



# THE RIGHT BALANCE: LUXURY RETAIL

Dr. Valerie Wilson Trower explores luxury retail, highlighting key retailers offering the right balance of luxurious interiors, VM and customer service.

Luxury in visual merchandising and retail is fugitive: it is no longer to be found in many of the premium stores in which it might be expected to reside. Instead, vestiges of real luxury remain in locations which have not been refitted with faux and durable surfaces, or the patina of age destroyed by ruthless store refitting.

For this reason, Prada's delicate wallpaper-clad stores with Chinese screens are luxurious. Most frequently it is the quality and finish of wooden surfaces that let down the impression of luxury. A little too light: a little too uniform: a little too pink-toned. Woods betray intentions unless in expert hands and often speak sadly only of aspirational brand positioning. Waterstones in Piccadilly - the former Simpson's department store - with its lovely curving, non-reflecting windows, beautifully enshrines luxury in its much-loved, worn, travertine marble staircase and parquet floors. Of new examples, Valentino's marble and wood are good.

Luxury in VM is something of an oxymoron. By its nature, VM is ephemeral, and many of the tropes of retail luxury embody the reassuring solidity of quality and permanence in wood, marble and metal finishes. The two are hard to reconcile. However, the fleeting element of luxury VM can be magnificently conveyed in the use of fresh flowers, not only inside but also outside the store, as at Emma Hope during Chelsea Flower Show or Sotheby's, conveying abundance and largesse, and cleverly making use of compelling faux flowers mixed with the real in order to prolong the display.

The heirloom, heritage quality of traditional bespoke retail interiors, be it Ede & Ravenscroft's Georgian, Grade II listed wall fixture, or Hatchards' seemingly unchanging permanence, are sometimes the result of coincidence.

James Smith & Sons' heritage umbrella retail interior is due to previous generations' parsimony, frugally refusing to spend on



store fitting, and accruing merchandise fixtures still in use. As a result, the store - perfectly situated between Covent Garden and the British Museum - has immense appeal, appearing in every tourist guidebook to London with commendable sales results. Like Hatchards, Daunts is a pleasurable experience, the jouissance of reading enshrined in the stores, but in comparison, not replicated in the giant, new, purpose-built Asian Eslite bookstores.

Paul Smith is to be honoured for his early recycling of a pharmacy for the Floral Street store, but here the charming patina >

**Main:** Fortnum & Mason's 'Every Cup Tells A Story' campaign earlier this year.

**Above:** Prada's delicate wallpaper-clad stores with Chinese screens ooze luxury.

Top: Waterstones in Piccadilly beautifully enshrines luxury in its much-loved, worn, travertine marble staircase and parquet floors. Middle: Ede & Ravenscroft's Georgian listed wall fixture. Bottom: Emma Hope during Chelsea Flower Show.

of age has been concealed under a unifying dark stain.

New and beautiful luxury retail interiors are to be found in some of the nicest home stores, including Heals, Scandium, Franz Hansen and David Linley's Burlington Arcade store where the original floor has been retained but re-stained: the wafer-thin display shelves appear to float on the wall and the lighting has a comfortable, domestic-lux level. A lovely touch is the full-size ruler, wall-mounted adjacent to the door, for measuring the height of junior customers.

This neatly brings me to my next point: luxury VM embodies humour. The use of humour, apart from suggesting that the VM professionals concerned enjoy their jobs and that the brand is inherently nice, also suggests that staff have sufficient reflective time to devise the small, gentle VM jokes that enliven customers' worlds. Remember John Lewis' joyous Christmas penguin, blind-folded by a pair of underpants on its head, about to step off the top of a washing machine? John Lewis and Chameleon, which devised the concept and installed the Oxford Street windows, successfully conveyed a generosity, besides evoking the classic cartoon humour comprehensible to all ages and cultures.

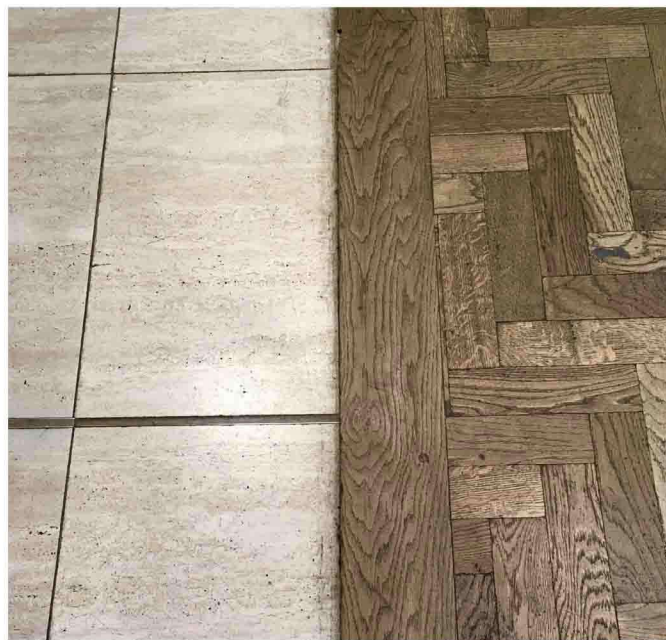
Luxury VM, as distinct from store fitting relies partly on classic VM display skills, often labour-intensive (as in paper art or Fortnum & Mason's recent tea windows). Islington home, toy, and stationery store, After Noah beautifully embodies these, delightfully combining the delicate colours of quality merchandise to allow the customer a pleasurable serendipity. Metaphorically, the store is akin to reading French novelist Proust, rather than the alphabet primer-experience that many multi-brands offer.

That said, Zara with a retail policy of a pleasant prime location, combined with clean and attractively-lit stores, does this very well, and in an emerging retail landscape, such as Manila for example, this is outstandingly appealing. In a mature retail environment, say, London's Bond Street, it is not so effective. In comparison, Massimo Dutti with its engaging strategy of emulating a classic, South of France boutique complete with checkerboard marble tiles floor, freestanding dining tables laden with neatly folded merchandise, and effective spotlighting, is beguiling, especially in non-mall environments, and succeeds in surprising and delighting the customer with its unexpectedly reasonable prices.

Proving that new and shiny, and luxury retail are not mutually incompatible, the elevator in the midst of Watches of Switzerland's helical staircase is a truly luxury experience. Moving totally smoothly and silently, its glass walls reveal the en-wrapping, ribbed-metal staircase walls above pale, wooden staircase treads, and its true luxury: a completely silent and slightly unnecessary digital clock.

A critically important element of luxury is, of course, satisfying customer wants, and stores which combine a broad range of merchandise with excellent service must also be included. Kitchen equipment and hardware stores, including Mottram's in Tunbridge Wells, and David Penton in Marylebone Lane, are wonderful examples. As in After Noah, the visual and tactile pleasures in touching and examining merchandise, assisted by an informed sales assistant, is truly a luxury in a retail world where browsing in sparsely-stocked premium boutiques is disappointing and almost forbidden.

That said, sometimes space itself can be a luxury. In densely-packed urban cities, expansive retail space conveys a generosity on the part of the brand, but this is very specific and contextualised. Hong Kong premium multi-brand, Joyce long had a full-size,



black-polished dining table completely stacked with part-melted and lit church candles - beeswax not tacky paraffin tea-lamps - a few alight at any one time (to have lit them all would certainly have been a fire risk). The indulgence and beneficence this suggested in a central location where real estate prices were, and are, horrendous, was almost philanthropic, offering its customers a simple spectacle that most customers would be unable to replicate for themselves at home.

To conclude, the modernist design credo, 'truth to materials,' and 'form follows function' are critical to luxury VM and retail interiors, however, architect Mies Van der Rohe's claim 'less is more' does not follow. Just as new crystal chandeliers, bevel-edged mirrors, dull Chinese marble and chrome are not luxury, sometimes, 'less' is just less. And, is this important? Yes, it is critical to distinctively and congruently building the retail brand. **RF**