

Of Judgment and Excess: Looking for Bad Taste in L.A.

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Bad Taste. Like pornography, no one seems able to define it-but everyone claims to know it when they see it.

Unlike bad morals, bad taste is basically harmless, benign, even funny. And unlike bad manners, bad taste is a subjective blight, existing in the eye of the beholder.

"Los Angeles is everything a great American city should be: rich, hilarious, of questionable taste and throbbing with fake glamour," says director John Waters ("Hairspray"), who has made a career out of tackiness; his 1972 film "Pink Flamingos" was even advertised as "an exercise in poor taste." He cautions, however, "to understand bad taste one must have very good taste."

Other artists have tackled the topic as well. Pablo Picasso once said, "The chief enemy of creativity is 'good' taste." And the French surrealist Andre Breton asserted, "In the bad taste of my epoch, I strive to go farther than any other."

In Search of Answers

One wonders what Picasso and Breton would make of Los Angeles circa 1989: a town where a supposedly formal party can mean more bras on cars than on the women who drive them. But after asking L.A. professionals who work in a variety of fields to elaborate on their notions of bad taste, one can only draw a single conclusion: bad taste is merely a question of . . . taste. "De gustibus non est disputandum."

"It's a vast topic," giggles Jackie Collins, the British-born novelist whose best-selling books "Hollywood Wives" and "Hollywood Husbands" recount bad taste, L.A. style, in lip-smacking detail. "There's always been plenty of bad taste in L.A. Hollywood is more flashy than other American cities, except maybe Las Vegas; it has more glitz, more gossip, more hustlers."

"Bad taste results when people don't understand limit or dimension. Then, tackiness and pretense become emphasized," says restaurateur Piero Selvaggio, who has had a bird's-eye view of the behavior and misbehavior of the rich and famous at his restaurants Valentino and Primi.

Selvaggio is bemused rather than annoyed by the bumper crop of bad taste he sees in L.A.

"It is a growing, new city, with all the problems that go with that," he says. "Money has been pouring in so incredibly that suddenly people are rich and finding themselves behaving in the most pretentious manner. Isn't that all a part of a city with very little culture or diversification? Material things become a part of the status quo."

"Someone who in the fin-de-siecle of the 20th Century wants to live in an all-Chippendale room is exhibiting a lack of taste and a lack of judgment," says Charlie Scheips, formerly the associate publisher of ARTCOAST magazine and the current project manager for ART-LA89, the annual L.A. Contemporary Art Fair.

"Bad taste, to me, is the attempt to express style without humor or mystery," Scheips says, "and you can certainly see plenty of that in L.A. But there are really no external standards for taste, despite the fact that the whole camp and kitsch sensibilities are based on an understanding of bad taste."

Merchant Fred Hayman, who set the style in Beverly Hills first with Giorgio and now with his own eponymous shop on Rodeo Drive, thinks that taste in L.A. is improving, "but there's still lots of bad taste everywhere. It's part of L.A. being a much younger, much more fun city."

It's easier to stick to generalities when discussing bad taste; when it comes to specifics, there's a wide range of opinion. Certainly most people, for instance, would agree on the poor taste of something as ludicrous as a mink bikini. But what about that hotly debated symbol of conspicuous consumption, the fur coat?

Animal-rights activists might argue that merely owning one would be an act of the poorest taste imaginable, but others would qualify the coat by where and how it was worn: to a PTA meeting, for instance, or on the back of an Eskimo.

"Fur coats are in bad taste. Period," Collins says, while Scheips demurs, "I think some fur coats are beautiful. But they're more practical in colder climates. In Los Angeles, where no one really needs a fur coat it's a major issue (of taste)."

"I think they (fur coats) are more an example of poor judgment, not poor taste," says screenwriter/novelist Bruce Wagner. Wagner limned the vulgarities of the rich in his screenplay for the film "Scenes From the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills," which gleefully delved into a world where family wakes come with cocktail pianists and the rich seek diet quacks to lose weight. After a moment of reflection on the fur-coat issue, however, Wagner revises his opinion.

"No, I take that back. If I see them on those young actors who fancy themselves to be celebrity poets, those fur coats are in bad taste."

Others disagree. Longtime Beverly Hills socialite and charity worker Ellen Byrens says simply, "If you have 'em, you wear 'em. But I would not purchase the fur of a trapped animal."

Clothing, that ultimate personal expression of style, is particularly fraught with the potential for bad taste.

"A polyester pantsuit is, of course, in bad taste," Collins says. "But so is wearing too many diamonds. Good and bad taste has nothing to do with wealth. Diamonds are great and rhinestones are great-but not with diamonds. Someone who would mix rhinestones and diamonds would be exhibiting very bad taste."

"Don't you know that the people who are against big diamonds are only the ones who don't have them?" Byrens laughs.

Rhinestones and diamonds, tasteless as they may be when mixed together, are hardly a common sight outside the charity bowls of Beverly Hills. What about the far more common-and growing-phenomenon of wearing workout gear outside of the gym?

"I've seen men wearing weightlifting belts in the supermarket," Wagner shudders.

"Someone wearing gym clothes to a restaurant is in bad taste," says Scheips, for whom workout gear crosses the line even in a town famous for its casual clothing at all occasions. "In L.A., casual means having expensive loafers and a Missoni sweater. I call it faux-casual."

And when it comes to evening wear Scheips is equally adamant.

"No colored bow ties or cummerbunds," he says.

Others agree.

"I've seen tuxedos made of screaming-green Lurex," Jackie Collins says. "The only person I think could get away with that is someone like Michael Jackson, whose taste is impeccable," she adds.

Wagner, whose everyday wear is more Melrose than Brooks Brothers-thick black-rimmed glasses and baggy jackets-finds clothing to be more of a relative matter.

"I think things that are either studiously boring or studiously affected are in bad taste," he says. "But different people can get away with different things. What's inexcusable is if you have bad shoes."

"A plaid tuxedo is in absolutely horrible taste," Byrens says. "I know a guy who has one and wears it!"

Subtlety is the key to avoiding bad taste, say both Hayman and Selvaggio, who think that a tasteful tuxedo is one that is not noticed or out of place. "Less is much, much more, as long as it doesn't become boring," says Hayman, who professes "a great dislike" for ruffled or colored tuxedo shirts or-worst of all-wearing brown shoes with a tuxedo. But what of men's evening wear in colors other than black or white?

"If you have the guts to wear it, I take off my hat to you," Selvaggio says diplomatically. "But some of those things I've seen are purely . . . hallucinogenic."

Designer clothing that bears the designer's name also rankles Scheips ("I'm not an ad"), while Collins thinks, "It depends on the designer. Fendi, for instance, is never in bad taste."

The chic L.A. restaurant scene can be a breeding ground, a veritable petri dish of bad taste: a place where eateries

boast of their unlisted telephone numbers, potential customers will wait two hours to pay for the privilege of being abused, and it's often a draw as to whether the staff or the customers behave the worst.

"We see things at Valentino that . . . puzzle us," Selvaggio says, choosing his words carefully. "Recently we had a birthday party for a 1-year-old with real lions and a circus and a lavish buffet-for a 1-year-old! Then we had a bachelor party, which ended with the arrival of a 240-pound lady wrestler.

"I have also seen people order a \$5,000 bottle of wine, merely to impress a girl. And then when they only drink about three ounces of it-it really blows your mind."

Sometimes bad taste in restaurant-going begins even before one enters the door. Which is in worst taste: the restaurants that force customers to queue up for no reason at all, or customers who willingly put up with such treatment?

"What's the point of going to a place that doesn't want you to be there?" Wagner sneers, speaking of the boites and private clubs whose pretensions to exclusivity result in long humiliating lines for the proletariat. "I think it's in bad taste for both the restaurant and the people waiting to get in, like it was Six Flags Magic Mountain. To me, it's in bad taste to wait for anything except a movie or an AIDS test."

Says Scheips: "I don't understand anybody wanting-or paying-to be treated badly."

"Bad taste in restaurants is just poor manners," Hayman says. "It's when people are too loud or obnoxious, or the waiter or captain tries to become too personal."

And speaking of personal, Collins claims to have been in trendy L.A. restaurants where "people are having sex with girls in adjoining rooms. That is in horrendous taste, as is using drugs. I also hate it when I'm out and I see a couple who are passionately making out nearby; I figure that they don't even touch each other once they get home."

"These people that pay \$350 for box seats at the Lakers, or \$500 to see `Phantom of the Opera'-it becomes about status, not sports or theater," Selvaggio says. "Certain people play into that sense of inferiority, that confusion about values. I've been to some picnic orgies at the Hollywood Bowl, where Tchaikovsky is playing to the stars, and people are eating, kissing, doing everything but listening to the music."

One aspect of L.A. life that several people singled out as being in bad taste was the proliferation of bodyguards on the Hollywood scene, and the celebrities who, for whatever reason, feel the need to surround themselves by intimidating musclemen at industry functions.

"I have seen movie stars with six bodyguards," Collins states in half-fascinated, half-horrified tones, "who send a bodyguard or two over to another table to try and get a woman for the star. Appalling."

According to Selvaggio, "That is insecurity, not bad taste. They've come to accept and need an entourage to cope with success. I mean, I know people who make money by being professional company, going out with celebrities and laughing at their jokes and everything."

Can bad taste sometimes become good taste? That is, can it go so far, with such abandon, that it transcends traditional notions of taste and becomes an expression of style all its own?

"Oh, absolutely," Collins says. "Las Vegas is the very capital of bad taste for instance-but it can be fun. Look at the style in films like `Married to the Mob' or `Hairspray.' You can get away with a lot if you have humor."

"Kitsch transcends all that," according to Wagner, mentioning the Tail o' the Pup (the venerable L.A. wienie stand shaped like a hot dog) as an example of bad taste so transcendent it becomes good taste. "The worst thing about it is if it becomes boring or self-conscious."

Conversely, Wagner cites The Burger That Ate L.A. (a new Melrose hamburger stand shaped like a hamburger), as true bad taste-"an artificial landmark. Like Epcot Center in Florida, trying to replicate the Eiffel Tower and the landmarks of the world. It's bullying the public, rubbing people's nose in it."

What about someone like Liberace, who took rococo kitsch to such an extreme that he still stands as perhaps the bad taste beau ideal of our time?

"Liberace's home is not bad taste," Collins insists. "He was an entertainer, and this was part of his persona. If a bank manager decorated like that, it might be bad taste."

Wagner agrees. "Hollywood is, after all, a repudiation of one's roots," he points out, while Scheips thinks it was actually good taste on Liberace's part. "He did it with humor. He transformed kitschy candelabras into a statement."

What's the ultimate in bad taste?

"I've lived in L.A., for 25 years, and I've seen people making fools of themselves in so many ways," Selvaggio says, begging off the question. "Let's forgive L.A., shall we, for being so young and rich?"

"Flaunting excess," Fred Hayman says. "Publicizing your wealth. You know, there's nothing wrong with having a hell of a lot, but when you show too much, that is in awful taste."

"I think criticizing other people is in very bad taste," Scheips says. "And making someone feel as if they were in a lower station than you is the very ultimate in bad taste."

To Byrens, the ultimate in bad taste "is putting someone in an embarrassing position. If you want to yell at someone who is your social equal, that's OK-but never at a salesgirl or a waiter."

Isolating bad taste in L.A., according to Wagner, "would be like taking a slide of a cancer patient and pointing your stubby finger at which cells are growing and where. Come on! This is the very crucible of bad taste!"

But Wagner is a pragmatist as well.

"The bottom line, of course," he sighs, is "as long as you make a lot of money in L.A., people do tend to ignore bad taste."

[Illustration]

PHOTO: Screenwriter/novelist Bruce Wagner loathes fur coats. / STEVE DYKES / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Merchant Fred Hayman pans those who flaunt their wealth. / BRIAN GADBERY; PHOTO: Novelist Jackie Collins won't wear a polyester pantsuit. / GEORGE ROSE; PHOTO: Director John Waters: It takes good taste to know bad taste.; DRAWING: COLOR, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times; DRAWING: COLOR.; DRAWING: COLOR,

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