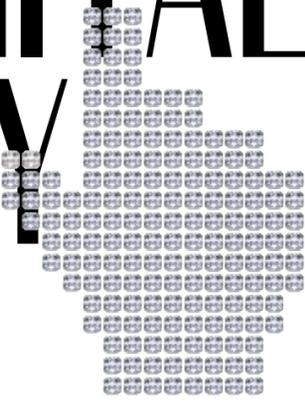


DIGITAL LUXURY



THE TIME HAS NOT YET COME FOR A DIGITAL IDYLL LIKE THE ONE SHARED BY JOAQUIN PHOENIX AND SCARLETT JOHANSSON IN *HER*, BUT IT IS QUITE CLEAR THAT DIGITAL LUXURY HAS BECOME A REALITY.

BY ANAÏS GEORGES DU CLOS

CUSTOMER 2.0: POINTERS AND THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE. Watch sales in shops are plummeting but this cannot be wholly attributed to the world economic crisis. Modes of consumption have evolved in favour of online sales of watches. Why? Because the internet is “a formidable facilitator”. When you know what you are looking for, the Web is the only place where you can instantaneously view photos, videos, technical specs and ratings of the object of your desire. Most importantly, you can get a good idea of its price. This applies to watch lovers who, while they do not buy everything over the Internet, consult the Internet before they make their purchase. And buying online is also fun, fast, and risk free. Risk free? Yes, respond those who highlight the secure payment methods, ease of credit, and the options for returns or exchanges. One thing is sure: watch lovers are buying watches online in greater and greater numbers and paying higher and higher prices. As a young man interviewed for the article said: “On the Internet, if you have the means, you can do your thing anywhere, any time!”

ARE YOU SERIOUS? Yes. Initially, the Internet was the place for good deals but for five years now the average checkout has been growing bigger. Sharing, services and transparency have become the strong suit of online selling, as affirmed by Loïc Bocher, General Manager of Collector Square, a website launched about three years ago specialized

in the sale of used watches. The range deliberately concentrates on iconic models such as the Chanel Première, the Rolex Submariner, or the Patek Philippe Calatrava (average cart €2,000-5,000). “In this price range, customers no longer need to see the piece before buying it. A phone call from us is enough to offer systematic expertise and a range of services, such as the waterproofness test,” explains Bocher. “The more intangible the transaction, the more the substance counts,” explains Fabien Chicha, watch expert who started Iconeek in 2014 in Geneva with his wife Vanessa. “Customers trust us because we provide them with expertise. But clinical photos are no longer enough. They lack glamour.” Once the milestone of “reassurance” has been passed, it is the photos that sell things on the Internet. This is confirmed by Jean Lassaussois, founder of the Les Montres boutique in Paris, who has been involved in e-commerce for five years and continues to invest in it: “Even though we do very little business on the Internet, we have outfitted ourselves with a professional photo studio.” This approach seduced Cartier, who entrusted to him the management of one of the brand’s mini-sites. The quality of the visuals is all the more important since the advertisements retailers put on their websites are often linked to Chrono24 and thus likely to be seen by more than ten million visitors a month! Thanks to its powerful algorithm, the website, purchased in 2009 by e-commerce specialists, has become a global reference in record time

without any investment in marketing. But times change and Tim Stracke, co-founder, recognizes that the marketplace needs to move closer to the aesthetic codes of luxury.

OF MACHINES AND MEN. “The machine is a search engine,” summarizes Geoffroy Ader, auctioneer and e-commerce consultant. Laurent Picciotto, founder of Chronopassion in Paris, specialist in complicated and rare watches, is of the same mind. “We have always done distance selling,” he explains. “We used to send a fax, now we send an e-mail. All the rest is based on trust.” And if there is no *buy now* button on the Chronopassion website, the team is in permanent contact with customers via social media. “We recently received a collector from the Emirates who has nearly 2,000 watches. He follows us on Instagram but had never come to our boutique. When we found out, through geolocation, that he was in Paris, we invited him to come see us.” In the age of connected watches, retail still has a good future ahead of it.

WHAT THE BRANDS THINK ABOUT IT: I LOVE YOU A LITTLE, A LOT, NOT AT ALL! It is interesting to note that Chanel – one of the most coveted brands on the Web – sells cosmetics and accessories on its website but not watches. Are watches an exception? “We are not on the Internet to replace our boutiques, which are the true showcase for the brand and its universe,” explains Frédéric Grangié, President of Watches and Jewellery. This is also the position of many watch brands, who stake more on e-service than on e-commerce. A multichannel approach dominated by the Web-to-store makes it possible to prepare online for a visit to the physical boutique. The approach is different at Hermès, which stands as a pioneer. The brand launched both its website and its online boutique simultaneously in 2001 and has offered a selection of watches since 2008. The strategy echoes that of department stores with a range of differing offerings. Cartier has also sold watches via its e-commerce platform since 2008. But while you “purchase” on the Hermès site, on Cartier’s you “add to shopping bag”, “order by phone”, “contacts ambassador” or “add selection to wishlist”. Hard to beat. The independents have played their cards well, like Max Büsser, founder and director of MB&F. He recently sold a special, limited edition of the LM101 in stainless steel for 52,000 dollars via the Hodinkee site. “The ten pieces sold in five hours and one of the customers paid via Apple Pay!” But the king of digital is Piaget. “E-commerce, I believe in it!” declares Philippe Léopold-Metzger in no uncertain terms. He draws on the experience of the U.S. Neiman Marcus, which was already selling products costing more than a million dollars in its catalogues from the 1980s and '90s, proving the potential of distance selling for high

value-added products. The brand orchestrated a vast digital campaign for the launch of the Piaget Polo S. It began with a subtle teaser in July and culminated in the unveiling of the model in September. Glamor videos shot with the very photogenic Ryan Reynolds, photos that partially revealed the other ambassadors of the collection, virtual reality experiences, photos and descriptions of the models, all channelled through Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter... Everything was designed to create total complicity with the brand’s different customer groups. As for Audemars Piguet, tradition still reigns. “Luxury watches are a journey through time,” explains François-Henry Bennahmias, CEO. “In the age of the disposable, we stand for artisanry stretching back more than 200 years. To transmit this, nothing can take the place of human contact.” Luxury is a dream. Immaterial in its essence, it is perfectly compatible with the digital. If the online experience is on a par with a visit to the boutique, e-commerce should continue to progress. But while it is too early to predict the future, it is high time we stopped considering price to be a disqualifying criterion. As Tim Stracke said: “It is easier to sell a watch for fifty thousand euros, because the more money the customers have, the more relaxed they are about spending it.” HH

Luxury is a cultural notion taking various geometries but sharing a common denominator: the experience of luxury is more important than the object embodying it.

This is the credo of watch brands that have long held that luxury can only be experienced in boutiques (pronounced “salon”) under the care of friendly, doting staff, scientifically dosed lighting and exclusive ambient fragrances... between the hours of 10 AM and 8 PM.

E-commerce has changed things by making luxury available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, complemented by choice, services, interactivity and promotions. But who buys watches over the internet, which watches, and why?

Is traditional commerce doomed to disappear? Certainly not. But the future lies in multichannel distribution. The grand watch brands, champions of communication and service (digital or otherwise) are perfectly equipped to make the most of this development. The experience is the same, it’s the vehicle that changes.