

Heritage has become a must-have quality for any successful maker of upmarket goods – having been around for a while being an accepted stand-in for, some might argue, doing anything new. But, finds Gwyneth Holland, now the pitch is rapidly becoming seen as hackneyed, and the progressive is in demand. The past, it's just so yesterday...



↑ Van Cleef & Arpels' Alhambra motif

TOMORROW THE



This watch company claims to go all the way back to the 16th century, while that leather-goods maker boasts centuries of expert craftsmanship. But does that really matter any more? As Gareth Coombs, a trends analyst at the Cambridge Strategy Centre, comments, "Today's shopper is well informed by the internet and steeped in consumerism. Today's shopper is an expert shopper. That a brand has been around for a while may add a finishing touch, but increasingly is more garnish than main course."

Sacrilegious though the thought may be in some business sectors, branding experts are starting to wonder. The leading edge of luxury brands are, they argue, those that create new stories rather than perpetuating old ones.

Call it a post-post-recession attitude. Right after the recession hit, people needed a reason to open their wallets, and a reassurance of quality and authenticity helped them to spend, so it is no wonder that brands from both ends of the spectrum jumped on the bandwagon. But shoppers – now also increasingly attuned to judging products in and of themselves – have also grown weary of companies trumpeting their heritage as a justification for high prices or a smokescreen for decreasing quality, and they're suspicious of the number suddenly claiming centuries of tradition out of nowhere, from telecoms giants to multinational brewers.

↑ Coombs, Hair Highway by Studio Swine



Images: What is Luxury? Exhibition, V&A



WORLD

If you had a pound for every luxury brand that spends more time celebrating its heritage than creating interesting new products, you'd be able to buy out LVMH. Mark Tungate, author of *Luxury World: the Past, Present and Future of Luxury Brands*, says, "Some luxury brands have alienated consumers by overplaying the heritage card when in reality they have betrayed their own pasts in the race for profits. One thinks of recent advertising campaigns by the likes of Gucci and Louis Vuitton that suggest an artisanal approach when the reality is, I suspect, closer to mass production."

Anniversary editions are a particularly popular way to restate a brand's heritage, gain press coverage and launch new products (without the cost of designing anything actually new) in one fell swoop. Porsche, for example, loves to issue anniversary editions of its 911 Turbo series, with its latest, the 40th-anniversary 911 Turbo S Exclusive GB Edition gaining Union Jack motifs on the seats and glove box to bring it up to date. Van Cleef & Arpels is re-introducing its gorgeous clover-like Alhambra motif with hardly any changes from the original 1968 version, claiming that the "iconic" designs guarantee that they will be worn by future generations. With the re-edition of Gucci's classic loafer, Frida Giannini actually reversed the evolution of the shoe's design by going back to the 1953 version (with a few tweaks, of course). Progressive it cannot be claimed to be.

Indeed, being well-known and beloved enough to celebrate your brand's heritage is no longer, as it has been, the preserve of labels at the top of the market, with even the most workaday supermarket brands trading on their long-standing name. Marmite, a yeast spread popular in the UK, has created special-edition packaging for its 100th and 110th anniversaries, while mainstream olive oil company Filippo Berio has launched a limited-edition of the Founder's Favourite Olio di Lucca – the 250 bottles sell for £100 each.

So is heritage losing its lustre? "There's always a danger that 'heritage' is going to mean 'stuffy' to Millennials [consumers aged between approximately 18 and 33]," says Tungate. As technology and emerging markets increasingly re-shape the luxury landscape, figures seem to suggest that there is a shift away from the heritage that so many ultra-premium brand names cling to towards products that are innovative, functional and relevant.

Certainly shoppers are increasingly wondering if they're paying more for an esteemed and historical name rather than for the product itself, especially as prices for high-end goods skyrocket. The average price of luxury products rose 13% over 2013, while prices for other goods rose just 1.5%, according to the US Consumer Price Index. That is why a Chanel quilted bag now sells for \$4,900, 70% more than it did in 2009. And although prices may be rising, many shoppers – even those who can afford the pricier goods – feel that they're no longer getting value for money: according to the recent Survey of Affluence and Wealth by YouGov and Time Inc, 71% of affluent consumers believe that many luxury products are no longer, well, luxurious.

No wonder, then, that in order to bring back a sense of rarity and excitement, some brands are beginning to look forwards instead of backwards. The decidedly contemporary London store Dover Street Market, for instance, recently celebrated its 10-year history not with re-issued products or a self-regarding exhibition, but with a collection of products that look to tomorrow: Simone Rocha created Perspex-heeled silver brogues with the futuristic glint of aluminium, while up-and-coming designer Phoebe English designed a chiffon-trimmed top and an angular metal headpiece.

Even the big guns are cottoning on to the need to let go of the past, or at least not to come to depend on it. An unlikely candidate to break the rules of the heritage-hustlers is Louis Vuitton, which has worked with different designers to create new products bearing its famous monogram canvas. The Iconoclast collection features designs from creatives including Frank Gehry, Cindy Sherman and Rei Kawakubo, each producing wonderfully odd new pieces, such as Gehry's twisted box handbag and Sherman's travel badge-embellished camera bag, as well as a determinedly modern shearling backpack by product designer Marc Newson. Similarly,

venerable Scottish knitwear brand Pringle may date all the way back to 1815, but it's certainly not stuck in the past. For its latest collections, the brand collaborated with architect and materials expert Richard Beckett on 3D-printed knitwear.

That blend of tradition and modernity seems to be a winning combination: according to a study by The Intelligence Group and Engine, tradition still matters to those aged between 18 and 35, with 37% saying that a brand's heritage is important. However, 67% want that balanced with modernity – and there's a growing array of companies willing to give them this "heritage of the now".

Revitalised German accessory brand MCM is successfully mixing traditional skills with contemporary creativity to establish a truly modern luxury brand. Despite having all the trappings of its luxe compatriots – an acronym, a monogram and a global presence – MCM is resisting the heritage obsession, thanks to its creative director Michael Michalsky, formerly of Adidas, who brings a streetwear vibe through art collaborations, excessive embellishments and off-duty staples such as rucksacks, winning it diverse and usefully high-profile fans. MCM's owner, Sung-Joo Kim, recently noted that its customers, "are born with computers, so they have a completely different approach to life and expect luxury to be functional."

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↑ Kovert Designs

In London, the Victoria and Albert Museum's upcoming What Is Luxury exhibition explores what luxury means now, with a notable focus on technology, innovative materials and cutting-edge craftsmanship. In fact, as co-curator Jana Scholze says, "The exhibition questions the very idea of luxury today. It will challenge common interpretations of luxury, invite close examination of luxury production and extend ideas of what luxury can be." These challenging luxuries include a laser-cut couture dress by Iris van Herpen, objects made from human hair and resin by Studio Swine, a diamond made from road-kill, and a dandelion seed-and-LED chandelier. The mantra of the heritage of the now is clearly to forget the time-honoured and classic.

It's not just high-concept pieces that are showing the way forward: technology is increasingly being seen as upmarket for its high design and production standards and, more importantly, for its ability to make our lives better. Technology now defines the swankiness of homes, from smart thermostats and lighting to security and entertainment systems, while the growing profile of hi-tech wearables is bringing tech on to the body and into what has traditionally been the territory of the artisans of yore.

Few can fail to have noticed the buzz around "smartwatches", supposedly the future of technology, especially with the launch of the Apple Watch: according to Smartwatch Group – who would say this, of course – 60% of all watches will be connected to the internet by 2020. But for tech goods to be as sought-after as heritage products they must be both clever and beautiful – a combination that, to date, few makers have mastered.



↑ Voltage Dress by Iris van Herpen

But even that is changing. Computing giant Intel is now working with leading premium companies, among them New York's Opening Ceremony and eyewear giant Luxottica, which produces sunglasses for many major brands, on wearable tech that is as seductive as it is technical. Intel's collaboration with Opening Ceremony has already produced Mica, a capsule collection of smart bangles adorned with gems and Ayers snakeskin that operate as a watch, smartphone and sat-nav rolled into one.

"Mobile technology really guides everything we do. The issue for many consumers on wearable technology lies in the fact that the devices typically are not attractive and are often cumbersome," as Daniella Vitale, chief operating officer of Barneys New York, puts it. "Opening Ceremony founders Carol and Humberto, along with Intel, had the prescience to create something functional but also beautiful and chic."

In London, design-led tech startup Kovert Designs similarly aims to shake off the predictable and stolid outlook of many luxury brands and produce forward-looking hi-tech accessories, such as the precious metal and ceramic Altruist ring that synchs with the wearer's iPhone. "We see ourselves as a new-age design house, meaning we take the traditional concepts of product design and brand development, and remove the technological constraints that traditional

↑ Fragile Future 3 Concrete Chandelier by Studio Drift



design houses have," says Kate Unsworth, founder of Kovert. "If companies like ours can successfully do this without forgetting impeccable design, I think we'll see a real shift in the industry."

Heritage and tradition may confer a sense of comfort and continuity, but it seems a case may be building that they also stop companies and their designers from being innovative – and as big spenders increasingly demand goods that are both high-quality and progressive, only those makers looking to the future are certain to have a place in it. ♦