

form International Issue 01

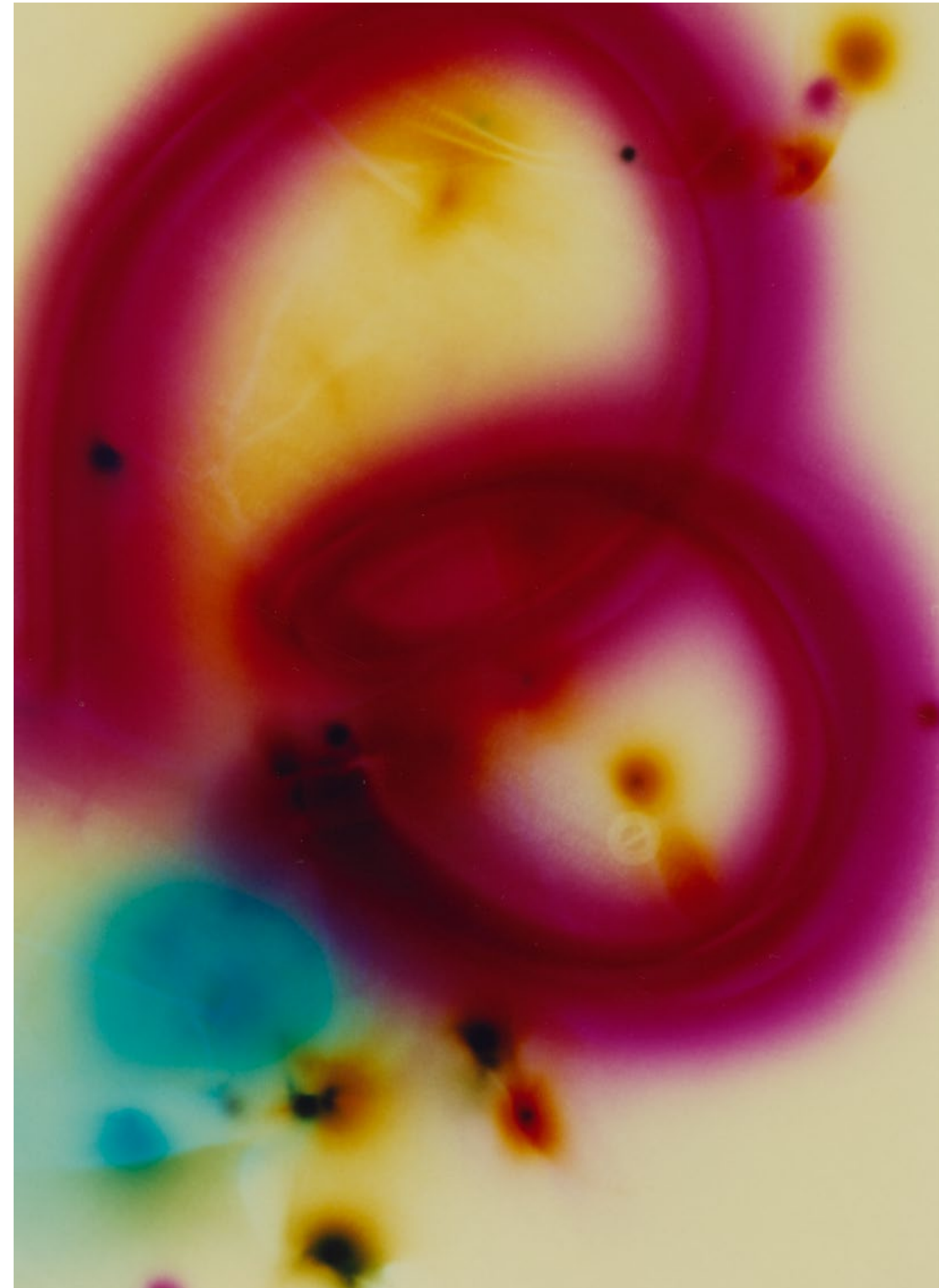
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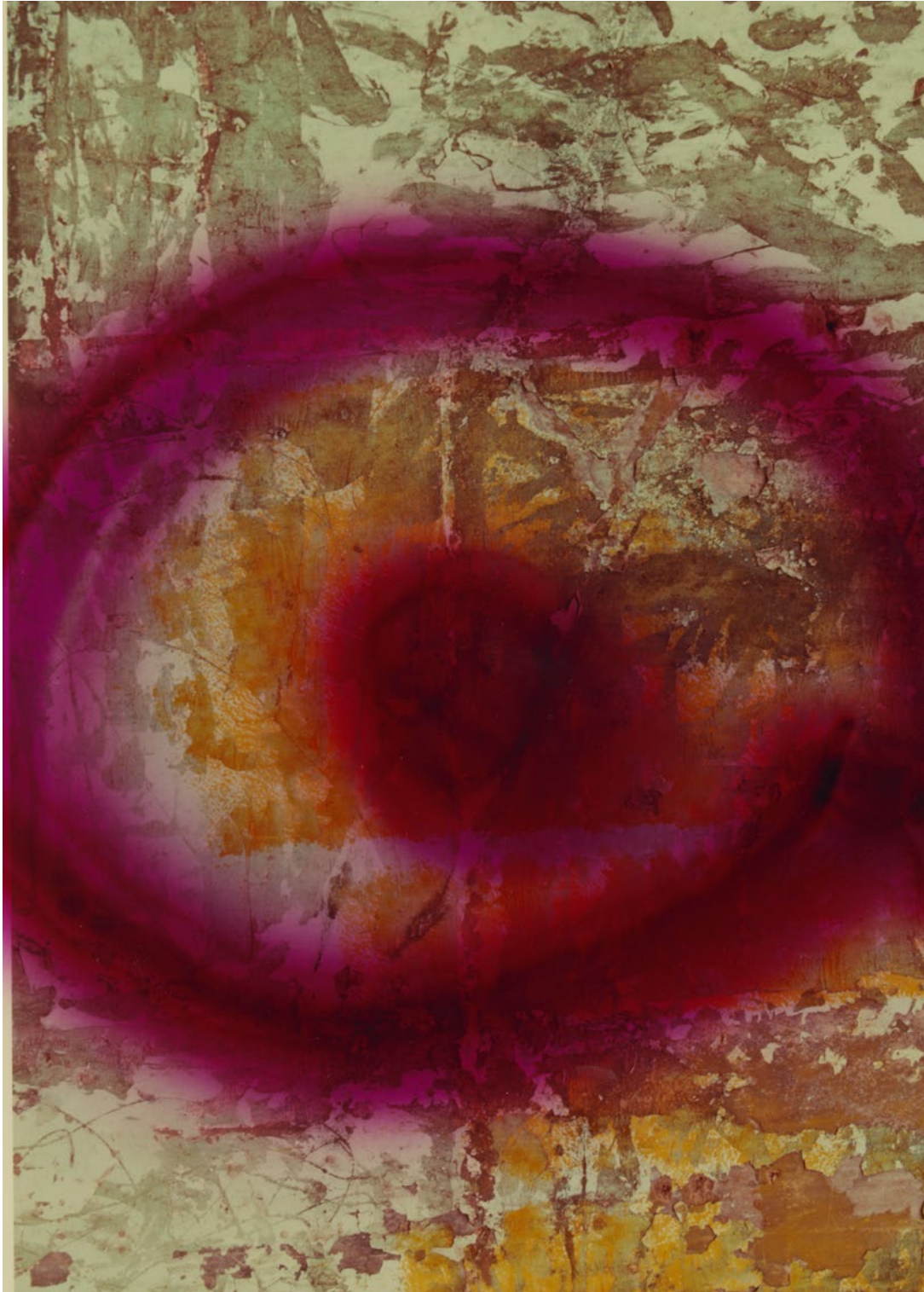
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First More, Then Less

What is luxury? A hot shower?
A television? The feeling that you
belong to a culture? And is less
really more, as they say in design?
Designer Poonam Choudhry grew

up in India and Germany. In a
personal essay, she reflects on what
each country's version of luxury
means to her.





My perspective began to shift when I came to Germany as a four-year-old in the 1960s. I had spent my early childhood in India and I immediately noticed the differences in colour between the two countries. Everything in Germany seemed so quiet and empty to me. We regularly travelled to India to visit family. On arrival, we were greeted by a wave of noise: the traffic with its countless rickshaws, bicycles, honking cars, and so many people selling their wares in between them.

In India, we lived in New Delhi with my uncle, in the house that my grandparents had received from the state as compensation for their land and their previous home in Bahawalpur after the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent into the independent states of India and Pakistan. Hindus left the newly formed Pakistan, and conversely, Muslims left the new India. I still remember the house today. My uncle lived in a two-room flat on the top floor. In summer we set up charpais, traditional Indian bedsteads on the balcony, which was as big as both rooms. It was possible to sleep under the open sky there.

In Germany, luxury to us meant getting a black-and-white TV set. "Maya the Bee" was the first animated series I watched, riveted. Luxury to us as an Indian family was being able to borrow one of those big, heavy VCRs to watch an Indian film on VHS. The tape was old, and we could barely make out the images, but we could hear everything in Hindi and, above all, sing along with the songs – that was a piece of home. For me, home is a piece of luxury. To feel that you belong to a culture and are able to live out your own identity is a gift.

In India, I realised that it was a luxury to have hot water from the tap, to be able to turn on the shower and have hot water come out immediately, as was standard in Germany. In the neighbourhood where my aunt lived with her sons in New Delhi, tap water was only available between five and six in the morning. It would be filled into buckets so as to have water throughout the day. The electricity goes out for a few hours in Delhi every now and then. I get a strange feeling when I think about what it might be like in Germany with gas in the winters ahead. But I know that you can live with less. Luxury mutates into the ordinary when a lot of people can afford it. For those who don't have much, it still remains luxurious. Like when having a shower became common in India. Mind you, I'm comparing middle classes here. The Western gaze often makes the mistake of comparing the lower class with the middle class.

To me, an enduring luxury in India is handicrafts. Having a dress or a suit custom-made is not quite as affordable nowadays, but it's still within reach for the middle class on special occasions. When visiting sari shops as a child, I was fascinated by the range of colours and the variety of fabrics. That feeling remains still today. When textiles are spread out in front of me, I feel like a princess.

Opulence and Asceticism

During my textile design studies at the Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design in the 1990s, where I learnt about European art history, and years later while grappling with the discourse on Adolf Loos and ornamentation, I brought back from my travels to India miniature and landscape pictures painted on paper, as well as handmade textiles decorated with ornaments and designed in magnificent colours. The textile company that my father founded in Stuttgart also imported handmade objects such as wooden bowls with inlays and brass figures. The cultural attachment to handicrafts is one of India's strengths, and is duly promoted by the national Crafts Council.

In Germany, I have sadly seen the demise of many textile companies that were filled with know-how and potential, such as the Pausa company in Mössingen, for which I once worked. "Made in Europe" has become a luxury for the textile industry as the pursuit of cheapness has become the norm. A quote from Abbé Coyer comes to mind: "Luxury is like fire in that it can warm as well as consume. If on the one hand it destroys rich houses, it keeps our manufacturers alive on the other. It devours the squanderer's fortune, but it also feeds our workers."

Opulence and lavish symbolism unite Germany and India. In India, the Maharajas lived decadently in their palaces with splendid fabrics and bright colours. But asceticism and renunciation also have their roots in the emergence of Buddhism in India. Renunciation in order to attain higher inspiration can be a cultural asset. In India, ostentation and modesty run side by side as a matter of course. Incidentally, India and Germany share a common history in the development of design. The first architecture and design college, the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, which came into being in 1961, was staffed by teachers who had studied at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, where they had become acquainted with the Bauhaus philosophy. The first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was keen to introduce Western aesthetics to India

to enable a modern Indian identity and a design-embracing future. From a European perspective, it's also often overlooked that artists such as Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee were inspired by Indian spiritual philosophies. Itten drew on the Mazdaznan movement, whose founder Otto Hanisch combined Indian cultural heritage with crude nationalist and racist theories.

The Time of Chauffeurs

Since then, the Western design mantra "less is more" has arrived in India. Those who live modern, luxurious lives furnish themselves with fewer but higher-quality objects. Here, cultural heritage is incorporated in the form of traditionally inspired textiles combined with modern furnishings. The Arts and Crafts movement never disappeared in India. Art and craft were never thought of or practised separately. The early aspiration of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius to "realise a new unity of art and craft", on the other hand, has not been carried forward in Europe. In Germany, arts and crafts are ridiculed, and a fusion of the two tends to be derided as kitsch. In India, the formal language of traditional patterns, interpreted in a modern way, is combined with contemporary design. An aspect of cultural identity remains attached to form.

One example is fashion designer Payal Khandwala, who founded his label in Mumbai in 2012. Architectural draping and hand-woven fabrics make up his collection; a symbiosis between East and West. Designer Andrea Noronha has also developed her own Western-Eastern design language. Her "Glimmerfly" and "Bo" lamps reveal her playful mastery of bamboo as a material. India's luxury market is one of the fastest growing. From just under six billion dollars in sales in 2021, the 2022 calendar year is predicted to have reached seven and a half to eight and a half billion, an increase of 27 to 43 percent.

Luxury brands that manufacture in Asia and IT outsourcing have both helped to increase India's wealth. The middle class has grown enormously in the process – as have people's aspirations along with it. Travel has gone from a luxury to a normality. Premium resorts are springing up everywhere. Architects from Mumbai are building holiday and weekend homes for themselves and their clients in the coastal town of Alibag. I've noticed that the nouveau riche in India flaunt their wealth. Those who have something like to show it. Big cars push their way through the Greater Kailash Market, one

of the most charming shopping districts in New Delhi. Chauffeurs look for a parking space, then remain in the car while their passengers go shopping. Malls have become the place to be. As you walk in, you no longer know which city you're in. It's all so slick and interchangeable. And yet there are some things that distinguish these spaces from their Western counterparts: a mall in New Delhi, for example, has a temple and a museum integrated into it.

Footfall in stores themselves has also grown, of course. Reliance Brands Limited (RBL), India's largest player in the luxury segment, has partnered with over 60 luxury labels. In 2019, RBL launched The White Crow, a multi-brand concept store for shoppers in tier-2 cities who have to travel to tier-1 cities to shop – the peak of luxury in India. To what excess this will all lead remains to be seen.

What Really Matters

In Germany, the idea of luxury is also changing. Handcrafted coffee and premium wellness services are emblematic of a new kind of consumption that's not available to everyone. It's no longer about big cars and sparkling jewellery – sustainability is now a key marketing claim. Luxury can be distinguished into two types: hardware and software. The first simply denotes branded goods that convey a certain status. The second is described by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who in 1996 wrote about an evolution in luxury that would see abstract goods take the place of objects. The things that matter can't be purchased duty free: time, attention, space, tranquillity, environment, safety.

Time is definitely a luxury in India. The journey from home to work can take up to an hour and a half – one way. Work-life balance is accordingly becoming a valuable commodity, as workdays get longer, workloads get heavier, and constant reachability becomes a given. I wonder if people in Germany perceive their free time as a luxury. On top of that, digital media has become the killer of free time the world over. Yet – and this also applies to India – family gatherings, community, and spirituality all exist alongside the internet. Meanwhile, space is becoming scarcer and more expensive everywhere, especially in metropolises. Rents in Mumbai are now higher than in Stuttgart or Munich. Tranquillity, by contrast, has never really existed in cities anyway. Indians find their peace on the way home, in temples – where they pause for a moment. Recent years have seen the emergence of superlative examples of architecture and interiors that take





this necessary balance into account. What always fascinates me about India is the juxtaposition of spiritual rituals and consumption. The temple next to the mall exemplifies this. Preserving the environment is one of the biggest challenges facing Germany and India alike. While in Germany, forests and meadows are still within relative reach for city dwellers, in India such pleasures require several hours' travel – and are generally only accessible by car. India has always fought pollution, but it's ultimately a fight against time.

Security has never existed in India. In my view, it's one of the West's greatest achievements, and one which India is still working hard to achieve. India's population has always been threatened by natural disasters, poverty, and other crises. This has led to helplessness, but also resilience, serenity, and greater resourcefulness. Yet I see another "software" luxury: freedom. We're living in a time when democracies are becoming scarce, although freedom should be a given. If luxury is defined as something reserved for the few, we're at the point where freedom is becoming a luxury. Freedom of the press, which the country has long held dear, is on its way out – or so I am told by Indians.

Luxury Criteria

Personal definitions of luxury depend on individual perspectives and experiences. They depend on the country you live in, the cultures you grew up in, and your profession. We designers can help preserve the luxury of resources and find solutions by implementing the notion of "less is more" in our design of products, spaces, and services. It is, however, a privilege to hold that having less is better. This logic is afforded to those who already do, or can have enough. Those who don't yet try to have more first. They too want to feel and experience the touch of luxury. Can they be blamed for this desire?

From this perspective, perhaps the real work consists of shifting the criteria for luxury away from pure consumption. I plead for empathy, and for an understanding of life's many realities, so that we can better appreciate the meaning of the previously mentioned "software" luxuries such as time, attention, and freedom. The pursuit of luxury in all its forms often arises from unconscious and conscious responses to advertising. Through them, brands convey to us that we need products or services to make us feel better. True luxury is when you have the time to think about what you really need. Deceleration is a luxury that only the wealthy can afford.

But it is just as essential to focus on aesthetics and beauty as criteria for luxury, because people need beautiful things to feel good.

When you grow up between two worlds, you're challenged to formulate your own identity. In Germany, my Indian heritage was part of my charm; in India, people perceived my European influences. When you define how you can unite both worlds on your own terms, and proudly carry them with you, unimagined possibilities open up. And aren't possibilities also a form of luxury?

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