

**In the Palm of Your Hand....**

By Fiona Mackay

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Luxury fashion houses are adapting to the current mania for smartphone applications.

There was a time, not all that long ago, when luxury fashion was found only in a magazine's glossy pages or a trip to Avenue Montaigne, Bond Street and the like.

Today access to those same kinds of beautiful images or exclusive items is as easy as the click of a mouse in free applications that can be downloaded to a smartphone: The worlds of Dior and D&G in the palm of your hand.

"The truth is that the app, and new media in general, are today presenting us with a new reality, and we are working within that reality," said Patrizio di Marco, chief executive of Gucci, a brand that has produced a popular one. "But this is nothing to fear. Luxury and technology can live together very well."

This embrace of technology by traditional luxury fashion houses is a bit of a surprise, considering the digging in of stilettos that went on around the millennium.

At that time, Web sites, especially those with e-commerce functions, were still considered a bit declass  by most of Paris and Milan.

And while there still may be only a few dozen fashion applications among the 150,000 in the iTunes store, a search does turn up true luxury heavyweights like Chanel, Van Cleef & Arpels, Dolce & Gabbana, and Fendi.

Van Cleef & Arpel's "Une Journ e   Paris" guides users through a poetic discovery of Paris. Ralph Lauren offers an application-exclusive "Backstage Pass" photo essay, beautifully shot in black and white.

But it is Gucci's application, with its multidimensional, interactive content that is really dispelling the myth of traditional luxury brands as technophobes.

Designed to be an "intersection of fashion, technology, music and lifestyle," the application makes wide use of the iPhone's functionality, so that "users can not just learn about the House of Gucci but also creatively interact with it and be inspired by it," Mr. di Marco said.

It was introduced in October to coincide with the Gucci Icon-Temporary project, a sneaker line created in collaboration with the musician Mark Ronson and sold exclusively through a pop-up store that started in New York, moved to Miami, is planned for London in April and Tokyo later in the spring.

In addition to videos of the stores, a call-to-buy feature and travel recommendations, users can create their own music through "Gucci Beats," with drums, loops, beats and vocals compiled by Mr. Ronson.

A completed song can be played on a virtual turntable or forwarded to friends on Facebook.

Since its introduction five months ago, the application has been downloaded more than 440,000 times (an average of 4,000 times a day) and content updates have been downloaded almost as many times.

“We view this new media as a way of making luxury younger,” Mr. di Marco said. “The technology is allowing us to build new relationships and to speak on more intimate and direct terms. This is very empowering for a luxury brand, especially when you are disciplined in managing it according to your brand values.”

The application also is a brand response to consumer curiosity about Frida Giannini, Gucci’s creative director. Ms. Giannini was said to be deeply involved in the application’s design, and its Little Black Book of hotel, restaurant and store recommendations around the world reflects her taste.

(Ms. Giannini’s Facebook page had to be removed last year because of recurring “identity theft” and an unmanageable number of “friends” — “It is a clear sign of how much people want to get in touch with her,” Mr. di Marco said.)

“At the moment there is a very high demand, especially for iPhone apps. It’s almost like a land grab,” said Michael von Roeder, chief operating officer of the Berlin agency Iconmobile, which lists Gucci as one of its clients but would not specify its work for the brand.

Mr. von Roeder stressed that luxury houses, which are heavily invested in their brand identities and traditions, should not rush into applications.

“You need to have a full mobile strategy before you create an app,” Mr. von Roeder said. “Don’t just throw something out there and say ‘OK, now we are mobile.’ You have to develop a strategy first, and an app is just one part of this.”

Lucian James, founder of Agenda Inc., a luxury brands consulting agency based in Paris, noted that traditional fashion houses are still only experimenting with new media.

“The mind-set is a big shift from what luxury brands are used to,” he said. “They have hundreds of years of proven success on the ability to create meaning and deliver it through highly formal, socially approved, and traditional media.”

He added, “It’s too early to see whether this is part of a strategic push to really innovate in the digital space, or just a more tactical response to the excitement that luxury brands are currently feeling over all things digital.”

When talking fashion, applications can have another very important use: shopping.

As with Internet shopping a decade ago, it is the online innovators Yoox and Net-a-Porter that have set the standard in Europe for buying designer fashion using mobile technology.

Yoox's "Style Gift Guide" is a playful shopping application available free from the iTunes store, which was introduced shortly before Christmas. Users specify who they are shopping for and identify the occasions, and the application then suggests gifts and handles purchases.

Rather than fading away after Christmas, "purchases on the Yoox application are growing a little every week," said Federico Marchetti, the founder of Yoox. And, "the average order value is very similar to that on Yoox.com — around €170, or about \$230 — which means that it is not true, the stereotype, that through the iPhone you only buy things that are less expensive because it is faster."

He also noted that someone using the application recently bought a €3,600 Emilio Pucci jacket.

The guide was developed by Yoox Group's research and development and new devices team, headed by Fabio Cesari — the same team that is responsible for the online stores of 17 fashion brands, including Marni, Roberto Cavalli and Moschino.

According to Mr. Marchetti, there are plans to develop applications for a few of these luxury brands that will allow for shopping.

Most recently, the British designer Henry Holland bypassed the usual six-month delay between runway and retail, selling T-shirts straight off the London Fashion Week catwalk through his BlackBerry application.

Mr. Holland's signature slogan T-shirts became available in limited edition batches of 50 from the moment the first model hit the House of Holland runway on Feb. 20 — making it one show where it was not rude to be BlackBerry gazing even in the front row.

Over the course of the Saturday afternoon that the show took place, 60 T-shirts were purchased and, in the future, more "easy-to-sell accessories and jersey pieces" will be available through the application, Mr. Holland said.