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John Armitage

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The Visual Luxury Consumer: Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Maison Schiaparelli

John Armitage 
University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

John Armitage is Emeritus Professor of Media Arts at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, United Kingdom. He is the co-editor, with Joanne Roberts, of *The Third Realm of Luxury: Connecting Real Places and Imaginary Spaces* (Bloomsbury 2020) and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Visual Culture*.
j.armitage@soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT The luxury consumer is one of the most celebrated concepts in what is known as luxury brand management. However, this study of the associations between the visual, luxury, and the consumer offers new possibilities for thinking about the contemporary visual culture of luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Hermès, and Maison Schiaparelli. The article guides readers through issues at the heart of work on the luxury consumer, including the visual luxury consumer as practitioner, as an expert who uses their visual knowledge as part of their luxury consumption. What becomes apparent is that work on the luxury consumer is impossible to ignore for anybody who is serious about contemporary visual culture, and this investigation provides an ideal critical introduction to a wide variety of texts and topics related to luxury and consumption.

KEYWORDS: Visual luxury, consumer, Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Maison Schiaparelli

Introduction

The luxury consumer is a central concept in the investigation of luxury consumer goods by scholars of luxury brand management, both as the examination of and guide to the conditions of how, when, and for what reasons luxury consumer goods are used, understood, and perceived as significant and by whom.¹ However, this article offers readers an alternative methodological encounter with luxury from the perspective of visual culture.² Bringing together and studying numerous types of mass luxury culture, inclusive of luxury in film and television that have existed for decades though experiencing repeated transformation in economic, technological, and institutional terms, the visual culture of luxury is thus a recently established disciplinary specialism that is concerned with luxury advertising and luxury fashion, luxury graphic and product design as well as with critical luxury studies.³ Introducing the idea of the visual luxury consumer, a person, it is argued, who is more than a viewer or spectator, the article examines various crucial writings on important theoretical and practical debates of the present post-Covid period, including: the study of the viewer of luxury consumer goods and conceptions of looking; what visual luxurious materials get seen and by who; the visual practices of the viewer; cultural discourses of the practice of luxury consumption; and an existential conceptualization of the post-Covid experience of how luxury consumer goods get seen and by whom. In exploring various influential notions concerning the luxury consumer and their relation to the visual, the article traces the luxury consumer's engagement with viewing luxury consumer goods. For ease of explanation and comprehension, the article takes as representative of the visual luxury consumer the visual luxury consumer of various luxury branded goods produced by Louis Vuitton, Hermès, and Maison Schiaparelli, of those luxury branded goods associated with high price, quality, a visual aesthetic, rarity, and, frequently, non-functionality. Offering an original understanding of the visual luxury consumer as practitioner in the post-Covid era, as a person who practises the art of visual luxury consumption, the article is essential to anyone reading contemporary critical theories of the luxury consumer, the visual, and luxury goods.

The luxury consumer

If the investigation of the producer of luxury consumer goods – and all other articles of the economy – is the examination of how, when, why, and with what resources luxury consumer goods, such as Louis Vuitton bags and Christian Dior dresses, get manufactured and by whom, then the investigation of the luxury consumer is the examination of the conditions of how, when, and for what reasons luxury consumer goods are used, understood, and perceived as significant and by whom.⁴

However, this article offers readers an alternative methodological encounter with luxury from the perspective of visual culture.⁵ Bringing together and studying numerous types of mass luxury culture, inclusive of luxury in film and television that have existed for decades though experiencing repeated transformation in economic, technological, and institutional terms, the visual culture of luxury is thus a recently established disciplinary specialism that is concerned with luxury advertising and luxury fashion, luxury graphic and product design as well as with critical luxury studies.⁶

In one customary meaning, the luxury consumer is the person who “uses up,” if not always destroys, that which they consume – say, a Hermès silk scarf – and it is likely, consequently, that in modifying the concept for visual culture some elaboration of, and alteration in, its meaning is essential. This is since not all luxury consumer goods are destroyed in their consumption (although contemporary luxury producers do create luxury consumer goods that innately perish quickly, such as Benefit cosmetics (e.g. lipstick) and Estée Lauder fragrances (e.g. perfume). The luxury consumer, then, is possibly best comprehended visually, culturally, and historically, as someone whose actions regarding luxury consumer goods are concerned with their interpretation and with giving them meanings: the luxury consumer uses but does not necessarily use up luxury consumer goods in specific settings. Consider, for example, how the Louis Vuitton Van Gogh “Masters” bag designed by the contemporary American artist Jeff Koons is used in a talk on luxury fashion, or in an article on Van Gogh, or in a Louis Vuitton store window.⁷ This simple instance, though, already assumes a great deal: that a real luxury consumer good – in this illustration, a bag – instead of a photograph or digital representation of the bag, is not only the focus of the luxury consumer but is also what is consumed. Conceivably there is another sense, also, wherein real luxury consumer goods are basically used up by the luxury consumer, when, for instance, they are purchased or sold, and stop belonging in one private place to one person and begin to belong in another public place such as Fanny Moizant’s *Vestiaire Collective*, a well-known “re-commerce” website for authenticated, pre-owned, luxury fashion. The danger frequently overshadows such highly valued luxury consumer goods that their acquisition by re-commerce websites constitutes an authentic loss to the luxury fashion consumer.

Certainly, fully to examine the concept of the luxury consumer in the meaning of someone who uses luxury consumer goods up, reflect on the prestigious Hermès box as well as the Hermès silk scarf inside it. This Hermès box is often not lost or destroyed at the end of the luxury consumer’s process of consumption – for the Hermès box can reappear on YouTube as an “unboxing” video or is reprocessed as a home jewelry box in the bedroom, or, if the luxury consumer is wealthy, and already has numerous Hermès boxes about the home, it may find its way onto a garbage site.⁸ Much

short-lived visual-cultural luxury branded material, this instance implies, is not purposely destroyed in the luxury consumer's process of its consumption – wrapping sometimes not at all, at other times, later and slowly, perhaps on the opening of newer luxury consumer goods subsequently; or more quickly through the instantaneous obsolescence of numerous luxury consumer commodities themselves, such as Moët & Chandon Brut Imperial champagne. This concept – luxury consumer commodity – is only infrequently connected to the conventional luxury consumer goods examined in visual culture: “vintage” Louis Vuitton bags (or new ones for that matter) are not normally thought of by luxury consumers as consumer articles in this way at all. The luxury consumer, then, in one of its most significant visual-cultural meanings, is a concept for the person who processes the use (not always involving the actual “using up”) of, in our case, largely mass-produced luxury goods manufactured in factories, within a society that has made mass luxury consumption an incessant and sometimes controversial mass pursuit.⁹ The important concepts of the luxury consumer and the luxury consumer society – partially invented by the publicists and advertising managers of luxury brands such as Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent in the 1960s – signify how an entire social system was altered in the growth of a luxury consumer capitalist economy.¹⁰ As such, the consumption of luxury branded goods, on a mass and unceasing scale, itself has become an extremely influential productive pursuit, creating enormous numbers of luxury goods and services, from TAG Heuer watches to Tiffany & Co. cafes, and producing people themselves today as, increasingly, economically defined luxury consumers above all, in the way that they had once been urged to imagine themselves politically, and chiefly, as citizens.

The visual luxury consumer

If the analysis of the luxury consumer is the study of the circumstances of how, when, and for what purposes luxury consumer goods are used, interpreted, and comprehended as consequential and by whom, then what is the analysis of the viewer of luxury consumer goods? Let us investigate the concept of the visual luxury consumer.¹¹ For, in contrast to the idea of the viewer, which might be used to explain a person reviewing or scrutinising luxury consumer goods, or the notion of the spectator, which could be utilised to illuminate a person who observes or considers luxury consumer goods at particular sites or events, a visual luxury consumer, I argue, is more than a viewer or spectator. This is because the visual luxury consumer is a person who perceives, detects, or spots, for instance, a contemporary Louis Vuitton bag not as an everyday viewer or spectator but as a possible or real luxury consumer, as a person who visually understands a luxury branded bag either with a desire for what they cannot afford or with the means for what they can afford and will purchase. In this sense, a visual luxury consumer is a

person who looks at luxury goods with, on the one hand, visual care and attentiveness, but, on the other, with a view to desiring, if not necessarily buying and using up, the luxury commodity in the window; a person who meticulously discerns their own and others' yearnings associated with the purchase of luxury goods or inspects them as a likely or actual customer; a person who embarks on viewing luxury goods in a different way from their producers. A visual luxury consumer is thus a person who is focused on the visual culture of luxury and its contemporary luxury goods. But why is a conception of looking at all the articles of the economy essential? Why examine how, when, why, and with what visual resources luxury consumer goods, such as Bottega Veneta shoes and Jo Malone London scented candles, get noticed and by whom?

The visual luxury consumer, much like the luxury consumer, is a person who uses up commodities, but, unlike the luxury consumer, is a person who uses up commodities visually at a particular site, such as standing in the shopping mall, window shopping, at the Hermès store. Furthermore, as with certain other luxury consumers, visual luxury consumers do not destroy that which they visually consume through gazing at that Hermès silk scarf in the window. It is imperative, therefore, to expand the concept of the visual luxury consumer for visual culture further from its initial introduction because, as with all readings, the concern with the role of the visual luxury consumer's attention in visual and cultural research is constantly changing, along with its meaning.¹² This is because, as with numerous other luxury consumer goods, the person doing the looking, the visual luxury consumer, does not destroy the object of their action when they consume that which is seen. Contemporary luxury producers, for instance, ceaselessly create images of luxury consumer goods that are meant to be viewed as representations of the outward form of a luxurious person or object but also as scenes that, as mental pictures, unnaturally disappear rapidly, such as luxury magazine photographs by Annie Leibovitz, cinematic images by Tom Ford, television series focused on luxury lifestyles such as *Billions*, and the social media presence on YouTube, Twitter, Tik Tok, and Instagram of luxury brands such as Marc Jacobs and Balenciaga. The visual is an important concept, therefore, because what is not yet fully understood are the complexities of the concepts "the visual" and "the cultural" and how researchers might evaluate the activities of the visual luxury consumer when contemplating luxury consumer goods. There are, for example, two components within the process of viewing luxury consumer goods. Indeed, while any methodical analysis of the visual luxury consumer should pay attention to the visual in the sense that it must prudently consider looking at luxury consumer goods as a crucial part of visual and cultural work, it must also recognize that any analysis is only partially visual since the process additionally entails the linguistic explanation and interpretation of luxury consumers, the conceptualisation of visual meanings, and written

elaboration of the luxury consumer and, in our example, luxury consumer goods in precise situations. Contemplate, for example, how the Louis Vuitton Van Gogh “Masters” bag designed by Jeff Koons is not so much “used” as “viewed” or visualised within a range of connected senses that extend beyond talks on luxury fashion. What, for instance, does it mean when Koons “appropriates” and reproduces a scene portrayed in Van Gogh’s particular pictorial representation entitled *A Wheatfield with Cypresses* (1889), an oil painting that is part of a series shown at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole mental asylum at Saint-Rémy near Arles, France, where Van Gogh was willingly a patient from May 1889 to May 1890? Whether we are a student of art history or a visual luxury consumer “just looking” in a Louis Vuitton store window, we recognize that the “Masters” bag before us does not represent all the worldly objects that fall under our actual sightline at that exact instant. Instead, we quite voluntarily accede that our view of this actual luxury consumer good that is this bag, is not a photograph or digital image of the bag. Yet, from the perspective of a visual luxury consumer (and, no doubt, from Van Gogh’s perspective as a visual producer), it is understood that what is being visually consumed is an incomplete view of a nineteenth-century wheatfield and a creative composition featuring cypresses – appreciated, in the appropriated version presented on a Louis Vuitton bag by Koons, as the inventive recreation of its original producer, Van Gogh. There are, then, many senses in which actual luxury consumer goods, such as the Louis Vuitton “Masters” bag, are used up by the visual luxury consumer. However, unlike the luxury consumer, the visual luxury consumer does not necessarily either buy or sell luxury consumer goods since this is a private person functioning in a variety of public places (e.g. window shopping in the mall) and spaces (e.g. surfing the internet for the websites of luxury brands). The concept of the visual luxury consumer, then, must be differentiated from the concept of the luxury consumer because, whereas the concept of the luxury consumer suggests a person who purchases and uses up goods, the concept of the visual luxury consumer does not. Hence, whether we are concerned with luxury fashioned consumer goods or the websites of luxury fashion brands from Alexander McQueen to Chloé, the concept of the visual luxury consumer indicates a much more visible and sometimes invisible actor (e.g. when a person is invisible to producers and to other luxury consumers while surfing the internet) – because it incorporates the implication that the organ of sight, unlike the concepts of the luxury consumer and luxury consumer goods, is fundamentally a biological device and so in some important sense unbiased.

In fact, to comprehend the significance of the concept of the visual luxury consumer in the sense of someone who, perhaps with a contemporary critical “eye,” uses luxury consumer goods up like the Louis Vuitton bag but only visually, reconsider the act of viewing the admired Hermès box in addition to the Hermès silk scarf inside it.

For whilst it is true that the Hermès box is frequently not lost or destroyed at the conclusion of the luxury consumer's process of consumption, it is also true that the visual luxury consumer's eye is neither disembodied nor impartial and, as such, the Hermès box - as a luxury branded object - remains a wholly ideological artefact that is produced by a luxury consumer brand with primarily economic interests. The Hermès box that appears on YouTube as an "unboxing" video is thus incongruous in the sense that the value of the "unboxer's" eye, which is mainly if not exclusively a young and female eye, it is often asserted, lay in its capacity to discriminate the uppermost quality in the boxes and contents of luxury consumer branded goods (discrimination being a concept nearly always used in "unboxing" videos in a positive way, to suggest an "unboxer" who is aware of the full picture regarding, for instance, new, pre-owned or recycled luxury consumer branded goods for the well-heeled home). Nevertheless, while gazing at the ephemera of the visual culture of luxury branded materials does not destroy them as part of the visual luxury consumer's process of visual consumption, what has been profoundly challenged and destabilized by feminist visual culture theorists is the idea of viewing luxury and other consumer branded goods as fundamentally unbiased.¹³ In other words, all acts, and processes of looking at luxury consumer branded commodities have been thoroughly redefined within visual culture as gendered, classed, raced, and sexually oriented and interested luxury consumers. The visual luxury consumer, in one of its most significant cultural senses, is therefore a significant concept not only because it defines the person who visually processes the use (i.e. without the actual physical "using up") of mostly mass produced luxury goods but also because it recognizes that all acts associated with the pursuit of luxurious forms of consumption are at once unremitting mass activities and, as such, are deeply connected to questions of power, control, and transgression in society.¹⁴ The key concept of the visual luxury consumer discussed in *Luxury and Visual Culture* is thus significant because it indicates how consumer societies are being transformed by the development of visual luxury consumers who, increasingly, view today's global capitalist economy from the position of what might be called the cultural politics of viewing the consumption of luxury branded goods.¹⁵ Challenging, even subverting, the production of luxury goods and services, many people are progressively working towards a view of traditionally economically defined luxury consumers that is different because it is rethought not in terms of formal politics or citizenship but in terms of an explanation of vision, visibility, and viewing: the luxury consumer is thus re-viewed as the visual luxury consumer, which is recognized to be always a historically specific person, with an array of visual qualities and cultural interests that influence the types of viewing or theoretical interpretations that person will make when gazing at the luxurious and other things they look at.

The visual luxury consumer as practitioner

How useful is the study of the viewer of luxury consumer goods? Does the theoretical examination of the viewer, the associated readings, and the meanings of luxury consumer goods have anything to tell us about the situations, rationale, and, crucially, the practices of the viewer? How valuable is it to conceive of examining all the elements of the economy not from the standpoint of visual theoretical cultural discourses but from the viewpoint of visual practice, from a cultural discourse focused on the practice of consumption? Evidently, the analysis presented here, which centers on the visual resources offered by luxury consumer goods, such as Cartier rings and Montblanc fountain pens, does not constitute a materialist conceptualisation of the character of how things such as luxury consumer goods are seen and by whom but, rather, an existential conceptualisation of the experience of how luxury consumer goods are seen and by whom.

The visual luxury consumer as practitioner, similar to the luxury consumer, is a person who, in using up commodities, seeks an explanation for the visual ideas such commodities contain, for the cultural conceptualisations they embody. Actually, the visual luxury consumer as practitioner is, much like any luxury consumer, a person who uses up commodities only visually at a certain location. However, the visual luxury consumer is frequently focused on the concept of the individual, on the idea of the individual standing in the shopping complex, indulging in an explicit window shopping, as a form of luxury consumer creativity and expression. It is not at all the case, though, that the practice of window shopping is simply ideological capitulation to the typical luxury brand store. Indeed, the visual luxury consumer as practitioner is analytically important for any thoughtful effort to elucidate how luxury consumer goods that are not destroyed seem sensible when visually consumed and as part of looking in luxury brand store windows. This is because, to fully explain how luxury consumer goods seem sensible within specific societies, it has to be acknowledged that, occasionally, the visual luxury consumer critically transcends extant visual culture, leading, perhaps, to wish fulfilment fantasy readings, concerns, and meanings that become comparatively independent from the initial visual and cultural conditions of consumption, thus offering further visual resources to the consumer of luxury goods. This question of the cultural, historical, and contemporary value of luxury consumer goods has produced some significant visual and socio-cultural history of luxury consumer goods scholarship on luxurious things in the early-modern and modern periods that feature, for instance, examinations of glass and chinaware, furnishings, wine, silk, and spices.¹⁶ To identify a tradition of the production of visual consumption as a practice does not, in the sense that it is used in this article, mean to comprehend its essentially material character as work-process and product. Rather, to identify a tradition of the production of visual consumption

as a practice denotes to appreciate its visual existence, representational organization, and luxurious meanings as an objective yet subjective, mental yet physical, socio-cultural pursuit within a certain historical visual moment (e.g. the nineteenth-century visual moment of photography, the twentieth-century visual moment of cinema, the twenty-first-century visual moment of social media) – namely, within definite economic, technological, political, and ideological conditions of the production of the visual, of the luxury consumer and luxury consumer goods, and of the cultural. Consider the practice of owning and using a luxury bag, for example, as a reworked processing of leather and canvas, and product of the luxury consumer goods industry. In a broad and consequently non-historical sense, this socio-cultural visual and luxury consumer practice – similar to any other – is what we might define as the routine owning, carrying, or using of the bag, a normal or habitual luxury consumer action or performance that involves visually describing and culturally interpreting the bag to family and friends and the subsequent conceptualisation of the meaning of the bag as a luxury consumer good in specific circumstances. In historical terms, conversely, actual luxury bags, such as the Louis Vuitton Van Gogh “Masters” bag designed by Jeff Koons, have taken an extremely varied diversity of particular visual and socio-cultural forms: at the levels of, for instance, Louis Vuitton’s corporate backing for practitioners such as Koons; the actual material means of the production of the “Masters” bag (e.g. the use of Van Gogh’s painting, the leather surface, the tooled “VAN GOGH” metallic nameplate, Koons’ studio amenities etc.); the kind of professional commission Koons received from Louis Vuitton, and other relationships of exchange that directed the creation of Koons’ work for Louis Vuitton, together with its thematic and socio-cultural use within particular societies such as France and the United States and the specific cultures of, for example, Italy and China. Part of any – and all of these historically specific practices of owning, carrying, and using a luxury bag recognized as the working and reworking of visual and cultural processes and products has been the language of description and clarification available to the practitioners of, for instance, luxury fashion themselves.¹⁷ Artists working in luxury fashion, such as Koons, that is to say, accompanied by, for example, critiques of Koons’ appropriation art, and others concerned with issues of pictorial representation such as painting, have interconnected and developing positions within the socio-cultural circumstances of the production of the visual luxury consumer that informs the visual luxury consumers’ practice of “just looking” in a Louis Vuitton store window and supports their specific visual understanding of representation, of cultural objects, and of sight. The practice of viewing luxury consumer goods, such as a luxury bag, is thus frequently a product of the history of visual culture – such as Van Gogh’s wheatfield and cypresses – and also, in the case of the Louis Vuitton bag designed by Koons, of appropriated yet imaginative artistic practice. Ideas of

luxury consumer creativity and fashionable artistic expression – together with those of luxury consumer goods and artists such as Koons – are not just visual, cultural, and historical conceptions of goods. Instead, they are important elements of the meaning and structure through which practices such as window shopping in the mall and surfing the internet for the websites of luxury brands are established by visual luxury consumers, and through which their practice of not using up goods understands and clarifies luxury fashioned consumer goods to themselves the meaning and importance of the visible and the invisible, of what visible things are, of what it is that makes the visible things, of what it is that makes the visibility of things, and, critically, the value of their own visual practice concerning luxury consumer goods.¹⁸

Actually, to grasp the usefulness of the concept of the visual luxury consumer in the sense of someone whose contemporary critical eye uses luxury consumer goods up like the Louis Vuitton bag but only visually, reconsider once more not only the practice of viewing the high-status Hermès box and silk scarf inside it but also the visual luxury consumer's practice of the attribution of value, meaning, and importance to the esteemed Hermès box and silk scarf. This active practice of assessing the Hermès box implies that the value of the luxury consumer's process of consumption or belonging to such articles (e.g.: the Hermès silk scarf) is not, and can never be, inherent to the visual luxury consumer's eye: the value of the Hermès box and silk scarf – together with luxury and other branded objects – is continuously awarded by someone and frequently through an ideological practice entailing the power of luxury consumer brands with partial interests of one sort or another. Nevertheless, artefacts such as the Hermès box and silk scarf, and mainly because Hermès is a "heritage" luxury brand - a luxury brand whose identity is based on its core values, use of symbols, and on its own long history – are generally recognized as valuable to the visual luxury consumer's eye not simply because they are conventional luxury goods but also because, since the nineteenth-century, and, today, through "unboxing" videos on YouTube and so on, they have achieved a luxury status that, on closer inspection, only appears to contain their own value as if a Hermès box and silk scarf radiate innate properties. A Hermès boxed silk scarf on display, for example, protected by a security tag in the Hermès store window that looks like a museum in the fashionable boulevards of Paris, behind a toughened glass windowpane, and kept at a distance of at least a meter from its visual luxury consumers, by some means not yet entirely understood, exudes an aura of discrimination, luxury, and ultimate luxury consumer brand value that appears positive and also obviously "good", irrefutably only for the well-off, and irreversibly visual, cultural, and lavish. This instance demonstrates the power such luxury consumer brands have in influencing and arranging the value attributed to the visual luxury consumer's practice of visual consumption and to luxury

branded materials and objects. In obtaining this visual and cultural value over extended periods of time, luxury consumer brands, such as Hermès, together with its very own luxury and visual culture theorists, and their texts, such as Alice Charbin and Rachael Canepari's *Hermès: Heavenly Days*, play a crucial role in the socio-cultural reproduction of luxurious consumer commodities.¹⁹ On the other hand, luxury consumer brands also occasionally generate new and renewed assessments of commodities, preserving, raising, and promoting luxury consumer goods with formerly precarious high luxury consumer prestige. Italian businessperson Diego Della Valle's 2007 acquisition of Maison Schiaparelli, (once owned by Elsa Schiaparelli [1890–1973], the famous Italian luxury fashion designer and creator of the House in Paris in 1927), though not revealed by Della Valle publicly until 2013, is an example of this revivalist (re)production of the value of heritage luxury brands.²⁰ However, the practices and processes of looking at luxury consumer branded commodities and other luxury consumer goods, it must be noted, are themselves value-laden and, equally importantly, exist relative to other visual and cultural concepts such as gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and sexual interest. Within any definition or redefinition of luxury and other consumers, however radical, or otherwise, then, the study of visual luxury consumer culture and its historical meaning suggests that a scale of visibility or gage of visual practices, uses, and luxurious values exists, and that any one luxury consumer good eventually finds its place and practices within this scale. In developing a socio-cultural history of the visual culture of luxury and other forms of mass consumption, particularly in the present period, the power of the value attributed to luxury consumer goods must be thought significant: certainly, the increasing domination of the luxury aesthetic and its occasionally transgressive posthuman qualities (e.g. luxury brands operating within the virtual worlds of the metaverse) or socio-cultural worth must be subject to continued critique from, for example, a Heideggerian perspective.²¹

Thus, any perfunctory consideration of the interrelated components of luxury, the visual, and culture within any actual practice of visual consumption – say, that of Schiaparelli's famous summer gown, the “lobster print dress”, designed by her in 1937 and featuring a large lobster painted by the Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí (who had already used a lobster in his “Lobster Telephone” work of 1936) – signifies that it would be nonsensical to place the practice of creating haute couture dresses like the lobster print dress in an opposition to social explanation or a theory of viewing the consumption of luxury branded goods: the two were wrapped up together in Schiaparelli's declarations about her work with Dalí, and in her explanation of the lobster print dress that, apart from the lobster motif, was also strewn with sprigs of parsley printed on white organdie.²² The daring and subversive lobster print dress itself makes sense only within, as a product of, Schiaparelli's discursive practice concerning the

production and consumption of surreal luxury fashion goods. Of this finely sewn lobster print dress we might not only observe its rejection of traditionally economically defined luxury consumption (*haute couture* has no upper price limit) but also propose that the significance of the meaning of Schiaparelli and Dalí's practice summarised here – its form and content – condenses the possibilities of vision, visibility, and viewing at a particular moment into a number of yet to be answered questions concerning the luxury consumer, the history of visual culture, and the theories, interpretations, and practices associated with the luxurious and other things that we continue to gaze at.

Conclusion

Any critique of the concept of the luxury consumer and the study of luxury consumer goods must be differentiated from simple criticism of such ideas and investigations and also from the assumption that the luxury consumer and luxury consumer goods can be understood from an impartial viewpoint beyond their use, interpretation, and meanings. The critique presented in this article has taken up a stance within the object of study, that of the luxury consumer, but it has sought to draw out its inconsistent propensities and to highlight the idea of the visual luxury consumer as well as its persuasive characteristics when compared to the person who is a viewer or spectator. Emphasizing key texts and the import of critiquing theoretical and practical positions and debates for the future growth of visual and cultural studies, the article has offered a critical investigation of the viewer of luxury consumer goods: not criticism just of ideas of looking, observing, and gazing, nor even a polemic concerning visual resources, but procedures by which the visual and the luxury consumer are approached for what they may produce and to whom and for what visual practices they constrain. Such a critique has required adopting and adapting the more valuable components of concepts such as the viewer and refusing uncritical cultural discourses of the practice of consumption. From this perspective visual and cultural studies are an existential conceptualization and process, a sort of experimentation for creating useful knowledge about the experience of luxury consumer goods. Like Jeff Koons' appropriation art, the article has concerned itself with the ways in which visual and cultural studies appropriates the different methods of different "ways of seeing" and by whom, but the critique in this article applies equally and more generally to the visual and cultural analysis of luxury consumer processes and goods.²³ Thus constituted, the visual and cultural study of the visual luxury consumer is a radical activity that politicizes, for instance, luxury branded goods. It is not, though, to be appreciated by that token, as a research program either for or against, for example, luxury companies such as Louis Vuitton, Hermès, or Maison Schiaparelli. Its association with such luxury companies is politically open and mutable but nevertheless a genuine one: typified, we might suggest, by a constructive argument with

current styles of politicized luxury discourse and the forms of branded goods, such as Koons' "Masters" bag, appropriated from a painting by Van Gogh. Such critiques are then fundamental defining features of engaged intellectual work on notions like prohibitive pricing and value, visual aesthetics, rarity, and non-functionality, or the cultural politics of luxury, which extends beyond visual and cultural studies as such to the numerous differently situated varieties of the study of the visual luxury consumer, contemporary critical theory, and luxury goods.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. Batat, "Digital Luxury: Transforming Brands and Consumer Experiences;" Turunen, "Interpretations of Luxury: Exploring the Consumer Perspective."
2. Armitage, "Luxury and Visual Culture."
3. Armitage and Roberts, "Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media,;" Clark and Lezama, "Canadian Critical Luxury Studies: Decentring Luxury."
4. Batat, "Digital Luxury: Transforming Brands and Consumer Experiences;" Turunen, "Interpretations of Luxury: Exploring the Consumer Perspective."
5. Armitage, "Luxury and Visual Culture."
6. Armitage and Roberts, "Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media,;" Clark and Lezama, "Canadian Critical Luxury Studies: Decentring Luxury."
7. Armitage, "Luxury and Visual Culture," 77.
8. Armitage, "Luxury and Visual Culture," 89.
9. Armitage, "The Pursuit of Luxury as an Act of Transgression: Bataille, Sovereignty, Desire," 343-358.
10. Armitage and Roberts, "The Globalisation of Luxury Fashion: The Case of Gucci," 227-246.
11. Armitage, "Luxury and Visual Culture," 37-38.
12. Schroeder, "Visual Consumption."
13. Carson Pajaczkowska, "Feminist Visual Culture"; Cherry, "Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture," Jones, "The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader."
14. Armitage, "The Pursuit of Luxury as an Act of Transgression: Bataille, Sovereignty, Desire," 343-358.
15. Armitage, "Luxury and Visual Culture," 38-39; Armitage, "Golden Places, Aesthetic Spaces: An Introduction to the Cultural Politics of Luxury," 51-54.
16. Berg, "Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain"; Trentmann, "Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first"; Ilmakunnas and Stobart, "A Taste for Luxury in Early Modern Europe."
17. Armitage and Roberts, "The Globalisation of Luxury Fashion: The Case of Gucci," 227-246.
18. Merleau-Ponty, "The Visible and the Invisible."
19. Charbin and Canepari, "Hermès: Heavenly Days."
20. Dion, "How to Manage Heritage Brands: The Case of Sleeping Beauties Revival," 273-286.
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ORCIDJohn Armitage  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5533-197X>**Bibliography**

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