

ORNAMENT TODAY

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What Is Ornament?

It is typical of discussions of ornament that they seldom attempt to define their subject with sufficient precision. Ornament appears to be too complex, too multifaceted, and as well too various in its manifestations to allow it to be clearly defined. One settles for the affirmation that ornament is no *affictum*,¹ *Aufgeklebtes*,² or something «stuck on,»³ and that it's different from pure embellishment, or mere pattern and diagram. It's as though the visible and material existence of ornament should say enough about it. So, are we finally, then, to agree with the art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), when he asserts that ornament cannot be more closely defined, but that this presents no problem since, finally, one also talks about «art» and «life»⁴ despite both of these terms being even more difficult to reduce to a clear definition?

One thing, however, seems agreed upon: the Modernist rejection of ornament. One speaks of ornament as having been liquidated by Modernism, of the absence of ornament as a cultural value for Modernism, and also of the trauma resulting from the lack of ornament, a trauma which only now, in our current digital age, would seem to have been overcome. There is surely no doubt that Modernism

discarded the stylistic elements of classicism, but we must ask if this also means that it desired to eliminate ornament entirely.

Lack of clarity in the definition of ornament is doubtless of service in taking *pars pro toto*, and thus, in accord with Modernist praxis and viewpoints, for the rejection both of ornament and of classical styles at one and the very same time. Yet, it remains entirely unclear even that it might be possible to eliminate ornament, or that ornament allows itself to be eliminated. The question of the cultural function of ornament arises. When we see that ornament is no *affictum*, we have also reached the point at which we have to begin to investigate its deeper cultural function. Could it be, for example, that shifts in the form and status of ornament are a guarantee that in times of change its cultural function will be able, in fact, to remain unaltered, and thereby true to itself? But what is ornament's cultural function? How can it be determined, how does it show itself in ornament, and, even more importantly, how does it reveal itself in ornament's shifts in form and status? Such questions will be addressed in the text that follows. Despite the myriad difficulties, an attempt must be made to define a few of ornament's essential, structural traits.

Preconceptions

What, then, is ornament? Where does it come from and what are the features by which it is recognized? As shown by the bewildering number of treatises and essays on the subject, these questions are surrounded by great uncertainty. This uncertainty, however, also arises, on the one hand, from the fact that the discussion of ornament, more than any other topic, has been rendered so thoroughly ideological in Modernist and Postmodern discourse;

¹ Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, Book V I.2.

² Henry van de Velde, «Das Neue Ornament,» in *Kunst und Alltag um 1900*, ed. Eckhard Siepmann, 353–362 (Lahn-Gießen: Anabas-Verlag, 1978), 357.

³ Louis Henry Sullivan, «Ornament in Architektur (1892),» *Der Architekt* (2/2011), 46–49: 48.

⁴ Ernst Gombrich, *Ornament und Kunst. Schmucktrieb und Ordnungssinn in der Psychologie des dekorativen Schaffens*, (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 1.

and, on the other, there's the fact that ornament too gets lost in the floodtide of digital images, just like all the other kinds of images. For a better understanding of ornament, it is therefore necessary, first of all, to eliminate a number of preconceptions.

The first and most stubbornly repeated preconception is that Adolf Loos (1870–1930) declared that «ornament is a crime,» or tabled a discussion of «ornament as crime,»⁵ and thereby established the co-ordinates of the Modernist attitude to ornament. Specious reference to the title of Loos's essay has ever since—and this is the second preconception—been used as vindication of the thesis that Modernism appeared on the scene as a radical partisan of iconoclasm, and left a *tabula rasa* behind it. The third preconception lies in the notion that the modern discussion of ornament is unique; that ornament became a topic of discussion only at the beginning of the twentieth century; that the early phase of Modernism resolved its problem with ornament, and that in the wake of the subsequent banishment of ornament no further debate took place until the advent—as various authors argue—of the era of digital computer technology. But none of these three views will survive closer scrutiny.

Loos's epoch-making essay found the model for its title in a work by Karl Kraus (1874–1936)—*Sittlichkeit und Kriminalität*, (*Morality and Criminality*, 1908)—and that title is *Ornament und Verbrechen* (*Ornament and Crime*). While in fact writing «and,» Loos had no intention of meaning «is.» Furthermore, he by no means equated all ornament with crime, and he made no attempt to forbid all ornament, as a matter of principle. Loos wrote: «Everything created in past centuries can be copied today, to the extent that it's still of use. The forms of the new phenomena that appear within our culture

5 See Veronica Biermann, *Ornamentum. Studium zum Traktat «De re aedificatoria» des Leon Battista Alberti*, (Hildesheim et al: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997), 148; and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Die Architektur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, (Munich: Aries Verlag, 1994), 465.

6 Adolf Loos, «Der neue Stil und die Bronze-Industrie,» in Adolf Loos, *Sämtliche Schriften in zwei Bänden*, vol. 1, ed. Franz Glück, 26–32 (Vienna and Munich: Verlag Herold, 1962), 28.

7 Francesca Ferguson, *Re-Sampling Ornament/Ornament neu aufgelegt*, catalogue of Schweizerisches Architekturmuseum (2008), 1.

(railway cars, telephones, typewriters, etc.) must be developed without conscious reference to styles which already have been superseded. Modification of an old object in order to adapt it to modern needs is not allowed. The rule here is: 'Either copy something, or create something new.'»⁶ And, as he further pointed out, no third possibility exists. What Loos opposed was the gratuitous invention of ornament.

Secondly, it is repeatedly maintained that Modernism came into existence as a form of iconoclasm, and the visible sign of that attitude is presumed to be found in the white, unadorned, puritanical structures of modern architecture, as seen for example in Stuttgart's Weißenhofsiedlung (1927). To be sure, a fleeting glance might suggest that Functionalism and New Objectivity would entirely have banished images from architecture. This counts, however, as a repeatedly revisited cliché which ever since the end of the 1970s has been ever more heroically deployed in the Postmodern movement's promotion of itself in the battle for hegemony over images. The Modernist movement's rejection of certain ornaments and thus, as well, of certain iconic structures, is only one side of the coin; the other is its search for a new visual and symbolic language that was capable of doing justice to the altered social, technological and material premises of its times.

The third preconceived idea is the often reiterated notion that the early Modernist discussion of ornament was unique. This, too, belongs to the realm of modern myth, along with the assertion that «aside from a few, memorable, Postmodern experiments, the language of ornament in architecture remained silent for decades.»⁷ Yet, a look at precisely the second half of the twentieth century will attest to the

opposite, and namely to the fact that a permanent discussion of ornament—albeit with a different intensity—was underway, and that ornament, indeed, was the fuse that ignited the period’s theoretical disputes. Historical analysis will show that ever since its alleged eradication, ornament has time and again been the catalyst of a reconceptualization of architecture. An example will be found in the exhibition *Ornament ohne Ornament* (*Ornament without Ornament*)⁸ which took place in Zurich in 1965. It addressed the question of ornament within the context of what then were the current debates on Structuralism. With the emergence of computer technology in the 1960s, Frieder Nake, Georg Nees and Michael Noll made ornament a central concern of computer graphics, which in turn became the point of departure for Concrete Art. Postmodernism and Deconstructivism also relied to a great extent on ornament: Postmodernism, on the ironic use of classical ornament; Deconstructivism, on the ornamental and performative aspects of the return to such classical rhetorical strategies as allegory, catachresis, synecdoche and the grotesque, even if in both of these cases these procedures were seldom referred to as such. It can be shown that ornament has again and again reappeared in times of cultural change, but not in its classical forms, and by no means simply as a marginal phenomenon. It presents itself, quite to the contrary, at the center of theoretical discourse, and even as its catalyst.

We can thus begin to shape a possible definition of ornament. The point of departure is that Modernism rejected the older ornaments of the various historical styles—especially the iconology of the nineteenth century—but not for the purpose of somehow getting rid of ornament. Modernism’s goal was rather to develop a language of its own,

8 *Ornament ohne Ornament?* exhibition catalogue of Züricher Kunst- und Gewerbemuseum, (Zürich, 1965).

9 Henry van de Velde, «Das Neue Ornament,» op. cit., 357.

10 Gottfried Semper, *Über Baustyle*, (Zürich: Friedrich Schulthess Verlag, 1869), 6.

or its own canon of symbols and images, in the light of the novel premises of the altered cultural framework of the machine age. As they grappled with these issues at the beginning of the twentieth century, the protagonists of early Modernism rejected the ornaments of received tradition, but that doesn’t permit the conclusion that they rejected ornament entirely.

The writings, for example, of Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), Hermann Muthesius (1861–1927), Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) and Walter Gropius (1883–1969) reveal a different picture. Their words almost magically revolve around a particular theme: the theme of a new architectural language in accord with the new social and technological phenomena of their era. Van de Velde writes: «The works of the engineers have covertly influenced our lives and habits.»⁹ Since the modern age produces entirely new technological objects, it’s only natural for them not to present themselves in garb that comes from the past, but in «forms which have never before been known.» And ornament was unavoidably an integral component of this search for a new architectural language that synchronized with current forms of cultural praxis. Gottfried Semper remarked as early as 1869, in *Über Baustyle* (*On Styles of Construction*), that the function of architecture, just as of the arts in general, is «to accomplish the symbolic representation of the current social, political and religious systems, and thus to link back to the basic concepts that underlie those systems.»¹⁰

Van de Velde insisted on the need for a logical connection between new ornament and architectural praxis. Accordingly, he spoke of «rational ornament» and argued that it must not be autonomous. Ornament, as he saw it, was no free expression of



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ORNAMENT AND KNOWLEDGE

On the Symbolic Function of Ornament

What's seen, in architecture, as ornament depends decisively on one's view as to the way in which ornament is recognized. Depending on one's concept of the knower and the known, and of how they relate to one another, any number of «things» can be classed as «ornament.» But from an epistemological point of view, the principal question is not *what* ornament is, but *how* something becomes ornament.

The symbolic function of ornament is decisive for this question of *how*. It stands apart from what linguistic semiotics refers to in general as the function of sign. Ornament neither «represents» nor «stands for» something else, on the principle of *aliquid stat pro aliquo*. Instead it makes something visible. It says nothing, but shows something. The difference can be clarified as follows: in the conventional linguistic definition of sign, a distinction is drawn between the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the means for the conveyance of the signified. In such a functionalist perspective, deeply influenced by linguistic semiotics, a sign is an instrument that serves for the transmission of meaning, but

1) Cf. Sybille Krämer, «Das Medium als Spur und Apparat,» in *Medien Computer Realität*, ed. Sybille Krämer, 73–94 (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 77.

2) Even for this seemingly simple translation, there is no formal means for determining absolute correctness. Cf. Quine's reflections on the thought experiment concerning radical translation: Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1964), especially chapter II.

which itself remains extraneous to meaning.¹ The meaning of the sign can only be determined by convention. The meaning, for example, of the concept «tree» can be transmitted by any number of word-signs, such as «tree,» «*Baum*,» or «*albero*.»²

With ornament, on the other hand, concrete material form is an integral component of symbolic function. Here, it's not so easy to draw a distinction between signifier and signified. This is also seen, for example, in Modernism's putative attempt to do away with ornament. The attempt to banish all ornamental symbolism from architecture, and thus to allow function to «speak» for itself, led directly to a situation in which architecture as a whole is seen as ornament: as ornament of its function. This derives from the fact that ornament, rather than an *instrument* of architecture, is the *medium* of architecture: it's by way of ornament that architecture first discovers its possibility of symbolic denotation.

ORNAMENT AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemologically, ornament presents a special challenge. This challenge, however, has mainly been neglected, since epistemology was principally concerned with the objects and processes of the natural sciences and their mode of scientific knowledge. For a great deal of time, epistemology was more or less simply authoritarian in its exclusion of objects of art and architecture from its field of inquiry. Moreover, it had good reasons, since up until the start of the twentieth century epistemology was mainly focused on the grounding and justification of scientific knowledge. The natural sciences are not concerned with giving form to things, as architecture does, but with furnishing correct descriptions of things which exist independently of the natural sciences. Accordingly, the theory of science concentrated for a great deal of time more on the context of justification than on the context of discovery and the creation of form. The central question was less concerned with the ways

in which knowledge is obtained than with the ways in which the knowledge of given objects and relationships might be grounded and justified.

The relationship between knowledge and ornament is an altogether different story: questions of construction and the creation of form are central from the very beginning. An ornament is never simply a natural given; it is always something that has been made. Unlike the objects of the natural sciences, the central feature of ornament lies in its having been created for a concrete context of perception and use. In order for a thing to be an ornament, it must have been designed with respect to the perceptual situation in which it's to play a part. So, ornament is no act of illustration or representation; it supplies us with something that otherwise would not exist. It is something that has been conceived and constructed for the role it plays as ornament, and it can therefore be seen as a prototype for constructed objects that serve a particular purpose in a specific context of perception and action.

Ornament therefore escapes the dichotomy of empiricism and idealism which ever since antiquity has determined the character of epistemological debate. Ornaments are neither ideal nor empirical, and instead are a product constructed in the course of a creative process. Ornament confronts epistemology with the aesthetic dimension and the inherent relativity of knowledge. Ornaments are a stumbling block for the modern ideal of scientific objectivity and the history that lies behind it.³ Since all ornaments are artifacts they can never be positivistically determined from the very start, in the manner in which empiricist epistemology conceives of the objects of scientific knowledge: as given things and the effects they produce. But it's equally impossible to adhere to a purely idealistic concept of ornament, since even though abstract ideas and intentions find a place in ornament, they are always linked to the historical cultures and material practices through which they come or came into existence.

3) On the history of objectivity cf. Lorrain Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 17.

4) John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, chapter 8, no. 8–10.

ORNAMENT AS RELATION BETWEEN IDEA AND MATERIAL

This peculiar, hybrid status of ornament between the ideal and the material—its intermediary character—is its epistemological signature. With respect to ornament, idea and material are irrevocably interrelated from the very start. So, from an epistemological point of view what has to be done is to place the reciprocal relation between material and idea at the center of the theory of ornament. Idea, here, in this relation, is no more primary than material, and vice versa: idea and material are correlated sides of one and the same ornament.

The distinction between accident and substance, or between primary and secondary features of objects of knowledge, has always been a central topic of philosophy. Ever since epistemology has held the status of a discipline, attempts have been repeatedly made to establish a categorical difference between the objective qualities of an object of knowledge and its subjective perception. One of the best-known formulations of the difference between primary and secondary qualities is found in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where he tells us that objects of sense perception have the primary qualities of «solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number,» and such secondary qualities as «colours, sounds, tastes, & c.»⁴ Primary qualities are grounded in the object's internal qualities, whereas secondary qualities are a product of the way in which they are perceived.

The difference between primary and secondary qualities has often been invoked as a criterion for the definition of ornament in architecture, as for example when Leon Battista Alberti remarks: «Ornament may be defined as a form of auxiliary light and complement to beauty. From this it follows, I believe, that beauty is some inherent property, to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character

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