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Is \$67,000 for a hand-crafted copper bathtub too much? Perhaps not, if you can afford it--and it appears that now more Americans can than ever.

According to the Federal Reserve, the net wealth of American households hit a high at the end of last year, increasing from \$46.59 trillion in the third quarter of 2004 to \$48.53 trillion in the fourth quarter. Rising real estate and stock prices helped push the country's household net worth up 4% between the third and fourth quarters.

Meanwhile, experts say people are spending differently than they used to. "Luxury is no longer confined to the affluent," **Lynn Franco**, director of the consumer research center at the Conference Board, told Reuters. Buyers are more willing to pay for some luxury goods that enhance their lives, like an expensive bottle of vodka or a designer handbag. You can see that reflected in the financial strength of high-end retailer **Neiman Marcus** (nyse: [NMG](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)), which announced record revenues in 2004 rising 14% to \$3.55 billion.

Last year was also good for luxury goods giant **LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton**. The Paris-based conglomerate, which trades on the CAC40 and owns such as brands as champagne maker **Dom Perignon** and fashion houses **Donna Karan** and **Givenchy**, recently said that, despite a weakened dollar, its earnings increased 11% in 2004.

Luxury has become more mass-market, with more consumers than ever aware of brands such as **Rolex**, **Manolo Blahnik** or **Chanel**--even if most people will never be able to afford a \$500 pair of shoes or a \$7,000 wristwatch. That level of spending is restricted to a small and exclusive club.

In compiling our list of the most expensive household goods, we looked for items that are common to most American homes--everyone has a bed, and we hope you own a vacuum cleaner. Then we sought out the priciest versions, which smack of **Dennis Kozlowski**-style spending. The public was aghast when it was revealed that the former **Tyco** (nyse: [TYC](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) chief executive had coughed up \$6,000 for a shower curtain and more than twice that for an umbrella stand. But we found that there are buyers who will shell out \$15,000 for a mattress, more than \$3,000 for a baby's crib and upwards of \$400 for a single bath towel. And if one is buying a \$10 million house, a pair \$350,000 speakers doesn't seem quite so extravagant anymore.

Those are just the off-the-rack versions, or items that may be made to order with little customization. We didn't consider antiques or bespoke products, which can be as opulent as the client desires. Jewel-encrusted bidet, anyone? A fur-lined sink?

Sometimes it's hard to justify spending ten times as much on a furnishing when another considerably less expensive item offers the same functionality. In other cases, rare and exotic materials, and extensive and highly-skilled labor obviously factor into the exorbitant prices. **Hypnos**, the exclusive maker of mattresses for the British royal family, will reject a container of cashmere if it is deemed to be clumpy or defective in any way, says **Marc Jason**, a director for the American division. For each bed, workers cover thousands of springs in calico cotton; the damask cases are hand-woven in Belgium.

Brand names may not influence prices as much at these price levels. Many of the manufacturers are small affairs, even family businesses, that haven't been acquired by big competitors and don't have splashy ad campaigns. And relatively few people are buying goods from companies such as **Herbeau**, which hand-makes bath fixtures in France, or **German Physiks**, maker of the aforementioned speakers.

Then again, there is the intangible value of being able to say you sleep in the Queen of England's bed. The best that money can buy, or the most expensive that money can buy? It's all in the eye of the buyer.

### BED - Hypnos \$15,000

Sleep as the royals do, in a plush bed by Hypnos, the exclusive supplier of mattresses to the British royal family, and maker of some of the most expensive beds around. The luxurious nests have 4,000 to 5,000 mattress coils per set, with each spring cocooned in calico cotton. The fillings are made from cashmere, silk, lamb's wool and natural latex, and the outer damask is hand-woven in Belgium. The whole mattress is hand-tufted, with all the layers sewn together using a three-foot-long needle. Little surprise that it has been said that the two things that kept the Queen Mother alive to the age of 101 were her gin and tonic and her Hypnos mattress.

For further information, visit [www.hypnosusa.com](http://www.hypnosusa.com).

