

Three Decades of THE LUXURY LIFESTYLE

# Robb Report

SPECIAL ISSUE

The Icons  
and Innovators  
Who Define  
Excellence

*Celebrating the  
Most Exclusive  
Brands of All Time*

30th  
Anniversary  
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EDITION

JANUARY 2006



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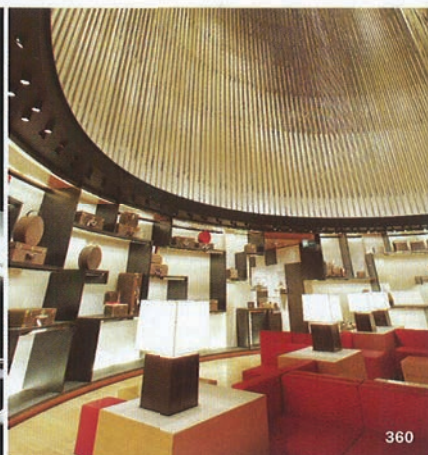


# Robb Report

SPECIAL ISSUE



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# Bon Voyage

*Louis Vuitton masters the art of traveling in style.*

BY RUBEN TOLEDO

TRAVELING AND MAKING ART have much in common: Both require faith that you will get from one point to another, although the real pleasure often comes from connecting the dots along the way. A love of the unknown and trust in yourself are also very useful. These characteristics propelled Louis Vuitton, after he opened his trunk-making business in Paris in 1854, to discover and invent new options and ways of helping people get "there," wherever "there" may be. Creating a new philosophy of travel while charming and seducing an entire era's elite with your work is no small feat.

Was Vuitton a tailor of sculptures? An upholsterer of forms? An architect of patterns? He was all of those and more; he was a modern artist. Modern art is the celebration of design. The pure and noble lines of a well-designed building, airplane, or drawing usually are taken for granted by those of us who are lucky enough to be surrounded by such beautiful things. A piece of Vuitton luggage is a sculpture in that it is not only a finely crafted form, but also, with pattern repetition on its surface, a graphic work of art.

In both art and business, strong doses of practicality and ingenuity are essential to

*At its workshops in Asnières, France (opposite), Louis Vuitton produces custom pieces such as the Sharon Stone Vanity Star hardcase (above), which was made for an Amfar charity auction in 1998.*





Ruben Toledo's *Idea for Spaceship* (left); *Emprise Champs-Élysées* diamond and gold pearl bracelet (right).

attracting others to your way of thinking. Vuitton seemed to understand that if you make people's lives easier and improve their quality and enjoyment of life, they will want to join your club, and millions have joined the Louis Vuitton travel club through the decades. We cannot deny, in this day and age of logo-mania, that there is still a magical equation within that specific pattern created with Vuitton's initials—the world-famous monogram designed in 1896 by Louis' son Georges. These strategic embellishments placed upon masterfully constructed bags, trunks, and other marvelous devices for storing our goodies are not unlike a talisman that helps us fearlessly navigate our crossings.

The collision of industry and art can lead to great things when both sides trust each other. The antenna of art is the highest and the very first to catch a signal of what is coming next. Art is the fearless

pioneer, the brave explorer ready to set sail for the next unknown territory. This is the real purpose of art, to lead and guide us into the "next."

The company that carries on Mr. Vuitton's legacy today is keenly aware that behind those famous LV initials is the soul of an artist. Louis Vuitton, the entity, understands this instinctively, forging collaborations with artists such as myself, Murakami, and Marc Jacobs, who creates the brand's fashion collection.

The leap from luggage to apparel is a natural one. Fashion loves to travel, to change the scenery, while changing costumes frequently along the way. Whether you prefer going incognito behind large, dark sunglasses so as not to be recognized or being packed to the nines with a tower of luggage so as not to be missed, fashion and travel grant the liberating opportunity to transport yourself both physically and mentally.

While fashion's whims may seem fickle

on the surface, visionary designers are quick to recognize and stick with a good thing. Vuitton's connection to the fashion world dates to the company's inception. Charles Worth, the first officially recognized couturier in Paris, was a great friend and contemporary of Mr. Vuitton. Vionnet, Chanel, Dior, Balenciaga, and a host of other fashion luminaries also flocked to Vuitton for assistance with storing and transporting their treasures. These arbiters of taste and innovators of design understood and appreciated the high quality and extreme care that goes into the making of Vuitton products. They intuitively sensed the aura of the LV symbols and understood the timeless quality inherent in something so well made that also had a soul. These are the qualities that any great work of art, or fashion, or architecture must possess, if it is to make a difference in the world and survive the passing of time. The ability to morph with each new generation and evolve into each new era is what defines longevity. One can only dream of what is yet to come from Louis Vuitton: One day, we all may be propelled off into the sunset, riding on our Vuitton luggage. \*

*Ruben Toledo's work has been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the textile museum at the Louvre, and the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Toledo's ongoing relationship with Louis Vuitton began in 1999, when he illustrated its book *New York Carnet de Voyage*, which celebrates New York City. He is married to fashion designer Isabel Toledo.*



# ART HOUSE

PARIS HAS A NEW landmark. On its opening day last October, the newly redesigned Louis Vuitton flagship on the Champs-Élysées drew lines of spectators worthy of the Eiffel Tower. A year after its 150th anniversary, Vuitton celebrates both past and present in a grandly expanded store with a lavishly renovated decor that singularly combines art, architecture, and design in a futuristic vision.

The two men who masterminded the transformation of this stronghold of Gallic savoir faire are American. New York architect Peter Marino is renowned for prestigious retail and residential projects (including Vuitton's U.S. flagship on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue) and was the author of Vuitton's original store that opened on the Champs-Élysées site in 1998. Architect Eric Carlson cofounded the company's architecture department and worked on the innovative Tokyo and Seoul stores before opening his own Paris office, which he named Carbondale after his southern Illinois hometown.

The new store layout takes cues from the Champs-Élysées, the favorite Parisian promenade since the Second Empire in the 19th century. The street's sidewalk paving is echoed with brown and beige limestone interior flooring at the store's entrance, which is framed dramatically by pyramids of scarlet, grained leather Epi trunks. The traffic flows down three spacious terraces that gently descend, much like the avenue slopes downward from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde.

Carlson created a stylish promenade that spirals through the store, transforming four floors into a series of graduated terraces spread over 10 levels that manage to create the impression of a single unified space. The concept, a larger-scale riff on the design of New York's Guggenheim Museum, provides



Crowning the atrium of the Champs-Élysées flagship are 1,900 stainless steel rods.

fluidity of circulation and creates inviting, intimate display spaces.

Preservation laws prohibited the modification of the 1931 landmark Art Deco building's facade, so Carlson devised a metallic monogram "skin" (a curlicued grille modeled on the brand's famous monogram insignia). The grille is principally positioned behind the windows, unifying and identifying the exterior facade as Vuitton. Inside, it serves as an orientation device, demarking particular areas in the store: Porcelain insets in the grille signal women's shoes; wood, titanium, and leather inlays denote men's sections; and ruby-red glass accents the fine jewelry area. Natural daylight floods in through the metal skin from plate glass windows that offer views of the trees and surrounding buildings. "We want you to understand you are in Paris," notes Marino.

The new design more than doubles the previous retail space. For Marino, the massive scale of the project called for "a new way of merchandising, new materials, new excitement," he says. As we walk throughout the store, he points out the imaginative couture details. Flooring may consist of custom designs in white aviana and gray picture stone, or marquetry combinations of precious woods. Dark wenge wood chairs have textured chocolate-colored seats made of custom-crafted strips of leather. "Each one of the strips is cut with a knife and resealed," explains Marino. "When I work in luxury, I don't pick something, I develop things and the company gets a patent on them."

Original works of contemporary art further emphasize the artistic detail of the architecture. Riders on the traveling staircase (Vuittonese for



escalator) that spans the lowest to the highest level are entertained by Tim White-Sobieski's "Alpha," a 65-foot-long video installation comprising 720,000 fiber-optic points that project constantly mutating abstract patterns and colors. "It's one big, very Warholesque happening," says Marino, an alumnus of Andy Warhol's Factory. "We wanted to give the customer an artistic experience, one of 10 million reasons to come back."

Shortcuts through the store are available via elevator or staircases, but all paths lead to the throne room, the soaring glass atrium that houses Vuitton's famed luggage. In a nod to the avenue's Rond Pont fountains, 1,900 stainless steel rods hang from the dome, shimmering with an icelike effect.

From here, a pitch-black elevator whisks you up to the top floor in total darkness. The 20-second trip is actually an art installation called "Lost Senses," which is intended to offer a Zen experience. "I wanted the opposite of the voluptuous, sensuous shop," explains the Danish-born, Berlin-based artist Olafur Eliasson. "I carefully planned an empty space of nothingness, which we all need from time to time." Starting in January, the top floor will house an art gallery.

Ultimately, the store's striking art exhibits distinguish it as much as its progressive architectural design does. When contemporary art collector Marino proposed art as art, not as a product support, it struck a chord with his contemporary art-collecting patron, LVMH (Moët Hennessey Louis Vuitton) chairman Bernard Arnault.

Marino confides that the installation of James Turrell's "First Blush," a beguiling light show of evolving colors, is intended to thank shoppers for visiting. "People smile when they see it," he says. "They seem happy, and that's what I aspire to in creating a shopping experience."

—JEAN BOND RAFFERTY

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866.884.8866 (U.S.), [www.louisvuitton.com](http://www.louisvuitton.com)

## SPECIAL DELIVERIES

LOUIS VUITTON'S FIRST trip was a personal mission. The then-14-year-old, who descended from a family of millers and carpenters, left his hometown of Anchay, in the remote French Jura mountains near the Swiss border, and set off for Paris to make a new life. He spent two years walking the 250-mile route, stopping along the way to earn money by performing woodworking tasks. The experience shaped his life, and travel became his passion and his calling.

By 1859, having achieved success as a trunk maker in Paris, Vuitton prepared to expand his company, which had outgrown its city atelier. He moved his manufacturing operation to nearby Asnières, the quiet rural town located on the banks of the Seine. In the 1870s, he built near the workshop a charming house, which five generations of his descendants inhabited until 1984. The ground floor still retains a residential ambience; its dining room and living room are decorated in Art Nouveau style, with period furnishings and personal touches such as Vuitton family portraits.

The top floor of the residence houses a museum dedicated to luggage. Here, the company displays the travel-oriented collection of Louis' grandson, Gaston-Louis Vuitton. His assemblage of international treasures

includes antique trunks, jewelry boxes, and portable desks—some of which predate Louis Vuitton by centuries. The museum also exhibits some of the company's most prized special-order pieces.

Custom commissions have been a cornerstone at Louis Vuitton since the early days of Louis' career, when Empress Eugénie tapped him to construct her travel accoutrements. The explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza—who in 1883 founded Brazzaville, the capital of the Congo—commissioned a trunk containing a fold-out cot for his African expeditions. Vuitton used zinc in the crafting of the trunk to protect its contents from temperature extremes, sand, rain, and humidity. The interior employed camphor wood to repel insects.

This tradition of special orders continues to thrive in Asnières, where Patrick-Louis Vuitton, a fifth-generation family member, supervises the custom workshop. Tastes have changed since silent-film stars such as Douglas Fairbanks placed orders for toiletry cases replete with an array of crystal bottles and tortoiseshell combs. One celebrity recently commissioned a case that is designed to house an iPod docking station and a collection of 20 iPods. Of course, the department still handles more routine projects, including gigantic watch trunks with watch winders, travel bars appointed with Baccarat crystal, and elaborate wardrobe cases, including one designed to hold 30 shirts, 60 coordinating ties, and an assortment of cuff links.

Nothing is out of the question as long as the request adheres to Vuitton ground rules: "We are in the business of movement," says Patrick-Louis. "Nothing is made by our master craftsmen that cannot be easily transported." Furniture is out of the question. —LAURIE KAHLE

*A special-order case for an iPod docking station.*

