



One of only 15 Louis Vuitton 'Maisons' in the world, the new Toronto location (far left) includes a dedicated women's shoe section (middle) and a men's bag bar (far right).

IN TORONTO, A NEW TEMPLE OF LUXURY

Hogtown joins Vancouver in acquiring a Louis Vuitton Maison, the high-end retailer's highest-tier store format. But, as **Deirdre Kelly** reports, T.O.'s has something Vancouver's doesn't: a haute maroquinerie service offering bespoke handbags. Let the worshipping begin

Luxury retailer Louis Vuitton has a new Toronto home – a deluxe, light-filled shopping emporium on Bloor Street West at Avenue Road, one of the most exclusive shopping districts in the country.

Designed by Peter Marino, Louis Vuitton Maison replaces the original LV boutique that had been farther down on Bloor Street since 1983. At 10,000 square feet, the new store, which is divided into Men's and Women's Universes and features lots of teak, a white floor-to-ceiling metal wall composed of interlocking flowers and a palette consisting of rich brown, caramel, peridot and mustard, is double the size of the old one and consequently accommodates a greater range of LV products and services than has previously been available in Canada.

Among those products and services is a men's "bag bar" as well as defined zones for shoes, watches, luggage, wallets, ties and accessories in the Men's Universe, all of it distinct from the jewellery, shoes, clothing, glasses, handbags and watches in

the Women's Universe.

"We started the process two years ago," Jean-Philippe Hecquet, LV's vice-president for Canada and Bermuda, said during a tour of the store last week. "We wanted to find a way of offering something exceptional to the customers. Luxury on Bloor Street is already here. With the addition of more space, we were able to introduce a higher level of sophistication, among other offerings unique to Toronto."

The company, which started in Paris in 1854 as a maker of luxury leather luggage, today has 452 stores worldwide, only 15 of which (two of them in Canada) are "Maisons," a distinction bestowed only on locations that offer a certain difference from other outlets. Usually, that difference is measured by the range of products and services available – and by the art on the walls.

In the new and expanded Toronto store, for instance, are two enormous hyper-realist photographs, depicting cascading florals, by Vancouver's James

Nizam. Uncannily (or not), their purple and green palette reflects the tones used by LV designer Marc Jacobs in his new fall ready-to-wear collection.

Nizam's images will be permanent fixtures, but other original works to be featured in a large glass vitrine in the main-floor entryway will be rotated every three months. The first of these is by Shary Boyle, Canada's selection for the 2013 Venice Biennale.

Heightening the air of exclusivity is a private second-floor atelier offering haute maroquinerie (or custom-designed handbags), which Valérie Chapoulaud-Floquet, president and chief executive officer of Louis Vuitton North America, calls "the cherry on the cake" of the new store. Toronto is now one of only seven cities in which LV offers haute maroquinerie, the others being New York, Paris, Milan, Shanghai, Taipei and Sydney. During the tour last week, Chapoulaud-Floquet showed off the eight different kinds of fine leathers, a palette of 26 colours and five handbag shapes that

allow for more than 40,000 custom bag options. Bespoke handbags range in price from \$8,000 to \$60,000, depending on the skins and hardware used.

The practice of making custom bags started with the company's namesake, who in 1892 began using the finest leathers to craft purses for women of elevated social rank out of his workshop in Asnières, a suburb of Paris, where LV leather goods are still manufactured today.

Toronto customers participating in the deluxe program select from the array of coloured skins and metal hardware. Their design choices are then shipped to France, where the purse is handcrafted at Asnières and delivered back to Canada, usually after six months of handcrafted labour.

How popular is it? "We made a sale almost the minute we opened our doors," Hecquet said. "Customers love that they can now get in Toronto what they have seen in other Maisons around the world. The product speaks for itself."