

Heritage of the luxury goods industry:  
Bernardaud et Baccarat making the most of  
valorisation  
Eugénie Briot

The luxury goods industry came to its own in the first decades of the 19th century at the same rate as the move towards more comfort and quality for growing sections of society<sup>1</sup>. A large number of the companies that today constitute the cream of French luxury goods producers were established at this time, out of this generalised burst of activity. At this, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they possess a heritage that is in some cases over one hundred and fifty years old and which includes industrial buildings as well as a rich collection of objects half way between functional and art which are often treated with great care, or at least conserved in relatively good shape and quite high numbers. Just as in other industries, older production tools and machines were slowly replaced by more innovative technologies. However, "savoir faire" and technical know-how is at the heart of the heritage of the luxury goods industries, crafts that are perhaps not used in the same way as in the 19th century but are often specifically conserved to be passed on.

In a sector where brand image relies heavily on authenticity and savoir-faire and is considered the most precious asset of a luxury goods manufacturer, the idea of getting the most from this heritage is *a priori* considered to be a good thing. Heritage is an essential advertising and communication tool as it provides a constant supply of museum pieces and is a well of inspiration for contemporary design and creativity. Along with Louis Vuitton<sup>2</sup>, Hermès<sup>3</sup>, Christian Dior<sup>4</sup>, Christofle<sup>5</sup>, and a number

of wine and liqueur manufacturers, Bernardaud and Baccarat, in 1998 and 2003 respectively, chose to open their company heritage to the public. Their heritages are similar but they chose radically different options for its exploitation and display. If we examine these choices they help us to reflect on the two main obvious issues : « what constitutes luxury goods today? », and « why exploit heritage and history? ».

### A rich artistic and industrial heritage

In as much as they both benefited fully from the Second Empire industrial boom, the industrial and artistic heritage which exists today in the maisons Bernardaud and Baccarat have much in common.

Established in 1863 in Limoges, the porcelain factory of the rue Albert Thomas became the property of the Bernardaud family in 1900<sup>6</sup>. The main factory buildings date from this period but there was some significant refurbishment done in 1889 and 1911 resulting in the factory as we know it today. This factory was home to the porcelain manufacturing process until 1991 when the space was no longer sufficient, pushing Bernardaud to create a second industrial site at Oradour-sur-Glanes and to abandon all industrial production in the rue Albert Thomas site. The company directors then decided to create a visitors centre dedicated to the manufacturing techniques of porcelain and the history of Bernardaud on this site. The musée national Adrien Dubouché in Limoges, which has existed since 1845, is already dedicated to artistic creation in the city.

The « verrerie » Sainte-Anne de Baccarat, an older company (1764), situated on the banks of the river Meurthe, became a crystal factory in 1817. The factory came into its own under Louis-Philippe<sup>7</sup>, before gaining absolute supremacy in the second half of the 19th century as supplier to the most prestigious courts in Europe<sup>8</sup>. The current buildings of the crystal factory at the centre of an architectural ensemble which developed progressively during the 18th and

19th centuries, revealing the social ambitions of successive administrators (houses for workers, chapel, school etc.), constitute an industrial heritage that is second to none and is still in working order. The idea of creating a showcase for their products came very early on at Baccarat : in 1831, the company set up its Parisian sales outlet and depot at 30bis rue du Paradis and in 1908 they created the « petits salons » so as to present Baccarat pieces in a real home-like setting. The location at 30bis rue du Paradis slowly turned into a museum with a collection of five thousand objects. In 1966 the old house of the administrator of the Sainte Anne glassworks was chosen for the Musée de la Manufacture. Up until 2003, the Musée de la Manufacture and the Musée Baccarat at 30 bis rue de Paradis worked together as two parallel showcases of the historical production and design of the company.

## Two different choices

Despite their rich industrial and commercial heritage, neither site was chosen in 2003 for the Maison Baccarat, instead they chose the « hôtel particulier » of Marie-Laure and Charles de Noailles, place des Etats-Unis in the 16th arrondissement in Paris. It was built in 1895 by the architect Ernest Sanson, and in the first half of the 20th century was the setting for sumptuous parties and a meeting place for the greatest artists. The company gave Phillipe Starck a free hand in this, the centre of surrealism to create an exceptional presentation space in the amazing rooms of the house. Talking masks, crystal chimneys, spinning chandeliers, monumental chair, visitors find themselves in dream-like surroundings in the new Maison Baccarat which guide them to the actual museum part of the house. There, three spaces are given over strictly to the presentation of crystal pieces entitled “Folie des Grandeurs”, “Alchimie” (decorated with a dais designed by Gérard Garouste) and “Au-delà de la transparence” (beyond transparency). The latter is divided

into four showcases arranged thematically : the “Légèreté, raffinement, féminité” (Light, refinement, femininity) showcase emphasises technical prowess and aesthetic audacity, the “Grands créateurs” (Great designers) showcase places Baccarat at the avant-garde of modernity, the “Commandes prestigieuses” (Prestigious made-to-measure orders) showcase underlines the exclusivity of the house, and the “Contes d’ailleurs” (stories from elsewhere) showcase the exotic themes which have enriched the evolution of design at Baccarat.

The visitor's tour of Bernardaud is light years away from that of Baccarat. Yves Taralon's<sup>9</sup> design began by clearing away the annexe buildings that cluttered up the factory so as to reconstitute the historic shape of the site. The choice was then made to emphasise the actual porcelain manufacturing process as part of the visit : modelling, pouring, decorating, finishing, calibrating, varnishing etc. Particular attention was given to the demonstration of the technique, with the idea of audience participation an integral part of the process : thus visitors get a chance to pour or varnish a piece and at all of the stages of the manufacturing process, one can touch the materials, feel their fragility, truly comprehend the process.

The « pièce maitresse » of this site remains the workshop, the old pouring room with its enormous drying boards which are strictly kept just like in 1991. The immense dryer is covered completely with the pieces that were fired just before the workshop ceased its activity in 1991, as if the workers had just gone on a break.

Four theme-based exhibitions inspired by the artistic heritage of Bernardaud retrace the history of the company and its contemporary creative approach. This part of the visit also retains an industrial edge : in the old oven room pieces by contemporary designers are displayed on the little wagons that used to transport the pieces to the ovens.

## **Making the most of brand heritage: the issues at stake**

Using these two examples, we can compare an approach which displays artistic heritage to one that displays industrial heritage, aesthetic creativity as opposed to technical craftsmanship, an intellectual and sensorial approach as opposed to one that appeals to the emotions.

The recent poster and press advertising campaigns carried out by the two companies prove the continuity of the choices made. Bernardaud concentrated on the object itself, a close-up shot of the piece touching a woman's face, the soft texture of her skin against the hardness of the porcelain. In the Baccarat advert the shot was much wider, the relationship to the object much more dramatic in strange surroundings where « beauty is never reasonable ». Where Bernardaud emphasises the object, the materials and the senses, Baccarat widens the field to evoke a fantastic universe –unlimited but for the fragility of crystal.

In emphasising the production of pieces of art rather than the glass manufacturing side, Baccarat stands out from the tableware sector to evoke a festive atmosphere as part of its universe while Bernardaud hones in on porcelain as a material and magnifies this aspect.

That is not to say that Bernardaud tour lacks a sense of wonder, from the fairylike atmosphere of the workshops frozen in time in the whiteness of the kaolin, to the beauty of the constant repetition of the movements of the varnisher, the visitor is touched by the true poetry of the place. At Baccarat, beyond the spectacular museum-like aspect of the affair there is a real narrative, placing the production of the factory in a historical and artistic context. The Simon vases from 1867 bring back the technical prowess of the Universal exhibition : the Tsar's candelabra, two of which were never delivered, echo the Russian revolution.

To sum up, for both Bernardaud and

Baccarat, the objective is to create a sense of wonder, through the beauty of the piece, the beauty of the technique, but also and above all to evoke the weight of history around current and past production, which alone distinguishes a luxury object from its utilitarian counterpart whether that history be technical, artistic, political or social.

With a structure where personnel costs run very high, accounting for 40% of the outgoings of the companies and where the unitary cost for a piece is relatively high and a high rate of damages, the porcelain and crystal sectors, despite the automation of certain tasks, remain reliant on craftsmanship. By emphasising their savoir-faire and their artistic dynamism, Bernardaud and Baccarat stand out from the competition from lower quality products and imports, from brands with no history or past. However, quality, the result of this savoir-faire and creativity is not, according to Denis Woronoff, the preserve of luxury products: « Historians have learned to throw off this restrictive idea. Quality is not restricted to luxury products (...) ; it is the union of certain characteristics and apt uses for a piece of merchandise<sup>10</sup>." Following this definition, quality exists outside the realm of luxury products with which it is too often associated and in return it is not enough to characterise them.

History plays an important role in defining a luxury product and making it stand out, in true historical terms or more broadly diegetic terms that can be felt through an object by the lovers of luxury, like art lovers, who form a community of people « in the know » and who speak the same language. Much has been said about a more personal luxury, more intimate, for oneself – opposing the luxury of today and the luxury of yesterday. This does not mean that the desire for distinction that governs the consumption of luxury items has abated, but it has moved to the satisfaction of an intellectual distinction rather than a material distinction. With this perspective, opening the history and heritage of a luxury goods company to the public means

touching a new public and offering another means of access, not by a drop in quality but by an initiation to beauty.

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1. See L. Bergeron, *Les industries du luxe en France*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998, pp. 63-64.
2. The Louis Vuitton family home, on the Louis Vuitton site in Asnières dates from 1860, and has housed a company museum (not open to the public) since 1989 (scenography by Bernard Fric).
3. The Hermès boutique at 24, faubourg Saint-Honoré houses the Emile Hermès collection.
4. Since 1995, the « Les Rhumbs » villa in Granville, where Christian Dior grew up has housed a museum dedicated to the couturier.
5. The Christofle collections are open to the public since the Saint-Denis museum was refurbished in 2002 (scenography by Richard Peduzzi).
6. On the history of Bernardaud, see E. Blanc, *Au Royaume de la porcelaine : Visite d'une fabrique de porcelaine, la fabrique Bernardaud*, Paris, Imprimerie Charles Lavauselle, 1944, 111 p.
7. On the history of tableware, see M. de Ferrière Le Vayer, « Les arts de la table en France, 1830-1995 : du développement au déclin ou une industrie victime des consommateurs », *Les entreprises et leurs réseaux : hommes, capitaux, techniques et pouvoirs : mélanges en l'honneur de François Caron*, under the direction of D. Barjot and M. Merger, Presses de l'université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998, pp. 251-261.
8. On the history of Baccarat, see D. Sautot, *Baccarat : une manufacture française*, Paris, Massin, 2003, 277 p.
9. Yves Taralon also created the visitor's site for Rémy Martin, and in 2000 did the scenography for the exhibition on Métiers d'Art which took place in the Palais des Congrès in Paris.
10. D. Woronoff, Postface, *La qualité des produits en France, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, under the direction of A. Stanziani, Paris, Belin, 2003, p. 298.