

## **An Odd Relationship: Craft and The Future of Luxury**

It is difficult not to fall for Ole Hansen-Lydersen. Tall and blond, his blue eyes shining from his lean, pale face, he looks like a teenager who needs a good meal: charming but slightly hapless. Like many Norwegians Hansen-Lydersen speaks English better than most natives and he loves to talk, even if it diverts him from selling what might be the most expensive smoked salmon in the world.

Hansen-Lydersen makes his salmon in the most unlikely of smoke houses at the end of an unprepossessing lane on an industrial estate off Church St in trendy Stoke Newington in north London. The salmon comes in from the Faroe Islands and then Hansen-Lydersen painstakingly cold smokes it along with juniper. The exquisite salmon that emerges is almost red; it's succulent without being fatty.

Like most food that is organic and slow Hansen-Lydersen's salmon comes with an extra helpings of narrative. The recipe came from his grandfather, a fisherman, in 1923. Ole himself is a bit of renegade. He gave up a career as a sound engineer because of the lack of respect for his craft and decided to become an artisan entrepreneur instead. He has a flair for branding: his King Olav Fillet is sold at markets in small packets of beautifully folded white tissue paper, each hand stamped with the Hansen-Lydersen logo - a salmon wearing a royal crown - to evoke an ironic sense of tradition.

The King Olav Fillet, however, should be traded on a precious metals exchange. In the run up to Christmas 2011 a hundred grams of Tesco's value smoked salmon cost £1.40; Waitrose's organic Orkney salmon, smoked over oak cost £4.28. The King Olav Fillet cost £6.15.

It might seem odd to suggest that a maverick Norwegian who smokes salmon in Stoke Newington could provide some clues to the future of luxury but the King Olav Fillet combines three ingredients which may define what luxury comes to mean, at least in the hard-pressed developed world economies. Luxury products will show signs of being hand crafted, possibly by being a little odd. Luxurious experiences will often be convivial: they will help us restore relations strained by the incessant frenzy of modern life. The ultimate

luxury, might not be just to consume such products, but to work in that way. Work that has meaning is the ultimate luxury.

Luxury has never been fixed. For most of human history luxury was frowned upon. Plato scorned an appetite for luxury as a sign of weakness. Roman philosophers counselled that insatiable appetites for luxuries would unravel the social order. Luxuries became something to aspire to only when courts began to display their social standing by what they consumed. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century flat plates and sugar were considered luxuries. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was pepper. In Elizabethan times a luxury was something with a patina that meant it was old. Luxury could not be “nouveau.” The rise of Josiah Wedgwood’s crockery empire fatally breached that association of luxury with the old. Wedgwood invited consumers to associate the fine with something that was designed and newly made. The Apple iPad is following in his footsteps.

Although many goods and services have counted as luxuries, the core to the idea has remained constant. A luxury is something you do not strictly need. To enjoy a luxury a consumer needs a surplus to devote to things that are unnecessary. Luxury experiences are open to only a few people yet lots of people want them. Selling luxury invariably involves flattering the customer: by buying a luxury they are displaying not just wealth but refinement. Luxury is best sold as discernment, spirituality, healing. Luxury is a form of escapism. What counts as a luxury depends on what we you are trying to escape. Perhaps the founding myth of the luxury industry was the medieval legend of Cockayne, an imaginary place that had an constant spring-like temperature. Inhabitants remained 33 years old, the age at which Christ died, and consented to gentle offers of love-making. To heal yourself you bathed in mysterious pools. Supplies of fresh food were regularly replenished. Columbus was searching for Cockayne when he came across America. Centuries later we are still striving to bring Cockayne to life. A luxury spa is a little bit of Cockayne: a world of never ending hot water, clean towels, service on tap, soothing lotions that make you feel younger, health restoring pools and fine food. An Ocado delivery is the myth of Cockayne brought to your door in lots of plastic bags.

Luxury will take two very different directions in the decade to come: one tangible, shiny and material, the other intangible, understated and relational.

Many newly rich consumers in China and India, Brazil and Turkey, want to signal their wealth by escaping where they have come from: poverty, agriculture, home made goods. That means more: Spider ski wear; chalets in Meribel; top of the range Audis that stay in Indian garages and Vertu phones bought for show in China. These new consumers will want to set themselves apart from their fellow citizens by buying foreign goods with a reputation for the fine life: a boon for traditional luxury brands from Paris and Milan, not to mention Crewe, home of the Bentley. In Europe and America, the very rich, those that work in international finance, if they are sensible will become a less ostentatious, more discrete and perhaps more embattled branch of this world.

Seen from the increasingly cramped conditions of the reasonably affluent middle class in the developed world, luxury may well come to mean something quite different.

First, when so much is done for us by systems that process us without bothering to find out who we are, products and experiences that are crafted just for us will become luxurious. Most people will spend much of the next decade feeling a little poorer than they would like. Being able to escape the world of cut price, low cost products and enter the world of the King Olav Fillet will be their luxury. Odd, unusual, idiosyncratic experiences that come with an aura of authenticity and a story of their origins will become more valuable. It was another Norwegian, the economist Thorstein Veblen, in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, who spotted that when more products were being manufactured in standardised ways the ability to stand out might come from rediscovering archaic solidity and simplicity. In an era dominated by systems of all kinds the way to distinguish yourself will be to borrow the manners, looks and behaviours of those who stand outside or even against systems: artists, gangsters, peasants, renegades.

The second main ingredient of the new luxury will be to have time to be with other people. In a more cacophonous, relentlessly always on world, people will look for pockets of calm and breathing spaces where they can be themselves. In a world that seems to worship speed going a little faster is not a luxury. Being able to go a lot slower is the luxury. Often the point of going slow is to enjoy the unfolding company of other people.

What we most value – love, dignity, good conduct, pride, trust, friendship, care – cannot be bought: they are beyond price. All these experiences come from relationships, how we are with other people, rather than being delivered just-in-time by systems that do things for

and to us. That does not mean, however, that money plays no role. Services that give us access to these heightened relational experiences will become gateways to luxury. As Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher puts it in *The Secular Age*:

“The individual pursuit of happiness as defined by consumer culture still absorbs much of our time and energy...and yet the sense that there is something more presses in. Great numbers of people feel it: in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of bereavement and loss; and quite wildly and unpredictably.”

The “something more” that Taylor is talking about tends to come from experiences that give us a different perspective on life. They have a lasting impact if only because they are memorable: they move and touch us. They make us feel, if only fleetingly we have found our true selves. Invariably they involve relationships: bringing together friends, families, lovers, fans and believers. The objects people most value embody relationships: a memento from a holiday, a photograph from a wedding, a hobby collection built up with a partner, toys lovingly kept from childhood. That is also why we pay so much to be part of huge social gatherings: festivals, carnivals, raves, sporting events, mass shows of emotion which give us a sense of being caught up in something more than ourselves. Luxury experiences will embody the relationships we most cherish. They will be social as well as solo.

Finally, meaningful work is becoming a form of luxury. Luxury as a form of conspicuous production rather than conspicuous consumption: being able to show that you are doing work which expresses who you are. That is why so many modern knowledge workers style themselves as bohemian artists: they like to show that their work is not imposed on them.

We are all going to have to work till we are older – to make up for our lack of pensions - and harder – to pay off our debts. More of us sadly will work for the self same bullying systems that we often consume from. Work in large organisations is increasingly driven by rules, procedures and protocols, from the scripts that staff follow at a call centre to the uniforms and formats of a retail store, to the way bank clerks take their cue from a computer screen. The chief skill of modern work is to learn the system, to tick the boxes, fill in the form, and to find a way around the rules when needed. That is why so much

work for large corporations comes with such a profound and demoralising sense of powerlessness.

One response to the way work has had the meaning hollowed out from it is new cult of craft: people, working in their own time to make things by hand. One of the most striking examples of this craft insurrection is the extraordinary popularity in the US of the hobbyist “Make” movement, which draws thousands of people to its conventions. Their chief ideologist is the sociologist Richard Sennett, author of international bestseller *The Craftsman*, a book with the pencil as its symbol.

For Sennett craftsmanship stems from a desire to do a job well, for its own sake, not just because it is a means to an end: the way to earn a wage. Craft work is a good in itself, a source of pleasure, achievement and identity. A craft is not learned from a manual, nor in a classroom but in practice, by show rather than tell. That means craft work is intensely relational: craft cannot be learned other than by working with, alongside a craftsman. Learning a craft is inseparable from becoming part of a community. Craft work involves a form of respectful, cooperative self-governance as workers solve problems together.

The mid twentieth century sociologist C Wright Mills put the attractions of craft work this way:

“The laborer with a sense of craft becomes engaged in the work in and for itself; the satisfactions of working are their own rewards; the details of daily labor are connected in the worker’s mind to the end product; the worker can control his or her actions at work; skill develops within the work process; work is connected to the freedom to experiment; finally, family, community and politics are measured by the standards of inner satisfaction, coherence and experiment in craft labour.”

We are so attracted to the ideal of craftwork as pure and honest, plain and uncalculated, trustworthy and reliable, because most of us work for and in systems that seem calculating and self-interested. Being able to do work you are proud of, which gives you a sense of freedom, will be part of the new luxury.

In the decade to come in the upscale malls of Doha and Mumbai, Shanghai and Rio, luxury will mean ever more gargantuan trinkets. The traditional luxury goods industries will find a new lease of life outside their home turf in Europe. But in the developed world, among the insecure but still aspirational middle classes a different story of luxury will develop. What we will want to show off, to ourselves as much to our friends, in what Thorstein Veblen called a symbolic pantomime will be a studious exhibition of expensiveness combined with make believe pastoral, craft simplicity, to create the impression that we are exempt – if just for a moment when buying a packet of smoked salmon - from the all encompassing logic of the system.

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