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# On Luxury: A Cautionary Tale: A Short History of the Perils of Excess from Ancient Times to the Beginning of the Modern Era

*William Howard Adams*

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Diamond-encrusted, alligator-skin handbags. Eighteen-course feasts. Yachts the length of city blocks. In the twenty-first century, many point to such conspicuous consumption as reflecting the moral failings of a rampant capitalism that sacrifices community values on an altar of greed. Television shows such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* illustrate the folly of wealth without responsibility even as they elevate their subjects on pedestals of desire. Our discomfort with extravagance is not new. The ancient Greeks and Romans fretted over the ideal relationship between morality and luxury. Politics, religion, and economics influenced the debate, with the concept of luxury as a moral question becoming a core issue in Christian theology and even a cornerstone of the founding of America. People have long feared luxury's evil influence. Society has publicly and privately extolled the virtues of moderation and restraint, and condemned luxury as a breeding ground for vice and sin. After capitalism and the consumer revolution removed its stigma, the concept of luxury underwent a radical transformation, from a vice to be feared to a marketing tool of the new capitalist era. In this lively and thought-provoking narrative, William Howard Adams shows how this simultaneous distrust and embrace of luxury has pervaded Western thought for three millennia, leading us to the question, what price the soul?

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