Nest Panelists Share Insights on Evolution of Luxury Goods, Craftsmanship

Panelists offered insights on the evolution of craftsmanship in the luxury sector.

By Tracey Greenstein on December 14, 2017
Returning fashion luxury to its artisan roots was one of the key themes during a panel session at nonprofit Nest’s Third Annual Handworker Leadership Summit last week at the United Nations.

During “Fashion’s New Value System: Redefining Luxury Through the Lenses of Craftsmanship and Authenticity,” panelists offered insights on the evolution of craftsmanship in the luxury sector. The panel was moderated by Steven Kolb, the president and chief executive officer of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, and included Simone Cipriani, the head and founder of the Ethical Fashion Initiative, and Burak Cakmak, the dean of fashion at The New School’s Parsons School of Design.

The panelists acknowledged an increased interest in authenticity, heritage and social responsibility among consumers. Cipriani said that carefully crafted authentic goods were “what fashion used to be” prior to mass production, standardization of labor, compression of costs and “big” marketing strategies. And preceding standardization, luxury brands were full of artisans, according to Cipriani. “Consumers were able to recognize the authenticity and exclusivity of the product” and “[they] are going to rediscover [authenticity] and value [craftsmanship] again.” He added, “You have to know how things are made and you have to know that people [will] be paid fairly.” Cipriani’s Ethical Fashion Initiative works with artisans in Haiti, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali, Kenya, Ethiopia, the West Bank and Kenya.

Cakmak noted that in recent years, students at Parsons have expressed greater interest in transparency throughout the design process. “The role of a designer is not anymore just to create a collection, but to think about how to create a system and a business model that addresses the needs of the future.” He added, “Whatever the reason is that brands tap into those cultural elements, they have proven that there is consumer interest in that culture and what they offer,” and “there is a chance to turn this tide around and make the artisans the face of this creation and direct access to consumer. So if there is a way to enable all of those cultural elements to be directly produced and provided to an end consumer that recognizes the contributions of that community, maybe this conservation about cultural appropriation will disappear and it will be about celebrating what that culture has offered to the rest of the world.”
And the use of more modern technologies in design can be used in tandem with handcrafting techniques to accelerate design processes. Cakmak said that “In working with young talent and young designers, we are trying to bring the craft and art element together with the technology because we recognize that there is a place for all of the different approaches.” Automation is not necessarily a bad thing for products, but it can highlight the value of craft. Parsons has fully automated sewing machines and CAD product design, verses designers that leverage the old traditional skills to create unique products. “There’s an appreciation for both from the consumer side as well as the designer side.”

Couturier and textile artist Yoshiyuki Minami, the founder of New York-based fashion brand Manonik, told WWD, “Our recent economic growth and technological advancements have dismantled the culture of handcrafting that used to be the foundation of our economy. As a society, we’ve automated and simplified much of the production processes for efficiency and profit maximization, and as a result, the art and knowledge of handcrafting have become scarce. This scarcity is the base of the evolution [toward the resurgence of handcrafting].”

Manonik said that over time, consumers became dissatisfied with mass-produced products that lacked authenticity. “[Consumers’ dissatisfaction] coincided with the collective movement by a small group of people who took the initiative to learn and preserve the dying art of handcrafting. This collective and conscious effort has brought the appreciation for handcrafting to the general public, and handcrafted apparel and accessories were a solution to their dissatisfaction.”