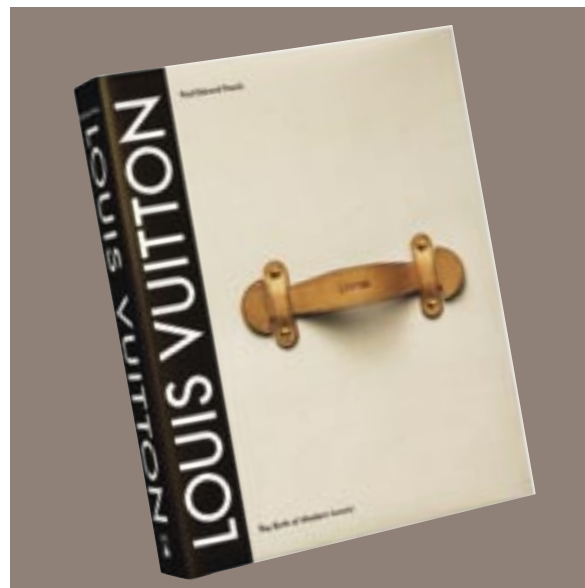


READ

ART TO HANDLE

Art and fashion are next of kin — the Biennale is nothing if not a catwalk. But did you know Degas and Renoir were unknowns before Mr. Vuitton came a knockin'? Liza Monroy reads up on **LV's very artsy history**.



FOR MORE THAN 20 MONTHS, STORIES-HIGH trunks emblazoned with an oh-so-familiar “LV” monogram dwarfed zooming Peugeots and strolling Parisians on the Champs-Élysées. Hidden behind those Goliath-sized suitcases, Louis Vuitton’s flagship store underwent extensive renovations that transformed the Paris outpost into the world’s largest and most forward-thinking. When it finally reopened in October, it included not only a “bag bar” and bookstore, but also an art gallery. It was the latest benchmark in the luxury brand’s evolution, a storied history newly chronicled in the 540-page, heftier-than-your-Vuitton-luggage volume, *The Birth of Modern Luxury*.

With more than 700 lush illustrations and photographs, and text by Paul-Gerard Pasols, the book offers a look behind the Monogram of a brand that has defined and redefined luxury throughout generations. From the original workshop in Asnières to today’s Uma Thurman-centered advertising campaign, no part of the Vuitton story goes untold. But what also emerges in *Modern Luxury*’s pages—and what might explain that art gallery in the Paris flagship—is a recurring and compelling convergence of Louis Vuitton and the avant-garde art world.

It’s difficult now to imagine that Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Degas, and Cézanne were ever considered “rebel artists,” but back in 1874, their work was so revolutionary it was rejected from the salons of the day. Some of the few to recognize the importance of this work, Vuitton founder Louis and his son and successor Georges spearheaded that year’s famous exhibition of the first impressionist painters. It was just the

beginning of Vuitton’s championing of progressive ideas and art. Throughout the 20th century, the company came to relish its role as a patron of the arts, supporting young artists, backing national exhibitions, restoring historic monuments, and, most recently, allowing contemporary artists to let their whimsy run wild with the Monogram.

Playing with the Monogram has a long, eclectic history. Salvador Dalí was so fascinated by the symbol he incorporated it into a series of Daligrams in the 1960s. Three decades later, when Marc Jacobs was brought in as the new artistic director to reinvigorate the sluggish and increasingly conservative brand, he convinced the company to embrace what Jacobs calls “total respect and healthy disrespect” for the Monogram, asking ground-breaking contemporary artists and designers to create ironic re-interpretations of it, much like Dalí. “Drawing graffiti on the Monogram was going as far as Duchamp did when he defaced the ‘Mona Lisa,’” Jacobs says in *Modern Luxury*, comparing artist Stephen Sprouse’s limited edition bag to the 1919 canvas of the “Mona Lisa” with a mustache. Japanese artist Takashi Murakami and English illustrator Julie Verhoeven’s whimsical Monogram designs have yielded hundreds of millions of dollars in sales—and a newly found, young, hip client base.

It’s no wonder, then, that for almost two years, giant LV-stamped luggage became the must-see street art exhibit in Paris, and that now the store’s gallery is championing emerging talent like Tim White-Sobieski. After all, in the city of the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, and the “Mona Lisa,” there’s always room for another masterpiece.