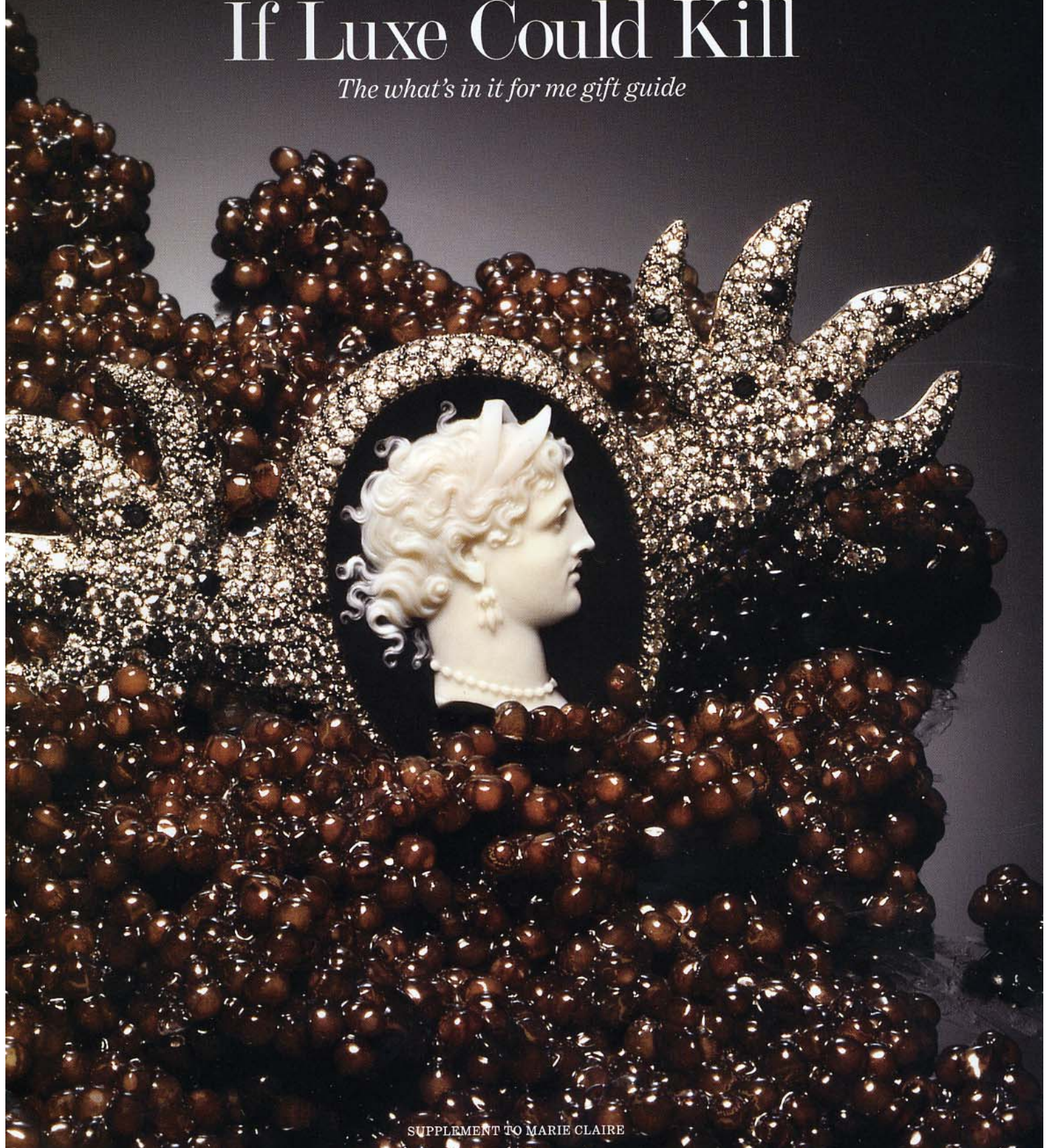


marie claire

If Luxe Could Kill

The what's in it for me gift guide



It's better to give...

BY STEPHEN HENDERSON

aND GET CREDIT for it. Seasonally affected cynic, am I? Please. Tell me that after bestowing an extravagant gift on someone, you've never thrilled to their "Oh, you shouldn't have!"—knowing that through their fixed smile, they're really thinking, "Oh no, major IOU." Sorry to mess with the mistletoe mood, but I'd wager most gifts—like political-campaign contributions—come wrapped in ulterior motives.

This is not a modern conceit. Centuries before China presented President Nixon with a pair of precious pandas—opening the way for free trade and a hands-off policy toward human rights . . . just a conjecture!—Marc Antony, to the horror of the Roman senate, saw fit to give large chunks of Syria, Cyprus, and Sicily to his girlfriend, an Egyptian queen named Cleopatra. In the 16th century, *le Roi* Henri II gave Chenonceau, one of France's most magnificent châteaux, as a coronation gift—not to his queen, Catherine de Medici, but to his ever-accommodating mistress Diane de Poitiers. Just recently, much buzz ensued when billionaire financier Ron Perelman slipped a 32-carat apricot-diamond ring on wife Ellen Barkin's finger just weeks before serving her with divorce papers. A good-bye token? A go-easy-on-me-in-court kiss? Turns out Ron gifted twice: Ellen was last seen laughing all the way to the auction block—where fine-jewelry experts estimated her cache of hubby-supplied gifts would yield her some \$15 million.

"I don't care what it is, just don't spend more than \$2000 on each," were the instructions a famous TV star used to give a friend who ran a stylish home-decor business on Manhattan's Upper East Side. She'd swan in in early December and tell him to send "some nothing" to everyone on a typed-up list of roughly 100 names: her lawyers, shrink, plastic surgeon, and so on. Somewhere between Scrooge and Santa—call her "Scanta"—she got to appear merrily munificent while her lawyer, shrink, surgeon, the lot of them, remained at her beck and call.

On America's left coast, Hollywood stars shine with special fervor at holiday time, dazzling the little people in their employ. Television producer Hope Biller says agents are lavished with lovely luxuries from their celeb-

rity clients, and it's not uncommon for personal assistants to be handed Hermès bags stuffed with cash. "Everyone pretends they put such thought into these gifts," says Biller, "when really, it's a reminder that indentured servitude is practically in the contract."

Wonder why it's called Tinseltown? If the gifter and giftee are both paparazzi prizes, after spending obscene amounts, isn't it time for a little free publicity? We don't really imagine Jay-Z wanted to keep secret that he dropped a reported \$1 million on a vintage Rolls for Beyoncé's 25th-birthday present. Hey, what's a million plus when you're crazy (rich) in love?

If giving in the limelight has its own rule book, there should be another one for giving in the office or at home. It's completely natural to stress about buying for your boss (fearing that a promotion depends on it) or your boyfriend—for whom you recently borrowed great sums to buy the same brand of watch favored by Prince Charles. Madness? Not when you're banking on the interest compounded by the watch resulting in a return trip to the jeweler for you. I remember when I got my first well-paying job—I splurged on a black cashmere cardigan for my mother that had clear sequins sewn in the shape of a subtle brooch. It was, I thought, the last word in chic, and certainly a good deal nicer than anything else she had in her wardrobe. This, I now realize, was precisely the problem. When she lifted the lid, I could tell instantly that Mom found the sweater pretty but patronizing. "Here, you silly old shoe," my gift said. "Let me show you how to dress." She said she adored it, but I never once saw her wear it. Sigh.

Will gift-giving ever lose its political dimension? Consider the possibility that even Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar weren't completely free from cunning as they traveled so far in search of the infant's cradle in Bethlehem. The frankincense, gold, and myrrh they brought were as expensive 2006 years ago as they are now—like carting in a Bentley, a van Gogh, and the deed to a mansion estate in Greenwich, CT. But they probably thought it was worth it to dazzle the king of kings. Wise men, indeed. **mc**

Manners expert Stephen Henderson writes regularly for Town & Country and The New York Times.