies and eighties which favoured nostalgic revivals – remember the persistence of the retro looks of the 73 – 78 period. This is a form of evocation that concerns mainly the older brands with jaded heritages such as Lanvin or Courreges. Behind this type of reference there is a real logic of reconstitution, the idea being to recreate an era (through the décor, environment, stylistic features etc.) so as to enable the placement of the brand in this era. A more recent example is Burberry's advertising campaign which followed the redevelopment of the brand which projected images of the aristocratic Edwardian era (the birthplace of the brand) with numerous references to Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll. However, this method, even though it is used by brands with authentic but jaded heritages, is also used by brands without any real history thus creating their own aura of legitimacy through reconstitution - the most glaring example of which is Ralph Lauren but also more discreetly Giorgio Armani with regular references to the thirties.

2. The brand possesses a certain stylistic repertoire that is its own – heritage that usually comes from the product itself – and to which it refers constantly as it evolves. Depending on the brand the size of this heritage is obviously favoured by the way in which the head designer works, whether or not the designer retains the same range of styles from one collection to the next. The longer the “dynamic” creative period of the brand, the broader and richer the heritage will become as is evident in the case of Jean Paul Gaultier or Yves Saint Laurent. This “natural” heritage can then be altered or interpreted differently in the future especially when the head designer changes and the newcomer wishes to anchor his or her work in the heritage of the brand like Tom Ford doing tuxedos at Saint Laurent or Karl Lagerfeld doing tweed suits at Chanel. However, whether it is a heritage of “invention” or “reinvention” the logic is the same:

reworking and transforming the classics to bring them up to date. This logic is prevalent today in all brands, at least those who have constituted a minimum amount of heritage.

3. The brand possesses a collection of timeless emblems that are its own and that are used as a kind of refrain that suggests a sense of belonging on designs that can in theory constitute a total departure from the stylistic heritage of the brand mentioned in point 2. This repertoire of stylistic emblems (logos, symbols) is relatively stable, even though the race for innovation among the bigger groups in recent years has made them evolve all the more quickly. However, the evolution is usually gradual so as to avoid losing sight of the brand and maintaining its recognition value. The list is endless – each big brand has at least one, sometimes more and they come in all shapes and sizes (object, motif, logo, pattern) from the Chanel flower to Burberry's Nova check, Vuitton's monogram or the H at Hermès. These logos/signs have progressively become a way of ensuring the continuity of the brand heritage they perpetuate the emblem of brand (deformed, reworked, coloured) reminding consumers where the product comes from and at the same time serving as an identity symbol. In passing we must also mention that this type of heritage must be handled delicately and in the same way that the evolution of a stylistic heritage must be "iconoclastic" that of the emblematic heritage must be discreet: one must "change without changing" avoiding sudden departures that might damage the clarity of the message. It is worth noting then that when Tom Ford took over Gucci and made drastic changes in the stylistic heritage, the brand codes (logo, bamboo, red and green strap) remained untouched.

4. The brand explicitly refers back to its past and juxtaposes it with the present, most often at the point of sale either by evoking the past in architectural details, in the visuals used or more directly by the use

of antiques. This more recent method is used to hammer home the origins, the craftsmanship and the age of the brand to the consumer and the narrative that constitutes its past, whether they be centred around the craftsmanship alone (trunks at Louis Vuitton, photos of the workshops at Loewe) or on the story of the brand (photos of famous clients at Ferragamo, videos of historic shows at Dior, architectural history at the Hermès HQ). We can also include the re-edition of vintage products at least when this is an explicit strategy such as Dior's Duchess of Windsor bag with specific window dressing around the bag including a photo of the duchess. This museum-like approach is confrontational enabling the brand to express traces of its past and its contemporary spirit in the same location. In fact it reproduces what the consumers of these brands have in mind when they come to buy: an image of the past and at the same time, if not radical modernity, a certain up-to-dateness in the product to be purchased there. It must be noted that in some brands this confrontational strategy is not used systematically and may be just used in specific circumstances around a window display or as a point of sale feature as is often the case at Dior. Apart from the point of sale – today the main vector for expressing one's heritage in this manner – certain examples can exist in press and advertising such as the Chanel catalogue for clients with old photos of Coco Chanel and their modern "equivalent" – here a direct juxtaposition of two expressions of the same style.

5. The brand gets involved in a direct heritage policy and creates specially designed spaces in which to display their heritage. This is a recent policy and one of the precursors was undoubtedly the Yves Saint Laurent house, one of the first to have created a museum even though it was not open to the public, recently added to with the establishment of a foundation in the building of the couture house. It is however a policy that has existed in the other houses

for a long time, Hermès has had its own museum for sometime and is being copied by a number of other brands. Diverse museum-like forms which range from the purely historical (such as the Vuitton museum in Asnières) to a logic close to the confrontational strategy mentioned in point 4 – a very good recent example of which is the Baccarat museum. It is basically a direct method of displaying heritage using museum methods that can indeed be added to or replaced by the gallery exhibition method (Armani at the Guggenheim), another recent strategy initiated once again by Yves Saint Laurent and his invitation to exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in 1983.

These are diverse strategies which also correspond to a more general evolution: the five methods outline above are in fact more or less chronological and it seems evident that the museum option (points 4 and 5), which has appeared recently will continue to develop as the work on the repertoire in points 2 and 3 (both stylistic and emblematic) remains an obligatory passage, though less to signify one's heritage and more to help it survive. If we consider the above points as a form of inter-textuality, in other words the way in which narratives intertwine, points 2 and 3 are less directly forms of inter-textuality of heritage than they are simple natural developments of heritage and the two last points are on the contrary more directly modes of explicit intertwining of the past and present of the brand – a statement which leads us to surmise that the narrative of a brand must be built from the past and the present and even more so in times to come.

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