The Use of Art for Branding Purposes
- A Study of Louis Vuitton’s Art Collaborations
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# Table of Contents

## Introduction

- Background  
  - p. 2
- Purpose and aim  
  - p. 2
- Subject restrictions  
  - p. 3
- Theoretical foundation and method  
  - p. 3
- Earlier research and relevance of subject  
  - p. 4
- Essay structure  
  - p. 5

## 1. The Louis Vuitton Brand

- History of the brand  
  - p. 6
- The creative spheres  
  - p. 7
- Collaborations between cultural spheres  
  - p. 9

## 2. Louis Vuitton and the Fine Arts

- The purport of an art collaboration  
  - p. 11
- The limited edition collection  
  - p. 12
- The independent artwork  
  - p. 15
- Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton  
  - p. 17
- Sponsorships of the arts  
  - p. 18

## 3. The Individual in Context

- Identity construction  
  - p. 20
- The desirable object  
  - p. 21
- A definition of the hybrid  
  - p. 23

## Conclusion  
  - p. 24

## Summary  
  - p. 25

## Bibliography  
  - p. 26

## Appendix: Illustrations  
  - p. 29

## List of Illustrations  
  - p. 37
Introduction

Background
When profiling a luxury brand, one would want it to be associated with just the right persons, things or phenomena. Different marketing strategies may be used in order to attain results and only the restrictions of one’s creativity will set the limit for it. When Bernard Arnault assumed controlling interest of Louis Vuitton in 1990, incorporating the brand in his multinational luxury goods conglomerate LVMH, he wanted to remake the brand as an embodiment of elegance and extravagance. Safeguarding Louis Vuitton’s heritage by keeping focus on travel and accessories, he contemporarily introduced prêt-a-porter fashion and modernity by making American designer Marc Jacobs artistic director in 1997, the person who would establish strong bonds with the art world through numerous, and sometimes daring, artistic collaborations.

Purpose and aim
Looking at Louis Vuitton’s many art collaborations and the brand’s usage of art, this thesis will investigate the relationship between art and fashion. It will explore the power of branding, but above all this essay will look closely on the encounter between the unique work of art and the mass-produced item. Focus will be on four approaches to art made by the brand: firstly, the direct collaboration with an artist who makes a limited collection for the brand; secondly, an artistic collaboration only indirectly connected to the product, for example an artwork displayed by itself in a Louis Vuitton store window; thirdly, the brand’s latest art investment, Louis Vuitton’s own art museums; and ultimately, the brand’s sponsorships of the arts. Hence, this study will be made with the purpose of finding an answer to the following thesis question:

- How does Louis Vuitton use art in profiling the brand and what benefits do they attain by doing so?

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1 Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy. LVMH is the established abbreviation.
Subject restrictions

Louis Vuitton does numerous collaborations that connect and spread over many different fields, mostly fields of culture and creativity. The brand works closely with people from the fields of art, architecture and photography, but has also engaged with both actors and politicians in various campaigns. Due to a limited amount of space, this essay will above all discuss the aspects of the fine arts and its relationship with the brand in-depth, and may only briefly mention other aspects as examples or as confirmation of structures.

Theoretical foundation and method

Branding is partly an economic phenomenon coupled with marketing, management and communication. Since this text is not focusing on branding itself but on how art is used in order to profile the brand, this analysis will take a different approach, focusing on art history and its social aspects. The analysis of the subject will therefore be grounded in the theoretic work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The most prominent notions to be used are his concepts of habitus, cultural capital and fields of production. Bourdieu was very interested in the role of the individual in the reproduction of social restrictions and the guidelines of any particular cultural contexts. As a corollary of his investigations he develops the notion of habitus, an unconscious system of dispositions that generate and control human actions and behaviors. The process of shaping ones habitus is one of informal and unconscious learning which are influenced by and come into focus through the juxtaposition of different social and cultural markers such as occupation, religion and taste preferences. Bourdieu stresses the power relations that exist between different social classes and argues that symbolic power is distributed in order to maintain these class distinctions and make them appear natural. Aside from financial capital, cultural and symbolic capital are crucial for this establishment. Symbolic capital is a general concept, broadly indicating what is considered valuable in various social groups. Cultural capital, a sort of symbolic capital, refers to “a familiarity with objects and practices in the cultural sphere determined by educational level, linguistic competence, and other forms of capital that mark a social class.” The arena in which cultural capital flows and is valid is what Bourdieu calls a field of production. Whether it is the political field, the fashion field or the art field, every field has its own laws and values. All fields are structurally homologous, but each field has its own characteristics and, above all, its

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own price that is valid only in that field and that everyone belonging to that particular field
acknowledges as worth fighting for.\(^5\)

As a complement to the ideas of Bourdieu, American sociologist Howard S. Becker’s book
*Artworlds* will be used as a theoretical foundation. Here he examines the cultural contexts in
which artists produce their work and is hence relevant when looking at the context of any
Louis Vuitton art collaboration. Becker stresses collective activity and the joint contribution
of a number of people in order to produce a work of art. The artist’s position is that of the
indispensable figure in the center of a large network without whom the work could not have
been accomplished. However, it is far from that of the genius. The main difference from the
theories of Bourdieu is that there is no struggle controlling the relations of the field, and
furthermore, to a greater extent than Bourdieu, Becker stresses the existence of numerous art
and fashion worlds that vary greatly in size and importance. These differences will be put into
context later on in the text.\(^6\)

Since this will be a study that emphasizes the personal relations between brand and people,
and reciprocally between individuals, theoretical ideas of this kind are highly applicable and
may offer interesting results. The method used is one of investigation and selection. Through
extensive research of empirical material, conscious choices of examples have been made
which are thought upon as representative of the main lines of approach to the arts.

*Earlier research and relevance of subject*

Several studies have been published on the various collaborations of Louis Vuitton. A
majority of these, however, focus on solely one collaboration or event at the time. Often, the
accomplishments of the brand may be used as examples to illustrate a view in various texts,
but very few authors have chosen to look at Louis Vuitton’s general branding strategies in a
more in-depth manner. Some have made thorough analyses on the relationships between
consumers and luxury goods, or on the development of collaborations between fashion houses
and art, aspects that will be relevant in this study. I was however unsuccessful in finding any
text treating the field of art from a wider perspective and from the point of view of only one
brand, using and stressing the different nature of the examples that will follow in the analysis
below.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Examples of texts with relations to the subject: Young Jee Han, *How do consumers use brands for identity signaling: impact of brand prominence on consumers’ choice and social interaction*, Ph.D. dissertation,
**Essay structure**

This text will carry the structure of a pyramid, initially providing a basic foundation of knowledge on top of which additional bricks of information will be laid. The first chapter will hence account for a short background of Louis Vuitton’s history and a more in-depth theoretical discussion of Bourdieu and Becker and the two theorists’ different views on the creative contexts, in which these collaborations between fashion and art occur. The second chapter discusses the relationship between Louis Vuitton and the fine arts; the brand’s motivations behind the collaborations; the artists’ positions; and ultimately, takes a closer look on the various approaches to art made by Louis Vuitton. The third and final chapter focuses on the individual: why she buys Louis Vuitton items in the first place, or any luxury goods, why the products of these art collaborations are appealing and, finally, this chapter attempts to define the form of these collaborations before concluding and summarizing.
1. The Louis Vuitton Brand

**History of the brand**

The history of Louis Vuitton traces back to 1854 when Mr. Vuitton founded his house in central Paris. He set up as an innovative trunk maker of exquisite quality, offering stackable and waterproof trunks, difficultly obtainable properties at that time. Industrialization had brought both new means and new needs for transportation, for merchandise but also for travelers’ clothing. The light yet durable trunk with removable interior frames, quickly became an indispensable item of traveling for those who could afford it.\(^8\)

A pioneer of what is known today as the “luxury industry”, Louis Vuitton was also one of the first manufacturers to place a signature on his creations. This was probably an early attempt, in what would become a never-ending battle, to protect his firm against imitators. In 1896, four years after Louis Vuitton’s death, his son George introduced the brand’s signature monogram. Designed by George Vuitton himself, it was a pattern of stylized flower symbols and the now classic intertwined initials of the house (see appendix I). In addition to being yet another effort to impede counterfeit, the introduction of the monogram echoed the modernization of the company. It was the beginning of a new era through which the house would create new designs of luggage, but also handbags, to meet the needs of the new century. Many of the models launched in this period have become, or are predecessors of, the traditional standard models of today’s Louis Vuitton.\(^9\)

Remaining a symbol of exclusivity and exceptional craftsmanship, by the late 1980s the brand had become quite dull and unexciting. This all changed in 1987 after the merger between Louis Vuitton and Moët Hennessy, thus creating LVMH, Luis Vuitton Moët Hennessy, the luxury goods conglomerate that is Bernard Arnault’s empire.\(^10\) The rapprochement to art began already in 1988 when a series of silk scarves was commissioned from prominent artists like Sol LeWitt, Arman and James Rosenquist. The real difference, however, came after Arnault assumed controlling interest in LVMH in 1990. First, he hired Yves Carcelle to run Louis Vuitton. Then, in 1996, celebrating the centennial of the Monogram canvas, the brand tightened its bonds with the creative world. The company invited seven designers, including Vivienne Westwood, Azzedine Alaïa, Manolo Blahnik and

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Helmut Lang, to reinvent the emblem by adding their personal touch. Finally, in 1997, Marc Jacobs was appointed creative director and with the new and hip New York designer followed not only the introduction of seasonal Louis Vuitton prêt-a-porter lines, but he also initiated a series of creative partnerships.

The creative spheres

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu studied the shared behavior of people in relation to specific structural social formations, or as he would come to call them, fields of cultural production. One way to define a field is by establishing its particular interests and, more importantly, the prizes or profits that the struggle within the field is about. In order for a field to work, everyone belonging to that field must be gifted with a habitus that presupposes their knowledge of the rules and laws of the field, acknowledge the prize and the game which is played for it, and ultimately be willing to participate in that game. The structure of a field is the state of the correlation of power between the persons or institutions involved in the struggle. Another way to put it is to say that it is the state of the distribution of capital, which regulates the structures of the field. Moreover, this structure is under constant threat, which on the other hand, is the principle of the game. In fact, the struggle in the field is to a great extent about who is to possess the dominant position in the field, to have the power over its very structure and decide whether to maintain or radically change the distribution of the specific capital of the field.

In today’s fashion field the Louis Vuitton brand would be considered to be in a high position. It is one of the most well-known fashion brands in the world with a prosperous business, a successful and respected history of craftsmanship and exclusive top-quality merchandise that almost anyone would like to possess. They house at the most exclusive addresses in all of the world’s fashion capitals and there is no fashion magazine that does not cover the brand’s runway shows, news or events. To put it in other words, even in the extended fashion field, Louis Vuitton holds a great share of cultural capital and, subsequently, power.

In the field of art, however, the way of acknowledgement is quite different. To use Bourdieu’s terms, there is one particular struggle within the art field that quite distinctively determines the distribution of capital. Sociologist Victoria D. Alexander uses the expressions

11 Gasparina, p. 44.
12 Saillard, p. 70.
13 Bourdieu, p. 128.
autonomous versus heteronomous when discussing the two opposite poles of artistic fields. The autonomous pole is one where its participants distance themselves from outside influence which may bias their art, such as commercial factors, and instead value art for art’s sake. This will grant much cultural capital within the field as this stance is viewed with great approval by the field’s members. This standpoint is hence a prestigious one, which will receive a lot of recognition but, instead, will obtain little or no economic capital. The heteronomous pole on the other hand will have quite the opposite distribution of capital. These artists are judged on their commercial value, that is, their ability to sell works of art for as large sums of money possible. This is of course held in low regard by those members who identify themselves with “pure art” and high culture. Moreover, the commercial field is further divided into two subcategories: the higher status “bourgeois art” which still holds some kind of exclusiveness and a higher degree of “art-ness”, and the low-brow mass produced artworks which comprehend souvenir art, kitsch and the popular arts. Bourdieu emphases his believe that all fields carry ideologies, and by looking at the examples above, one might understand what he means. Additionally, the struggle between the two poles and their respective believes is evident, as is the connection with one’s habitus in the different extremities.

American sociologist Howard Becker is of a different understanding when considering the social aspects of the creative spheres. Instead of seeing the art worlds, to use his own terminology, as being structured by internal struggles, he views the final product as a collaborative creation resting on the extensive division of labor. To create a Louis Vuitton bag, for example, someone needs to design it. To sketch the design this person would need pen and paper which someone, in turn, first would have to have invented. Later someone would need to manufacture (not to mention someone having to construct the factories where the paper and pens are made, the people working there, the distribution to stores where someone can sell them and so forth). Someone else would then have to sew the bag, make the leather of which the bag is made, pick up the leather from the farm or wherever it comes from, and before that feed the animals etc. It is easy to see that this kind of network is almost infinitely extendable. This is why Becker stresses the collective contribution, where of course, the people contributing are of different importance and relevance. The designer might be doing the core activity, while others have the status of mere support; nonetheless, it is a long process to arrive at the final outcome.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Becker, pp. 7-17.
To think of everyone in the whole world as being connected in some way or another, at some point in time, may make it difficult to imagine a definition of a smaller unit such as the art world or the fashion world, especially as Becker describes it as consisting of everyone whose activities are necessary to the production of a work. This is of course true, but it helps to think of a world as a more fixed entity of people cooperating on a relatively constant basis referring to a common understanding of conventions relating to their collaboration. Some members of an art world may do something innovative that is not accepted by the rest of the contributors and might then develop a world of their own. Some networks can therefore be large and complex while others are smaller with only a few participants. Additionally, art worlds often have close relations with other worlds from which they try to distinguish themselves, sometimes complicating any attempt of distinction. They find inspiration and recruit personnel from each other, share sources of supply and compete for audiences and financial support. In many ways the separate worlds are part of a larger social organization. This has motivated the use of the term “sphere”. As demonstrated, the notions of field and world are similar in many ways but are evidently not interchangeable terms.¹⁶

Collaborations between cultural spheres

For the past 15 years, since Jacobs became creative designer in 1997, Louis Vuitton has made countless collaborations with various creative spheres. Often this has taken its form through commissions of works of art, exclusive collections, sponsorships, and perhaps most extensively, through advertisements. In various campaigns they have used actors, athletes, politicians, had famous photographers shoot the ads, famous architects design the buildings, and made sure the right celebrities were seen with the suitable Louis Vuitton bag. And this is to name only a few common publicity campaigns made by the brand.

Every brand is associated with a certain number of principles and values, not only by its customers, but also by everyone who is in somehow familiar with the brand. This is important as it essentially determines the brand’s customers, and by consequence, its success. Customers will relate to what a brand stands for and decide if that correlates to who they are, who they would like to be, or who they want to portray themselves to be. Louis Vuitton is known for being a brand of travel, luxury, exclusivity and respected heritage. People who buy their products will hence identify with the brand on one of these levels.

¹⁶ Becker, pp. 35-37.
Using a personality from outside Louis Vuitton to work as a face of the brand means that consumers will no longer search to identify with merely the brand, but also with the person representing it. A significant persona will thus function as an indexical sign of that particular field, meaning that this person will be a direct reference and work as a representation for the whole field.\(^\text{17}\) A good example of this is Louis Vuitton’s Core Values Campaign. The brand has been promoting the art of travel for 150 years and is now doing it with the help of carefully selected personas. The campaign consists of Louis Vuitton travel equipment, the Keepall travel bag in particular, which is featured in various settings of the personal journeys of icons including the former Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev, French actress Catherine Deneuve, tennis players Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf, and most recently, legendary boxer Muhammad Ali.\(^\text{18}\) For Becker this would be a way to extend these art worlds by incorporating further contributors to these particular collaborations, while for Bourdieu it would be an intersection between different fields.

In pairing these personalities and their values and stories together with those of Louis Vuitton, they are affecting the way the brand is seen. Since choosing the celebrities sensibly, this would hopefully grant the brand only positive associations. Of course one person will not speak to every single consumer, whoever this person may be, but it will be addressed to suitable consumers. This would in any case mean recognition in the spheres of the celebrities, such as the political, tennis, boxing, acting, and perhaps even the sport and French spheres. This presumably newly gained respect and esteem would not only attract new costumers, but would also amount to cultural capital within the different fields, which doubtlessly, is the brand’s main concern. Because whilst making sure that the broader mass desires the Louis Vuitton products, it is of greatest interest to keep the brand’s strong image as luxurious and exclusive, especially in times of recession when convincing people to buy luxury products may be of slightly more difficulty than are items of direct need. Louis Vuitton has found a way to do this parallel to its vertical extension through what is known as the ultimate luxury item: fine art.


\(^{18}\) See appendix II for images
2. Louis Vuitton and the Fine Arts

The purport of an art collaboration

Going through a vast amount of material, reading about the brand and researching on its great number of collaborations, a pattern started to reveal itself. Although Louis Vuitton has stretched across a number of fields in a variety of campaigns, the art collaborations are the ones that stand out. They have left the most permanent marks and have surely become one of the brand’s more time consuming and genuine endeavors. Even though Marc Jacobs himself, at the least, is both an art enthusiast and a collector, it would however be naïve to think that the scope of these collections is anything but marketing for Louis Vuitton. The connection to the arts might be explicitly commercial or discreetly present but it is nevertheless an aesthetic investment in the immaterial and symbolic definition of the brand.19

To do a collaboration of any sort is nonetheless to take a risk. To have an artist design a collection, for example, may change the way the brand is seen, which of course is the scope of it, as long as the outcome is positive. As expressed by Becker in *Art worlds*, “artists’ reputations”, but also every brand with an image, “are a sum of the values we assign to the works they have produced”. This means that everything they do will add or subtract to the basis on which one judges them. A collaboration may consequently be fruitful but could, in the worst-case scenario, threaten the brand’s very identity and reputation. Furthermore, one’s attitude towards a piece of art, or a fashion item, will differ depending on who made it.20

Everyone who is taking part in a collaboration has different interests. They may be commercial, career-bound or linked to marketing benefits. However, in order for a collaboration to be rewarding for all parties, everyone participating must have something to offer, and in return, have something to gain.21 In the case of Louis Vuitton, they certainly have much to offer. Not only do they have a large global network and enough resources to implement almost whatever undertaking they find worthwhile, but they also represent an authoritative brand with a high position in the fashion sphere. If an artist with a respected amount of cultural capital in the field of art would like to expand his business to other fields, like the field of fashion, Louis Vuitton would be the perfect partner. One would presume, however, that the artists agreeing to work together with the brand, are artists who to a large extent are concerned with economic capital, or who at the least do not find the two poles of

19 Gasparina, p. 46.
20 Becker, p. 23.
21 Becker, p. 25.
commercial and non-commercial art as repellant as many others. Since Louis Vuitton works only with established artist who have already accumulated much cultural capital in the art field, the risk for failure is much smaller. Building a bridge between two fields is a lot easier and safer if both sides are strong and solid. In fact the main benefit for Louis Vuitton does not lie in a profitable sale of an artist-designed collection, but rather in the gained respect exchangeable for cultural capital and another step up the social ladder. By example, when Louis Vuitton collaborated with artist Stephen Sprouse who made a graffiti-inspired collection for the brand, the whole trademark was swiftly seen differently. This unexpected urban collection brought modernity and edge to a more traditional Louis Vuitton, leading not only to a successful sale of the Sprouse-collection but increasing interests in other products as well (see appendix VII for image).

In art, and in any other creative field, people rely on history and previous ways to do things that have now become customary. Agreements on how things are done have become conventional when producing a work of art. This means that Louis Vuitton has to be avant-garde in order to stay interesting but at the same time be careful not be too unconventional, partly to stay accepted and thus desirable to its consumers, but also not to lose touch with its heritage. Generalizing, it is possible to distinguish four main approaches to the fine arts made by the brand which enables this: the limited edition collection of Louis Vuitton merchandise designed by an artist; the independent work of art of an established artist displayed in close connection to the brand, e.g. at various Louis Vuitton stores; works of art by young artists put on display at Louis Vuitton’s own art space; and finally, the brand’s sponsorship of the arts. These approaches are all art collaborations but offer different degrees of liberty and independence as will be revealed below.

The limited edition collection

Perhaps the most straightforward cooperation between Louis Vuitton and the arts are through their direct artist collaborations. That is, having an established artist design a highly exclusive, limited edition collection for the brand and subsequently selling these products. What Louis Vuitton is vending then is an exclusive product merged together with the creation of an esteemed artist whose work otherwise would sell for huge amounts of money. Consumers are hence given the possibility to buy and possess a piece of art by a certain artist. Marc Jacobs himself has called these art collaborations a way to reach out to a broader public. Talking

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22 Bengtsen, pp. 18-19.
23 Becker, pp. 29 f.
about Richard Prince’s bags, he said that the limited edition collection made for and in collaboration with Louis Vuitton, is an opportunity to enjoy an authentic Richard Prince even if one cannot afford, or simply does not want, to buy a thirty or forty thousand dollar painting. This naturally goes for all their artist-designed products, which make this symbiosis between art and commercial production difficult to define. Is it art? Or is it simply the new it-bag of the season?  

To begin with, the artists with whom Louis Vuitton collaborate on these collections are all contemporary and sought-after, often at some peak of their careers. This contributes to the vast amount of attention these collections draw, together with extensive marketing, of course. Even if the artists have to base their work on the already designed, and by now classical, pieces and products, they are given quite much liberty for their creativity. In these lines, Louis Vuitton’s traditions and customs of outline may gladly be altered and limits pushed for the benefits of bold colors, irony and playfulness. Notably, this has been shown in previous acclaimed collections by Steven Sprouse, Takashi Murakami, Richard Prince, and most recently by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama (see appendix VIII for images).

In the summer of 2012 Louis Vuitton stores worldwide were transformed into polka dot drenched havens for the Infinitely Kusama collection. The theme of dots spreading out in a seemingly never-ending and repetitive manner is a Kusama hallmark. While the earlier artists who have collaborated with the brand have been spontaneous and inventive, it was Kusama’s lifelong obsession with dots that fascinated Marc Jacobs. In an interview uploaded before the release of the collection, describing the working process, the designer compares Kusama’s dots to Louis Vuitton’s monogram. They go so well together because both patterns are infinite and everlasting. In fact, the brand has made sure to keep as much of Yayoi Kusama and her earlier work as possible when creating the collection. In the ads made for the collaboration and present in the Louis Vuitton stores, there are equivalents to her biomorphic nerves, flowers, pumpkins and infinity nets. In this way, letting the Louis Vuitton merchandise be as true to Kusama’s lifelong production of art as possible, the argument for calling these luxury goods cheaper alternatives for pieces of art seem pretty effective. Furthermore, Kusama, but also Murakami, represent two of Japan’s most important artists. This too is of marketing relevance as the Japanese market and even the Japanese buyers internationally are very

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24 Gasparina, p. 48.
26 See appendix IX for selected images of Kusama’s earlier work and appendix X for the Louis Vuitton Milan store windows’ display of the Kusama collaboration.
27 LOUIS VUITTON You Tube Channel, watched on 19 December 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygGEICDbjZE
important for Louis Vuitton. Together with other parts of Asia, China in particular, Japan is subject to a will to expand on the part of the brand. In discussing Takashi Murakami, also known as the Japanese Andy Warhol, and his work for Louis Vuitton, Jill Gasparina draws parallels to Pop Art, an artistic movement in part associated with Yayoi Kusama. She mentions the breakdown of the hierarchical distinction between high and low art as owed to the movement, and continues to make a comparison of this breakthrough in fashion with the introduction of prêt-a-porter alongside haute couture. What is not mentioned, but quite automatically springs to mind, is Louis Vuitton’s importance in a similar development today. The hierarchical discrepancy between high and low culture is united by the brand through their convergence with the arts. A convergence that inter alia manifests itself in the shape of a Yayoi Kusama designed handbag. It is a fusion between the field of art and the field of fashion that creates a new world, in the Beckerian sense of the world, of post-Warhol art, or to cite Gasparina: Pop Art Luxury.

By using terms that belong to the artistic sphere, Gasparina positions Luis Vuitton and its creative designer in the modern history of art, legitimizing their work as such. In her biased text in the Louis Vuitton-approved book, the desire to be likened to important movements or moments in art is evident. In addition to the avant-garde, Andy Warhol and Pop Art, she

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30 *Gasparina, p. 48.*
mentions André Breton, and in another place in the book, Oliver Saillard draws parallels to Marcel Duchamp and Claes Oldenburg. It is the latter's challenging museum-store setup in the 1960s that is thought upon when comparing it to Murakami’s offer to Louis Vuitton sometime after their collaboration on the limited edition collection. The artist invited the brand to set up a temporary store as a part of his exhibition at MOCA, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, which later moved to the Brooklyn Museum in New York, and then further on to Germany and Spain, selling unique bags produced exclusively for that occasion. Similarly, Steven Sprouse, who created the graffiti-inspired collection for the brand, is compared to Duchamp and his ready-mades. Saillard is referring to Sprouse’s writing on prefabricated bags such as the Keepall and the Speedy, arguing that the Louis Vuitton bags are the ready-mades, the Mona Lisa of Duchamp, and Sprouse being the revolutionary himself.31 In powerful fields such as the art or fashion field, Bourdieu maintains that one cannot understand a work and its value without possessing knowledge about the history of the production of the work in the field in question. This would hence exclude the artists’ work for Louis Vuitton from the field of art, rather than including it, possibly creating a counterpart to it in the fashion field, albeit 50 years later.32

The independent artwork

A second approach to art made by Louis Vuitton is through indirect artist collaborations. This means that the art or design made by whichever renowned artist is not directly connected to the products but rather to the brand name and image. This could be a commissioned work for a new store, a campaign or an event where the artist is given more freedom of creativity, not having to incorporate a Louis Vuitton bag or any other particular product. The artwork is thus commissioned by Louis Vuitton and is displayed in relation to the brand so the association between the two could not be mistaken. In most cases, these works of art are much less restricted in their design than are the limited edition collections. This detachment from the actual products is, however, merely appearing. Every connection to the brand is always consequently and indirectly linked to its merchandise, especially in cases such as Louis Vuitton, where the brand name and its connotations are crucial.

A prime example of an independent artwork is Danish artist Olafur Eliasson’s Eye see you commissioned by Louis Vuitton in 2006. The artwork was exhibited for three months as the Christmas windows display in Louis Vuitton stores worldwide. During one of the most

31 Gasparina, pp. 43, 47; Saillard, pp. 70-71. See appendix XI for image.
32 Bourdieu, p. 131.
important and busy times of the year, with regard to sales and gift shopping, the luxury goods stores did thusly not display a single product of their own, but let a work of art represent their whole product range. In the form of a giant luminous eye, Eliasson’s solar lamp installation glares at whoever walks by and imitates their curious gaze. Recalling the shape of the pupil, this participatory theatre between the eye(s) of *Eye see you* and the eyes of the onlooker, is the kind of spectator/artwork relationship that is characteristic for Olafur Eliasson and his work. Eliasson is in fact renowned for engaging viewers and visitors in uncommonly sensorial experiences in everything he does, even by omitting them. *Your loss of senses*, made for Louis Vuitton’s Paris flagship store in 2005, is in fact a light- and sound-depriving elevator fittingly leading up to the Espace Culturel, Louis Vuitton’s art space.33

Choosing to solely display a non-commercial piece by a contemporary artist throughout their global network is quite a statement, a marketing paradox even. What might seem like an internal conflict of interest is rather a manifestation of the importance of the arts for the brand. It says that Louis Vuitton is serious about its art commitment and is not afraid to put non-commerciality in front of the commercial. Since the commercial is viewed with less prestige, to work with art in absence of any apparent commercial prospect almost as a compensation for this, is a fruitful way to aim at the more prestigious stratum of the art world.

It is in any case important to remember the emphasis that Becker puts on the aspect of contribution and the sum of all combined activity in the completion of an artwork.

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See http://www.louisvuitton.com/front/#/eng_US/Journeys-section/Friends-of-the-House/Personalities/Olafur-Eliasson for images of both *Eye see You* and *Your loss of senses*. 
Commissioning Eliasson’s work of art plus providing for an exhibition space is, according to Becker’s view, more than enough to make Louis Vuitton part of this art world. This is also true for the audience, in this case the passersby, through whom the properties of the artwork exist and are given meaning, if only temporarily as they walk by and experience the piece. This differs markedly from the view of Bourdieu, where ones habitus is essential in determining the belonging to any field.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton}

Louis Vuitton’s most recent undertaking towards an even closer relationship with the arts was through the opening of the Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton in 2006. This is the brand’s own art museum, situated at the seventh and top floor of the Champs-Elysées flagship store in Paris. Since it is a privately owned space open to visitors and completely free of charge, art gallery might be a more suitable word. The brand itself has chosen to call it an art space. The big success of the Espace Culturel in Paris leads to the opening of the Espace Louis Vuitton Tokyo, opened in 2011, together with a few other smaller art spaces around the world – and more in the planning.\textsuperscript{35}

The ambition of the Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton is to promote emerging contemporary art and artists, stepping somewhat further out of the traditional Louis Vuitton brand image box, taking risks and wanting to push the envelope even further. Here, the curators of the Espace Culturel try to put together unexpected exhibitions by making unforeseen choices, as showcasing creative work from countries such as Turkey and Korea, as opposed to Japan and China, which perhaps would have been more expected. Whether this is an attempt to keep with the new and fresh, it is nonetheless an excellent way to make a rapprochement towards future relations with these countries. In any case, the Louis Vuitton art spaces offer sometimes well-known, but often unknown artist to be part of an innovative approach to art and the possibility to tell new stories. As a matter of fact, the brand’s president Yves Carcelle returns to the metaphor of journey when talking about the exhibitions, meaning that they offer to take the visitors on a true journey when experiencing the art shows. From the point of departure of

\textsuperscript{34} Becker, p. 214.
the brand, being the art of travel, Louis Vuitton is now making the possibilities of travel in art part of their philosophy.\textsuperscript{36}

Surely this approach to the arts is the one that will provide the brand with the most symbolic capital. A prestigious, non-commercial sideline that can work as a currency converter, transferring and transforming capital from the fashion field into valid capital in the field of art.\textsuperscript{37}

**Sponsorships of the arts**

The last two approaches appear to be completely non-commercial undertakings by one of the world’s most successful luxury corporations. However, this would not be their position if truly endeavoring and investing in non-profitable businesses. Surely, these actions must be motivated by a major recompense. Looking at Chin-Tao Wu’s texts on branding and corporate capital going into the visual arts, one may apply his theories to fashion corporations and get a possible idea on the forces behind this relationship. Wu exclusively discusses companies that of natural reasons may need image boosts like petroleum, tobacco and weapon producing corporations. Not surprisingly these companies are among the biggest sponsors of the arts in both America and Britain, proving the efficiency of the method.

The brand’s main sponsorship of Louis Vuitton is that of the Louis Vuitton Cup, i.e. the American Sailing Cup, which carries on since 1983.\textsuperscript{38} Additionally, the brand carries out several other, more random sponsorships, habitually of contemporary art. One of the most recent supports was of *Anthropocene Extinction*, a site-specific installation by American artist Swoon at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.\textsuperscript{39} Major sponsorships are nevertheless made by LVMH, indirectly putting Louis Vuitton in a good light. The conglomerate regularly sponsors blockbuster museum exhibitions, contemporary art works, restorations such as parts of the Chateau de Versailles, scholarships, charity donations etc (see appendix XII).\textsuperscript{40}

This is yet another demonstration of the resourcefulness of Louis Vuitton, penetrating the art field on innumerable levels, targeting different groups within the same field through


different means. Although this commitment to the arts is serious and extremely generous, it is nonetheless an image booster generating just the right connotations to the multi-billion-euros company. Instead of paying for regular advertisement to promote the corporation’s empire of luxury goods and spirits, the more subtly promotional form of funding will still provide prominent exposure on posters, catalogues and promotional material, while at the same time generating goodwill. Additionally, this method targets museum visitors, which generally consist of a high percentage of educated people, not seldomly in possession of cultural capital. This especially applies to the visitors of art museums, who statistically are even more socio-economically distinguished than the audiences of other museums. This thusly means that in this way, it is possible to isolate, to a great extent, the desired target group.⁴¹

3. The Individual in Context

Identity construction

The past sections have accounted for some basic knowledge and have illuminated relevant focal points in the Louis Vuitton complex, further explaining and discussing the various approaches to art made by the brand. It has been made clear that the use of art indeed is an important marketing factor that most certainly is part of the Louis Vuitton branding strategy. However, the forces and targets behind the profits of this rapprochement to art, that is, the consumers, have hitherto been modestly present.

When selling luxury goods it is all about creating a desire for something that no one really needs. In that sense, it may be harder to sell than, say, groceries. There may be many reasons for buying, or wanting to buy, an exclusive Louis Vuitton bag. In most cases, however, the main reason is to show the world, and even yourself, who you are. It is thus to a great extent about identity construction.42 If it were only important to show others that one can afford a certain luxury item, one would, of course under the circumstances that one would not get caught, just buy a fake item for a considerably lower price. However, if the authentic product still is desirable, it is to a significant degree not only about portraying oneself in a determinate way in relation to others, but it as also a question of self-identity. This is true for visiting the Espace Culturel too, or any other art museum, perhaps buying some kind of souvenir or taking pictures as evidence of the bond one has with art.43

From Bourdieu’s point of view, this would be directly connected to the buyers’ habitus. It would determine taste, brand preference and in most cases also economic possibility of buying certain items. This would furthermore be connected to cultural capital. Art being known as the ultimate luxury item, it unquestionably carries considerable prestige and important cultural capital. However, this would not only apply to the consumers of Louis Vuitton merchandise, for example, but to everyone. Slightly modifying Bourdieu’s theory, Wu argues that corporate élites, such as Bernard Arnault, use the position of their companies to advance their personal positions through art sponsorships for instance. Simply put, they transform the economic capital of the corporations they run into personal, social and cultural capital in form of new acquaintances and symbolic gestures, which consequently, later, may be turned into more economic capital. It is a never-ending beneficial circle both for the...

42 For an in-depth analysis and discussion on the different purchasers of luxury goods see Young Jee Han How do consumers use brands for identity signaling: impact of brand prominence on consumers’ choice and social interaction, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 2011.
43 Bengtsen, pp. 16-17.
companies and their managers. Here the famous quote by Thomas Hoving, late American museum executive and director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, seems particularly fitting: “Art is sexy! Art is money-sexy! Art is money-sexy-social-climbing-fantastic!”

*The desirable object*

That an exclusive bag works as a means for expression of identity, both in regards to the opinion of other people as well as for oneself, should be clear by now. What might be suitable to look further into is the reason why and how this exclusive item gets its status. Bernard Arnault has developed his own formula of success, a strategy that, because of its efficiency, he is trying to project onto other companies in his conglomerate. It consists of sharply defining the brand’s DNA, finding a designer who is able to express this in relation to the important history of the brand, safeguard top quality, create artificial scarcity, and invest in major publicity stunts.

An example of this that was carried out successfully was the release of the Theda bag some years ago (see appendix XIII for image). It quickly became the it-bag of the season and was seen on numerous celebrities. In the well-thought-out branding strategy of Arnault, this kind of bag, the fashion bag, has a specific function. It is not designed to make money, but to make envy. Because if one does not belong to the lucky few who can get hold of a Theda bag, or perhaps cannot even closely afford one, one might decide to get one of the 180 other standard bags instead. Since they by comparison are much more affordable, it will feel like a bargain. That is the Louis Vuitton formula.

Furthermore, it is possible to detect the same process in the brand’s limited edition art collaborations. In the whole collection there will be both expensive and less expensive pieces, so if ones budget does not allow the most exclusive one, it is possible to settle for, let say, an iPhone case instead, still feeling satisfied in having managed to take part in this narrow collection. In the end, the whole luxury industry is really associated with certain experiences and the feelings attained from inter alia the participation in a restricted group with exclusive ownership of a fashion-bag. The items thus keep their value as collectables.

Another example of how art collaborations may target different buyers and, above all, aim at consumers with a larger amount of cultural capital and knowledge in art, is the collaboration with Richard Prince. Just as with any other art collaboration, some buy the bags

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44 Wu, p. 33.
45 Guyon, pp. 229-236.
46 Ibid.
because they are fun, as this particular collaboration is called the Joke Collection, it consisted of color-splashed bags with printed jokes on them. However, at the end of the runway show, when all the models did the final walk together, Marc Jacobs himself walked last with a bag screening Sponge Bob Squarepants videos (see appendix XIV for image). This was a reference to Prince’s earlier work where he had done a series of pictures of Sponge Bob drawings on the back of bank checks. Reportedly, everyone was surprised and the majority probably did not understand the connection. Yet, those who were familiar with Prince and understood his work got an elite message only they could decipher at the spot. Additionally, the supermodel who opened the runway was Stephanie Seymour, Richard Prince’s muse, another slice of information only known to those with a more extended knowledge of the art sphere and those belonging to it. The people who got a private show and apprehension might buy pieces from the collection for this particular reason. Louis Vuitton hence secures the success of the collaboration by addressing different target groups and making them desire the same items.  

A successful art collaboration, such as the one with Louis Vuitton and Yayoi Kusama or Takashi Murakami, will furthermore create an advantageous referential circle for both parties. An artist-designed bag will refer both to the exclusivity of the fashion brand but also to the unique work of the artist. Subsequently, those who perhaps were not familiar with the work of Yayoi Kusama, but were attracted in the collaboration because of their interest in Louis Vuitton, will think of her each time they see a Kusama for LV bag or maybe even when they see a polka dot pattern. In the same way, participants in the art field might express a greater respect for Louis Vuitton for having shown intellect and knowledge of the arts in collaborating with such a distinguished artist. The two fields will hence give recognition to each other because of a common point of reference, an encounter between fashion and art in the form of various collaborations embodying this meeting.

The achievement of Louis Vuitton’s endeavor to bring the worlds of art and fashion together is surely in part due to the brand’s persistence. They fight to make it seem non-commercial which perhaps is what makes one believe it. The more they believe in this venture, the more do the consumers believe in it too, which, in turn, leads to success. They hence use art to profile the brand in a way that make people respect what they do, creating a desire to be part of it and consequently buy the products. In this way, the endeavor has suddenly become commercial. However, it is from this commerciality that the opportunity of art collaborations

47 Gasparina, p. 47
springs, because without the assets of the business of Louis Vuitton, it would not be possible for the brand to collaborate with world-known artists, operate a high-resource art space and sponsor various art events and aspiring scholars.

A definition of the hybrid

Discussing the art world, Howard Becker writes that all creative work involves the joint activity and contribution of a number of people, a very large number even. He believes that it is through their contribution that the artwork comes to exist and continues to do so. An important aspect of this theory is that any work of art will carry signs of this cooperation, in various forms and of unequal prominence, but they will always be a part of the work. This is very characteristic for Louis Vuitton’s art collaborations. The limited edition collections in particular carry signs of cooperation, in the iconic forms of the bags or in the artists’ unique design. The more indirect approaches do this too, even if less conspicuously, in having been displayed for the first time at Louis Vuitton stores or art spaces, or in carrying the brand’s name as an indication of its economical support.

For Bourdieu, this would rather be displayed in the form of an intersection of the field of art and the field of fashion. One could argue that these collaborations are an attempt to enhance positions in both fields, acquire recognition, obtain more cultural capital and subsequently increase their power within their field, safeguarding their dominant position against rebels wanting to change the field’s structure.48

However, if one were to leave Bourdieu’s theories of the different fields, and instead take a step back and look at it from a broader perspective, that is, as a bigger sphere of cultural or creative production, the premises of the Louis Vuitton art collaboration would change. This collaboration between two separate fields, the field of fashion and the field of art, would seize to be a fusion between two different entities. Instead, it would simply be a creative work developed through the activity made by a large number of contributors. It would be the result of a cooperation, without the need to label it an “art” or “fashion” product. Perhaps the answer lies in the confusion and in the difficulty to label it. It is on the borderline, in the space between two different cultural spheres, being neither one nor the other, but still being part of both.49

48 Bourdieu, pp. 128-129.
49 Bengtsen, p. 22.
Conclusion

This text has discussed and accounted for Louis Vuitton’s relationship with the fine arts and how the brand in these various approaches profiles itself. Through art, a parallel sideline to the commercial fashion production has been made, targeting intellectuals and members of the high culture. In this way, they reach out to different customers, broadening their clientele, increasing sales and gaining influence. Louis Vuitton consequently has much to gain from an association with the fine arts, especially as a luxury brand, strengthening its connotations with exclusiveness, elegance and sophistication. There is a greater aspiration in the fashion world to be associated to the arts, than what it seems to be the other way around. There is for example no trace of Louis Vuitton on the official homepage of Olafur Eliasson.50 The saying “you always want what you can’t have” is the kind of thinking that make these kinds of corporations that sell superfluity to go round. No one really craves what is too easy to get. So if fine art is the ultimate luxury, it must be any luxury goods company’s natural ambition to rise to the same level, creating the ultimate level of desire.51

Whether one then chooses to see it as a juncture between two fields or as a new world made with the collaboration of other worlds, really does not matter, as long as it helps in visualizing and understanding this expanding development of rapprochement between these two spheres of visual culture. Creative designer Marc Jacobs’ importance should however be noted, being the link between the two. He already existed in both spheres when he initiated his journey at Louis Vuitton, and does so to a much greater extent today, possessing a rare understanding of both and functioning as a common point of reference.

Finally, to try to briefly answer the question posed at the beginning of this essay, how does Louis Vuitton use art in profiling the brand and what benefits do they attain by doing so?, the brand uses art both in a direct manner applicable to the merchandise, as well as in indirect manner linking art to the Louis Vuitton name and image, creating goodwill and esteem for the brand. This additionally profiles the brand as intellectual and luxurious, further strengthening the way it wants to be portrayed, facilitating continuous use of what Arnault refers to as the brand’s formula of success, creating desire for the Louis Vuitton products and thusly securing the brands continuous prosperity.

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50 http://www.olafureliasson.net/
51 See appendix XV
Summary

It has come to show that Louis Vuitton’s relationship with the arts is a vast and multidimensional one. Through empirical research four main approaches to art were distinguished: the artist-designed limited edition collection, the commissioned artwork displayed at Louis Vuitton locations, art exhibitions presented at the brand’s own art spaces, and ultimately, art sponsorships. With the variation in form comes the variation in scope, though a constantly present aspect is that of branding. An aspect that of course must always be taken into account when being a brand of important size and influence, especially when the product’s success depends upon it. It has been shown that the buyers of luxury goods purchase partly out of identity-constructional reasons and partly because of the desire that Louis Vuitton builds up for their products through specialized marketing. The enterprise of bringing art and commercial production together has shown to generate a beneficial circle for the brand, creating esteem and desire that make consumers purchase more, which in turn engender authority and further means to expand.

This study has held its focus on the Louis Vuitton brand only, primarily investigating its relationship with the fine arts, what benefits can be drawn from it and how this is done. In order to get a more complete view of the luxury market and the fine arts, it would be fruitful to look at the position of other luxury brands, and ordinary brands, to try to detect their motivation behind a similar approach. It would be equally interesting to look closer on LVMH and the conglomerate’s branding strategy and relationship with the arts as a whole, further comparing fashion houses with other businesses. Unfortunately, the limitations of this essay would not nearly allow a study of that magnitude, but perhaps the demand for it will emerge as the creative spheres grow increasingly friendlier.
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Online sources


**Online journals**


**Digital sources**

Appendix: Illustrations

**V**: Louis Vuitton monogram pattern

![Louis Vuitton monogram pattern](image)

**VI**: Pictures from the Louis Vuitton Core Values Campaign depicting tennis players Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf, former Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev, French actress Catherine Deneuve, and legendary boxer Muhammad Ali.

![Pictures from the Louis Vuitton Core Values Campaign](image)
**VII:** Steven Sprouse x Louis Vuitton Keepall bag.

![Steven Sprouse x Louis Vuitton Keepall bag](image1)

**VIII:** Earlier Louis Vuitton artist collaborations:

![Takashi Murakami x Louis Vuitton](image2)

Takashi Murakami x Louis Vuitton.

![Richard Prince x Louis Vuitton](image3)

Richard Prince x Louis Vuitton.
IX: Selected earlier works by Yayoi Kusama:

*The Visionary Flowers*, 2002.  

*Infinity Mirror Room*, 1965.  


**X:** Yayoi Kusama x Louis Vuitton store windows in Milan: flowers and biomorphic nerves.

**XI:** Mona Lisa ready-made by Marcel Duchamp: *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919.
XII: Selected Louis Vuitton and LVMH sponsorships:

Screenshot showing the Louis Vuitton Cup, the brand’s sponsorship of sailing.

Screenshot from LVMH’s website showing the latest exhibitions sponsored by the conglomerate.
Screenshot from LVMH’s website showing the latest exhibitions sponsored by the conglomerate scrolling down to the next page.

Screenshot from LVMH’s website showing contributions “to the enrichment of major national museum collections” offered by the conglomerate.
Screenshot from LVMH’s website showing the latest restorations sponsored by the conglomerate.

XIII: The Louis Vuitton Theda bag.

Marc Jacobs carrying the bag screening Sponge Bob Squarepants videos at the end of Richard Prince x Louis Vuitton runway show.

XV: The Louis Vuitton virtual “Art Wall”

Screenshot showing part of Louis Vuitton’s “Art Wall” on the brand’s website.
List of Illustrations


Image VIII: Earlier Louis Vuitton artist collaborations:
Image IX: Selected earlier works by Yayoi Kusama:


Image XII: Selected Louis Vuitton and LVMH sponsorships:

The Louis Vuitton Cup, screenshot taken on 5 January 2013 from www.americascup.com/en/events/louis-vuitton-cup;


