

LUXURY

Louis Vuitton opens Canada's first 'Maison'

Vancouver's character makes it a natural choice, VP says

BY KATE MACLENNAN

At the Spring 2011 Louis Vuitton ready-to-wear fashion show in Paris, guests arrived to find a single piece of paper on each chair, imparting a quote from literary theorist Susan Sontag: "The relation between boredom and camp taste cannot be overestimated," it said. Neither, apparently, can the relation between a world-wide economic woes and the determined and spectacular trajectory of a luxury label — arguably *the* luxury label. Or so Vancouverites discovered when, a week ago, the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver quietly became home to Canada's first Louis Vuitton "Maison."

The Maison, at 10,000 square feet, (double the space's former size) is no longer just a boutique, but a fashionable mark of distinction we share with only 11 other cities worldwide, including London, whose May Maison opening bash attracted the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow, Thandie Newton and Kirsten Dunst.

It is anyone's guess which celebrities will appear at Wednesday night's private opening soirée downtown. The affair will officially throw open the doors to two floors of unabashed luxury including the label's entire ready-to-wear collection, designed by U.S. fashion legend Marc Jacobs — available for the first time in Vancouver.

Louis Vuitton has occupied the space at the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver for 14 years, and from Burrard Street the evolution that's occurred inside doesn't reach out and hit you with a monogrammed handbag. Changes to the exterior of the historical hotel weren't an option, but neither were they a consideration, said Jean-Philippe Hecquet, vice-president at Louis Vuitton Canada.

"Maison isn't really about the architecture of a store, about the biggest one or the one with the highest façade. It's about the art and the feeling inside the store. It merges luxury product, leisure, art and culture to provide the ultimate customer experience. Stepping into one of our Maisons is, quite literally, stepping into the home of Louis Vuitton."

Step inside the space, and you'll find yourself standing before a visually arresting, two-storey high "bag bar." Built to showcase the brand's iconic handbags, on the third day the Maison was open people were lining up eight deep to inspect the smorgasbord of purses.

"In Vancouver, we've elevated the Louis Vuitton experience to the next level of imagination," said Yves Carcelle, chairman and CEO of Louis Vuitton.

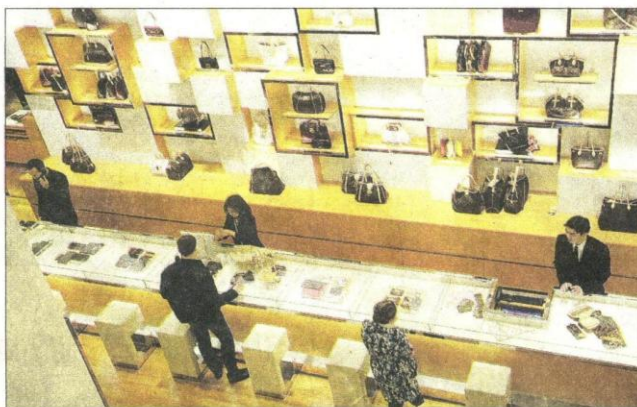
If you want to take something home you'll need at least \$180 for a pen, hair accessory, or monogrammed key and card holder. From there, the sky's the limit. For the holiday season there's a large, monogrammed "Christmas trunk" packed with festive but sophisticated silver tree ornaments. It comes complete with little LV hanger hooks, and can be yours for \$19,000.

The experience begins in the men's "universe" on the main floor, which shares the level with the luggage department, and the dazzling bag bar. Peter Marino, the New York-based architect responsible for the Champs Elysée and



JASON PAYNE/PNGS

Louis Vuitton service associates Marcia Yeh and Eduardo Garcia-Toribo look at handbags at the Louis Vuitton Maison at the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver.



Bond Street Louis Vuitton Maisons, did not work directly on the Vancouver Maison, but his work informs the brand's global store concept. Materials running the gamut from warm woods to highly reflective metal are used throughout the space. Rooms within the Maison are clearly defined but feel connected. It's spacious enough to navigate with ease yet it's cosily inviting.

Beside the bag bar a wide staircase beckons you to float up, up, and away to the second floor, pausing to contemplate original artwork by local Steven Shearer. The B.C.-born artist has an international reputation having exhibited at the Tate Modern in London and Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York, and he'll represent Canada at the 54th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia in 2011. His collection Raggicker's Rainbow, 2004, will be permanently housed at the Vancouver Maison. A collection of brightly coloured, almost psychedelic serigraphs on rag paper, it toys with the idea of decorative versus functional forms.

"It's important to Louis Vuitton to work with the local creative community, and to bring attention to artists

that have cultural resonance and relevance to each specific region," said Hecquet.

On the second floor, the coveted women's ready-to-wear, lavish shoes, watches and jewelry abound. The Maison also boasts a private VIP suite and an entire wall dedicated to displaying exotic leather goods and runway show collection pieces.

According to Hecquet, the decision to open a West Coast Maison as Canada's first was as organic as it was strategic.

"It's not like we just think about all the cities [in Canada] and decide, 'Okay, it's going to be that one,'" he said. "It's more natural than that. ... Vancouver is becoming more and more important in Canada. For example it was the first to have a Shangri-La, and it has Jean-George's [Vongerichten] restaurant. It's a very dynamic city with a strong image and character, and its own personality. It represents a truly diverse, sophisticated cultural centre, one which we knew would be extremely receptive to the very highest level of Louis Vuitton creativity."

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