

Ornament

For the better part of the 20th century, ornament was viewed with skepticism and hostility. Outlawed from the modernist canon by the Viennese architect Adolf Loos in his seminal 1929 essay “Ornament and Crime,” and eschewed by modernist advocates of ‘less is more,’ ornament was condemned as superfluous. By the turn of the 21st century, however, ornament had found new champions among postmodern designers who embraced a larger view of history and a non-linear aesthetic. Ornament re-entered design and the visual arts as not only a stylistic fashion, driven by cycles of consumption, but also, more significantly, as a potent outgrowth of the flows of globalization.

No account of ornament can dismiss its pejorative associations as mask and deception. To do so would be to overlook history once again. (James Trilling writes, for example, that interlaced ornament is connected to evil eye through the folklore of knots too visually complex for demons to untangle.¹) However, contemporary designers use ornament today not only to play with those associations, but also to fabricate wholly new design dialects. Against the background of homogenous late modernism and equivocal, plural postmodernism, increasing numbers of contemporary designers are searching for ways of creating form languages that bridge culture, class, race, gender, as well as the formerly discrete narratives of the decorative arts, design, and fine arts. Ornament can be seen as a means to those ends.

In a post colonial era, ornament is used as an instrument of cultural 'reconciliation,' not unlike the way it operated in past moments of globalization, seen, for example, in the hybrid Arab-Christian-Jewish visual culture of medieval Andalusia, Spain. Today, artists such as Yinka Shonibari are reversing the flows of cultural exchange, as seen the Victorian interior he patterned with African that was featured in the 1997 Johannesburg Biennial. Hella Jongerius has produced pottery embroidered with dragons, such the Giant Prince (2006), referencing the Dutch East India company's history with China. And projects, like Tramjatra (2001-) led by Mike Douglas in Melbourne, Australia, tap the potential of ornament as a universally recognized mode of speech that can communicate multiple messages to diverse audiences. In the case of Tramjatra, ornament is used to enliven local trams, recognizing the cultural dynamic between Australia and Southeast Asia, offering an alternative to corporate advertising, and promoting sustainable public transportation. In New York, architects Benjamin Aranda and Chris Lasch and Terrol Drew Johnson, a leading Native American basket weaver, are investigating the parallels between traditional basket weaving techniques and the systems of advanced computation used in architecture. (Their work was exhibited in Storefront gallery in New York in 2005.) Perhaps the most potent use of ornament is as a fulcrum for East-West discussions, so fraught in today's political climate. This use of ornament is typified in the carpets designed by artist Shirana Shabazi. Born in Iran and now working in Zurich, Shabazi weaves images of Western art (such as Monet's “Waterlilies,” re-titled Farsh-11-2005) into textiles associated with Middle Eastern culture. (Here the carpet and the imagery both function as ornament.) In all of these examples, ornament functions as an advocate for cosmopolitanism, without resorting to pastiche or parody.

In addition to being a means of rapprochement in addressing issues of nationality and ethnicity, ornament is used as a tool of engagement in the conflicts surrounding race, gender, and class. African-American artist Kara Walker uses the decorous silhouette to provoke uncomfortably sexualized memories of slavery. Commenting on contemporary class tensions, graphic designer Melissa Gorman uses gilded barbed wire as an ornamental motif on a CD for the rap artist Lif (More Mega, 2006). Both class and gender inform the work of Swiss artist and graphic designer Sandrine Pelletier, who, in 2002, created a series of embroidered portraits of young backyard wrestlers in northern England. Pelletier literally sewed together status symbols of heroism (the tapestry format) and feminine domesticity (derived from the wallpaper and crocheted afghans that decorate the boys' family homes). In Brazil, designers Humberto and Fernando Campana used wood scraps to ornament their Favela chair (2002) to honor the scavenged nature of the slums of Sao Paulo. Diametrically opposed worlds are also reconciled in the work of artists Eric Chan and Heather Schatz. Working via the World Wide Web, ChanSchatz ask soldiers, coalminers, and other constituencies outside of their practice, to make selections from a palette of phrases, color combinations and motifs. These choices are configured into highly ornamental paintings and textiles printed on silk.

While ChanSchatz bring people together through their process, the resulting pieces are abstractions. They do not offer images of conflict through ornament, rather they use ornament as a kit of parts to interrogate the hierarchies inherent in the business of art and design. In that sense, their work participates in a larger critique of the passivity of the culture of consumption. Ornament in this context privileges production. The graphic identity of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, designed by Eric Olson Andrew Blauvelt in 2005, offers another illustration of this idea. The identity is comprised of strips of ornament--strips of pattern and text--that can be recombined (not just by its creators but by the museum's other designers as well) in different ways and at different scales that are still recognizable but never exactly the same. Ornament in this light is understood as a network of systems that can be manipulated and, ultimately, as means of developing a more quixotic visual landscape in contrast to the specious diversity of corporate capitalism and conventional branding.

Digital technologies, interactive by nature, are also driving the cultivation of ornament today. American graphic designer Denise Gonzales Crisp has advanced a theory she terms the "decoRational" to articulate the ornamental possibilities offered by computer software that can accomplish complexities that the human hand cannot achieve with any remotely comparative efficiency.² Where Gonzales Crisp and others generate digital ornament to amplify the narrative potential of typography, British designer Rachel Wingfield uses ornament in conjunction with technology to underscore the relationship of human-made objects to the natural environment. (Wingfield embeds electroluminescent technology in patterned objects from table cloths to window blinds; their outlines become stronger or weaker in response to changing light levels.)

In an era whose hallmarks are multi-tasking, simultaneity, and virtuality, there is also psychological comfort with the kind of ornament described by art historian Meyer Schapiro as "discoordinated as opposed to coordinated, but also as distinguished from

disordered or dissonant.”³ Schapiro was, in fact, describing the nature of seventh century Insular illuminated manuscripts. The fact that these manuscripts were created during an earlier episode of global transfers may explain the resonance of his observation to ‘discoordinated’ ornament in the 21st century. Certainly, one of the most fertile uses of ornament today is within the culture of design itself. Contemporary Dutch designers have been particularly active in using ornament to create the visual equivalent of verbal non-sequiturs. In 2005, the Dutch collaborative Demakers Van transformed from industrial fencing by weaving its chain links into lace-inspired floral patterns. The same year, their compatriot Hella Jongerius produced a group of blankets appliquéd with fragments of decorative motifs taken from embroidery samplers in collection Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt National Museum of Design.

Replacing the pessimism of the previous generation’s ethos of deconstruction and fragmentation of a previous generation is a more optimistic ethos of reconstruction that uses ornament as a bonding strategy. For example, Brooklyn-based artist Courtney Smith carves rococo flora onto un-ornamented pieces of furniture, leaving large areas unaltered; in pieces such as *Bonito* (2002) two moments of time are compressed into one. Repurposing a classical motif, Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron used stylized acanthus leaf patterns to mark gallery entrances in their design of the Walker Art Center (2005). In the same vein, Petra Blaise explores the potency of the vernacular in the interior of the *Casa da Musica* (designed by Rem Koolhaas in 2005), in Porto, Portugal, by incorporating traditional Portuguese ceramics and complementing their aesthetic in contemporary tiled walls of her own design.

Ornament is increasingly a function of structure, especially in architecture. Frank Gehry’s design for the Guggenheim Bilbao (1997) continues to serve as an icon of formal complexity, distantly but decidedly rooted in the fan vaulting of Gothic cathedrals. There are also ample instances of structural ornament in furniture design. Marcel Wanders’ iconic 1996 Macrame chair is a portrait of frozen, rope lines. Wanders counterintuitive use of fibers has inspired other variants on furniture-as-drawing-in-space from the calligraphic *Corallo* armchair (2004) designed by the Campanas to the *Twig* system (2004) designed by the French brothers Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec. (The ‘twigs’ are interlocking plastic forms that can be combined at will, yielding wall screens with patterns that appear to float in space.) Appearing to defy gravity, projects such as these allude to the fantastical nature of ornament.

A more literal correlative with ornamental fantasy (and its antecedents in the grotesques of 15th and 16th century Italy) can be seen in the work of Japanese artist designer Takashi Murakami. Murakami’s colorful, child-like figures and densely patterned flora reflect of the aesthetic of a Japanese subculture that has found a place in the mainstream. Called *otaku*, this work is also identified with animé and *manga* comics; Murakami sees *otaku* as a protracted response to the infantilization of Japan, stripped of its military power by the West after World War II.⁴ It is an idea concurs with Ernst Gombrich’s observation that cartoon-like forms offer distance from fear and shame,⁵ and one that demonstrates the enduring power (and value) of ornament as dissemblance.

As an aspect of visual language that is regaining its voice, ornament's relevance is rooted in its inherent potential to enlarge the discourse of design. It is at once both formally expansive and socially inclusive. Understood as more than a border or a frame, or a mere sampling of exotica, but rather as a process of integrating systems of form and production that can yield innovation, ornament may well have deeper consequences for human relationships. Indeed, in his book *The Transparent Society*, the Italian jurist and philosopher Gianni Vattimo posits a more generous a world view of aesthetics (a view he calls heterotopic) would be based on "the proliferation of ornament."⁶ Organic and evolutionary, the nature ornament also represents an ideological alternative to notions of fixed aesthetic values and principles of metaphysics that have governed past centuries.

Footnotes

1. Trilling, James. *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*. (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2003), p. 98.
2. Gonzales Crisp, Denise, "Toward Definition of the Deco-Rational," copyright, Denise Gonzales Crisp, 2004.
3. Schapiro, Meyer. *The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art*. (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 2005), p 12.
4. Murakami specifically explored this thesis in the exhibition "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture" that he curated for the Japan Society in New York in 2005.
5. Gombrich, Ernst. H. *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1979), p. xxx.
6. Vattimo, Gianni. *Transparent Society*. (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 73.