

BEKER: FASHION: LUXE LUST

## **Why women will pay \$25,000 for a 'Botoxed' alligator handbag**

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'Botoxed alligator!' my fashionista friend Mary howled over cocktails recently. "I swear, that's what it was made of!"

I sat dumbfounded as Mary recounted her adventure of being invited up to a penthouse suite in Toronto's swank new Hazelton Hotel to drink Veuve Clicquot and check out a deluxe line of made-to-order Italian handbags that start at a whopping \$25,000 a pop.

Mary took it all in stride though. "I put my hand inside, and it was sooo exciting ... nirvana!"

Suddenly, I understood.

My first designer handbag was a Louis Vuitton purse - a Christmas gift from the man I would eventually marry. It was 1984 and, well aware of its status-symbol significance - and how crazy expensive it was - I relished the bag as a precious bit of exotica from a rarefied world that (at that point) I had no contact with.

As the opulence of the 1980s escalated, such designer bags grew in popularity. By the 1990s, Prada's pricey yet semi-affordable black nylon knapsack created a new entry point to designer goods, becoming the bag of the moment for mavens everywhere. As the millennium approached, celebrities did their bit to help designers promote and sell a wide variety of "it" bags. By 2004, according to a survey done by Coach, the average American woman was buying more than four handbags a year.

The luxury-bag business had gone mass market, and even I, a single, working mom, was guilty of splurging on a Gucci shoulder bag, a Prada bowling bag and a YSL horn-handled tote - all of which served to temporarily lift my spirits while doing major damage to my credit card.

But according to Dana Thomas, author of the recent, hard-hitting *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster*, this proliferation of luxury threw a wrench into the world of high-end labels. She writes that many corporations began cutting corners in order to maximize profits: Some houses started using cheaper materials, outsourcing production to developing nations (while falsely claiming that their goods were being made in Western Europe) and replacing craftsmanship with assembly-line production. The accessibility of chi-chi labels went against the very notion of what these labels traditionally represented: elite exclusivity.

And so, while many fashion fans (or victims, some might say) still covet those brilliantly designed bags from the precious few houses that maintain their lofty standards - Hermès, for example - some of us are beginning to crave something even more unique and unattainable. Ritzy, popular labels don't always cut it any more. They've become too darn common.

My most recent handbag acquisition is from a new Italian company called Camenae. This boldly handsome \$1,500 bag, handcrafted in Tuscany, is large enough to carry all the stuff that gets me through the day, and boasts a sophisticated lock system that enables me to change the strap and easily "personalize" the bag. ("Camenae offers a fresh combination of intellect and beauty in an ageless product with the ability to reinvent itself," the company's website says.)

Camenae is trying to get its bags into North American stores, but retailers have been skeptical about whether a woman would be inclined to spend that much for a bag that doesn't sport a familiar designer name. (You can get the bags online at <http://www.tobi.com>.)

A few lucky Canadians will be able to get their hands on the "Botox" alligator bags, however.

(After doing a bit of research, I discovered that "Botoxed" is a misnomer. An injectable is used, but it's not the wrinkle eraser. The concept was generated by Italian dermatologist-turned-designer Mauro Orietti-Carella, who was inspired to inject the skin of his python and alligator "Zagliani" bags with a silicone solution. The result is a glossy, ultrasupple skin that's as soft as cashmere.)

Nicholas Mellamphy, who is heading up the soon-to-open Hazel boutique in Yorkville - one of only five places in North America where these outré bags will be sold - is confident that these sumptuous Giambattista Valli "statements" will find their customers.

It's too bad more retailers don't get it: The very fact that bags from Camenae and Valli aren't readily recognizable is what gives them added cachet. I can't tell you how many people have stopped me in the past couple of weeks to ask me what kind of bag I was carrying, as though it was a kind of exotic pet, or a mysterious foreign sports car. The allure lies in the obscure label.

I don't agree that luxury has lost its lustre. Not at all. I just believe the nature of what we consider to be truly luxurious in fashion is evolving.

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