



The Luxury Network Newsletter

Luxury & the Manipulation of Desire: Historical Perspectives for Contemporary Debates

August 2013 Issue 2

THE FIRST NETWORK WORKSHOP

Lead Story

The first Network workshop took place on July 4-5th in London, exploring the theme of 'The Production of Luxury: Skills, Materials, and Networks'. Across two rich and full days, participants considered the role that luxury production has played in developing innovative technologies and preserving artisanal skills between the Renaissance and today, with papers that showcased how producers and consumers engaged with luxury materials from the traditional (diamonds, silks, glass) to the more unfamiliar (coral, exotic fruits, and even a luxury gas mask case produced in Britain during World War II).

A recurring theme was how flexible, contingent and contentious the concept of luxury can be in different contexts and historical junctures, and how it is shifting again in our own age of globalisation and mass production. Participants also enjoyed fascinating object sessions with V&A curators that explored 'Luxury for the Lower Sorts' and fashion past and present, examining objects from the museum's collections. Another session with artists Naomi Filmer and Oliver Ruuger on 'Contemporary Luxury' allowed participants to view strange and wonderful creations like the horse-tail umbrella pictured on the right.



Daljit Singh's closing lecture rounded off the event, offering a peek into the conceptualisation of the upcoming exhibition at the V&A on the theme of contemporary luxury.

Site visits

Participants at the workshop also enjoyed fascinating site visits to a number of luxury producers and purveyors in London, reported on below:

KEY PARTNERS

Giorgio Riello
(University of Warwick)

Rosa Salzberg
(University of Warwick)

Glenn Adamson
(Victoria & Albert
Museum)

Maria- Giuseppina
Muzzarelli (University of
Bologna)

Peter McNeil
(University of Stockholm
& UTS Sydney)

Catherine Kovesi
(University of
Melbourne)



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Henry Poole & Co, Savile Row

On a balmy Independence Day afternoon we were privileged to be granted access to a behind the scenes tour of the bespoke tailoring firm Henry Poole & Co, currently based at 15 Savile Row.

Our gracious host interrupted his dialogue with a group of documentary-makers (Savile Row tailors must enjoy constant approaches from overseas film crews eager for scenes of 'British Tradition'), and presented us with an overview of Poole's history, from its foundation in 1806 by Shropshire tailor James Poole who had moved to London to establish a business in Bloomsbury (then establishing itself as a fashionable suburb). The focus of trade during the Napoleonic Wars was military uniform, and as Poole furthered his social connections, Court dress. Dress Uniform for senior officers has remained a staple for the firm, and several fine examples from all stages of Poole's development were on display on mannequins in the showroom cabinets and alcoves. By 1822 Poole was in John Nash's recently completed Regent Street, moving to Old Burlington Street in 1828, until finally arriving in Savile Row (then a street more associated with medicine than men's clothing) in 1846. This early entry onto the street has earned Poole & Co the title 'Founder of Savile Row', a soubriquet the company are justifiably proud of.



Upstairs, the manner and interior of the shop evoked a quietly congenial atmosphere, not unlike the environment one might have found in a mid-nineteenth century gentleman's club or indeed, aristocratic tailor. There was much polished wood, brass and glass; turkey carpets, framed portraits of famous clients, royal warrants and ephemera, and a homely scattering of cloth sample books, containing examples of fine English cloths: meltons, worsteds, tweeds, superfines. Our host explained the defining characteristics of the Poole 'look', which differentiated it from the wasp-waisted and sharply structured forms of a Huntsman or Kilgour suit. Poole's style is a little softer and more unchanging, favoured by Americans and clients of the later generations. Tailoring for women (particularly in relation to sporting and riding wear) does happen, and forays have been made into the lucrative far and middle-eastern markets.

Downstairs, in the workshops, the atmosphere remained congenial, but we were reminded of the industrial hazards that attend fine tailoring as cloth dust was hoovered from surfaces, spotlights directed on detailed hand-work, ancient steam-presses hissed, and large sharp scissors cut as through butter. Our host explained the high-degree of specialization amongst cutters and tailors and noted that female workers tended to focus on finishing (buttons and button holes). Two senior cutters worked alongside our intrusion and exchanged banter, while at the far end of the room some nattily-dressed apprentices seemed to be preparing half-finished suits for the next day's fittings.



Stepping out into the early evening sun, we were left with a sense that working practices at Poole's have changed very little over the past two hundred years. It's strong sense of itself, in comparison to some other luxury men's wear outlets, has ensured a version of stability that transcends the vagaries of fashion, and that perhaps has contributed to its longevity.

Christopher Breward

Hare and Humphreys and Henry Herbert

In an unprepossessing yard on Grays Inn Road, the Queen's diamond jubilee barge, the *Gloriana*, had been sitting just the day before our group came to visit. By the time we arrived, she had been moved up to Henley, ready for the Regatta. The first new royal barge for over 250 years, the *Gloriana* was painstakingly gilded and decorated by the Queen's decorators, Hare and Humphreys [<http://www.hare-humphreys.co.uk>]. A former tram yard is perhaps a surprising location for the distinguished decorators, however, both the site and their workshop told us much about these decorators' approach: complete focus on the job to be done; complete disinterest in trappings extraneous to the task. Co-director and founder Peter Hare emphasised that their company cannot afford to fail at a given assignment and that no request or task from a client is seen as too extreme or demanding. We were shown infinitesimally thin paint samples from an historic house, which, under a microscope, were transformed into detailed strata of colours from each period of restoration. This kind of analysis enables clients to select which period and colour they might wish to select to be restored. In addition, Hare and Humphreys have a deep commitment to the ongoing training of new talent in the traditional arts and crafts which are their core business. To this end they bring over young apprentices and craftsmen from the countries in which they might have a new commission to train them and ready them for work in their countries of origin.



Hare and Humphreys have such a unique set of skills that they do not need to advertise their presence in the yard. But just across the yard was another craftsman who realised that his success in an over supplied market depended on a creative approach both to service and presentation. Charlie Baker-Collingwood is Henry Herbert, Savile Row on a Scooter – a bespoke tailoring service that will come to you, any time, any where to discuss your particular tailoring needs.

With a nominal upstairs presence on the famous Savile Row, enabling him to use the name without misrepresentation, Charlie has set himself up in the tram yard on a budget but with quintessentially British panache and has wholeheartedly embraced social media to get himself work: he blogs, he you-tubes, he emblazons his business on his custom-made vespas. Charlie is also completely committed to his craft. As a boy he was so obsessed with working out how a shirt was made that he pulled one apart, and worked at recreating it, until he had the skill mastered. Initially he offered a bespoke shirt service from a scooter, but despite hard work and numerous orders,

he had not yet mastered a business model that enabled him to make a profit. His new concept of a complete tailoring service offered from a scooter if need be seems to be paying dividends. Eschewing the traditional Savile Row house style, which requires a customer to bend his desires to those of the tailoring house, Charlie told us that his first response to a client is always “How can we help you Sir?” His fabrics are proudly British and the tailoring work is carried out in the Yorkshire midlands by women who still sew in the traditional way. Though Hare and Humphreys demonstrated craftsmanship of the highest order and were fascinating to meet, it was Charlie's enthusiasm and determination to market a traditional craft in non-traditional ways that moved our group the most.

Catherine Kovesi

Bentley & Skinner

A small group of us had the privilege of visiting Bentley & Skinner, historic jewelers, gold and silversmiths on Piccadilly. Bentley & Skinner has a much-vaunted heritage - its website explains how one of the progenitors of the company was an acquaintance of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg in Moscow, and Marie Curie in Paris - and heralds its long-held appointment to work for the British royal family. We were welcomed warmly and permitted to look at, handle (and try on!) historic pieces on display in the shop, including objects by Lalique and Fabergé and a diamond tiara worn by Lady Mary in the TV series *Downton Abbey*.



Our host, Omar Vaja, explained how the company specialises in catering to clientele who value antique pieces with unique histories. In this way, they distinguish themselves from the flashier and more mass-produced luxury of establishments like Tiffany's. This approach was expressed also by the transfer of the old (and distinctly unflashy) furniture and fittings from their former long-standing premises in Bond Street when they moved to Piccadilly in 2010. The overall impression of the shop, despite its prominent location, is hushed, discrete and understated - luxury that does not need to advertise itself, at least not too openly.

However, Bentley & Skinner also accentuate their role as a purveyor and promoter of artisanal skill. A small, glass-fronted workshop adjacent to the showroom allows pedestrians on Piccadilly to watch its three expert jewellers at work. In this tiny space, the jewellers sit surrounded by an array of precision tools, and they good-naturedly explained to us some of the extraordinarily skilled processes that had allowed to them create works including the artist Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull 'For the Love of God' (2007).

Although Omar admitted that Bentley & Skinner's clientele had seen some change in recent years, with younger customers and more from the Middle East and China, it would seem that its new patrons still appreciated the discretion, experience and historic legacy of the business, which retains an upper crust, Old World allure in its twenty-first century British surroundings.

Rosa Salzberg

Mohammed Jamal, Perfumer

Mohammed Jamal is a young perfumer who is currently relaunching his family's perfume brand in the UK luxury market. Key to the Jamal brand is the idea of fusing past and present, east and west, synthetic and natural. In explaining the evolution of his brand, Jamal touched on some of the most important issues raised during the two day workshop.

Jamal described how his firm seeks to combine the Arabic tradition of Attar with the science of Swiss perfumery. Over 400 years before the first western fragrances were created, natural perfumes known as attars were created from the petals of flowers and plants. This ancient art was passed through generations of the Jamal family. Jamal recalled how as a boy he would assist his father hand-filling bottles with their unique blends. Today Jamal continues to use the same recipes, creating his blends in Swiss laboratories. These discussions related well to Gertrud Lehnert's talk at the workshop on Etro and Fortuny's use of the past to create exclusivity.

Another important aspect to the 'luxury' of Jamal's brand are the materials used. Stricter legislation has forced Jamal to find alternatives to the purest oils used by his ancestors. Nevertheless he still prefers to use more expensive natural materials where possible.

Jamal also spoke about his upcoming re-launch which he hopes will create a more upmarket brand. He reflected on the importance of packaging and advertising in creating a sophisticated look which he considers key to luxury.

At the end of the talk participants were able to experience the Jamal brand past, present and future by sampling the fragrances produced by his parents, those currently on the market as well as the new perfumes which will be launched in the Autumn. Through this olfactory object session participants were able to understand how a brand's luxury products evolve much like the creations presented in the contemporary artists' object sessions earlier in the afternoon.

Joséphine De Stael

UPCOMING EVENTS

Workshop 2: The Regulation of Luxury: Morality, the State and the Law

Department of Medieval Studies, University of Bologna, 12-14 December 2013

Workshop 3: The Geography of Luxury: East, West and Global Directions

Global History and Culture Centre, History Department, University of Warwick, 14-16 May 2014 (tbc)

Final Workshop: Luxury and the Manipulation of Desire

Villa I Tatti and European University Institute, Florence, 25-26 September 2014

Forthcoming: The Luxury Network is developing in collaboration with the University of Warwick's Knowledge Centre a new Luxury Page with interviews, podcasts and many other materials. All of this and more coming soon!

The Leverhulme International Network Luxury & the Manipulation of Desire was initiated in 2013 and aims to connect the long history of luxury with the importance that luxury has assumed in contemporary society. It does so by fostering dialogue between academics and curators based in partner institutions and experts, journalists and business people working in the luxury sector internationally. The Network is part of the research activities of the Global History and Culture Centre at Warwick University.

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& Culture Centre**
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