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Art of fusion: infusion of fine art into Swiss luxury watchmaking

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ABSTRACT

In this article, based mostly on field study and literature review, we define the main axes of collaboration between Swiss luxury watchmaking companies and artists. Our article focuses on various forms of artistic collaboration and co-creation. Having analyzed the group of 200 Swiss luxury watchmaking brands first, we defined four levels of collaboration and illustrate all of these dimensions with the key players and their best practices in collaboration with artists and various art forms.

Key words: luxury marketing, watchmaking, marketing of art

INTRODUCTION

Association of outstanding timepieces with art is not new in Swiss luxury watchmaking industry. Before the industrialization of watch production at the end of the 19th century, most of the timepieces were all unique art pieces crafted in an artisan way (Donzé, 2009). At that time there was no timepiece that was not in itself a work of art, an expression of the utmost refinement that the arts and sciences of the time would allow. Since than swiss watchmaking industry passed by the period of industrialization and less artistic watches and then, after a substantial “quartz crisis” in 1980s turned back to exceptional pieces of watchmaking art.

Traditionally, luxury and art maintain a constant and intimate relationship (Kapferer, 2012). This statement clearly highlights the structural proximity that luxury brands have always had with various forms of art. As for luxury watchmaking, in its modern conception, art often remains a bridge between sophisticated mechanics and a symbolic meaning that it represents. It incarnate intangible associations connected to time and its perpetual movement. That is how luxury watchmakers attempt to signal that it is not simply a watch, but an artistic object that we could use to control the time. It is interesting to notice that art, under its different forms, is now becoming a very important pillar for many luxury watch brands in order to create more emotional attachments and value for the client.

METHODOLOGY

Our research is based on the literature review including professional watch-making press as well as field study notes (mostly professional fairs as SIHH – Salon international de la Haute

Horlogere, Baselworld as well as numerous points of sales and other professional fairs) in the period of 2013 - 2018. Having analyzed the group of 200 Swiss luxury watchmaking brands first, we defined four levels of collaboration and illustrate all of these dimensions with their best practices.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand the place that art plays in luxury industry it is important to address some conceptual frameworks.

There is a long-standing general notion that the perception of art differs from the perception of other objects. Extensive investigation of the perception and appreciation of art has led to the establishment of art as a distinct field of inquiry (Berlyne 1974; Funch 1997). It was also found that some companies use art in image promotion, conveying the idea that their products, like paintings or other art creations, are unique works of art. According to Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008) sometimes, art is even created for the sole purpose of marketing a product. However, for the purposes of investigating art as it pertains to the art infusion effect, we adopt a consumer-focused perspective that categorize art as such (Bourdieu and Darbel 1997:).

In this research, we examine the phenomenon of “art infusion” (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008) which was broadly defined as the general influence of the presence of art on consumer perceptions and evaluations of products with which it is associated. More specifically, they defined that perceptions, associated with visual art, spill over from the artwork onto products with which it is associated, leading to more favorable evaluations of these products. Furthermore, they argue that this influence does not depend on the content of the specific artwork— that is, what is depicted in the artwork—but rather on general connotation of the product associated with visual art.

According to Colbert (2003), the artistic product does not exist to fulfil a market need. Its “raison d’être” is independent of the market, which is what makes it a particular marketing challenge. Instead of seeking to meet consumers' needs by offering them a product they desire, the art manager seeks consumers who are attracted to the product. We observe the same phenomenon in the Swiss luxury watchmaking that is why we decided to further discover it.

RESULTS DISCUSSION

The association between watchmaking brands and art takes several forms, which can be classified according to the degree to which the artistic dimension of the brand penetrates its identity and the product itself. We defined four main categories according to the type of collaboration between Swiss luxury watchmaking companies and artists.

Art of mechanics

First category represents the most profound art infusion that we called the art of mechanics. In this case, from the very first steps of creation and conception of an artistic timepiece, the watch was imagined as a mechanical sculpture. One of the brightest example would be mechanical art devices created by MB&F (Maximilian Büsser & Friends) independent Swiss luxury watchmaking company. Maximilian Büsser, the owner and creative director of MB&F, sees watchmaking as an art. They are not producing watches, but “mechanical sculptures” that give the time. It pours its creativity into two product lines: “Horological Machines” and “Legacy

Machines”. They even pushed further the art of mechanics and opened three MAD Galleries (Mechanical Art Devices galleries). Located in Geneva, Taipei and Dubai, MAD Galleries offer a fascinating universe of kinetic art where Horological Machines mixed with other Mechanical Art Devices (M.A.D.)

In contrast to futuristic imagination of MB&F, Jaquet Droz, another high-end watches producer famous by its heritage and craftsmanship, as in previous years, also created mechanical sculptures and incorporates some of them into their watches. We can often see demonstration of these techniques by the white-coated craftsmen working in the boutiques or watch fair around the world. Inspired by the first automated sculpture produced by the company three centuries ago, this artistic work take a very important part in modern watches of Jaquet Droz.

Artistic co-creation

The second dimension would be a joint co-creation of a new model of watches as a collaboration between the high-end watchmaking company and an artist. One of the best example is an “Art piece One” co-created by Greubel Forsey and Willard Wigan. Greubel Forsey very exclusive watch brand was one of the first who initiated a program of collaboration with contemporary artists. The aim of the project is to mix the art of watch making with that of visual art. Art Piece One – a unique piece produced by this independent company represents an artistic co-creation with Willard Wigan – worldwide known master of nano-sculptures. Art Piece One feature a nano-sculpture by Willard Wigan set into its own dedicated space within the timepiece. The company found in the work of Willard the same miniaturist language as their own. It was presented in Time Art Gallery in Shanghai and then in Shanghai Art Fair and Foire Internationale d’Art Contemporain in Paris. Here we are talking about the most profound collaboration in co-creation of the new and unique timepiece.

Then, we should extend this co-creation category to another type of artistic collaboration when a famous person who is profoundly associated with art, for example, famous brasilian painter Romero Britto, participated in creation of a special series “classic fusion enamel Britto” of the iconic Big Bang Hublot watch.

Artistic installations and events

Since approximately 2016 when the first wave of “smart watches” appeared, Swiss watchmakers got a new artistic dimension, collaborating with artists in terms of events and installations.

The biggest annual watch fair Baselworld (2017 year edition) is one of the best examples of the platform where a contemporary art is exhibited in relation to various luxury watch brands in order to highlight its positioning and add even more artistic dimensions to watchmaking craftsmanship.

For example, the live painting event, organized on the booth of Tag Heuer brand, where an artist created a piece of art to celebrate their partnership. The live painting event saw the famed graffiti artist scaling the façade of the stand to ‘tag’ at the TagHeuer booth.

Following this milestone with art, Hublot, as the avant-garde brand in the watchmaking industry, collaborates with various art forms, no matter contemporary art, music or visual art. Walking hand in hand with the leading artists in their respective areas, Hublot courageously creates outstanding pieces of art, enriches and challenges traditional way of thinking,

interpreting “Art of Fusion” to the extreme. They even made an official advertisement champagne with this slogan.

Métiers d’art

An application of various craftsmanship techniques (*métiers d’art*) to the decoration or design of the luxurious time piece is not also a new phenomenon. Since the very beginning, luxury watchmaking was strongly influenced by art. Many Swiss luxury watchmaking brands Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin, Cartier to name just a few, have been involved in the world of artistic craftsmanship for decades.

Translated from French it is believed to be a particularity of swiss luxury watchmaking *métiers d’art* literally means arts and crafts. The traditional decorative crafts used in the watchmaking field have been re-discovered again. Numerous decoration techniques of engraving, enameling and marquetry creates outstanding timepieces or limited series of watches. The rise in popularity of *métiers d’art* applied to luxury timepieces coincides with the desire of customers to have something that no one else has. In line with that, *métiers d’art* watches are a true opportunity to demonstrate exceptional artistic creativity and distinguish the brand and its exceptional timepieces. Vacheron Constantin is generally associated with its reintroduction when they presented its “masks” series of limited edition timepieces.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH AVENUES

Collaboration and co-creation of artistic watches makes it possible to attract additional attention of the press, the public, it reinvigorates the creativity of the brand, brings it a new relevance since it is associated to the world of art and appeals to the aesthetic sensibility of clients.

For some brands associations with art is a unique brand identity that reinforce its image. Nowadays, in the era of over production, accessibility and digitalization consumers are looking for authentic brands and timepieces. Collaboration with artists, incorporation of *métiers d’art* to the decoration of the watch is one of a vector of additional value creation and distinction for Swiss luxury watchmaking brands. Another objective is to persuade (potential) clients that there is a « distinct gap » between a company’s artistic timepiece and other companies competing against it.

The main limitation of this research is in the nature of our research. The exploratory research helped us to identify the key dimensions of the art infusion in Swiss luxury watchmaking industry. However, this does not allow us to understand the depth of this phenomenon. In order to enrich these results the more profound and focused analysis is needed.

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