A few years ago, while compiling a study commissioned by the J. Walter Thompson agency on the evolution of international luxury, I had occasion to study numerous luxury brands, both French and foreign. Before beginning the study, I was still in the grip of a very hexagonal vision of things: I was convinced, as many people still are, that there was no luxury but French luxury.

That study began to change my opinion. It was based on the analysis of exhaustive documentation and also of several focus groups, in the course of which I heard remarks that, little by little, got me thinking. I heard people from all social categories saying things that it would have been easy for me to dismiss with a wave of the hand as being “false.” Indeed, those remarks went against the grain of what was being said and repeated all around me. True, a nice car or a diamond necklace were luxury items in the eyes of these customers, but a good wine or nice lipstick were also, and so were values and intangible goods like time, space, calm, and even health. Among brands considered luxury brands they included Chanel, Hermès, and Dior, but also Max Mara, Miele, Lancôme, Chivas, Calvin Klein, and Ralph Lauren. Prada and Gucci were also a part of the luxury universe for them. Apparently, they didn’t share the scornful point of view that many professionals in the French luxury industry adopt with regard to Italo-American brands.

That’s when I started to take a closer look at what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic. There, the borders of luxury were much less well defined, and, above all, its structures seemed
different. How could we in Paris continue to think that those borders and structures were less valid than ours?

It was time to examine them without prejudgment. At the time, it was said that 50 percent of profits worldwide in luxury were made by French companies. So, the remaining 50 percent were made by others: why should those others be seen as wrong, and the French as right?

It had to be possible to put these two main visions of luxury side by side so as to gain a better understanding of their differences—a more profitable and healthier exercise than the one which consists of blindly assuming some kind of superiority and discrediting what goes on elsewhere.

Putting all national chauvinism aside, I observed that there are indeed two coexisting models of luxury, and that we don’t have to choose one or the other.

THE PYRAMID

Historically speaking, the first of the two models to dominate the world of luxury is European. It wasn’t born in France, but it blossomed there with dazzling success in the 18th century, the century of Enlightenment. From there, its influence radiated across Europe, carried everywhere by the same aristocratic elites, within a system of privileges and relational constraints very close to the court system of ancient kings (see Figure 1).

The system is pyramidal in the sense that everything is placed on different levels beneath the supreme function, which is occupied by a single person. The hierarchy of titles and roles is precise. The maximum amount of power is found at the very top of the pyramid. It is, by definition, a kingly power: it is absolute, violent, capricious, and has no other justification than the king’s divine right or “bon plaisir,” to use the phrase by which the Sun King, like his predecessors, signed a good many of his decrees. Nobody dreamt of contesting that power, for to do so was to foment rebellion, which was a crime of lèse-majesté. Rare are the courtiers who took the risk, for this crime was punished by death, or at the very least by destitution and banishment, so that, in general, all preferred to take part in the king’s game and “pay him court.”