

Lux Populi

If rich old King Croesus were living in America today, he'd be hard-pressed to keep up with the Joneses.

BY JAMES B. TWITCHELL

At length I recollected the thoughtless saying of a great prince who, on being informed that the country had no bread, replied, "Let them eat cake."

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*

WELL, OKAY, SO MARIE ANTOINETTE NEVER SAID, "Let them eat cake." When Rousseau wrote those words, Marie was just 11 years old and living in Austria. But Americans used to like the story that, when the French queen was told by an official that the people were angry because they

had no bread, she responded, "*Qu'ils mangent de la brioche.*" We liked to imagine her saying it with a snarl and a curled lip. She was a luxury bimbo whose out-of-control spending grated on the poor and unfortunate French people. We fought a revolution to separate ourselves from exactly that kind of uppercrustiness. She got her just "desserts."

But that was 200 years ago. Now cake is one of *our* favorite foods, part of the fifth food group, totally unnecessary luxury



consumption. We're not talking about a few crumbs, but the real stuff. Brioche by the loaf. Not for nothing has Marie become a favorite subject for current infotainment. Novelists, historians, biographers, and even hip young filmmaker Sofia Coppola are telling her story, not because we want her reviled but because we want to be like her.

And we're doing a pretty good job. Luxury spending in the United States has been growing more than four times as fast as overall spending, and the rest of the West is not far behind. You might think that modern wannabe Maries are grayhairs with poodles. Not so. This spending is being done by younger and younger consumers. Take a walk up Fifth Avenue, and then, at 58th, cross over and continue up Madison. You'll see

who is swarming through the stores with names we all recognize: Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada, Dior, Coach. . . . Or cruise Worth Avenue or Rodeo Drive, and you'll see the same furious down-marketing and up-crusting. This is the Twinkiefication of deluxe.

You don't have to go to these streets of dreams to see who's on a sugar high. Take a tour of your local Costco or Sam's Club discount warehouse and you'll see the same stuff, only a day old and about to become stale, being consumed by a slightly older crowd. Observe the parking lot, where shiny new imported sedans and SUVs are parked beside aging sub-compacts. Or spend an hour watching the Home Shopping Network, a televised flea market for impulse buyers. Its call centers now have some 23,000 incoming phone lines capable of handling up to 20,000 calls a minute. The network no longer sells cubic zirconia rings. It sells Gucci handbags.

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We've developed a powerful desire to associate with recognized objects of little intrinsic but high positional value, which is why Martha Stewart, our faux Marie, is down at Kmart introducing her Silver Label goods, why a courtier the likes of Michael Graves is designing toasters for Target (pronounced by wits, with an ironic French flair, tar-ZHAY), why the Duke of Polo, Ralph Lauren, is marketing house paint, and why suave Cole Porter-brand furniture is appearing on the floor at Ethan Allen stores.

Look around, and you will see that almost every category of consumables has cake at the top. This is true not just for expensive products such as town cars and McMansions, but for everyday objects. In bottled water, for instance, there is Evian, advertised as if it were a liqueur. In coffee, there's Star-

THE POACHING OF DELUXE by the middle class has made things impossible for the truly rich.

bucks; in ice cream, Häagen-Dazs; in sneakers, Nike; in wine, Chateau Margaux; in cigars, Arturo Fuente Hemingway, and well, you know the rest. Having a few TVs around the house is fine, but what you really need is a home entertainment center worthy of Versailles, with a JBL Ultra Synthesis One audio system, a Vidikron Vision One front projector, a Stewart Ultramatte 150 screen, a Pioneer DV-09 DVD player, and an AMX ViewPoint remote control. Hungry for chow with your entertainment? Celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck has his own line of TV dinner entrées.

Ironically, what this poaching of deluxe by the middle class has done is make things impossible for the truly rich. Ponder this: A generation ago, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor surrounded themselves with the world's finest goods—from jewelry to bed linens to flatware. The duchess, the twice-divorced American Wallis Simpson, would never be queen, but that didn't prevent her from carrying off a passable imitation of Marie. In the Windsor household, the coasters were Cartier and the placemats were Porthault, and the pooches ate from silver-plated Tiffany bowls.

When Sotheby's auctioned more than 40,000 items from the Windsors' Paris home in 1997, the remnants of

their royal life went out for bid. Most of the items listed in the Sotheby's catalog are still being made, either in the same form or in an updated version. In other words, the duchess's precious things are within your grimy reach. From her point of view, she might just as well take 'em to the dump.

- Chanel faux-pearl earrings given to the duchess by the duke can be picked up for about \$360 at Chanel stores.

- The duchess's Cartier love bracelet in 18-karat gold with screw closure, which was presented by the president of Cartier to the Windsors and other "great lovers" in 1970 (among the other recipients: Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, Sophia Loren and Carlo Ponti), is yours for \$3,625 at Cartier boutiques.

- T. Anthony luggage, the Windsors' favorite (they owned 118 such trunks), is still being manufactured and can be bought in Manhattan.

- Hand-embroidered Porthault linens are stocked at your local mall.

- The Windsors' stationery from the Mrs. John L. Strong company, complete with hand-engraved

monogrammed pieces on pure cotton paper, can be yours for \$80 to \$750, depending on the ornamentation.

- The duke's velvet slippers can be purchased for \$188 at Brooks Brothers, which owns the London company that made them. Instead of an E for "Edward" below the embroidered crown, the slippers have a BB.

- Okay, okay, you'll never own as many scarves and gloves as the duchess did, but Hermes and Balenciaga sell exactly the same ones she wore for upward of \$300 a pop.

Here's the takeaway: There is very little cake a rich person once gorged on that a middle-class person can't get on his plate. You name it; I can taste it. So I can't afford a casita on Bermuda, but I can get in on a time-share for a weekend. No, I can't own a stretch limo, but I can rent one by the hour. Maybe Venice is out this year, but I'll go to the Venetian in Vegas instead. I can't afford an Armani suit, but what about these eyeglasses with Giorgio's name plastered on them? Commodore Vanderbilt said that if you have to ask how much a yacht costs, you can't afford one, but check out my stateroom on my chartered Majestic Princess. True, I don't have my own Gulfstream V jet, but I can upgrade to first class on Delta with the miles I "earn" by using my American

Express card. Is that my own Lexus out front? Or is it on lease from a used car dealer? You'll never know.

Lux populi may be the end of deluxe. "Real" luxury used to be for the "happy few," but in the world of the supra-12,000 Dow Jones industrial average, there are only the minted many. "Sudden Wealth Syndrome," as *The Los Angeles Times* has called it, is not just for dot.com innovators or contestants on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, but for a generation that is inheriting its wealth through the steady attrition of the Generation Who Fought the War. The "wealth effect," as former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan termed it, drives more and more money to chase after goods whose production can hardly be called beneficial and cannot now even be called positional.

There's a story, perhaps apocryphal, that when Tom Ford, chief designer for Gucci in the 1990s, was passing through the Newark airport (what the hell was he doing there?!), he saw one of his swanky T-shirts on the tummy of a portly prole. He immediately canceled the clothing line. Too late. Perhaps the social construction of luxury as a material category has already been deconstructed into banality.

The very unreachableness of old luxe made it safe, like an old name, old blood, old land, an old coat of arms, or old service to the crown. Primogeniture, the cautious passage and consolidation of wealth to the firstborn male, made the anxiety of exclusion from luxe somehow bearable. After all, you knew your place from the moment of birth and had plenty of time to make your peace. If you drew the short straw, not to worry. A comfortable life as a vicar would await you. Or the officer corps.

The application of steam, then electricity, to the engines of production brought a new market to status objects, an industrial market made up of people who essentially bought their way into having a bloodline. These were the people who so disturbed economist Thorstein Veblen, and from them this new generation of consumer has descended. First the industrial rich, then the inherited rich, and now the incidentally rich, the accidentally rich, the golden-parachute rich, the buyout rich, the lottery rich.

Call them yuppies, yippies, bobos, nobrows, or whatever, the consumers of the new luxury have a sense of entitlement that transcends social class, a conviction that the finest

things are their birthright. Never mind that they may have been born into a family whose ancestral estate is a tract house in the suburbs, near the mall, not paid for, and whose family crest was downloaded from the Internet. Ditto the signet ring design. Language reflects this hijacking. Words such as *gourmet*, *premium*, *boutique*, *chic*, *accessory*, and *classic* have loosened from their elite moorings and now describe such top-of-category items as popcorn, hamburgers, discount brokers, shampoo, scarves, ice cream, and trailer parks. "Luxury for all" is an oxymoron, all right, the aspirational goal of modern culture, and the death knell of the real thing.

These new *customers* for luxury are younger than *clients* of the old luxe used to be,

there are far more of them, they make their money much sooner, and they are far more flexible in financing and fickle in choice. They do not stay put. When Richie Rich starts buying tulips by the ton, Nouveau Riche is right there behind him picking them up by the pound.

In a sense, the filthy rich have only two genuine luxury items left: time and philanthropy. As the old paradox goes, the rich share the luxury of too much time on their hands with the very people on whom they often bestow their philanthropy. Who knows, maybe poverty will become the new luxury, as the philosophes predicted. Wonder Bread becomes the new cake. Once you've ripped out all the old patinaed hardware, once you've traded in the Bentley for a rusted-out Chevy, once you've carted all the polo pony shirts to Goodwill, once you've given the Pollock to the Met, once you've taken your last trip up Everest and into the Amazon, there's not much left to do to separate yourself but give the rest of the damned stuff away. Competitive philanthropy has its allure. Why do you think there are more than 20 universities with multibillion-dollar pledge campaigns? Those bobos sure as hell can't do it. Little wonder that Warren Buffett dumped his load rather casually on top of a pile amassed by another modern baron, almost as if to say, "Top that." Now that's a show stopper. Even The Donald can't trump that. ■



The Cartier love bracelet: \$3,625

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