



How craft became luxury's most valuable currency

Amid consumer fatigue, luxury is upping the ante on how it communicates about craftsmanship. How can brands get it right?

By Madeleine Schulz



At the end of May, Bottega Veneta released its first campaign since creative director Matthieu Blazy's departure. From New York to Shanghai, black and white images of hand gestures — forming hearts and handshakes — were plastered across cities, with no identifier but the Bottega logo and classic Intrecciato weave on the sleeves.

Days later, Bottega revealed the faces behind (some of) the hands. Celebrities, writers and designers from Tyler, the Creator to Zadie Smith to Bottega's first-ever design director, Edward Buchanan, featured in the brand's 'Craft is Our Language' campaign. The hands belong to a mix of creative talent and Bottega artisans. It's the first under new creative director Louise Trotter.

"The rollout was designed to mirror the ethos of Bottega Veneta: discretion, depth and distinction without overt branding," a Bottega Veneta spokesperson tells *Vogue Business*. "As the house's emblematic weave functions as a symbol without being a logo, the initial focus on hand gestures allowed us to explore a universal, non-verbal language that echoes this philosophy — a form of expression rooted in craftsmanship and connection." The campaign is about honouring excellence and drawing attention to handmade craft, care and intention, the spokesperson adds.

The pared-back Bottega campaign is in stark contrast to its late-2023 paparazzi campaign — a predecessor to 2024's oversaturation of paps-inspired ads. It's also a departure from luxury's recent obsession with lo-fi advertising. Gucci's latest 'GG Monogram' campaign, starring Emily Ratajkowski, embodies both of these trends. For brands looking to break through the noise, this is where craft — and the humans at the helm — come in.

It's an opportune moment for brands to up the ante on their storytelling about craftsmanship. Consumers are more discerning — and more fatigued — than they have been in a long time, jaded by what they view as unjustified price hikes and ambivalence, or even suspicion about luxury quality. Couple that





with social media-induced ad fatigue, made worse by an onslaught of algorithmically fed, AI-made content, and luxury has some convincing to do.

“In a world that’s gone a bit numb, dubious and algorithmic, craft feels humanist, sensual and true,” says Michael Scanlon, chief creative officer of creative studio Chandelier. “Prices have soared, quality is in question, and so craft and provenance are essentially the way to prove value.”

Fashion critic Osama Chabbi has been waiting for this narrative to pick back up. “Back in the Covid days, scanning the luxury landscape, brands were getting lost in what their values were; what luxury was supposed to be,” he says. Brands shifted from focusing on logo-heavy sneakers and hoodies to pandemic-friendly loungewear, straying further from the craftsmanship that these houses are built upon, he recalls. Now, labels are recognising the need to return to traditional practices — and narratives.

Bottega isn’t alone in this communications push. Loewe has long leaned into the brand’s craftsmanship on social media, posting behind-the-scenes handbag ‘making of’ videos and hosting celebrity-led ‘truth or craft’ challenges. Earlier this month, for the 10-year anniversary of the Puzzle bag, Loewe took this strategy IRL, hosting events from London to Dubai, where artisans demonstrated the making of the bag. Bally’s latest ‘Brand Heritage campaign’ also places emphasis on craft, with different execution: models pose in nothing but underwear and Bally shoes. It’s “to let the shoes speak”, a spokesperson says.

Every brand event that Chabbi has attended over the past year has featured a craftmaking element, he says. Aside from Loewe’s live making of the Puzzle bag, Bottega had a craftsperson showing clients how to execute the Intrecciato weave, while at a Celine boutique opening, an artisan made a Triomphe bag from scratch. Chabbi wonders: “Is craft the joker card for everything luxury now?”

This is where brands need to be discerning. Not *every* brand can — or should — incorporate craft as the backbone of its storytelling, experts flag. Bottega Veneta and Loewe, for instance, are primed for success given their histories of excellent craftsmanship. But those without a sufficient legacy to lean into need to be wary of “craftwashing”, experts caution. Even those with history need to be strategic about when and how they play the craft card.

Changing attitudes

Craft hasn’t always been key to aspirational brand storytelling. Last year, Blazy said in an interview with *The New York Times* that there’s a notion that craft is nostalgic and dusty — which he views as “quite wrong”.

Times have changed fast, experts agree — and they’ve proven Blazy right. Consumers now care more not just about the product quality itself (mainly because they believe this is declining at many brands), but also about the people making said products. From brand employees to the creative directors themselves, those previously behind the scenes are getting in front of the camera. This shift has created an opportunity for brands to centre craft and heritage, as craft increasingly becomes a status symbol in itself, says Katie Devlin, fashion trends editor at trends intelligence firm Stylus. “Luxury brands like Loewe are doing a lot of the legwork to make craft feel appealing and exciting by leading with informative content and playful aesthetics,” she says.

This shift is why Bally opted to lean into its heritage at this moment. “There’s a renewed appreciation for authenticity, quality and storytelling,” says a spokesperson for the brand. “Bally’s deep roots in footwear offer a rich narrative to draw from, and this felt like the right time to reconnect with that heritage and present it through a contemporary lens.”

While a splashy celebrity was once a convincing enough pull, in an era of brand ambassadors aplenty, a star may get a repost, but they won’t necessarily guarantee a purchase. “Clients aren’t as receptive as brands think to the fluff of ‘who’s the celebrity that’s wearing it’,” Chabbi says. “For a client, the cool of it is how it’s made. They want to know how long the piece will hang in their closet.”





One step further

In 2025, craft is good PR. This means the line between storytelling and manipulation is thin and blurred, Chabbi cautions. Though there's value in communicating craft, consumers' fast-rising obsessions risks brands tapping in just for optics' sake. Craftsmanship must be a brand throughline, not just a marketing tool or a seasonal talking point, Devlin says. One behind-the-scenes 'making of' video won't cut it.

This form of marketing needs to centre the people behind the craftsmanship, says sustainable fashion creator and consultant Scott Staniland. "There's the making of a bag — or 'finishing', more like — and then there's the full spectrum of sourcing and the deeper collaborations with garment makers, farmers, or in Hermès's case, a postman," he says. (Kermit Oliver, the only American to design Hermès scarves, worked at the US Postal Service). "These are the stories that will help brands break out from the ASMR-style, crafty, short-form content, just because they know it's going to bang on social media."

That said, this strategy of spotlighting craftspeople does have its limit, Chabbi flags. "Can you put that many people under the spotlight in the name of craft, without confusing the client?" To this end, brands need to pick and choose who to platform, and when. Oliver, for instance, featured in *Texas Monthly* back in 2012, and has made headlines since. Staniland calls Bottega's choice to include Buchanan in its latest campaign "genius". "It's the 'why' we do things this way, alongside the 'how', which is important," Staniland says. It's the individual, human element that can speak to the former.

It's also a return to form for many luxury brands, which, for a while, embraced irreverence, surrealism and internet memes at the expense of grounding ads in reality. In this return to the tangible, brands would do well to carry some of the romance through to their storytelling without sacrificing personality. Marketing around craft should also be fun in 2025, Devlin adds. "It's not enough to just centre the craft narrative anymore. It must be craft at the core, plus other creative elements that spark cultural chatter," she says.

To Devlin, Bally's heritage campaign works because it leans into levity. An unexpected take on craft, the visuals allow the product to speak for itself while reeling in customers by way of the Calvin Klein playbook — only it features models, not celebrities, so the focus is kept on the shoes. "The key to keeping craft-led messaging and product outside of this 'nostalgic and dusty' sentiment is to avoid expecting narratives around craftsmanship, heritage and quality to do all the heavy lifting without shaking up the visual language," Devlin says.

That said, the campaign left Staniland wanting more. He contrasts the images with Bottega Veneta's sound bites of the videos that accompany its 'Craft is Our Language' campaign visuals. "[It] needed more storytelling around the product, show us the models putting the shoes on, how it makes them feel," he says.

Bottega's multi-medium approach shows how brands can build out their world around craft. Alongside the accompanying films, in September, Bottega Veneta will release a book featuring the campaign images, as well as shots of more talent, which will form a "dictionary" of the language, craft and values of the brand through gestures.

Zegna has also nailed this deeper attempt at storytelling. At the brand's recent Dubai show, craft was the focus, says Chabbi, who attended. Beyond the show, 600 attendees (250 of whom were clients) were invited to Villa Zegna, where they were privy to insights from the textiles the clothes were made from to the trees the brand plants in Oasi Zegna. "They're extremely client-centric, and this is what clients are receptive to," Chabbi says. "If a jacket is going to cost \$3,000, they want to know how it's made."

Zegna knows that craft-based storytelling — imbued with insights about its founder's history — is the way to communicate this. "My goal is to increase the desirability of the brand — and my one avenue is telling stories," chief marketing, digital and sustainability officer Edoardo Zegna (one of CEO Gildo





Zegna's two sons), told *Vogue Business* at the launch of the New York edition of Villa Zegna. He added: "My KPI isn't how much they've purchased, it's how much they've bought the story."

Next gen

To date, heritage houses like Zegna and Bottega Veneta are the ones that have capitalised on craft, because they can back up the narrative with facts.

There's room for younger brands to borrow from this language — not to conjure up history where there isn't any, but to place more emphasis on the creation of products, the materials used, the people making them. This crop of brands could benefit even more than heritage houses from speaking up about the craftsmanship behind their products, because they're the ones that lack the legacy to help justify their high prices. Chabbi points to Jacquemus. "I think it would serve him [Simon Porte Jacquemus] well," he says. "At his last show in Paris, I could tell that there was a real improvement in the textiles used for these dresses. I could tell that it was new fabrics. I could tell that the bags were better leather. Maybe some of these brands could do with having an emphasis on craft."

One could imagine the already-savvy Jacquemus social team (which has shared brief glimpses of the atelier) taking cues from Loewe and getting into the nitty-gritty of the brand's product creation. Craft comes hand in hand with longevity. But that doesn't mean younger brands can't start weaving in storytelling about their craftsmanship early on, so they have established narratives to build upon as they progress.

To construct these narratives, brands need craftspeople. The irony behind a lot of the current craft focus is that many of the makers finally getting airtime are probably going to retire in the not-too-distant future, Chabbi says.

To safeguard, brands are introducing programming centred around craftsmanship training. In 2023, Bottega launched its Academy of Craft and Creativity (Accademia Labor et Ingenium), which hires and trains 50 students a year, each of whom are guaranteed a position at Bottega Veneta upon completion. Loewe, too, has the Loewe Foundation Craft Prize, which awards one artisan per year. It's a win-win: brands train and support could-be artisans, while ensuring they're avoiding craftwashing and practicing what they're preaching in their marketing tools.

This is the next step beyond campaigns and socials, Chabbi predicts. "Brands are going to be incubating craft," he says. "It's a good thing for brands. It's a good way for them to be in control, to create new jobs, and to encourage and include more youth."

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