

Catwalk to Culture: how the fashion industry values art

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Art and fashion have always had a flirtatious relationship, and this has become progressively more intimate since the 1980s when corporate intervention in contemporary art reached its height. Hence in late 1997 the corporate-friendly Art Newspaper was able to run a special section entitled 'Fashion and Art', with a specific focus on the sponsorship of haute-couture houses, including all the grand names in the trade, such as YSL, Giorgio Armani and Chanel.¹

Fashion houses' involvement in art can take various forms: firstly, by sponsoring art exhibitions at museums, including those that display clothes designed by celebrity designers; secondly, by providing gallery spaces managed by the companies or their associated foundations, such as the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art or the Hermès galleries in Tokyo and Seoul; thirdly, by organising contemporary art prizes administered by the companies, as with the Hermès Art Prize in Korea or the Hugo Boss Art Prize; and lastly, by establishing contemporary art collections, assembled by the companies or their foundations, for instance the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art or the Montblanc Cutting Edge Art Collection at its headquarters in Hamburg. Most of these arts activities undertaken by fashion houses have direct or indirect implications for art education, but the time at my disposal is short, and I will only be able to mention a few examples here.

As one of the world's most prominent luxury brands, LVMH, Louis Vuitton's holding company, has been sponsoring one big art exhibition each year in Paris since 1994. In conjunction with this sponsorship, LVMH has also organised 'art discovery' classes for children between 7 and 12 to participate in special workshops and educational visits. It has also initiated what it called LVMH Young Artists' Award in 1994, an international competition open to fine art students in France and worldwide. Six winners, French and foreign, are selected for the award of a scholarship of 4,270 euros each and a return ticket between Paris and the country chosen.

These are just some of the art educational activities that this particular fashion company has been engaged in over the last 15 years. Its involvement in the arts was intensified when in 2006 it opened a new art space, the Espace Louis Vuitton, on the seventh floor of its prominently situated store in the Champs-Élysées in Paris, where it holds regular exhibitions of mostly contemporary art three times a year. The 450 square meter exhibition space would be banal and unremarkable in the ocean of Paris's art museums and galleries if it were not for its premium site. This is, however, nothing in comparison to the projected new Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation, costing millions of euros and scheduled to open in 2012, which will devote 3500 square meters to exhibitions, both LV's own art collection as well as other temporary exhibitions.² With this plan to open such a spectacular building designed by Frank Gehry in Paris's centrally located Jardin d'Acclimatation in 2012, LVMH is pushing the boundaries of art and fashion further than anyone else has so far dared to do.

Compared with the extravaganza of LV's art venture, Cartier has been operating its own Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris since 1984 in a more low-key way, but nevertheless with confidence (not to say arrogance) about its activities: as the Foundation's own website claims, culture may still be a State monopoly in France, but Cartier has found a way of exposing its limitations.³ The Foundation has organized regular exhibitions, four or five times a year, which include painting, photography, video, sculpture and installation, design and fashion etc. It has also been collecting contemporary art works since its inception in 1984. The Cartier Collection comprises over 1,000 works by 300 artists, covering all media in contemporary art. One distinct element of the Cartier Collection, compared to other private collections, is the importance that the Cartier Foundation attaches to commissioning their own artworks. This commissioning, very often related to exhibitions that are to be held at the Foundation, can consist of a single work, a series of works (such as those of XXX), or an entire exhibition, such as that by the American artist Sarah Sze.

¹ See special section on fashion and art, *The Art Newspaper*, no. 76, December 1998, pp. 16- 21.

² Marion Delaidue at Louis Vuitton in Paris declined to reveal the budget figure for the whole project, telephone conversation, 7 May 2010.

³ The original quotation was 'culture was still a State monopoly whose limitations Cartier exposed'; see the website of the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, <http://fondation.cartier.com/?lang=en&small=0>, visited on 30 April 2010.

What distinguishes Cartier's involvement in art from that of other luxury goods companies is that it finds a place for education in all of its activities. Like the art education activities organized by the museum, the Cartier Foundation organizes workshops for children, group visits and introductory courses on contemporary art for the general public. It also organizes two types of art education activities for its employees: i.e. special guided tours, and two-day art training sessions. In the two-day training courses, employees are taught to understand the practices of the Foundation and its values, and the course involves also visits to other exhibitions or art institutions in Paris.

Unlike its commercial competitors Louis Vuitton and Cartier, which have centred most of their art activities in Paris, the luxury house Hermès, even though its base is in Paris, has in fact devoted its energy and art resources to its Asian stores. With the Asian market accounting for almost half of its sales worldwide,⁴ Hermès is clearly making every effort to ensure that its Asian customers' desires are satisfied and that their loyalty is maintained. It has specifically designed built-in art and cultural facilities within the shopping complex of its two flagship stores, Maison Hermès in Tokyo since 2001 and here in Seoul since 2006. This includes in both cases a cutting-edge art gallery and an exhibition space given over to telling Hermès product-related history. While the Tokyo store has an extra facility, Le Studio Hermès, for film screenings, the Korean house has initiated a potentially more influential event for the Korean art scene, that is, the Hermès Prize for Contemporary Korean Art. What Hermès has done in art in Asia is, in every sense of the word, remarkable, and inevitably leads one to wonder exactly why this Western luxury-goods firm wishes to associate its presence in Asia so closely with contemporary art.

Despite these luxury companies' undoubted commitment to art, they tend to be very reluctant to use the terms 'market' or 'marketing' in relation to their interaction with art.⁵ One exception is the Hamburg-based firm Montblanc and its Montblanc Cultural Foundation. They have been sponsoring the Philharmonia of the Nations and the Prix Montblanc Award for classical music since 1995, and 'the New Voices Award' for singers, the Young Directors Project, a competition for theatre directors as part of the Salzburg Festival since 2002, and the Montblanc Arts Patronage Award since 1992. The Award for Art Patrons is their most unique award, being specifically organized around the market and considered to be a significant marketing innovation for Montblanc, something that their spokesperson did not shy away from when we interviewed her.⁶ The award was initiated in 1992 with three participating countries, and it has steadily grown over the years until, in 2009, there were eleven countries involved, with Russia targeted as the 12th market.

Art activities have also been incorporated into Montblanc's business practices. In 2002 they started the so-called 'Montblanc Cutting Edge Art Collection'; the only consistent requirement for this is to have the Montblanc star logo incorporated into the art work in one way or another. Some of the works are on display at their headquarters, while others are sent abroad to their worldwide boutiques; as the spokesperson explained: 'because the clients have to see this as well. They have to understand that Montblanc is collecting art.'⁷ The Montblanc Cultural Foundation has also arranged two events for their employees in Hamburg; one is an in-house lunchtime performance that happens four times a year, and can be a classical music recital, a lecture, a reading or a theatre performance. The other benefit that the 800 employees get is the Montblanc Cultural Card which entitles them to 80 percent discount on any classical music or theatre performance in Hamburg, a very substantial discount and an incentive designed to encourage their employees to become regular art-goers.

Because of the limited time at my disposal, these are the only examples I have time to illustrate today. From my past research experience, however, they can be said to be entirely representative of the range of activities one can expect to find when a fashion house or other commercial business decides to get involved in art. As art educators, you may find that these activities could represent an untapped resource for possible engagement with business with the aim of 'enriching' art education. However, depending on which side you are on, politically, as art educators, you may find that their activities, even though they might seem to be channelling more resources into the arts, actually pose serious cultural and educational questions that need to be thought through and answered. Why and for what purposes would a business entity, whose ultimate concern is to make a financial profit, concern itself with promoting art or art education? Can the goals of business and those of art, and of art education, be reconciled and accommodated, and can they be mutually beneficial? And if collaboration between art and business is in the process of making the arts and arts education into a tool of business marketing, should such a marriage project be

⁴ *Hermès International's Annual Report xxx*

⁵ Mark Tungate, *Fashion brands: branding style from Armani to Zara* (London and Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2004), p. 76.

⁶ Interview with Ingrid Roosen-Trinks, Director, Montblanc Cultural Foundation, 29 October 2009, Hamburg.

⁷ Interview with Ingrid Roosen-Trinks, Director, Montblanc Cultural Foundation, 29 October 2009, Hamburg.

pursued without conditions or reservations, and will we be able eventually to celebrate it as a fully satisfying and lasting relationship? Many questions are raised, aesthetic, cultural and moral, and much soul-searching will be required before we can all give our wholehearted and unqualified endorsement to such an unlikely match.