



Luxury in the leather industry

London-based designer Bill Amberg, a renowned champion of leather, was one of the speakers at the 2014 Sustainability Forum, organised by Brazilian Tanning Industry Association, CICB, in Novo Hamburgo. This opinion piece is based on the talk he gave at the event.

What is luxury? Potentially a completely over used word that is becoming devalued in the lexicon. If you are hugely wealthy, for instance, you have a completely different notion of what luxury really means. Look at the Getty family, who have built a museum of epic proportions in Los Angeles to house and publicly display their collection of art. Or former Goldman Sachs partner Larry Linden who has bought millions of acres of the Amazon jungle just to maintain its safety. Then there is the Gates Foundation funding billion-dollar research into HIV, malaria, and more recently pouring yet more money into the eradication of Ebola. This may not sound like luxury to some people but others

would argue that philanthropy is in itself a form of luxury, an incredible legacy created by those who have the funds, a bequest to the world's future generations. So where does this all fit in on a wider, more commonplace level, and most particularly where consumer products are concerned? After all, we have luxury hotels but we also have luxury toilet tissue - those two things, obviously, just don't square up. So what does luxury really mean? Well, in everyday life rather than on a more esoteric level, we can all experience a sense of luxury by owning what we perceive to be a particularly special object. And by special we mean an appreciation of craft, provenance and authenticity over the simple branding and logo tricks of five years ago.

Back then, the brands told you that a particular item was "luxurious" and you colluded with that



Bill Amberg at the 2014 CICB Sustainability Forum in Novo Hamburgo.
CREDIT: CICB



Practising what he preaches, Bill Amberg recently used artisanal leather skills and the highest quality materials to produce "the ultimate photographers' accessory", a case for Leica M-System cameras.

CREDIT: BILL AMBERG STUDIO, LONDON

idea by simply buying and owning it, that was somehow enough. But now the landscape has changed and with it the luxury marketplace. Being part of a big homogenous tribe is no longer sexy or even acceptable. Little surprise then that "bespoke" is the new luxury buzzword – the ability to offer a client a completely unique experience from material selection to design development is becoming the winning solution. Designing their very own office, library, bag or even shoe – it's all part of giving customers that quiet knowledge that they are buying into something wholly unique. Look at the current trend for monogramming – be it Goyard bags, Burberry's brand new fragrance etc. – this is surely meant to be a sign that you, as an individual, now own a part of that brand's provenance rather than just being a mass consumer of their wares. It's all yours. It's got your initials on it.

This, however, means potentially tough times for the big logo-heavy brands and they are having to play catch-

up with their strategy while some more subtle, elegant, product-based brands are growing in both revenue and reputation. High-end consumers in these environmentally informed times are also now professing to want the confusing (for the retailers) idea of a purchase for life – not just for a season, or worse still a week. Across the board, brands are having to find new ways of providing distinct points of difference, new ways to reach more people and to tell better stories. In the world of leather this is seen quite clearly with the move to a much more crafted, technically sophisticated product that is rich in detail and finish. Making the product properly is now crucial. As the market fills with copies and poor interpretations, designers are constantly striving to find new techniques and technologies that will create superior quality and distinction. Clear evidence that care has been taken in the creation of an item is the first touch point of any product's luxury credentials but the next stage, is the

legacy, the back story - what is it made from, how is it made, where is it made, who made it, what are their skills, and how can this all be harnessed for the customer to give them some sense of pride of ownership.

Returning to the roots of my own industry, this whole interest in provenance links all the way back to the business of the raw material of leather. In other words, I think that the product sourcing, the sustainability of the supply chain and the raw materials they use are becoming part of that, the outward facing story too. Time was when nobody asked about where your leather came from. Now customers and clients want to know that every part of a company's methods and processes are ethical and sustainable, and not just part of a marketing lip service. This is creating a difficult problem for the leather industry. It has always been able to stand up and declare that leather is a by-product of the meat industry and therefore ethical and sustainable. But it is quite clear now that we all eat too much meat and the old days of the bucolic happy cow just simply doesn't exist outside a tiny organic beef industry. Cutting down forests to grow soya for cattle in feedlots in North America isn't representative of a sustainable industry. As a result, umbrella organisations representing those with an interest in the leather industry are now jostling to create the official kite mark of an ethically sourced supply chain.

As the ethical issues around leather become increasingly important we need to go back to looking at the design of products properly. In other words, simple things that are made to last and an acknowledgement that throwaway consumerism and its pernicious built-in obsolescence is no longer acceptable - one only has to look at some of the more interesting brands (Celine being a case in point) who are finding real traction and resonance in the market by producing things of a lasting, more timeless quality. This, to me, is how the future looks: this notion of legacy with all of its associations of both timelessness and quality and then the new, most important word – longevity – a wonderfully crafted, high quality world where things are no longer simply transient and throwaway. Sounds good for everyone but the retailers – so how do they begin to solve that very uncomfortable conundrum? 🤔



Bill Amberg insists his customers want to know where the leather he uses comes from, who tanned it and what type of raw material they used.

CREDIT: CICB

No price limit, if you tell the story well

Bill Amberg said at the 2014 CICB Sustainability Forum that luxury-level consumers are showing increasing interest in "authenticity of material". He also said that "there is no price limit" for the kinds of leather these customers are looking for if tanners are able to explain and show that the raw material they source and the processes they follow show concerns for animals, for the environment and for people.

At the event in Novo Hamburgo, Mr Amberg said: "Increasingly we find aniline-dyed, non-pigmented leathers are the ones that meet the needs of our customers. Shoulder cuts, for example, are popular, rather than the back or the bend and that's because they reaffirm the authenticity of the material. We talk to them about where the raw material came from and who the tanner is and customers like to know."

He insisted that the appetite for authenticity is very strong. The luxury goods space is "very crowded", he added, and brands are looking for ways in which to differentiate themselves from the competition. "This is not just marketing," he insisted. "Craftsmanship means authenticity. It means smaller batches, material coming from a recognisable source and it being clear that the product carries the touch of a human being."

He acknowledged that designers have an important role to play too by making sure the products they work on are ones that will last. He offered Prada, Loro Piana and Bottega Veneta as important brands whose designers have already embraced this. ☺

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