

# The Calculus of Pleasure

**I**F YOU HAVE EVER WONDERED HOW MUCH MORE PLEASURE IS TO BE derived from a handmade luxury object than from a machine-made piece with pretensions to luxury status, I am in a position to tell you. I can even put a figure on it. The order of satisfaction is up to ten times more. Happily you don't have to rely on my say-so. This ratio was calculated back in 1899 by Thorstein Veblen.



Veblen, you will need no reminding, was the philosopher and economist who bequeathed us the term “conspicuous consumption”—one of the many pithy epigrams to be found in his best-known work, “The Theory of the Leisure Class.” Coming as it did at the end of the century that had spawned the theories of Malthus and Darwin, Veblen’s book sees the conspicuous leisure, consumption and wastefulness of the late 19th- and early 20th-century elite as having an evolutionary inevitability about it. However, it is also a satire on the mores of the rich—and it is interesting to see how little has changed in what Veblen termed “pecuniary reputability.” Veblen’s text is short on factual data, but long on opinion, and it is this that has given it its longevity.

He uses the example of a handmade silver spoon to advance his theory on the “pecuniary beauty” of the handmade object: “If a close inspection should show that the supposed hand-wrought spoon were in reality only a very clever imitation of hand-wrought goods, but an imitation so cleverly wrought as to give the same impression of line and surface to any but a minute examination by a trained eye, the utility of the article, including the gratification which the user derives from its contemplation as an object of beauty, would immediately decline by some eighty or ninety per cent, or even more.” So there you are.

Gratification from contemplation is a succinct definition of the appeal of luxury goods; nevertheless it is hard not to see Veblen’s tongue firmly in his bearded cheek. The correlation between happiness and handmade versus machine-made goods is far more complex, as I found on a recent encounter with a delightful young French woman named Céline Rochereau, hard at work in the corner of my local Hermès shop restoring some vintage Kelly bags left by customers for repair.

This September she celebrated 18 years with the company. Until recently, she was based at the Hermès atelier in Paris making Birkin, Plume and Masai bags, creating items coveted by women the world over from a few dozen pieces of leather and some thread. It is people like Rochereau who make luxury-goods companies like Hermès great, and who also confound the superficially satisfying theories of Veblen.

I wanted to meet Rochereau because I needed her to settle not so much an argument as a philosophical debate I was having with the U.K. managing director of Hermès. I had dared to suggest that there was rather more machine stitching in Hermès goods than he would care to admit; I was quick to add that this was by no means a bad thing. Unlike Veblen’s Gilded Age con-

spicuous consumers, I do not mind a bit of machine work from time to time; after all, anyone who is prepared to spend his working life stitching mile after mile of belts would be little better than a machine anyway. But you know what the French are like: I think that he felt I was somehow impugning the good name of not just Hermès but the entire French nation.

Rochereau handed down her verdict with Solomon-like wisdom and admitted that some items, such as the card wallet my friend pulled out of his pocket, were indeed stitched by machine. However, it was not the admission that pleased me so much as the way it was made: unaffected, cheerful, without a vestige of embarrassment. For an artist such as Rochereau, the act of creating, or indeed restoring, an object like a bag that may endure for generations is about more than whether it is stitched by hand or machine.

Machine stitching, she explained to me, uses one piece of thread, while hand stitching at Hermès involves two needles; the threads cross each other and form a knot—something that is apparently not possible to accomplish on a machine. Obviously it was the hand stitching that occupied her most, and she was particularly keen to stress that hand stitching is emotional and sensitive work that requires the whole body, not just the hands.

It is in passing through the hands of people like Rochereau who make such objects, to the generations of owners, and then further generations of Rochereaus who repair them, that luxury items—whether watches, bespoke suits, jewelry, luggage or indeed Veblen’s silver spoon—acquire the patina that gives them their talismanic importance.

At this level, questions as to exactly how much handwork an object contains seem almost clumsy. **The other day furniture maker Viscount Linley invited me to**

**a small lunch he was giving for a British watchmaker named Roger Smith, who crafts a handful of watches a year, inspired by the example of mythical British watchmaker George Daniels. Daniels once explained to him that a handmade watch should look not as if it had been made by hand, but rather as if it had been created. This gnomic and yet expressive utterance has an almost mystical quality to it: I would like to have seen Veblen try to assign percentile value to that.**



**100 PERCENT:** *Yup, it was made by hand*

**Hand stitches at Hermès cross to form a knot ... that is apparently not possible to accomplish on a machine.**