

From austerity to prosperity: A historical perspective of Geneva's luxury industry

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Name three cities associated with luxury. Paris and Milan come to mind, along with Geneva. Each owes its prominence in this competitive market to very different beginnings.

Paris is synonymous with luxury thanks to the determination of King Louis XIV (1643-1715) to establish his kingdom as leader in taste and sumptuousness. So successful were his efforts that at the height of his reign, one third of Parisians were employed in the luxury sector, taking over from Belgium and Spain. The Sun King was known for his own opulent lifestyle, epitomized by the Chateau de Versailles with its Hall of Mirrors. His shrewd finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, recognized that luxury and fashions were to France "...what the mines of Peru were to Spain" - an extremely lucrative domestic and export commodity. Paris remains home to the oldest and most well-known luxury brands.

Milan's reputation for producing luxury goes back further to the Middle Ages, when Italian craftsmen learned to produce fine cloths such as silk, velvet and damas, previously imported from China. Not only the aristocracy but a burgeoning middle class composed of traders and merchants was eager to purchase these new materials. Their spending power increased as their prosperity grew. For many survivors of the bucolic plague which wiped out

more than one fifth of the population during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, wealth was increased by inheritance from less fortunate relatives who had succumbed. Milan gave its name to the English word "milaner" or "millaner", meaning fine wares like jewellery, cloth, hats and luxury apparel. Milan remains in the forefront for innovative design in the home as well as fashion.

Geneva's place in the luxury industry came about in spite of one man's efforts rather than because of them. The elegant Swiss town at the end of Lake Lemman conjures up images of exclusive designer jewellery, complicated watches and a thriving contemporary art market. But it was not always so. Strangely, theologian, pastor and protestant reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), known for austerity not opulence, motivated Geneva's success.

To understand how this came about, we need to travel back to the City of Calvin in the 16th century, and take a look at the paradoxical role this French immigrant played in turning Geneva into a centre of luxury.

Before his arrival, Geneva was home to highly regarded craftsmen, specialized in the intricate design of gold and silver for personal adornment and arts of the table. In 1550, Geneva metamorphosed into a safe haven for Protestant refugees fleeing persecution in Catholic Scotland, France, Italy and elsewhere in Europe. In the face of so much hardship it was no longer in keeping with the times to design and produce fine jewellery and ornaments. Simple and useful objects were the order of the day, watches and clocks instead of jewellery. The Geneva craftsmen quickly adapted, learning watchmaking skills from the Huguenot refugees.

Clockmaking was a particular favourite of Calvin. The theologian was obsessed with the ticking of time and how it regulated lives. By installing clocks all over the city he sought to encourage citizens not to waste nor squander their time and to remind them of its passing. “The devil makes work for idle hands” could have been his devise. By installing so many clocks, Calvin taught Geneva citizens to be punctual, managing their lives in a way only previously experienced in monasteries and convents. This was fitting for a city controlled by the clergy.

To this day, Geneva houses a myriad of clocks on church towers, building facades and one of its most photographed tourist attractions, the flower clock sculpture in the English Garden. Punctuality remains a much-admired quality in Geneva.

Calvin must also be given credit for the renown of the Swiss luxury industry outside of his city of adoption, albeit indirectly. Not that he was against luxury. “We cannot abstain from things which seem to serve pleasure more than necessity” he claimed, rejecting the traditional religious view of aesthetics. At no stage did he prevent craftsmen from manufacturing delicate pieces of art for the table, clothes and decoration. Instead he forbade Geneva citizens from purchasing them. Perhaps the first to respect Jean-Noel Kapferer’s anti-laws of luxury marketing, he made it difficult to buy through the introduction of sumptuary laws in 1541. These laws banned the wearing of ornamental objects and curtailed spending on pleasure or comfort that were not deemed essential. As craftsmen could produce but citizens could not purchase, their fine work had to be exported to other markets.

Clearly there were markets for these beautiful objects elsewhere. Geneva soon acquired a reputation for excellence and in 1601 the Watchmakers Guild of Geneva was established, the first of its kind in the world.

The laws put in place by Calvin, remained active for the next few centuries. They did not prevent people from living well. In 1643, a young patrician visitor to Geneva deplored the fact that even people of a modest condition generally sported coats made of taffeta or silk, and wore rings on their fingers.

The young visitor’s concern emphasizes the other role of sumptuary laws. They were not only aimed at curtailing spending but also at preventing an uprising against the ruling class. As of the second half of the 17th century, permissible expenditure was limited among the middle-classes. Three categories were implicated: so-called people of quality, lesser or mediocre people and mechanical craftspeople of lower stations. Each had limitations on its spending. The poor were not included in these categories.

As elsewhere, the bucolic plague had a devastating effect on the population. There were 10 outbreaks in Geneva during the 16th century and three in the 17th century. One particularly virulent attack between 1568-1572 killed 3,000 people - a fifth of the population. A doctor concerned with the plague was nominated, entry into the city was limited, and those who had been in contact with the sick were quarantined. Deserted by foreign students, the Theological Academy closed for several months and the last three professors were fired and paid off with an indemnity of 100 guilders. A

scapegoat was found for all this misery in the form of poor peasants looking for work in the city. They were accused and executed.

As a city of God and centre of the European Reformation Geneva required its citizens to adopt good Christian morals in their clothing. Too much fabric, *decoltés* considered too low cut, and fabrics like taffeta, damas and silk in colours of fire: violet, yellow, green or “dying blue” (*bleu mourant*) were all punishable. There were multiple infractions for excessive apparel at newly-allowed ceremonies such as funerals, marriages and baptisms. Even the length of a coat worn by mourners must be a particular length based on the social class of the wearer.

In the 17th century, Geneva’s Reformation Chamber, in charge of enforcing Calvin’s sumptuary laws, repressed and prevented citizens from sporting fine clothes and jewellery. After so much suffering and death, the citizens had turned enthusiastically to luxury spending, or revenge buying as it is known today.

Between 1646 and 1658 almost 10 percent of the Geneva population, essentially women, were denounced by fellow citizens or bourgeois. They were brought before the courts as “agents of luxury” for wearing clothes, jewellery and apparel above their station.

Fortunately, Geneva survived those tough times, maintaining and building on the skills of its craftsmen. It further benefitted from the growing renown of the Swiss watch industry throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Today Geneva is faced with challenges stemming from the Covid 19 pandemic such as the closure of the Basel watch fair. Plans are afoot to establish new

and exclusive fairs for watchmakers to exhibit in Geneva. There are some four contenders. Hopefully they will adapt like their forebears in the 16th century to uphold Geneva’s position in the world of luxury.

Recommended reading

- Kapferer, JN and Bastien, V., *The Luxury Strategy*, Kogan Page Ltd., 2012
- Walker, C., *Histoire de Genève* Tome 2, éditions Alphil-Presses universitaires Suisses 2014.