



# Luxury

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# Luxury, Voluptuousity, Levinas: on Jan Steen and Giovanni Segantini

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**ABSTRACT** This article deals with the concepts of luxury and voluptuousity, the abundant and the sensual, and their position in the history of art, for luxury and voluptuousity are rarely mentioned in single works of art by name. The article is an encounter with the history of art, particularly as it is manifested in two paintings that do at least reference luxury, the Golden Age Dutch artist Jan Steen's *Beware of Luxury* (1633), and the Symbolist stateless artist Giovanni Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* (1891). To understand Steen's and Segantini's conceptions of luxury and voluptuousity, and thus to build a foundation for an interpretation of their most important ideas regarding profligate and often exaggerated subjects and objects, it is argued that researchers can usefully explore Steen's and Segantini's engagement with luxury and voluptuousity from the perspective of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological explanations

of art, knowledge, and ontology where these two concepts are appreciated not as aesthetic categories but as aspects of desire and happiness, need, the untouchable in human contact, and as the future in the present. Deliberating the wider philosophical implications of why luxury and voluptuousity are not continually invoked by artists and writers on art history, the article emphasizes their significance for contemporary American artists such as Jeff Koons and for contemporary art history whilst concluding that, whereas Levinas' theorizations and interpretations of the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity are intellectually stimulating, they are also problematic because, it is suggested, luxury and voluptuousity are a continuum.

KEYWORDS: luxury, voluptuousity, Emmanuel Levinas, Jan Steen, Giovanni Segantini

## Introduction

Luxury and voluptuousity, the abundant and the sensual, are in some ways strange concepts that have yet to achieve an essential position in the history of art. For luxury and voluptuousity are rarely mentioned in single works of art by name; yet they denote sumptuous subjects and objects of aesthetic consideration typically from the position of the viewer seeking pleasure. In this article, I examine two paintings that do at least reference luxury, the Golden Age Dutch artist Jan Steen's *Beware of Luxury* (1633), and the Symbolist stateless artist Giovanni Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* (1891)<sup>1</sup>, together with their profligate and often exaggerated subjects and objects.<sup>2</sup> However, I do so not from the starting point of an aesthetic study of the stance of the viewer participating in leisure but on the basis of Emmanuel Levinas'<sup>3</sup> philosophical writings on art that are concerned with its relation to knowledge and ontology, or that branch of metaphysics which engages in the study of the nature of existence as a whole, not with the existence of particular entities<sup>4</sup>. This is because, for Levinas<sup>5</sup>, luxury is not an aesthetic category but an aspect of desire and happiness or a need, whilst voluptuousity in art, as elsewhere, is for him an indication of "the untouchable" in human contact and of the "future in the present."

Nonetheless, in this article on luxury and voluptuousity, I consider the wider philosophical implications of why these two concepts are not continually invoked by artists and writers on art history. For luxury and voluptuousity can be seen as defining the principles behind, for example, the contemporary American artist Jeff Koons' oil inks on canvas advertisements for alcohol, which are part of his *Luxury & Degradation* (1986) series<sup>6,7</sup>. Yet, the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity is the subject of no serious study by art historians, and it is quite possible to talk, for instance, of iconography and feminism without referring to this relationship.

Of course, different forms of interpretation of luxury and voluptuousness are possible. Academic philosophers such as Levinas have already elucidated and complicated the relationship between luxury and voluptuousness. Writers like Levinas<sup>8</sup> seek to develop the idea of the self-existing in an “eminent sense.” Elsewhere, Levinas<sup>9</sup> is concerned with being “moved” or stirred as a form of “pity that is complacent” and forms of pleasure wherein suffering is “transformed into happiness” or “voluptuousness.” I argue that Levinas’ theorizations and interpretations of the relationship between luxury and voluptuousness are intellectually stimulating yet problematic because, I suggest, luxury and voluptuousness are a continuum.

The article begins with the concepts of luxury and voluptuousness construed through a Levinas influenced discussion of Steen’s *Beware of Luxury*, before moving to an examination of Segantini’s *The Punishment of Luxury*, prior to selected critical reflections on Steen and Segantini, Koons, the relationship between luxury and voluptuousness, art history, and Levinas in advance of the Conclusion.

### **Luxury, Voluptuousness, Levinas I: Jan Steen’s *Beware of Luxury* (1663)**

What ideas concerning luxury and voluptuousness have been influential in the history of art? Consider the work of Jan Steen (1626 – 1679), who was a Dutch Golden Age genre painter of the 17th century<sup>10</sup>. Steen’s works are known for their psychological understanding, sense of humor and profusion of color.

Steen was born in Leiden, Holland, where his wealthy Catholic family members were brewers who managed The Red Halbert tavern. Steen was the oldest of eight children. Like Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), Steen attended the Latin school in Leiden. Although no official records of Steen’s artistic instruction are preserved, contemporary sources indicate that he acquired his painterly education from Nicolaes Knupfer (1603–1660), a German painter of historical and figurative scenes in Utrecht, Adriaen van Ostade, and Jan van Goyen, who became his father-in-law. Knupfer’s impact can be observed in Steen’s use of composition and color. Another stimulus was Isaac van Ostade, a painter of country scenes, who resided in Haarlem. In 1648 Steen and Gabriël Metsu created the painter’s Guild of Saint Luke at Leiden. Afterward, Steen became an assistant to the landscape painter Jan van Goyen (1596–1656) and moved into his house on the Bierkade in The Hague. In 1649 Steen married van Goyen’s daughter Margriet, with whom he had eight children. Steen worked with his father-in-law until 1654, when he moved to Delft, where he unsuccessfully ran the brewery *De Slang* (“The Snake”) for three years. Following an explosion in Delft in 1654, the art market went into recession. However, Steen did manage to paint one of his most renowned canvases, *A Burgomaster of Delft and his Daughter* (1665) during this period, a work that straddles portraiture and genre work. Subsequently, Steen lived and worked industriously

in Warmond, north of Leiden (1656–1660) and in Haarlem (1660–1670). In 1670, following the passing of his wife in 1669, and his father in 1670, Steen returned to Leiden, where he remained for the rest of his life. When the art market failed in 1672, which was named the Year of Disaster, Steen opened a tavern. In 1673 he married Maria van Egmont, fathered another child, and, in 1674, became president of the Saint Luke's Guild. Steen died in Leiden in 1679 and was buried in a family tomb in the Pieterskerk.

In 1945, Sturla Gudlaugsson, an authority on Dutch seventeenth-century painting and iconography and Director of the Netherlands Institute for Art History and the Mauritshuis in The Hague, wrote *The Comedians in the work of Jan Steen and his Contemporaries*<sup>11</sup>, which disclosed that a key influence on Steen's work was the guild of the Rhetoricians or *Rederijkers* and their theatrical activities. This revelation is important because it casts doubt on the idea that Steen's paintings are a truthful depiction of Dutch 17th-century everyday life, given that many of his scenes comprise peaceful, picturesque, and rural fancies with a dramatic accent that is suggestive of theater. Steen's association with theater is not only evidenced by the fact that his uncle belonged to the *Rederijkers* in Leiden but also by Steen's rendering of numerous scenes from the lives of the *Rederijkers*, such as his painting *Rhetoricians at a Window* (1658–65).

As to the genre scenes Steen depicted, such as *The Feast of Saint Nicholas* (1665–1668), many are anarchic, so much so that “a Jan Steen household,” denoting an untidy domestic or family incident, became a Dutch proverb (*een huishouden van Jan Steen*). Yet Steen's paintings often imply that his intention was to caution viewers and not to inspire them to imitate the conduct of his protagonists. Several of Steen's paintings address old Dutch proverbs or literature. Moreover, he frequently used family members as models, and painted self-portraits wherein modesty was an important topic. Steen's other painterly subjects include historical, mythological, and religious scenes, children's portraits, still lifes, and natural scenes. Steen is also recognized for his command of light and meticulousness, most particularly concerning textiles such as Persian rugs. He was extremely productive, creating some 800 paintings, of which about 350 survive. Steen's work was much appreciated by contemporaries and accordingly he was in high demand and well rewarded. Only one student, Richard Brakenburgh, is documented, but Steen's work has proved an inspiration for countless later painters.

Now consider a single work of art by name concerned with sumptuous subjects and objects, which is Steen's *Beware of Luxury* (1663) (Figure 1), an oil on canvas work that is currently in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Considered aesthetically (i.e., relating to its sense of the beautiful), the painting illustrates an unruly household given up to licentious or improper behavior. The nine individuals, predominantly up to no good, are gathered in the work in a triangular configuration, fronted by the loose-living young



**Figure 1**  
*Beware of Luxury* Jan Steen 1663 Oil on canvas 105 cm × 145.5 cm (41 in × 57.3 in) Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna, Austria. Copyright free source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan\\_Steen\\_004b.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Steen_004b.jpg).

woman smiling flirtatiously and assertively at the viewer. Bathed in warm autumnal shades of brown and yellow, vermillion, black, cream, olive green, and naturalistic flesh tones, the canvas is an amusing exemplification of the Dutch saying, “In good times beware the consequences,” which is etched on the slate at lower right of the painting. In the painting, the mother has fallen asleep, allowing the other members of the family to make the most of her slumbers. Her husband, in the foreground, obscenely throwing his leg across the lap of the young woman, is carrying on a liaison with her, and she is wearing a necklace and holding a glass of wine provocatively between the husband’s legs. Meanwhile, the husband is shrugging off the scolding given to him by a nun about the sins of unruliness in the home. Simultaneously, a young girl in the background is helping herself to something from a cabinet and her younger brother is experimenting with smoking a pipe, while a youth, perhaps the eldest son, plays the violin. There is also a baby boy in a high-chair at left, who is holding money and playing with a string of pearls, having thrown his bowl and a valuable document, to judge by its seals, to the floor. Concurrently, a dog is on the table finishing off a meat pie and a pig has strolled into the room. Steen’s warnings of the results of indulging in luxury include the amusingly and absurdly out-of-place elderly Quaker couple. There is, for instance, a duck on the Quaker man’s shoulder and he himself is reading out a devout text, all the while remaining seemingly unaware of the chaos surrounding him. Additionally, a basket of instruments of punishment (including a sword) hangs from the ceiling adjacent to a monkey on a shelf playing with the weights and chains of a clock. The message of the painting is apparent: sinners, guilty of the deadly sins of luxury (avarice, gluttony, and lasciviousness) and unnatural lust within degenerate households, of unrestrained desires in pursuit of the earthly pleasures of female flesh, must expect some consequence or punishment that, in 1663, was habitually classified as the descent into effeminacy in men or the descent into corruption in all.

However, if we reconsider the ideas about luxury and voluptuousity and what stimuli are at work in the historical artwork that is Steen’s *Beware of Luxury* from Levinas’ philosophical perspective, then Steen’s art and our knowledge of it can be recast as a question of ontology.

The first fundamental idea drawn from Levinas<sup>12</sup> is less to do with luxury as an aesthetic category and more to do with the experience of luxury as an aspect of human desire in beings that are “already happy”: indeed, desire has such an effect on people’s, and, particularly, artists such as Steen’s, ideas of happiness that it becomes their “misfortune,” which only highlights that, for Steen and for Levinas, luxury is in fact a need. Still, we must be careful to divide our comments on *Beware of Luxury* into two elements: on luxury and on voluptuousity. In this section on luxury I do not consider the nature of the work of art that is *Beware of Luxury*. Rather, I am concerned

with Steen's insight into and views on the experience of luxury as well as with his art. How can we critically evaluate the experience of luxury in *Beware of Luxury*? Adopting yet adapting Levinas<sup>13</sup>, I argue that people's, and specifically Steen's, perception of the experience of luxury initially "exists in an eminent sense," that is to say people's existence is depicted by Steen as wholly unconnected in their enjoyment. They take pleasure in their happiness, in the sensation of surrendering their genuine and humble being to happiness and from existing in an eminent sense: indeed, as I have written elsewhere<sup>14</sup>, such people exist above or beyond being. This opens up the idea of Steen's conception of the experience of luxury as a separate sensation, perhaps even independent of desire or other kinds of comprehension, and to the separation of the response to Steen's and others' art from all other forms of knowledge about being or feeling for happiness. This, at least in its form as Steen's *Beware of Luxury*, finds a fulfilment in his seventeenth century pictorial depiction of a disorderly household given up to immodest and even to unseemly activities.

A second proposition is that the experience of luxury is a form of desire wherein "being becomes goodness"<sup>15</sup>. The experience of luxury is "the apogee of being," or so it is argued by Levinas<sup>16</sup>, who outlines this form of desire and the apogee of being as an extension into enjoyment or happiness. The idea is that this form of desire, of the apogee of being, is initially expressed in egoism. The apogee of being that is the experience of luxury is, however, not an individual process, and in being a form of desire is opposed to a subjectivity based on a conception of individual goodness which implicitly limits it. This has implications for Steen's *Beware of Luxury*, which, by offering the viewer an art of luxury, applies to it a contrast between the idea that luxury is goodness and offers "good times," and that luxury is not goodness and augurs the prospect of "bad times." The idea of luxury as a form of desire, as the apogee of being, is thus invoked by Steen to illustrate that "in good times" people must "beware the consequences."

A third argument is that the determining ground of the experience of luxury as the apogee of being for Steen is the preoccupation of luxurious beings with the Other, with other luxurious beings, because this "represents a fundamental inversion" of a luxurious beings' "very exercise of being," an exercise of being which is suspended in "its spontaneous movement of existing" and given another direction<sup>17</sup>. This leads to an important distinction between the voracious or unconditional desire generated in a luxurious being in possession of itself and that desire which corrodes the absoluteness of the luxurious being through the presence of the Other, of the desirable, and that desire is expressed in the form and delineation of a revealed presence and not in desire "in a being that in separation experiences itself as autonomous ..."<sup>18</sup>. This aligns my position with Levinas' academic belief that desire for the Other is superior to desire in a

being that in separation experiences itself as autonomous, which appeals only to the egoist, and to distinguishing two kinds of the luxurious in Steen's work: the luxurious Other and the luxurious self which draws in the ego and the separated being but who is clearly of a lower moral order. The desire for the luxurious Other may be observed in the absolute Otherness of the luxurious Other when compared to the luxurious self and the luxurious self in Steen's representation in *Beware of Luxury* of the lady of the house falling asleep. But there are signs of prevarication in *Beware of Luxury* as to whether an absolute desire for the apogee of being was ultimately ever achievable or even desirable in reality.

The distinction between the experience of luxury and the experience of voluptuousity that Steen makes in *Beware of Luxury*, I suggest, is to set them up as a continuum. Steen, I argue, sees voluptuousity as like luxury in being also a critical evaluation concerning the apogee of being but not based on egoism or on a conception of goodness. For Steen, voluptuousity is therefore also a form of desire, but where luxury in the presence of the desirable is concerned with desire expressed in the form and delineation of a revealed presence, voluptuousity is desire expressed as unrevealed absence or the "untouchable" in human contact<sup>19</sup>. If luxury in Steen's *Beware of Luxury* is a representation of the present becoming the future, then voluptuousity for him is experienced through the "future in the present"<sup>20</sup>; if Steen's visual representation of luxury invokes familial and coquettish pleasures that are compatible with provocative young women and the drinking of wine, voluptuousity evokes the visual delicacy and representation of human limbs at the boundary of non-being and gives an intimation of what is eclipsed, of what is no more, and of what is not yet rather than domestic desires and flirtatious gratifications. If the experience of luxury for Steen is adapted to laughing off the admonitions of the Other as a critical evaluation concerning the apogee of being, then voluptuousity for him is associated with the incomprehensible and a retreat into the future. If Steen's protagonists in his *Beware of Luxury* must seek a ground external to themselves – a cabinet, a pipe, a luxurious string of pearls, a violin, a dog, and even a pig – they seek voluptuousity only internal to themselves because it is the nameless, the sensual, the concealed, the secret, and the strange. Thus, Steen's external warnings of the consequences of luxury, whether they appear in the form of a Quaker, a duck, a pious text, or even as an instrument of punishment fail to stem the rising tide of immorality and lust because earthly pleasures are experienced by beings that are moved internally, through a form of "pity that is complacent"<sup>21</sup>, through interior delights and sorrows that are transformed into happiness or voluptuousity. Uncontrolled erotic desire is therefore the starting point of voluptuousity and the very reason why, according to Steen, it must be penalized.

In arguing that for Steen the experience of voluptuousness is no less important than the experience of luxury, I have stressed that both contribute to Steen's intimations of the metaphysics of desire. The above account of Steen's *Beware of Luxury* thus sought to emphasize that the experience of voluptuousness and luxury are equally influential concepts for Steen, not least because they are associated for him as much with desire as with a form of eagerness that is both astonished by its termination and yet proceeds with no termination in sight.

### **Luxury, Voluptuousness, Levinas II: Giovanni Segantini's *the Punishment of Luxury* (1891)**

Unsurprisingly, ideas about luxury and voluptuousness have remained significant in the history of art long after Steen. Consider the work of Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899), who was a nineteenth century painter of large pastoral landscapes of the Italian and Swiss Alps<sup>22</sup>. Combining Realist, Divisionist, and Symbolist painting styles, Segantini's paintings typically portray the natural world of Alpine peasant farmers.

Segantini was born at Arco in Trentino, which, in 1858, was in the County of Tyrol in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The second child of Agostino Segatini (1802–1866) and Margarita De Girardi (1828–1865), Segantini (who himself added the second "n" to his original Segatini) had an older brother, Lodovico, who died in a fire. Except for six-months in 1864 when Agostino returned to Trentino, having failed to find work as a tradesman, Segantini spent his childhood with his mother, who experienced depression because of the death of Lodovico. Marked by poverty, hunger, and a limited education owing to his mother's inability to cope, her poor health, and death in 1865, Segantini was cared for by Irene, his father's second child from a previous marriage. Segantini's father died penniless in 1866, leaving Irene and Segantini in hardship. Moving to Milan in 1865, Irene applied to relinquish her and Segantini's Austrian citizenship and for them to both become Italian. However, Irene either misconstrued the process or did not have enough time to complete it, which resulted in her and Segantini's Austrian citizenship being revoked. Hence, without a successful application being made for Italian citizenship, Irene and Segantini remained stateless for the rest of their lives. At seven-years-old Segantini was a runaway living on the streets of Milan before being detained in the Marchiondi Reformatory, where he learned cobbling rather than reading or writing, which he only mastered in later life. In 1873, Segantini's half-brother, Napoleon, claimed him from the Reformatory, where Segantini had also studied drawing. Living with Napoleon in Trentino where the latter ran a photography studio, Segantini absorbed this new art form, which he used later to record scenes that he incorporated into his paintings.

In 1874, Segantini returned to Milan and to the Brera Academy of Art where artist friends such as Carlo Bugatti influenced his early work. Segantini's first major painting, *The Chancel of Sant Antonio*, was acquired in 1879 by Milan's Società per le Belle Arti, a painting that attracted the attention of painter and gallery owner Vittore Grubicy de Dragon, who became Segantini's advisor, dealer, and life-long financial supporter. Grubicy de Dragon introduced Segantini to the works of Anton Mauve, the Dutch realist painter and leading member of the Hague School, and to the works of Jean-François Millet, the French artist, founder of the Barbizon school, and realist painter of peasant farmers. Segantini also met Bugatti's sister, Luigia Pierina Bugatti (1862–1938), or "Bice," and they began a life-long romance. Segantini and Bice attempted to marry but, due to his statelessness, it was legally impossible. Consequently, Segantini and Bice lived together as an unmarried couple, which led to conflicts with the Catholic church and frequent forced relocation to avoid social condemnation. In 1880, Segantini and Bice moved to Pusiano in the Province of Como and then to the village of Carella. It was in this Alpine landscape that Segantini painted *en plein air* rather than in a studio, completing the first version of *Ave Maria* (Segantini Museum, St. Moritz), which was awarded a gold medal at the 1883 World's Fair in Amsterdam. Segantini then entered into an agreement with the Grubicy de Dragon gallery, which was to be his sole representative, even though the gallery was slow in fulfilling its financial obligations to him. Subsequently, the family struggled in poverty, particularly as Bice and Segantini had four children to raise. To help the family, Segantini employed a young maid, Barbara, or "Baba" Uffer, who became his favorite model for many of Segantini's important paintings, including *Mothers*, *After a Storm in the Alps*, *A Kiss*, and *Moonlight Effect*. In 1886, Segantini sought a cheaper place to live and, attracted by the beautiful Alpine panorama, moved the family to Savognin in the Gelgia valley. Between 1886 and 1887, Vittore Grubicy de Dragon stayed with Segantini, suggesting that, like Mauve, Segantini separate his colors to increase their brilliance. Segantini applied this method for the first time to a second version of *Ave Maria*, wherein he used the Divisionist or Neo-Impressionist painting technique of dividing colors into individual dots or areas which interrelate optically. His bolder style was acclaimed by patrons, critics, and viewers alike; Segantini received gold medals in Munich (for *Midday in the Alps*) and Turin (for *Ploughing*). Grubicy de Dragon also introduced Segantini to Symbolism, the 19th-century art movement of French, Russian, and Belgian origin that sought to signify absolute truths symbolically through metaphorical paintings as a counter to naturalism and realism<sup>23</sup>. Unable to attend international exhibitions featuring his paintings due to his statelessness and frustrated that the Swiss government would not grant him citizenship, in spite of his growing fame, Segantini refused to pay cantonal taxes in Savognin and, after being pursued by creditors, moved his family to

the Engadin valley in the eastern Swiss Alps. There, in the high Alpine passes, clear light became Segantini's chief subject matter. He also studied existential philosophy, concentrating on Friedrich Nietzsche, even illustrating the first Italian translation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*<sup>24</sup>. Meanwhile, Segantini continued to gain recognition in Italy, and, in 1894, the Castello Sforzesco in Milan mounted a retrospective of ninety of his works, whilst at the first Venice Biennale, in 1895, he was awarded the Prize of the Italian State for his painting *Return to the Homeland*. Segantini's painting, *The Sad Hour*, exhibited in the Munich Secession in 1896, was purchased by the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin, whereas his 1896 painting, *Ploughing*, was bought by the Neue Pinakothek in Munich. In 1897, Segantini was commissioned by local hotels to produce a panorama of the Engadin valley, which was to be exhibited in a specially built round hall at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. However, before the panorama was completed, the commission was scaled down for financial reasons. Thus, Segantini redesigned the panorama into his now famous triptych, *Life, Nature and Death* (Segantini Museum, St. Moritz). Segantini's importance as an international artist was further established by museums throughout Europe beginning to compete for his paintings, such as *The Comfort of Faith*, purchased by the Hamburger Kunsthalle and *The Bad Mothers* (Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna), bought by the Vienna Secession. Eager to finish his triptych, Segantini returned to the Alpine mountains of Schafberg in the Austrian state of Salzburg. Nevertheless, the pace of Segantini's work, coupled with the high altitude, affected his health, and, in mid-September 1899, Segantini became ill with acute peritonitis. Two weeks later he died. In 1908, the Segantini Museum was established in St. Moritz, Switzerland, its design inspired by one of Segantini's sketches for the pavilions for the Engadine Panorama.

Segantini's work and varying style began with unassuming scenes involving common people living off of the earth – peasants, farmers, shepherds – yet gradually shifted towards a thematic symbolism that continued to embody the landscapes around him while intertwining pantheistic images representing a primeval Arcadia. Moving from the internal, such as Segantini's intimate scene of motherhood in a stable, to the external, such as his grand views of the mountains where he lived, it is the spiritual, eternal, and erotic connections people make with nature and with the earth that are the core themes of Segantini's art. Segantini's 1896 painting, *Love at the Springs of Life* (Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, Milan), for example, reflects Segantini's increasingly philosophical approach. Set in the high Alpine landscape near his home, it pictures an angel with large wings spread over a small waterfall flowing from rocks. In the distance, two lovers, clothed in white flowing robes, walk along a flower strewn path towards the spring. Segantini's work can, then, be characterized as an amalgamation of Naturalism and Symbolism.

Now contemplate a single work of art by name regarding luxurious subjects and objects, which is Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* (1891), (Figure 2), an oil on canvas painting that is presently in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, United Kingdom. Deliberated aesthetically, as a depiction of some subject or object that is beautiful, the painting is part of Segantini's thematic series on *cattive madri* ("bad mothers") that he produced between 1891 and 1896. Inspired by the poem "Nirvana," published in 1889, and supposedly a translation from the 12th-century Indian Panghiavahli of Maironpada by the librettist Luigi Illica, but probably written by him or translated from an intermediate work, the painting shows the viewer women being punished for preferring a life of luxury and unnatural lust over a life of duty by being suspended among the barren landscapes of the Alps. Segantini's Catholicism meant that he believed that the role of women was to be mothers: for him, women who fail in the role of mother are "bad mothers" who must be punished whilst women who succeed in the role of mothers are "good mothers," the latter of whom Segantini depicts in his "Angel" cycle. Consequently, the women in *The Punishment of Luxury* are represented as having aborted or lost their children, and, although this is a sin according to Segantini, he treats the women somewhat sympathetically and, just as the poem "Nirvana" does, intimates that they could be saved; for the bodies of the ginger-haired women are not only suspended among the steel-blue and grey wintry skies, the brown, white, and snowy mountaintops of the Alps, and their blackened tree branches but also in a dream-like state. Yet, though stark, it can be argued that Segantini's landscape is not unpleasant, for he regarded the mountains as his spiritual home and the inclusion of the darkened branches of the withered trees is perhaps symbolic of a possible return to life in the spring.

Nonetheless, if we reassess various notions relating to luxury and voluptuousity and what influences are evident in Segantini's historical painting *The Punishment of Luxury* from Levinas' philosophical point of view, then Segantini's art and our knowledge of it cannot be revised as a question of ontology in quite the same way that was possible with Steen's art.

This last is because, while the first important conception elicited from Levinas, that luxury is not an aesthetic category, can be upheld, the idea that the experience of luxury is an aspect of human desire in beings that are already happy cannot. Certainly, for Segantini, the experience of luxury is a feature of human desire in flying female beings that are already unhappily ensconced in a frosty scene consisting of an icy Alpine panorama: here, desire has such an impact on people's, and, above all, artists like Segantini's, thoughts on unhappiness as a form of emptiness, that it turns into self-chastisement, which only emphasizes that, unlike either Steen or Levinas, for Segantini, luxury is the motor force of the need to punish. Even so, as with Steens' *Beware of Luxury*, we must be assiduous and split



**Figure 2** *The Punishment of Luxury*, Giovanni Segantini 1891, Oil on canvas, 99 cm (39 in) × 172.8 cm (68.0 in), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, United Kingdom. Copyright free source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni\\_Segantini\\_-\\_The\\_Punishment\\_of\\_Lust\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni_Segantini_-_The_Punishment_of_Lust_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg).

our remarks on *The Punishment of Luxury* into two components: on luxury and on voluptuousness. In this segment on luxury I do not contemplate the character of the painting that is *The Punishment of Luxury*. Instead, I focus on Segantini's understanding and interpretation of the experience of luxury in addition to his painting. How can we critically evaluate the experience of luxury in *The Punishment of Luxury*? Critically evaluating Levinas, I contend that people's, and explicitly Segantini's, insight into the experience of luxury primarily exists in an eminent sense of evil, namely, people's being is portrayed by Segantini as completely unrelated to that of others in their joylessness among the branchless trees. People take no gratification, amusement, or enjoyment from their unhappiness, from the feeling of relinquishing their real and modest being to unhappiness and from subsisting in an eminent sense of evil: actually, people such as Segantini's flying, ethereal, females literally exist in the air or above being. This introduces the idea of Segantini's comprehension of the experience of luxury as a distinct impression, conceivably even free of desire for female locks or other types of understanding of female sensual bodies, and to the separation of the reaction to Segantini's and others' art from all other varieties of knowledge about being unearthly or sensitive to unhappiness. This, at any rate in its appearance as Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury*, obtains realization in his nineteenth century symbolic representation of the "bad mothers" of his "Nirvana" cycle, of the drifting female forms given over to evil.

A second suggestion is that, unlike Steen or Levinas, the experience of luxury for Segantini is not a type of desire where being becomes goodness but a type of evil where being, driven by sexual desire, becomes selfish. The experience of luxury is the apogee of being bad. Hence, in contrast to Levinas, for Segantini, evil and the apogee of being bad are an expansion not into enjoyment or happiness but into the sadness of being a selfish or a bad mother. Segantini's view is that this kind of evil, of the apogee of being bad, is originally articulated in an egoism that can never be fulfilled. The apogee of being bad, namely, the experience of luxury for Segantini is, therefore, and against Levinas, an individual process, and in being a class of evil is aligned with a maternal subjectivity founded on a model of individual selfishness which indirectly yet unreservedly rejects motherhood. Poles apart from Steen's *Beware of Luxury*, Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* presents the viewer with an art of luxury as pure desire. Indeed, for Segantini, the idea is that luxury is unadulterated self-centeredness. Conversely, while for Segantini the pursuit of luxury seemingly only offers posthumous wandering in parched, icy lands, it also presages for him the potential of Nirvana or moral renewal. The idea of luxury as a strain of evil, as the apogee of being bad, is accordingly evoked by Segantini to demonstrate that, in their posthumous wandering, women will not so much beware of the consequences of their actions but be tormented by the regret of childlessness.

A third line of reasoning is that the decisive argument concerning the experience of luxury as the apogee of being bad for Segantini is the fixation of luxurious female beings that are bad mothers with an Other luxurious being, with the unborn child, since this experience denotes an essential perversion of a woman's actual enactment of being, an enactment of being bad that is suspended in its spontaneous movement towards women's natural instincts and given an alternative route away from motherhood or the possibility of bringing life into the world. There is, therefore, a crucial difference between the avid or unrestricted evil created in a luxurious female being in control of its selfishness and that evil which erodes the absoluteness of the luxurious female being due to the presence of the Other that is evil, and that evil is articulated or communicated in the manner and description of the revealed presence of the unborn child and not in evil in a female being that in separation senses itself not, as Levinas claims, as autonomous, but, as Segantini claims, as a mother who accepts and enjoys the ecstasy of giving birth to and parenting her child. This differentiates my standpoint from Levinas' intellectual conviction that desire for the Other, in this case the desire of the mother for the Other that is her child, is superior to desire in a being that in separation perceives itself as autonomous. This is because, in Segantini, the desire of the mother for the Other that is her child is not superior to desire in a being that in separation discerns itself as autonomous; in truth, desire is a form of evil that is twisted, decayed, and literally lifeless, a form which is of interest only to the ego that is unrepentant, and, as with Steen's art, to differentiating two categories of the luxurious in Segantini's art: the luxurious Other that is the unborn child and the luxurious selfish or bad mother who bathes in the egoistic personality of the separated female being but who patently belongs to an inferior ethical regime because she is guilty of rejecting the unborn child in the eyes of natural law. The evil perpetrated against the luxurious Other that is the unborn child can be seen in the total annihilation of the Otherness of the luxurious unborn child by abortion when contrasted with the luxurious selfish or bad mother in Segantini's depiction in *The Punishment of Luxury* of women who commit the sin of abortion deliberately or accidentally. In contrast, there are indications of forgiveness in *The Punishment of Luxury* wherein the luxurious selfish mother, despite representing absolute evil and epitomizing the apogee of being bad, is offered the possibility not only of being reunited with her unborn child but also, by doing so, attaining the state of Nirvana.

The difference between the experience of luxury and the experience of voluptuousity that Segantini, like Steen before him in *Beware of Luxury*, makes in *The Punishment of Luxury*, I propose, is to establish them as a continuum. However, Segantini's continuum is one in which the luxurious spiritual desires of the women floating in immense spaces of snowy and glacial settings in the mountains of the Alpine region have, much like voluptuousity itself, no origination,

objective, or termination. Unlike Steen, I maintain, Segantini perceives voluptuousity as similar to luxury in being likewise a critical evaluation regarding the apogee of being bad centred on egotistical profanation or on an idea of selfishness. Different from Steen, for Segantini, voluptuousity is consequently also a type of blasphemy, although where the luxurious female being in the presence of evil is engaged with evil conveyed in the form and demarcation of the revealed presence of the unborn child, voluptuousity is evil conveyed as the discovery of the concealed as concealed, or, put differently, the untouchable, while detected, does not lose its inscrutability in the human contact that is the discovery. If luxury in Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* is an illustration of the current physical and metaphysical beauty of the Alpine environment, of the individual apprehension of the becoming of nature with all its futural capriciousness, magnitude, and vicissitude on display, then voluptuousity for him is felt through the concealed futural meanings of the immensity of the Alpine space in the present that are not revealed by the atmospheric quality of the firmament; if Segantini's visual representation of luxury evokes the glowing manifestation of the chilly light that produces a kind of spiritual heaven, voluptuousity conjures an Alpine location wherein such a visual representation can never detect let alone portray the spiritual experience of women who commit the sin of abortion deliberately or inadvertently. If the experience of luxury for Segantini is the spirituality of women who are infertile and desolate, or who abandon their children, then voluptuousity for him is connected with the fact that their spirituality, however much it is perceived by him as bad, mean, or selfish, remains visually obscured, pictorially concealed: in short, the spirituality of the women does not attain the position of the revealed. If Segantini's selfish mothers in his *The Punishment of Luxury* discover themselves airborne in snowy wastelands, they also detect that their spiritual bodies cannot reveal their secrets either to Segantini or to the viewer; their self-propelled suspension thus alludes not to their physical reality but to their spiritual reality, to their apparent mystical void. In consequence, Segantini's admonitions to the soaring somnambulist women hanging in freezing environs refer not to their semiconscious or dreamlike state where disconnection from reality provides comfort but to their violated state where detachment from reality provides only shame. Surrounded by fruitless trees and dead branches, the rootless women are portrayed by Segantini as spiritually purposeless and living in nothingness or a state of unconsciousness that offers only scant relief from remorse and Segantini's accusation of vanity.

In insisting that, comparable to Steen, for Segantini, the experience of voluptuousity is no less significant than the experience of luxury, I have stressed that both are important factors in Segantini's indications of the metaphysics of an evil spirituality. This explanation of Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* has therefore strived to accentuate that the experience of voluptuousity and luxury are

correspondingly powerful concepts not only for Steen but also for Segantini, not least as they are connected for him as much with evil as with a form of aimlessness that is both conscious and unconscious, remorseful, and vain.

### On Jan Steen and Giovanni Segantini

How might we think through the broader philosophical repercussions of why luxury and voluptuousity are not frequently mentioned by artists and critics of art history?

First, we can point to the fact that luxury and voluptuousity can be understood as delineating the assumptions behind, for instance, the contemporary American artist Jeff Koons' oil inks on canvas advertisements for alcohol, which are a component of his *Luxury & Degradation* (1986) series<sup>25,26</sup>. Taking existing advertisements for Hennessy and Martell cognac, Gordon's gin, and Dewar's scotch, Koons' conception of luxury is both similar to and different from that of Steen and Segantini. But, whereas Steen asks viewers to beware of luxury and Segantini asks viewers to punish those who practice it, Koons asks viewers to appreciate how luxury degrades, damages, and diminishes them. Referring to the "levels of political abstraction" that are implanted in such advertisements, Koons<sup>27</sup> presents his *Luxury & Degradation* series as a social critique of the ways that "white middle class art" reduces "art to social mobility for certain ethnic groups." Koons' critique is concerned with demonstrating how art can be utilized, with demonstrating that there are various planes of political abstraction in the domain of art. People thus need not so much, in the vein of Steen, to *beware* of luxury as to *be aware* of how luxury as and in art can be employed against them, compelling people to part with their own economic and political power. Consequently, Koons' *Luxury & Degradation*, unlike, say, Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury*, is about creating art that is not against particular people. Hence, for Koons, voluptuousity in contemporary art is not about discovering attractive subjects and objects in the world; nor is it about expressing, satisfying, or achieving a sort of self-glorification. Rather, voluptuousity in contemporary artworks such as Koons' *Luxury & Degradation* series is about the sighting of the ineffable, of the enigmatic, and of expressions that conceal their political foundation whilst uncovering the self-value, history, and expansion of the viewer's own limits.

Second, whether we consider Steen's *Beware of Luxury*, Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury*, or even Koons' *Luxury & Degradation*, the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity is the topic of no important investigation by art historians. This is not to argue that there are no significant art historical explorations of Steen's, Segantini's, or Koons' art, of which there are a number, including Ariane Van Suchtelen's *Jan Steen's Histories*<sup>28</sup>, Beat Stutzer's *Giovanni Segantini*<sup>29</sup>, and Norman Rosenthal's *Jeff Koons: Conversations with Norman Rosenthal*<sup>30</sup>. It is to argue that, whether

we contemplate such art historical practices as curation or the publication of articles, books, and catalogs, there is no substantial work on the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity. As a consequence, while art historians continue to produce remarkable exhibitions and scholarly publications, the discipline tends to focus on concepts such as iconography and feminism. However, praiseworthy as it might be for art history to concentrate on these and related concepts, what is being proposed here is not that the discipline revolve around the concepts of luxury and voluptuousity, even though luxury<sup>31</sup> is studied much more than voluptuousity within art history, but that the discipline consider the relationship between the concepts of luxury and voluptuousity as an object if not a method of study. This is because, as noted earlier, a number of arguments and value claims underpin and direct any study of the art historical and contemporary relationship between the concepts of luxury and voluptuousity; a relationship whose elements, as seen in the example of Koons, continue to evolve from Steen and Segantini and multiply today almost beyond their recognition, thus making this relationship a crucial present-day concern of the discipline as a whole.

Finally, as stated throughout this article, Levinas has clarified, interpreted, and problematized the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity. Yet, for all the insight that Levinas provides, when we consider Steen's view of the experience of luxury as involving the depiction of selves existing in an eminent sense; as wholly independent in their enjoyment; as taking gratification in their happiness; as being aware of relinquishing their authentic and unassuming being to happiness; and, in existing in an eminent sense wherein such selves exist beyond being, various difficulties arise when Levinas' analyses encounter Segantini. For Segantini's vision of the experience of luxury, unlike that of Steen, necessitates the representation of selves existing in an eminent sense of evil; as totally separate to that of others in their joylessness; as taking no satisfaction from their unhappiness; as being conscious of renouncing their actual and ordinary being to unhappiness; and in living with an eminent sense of evil in which such exclusively female selves exist in the air above being. Equally, whilst enjoyment and happiness are rendered by Segantini as joylessness, unhappiness, and even evil, Levinas' concern with beings such as those represented by Steen who are moved internally as a kind of compassion that is self-satisfied, whose interior joys and torments are transformed into happiness or voluptuousity, is also redirected by Segantini towards flying somnambulist women who are violated internally as a kind of shame that is spiritually empty, whose interior discontents and miseries are changed into unhappiness or a form of voluptuousity that is founded upon penitence and pride. Consequently, whereas Levinas' philosophy and explanations of the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity are academically invigorating, they also remain problematic because his notions of

enjoyment, pleasure, and happiness can effortlessly slide into other very different ideas, such as joylessness, displeasure, and unhappiness, or from luxury as a form of desire wherein being becomes goodness to luxury as a form of evil wherein being becomes selfish. To understand the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity is therefore to understand it as a continuum, as a relationship where beings such as those depicted by Steen and Segantini can be considered and examined as a spectrum that can incorporate beings that are being moved and beings that are being violated; beings that exude pity and beings that exude shame; beings that are self-satisfied and beings that are spiritually empty; beings that are experiencing pleasure and beings that are experiencing displeasure; and, ultimately, beings that are sensing happiness and beings that are sensing unhappiness.

## Conclusion

It is evident that the concepts of luxury and voluptuousity have yet to attain an indispensable place in the history of art for they are seldom referenced in individual works of art by name. However, whilst this article has contemplated the lavish subjects and objects of Steen's *Beware of Luxury* and Segantini's aesthetic considerations in his *The Punishment of Luxury*, alongside the viewer pursuing enjoyment, it has not done so on the basis of an aesthetic analysis from the standpoint of the viewer engaging in pleasure but on the basis of Levinas' philosophical texts on art that are focused on its association with knowledge and ontology. This Levinas inspired ontological inquiry has thus been concerned with the question of luxury and voluptuousity in Steen's and Segantini's art from the perspective of being as a whole, by which was meant the conditions of possibility for the existence of these specific works of art and the beings represented therein. Indeed, the inquiry has challenged that set of assumptions about the fundamental nature of art and existence wherein luxury is understood as an aesthetic category. In contrast, it has been argued that luxury can be comprehended as an attribute of desire and happiness or a need, while voluptuousity in art can be appreciated as a sign of the untouchable in human contact and of the future in the present.

Concurrently, the article has deliberated the larger philosophical ramifications of why luxury and voluptuousity are infrequently cited by artists and authors on art history. In the example of Koons' *Luxury & Degradation* series, for instance, it was established that luxury and voluptuousity remain important concepts within his contemporary art concentrated on alcohol advertising. Nevertheless, the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity remains a topic of no significant investigation by art historians, who confine themselves to, among many other important theories and practices, concepts such as iconography and feminism.

Lastly, whereas Levinas proposes a distinct mode of analysis from that of aesthetics when he dwells on luxury and voluptuousity, and his philosophy does clarify and problematize the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity, Levinas' elaboration of the idea of the self-existing in an eminent sense is itself problematical. This is because, on the one hand, the self-existing in an eminent sense can, as Levinas argues, result in enjoyment, pleasure, and happiness but, on the other hand, as was disclosed in the case of Segantini, it can also bring about joylessness, displeasure, and unhappiness. Likewise, Levinas' concern with beings, such as those represented by Steen, who are enthused or aroused through a sort of benevolence that is self-righteous, whose delights and sorrows are transfigured into happiness or voluptuousity, is itself transfigured by Segantini into a concern with beings, such as the women painted by him, who are dishonored and disrupted, infringed, or ravaged through a form of disgrace that is purposeless, whose displeasures and grief in the abyss of oblivion are changed into unhappiness or a type of voluptuousity that is based upon guilt and conceit. For these reasons, I have argued that, although Levinas' theorizations and explanations of the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity are academically inspiring, they also remain problematic since, I have proposed, his ideas of enjoyment, pleasure, and happiness can readily slip into ideas of joylessness, displeasure, and unhappiness, a slip which indicates that the relationship between luxury and voluptuousity is a continuum.

## Notes

1. There remains some scholarly uncertainty as to whether Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* should be titled *The Punishment of Lust*. The Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, United Kingdom, which owns the painting, title's it *The Punishment of Lust* but acknowledges on its website (<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/artifact/punishment-of-lust>) that the "title on the frame calls it *The Punishment of Luxury*." The standard explanation for the uncertainty, for which there is no empirical evidence, is that Alberto Grubicy de Dragon, the son of Segantini's dealer and friend Vittorio Grubicy de Dragon, may have mistranslated Segantini's response to a cablegram from the Walker Art Gallery in 1893, mistaking the Italian word "lussuria" or "lust" for "luxury." However, the standard explanation remains uncertain not only because there is no empirical evidence for it but also because, in Segantini's documented response to the Walker Art Gallery, which might or might not have been mistranslated by Alberto Grubicy de Dragon, Segantini writes in broken English that "Your offer accepted wishing that my picture 'Punishment of Luxury' could be part of that Distinguished Gallery"<sup>32</sup>. Consequently, for the purposes of this article, I have titled Segantini's painting *The Punishment of Luxury* for three reasons: first, because that is the title written on its frame; second, because the standard explanation for the uncertainty regarding the title of the painting lacks empirical evidence; and, third, because Segantini's own documented response to the Walker Art Gallery concerning his painting offers empirical evidence that he himself was content with the title *The Punishment of Luxury*. A discussion of the,

- by now, essentially unsolvable problem of the scholarly uncertainty surrounding Segantini's title can be found in Cheney<sup>33</sup>.
2. Paintings in the Western tradition other than Steen's *Beware of Luxury* and Segantini's *The Punishment of Luxury* that do explicitly name luxury are few and, to my knowledge, are limited to Adriaen van de Venne's (1627) *Strong Legs are Needed to Carry Luxury* (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow) and Henri Matisse's (1904) *Luxury, Calm and Pleasure* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Because of lack of space, neither Venne's nor Matisse's paintings are discussed in this article.
  3. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.
  4. Cohen, "Levinas on Art and Aestheticism," 11.
  5. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62, 258.
  6. Rosenthal, *Jeff Koons*, 117.
  7. Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture*, 73–74.
  8. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62.
  9. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 259.
  10. Van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen's Histories*.
  11. Gudlaugsson, *The Comedians in the Work of Jan Steen and his Contemporaries*.
  12. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62.
  13. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62.
  14. Armitage, "The Pursuit of Luxury as an Act of Transgression."
  15. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63.
  16. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63.
  17. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63.
  18. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63.
  19. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.
  20. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.
  21. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 259.
  22. Stutzer, *Giovanni Segantini*.
  23. Neginsky, *Symbolism, Its Origins and Consequences*.
  24. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
  25. Rosenthal, *Jeff Koons*, 117.
  26. Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture*, 73–74.
  27. Rosenthal, *Jeff Koons*, 117.
  28. Van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen's Histories*.
  29. Stutzer, *Giovanni Segantini*.
  30. Rosenthal, *Jeff Koons*.
  31. Lapatin, *Luxus*.
  32. Cheney, "Giovanni Segantini's *The Angel of Life* and the *Nirvana Cycles*," 444.
  33. Cheney, "Giovanni Segantini's *The Angel of Life* and the *Nirvana Cycles*," 426–454.

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