



*Hors-d'oeuvres:  
ornamental decoration  
and gender*

by

LESLEY

ROBYN DAW

B.A. (The University of Melbourne)

B.F.A. (Victoria College, Prahran)

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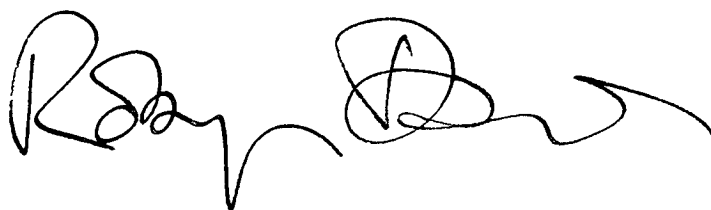
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ray Davis', with a stylized, flowing script.

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The assistance, support and patience of my supervisor, Dr Llewellyn Negrin is gratefully acknowledged; the input from Academic staff at the Centre for the Arts during the initial internal, studio-based phase of my thesis, and their patience during its evolution into a theory-based, external work has also been appreciated.

# *Hors-d'oeuvres: ornamental decoration and gender*

## Abstract:

In this thesis I propose to make explicit the historical basis of the connection between ornamental decoration and the feminine and reveal this as not just something inherently 'female', but a product of historical conventions and interpretation. I wish to show how this has impacted on the way artists and theorists have approached ornamental decoration, its reception in the public domain, and how contemporary artists have achieved a critical approach that both relies upon and is distinct from previous artists' and critics' interpretations. The 'feminine' is as much an historical construction as the link between it and ornamental decoration: neither are biologically determined. Yet it is still difficult to dissuade viewers from this assumption.

In order to achieve my aims, this thesis investigates the evolution of the link between ornament and the feminine through an analysis of the terms 'ornament' and 'decoration' and traces the history of the feminisation and subsequent denigration of ornamental decoration through a discussion and comparison of historical and modern writers on the subject. It addresses how ornament has become connected to the feminine and indicates the implications for artists who choose to use it. It also investigates various attempts to reinsert ornamental decoration into contemporary visual art, paying specific attention to the exploitation of the 'feminine', and the critical reception of these attempts.

What is revealed is that, even when ornamental decoration is used to critique or subvert the historical construction that gave rise to the dichotomy, often it serves to reinforce its reductive, essentialist position, to the extent that it remains problematic for women artists to use it without being perceived solely as taking a 'feminine' position, and falling victim to the dichotomies that have denigrated it as trivial and extrinsic to form.

Through investigating contemporary visual art and theory, particularly those which suggest alternative models for approaching the construction of gender, I propose a possible direction by which the dichotomy that sees ornamental decoration as extrinsic to form, can be transcended.



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# *Hors-d'oeuvres: ornamental decoration and gender*

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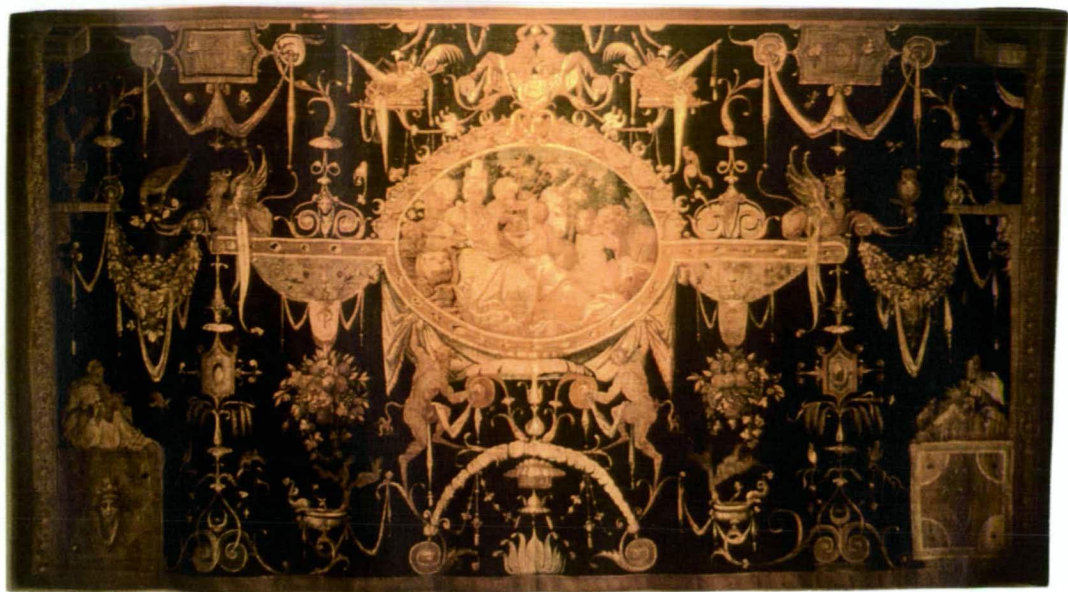


Fig. 1 *Cybele*, woven tapestry, c. 1550, Atelier de Fontainbleu (?).  
Seen *in situ* at the Galerie Nationale de la Tapisserie, Beauvais, France, 1992.



Fig. 2 *Flore*, woven tapestry, c. 1550, Atelier de Fontainbleu (?).  
Seen *in situ* at the Galerie Nationale de la Tapisserie, Beauvais, France, 1992.

## Introduction:

In 1992 I was granted a scholarship that allowed me to travel to France to undertake research on pre-Renaissance and contemporary site-specific works. In the Galerie Nationale de la Tapisserie in Beauvais, I encountered two woven tapestries entitled *Cybele* and *Flore* in the 'grotesque' style popularised during the early sixteenth century (Figs. 1, 2).<sup>1</sup> Although familiar with the highly decorative art of that era, the tapestries resonated with an alternative beauty, their faded arabesques and materiality stood in contrast to other, more narrative and representational painted artworks that appeared staid and complacent by comparison. Something about the language that was used in the tapestries spoke to me about the pleasure of looking, about using one's eyes as physical organs connected to one's body, not filtered by analysis through the brain. Their combination of reckless decoration and celebration of the physical seemed to make an immediate connection to the body that was not enhanced by intellectualisation or literary rationale. This did not mean that they were not made with *intelligence*, but connected with a visual language that seemed alternative to the one I knew: the artists who made them also comprehended what we understand to be the 'feminine' realm of sensuality and seduction. I resolved that on my return to Australia, I would find out more.

The search has proved both difficult and simple, for there is a plethora of material that catalogues such decoration—illustrated encyclopaedia of decoration abound—but little to explain for example, why such highly decorative works seemed to be immensely popular then, but were almost reviled in subsequent history books. Why, for example are there many illustrations and explanations of Raphael's paintings of the *Madonna*, but far less information on his work in the Vatican Loggia, where he and Giovanni da Udine decorated the walls in the 'grotesque' fashion. Why could I find little about the relationship between the elaborate ornamental frame and the narrative central imagery in tapestries such as *Cybele* and *Flore*?

Questions arising from my initial observations and enquiries, coupled with an increase in the use of ornamentation in contemporary art prompted further research into the possible link between ornamental decoration and the feminine. Many recent catalogues on patterning, decoration and/or ornament have presumed that such a link exists, yet go no further to explain how or why this has occurred. It is often convenient to maintain an association between the two for curatorial reasons, or to

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<sup>1</sup>*Cybele* and *Flore*, woven around 1550, Atelier de Fontainbleu (?), wool and silk woven tapestry, 250 x 500cm (approx. each), Collection Mobilier Nationale, France. Displayed at the Galerie Nationale de la Tapisserie, Beauvais, France, 1992.

provide a point of similarity or contrast, as for example when contrasting 'decadent' nineteenth century ornamentation with the 'purity' of modernism.

This relationship of convenience maintains an identity based on cultural construction—marginal ornament is associated with the feminine just as essential form is aligned with the masculine—but goes no further to explain how or why this construction occurs, and what is to be gained by its advocacy. Used to represent the 'other' in this equation, ornamental decoration is sometimes dangerously conflated with discourses that are also perceived to share this position. For example, in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Patterning in Contemporary Art*, the curator suggested that decoration may be seen as 'almost a definitive feature within discourses of marginalised cultures (the feminine, the crafts and the 'traditional')'.<sup>2</sup> Claiming a link exists between diverse discourses predicated on their use of ornamental decoration—as a 'definitive feature'—is one thing, but viewing decoration as exemplifying the 'marginalisation' of these cultures is another thing entirely, and one that serves to conflate quite disparate discourses. I would suggest this is a convenient, but reductive association that may deny the actuality.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis seeks to clarify several issues pertaining to ornamental decoration and gender, specifically how and why the association between ornament, decoration and the feminine has occurred, and the subsequent ramifications for artists who use it in their work.

Ornamental decoration is generally viewed as trivial, peripheral and feminine, obsessively repetitive, unworthy of attention except as a definition of what it is not—not authentic, not original, not necessary. Included alongside marginal discourses, it evades analysis except as the 'other' to whatever is the central concern, and is therefore often used to convey a marginalised position, almost as a *fait accompli*. This position does nothing to illuminate the complex relationship between ornamental decoration and form, or ornamental decoration and the feminine (or the crafts or the 'traditional'), or the specific context in which it occurs. Neither does it reflect whether ornamental decoration may hold a valid position *within*, rather than outside the language of visual art when used in such contexts. It seems easier for all concerned to maintain a position of exclusion: at least it is clear who is marginal and who is not.

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<sup>2</sup>Merryn Gates, *Patterning in Contemporary Art: Layers of Meaning*, The Asialink Centre, University of Melbourne and The Canberra School of Art Gallery, ANU, 1997, p. 5

<sup>3</sup>I While Gates has looked at ornament as a concern shared by Australian and Asian artists in a positive manner, I feel that she has simplified a very complex set of relationships in favour of a position that maintains ornamental decoration as the misunderstood 'other'. Each use of ornamental decoration (in the feminine, the crafts, the 'traditional') is for different reasons, and its marginal position exists only when seen through the eyes of the western, male spectator.

Some of the questions that initiated this research also resulted from my feeling that the assumed equation 'ornamental decoration=feminine' simplified what I saw as a much more complex issue. The relationship between ornamental decoration and form is well documented, particularly in architectural theory, but that which exists between ornamental decoration and gender is only touched upon and then it usually assumes an extreme stance of either denigration or elevation. There appears, in many of the articles I have read, to be an almost pathological hatred of its use. It is one thing to say 'I don't like that' or 'I don't think that works' with good reason, but to vehemently and passionately denigrate the use of ornamental decoration almost to the point of fanaticism (as for example with the work of Adolph Loos, Clement Greenberg or Donald Kuspit and their followers), suggests a disturbance to the *status quo* that is worthy of investigation.

In this thesis, I wanted to ascertain whether a link actually existed between ornamental decoration and the feminine that could be historically determined, how and why this had been generated and what the ramifications were for artists (both male and female) who employed it. Have artists exploited this assumed link, either as a critical strategy or for validating certain practices? Was there some way of using ornamental decoration as a subject without collapsing into the reductivist confines of equating ornament solely with the feminine? How do contemporary post-feminist, post-colonial artists use ornamental decoration?

This thesis is also an attempt to address the problem of women artists using ornamental decoration in the late twentieth century. The association of ornament with the feminine problematises its use for women: its use tends to be perceived as neither transgressive nor radical—and certainly not avant-garde—concepts that were held in high regard during an era that espoused originality and transgression as the hallmark of the modern artist. If ornamental decoration slides neatly into the realm of the 'feminine', then there is the danger that to use it simply underscores 'femininity'. Ornamental decoration as used by women is often seen as too 'traditional', too obvious, predictable and conservative. After all, it is using 'what comes naturally'. Or is it? Is ornamental decoration inherently 'feminine', or is it only perceived as such in an era when the art object itself is being challenged as lacking significance, and historical material is used to legitimate that claim?

Seen as a lack, devoid of sense, essentially feminine and extrinsic to form, ornamental decoration—and therefore its use—can only reinforce a marginal position. Yet to abandon its use risks failing to acknowledge or seriously discuss many of its



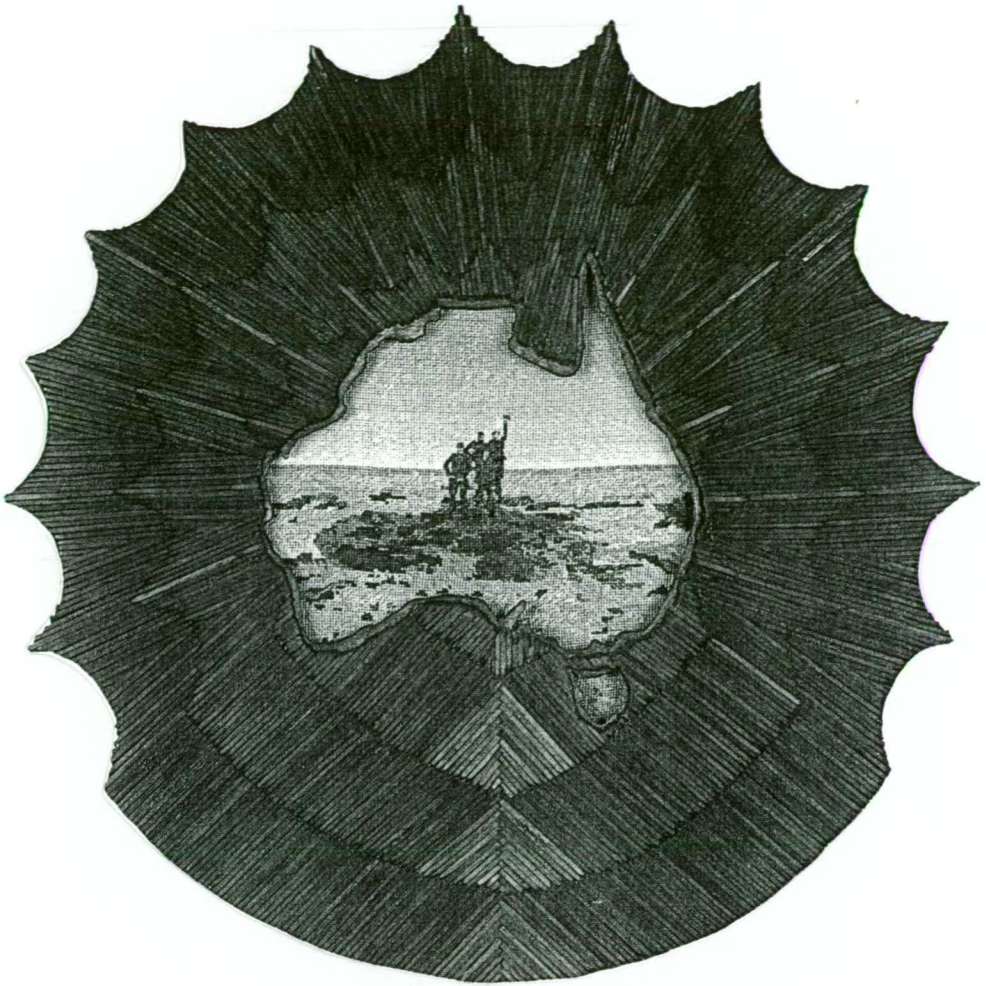


Fig. 3 Narelle Jubelin, *Boer War comrades, relaxing*, 1988

associated aspects—seduction, sensuality, materiality, pleasure, its link to sexuality and the body—that have influenced contemporary writers whose observations, comments and analysis challenge our concept of gender as a social construction. In the visual arts, such a risk needs to be taken.

If the paradigm of modernity embraced the avant-garde strategies of authorship and originality, ornamental decoration stands in opposition: it has no author, constantly borrows and generally continues its historical mission of reproducing motifs from the past. One can be assured it will continue in some form in the future. It coexists in linear, historical time, and cyclic, repetitive time. It can create synchronic connections for the viewer between the autonomous art object and the concerns of the external society into which that art object is placed. For example a frame surrounding a painting can be used to articulate a relationship between the image, the patron and their social position (Fig. 3), or can comment on contemporary events

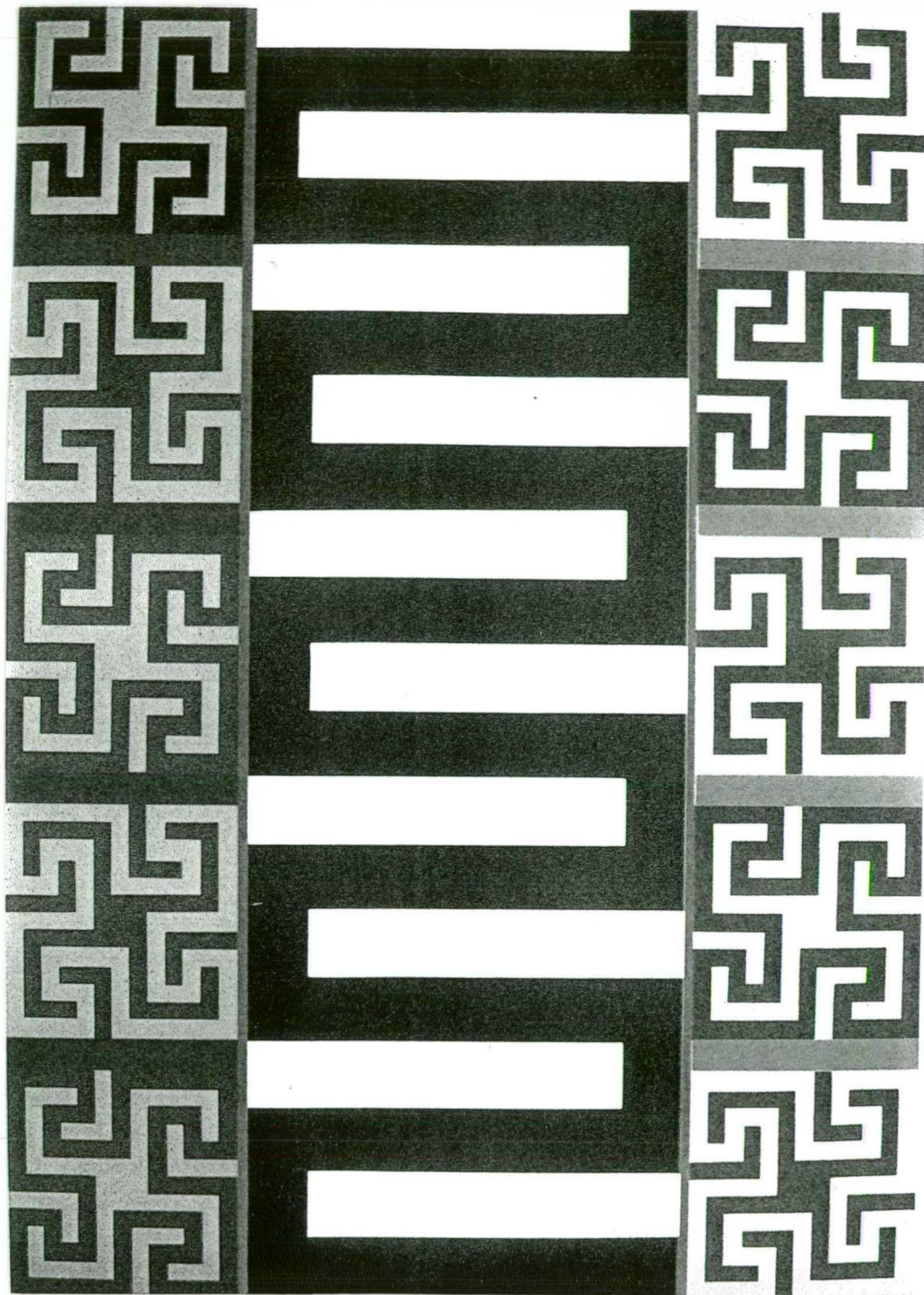


Fig. 4 Constanze Zikos, *Death Double*, 1992

that are wittily reflected in a 'decorative' work that speaks of colonisation and cross cultural dialogue. It also creates diachronic connections through history to previously encountered images, as a form of reverence for the traditional: ornamental decoration places heavy emphasis on the reproduction of slightly altered motifs (Fig. 4).



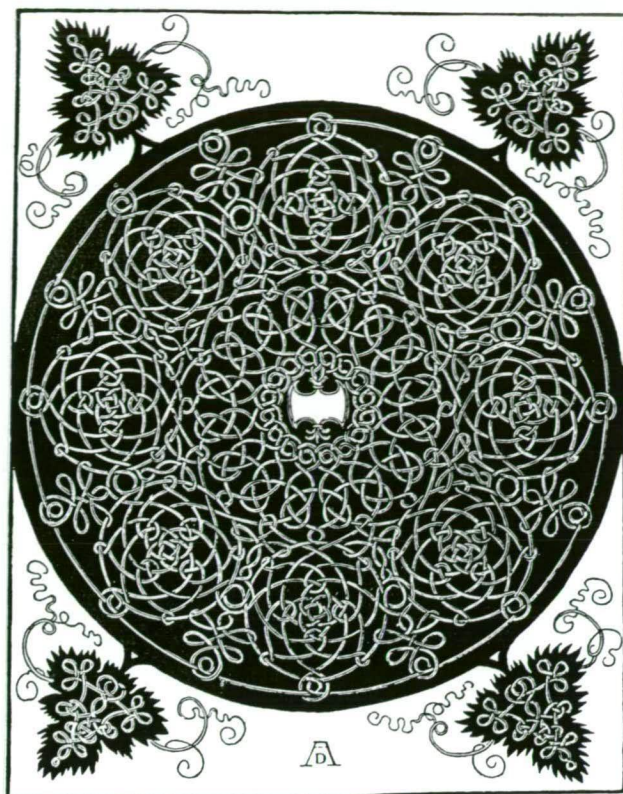


Fig. 5 Albrecht Dürer, woodcut, 1507

It is this reliance on previous models that gives ornament a tangible and celebrated connection to the past. Long before appropriation qualified the critical use of previous forms, ornamentalists relied upon making additions to or subtractions from the lexicon of models available to them. Pattern books, paintings and architectural designs were the subject matter, not nature—where one was continually obliged to invent anew. Repetition of a pre-existing model, with slight alterations and interpretations were (and are) the mark of ornament. The woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (Fig. 5) that has always seemed out of place within his oeuvre was copied from Leonardo da Vinci, who may very well have copied it himself (Fig. 6). To attempt to invent this design every time would be both wasteful of time and futile when a template or pattern already existed. To indulge in reproduction is honestly acknowledging the past, its influence and, in the spaces where difference occurs, what the present preoccupations of the artist may be. There is an acknowledged genealogy that is integral to the understanding of the work: the origins of the historical form are as important as how the contemporary voice then interprets it.



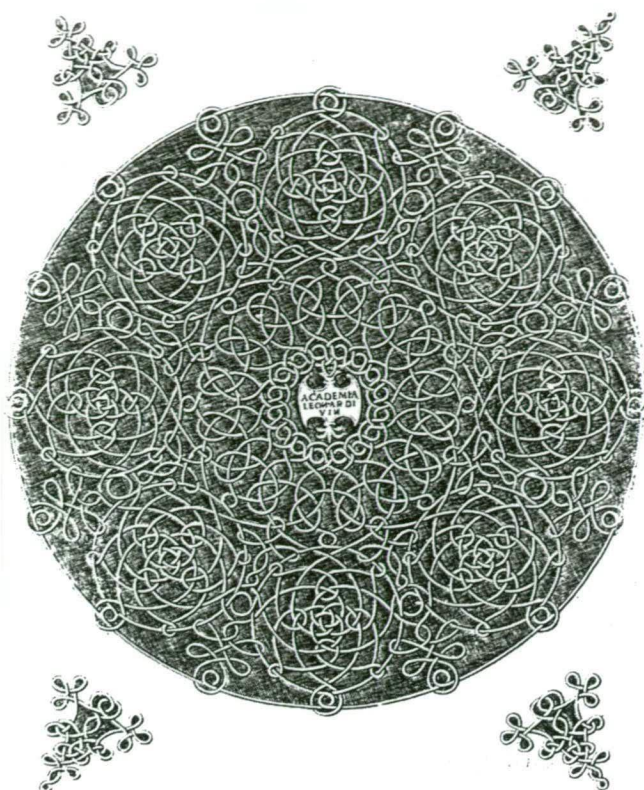


Fig. 6 Engraving after Leonardo da Vinci, about 1495

Ornamental decoration celebrates the perceptual, sensory realm, and operates in a pleasure zone of visual seduction and delight, masquerade and mimicry. The viewer's eyes are delighted, often seduced—and then abandoned—leaving one in a somewhat frustrated position, having voluntarily allowed oneself to be seduced in the first place. But that is part of the treacherous nature of ornamental decoration. Its capricious and inconclusive nature stands in contrast to the solemn sincerity of visual art that relies on literary narrative to satisfy its viewers' desires by providing a convincing closure: we read a story into the work, believe the content to be understood and leave satisfied. Ornamental decoration does no such thing: it is always *becoming*, never *concluding*. This certainly stands as a paradox, and may be one of the reasons why such negative criticism has been provoked.

Ornamental decoration is persistent throughout history. 'Like a bad cheque' it recurs in various guises and never entirely disappears, despite the best attempts by modernists to dispel it once and for all. Although it has been associated with the feminine, this has not always been the case, nor has it always been viewed negatively. Its misuse, or inappropriate use was more cause for concern. This

argument has its origins in the Antique, where the concept of *decorum* developed to criticise the excessive use of ornament and allow clarity to emerge; a similar argument was later reiterated when Neo-Classical writers denounced the Rococo as frivolous and decadent. It would appear that the twentieth century produced the most virulent arguments about ornamental decoration: Greenberg and others dismissed it because they saw it as diametrically opposed to abstraction, while it was defended equally vigorously by the feminist *Pattern and Decoration* movement that sought to insert a version of abstraction stemming from feminine practice, antithetical to the perceived hegemony. Only in recent years have successful attempts been made by visual artists (and endorsed by their critics) that reflect the position of ornamental decoration as fundamental to lived circumstances, and not necessarily needing to be excised to maintain a position of central power.

This can be indicated by the substantial amount of older material currently being reprinted to accompany the increased interest in pattern arising from contemporary post-modernist discourses. In Australia, the political emphasis has shifted from Europe and America to the tiger economies of Asia. This has also impacted on our perception of ornamental decoration in Australia. Rather than viewing ornamental decoration through the eyes of orientalism and colonisation, artists are making exchanges with neighbouring countries and discovering an image grounded in reality rather than fantasy. Many younger artists are investigating their own cultural and sexual histories and ornamental decoration is a means by which this can be identified and used in a critical manner. The reinterpretation of our own environments—bodies, houses, cities—has allowed a climate of curiosity to emerge where ornamental decoration holds a valid position. But to achieve this has not been without struggle. The eventual acceptance of ornamental decoration as integral, not as 'other', may indeed indicate that the historical hiatus that excluded it from a valid position within modernist discourse has been passed.

My aim in this thesis is to make explicit the historical basis of the connection between ornamental decoration and the feminine and reveal this as not just something inherently 'female', but a product of historical conventions and interpretation. I wish to show how this has impacted on the way artists have approached ornamental decoration, its reception in the public domain, and how contemporary artists have achieved a critical approach that both relies upon and is distinct from previous artists' and critics' interpretations. In continuing the theme's use, its evolution also continues, which provides insights into the acceptance not only of ornamental decoration in our society through visual art, but of the feminine as well.

In order to achieve my aims, I have structured the thesis into two sections termed 'diachronic' and 'synchronic'. This is in line with the development of my research and also for clarity. Part one is a diachronic evaluation of the subject which investigates the evolution of the link between ornamental decoration and the feminine through history. It comprises firstly an analysis of the terms 'ornament' and 'decoration' and a second more lengthy analysis traces the history of the feminisation and subsequent denigration of ornamental decoration through a discussion and comparison of historical and modern writers on the subject. It addresses the questions I initially proposed, how ornament has become connected to the feminine and indicates the implications for artists who choose to use it.

Part two is a synchronic critique that analyses the different strategies arising from the employment of ornamental decoration in visual art during the late twentieth century. It contains three sections that investigate various attempts to reinsert ornament into contemporary visual art. Specific attention is paid to the exploitation of the 'feminine', and the critical reception of these attempts. I will investigate the feminist rehabilitation of ornament through the *Pattern and Decoration* movement of the 1970s, where ornamental decoration was used to critique the modernist paradigm, but actually served to reinforce its reductive, essentialist position.

I also investigate contemporary uses of ornamental decoration where artists have used it in conjunction with the feminine to declare a position of difference through post-modern appropriation of imagery, where ornamental decoration, perceived as marginal, is rewritten to represent all marginalised 'others'; through the reinterpretation and reassessment of 'the suburban domestic', previously ignored as banal and uncreative and now a site of investigation in which suburban decorative iconography is an agent for change; and as the basis for a critique of gender and gender expectations that exploits the historic link between sexuality and ornament, and its more subtle use as a means of visual seduction. Here, reference will be made to contemporary feminist writings whose work seeks to understand and transcend the inherited dichotomy, for example the psychoanalytical writings of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray and the theorist Elizabeth Grosz. Kristeva's analysis of semiotics pertaining to the acquisition of language helps explain the mechanics of a dichotomy that perceives of ornamental decoration as the inferior term, and Grosz's re-reading of the body as a site of fluidity investigates the profound changes that impact on our received knowledge of gender as static. Grosz, and the French theorists Deleuze and Guattari, offer an alternative model for the body that can be used to critique the equation that ornamental decoration=feminine.

Although I am focussing on western visual art, specifically two-dimensional works, the material that has proven most helpful to my research has been architectural and body theory. This is understandable, given that architecture is the site where form/structure most obviously meets ornament/decoration, and body theory has contributed most to the deconstruction of this dichotomy. It runs the risk of being fatefully misinterpreted, however, as the conditions that give rise to convincing architectural argument do not necessarily pertain to painting. Visual material, which initiated my enquiries through the tapestries *Cybele* and *Flore* becomes increasingly important in the second part of the thesis, where the link between ornamental decoration and the feminine, once proven, can be scrutinised.



## 2: Diachronic evaluation

### 2:1: Analysis of the terms.

The eighteenth century Enlightenment that defined, clarified and objectified phenomena in an encyclopaedic manner was the same system of thought that denigrated to the periphery and trivialised as unimportant ideas of ornament and decoration.<sup>4</sup> The oft repeated polarities of male/female, culture/nature, centre/periphery, and form/decoration reduce and simplify a more complex dynamic to an 'essentialist' concept that defined one term against the other, which is still difficult to excise today. Such rationalisation extended to the demarcation of men's and women's work and the expectations of appropriate work for appropriate gender.<sup>5</sup>

This dichotomy becomes increasingly problematic when one term is valorised over the other, the secondary term then being denigrated as inconsequential. Patriarchal discourse valorises the terms appropriate to masculinity (culture, centre, form etc); the feminine terms are deemed oppositional and therefore inconsequential to the dominant discourse. The serious Enlightenment world of men and history was at odds with the extraneous frivolities of decoration, an idea which seems, on the whole, to have remained with us. 'Decorative' continues to be associated with the 'feminine', even (or especially) if the artist is masculine.

In this section I propose to look closely at the terms ornament and decoration and their associated concepts, in an attempt to analyse what they represent to us. This will help determine whether their meanings have changed since first appearing in our written language, and whether there is something hidden in their definition that recognises the feminine as integral to them.

Defining the terms 'ornament' and 'decoration' is problematic if you confine the discussion to contemporary usage, where they are almost interchangeable terms at the close of the twentieth century, and any differences appear to be superficial. Ornament is currently perceived as decoration, and decoration is perceived as

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<sup>4</sup> The first *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné de sciences, des arts et des métiers* was written by Denis Diderot and was published during the Enlightenment in France between 1751 and 1780. It was reviled by the Jesuits because its aim was to teach men how to think, not to believe. It became the foundation for objective truths, in that 'there were no innate ideas, but that our concepts were derived from experience through sensations', ie. theorising the sensorial. Harold George Nicholson, *The Age of Reason: 1700-1789*, Panther, London, 1968, p. 355

<sup>5</sup> An issue developed by Rozika Parker in *The Subversive Stitch*, The Women's Press, London, 1989

ornament. Surprisingly, contemporary writers, whose work has attempted to critically evaluate the role of ornament in the twentieth century, also make little or no distinction between the two.

Take, for example, Brent C. Brolin's definition from his 1989 book *Flight of Fancy: The Banishment and Return of Ornament*:<sup>6</sup>

Decoration – that which decorates or adorns; an ornament  
Ornament – anything serving to adorn; decoration; embellishment

Brolin was satisfied to base his definition on previous work by Noah Webster, yet I admit to finding it somewhat bizarre that he has left further analysis of the terms seriously unchallenged, considering that his subject matter was to address 'the lack of debate about the use of ornament—until our time' and devoted his entire book to this pursuit.<sup>7</sup>

In 1965 *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (so chosen because of its popular usage and particular historical position) provided the following definitions:

decorate, v.t. (-rable). Make beautiful additions to, be such an addition to (decorated style of architecture); invest (person) with badge of honour.

ornament. 1. n. Thing that adorns or is meant to adorn, quality or person whose existence or presence confers grace or honour; decorative work, embellishment; necessities for worship...2. v.t. Adorn, beautify.<sup>8</sup>

Some differences, for example a physical badge of honour as opposed to a quality that confers grace or honour and the 'necessities for worship' imply a possible historical differentiation, but on the whole the definitions are remarkably similar. The focus is on additive beauty, embellishment and adornment; which is precisely how the two would have been used.

Thus, if a mid-twentieth century definition is followed that conflates the two terms, 'ornamental decoration' appears as an unintended tautology, whereas previously a distinction existed that referred to the particular type of design and its mode of application. I would suggest that a disintegration of meaning has occurred resulting from a century of modernist thought having cleansed the words of any prior complexity or association beyond excess and superficiality to essential form. The definitions we have today have been created through the filter of modernist

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<sup>6</sup> Brent C. Brolin, *Flight of Fancy: The Banishment and Return of Ornament*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1985, p. 234

<sup>7</sup> Brent C. Brolin, *Flight of Fancy: The Banishment and Return of Ornament*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1985, p. 1

<sup>8</sup> *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1965

discourse. Before ornament and decoration became superfluous to form, and subsequently denigrated by modernist discourse, perhaps a meaning existed that distinguished the two to a greater degree? Perhaps it still exists in another culture?<sup>9</sup> Through exploring the etymology of the terms, that meaning can be partially revealed. It also uncovers several important issues pertaining to the link between ornamental decoration and the feminine.

Meyer, in his nineteenth century work *Handbook of Ornament* discussed the differences between ornament and decoration and it appears that decoration refers to action, and ornament, design:

The term "DECORATION" signifies the art or process of applying the various Elements to beautify Objects. It is also used to denote the completed result. Thus the artist, who is occupied in the "decoration" of a vase, may represent ornament upon it; and the ornament is then the "Decoration" of the vase.<sup>10</sup>

Decoration was associated with action, in this case the process of applying a design to an object with the intention of beautification. It is a transient activity, as with interior decoration, one that will recur next time it is required. Transience is not applicable to ornament in the same way: interior decoration is different to interior ornament. Ornament is granted a more permanent status; one can represent a type of ornament as if pulled from a library of ornamental designs—which is precisely what often occurred, and decoration is the appropriate use of this.

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<sup>9</sup> Oleg Grabar, in his analysis of Islamic ornament *The Mediation of Ornament*, is particular in separating the roles of each. However, in spite of his distinctions, I perceive Grabar's brief definitions to be problematic:

*Decoration*: anything applied to a structure or an object that is not necessary to the stability, use, or understanding of that structure or object.

*Ornament* (preliminary working definition): any decoration that has no referent outside of the object on which it is found, except in technical manuals.

By his definitions, decoration can be anything applied to an object, and is not necessary to the comprehension of that object. I would argue this point. On the one hand anything *can* be applied, but whatever is chosen usually refers to some aspect of the object that requires clarification by the artist. Decoration may not be necessary to understand an object as 'an object', but it often assists in comprehending that object in a more detailed manner—it can articulate a doorway, the beginning or end of a piece of writing, the wealth of a patron, the skill of an artist—according to whatever form it takes. Grabar's definition of ornament also denies ornament to have a role outside of the object on which it is found. It appears as a kind of hermetic device that can be called on at will from a technical manual to apply to an object and has no meaning outside of this use. This creates an ambivalent meaning: first, it suggests a valuable symbiotic relationship between ornament and its object which may prove useful when analysing later works of art that use such ornament as cultural signifiers, but secondly, it denies the possibility of this use, as he suggests ornament has no meaning outside the object on which it is placed. His definitions, once looked at closely, are problematic.

Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament: the A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*, 1989, Bollingen Series XXXV, 38, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1992, pp. xxiii-xxiv

<sup>10</sup> Franz Sales Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, originally published Carlsruhe, 1888; reprinted by Dover, New York, 1957, p. VII

*Decorate* comes from the Latin *decorare* 'beautify' and *decus*, 'what is becoming'; *decoration* derives from French, via the same late Latin root. Importantly, decoration has strong associations with propriety through the Latin *decere* (to be becoming) and its etymological proximity with decorum, from the Latin *decorus* what is seemly, fitting and proper.<sup>11</sup> Thus a firm connection is made between the term decoration and the idea of behavioural propriety, for to act with decorum is to behave in a fitting manner, to decorate is therefore to adorn fittingly. Both are required to be suited to the dignity or circumstances of the person or occasion—an argument taken up during the Antique with great passion.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, the contemporary argument of decoration being excessive to form is not necessarily borne out, for if decoration *behaves* itself and suits the occasion, its place is rightfully earned, and is indeed necessary. Problems arise if decoration *misbehaves*, is out of place or unseemly (large, gilded chandeliers in a small domestic house, for example) and the rules of decorum are put into action: inappropriate and silly behaviour is brought into line. It would appear that a little playfulness is acceptable, but too much is not. It is under these circumstances that decoration is criticised for being 'effeminate', even monstrous, and with such denigration, returns to behaving with propriety.

It would appear that historically there has been a continual shift in such paradigms, and the appropriateness of decoration varies accordingly. In a simplified manner, I have set out a table overleaf, illustrating what I see as the characteristics associated with ornamental decoration, decorum and (essentialist) gender:

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<sup>11</sup> See Robert Nelson's arguments in the catalogue *Ornament*, Craft Victoria, 1993, p. 8

<sup>12</sup> At the risk of sounding pedantic, the definition of these terms arose according to need, and various meanings made their appearance at different times in the English language. Decoration meaning the act of decorating, the fact or condition of being decorated appeared during late middle English, 1350-1469, but its meaning as a thing that adorns, an ornament, does not occur until over one hundred years later, 1570-1599. To provide with adornments, add colour or ornament to, or make more attractive only occurs in the late eighteenth century, as does the word decorative. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993



**Perceived relation between decoration, decorum and (essentialist) gender**

gender	'masculine'	'neutral'	'feminine'
<b>appropriate characteristics</b>	unadorned or undecorated emphasis on form geometric clarity straight lines, symmetry form follows function seriousness purity and morality public space	balance between decoration and form	adorned or decorated emphasis on surface <i>horror vacui</i> curvelinear, assymetry going 'over the top' frivolity decadence and excess private space
<b>movements or protagonists</b>	Atticists Classicism Iconoclasm extreme Modernism (eg. Mies van der Roe) Shaker style	Can be aspects of any movement	Orientalists Rococo Art Nouveau, Jugendstijl Secessionism some 1980s post- modernism

Table 1

Appropriateness (decorum) depends on the prevailing aesthetics at any particular time. A balance between ornamental decoration and form—a position deemed 'neutral'—would exist within the realms defined as 'masculine' or 'feminine' in any given movement. But this contemporary status can always be revised at a later date. Even Rococo, at the time, exhibited restraint in some decoration, although in retrospect it may appear 'over the top'.

If we follow that decoration is linked to appropriate use, at any time when the preferred characteristics are lack of adornment, *any* decoration will appear excessive and be open to criticism of 'effeminacy' in order to limit its use: 'neutral' skews towards the unadorned form. If on the other hand, the cultural preference is for decorated forms, 'neutral' resides closer to this. 'Neutral' is a relative term, residing as it can within any movement; so, by implication are the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine'. In retrospect, whole movements can appear 'masculine' or 'feminine', which may not actually be apparent at the time. We view our own time from within its structure, and are aware of its microclimate more than its position from an historical perspective.

Therefore, decoration itself is not inherently feminine, but it came to be associated with the feminine when it was deemed to be superficial and superfluous to the predominant mode: when it was 'excessive' to form. Then the criticism of

'effeminacy'—which implies feminine behaviour that is unrestricted to biological sex (its insidiousness is even capable of perverting rational men)—was brought into play, as a means by restoring order and propriety.

Decoration, linked to decorum, implies appropriateness and seemliness and by extension morality.<sup>13</sup> This applies equally to men as to women. Why should a connection then be made between decoration and the feminine? Perhaps it has to do with a mistrust of women by men under patriarchy, where women are seen to be the source of excessive and irrational behaviour among men. Metaphorically, decoration may be seen as a threat to proper behaviour as deemed by men. An historical problem may provide some insight that is as much to do with propriety and appropriate behaviour as with control against excesses. The question of male control over the family in patriarchal society, particularly control over the wife has been discussed since Vitruvius<sup>14</sup>, and various attempts at providing the right environment for this to occur have been similarly discussed. Vitruvius advocated segregated areas to carefully control architectural spaces and therefore human relations, and contemporary design suggests the domestic home where 'the family' coexists in privacy is the best place for maintaining control. If the woman's behaviour is controlled, and deemed appropriate and seemly, the man is acknowledged as head of the house and father of his children.<sup>15</sup> If she cannot be controlled, the family disintegrates along with his reputation.

Whatever is deemed to be a threat, or 'excessive' to the prevailing conventions of the time is brought into line through criticism of inappropriate behaviour. In the case of decoration, the criticism of effeminacy was used which led, ultimately, to its denigration as excessive to form.

Ornament, on the other hand, is derived from the Latin *ornamentum* (equipment, ornament) which in turn comes from *ornare* (adorn). Unlike decoration, ornament tends to deal more with objects and the overt suggestion of behaviour or manner—either appropriate or inappropriate—is not attached to its meaning. To illustrate this contrast: although one can have a person as well as a thing acting as an ornament

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<sup>13</sup> The most extreme example is the Shaker religion, where the fundamentalist movement has an aesthetic that allows no decoration whatsoever (nor any misconduct, sexual or otherwise).

<sup>14</sup> Marco Vitruvius Pollio, active during Augustus' reign

<sup>15</sup> The position of women, as distinct from men, is controlled through the use of architectural space, and is theorised in Alberti's *Della Famiglia*: 'I often used to express my disapproval of bold and forward females who try too hard to know about things outside the home and about the concerns of their husband and of men in general...wise men say a woman who spies too much on men may be suspected of having men too much on her mind, being perhaps secretly anxious whether others are learning about her own character when she appears too interested in them. Think for yourself whether either of these passions is becoming to a lady of unblemished honour'. Alberti, *Della Famiglia*, trans. Renee Neu Watkins as *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, USA, 1969, Book III, p. 209

'adding honour or distinction to his or her sphere', it would be insulting to be called a decoration in the same situation!<sup>16</sup> In this respect, there is an element of pride to ornament, but pride that comes as a result of a separate activity resulting in the person being described as 'an ornament'. The etymology of the word is not prescriptive as to how that activity is carried out, for example, decorum is not mentioned.<sup>17</sup>

In modern usage ornament, like decoration, appears aligned to the concept of a frivolous extra to the utility of the object concerned: as in a musical grace note added to the main melody, or an ornamental tree in the garden. Interestingly, this last botanical reference only appears in the English language at the beginning of the twentieth century, although the Enlightenment thinker Denis Diderot discussed his dilemma of choosing between intellectual and sensual pleasures through the metaphor of stately trees versus perfumed flowers.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps prior to the twentieth century a pleasurable sensual experience was considered to be as useful in the garden as other more utilitarian varieties, such as the vegetable patch or the fruit trees. It may not be coincidental that ornament of any kind—including trees—was deemed to be extraneous precisely during the rise of functionalism in the arts, at the beginning of this century.

From this discussion, ornamental decoration can be understood as 'adornments or embellishments that behave in an appropriate manner', in other words they are not *inherently* excessive, nor are they inherently feminine, but operate in conjunction with the substrate, be it architecture, painting, or decorative artefact. Their relationship could be described as symbiotic, fluid or complementary—not antagonistic—and responding to contemporary circumstances. The transformation of the meaning of the term 'decoration' from appropriate use of ornament, to ornament as excessive to form, is the product of a particular historical era which has severely simplified its significance. To reduce and separate ornamental decoration purely to that which is 'other' than form, as the feminine is 'other' to the masculine, risks losing many subtleties of meaning in preference to upholding a dichotomy which is easily understood.



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<sup>16</sup> I am thankful to Robert Nelson for his elucidating essay on ornament and decoration in the catalogue *Ornament*, Craft Victoria, 1993, p. 8

<sup>17</sup> Etymology and quotes from *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 1993

<sup>18</sup> See later chapter for further discussion on Diderot and ornamental decoration.

## 2:2: A history of the feminisation and subsequent denigration of ornament.

The terms decoration and ornament are not inherently feminine. At most 'decoration' indicates a moral directive for the *appropriate* use of adornment or embellishment. It is the *inappropriate* use of decoration, its irrational use in contradiction of the prevailing aesthetic values that stress 'appropriate' usage which resulted in criticism and condemnation of offending ornamental decoration as 'effeminate'. This is usually in retrospect, as the critics of the Rococo and of the 'over the top' penchant for ornament in the 1980s were to discover—for at the time it was the style, and *everyone was doing it*.

In retrospect, the gendering of decoration can be traced quite clearly, climaxing at the beginning of the twentieth century. This coincided with the beginnings of 'pure' modernism and the interest in functionalism—styles which advocated meaning and purpose, that invented new rather than repeating old forms—and were untainted by dishonest or polluting embellishment that appealed to the senses. It also coincided with the beginnings of abstraction, and it would seem that in order for abstraction to live, ornament had to die.

What follows is a chronological overview which shows the increasing denigration of ornamental decoration from appropriate to inappropriate use, and its increased association with the feminine. The question of whether the feminisation of ornamental decoration led to its denigration, or the denigration of ornamental decoration led to its feminisation does not prove to be straightforward. It is bound up with appropriate use, stylistic conventions and the position in which women were held at any one time. There is, however, one constant throughout history, whenever ornamental decoration was deemed inappropriate, it was chastised as 'effeminate'<sup>19</sup>. After the Enlightenment, and certainly during modernism, this became a truism and all forms of ornamental decoration came to be seen as 'feminine'.

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<sup>19</sup> I have not found one instance of ornamental decoration being accused of overt masculinity, of being too 'butch'. It is the apparent 'absence' of decoration which is decreed masculine but, as I will argue, this can also be perceived as a decoration—of smoothness—which is equally applied to a surface.

## 2:2:1: The Antique

The art of ancient Greece provided the canon by which classical style has been historically understood. Its aesthetic characteristics included clarity and simplicity of form, rational and logical use of space, elevation of the idealised human body which was generally male. Forms were based on nature and artistic invention sprang from this. There was an implication that artistic perfection could be reached through a canon of harmonious proportion and that moral perfection would follow. Ornamental decoration does have a place within such a canon, but only if it can be controlled and used with discipline, else it risks becoming a vice. Moral, political and social restraint are the marks of noble and uncorrupted society. Degeneracy is marked by the desire for sensation over intellect, irrational playfulness over sobriety. A style of art which defies logic and rationality and errs towards 'excess' is more than likely to be censured and labelled 'effeminate'; it is to be mistrusted by classically-inspired artists, who will invoke incantations from the elders of the antique to point out the dangers of following this path, and the potential demise of art (and society) into degeneracy. I propose to undertake an excursion into this territory, in order to assess how this has developed.

Since the seventh century BC, ornament had been associated with the 'orientalising' influence from colonies in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria and Phoenicia. Monsters and hybrids (sphinxes, lions and panthers) had been introduced to enrich the Greek visual vocabulary that had previously been based on a geometric style.<sup>20</sup> This applied as much to visual arts as literature. The Atticists argued against the 'oriental' style of speech as much as Vitruvius later argued against the degenerate use of hybrid monsters in wall paintings. Both shared a passionate mistrust of these 'other' influences that were otherwise embraced and enjoyed by their contemporaries.

The argument which developed around the use of language during Socrates' time (470-399 BC) hinged on the seductive powers of fine speech. Audiences were apparently so overwhelmed by the rhetorical gymnastics of sophistic oratory that they could not hear the arguments actually being put forward, resulting in the suspicion that ornament and flourish could be used effectively to hide baser purposes. The eloquent rhetorical style used in the senate disguised the real (and often not very appealing) content.<sup>21</sup> This sense of 'treachery masked by ornament' prompted long and passionate arguments for and against the use of ornament.

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<sup>20</sup> Gisela Richter, *A Handbook of Greek Art*, Phaidon, London, 1980, p. 297

<sup>21</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Phaidon, London, 1994, p. 19

The extreme style promoted by the Atticists rejected all use of 'orientalised' ornamentation, relying on the virtue of restrained, plain speaking as a means to clearly articulate various arguments. They proposed a kind of early rhetorical functionalism be applied to language, dispassionate and unladen with emotion and deceptively simple to create. The following description by Cicero (106-43 BC) reveals the basis of Attic style, and also lays the foundation for the concept of *decorum* to develop—appropriate style for appropriate conditions:

The...Attic orator...is restrained and plain, imitating common usage, though he really differs more from the untrained as it seems...At first sight that plainness of style seems easy to imitate, but once you have tried it you know that nothing is less so...In his speech he should be free from the fetters of rhythm...these should be used in other styles of speech but should here be quite abandoned. It should be loose, but not rambling, to move freely but not wander about. He should also avoid, so to speak, cementing his words together too smoothly, for the hiatus and the clash of vowels has something agreeable about it and shows the not unwelcome negligence of a man who cares more for the subject than for the words...however there is such a thing as careful negligence.<sup>22</sup>

*Decorum* also implied that a lack of adornment was not always appropriate, and sometimes a more flourishing use of language would suit. But, as the following passage suggests, it is the chaste and rational style that is preferred for plain and factual honesty. It is with Cicero that the first intimations of the future connection between ornamental decoration and the feminine occur. His metaphorical use of ornament was aimed at criticising the Atticist position.

Just as some women are said to be handsomer when unadorned—this very lack of ornament becomes them—so this plain style gives pleasure even when unembellished: there is something in both cases which lends greater charm, but without showing itself. Also all noticeable ornament, pearls as it were, will be excluded; not even curling-tongs will be used; all cosmetics, artificial white and red, will be rejected; only elegance and neatness will remain. The language will be pure Latin, plain and clear; propriety will always be the chief aim. Only one quality will be lacking, which Theophrastus mentions fourth among the qualities of style—the charm and richness of figurative ornament.<sup>23</sup>

The unadorned woman, whose plain and simple style is without artifice and remains natural, was used to argue for a clearer use of language: where one was not deceived by ruses. It also indicated a philosophical direction that would have application in other areas, including the arts that looked to the Antique as a source of 'truth'. Unbeknownst to Cicero, he suggested a pathway for future arguments to develop based on a dichotomy of honesty versus artificiality, where an elegant, neat and plain style was to be preferred to the use of noticeable ornament. But it is apparently with

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<sup>22</sup> Cicero quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Phaidon, London, 1994, p. 19

<sup>23</sup> Cicero quoted in Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Routledge, New York, 1989, p. 45



Fig. 7 *Kore*, c. 510 BC

some regret to Cicero that charm and richness had to be sacrificed alongside the falsifying curling tongs.

What is demonstrated is the use of ornament only where appropriate. In circumstances that favour austerity, the use of ornamental decoration can deflect from elegance and neatness and be viewed as seductive and improper. Ornament is aligned with excess when it does not follow the rules of decorum under all circumstances and, where a regime proffers that the only honest way is through purity and absence of ornamental decoration—such as that proposed by the Atticists—, it would appear that for propriety to prevail, ornament must be relinquished.

In the visual arts, as in political speech, parallels can be made. For example, in the female *Kore* (Fig. 7) ornament is granted acceptable, if not essential, status. The statue is draped in stylised ornamental folds that cover the body and reveal little of the underlying form. She is represented in an appropriately modest fashion for a





Fig. 8 *Kouros*, c. 540 BC

contemporary aristocratic woman in patriarchal society. In contrast, in the *Kouros* (Fig. 8) the male figure is revealed in 'unadorned' splendour, the canonical ideal of masculine form, his stylised hair being the only place where ornament can be seen. It is this absence of ornament that forces the viewer to confront the *Kouros*' form. The statue is equally stylised through the body being stripped of sinew, muscle or imperfection: an appropriate way to immortalise the male body as a warrior. In this way, the male body has a tautness and flawlessness applied to the surface, just as ornamental decoration is applied to the female body, and both show the 'appropriate', idealised form. Ornamental decoration was not, at this stage, totally dismissed. It was as appropriate for the *Kore* to be covered in ornamental folds as it was for the *Kouros* to be made devoid of imperfections.

Similar parallels can be made with architecture, where a structure's surface can be articulated through the application of ornamental decoration or through a veneer of pared-back austerity. Vitruvius' ten books on architecture, *De Architectura* (written between about 28-23 BC) are the earliest extant texts on architecture and were determining influences on later revivals of classical styles. For example, Alberti derived much of his own architectural text from it during the Renaissance. Vitruvius'



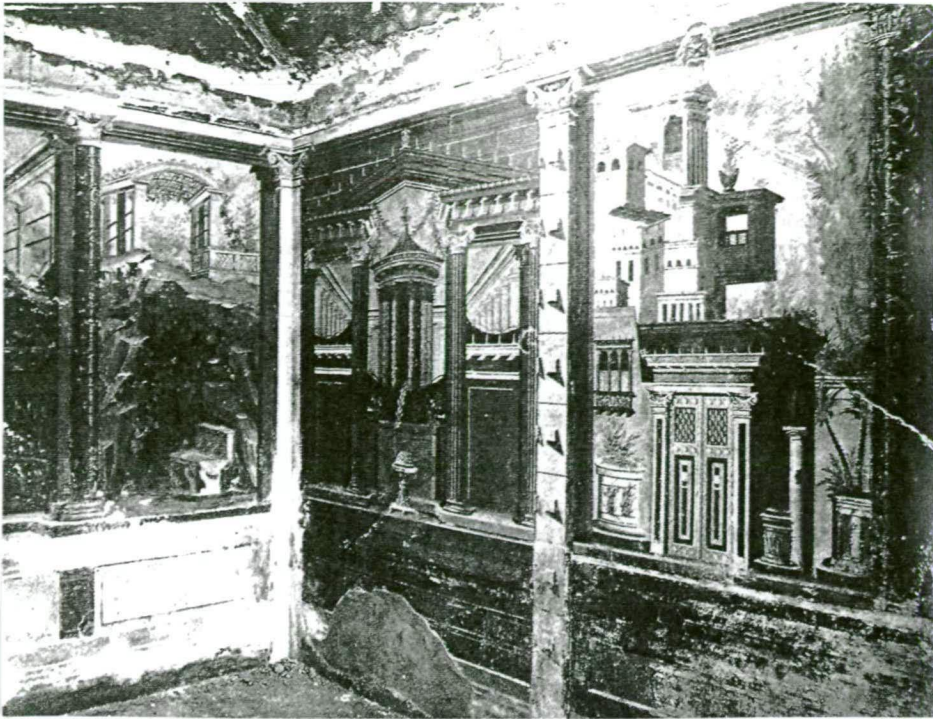


Fig. 9 Second Style of Pompeii (Corner of a painted bedroom in a villa at Boscoreale, near Pompeii), mid-first century BC, wall decoration

discussions of Augustan architecture combine direct observation and personal judgement, and form the basis of the classical tradition. His philosophical position owed much to Aristotle (384-322) and his mathematics of proportion were closely linked to Pythagorus' (active sixth century BC) geometry. His five principles of disposition, eurythm, symmetry, decor and distribution formed the basis of later interpretation, but number was also a significant underlying factor.

Order is the balanced adjustment of the details of the work separately and, as to the whole, the arrangement of the proportion with a view to a symmetrical result. This is made up of quantity...<sup>24</sup>

Number, measure, proportion and restrained elegance, used in conjunction with Aristotelian ideas of deduction and logic (but not always conclusive) provided the framework for Vitruvius, and thus for aspiring classicists. Against this strict and intellectual measure, there was a wide scope for art to be perceived as having irrationality or absence of logic.

Gombrich suggests that Vitruvius directed his critical attention towards the decorative frescos that were fashionable during the reign of Augustus (27 BC-AD 14). Where the Second Style of Pompeii (mid first century BC) (Fig. 9) favoured the imitation of architectural motifs and would appear to have been acceptable to

<sup>24</sup> Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, quoted in Robert Nelson, *Ornament*, Craft Victoria, 1993, p. 8

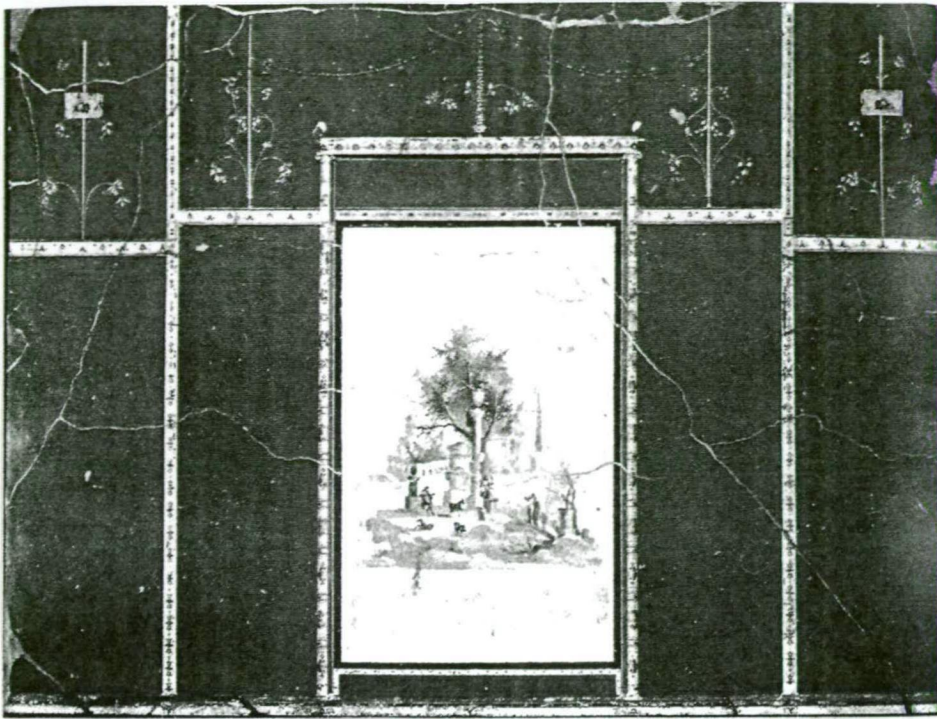


Fig. 10 Third Style (Painted wall decoration in the villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase), c. 10 BC, wall decoration

Vitruvius, the later Third Style combination of delicate ornament with landscape—as in the Boscotrecase (c.10 BC) (Fig. 10)—would not. In the following passage, Vitruvius berated artists who forsook nature for fancy, and logical space for irrationality.

But these imitations based upon reality are now disdained by the improper taste of the present. On the stucco are monsters rather than definite representations taken from definite things. Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curled leaves and volutes. Candelabra uphold picture shrines, and above the summit of these, clusters of thin stalks rise from their roots in tendrils with little figures seated upon them at random, or slender stalks with heads of men and animals attached to half the body...<sup>25</sup>

The imitation of architectural features was possibly inspired by stage-set designs and gave the appearance of increased space within the house. Although using a type of *proto-trompe l'oeil* technique that appeared consistent with logical space, in effect they falsified reality—the house was not as spacious as its decoration would suggest—but were acceptable because they followed the example of illusionism based on nature and upheld visual propriety, a metaphor for morality.

<sup>25</sup> Vitruvius, quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Phaidon, London, 1994, p. 20



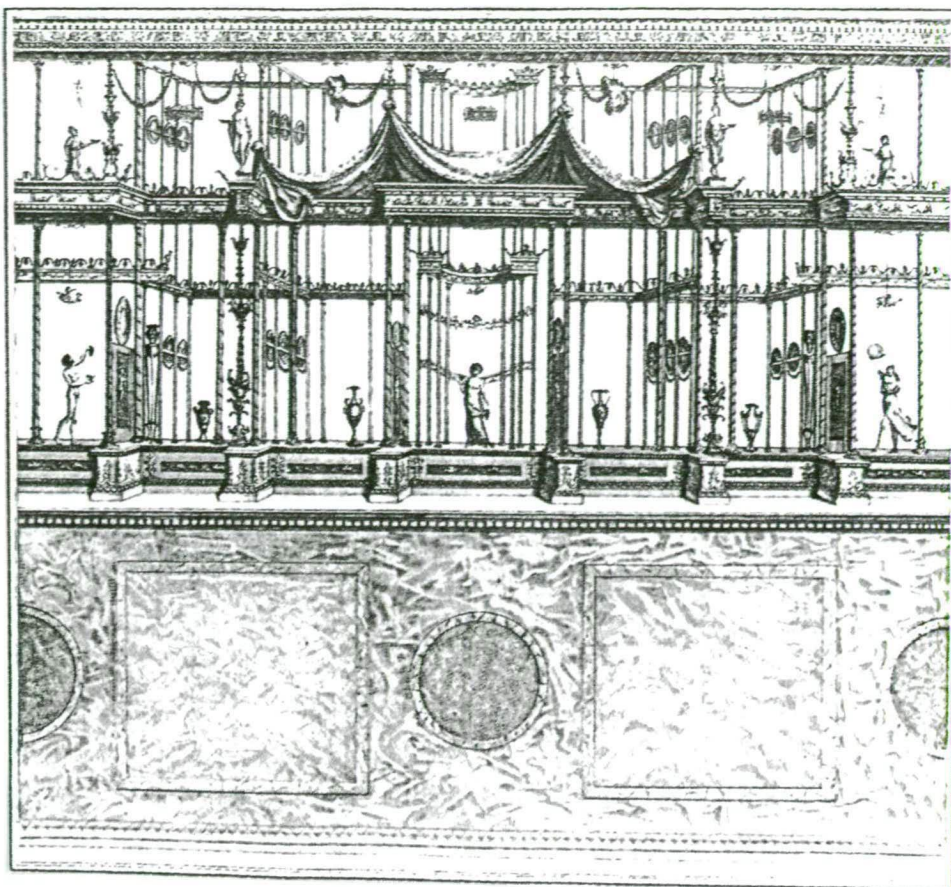


Fig. 11 Fourth Style (Wall decoration in the Golden House [*Domus Aurea*] of Nero AD 64-68)

The 'honest' use of playful exaggerations that delighted the eye (and teased the mind) were less acceptable, and the exaggerated distortions that became known as grotesque style, to Vitruvius would have been abominable. It follows from Vitruvius' arguments that he would have deplored the even more fanciful and convoluted decorations of the Fourth Style applied by the court artist Fabullus in Nero's Golden House (the *Domus Aurea* built 64-68 AD, Fig. 11)<sup>26</sup> that also inspired later Renaissance artists.

...such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been. On these lines the new fashions compel bad judges to condemn good craftsmanship for dullness. For how can a reed actually sustain a roof, or a candelabrum the ornaments of a gable, or a soft and slender stalk a seated statue, or how can flowers and half-statues rise alternately from roots and stalks? Yet when people view these falsehoods, they approve rather than condemn.<sup>27</sup>

Frivolous, irrational decoration appeals more to the sense of the absurd rather than the sense of the intellect. It did not appear to have logic, therefore it could not be understood. It encouraged pleasurable delight of the senses, therefore could not

<sup>26</sup> J. A. Wilson in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray, *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, p. 784

<sup>27</sup> Vitruvius quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Phaidon, London, 1994, p. 20

embrace high morality or virtue, or be capable of undergoing any critical analysis beyond physical or retinal sensation. Vitruvius suggested that the arts suffered as a result: good craftsmanship appeared dull by comparison with fripperies that provided instant gratification but no substance. What was more insulting was the pronouncement of excellence which had been made by 'bad' judges. What moral declarations are being applied in this statement? What were the opinion of the 'good' judges at the time? There is little evidence to suggest another opinion.

The critic Quintillian (35-100 AD) reacted against the degeneracy that was perceived to have pervaded Hellenistic style in the first century which, according to the Elder Seneca, had three causes: the loss of a republican freedom (political), lack of discipline among youth who sought sensation rather than discipline (moral), and a natural decline of a society that cannot remain indefinitely at its peak.<sup>28</sup> It is the second moral cause that interests me most, as it relates the argument of decorum (or its lack) to the perceived discontent and deterioration of the society, as witnessed through the literary and visual arts—particularly if Vitruvius' argument is followed.

Quintillian extends Cicero's metaphoric use of the feminine and points to a possible cause of this degeneration:

But such ornament must, as I have already said, be bold, manly and chaste, free from all effeminate smoothness and the false hues derived from artificial dyes, and must glow with health and vigour.<sup>29</sup>

Ornament can be manly, and exhibit the high moral ground of chasteness and boldness; the crime of effeminate smoothness—not exhibiting the reality of the body, its hair, muscle, sinews and bones—associates lack of truth-to-reality (falsity) with artificial dyes and abasement; the smooth, shaved body denies its actuality. If manly ornament is chaste and glows with health and vigour, effeminate (not *feminine*, per se, but with a definite tendency) is suggested as a possible pollutant of this pure state, and degeneracy and deceit will surely follow. There is little room for sensuality and its accompanying traits without it degenerating into falseness and decadence.



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<sup>28</sup> Donald Russell in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray, *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, p. 657

<sup>29</sup> Quintillian quoted in Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Routledge, New York, 1989, pp. 44-45

## 2:2:2. Quattrocento and Renaissance

Vitruvius' text was first published in latter-day Rome around 1486, although copies of it had been known during the middle ages. The Quattrocento architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404?-1472) was certainly aware of it. Raphael (1483-1520) directed the production of an Italian translation around 1520, a project that indicated the influence and esteem of Vitruvius' text within the artistic circles of the Renaissance.<sup>30</sup> Many of Vitruvius' concepts are evident during this time, particularly the development and use of the architectural orders and his ideas of decorum (propriety and appropriateness). Ornament received special attention in Renaissance texts, with ambivalent interpretations as to its use.

Alberti's discussion on the use of ornament in relationship to beauty in *De re Aedificatoria* (On Architecture) was inspired by Vitruvius' text, and his argument was by no means absolutely antagonistic to its use. Alberti saw ornament appropriately used as a means to increase the beauty of a person, an object, or an architectural building that would be aesthetically unsatisfactory if left unadorned.

The Critick in Beauty found that there was something deficient or superfluous, in the Persons he disliked, which was not compatible with the Perfection of Beauty, which I imagine might have been obtained by Means of Ornament, by painting and concealing any Thing that was deformed, and trimming and polishing what was handsome; so that the unsightly Parts might have given less Offence, and the more lovely, more Delight.<sup>31</sup>

Beauty was essential to Alberti's aesthetic pursuit. If something was not naturally beautiful, it was the artist's responsibility to undertake an improvement of its status by means of ornament. Alberti distinguished between 'natural' beauty and 'assisted' beauty, and indicated that although ornament ideally assisted in 'trimming and polishing what was handsome', it could also be used to cover flaws that would otherwise mar the beauty of an object. Both uses of ornament satisfied the Critick in Beauty, although one dealt with masking over the natural (deformed) state, and the other with polishing it. Both were necessary to accommodate the Perfection of Beauty. I would suggest an underlying subtext is present in Alberti's *De re Aedificatoria* that echoes Cicero's wariness of the overly ornamented (excessive and artificial), as opposed to the more 'natural' Attic style (elegant and intellectual). A deficiency may be disguised through ornament, but there is always the potential for its treacherous (mis)use by means of masquerade.

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<sup>30</sup> John Fleming, Hugh Honour, Nikolaus Pevsner, *Dictionary of Architecture*, Penguin, London, 1967, p. 236

<sup>31</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Alec Tiranti, London, 1965, Book VI, chapter II, p. 113

...we may define Ornament to be a Kind of an auxiliary Brightness and Improvement to Beauty. So that then Beauty is somewhat lovely which is proper and innate, and diffused over the whole body, and Ornament somewhat added or fastened on, rather than proper and innate.<sup>32</sup>

Here ornament is 'somewhat added and fastened on' and seen as an addition to form which ideally has as its very substance proper and innate beauty. Alberti does not see this as necessarily a pejorative, but essential to the completion of an object that would be appreciated by a superior man:

...the Pleasure and Delight which we feel on the View of any Building, arise from nothing else but Beauty and Ornament, since there is hardly any Man so melancholy or stupid, so rough or unpolished, but what is very much pleased with what is beautiful, and pursues those Things which are most adorned, and rejects the unadorned and neglected; and if in any Thing that he Views he perceives any Ornament is wanting, he declares that there is something deficient which would make the Work more delightful and noble.<sup>33</sup>

Alberti saw nobility coexisting with delight—they were not yet opposed to each other. More interesting perhaps is the comment on the appreciation of ornament by men of awareness. Its link during the early Renaissance is with intelligent masculinity, 'men remarkable for their wisdom', yet Alberti's comments based on the appropriate use of ornament also reflect a certain mistrust of inappropriately used or excessive ornament, which could be perceived as dangerously effeminate and looked on with disdain. Alberti suggested that the use of ornament is perfectly proper behaviour in the quest for beauty—ornament in the service of creating a more beautiful person or place. Yet its extension, ornament as concealing, as creating artifice, relates to the earlier criticism by Cicero of 'effeminacy' that indicated an impediment to the desired qualities of honesty and propriety in an ideal (masculine) state.

The antique was a source of written documentary material and subject matter for Renaissance artists. The *Domus Aurea*, for example was among the buildings excavated in the late fifteenth century and ignited a fascination for the antique that drew many artists to Rome for the purpose of study. On a visit to Rome, Raphael was overwhelmed by the impressive nature of the antique and the influence it had on artists such as Michelangelo:

what divine gifts there dwelt in the hearts of the men of ancient times, it does not seem unreasonable to believe that many things which to us would appear to be impossible were simple for them.<sup>34</sup>

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32 Leon Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Alec Tiranti, London, 1965, Book VI, chapter II, p. 113

33 Leon Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Alec Tiranti, London, 1965, Book VI, chapter II, p. 112

34 Attributed to Raphael in 'A Report to the Pope on Ancient Rome' (Leo X 1513-1521) reprinted in *A Documentary History of Art*, vol. I, Elizabeth Gilmore Holt (ed.), Princeton University Press, New



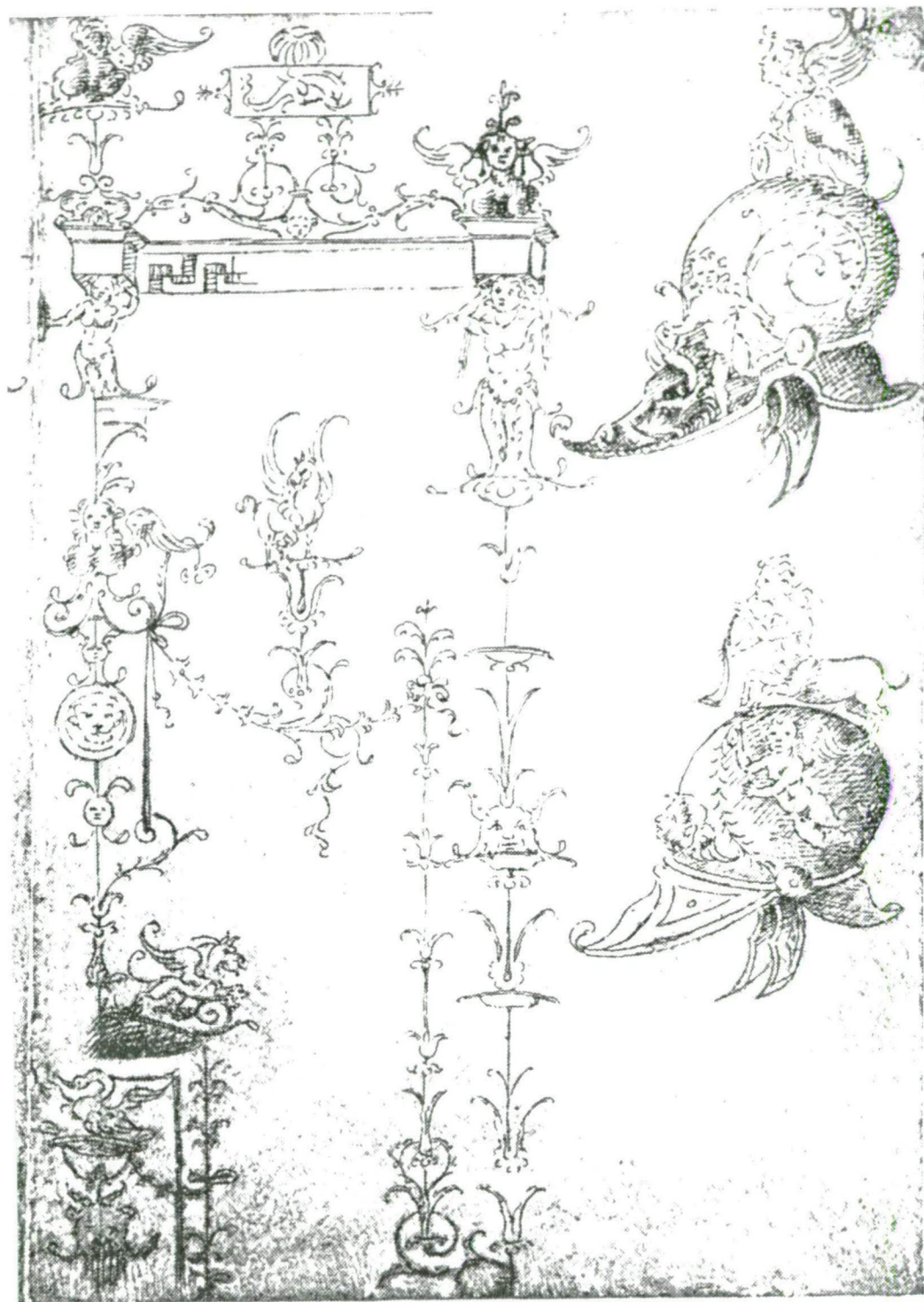


Fig. 12 Giuliano da Sangallo, *Drawing after Roman Grotesques in the Domus Aurea*, c. 1505

The novelty of the Fourth Style employed in the *Domus Aurea* (Fig. 12) was to inspire both Raphael and his student Giovanni da Udine who 'were both seized with astonishment at the freshness, beauty, and excellent manner of these works'.<sup>35</sup>

Jersey, 1981, p. 288

<sup>35</sup> Attributed to Vasari in John Fleming, Hugh Honour, Nikolaus Pevsner, *Dictionary of Architecture*, Penguin, London, 1967, p. 785





Fig. 13 Giovanni da Udine, detail of a pilaster from the Logge Vaticane, Rome, completed 1519

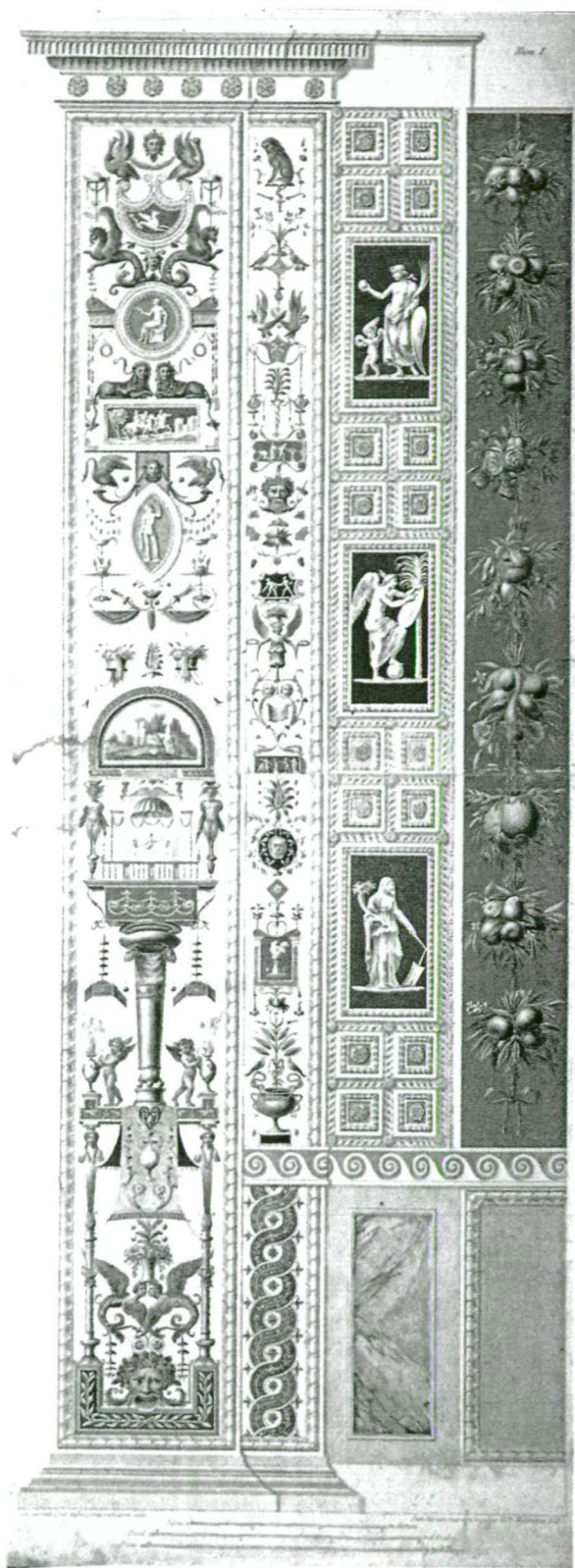


Fig. 14 Giovanni Ottaviani, after Pietro Camporesi and G. Savorelli, *Detail of the Decoration of Raphael's Loggias*, hand coloured etching, 1772-7



The airy architectural forms used in the wall decoration became the models for the decorative devices in the Vatican, in a scheme that integrated architecture, decoration and painting (Figs. 13, 14).

Besides adorning the palace with many grotesques and variegated pavements, Raphael also made designs for the papal staircases and the loggias which Bramante had started but left unfinished because of his death... This work was so beautiful that Raphael was then put in charge of all the works of painting and architecture being done in the Vatican.<sup>36</sup>

Such an integrated decorative style was both innovative and visually functional: the vast compartments were united through the use of ornamental decoration that provided visual links between the various themes in each room. The distinction between easel painting and decoration was yet to become apparent; both painting and ornamental decoration worked in tandem with each other relating to the specifics of the architecture, and both referenced the antique.

This manner of unifying compartments through decoration shares several features with more recent stylistic developments, for example the nineteenth century totalising concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is generally associated with feminine 'lived' interiors and fluid spaces where a hierarchy of artistic forms is not immediately apparent. It is not insignificant that we see it in the Vatican city state, bastion of patriarchy.

Raphael's successful scheme of decorations in the Vatican, coupled with Alberti's concept of ornament as integral to architecture (but not without reservations) indicates that ornament as 'feminine' was less of an issue for some artists such as Raphael. His comment '...there still remains to us the skeleton of those things, though without their ornament—the bones of the body without the flesh, one might say'<sup>37</sup>, implies an holistic view of ornamental decoration that is acknowledged as essential for the full appreciation of beauty. Our twentieth century concept of ornament is as clothing that hides the honest, naked, canonical (male) body, which can be traced to the ancient Greek clothed *Kore* versus the naked *Kouros*, but Raphael suggests it as the flesh covering the skeleton—pleasurable, sensuous and absolutely necessary. One cannot exist without the other.

However, not all Renaissance artists agreed. It is almost with malicious delight that Vasari details Raphael's early demise because of his love for women and 'excessive' sensuality:

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<sup>36</sup> Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, Penguin, UK, 1968, p. 311

<sup>37</sup> see note 34

Meanwhile, Raphael kept up his secret love affairs and pursued his pleasures with no sense of moderation. And then on one occasion he went to excess, and he returned home afterwards with a violent fever which the doctors diagnosed as heat-stroke<sup>38</sup>

Such a notorious ending would no doubt have garnered much publicity, and served as a warning for artists who strayed into the dangerous territory of women and pleasure. His enthusiastic use of ornamental decoration may have indicated his predilection for this sensual domain and, in effect served to write his sexuality boldly across the Vatican. For Raphael's critics, the ornamental decoration he employed indicated a weakness for the sensuous that ultimately led to his downfall.<sup>39</sup> For other artists it proved that it was far better to show fidelity to one's art and follow a higher ambition. Michelangelo's (1475-1564) sonnet to Tommaso Cavalieri could almost have been a direct criticism of Raphael's behaviour:

The love for what I speak of reaches higher;  
Woman's too much unlike, no heart by rights  
Ought to grow hot for her, if wise and male.<sup>40</sup>

A higher love, a transcendent love capable of being understood by wise men had no need for women, and any form of art that suggests the possibility of 'feminine' diversions (ornamental decoration, for example) needed to be treated with suspicion. Men who were less than wise may succumb to their unworthy charms.

Michelangelo's disdain for the 'feminine' is further revealed through his criticism of Dutch art which reveals a certain bias towards a particular type of art that expressed grand themes and *historia* or narratives. The use of the senses is rejected in favour of paintings that reveal an intellectual literary narrative. The following statement by Portuguese writer Francesca de Hollanda, is attributed to Michelangelo:

The Flemish pictures please women, especially the very old and the very young ones, and also monks and nuns, and lastly men of the world who are not capable of understanding true harmony. In Flanders they paint, before all things, to render exactly and deceptively the outward appearance of things. The painters choose, by preference, subjects provoking transports of piety...but most of the time they paint what are called landscapes with plenty of figures. Though the eye is agreeably impressed, these pictures have neither art nor reason; neither symmetry nor proportion...In short, this art is without power and without distinction; it aims at rendering minutely many things at the same time, of which a single one would have sufficed to call forth a man's whole application.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Raphael's sexual indulgences of the flesh lead to his untimely death from fever (perhaps assisted by overzealous surgical 'bleeding') aged 37. Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, Penguin, UK, 1968, p. 320.

<sup>39</sup> Louis Sullivan's career suffered a similar fate in the late nineteenth century, where his decorative scheme was criticised for its overt and dubious sexuality. (see chapter 2:2:5).

<sup>40</sup> Michelangelo, from *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, translated by Creighton Gilbert, Robert N. Linscott (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1980 sonnet 258, p. 145. Reprinted in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, Icon Editions, Harper Collins, USA, 1992, p. 99

<sup>41</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 150-1

The inference is that Dutch art with its detailed surfaces pleases women, and is without symmetry, proportion, art or reason. The corollary is that the world of Italian art is for men, and is reasonable and proportioned, canonised by Alberti's perspective that separates the object from the subject, with a good deal of distance in between. The Dutch, 'feminised' mode of painting, of capturing the world as observed—not necessarily as imagined or idealised—relies on the viewer being physically close to the subject, intimate enough to peer into the detailed image in order to be convinced by the painted illusion of surfaces and textures.<sup>42</sup> Rather than a monocular perspectival view onto the world that relies on symmetry or proportion and emphasising objectivity—whether real or imagined—scanning and close viewing are necessary in order for vision to play across the surfaces in an erotic, almost tactile sense that has little to do with a gaze from afar. In fact, that is the opposite intention: this is visual seduction of the viewer. The spectator is enticed into being in close proximity to the image in order to visually experience the work, and distance is anathema to this mode of working. Materiality, whether real or implied is uppermost, and it is this which provides the most satisfying visual experience. Yet, under conditions whereby 'reading' paintings in a narrative fashion are emphasised, it is derided as a peculiarly 'female thing', having neither art nor reason.<sup>43</sup>

Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) also relied on Vitruvius' texts for his theoretical stance: 'I propose to myself Vitruvius both as my master and guide, He being the only ancient Author that remains extant on this subject'.<sup>44</sup> His captivation with the antique was exemplified through an architectural style that was smooth, elegant and intellectual, and observed a strict symmetry based on mathematical proportions. Unlike Raphael, his critique of ornament suggests that it has become associated with 'abuses' and impropriety and he warns of the imminent slide into barbarian behaviour:

Book I. Chapter XX. *Of the errors and abuses introduced into Architecture.*  
Having set down all these ornaments of *Architecture* which consist in the right use of the five Orders...it seems to me not unfit here to inform the Reader of many Abuses, which have been formerly introduc'd by *Barbarians*, are observed to this day; and this I do, to the end that the Studios in this Art may avoid them in their own Works, and be able to take notice of them in those of others.<sup>45</sup>

Palladio's moralising tone is comparable to that of the Hellenistic critic Quintillian—both writers perceived a decline in art after the apotheosis of their respective eras.

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<sup>42</sup> My fascination with Dutch art stems from this 'peering into' an image, fascinated by the almost magic surface of paint where the painted sheen of a still-life grape merged with the image of it, and the two seemed hardly separated.

<sup>43</sup> Svetlana Alpers discusses this further in her article 'Style is what you make it', in Berel Lang (ed.), *The Concept of Style*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, n.d.

<sup>44</sup> Andrea Palladio, preface to *The Four Books of Architecture*, first published 1570

<sup>45</sup> Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture*, Book I, Chapter XX

For Palladio, the Renaissance had passed, and the art produced during the period known as Mannerism contributed to what he saw as an increasing degeneracy. Although attempting to reinstate the splendours of the antique, even his own work could not escape Mannerist tendencies, and was viewed as 'impure' by later Neo-Classical artists. In his criticism, he identified the contemporary stylistic fashion for 'cartooshes', as a particularly harmful vice. The 'cartooshes' to which he refers would appear to be similar to the decorative devices used to disrupt space in a whimsical fashion, such as those used in the Fourth Style of the *Domus Aurea*: playful, irrational and, quite possibly, directing critical attention to the severity of the architecture itself by visually deconstructing it from within.

One ought not to place those Modern Ornaments call'd *Cartooshes*, which are certain *Scroles* that are but an eye-sore to the Artists and give others only a confused Idea of *Architecture*, without any pleasure or satisfaction; nor indeed do they produce any other effect than to increase the Expences of the Builder... Besides that, as it is requisite to uphold a great weight with something solid, and fit to support it: so such non-sensical things, as *Cartooshes*, are altogether superfluous, because it is impossible that the Joysts, or any other Timber whatsoever, could really perform what these represent; and since they are feigned to be soft and weak, I know not by what rule they can be put under anything heavy and hard.<sup>46</sup>

One is left with a sense of absolute sobriety, intellectual and economic rationalism and a definite lack of humour. Palladio's concern for the 'Expences of the Builder' was an economics for materials alone that did not appear to have budgeted for pleasure, enjoyment or irony. However, his revulsion cannot be based purely on fiscal economics, for as Vitruvius pointed out, ornamental decoration can disguise poor craftsmanship, and it can be argued that it is the lack of ornamental decoration that leads to increased expense as the art work would necessarily rely on the perfection of good craftsmanship—perfect joins, immaculate finishes and even surfaces. How expensive is it to purchase and maintain a piece of minimal art? Ornamental decoration is not necessarily more expensive, and Palladio's criticism must have another cause. I would suggest it would be impossible for a man who upholds the antique and who views symmetry and number to be the canonical criterion by which intellect and rationality are expressed, to be reconciled with the fripperies of non-sensical asymmetric and illogical decorations. The Mannerisms that played ironically with the canons of the antique were to Palladio preposterous in the extreme, and were labelled 'superfluous' and 'impossible'. What is worse, they would visually obliterate the meaning of his solid architecture.

To return to the orders and harmonious proportions of the antique was the only method for Palladio and, in respect of temple ornament, the idea of propriety was again invoked. Propriety meant not that ornamental decoration was itself an

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<sup>46</sup> Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture*, Book I, Chapter XX

unnecessary or problematic addition, nor even feminine, but needed to be used according to the situation being addressed. Hence:

(i)n the disposing of their Ornaments also, they used extraordinary consideration to what God they were building: on which account they made the Temples of *Minerva*, *Mars* and *Hercules*, of Dorick work; because Fabricks without exquisiteness or softness were suitable, they said, to such deities, who presided over War. But they maintain'd that to *Venus*, *Flora*, the *Muses*, the *Nymphs*, and the most delicate Goddesses, Temples ought to be rear'd that agreed best to the bloomy, tender, and virginal age; wherefore to these they consecrated the Corinthian Order, being persuaded that the finest work and the most florid, adorn'd with leaves and *Volutas*, was agreeable to such an age.<sup>47</sup>

However, there was one crucial difference that impacted on the presentation of ornamental decoration in respect of decorum: the ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped several gods and goddesses whereas in Catholic Rome there was, and remains, only one—traditionally depicted as male. So 'propriety' or decorum could be applied to a variety of situations according to the deity concerned, a situation which would never be permissible in Christianity: 'propriety' must always address the masculine.<sup>48</sup> In a polytheistic society, the balance between 'feminine' and 'manly' decoration would shift according to the object (temple, house, institution), the patron, the subject (god or goddess, men's or women's chambers) and its requirements (at war or at peace, triumphant, solemn). Even Palladio recognised that in a monotheistic society, there are strictures that limit the interpretation of ornaments within a temple:

We therefore, who have no false Gods, should, in order to preserve a decorum about the form of Temples, chuse the most perfect and excellent; and seeing the round form is that (because it alone among all figures is simple, uniform, equal, strong, and most capacious) we should make our temples round...<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, Palladio chose the circular form as the most appropriate shape for the monotheistic Christian temple, as the most perfect and excellent form in which to worship and celebrate a faith based on a god gendered masculine. How times change, in the twentieth century the rounded form has been associated with the idea of 'female imagery'—circles, domes, eggs, spheres...<sup>50</sup>



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<sup>47</sup> Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture*, Book IV, Chapter II

<sup>48</sup> The two female presences in Christianity, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen are elevated through their relationship to Christ.

<sup>49</sup> Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture*, Book IV, Chapter II

<sup>50</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'What is Female Imagery?' in *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, Dutton, New York, 1976, p. 81

## 2:2:3: Rococo and Neo-Classical

The men of the eighteenth century Enlightenment employed philosophical argument to reassess the hitherto unquestioned role of tradition, and focussed instead on reason and individualism. Their conclusions shook the very foundations of European religious, social and political institutions. In particular the church took exception to an intellectual debate that strayed from the pursuits of theology and careered towards philosophy. This was to have serious repercussions for Enlightenment thinkers. Denis Diderot (1713-1784) for example had one of his publications burned, and was spurned as a 'free thinker'.<sup>51</sup> Rather than being satisfied with the canonical view espoused by the church, the men of the Enlightenment determined to classify and codify according to empirical and historical material: they were men of the world, and the spirit would follow.

One of the major areas which underwent reassessment was aesthetics, specifically, the possibility that there could be an objective means by which beauty, for example, could be ascertained as an absolute. This had reverberations in other areas, for once beauty was defined, it could be measured against, and if something so subjective as beauty could be measured, it could theoretically be possible to reduce everything to a definition deduced through reason.

Alongside this search for quantification of qualities, debates raged between the advocates of the Rococo style of the first half of the eighteenth century and Neo-Classicism of the latter half. Rococo<sup>52</sup> appeared around the time of Louis XV and was defined earlier this century as 'Having the characteristics of Louis Quatorze or Louis Quinze workmanship, such as conventional shell-and scrollwork and meaningless decoration, *excessively or tastelessly florid or ornate*' (my italics).<sup>53</sup> The style originated in France and spread to Germany and Austria (Frederick the Great was an admirer and his palace *Sanssouci* in Potsdam was decorated in the most elaborate Rococo style, Fig. 15) but it was never really taken up in England or Italy.

Neo-Classicism arose from a certain disenchantment with the excesses of Rococo, and while it is not within the scope of this thesis to argue this further, I would like to put forward some of the arguments that arose from the criticisms levelled at each style, as both share interest in the use and/or misuse of ornamental decoration and

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<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Gilmore Holt (ed.), *A Documentary History of Art*, vol. II, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1981, p. 311

<sup>52</sup> Named after the French *rocaille* meaning rock-work or shell-like encrustations

<sup>53</sup> This definition was purposely taken from *The Oxford Dictionary*, 1909, a period when the impact of the emergent early modernist style was strongly felt.

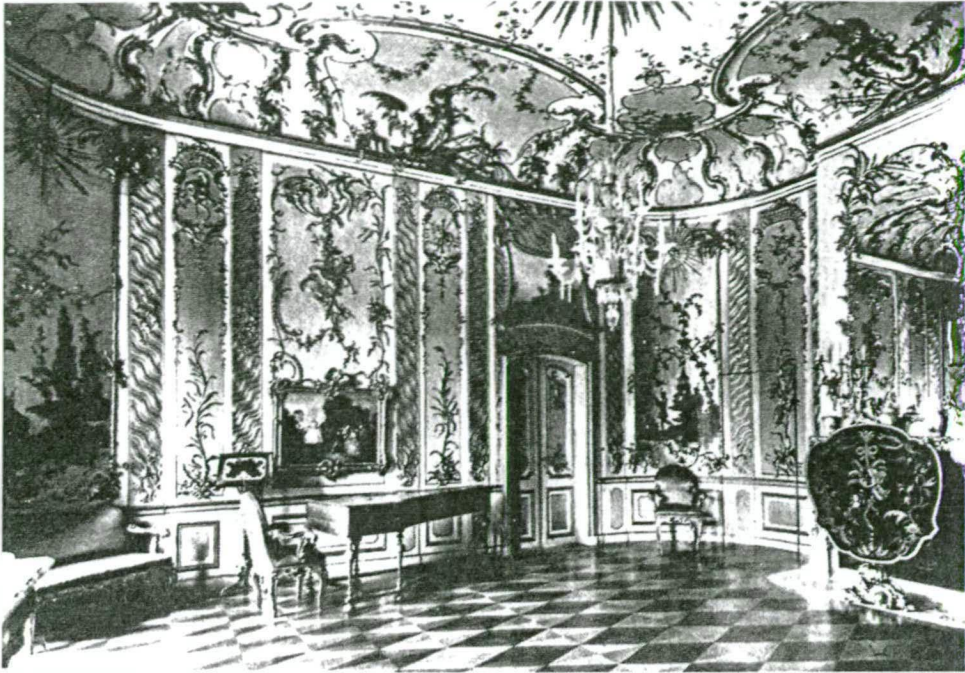


Fig. 15 Music Room, *Sanssouci*, Potsdam, (palace of Frederick the Great)

have been viewed as 'effeminate' or 'austere' respectively. What follows is a short analysis of the work of some major writers active in the burgeoning area of art history and criticism, whose theories have impacted on the ideas of beauty, ornament and their relationship to the feminine.

William Hogarth (1697-1764) wrote *The Analysis of Beauty* in London, 1753 as an aesthetic treatise against neoclassical dogma. It is witty, ascerbic and has an element of dandyish seriousness that cuts through the pedagogy of the Neo-Classicists. He attempted to fix the subjective idea of taste and distilled a concept on which objective beauty could be identified: the 'serpentine line'. Pythagoras had previously reduced music to a series of tones with mathematical foundations, and Hogarth saw his line as underpinning everything from attractive ornament to dance, literally linking colour and movement through the one unified concept of the line. Hogarth observed that the eye enjoyed following the bends in a river, winding walks and the rhythms of a country dance, which served as evidence to suggest that the underlying serpentine line was the uniting factor, and could be equated with beauty.

Hogarth was disappointed that the serpentine line did not have universal application. Some artists 'seem to be no less divided on the subject than the authors' and would



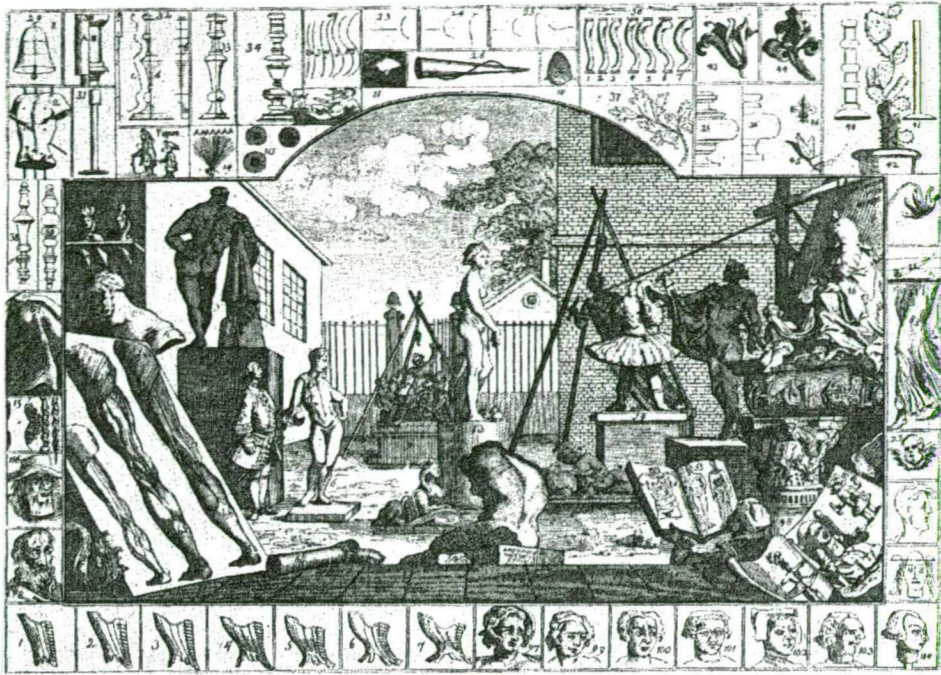


Fig. 16 William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753, plate 1

'seem to have studiously avoided the serpentine line in all their pictures'. He nevertheless selected the line as the basis for beauty, and proceeded to illustrate it (Fig. 16). He also provided examples of artists from the antique and the Renaissance who followed this path, in this instance artists who, during their own time, were not entirely in concordance with each other:

Raphael, from a straight and stiff manner, on a sudden changed his taste of lines at sight of Michel Angelo's works, and the antique statues; and so fond was he of the serpentine line, that he carried it to a ridiculous excess, particularly in his draperies: though his great observance of nature suffer'd him not long to continue in this mistake.<sup>54</sup>

Notice that the serpentine line, even when used by the masters, needs to be used with restraint as the damage caused by taking it to extreme is nothing less than 'ridiculous'. Although Hogarth suggests that Raphael was influenced by Michelangelo's artistry, as I have discussed, aspects of Raphael's work were considered to be 'excessive'. Even for Hogarth, who regarded himself as being 'at war'

<sup>54</sup> William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, London, first published 1753, reprinted by The Scolar Press, London, 1974, preface, p. ix.



with the Classicists and had a preference for Rococo taste, there were boundaries over which one did not step for long.

For ornamental decoration, the 'extreme' may be the only outlet for transgression—or expression of individualism—as it is based firmly on the interpretation of existing forms. In other words, ornamental decoration celebrates tradition in its very expression. To embellish and distort from a given, known form is one way to maintain a reference to the earlier form and clearly state how much it has been visually altered through the artists' own creativity. It is unclear whether Hogarth was referring to Raphael's paintings at the Vatican, but his criticism could easily apply to the ornate grotesqueries and arabesques that Raphael had used. If one compares the elegant leg that evolves into an extreme curve through exaggeration, (top of Fig. 16) a little serpentine is enough, but too much turns into a parody and loses any sense of beauty.

Symmetry, smoothness and geometric form—aspects of the antique that were valorised in Neo-Classicism—had no place in Hogarth's empirical argument where he sought to dismiss their relevance to beauty. His observations also touched on the distinction between beauty and the sublime, two of the main concepts in the development of aesthetic theory in the eighteenth century which have serious ramifications for the 'appropriateness' of gender: with beauty associated with the feminine and the sublime with the masculine.

In her *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty* Frances Reynolds differentiated between the two aesthetic categories, and declared that there were appropriate characteristics identified with each gender:

It is the feminine character that is the sweetest, the most interesting, image of beauty; the masculine partakes of the sublime<sup>55</sup>

Prettiness and sweetness, sensuality and the flesh (Rococo), belonged to the feminine; whereas manly beauty approached the transcendent and belonged to a higher realm (Neo-Classical). Rococo elegance, based on asymmetric, organic, sweeping curves, 'prettiness' rather than severity and solemn symmetry, would have amply illustrated Hogarth's thesis—perhaps too much, and, like Raphael, its curvaceous style opened up to the criticism of excess. (An excess of feminine beauty becomes a parody)<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Frances Reynolds, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty*, London, 1785, p. 29, reprinted in Chloe Chard, 'Effeminacy and Pleasure', *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth Century Art and Culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, p. 150

<sup>56</sup> A few years after Hogarth's *Analysis* was published, Edmund Burke published *Enquiry into the*

Rococo style found its greatest antagonist in the work of German writer Johann J. Winckelmann (1717-1768), whose study of Greek art was to be a pivotal point in eighteenth century aesthetic debate, and his contributions have been influential in the formation of art history as a discipline. Yet it is with Winckelmann that we find the polarisation of ornament *versus* essential form, of the feminine *versus* the masculine, concepts that have become a characteristic of Western culture—and essential to art history—ever since. Whereas previously, the use of ornamental decoration had been seen as appropriate in certain circumstances, with Winckelmann, all ornament was deemed inappropriate and effeminate. If art history originates with the work of Winckelmann, how dispassionate is our received knowledge?

Winckelmann's passion for the antique prompted a visit to Rome, a conversion to Catholicism (a major step considering the Reformation that had arisen in his native country) and eventually resulted in his appointment to the Superintendent of the Antiquities of Rome in 1764.<sup>57</sup> His elevation of Greek over Hellenistic art formed the springboard from which Neo-Classical art could metaphorically take flight. His admiration for Greek art, its simplicity and purity,<sup>58</sup> was only matched by his severe criticism of the contemporary Rococo style, which he derided as an 'exaggerated' and 'insolent' fashion that resulted in distraction and confusion, 'as at a party when everyone talks at once'.<sup>59</sup> Greek art, in contrast, offered noble simplicity and silent greatness, and would certainly have little appeal to those attracted to only pleasure or prettiness.

Finally, the most prominent general characteristic of the Greek masterpieces is a noble simplicity and silent greatness in pose as well as in expression.<sup>60</sup>

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*Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* where, according to Wittkower, Burke associated the following qualities with beauty: 'smallness, smoothness, gradual variations in contrast to angularity, delicacy without any remarkable appearance of strength, and colours clear and bright, but not very strong and glaring'. Rudolf Wittkower, *Palladio and Palladianism*, George Braziller, New York, 1974, p. 200. The emotions produced by beauty, as Burke defines it, are pleasure; it has nothing to do with mathematics or proportion. His argument furthers the division between beauty and the sublime and, if Reynolds' comment is to be followed, the idea of masculinity and femininity. For, if beauty was all prettiness and pleasure, the sublime evoked intensified emotions where thoughts were deeper, yet more confused, and concepts of vastness and infinity, strength and greatness were able to be investigated. The gender divisions were being set down, and with Neo-Classical criticism, were consolidated.

<sup>57</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1755, reprinted in Elizabeth Gilmore Holt (ed.), *A Documentary History of Art*, vol. II, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1981, p. 335

<sup>58</sup> Winckelmann appears to have looked only at the *Kouros* as the model for Antique simplicity and purity, and not the *Kore*. Nor could he have been aware of Semper's later discovery that antique statuary were painted.

<sup>59</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1755, p. 351

<sup>60</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1755, p. 349

He contrasted this characteristic—to which artists should aspire—with contemporary taste:

The exact opposite, in fact, the other extreme, is the taste most common among the modern artists, especially the famous ones. Nothing earns their applause but exaggerated poses and actions, accompanied by the insolent "dash" that they regard as spiritedness, or "franchezza", as they say. Their favourite concept is "contrapposto" which to them is the essence of everything that makes for artistic perfection.<sup>61</sup>

For Winckelmann, excess of any kind was to be admonished. The serpentine line so treasured by Hogarth was demolished through a desultory comment about 'contrapposto' that accompanied exaggerated poses, which were interpreted as overdetermined and antagonistic to the pursuit of truth. Even flesh was treated with severity and the body bent to the will of art. The body was stripped of fat, what remained was pure muscle and sinew, all the better to observe the canon of physical proportion—which was historically applicable only to men:

Through these exercises the bodies, free from superfluous fat, acquired the noble and manly contours that the Greek masters gave to their statues...Indeed, one of the laws of Pythagoras was to beware all excess weight...Everything that disfigured the body was carefully avoided.<sup>62</sup>

His severity approached that of the most ardent Athenians, and one wonders what constitutes the place for the 'feminine' in his idealised schema, where only heroes could reproduce perfection, and care must be taken to avoid anything that may disfigure the ideal. It is through a Spartan existence based on the essential needs for physical survival, free of any sensuality, any pleasure—beyond a shared admiration of the observed and perfected body—that the ideal could be created.

Take a young Spartan, bred, by a hero and heroine, never bound by swaddling clothes, who has slept on the bare ground from the age of seven and has been trained in wrestling and swimming from earliest infancy; put him beside a young Sybarite of our day and then decide which one the artists would choose as the model for a youthful Theseus, and Achilles, or even Bacchus. Were he to choose a Sybarite, the result would be "Theseus raised on rose petals" while the young Spartan would make a "Theseus raised on meat", as one Greek painter phrased the difference between two possible concepts of that hero.<sup>63</sup>

Winckelmann suggests that there is a 'natural' state for perfection to develop, and it is not a state accommodated within the extravagances of the Rococo, perceived as too weak and incapable of fostering the development of perfection. The sensuous

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<sup>61</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1755, p. 350

<sup>62</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1755, pp. 338-339

<sup>63</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1755, p. 338

Rococo women of the eighteenth century, in their rose-scented boudoirs were incomparable to the heroines of yore and would be lucky to be considered even beautiful.

(The Greek artists) began to form general concepts of beauty for the individual parts of the body as well as for its proportions: concepts that were meant to rise above nature, being taken from a spiritual realm that existed only in the mind.

In this way Raphael formed his Galathea. As he says in his letter to Count Balthasar Castiglione, "Since beauty is rare among women, I follow a certain idea formed in my imagination."<sup>64</sup>

For Winckelmann, the spirit must be elevated above the sensual, a fat-free life must be led and, one could presume, ornamental decoration would not be included in this diet.

The eighteenth century produced moral dilemmas for its artistic population, who often felt compelled to choose between a life of licentious hedonism as a libertine, or to follow the path of moral righteousness as an *homme sensible*. Jesuit-educated Diderot epitomised this moral plight, torn between his father's wish to enter the clergy and his youthful yearnings for the sensual pleasures of the flesh. His writings were seen as attacks on the church, with dangerously immoral overtones.<sup>65</sup>

Diderot's oscillation between these two spheres was visualised in several analogies. For example, he used the concept of an avenue of chestnut trees that offered quiet shade where philosophical thoughts could emerge, in contrast to an avenue of flowers that provided pleasures for the senses. In his youthful writing, he saw the two as necessary, but exclusive, and suggested a horticultural dichotomy existed that separated the 'worthy' from the 'ornamental'. Even though Diderot saw the value in sensual pleasure, it remained weak and effeminate by comparison to the strong, sturdy chestnut trees.

Such are the absurdities and vices of the avenue of flowers, such also are its charms. Access to this avenue is not forbidden to us; it offers a promenade which we regard as protection from the cold air we breathe beneath the shade.<sup>66</sup>

The two concepts can be refined as licentiousness (sensation) and moral feeling (*sensibilité*, sensitivity or sentiment) and were connected to certain behaviours: sensation being the predictable outcome for a curious, enlightened man indulging in philosophical discourse, and sentiment appropriate to temperance and more delicate

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<sup>64</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1755, p. 341

<sup>65</sup> Denis Diderot's *Philosophical Thoughts* (1746) were burned by the public hangman, giving him the notorious reputation as a 'free thinker', and a danger to the upholders of morals.

<sup>66</sup> Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes*, II, p. 152

and refined moral virtues. Whereas men could indulge in both sensation and sentiment, women of respect were granted access to only one, sentiment. For a woman to indulge in sensation or licentiousness would bring criticisms of indecency, of 'inappropriate' behaviour. Diderot's famous *Encyclopédie* written during the 1750s and 1760s fixed concrete descriptions of philosophical, moral, technical and physical concepts that had previously existed as oral traditions or as church dogma. He also commented on vices and virtues. His entry on indecency is revealing:

Indecency produces contrary effects. We forgive men for it, when it is accompanied by a certain originality of character, by a special kind of cynical joviality, which raise them above common custom. it is unbearable in women. A woman who behaves indecently is a kind of monster, comparable to a ferocious lamb. We simply don't expect this.<sup>67</sup>

Woman can thus become monstrous if indecent, but in a ludicrous and derogatory fashion: a ferocious lamb, to be reviled and pitied. This is not the 'monstrous' of the sublime, to be feared as awesome, but one borne of stupidity and ignorance—originality of character notwithstanding.<sup>68</sup> Transgression, the hallmark of the enlightened man, is thus out of the question for women, as it is too great a risk to be marked 'indecent' and ridiculed as pitifully monstrous. Following this logic, if Rococo were seen to be appealing to the senses in a way marked 'feminine', then it, too would be open to the charge of monstrousness and unacceptability.

Diderot wrote some of the first art criticism on the *Salons*, and, like Winckelmann, provided the benchmark for criticism that followed. His comments on the artist François Boucher (1703-1770) reveal his increasing hostility towards the senses and the pressure of the critic to act as the guardian of morality:

He will turn the head of two kinds of people: his elegance, affectation, romantic gallantry, coquetry, taste, facility, variety, brilliance, heavily rouged flesh tints and debauchery will captivate dandies, society women, young people, men of the world and the whole crowd of those who are strangers to true taste, to truth, to right thinking, to the gravity of art. How could they resist Boucher's wit, licentiousness, titivating sparkle, breasts, buttocks, or epigrammatic qualities?<sup>69</sup>

Boucher, it would seem, had been the whipping horse for Diderot's criticism, and was representative of the whole of the Rococo movement, a movement seen as a slide into effeminate and over-ornamented degeneracy. His observations on Boucher's 'elegance, affectation...heavily rouged flesh tints' etc. show an affinity to the criticisms of Cicero, but also implied that Diderot had spent quite some time looking at the artist's work in order to reach these conclusions. I am curious as to whether the

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<sup>67</sup> Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes*, VIII, p. 517

<sup>68</sup> A contemporary comparison may be made with the television programme 'Men behaving badly', where the men revel in indecency in a way that is unacceptable in the women's behaviour.

<sup>69</sup> *Salon of 1761*, in Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes*, XIII, p. 222

private, critic-off-duty Diderot, who struggled against the attractions of the flesh in his youth, would share the same criticisms as Diderot 'guardian of morality'.

Ornamental decoration thus became increasingly equated with the flesh, with debauchery and imbecilic, monstrous behaviour associated with degeneracy. This association became irrefutable if ornamental decoration was used 'in excess' which, as I have argued, is often a judgement of contemporary taste. It was the primary indication of morality going into decline, and as such needed to be closely monitored. Such a moral responsibility was not demanded of artists who sought to transcend the physical, sensual world through the intellectual sublime, but for artists whose work addressed sensual beauty, the question of morality was everpresent. Through Neo-Classical critics who eschewed the perceived excess and sensuality of the Rococo, ornamental decoration was increasingly viewed as superfluous to the artistic endeavour of perfection, both physical and moral, embodied in the (naked and male) human form. Beauty and the sublime were at odds with each other, as were sentiment and sensation.

The Enlightenment struggle to clearly mark out each of these territories and analyse them in an objective manner was explored further in the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's *The Critique of Judgement* effectively authorised the dichotomy of ornament and form, where 'free' and 'dependent' beauty served markedly different roles in aesthetic judgement: 'the one according to what he had present to his senses, the other according to what was present in his thoughts.'<sup>70</sup>

Kant's doctrine of free (*pulchritudo vaga*) and dependent (*pulchritudo adhaerens*) beauty placed the natural world of the senses (eg. flowers, birds) as existing without implicit meaning—they are beautiful 'in themselves', that is, without any underlying intellectual meaning. Any aesthetic judgement of these 'free' beauties was considered 'pure', hence '(i)n the estimate of a free beauty (according to mere form) we have the pure judgement of taste'<sup>71</sup>. Kant also suggested ornamental designs *à la greque*, foliage for wallpaper etc. to be 'free beauties':

So, designs *à la greque*, foliage for framework or on wall-papers, &c., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing—no object—under a definite concept—and are free beauties. We may also rank in the same class what in music are called fantasias (without a theme), and, indeed, all music that is not set to words.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §16, p. 74

<sup>71</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §16, p. 72

<sup>72</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §16, p. 72

This he opposed to 'dependent' beauty, which had an underlying rationale—an end—that could cloud our judgement:

If, now, the judgement of taste in respect of the latter delight is made dependent upon the end involved in the former delight as a judgement of reason, and is thus placed under a restriction, then it is no longer a free and pure judgement of taste.<sup>73</sup>

Or, as Gadamer suggested, the 'fact that things are ordered to an end is a limitation of aesthetic pleasure'.<sup>74</sup> With dependent beauty we are obliged to look to the end, to find the closure, to attain the perfection of an ideal state, and deny the pleasure in experiencing the object 'for itself'. Kant views ornamental decoration as a 'free beauty', with no inherent meaning and subject to pure aesthetic judgement without *a priori* understanding. Thus it is also outside analysis.

Now, just as it is a clog on the purity of the judgement of taste to have the agreeable (of sensation) joined with beauty to which properly only the form is relevant, so to combine the good with beauty, (the good, namely of the manifold to the thing itself according to its end) mars its purity.<sup>75</sup>

As a 'free beauty' ornamental decoration—as in Kant's 'designs *à la grecque*'—cannot be permitted entry into the realm of meaning, it must remain outside: it takes up its position of becoming, never acting out its end, never able to reach perfection of form. On the one hand, this resulted in ornamental decoration being judged delightful, meaningless and prized for its pure aesthetic, as meaning was assigned to 'dependent' beauty. Ornament did not share that burden, nor enjoy any of its potential. But, where 'free beauty' could be appreciated for aesthetics alone, when compared with art that valorised concept, intellect and the sublime, its meaninglessness became a disadvantage. Kant's categorising of ornament as a 'free' beauty explains to a certain extent the historical rejection of ornament as being capable of further analysis.

Kant also argued that certain forms of ornament acted as adjuncts to intrinsic form, and were unnecessary, a point which was taken up later in a more zealous fashion.

Even what is called ornamentation (Parrerga), ie., what is only an adjunct and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of the object, in augmenting the delight of taste does so only by means of its form. Thus it is with the frames of pictures or the drapery on statues, or the colonnades of palaces. But if the ornamentation does not itself enter into the composition of the beautiful form—if it is introduced like a gold frame merely to win approval for the picture by means of its charm—it is then called *finery* and takes away from the genuine beauty<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §16, p. 73

<sup>74</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1975, p. 42

<sup>75</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §16, p. 73

<sup>76</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §14, p. 68

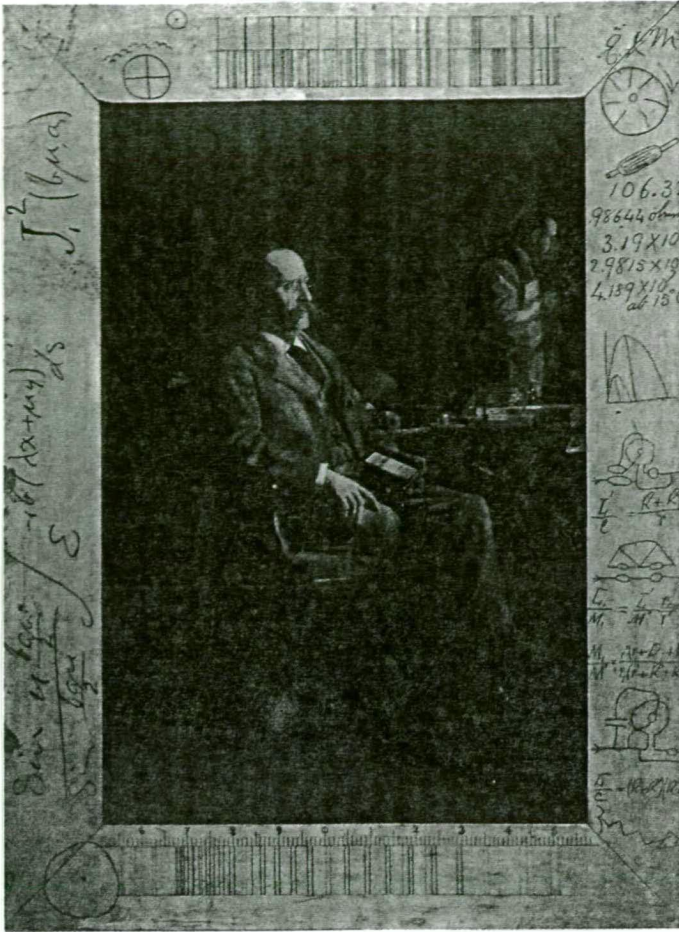


Fig. 17 Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Professor Henry A. Rowland*, 1897

However, in rejecting ornament as framing device, Kant also negated the potential interface between the image and the world that such a frame offers. I would argue that the frame can achieve an interface between the image as the bearer of 'dependent' beauty (reliant on meaning beyond appearance) and the environment in which it is seen that is desired by the artist/possessor of the work. A connection exists, even if 'merely' through the use of a gold frame, that anticipates a relationship between the viewer, the work and the external world. The decorative frame can comment on the beauty, meaning and content of the image in relation to its context, in a way that is decorative, utilitarian and enhancing to both the image and its setting. In this way, ornament has a meaning and a purpose which removes it from being seen as 'free beauty' and 'purely' aesthetic. The frame surrounding Thomas Eakins' *Portrait of Professor Henry A. Rowland*, 1897, for example has formulae from the mathematician's distinguished work embellishing the frame, indicating more about the person's intellectual achievements in life than Eakin's portrait could permit. (Fig. 17)

Twentieth century art books often illustrate only the pictorial scenes, yet the intricate framing devices that separate the 'main' images may be of equal importance



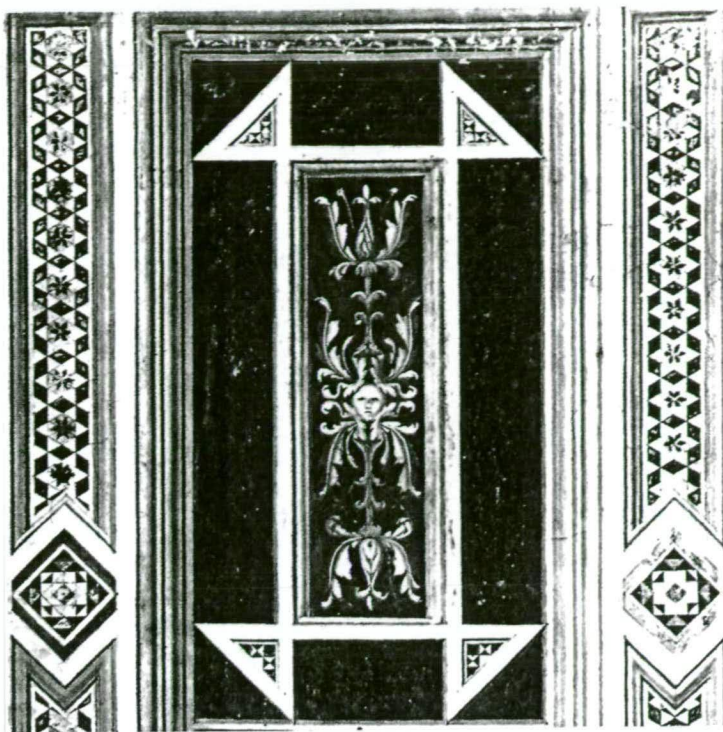


Fig. 18 Giotto, *Decorative panel from the Arena Chapel, Padua*, about 1306

in the function of the work as a whole. The recent work of Massimo Carboni addresses this point in respect of Giotto's frescoes (Fig. 18) where the ornamental decoration could not hold the same meaning as the narrative scene, but articulates a position nevertheless:

These frames set off the picture space from the wall around it, defining it, reserving it for narrative. Their silence modulates this narrative's clamour, its loquacity. The story—the life of Christ say—is a continuum in which the ornament is a mute interval. Yet it is this interval that makes possible the perception of the narrative, just as speech needs pauses to make it understandable. And so in the great frescoes the frames are silent but articulate at the same time. The images *speak* of human belief, of life on earth and its ultimate destiny. The frames *write* in the abstract vocabulary and syntax of rhombuses, triangles and polygons, creating sequences of geometries within which painting dances, plays and puts itself on display, cut free from narrative and from the need to declare a meaning.<sup>77</sup>

Gadamer suggested that the dual purpose of decoration is integral to the comprehension of a work of art, and is applicable as much to the decoration of municipal architecture as to individual ornament:

The nature of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation: namely to draw the attention of the viewer to itself, to satisfy his taste, and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Massimo Carboni, 'Infinite Ornament', *Artforum*, September, 1991, p.106

<sup>78</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1975, p. 140

He was critical of the prejudice whereby 'the actual work of art is what is, outside all space and time, the object of aesthetic experience' and saw ornamental decoration as an important mediator in this experience.<sup>79</sup> With the rise in status of the autonomous art object—prized by modernism—the importance of an aesthetic experience increased, yet that same status was not granted to ornamental decoration; in fact, the use of ornamental decoration was actively discouraged. A paradox arose, whereby the image became the object of aesthetic experience, yet this same point was used as a criticism of ornamental decoration.

Kant also saw it as essential that 'free' and 'dependent' beauty operate together when it came to taste: 'Taste, it is true, stands to gain by this combination of intellectual delight with the aesthetic'.<sup>80</sup> But the distinctions remained clear:

For *estimating* beautiful objects, as such, what is required is *taste*; but for fine art, ie. the *production* of such objects, one needs genius.<sup>81</sup>

Where

*Genius* is the talent (natural endowment) which gives the rule to art....it may still be shown at the outset that, according to this acceptance of the word, fine arts must necessarily be regarded as arts of *genius*.<sup>82</sup>

Genius cannot be learned, but must be innate and transcend the imitative approach which maintains a lesser level. Taste is the moral guide of genius:

Taste, like judgement in general, is the discipline (or corrective) of genius. It severely clips its wings, and makes it orderly and polished; but at the same time gives it guidance, directing and controlling its flight, so that it may preserve its character of finality.<sup>83</sup>

Hence the production of fine art required genius, and taste became its discipline. Ornamental decoration, defined as 'free' beauty, without meaning, further lost significance and, because of its imitative nature, was also diminished by comparison to the fine arts—the arts of genius—to become that of taste: essential, but without imagination.

Kant's explanation states that natural talent for genius must not follow rules, and added the qualities of *originality* and the production of *exemplary* art works (ie. no

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<sup>79</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1975, pp. 140-141

<sup>80</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §16, p. 73

<sup>81</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §48, p. 172

<sup>82</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §46, p. 168

<sup>83</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, §50, p. 183

*nonsense* was allowed, even if original). If one were restricted by rules that could not be transcended (either through lack of natural talent or opportunity), the best one could hope for was good craftsmanship.

It also follows that the concept of genius would rarely be applied to women, whose social position did not allow for rule-breaking activities. The licentiousness and explorations of sensations that were essential to develop an enlightened artistic mind were entirely inappropriate for women. The outlet for acceptable artistic creativity would be through copying traditional patterns, where untoward thoughts and indecent actions would be discouraged. Their highest ambition would thus be to excel at craftsmanship, and good taste.



## 2:2:4: Nineteenth Century

Concepts of ornamental decoration from the previous century were further refined and the results illustrated in encyclopaedic 'grammars of ornament', presented in exhibitions (such as the great London exhibition of 1851), and the new department stores that presented mass-produced objects based on the favoured styles. These 'bibelots' or cheap reproductions of exclusive objects were detested by many contemporary critics and were referred to as 'kitsch'—a term that Greenberg later used to advantage.

Whereas previously, a close relationship had existed between patron and artisan in order to achieve an harmonious domestic ensemble, the new middle class which arose during the nineteenth century could neither afford nor wished to have an outsider's view imposed on the decoration of their home. Decoration was selected through department stores, and it was the unique arrangement of identical objects that set the fashionable homes apart. No longer the aristocratic public *Salon*, the bourgeois home was domestic, private and feminine, where 'good taste' could be displayed through the careful selection and display of objects, a sanctuary from the masculine world of post-industrial revolution work and progress. In *Art in the Home* (1879) Jacob von Falke describes the ideal relationship between the public (masculine) and private (feminine) spheres:

...the husband's occupations necessitate his absence from the house, and call him far away from it. During the day his mind is absorbed in many good and useful ways, in making and acquiring money for instance, and even after the hours of business have passed, they occupy his thoughts. When he returns home tired with work and in need of recreation, he longs for quiet enjoyment, and takes pleasure in the home which his wife has made comfortable and attractive...She is the mistress of the house in which she rules, and which she orders like a queen. Should it not then be specially her business to add *beauty* to the *order* which she has created?<sup>84</sup>

Masculine and feminine were increasingly polarised: the woman became a dedicated consumer of mass-produced objects who added beauty and order to her domain. With the advent of mass-production and selection of goods to decorate the home, hand-made objects became increasingly out of the economic range of the bourgeoisie—unless they made them themselves. Encyclopaedias of ornament, such as the influential *Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, accommodated the interest in decorative styles, and reproduced illustrations of originals to be used as the basis of designs for the interior (Figs. 19, 20). Women often executed embroideries based on these designs for the home, which were also used in the workshop, for example in the

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<sup>84</sup> Joyce Henri Robinson, 'Hi Honey, I'm Home', in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, 1996, p. 102





Fig. 19 Greek Ornament, Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856



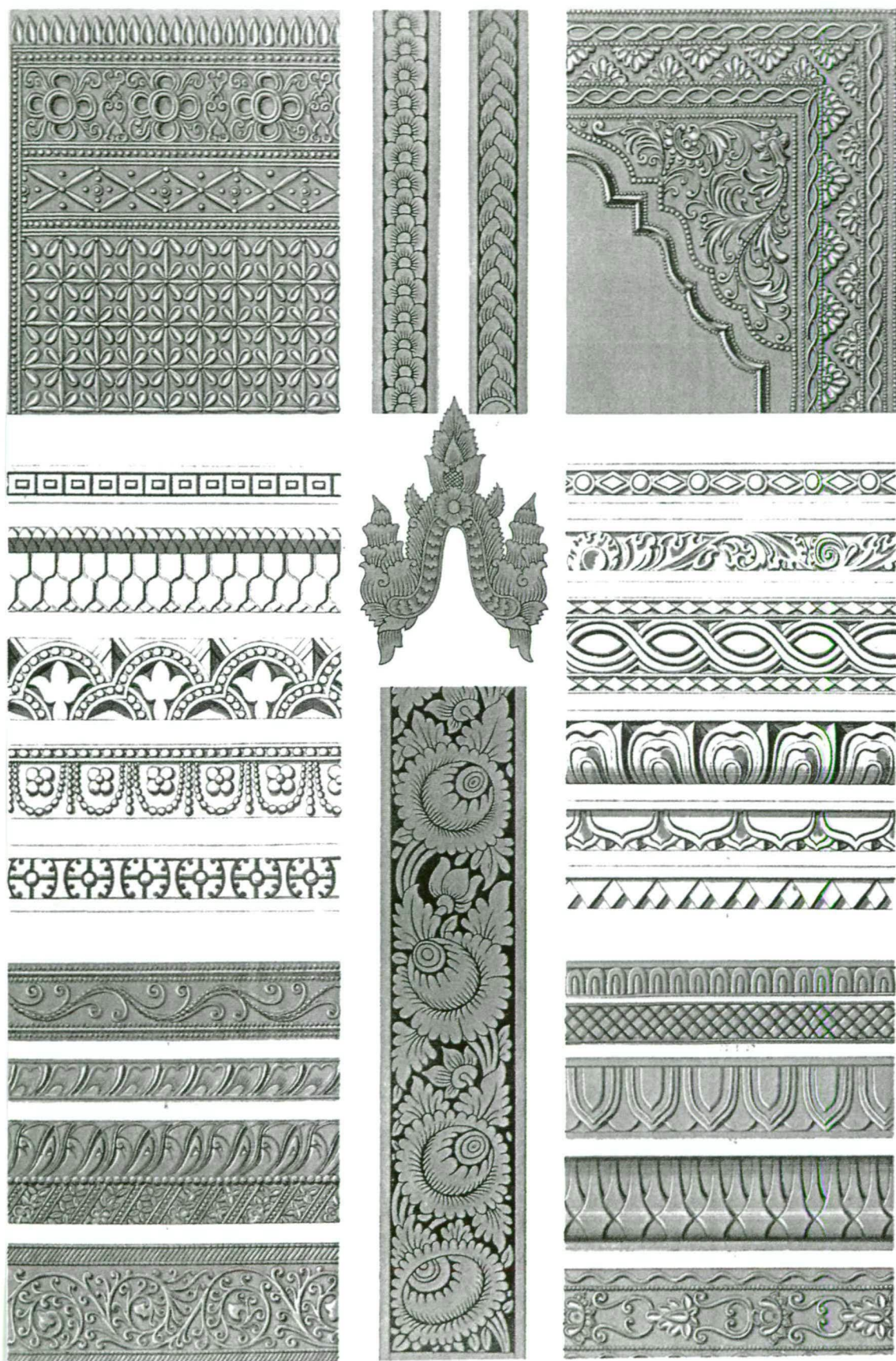


Fig. 20 *Hindoo Ornament*, Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856

Gothic revival style of William Morris. If she wanted to be very thorough, by careful selection and matching of her own apparel (bought at the same department store as her other goods) the bourgeois woman could become totally integrated with the decorative ensemble that she had purchased. The bourgeois home could thus be, and indeed was, an extension of the woman, who was literally an 'ornament' to her decorated home.

In contrast, the bourgeois man exhibited objects in both public and private venues for the spectatorial pleasure of himself and others, in the traditional style of the *studiolo*. Whereas women were engulfed in their private sanctuary, unable to view themselves as separate from it, men slipped between the public and private spheres, and could objectively view their selected items with others, as evidence of erudition, worldliness and sublime taste—and certainly separate from the man himself.

A distinction was made between the emotional sensations and responses appropriate to the private and public spheres; so too were there expectations of emotions appropriate to the 'masculine' or 'feminine'. A most ingenious diagram was invented in 1897 by August Endell (1871-1925) in an attempt to understand the various shades of human emotions by relating sensation through 'tempo' and 'effort'. Some sensations, for example 'frivolity', were categorised as quick and light, whereas others such as profundity were seen as being slow and heavy. This diagram is insightful in its coupling of sensations that have since become associated with behaviour which is linked to gender, most obviously when certain terms are used for ridicule. His table is set out below:<sup>85</sup>

Malicious	Scornful	Haughty	Pathetic	Frigid	Pitiless	Cruel	Terrible	Quick
Facetious	Frivolous	Provocative	Arrogant	Harsh	Violent	Savage	Hideous	↑
Coquettish	Chic	Ebullient	Daring	Reckless	Majestic	Awesome	Dreadful	T
Affected	Gracious	Elegant	Energetic	Vigorous	Firm	Brutal	Bestial	E
Sweet	Dainty	Flexible	Fiery	Strong	Rugged	Powerful	Frightful	M
Insidious	Delicate	Devoted	Generous	Distinguished	Mighty	Monstrous	Awful	P
Vacuous	Straight-forward	Sincere	Warm	Solemn	Profound	Sublime	Gruesome	O
								↓
Dim	Weak	Tired	Troubled	Sad	Melancholic	Sombre	Desperate	Slow
Light ← ————— EFFORT ————— → Heavy								

Table 2

<sup>85</sup> August Endell, 'The Beauty of Form and Decorative Art', originally published in *Dekorative Kunst I*, Munich, 1897-8, pp. 75-7, 119-25, reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, Blackwell, UK, 1994, p. 65

Endell's chart shows the quick, light Chic of the home is far removed from the heavy, slow, meaningful Sublime of the intellect. Sublime finds its neighbours to be 'profound' and 'melancholic'—traits ascribed to exemplary artistic endeavour—whereas Chic is accompanied by 'frivolous' and 'affected'—terms of unnecessary excess. The diagram is informative in that it shows the semantic disposition of positive and negative criticism. For, if either misbehaves, is deemed to be 'out of place' or inappropriate to the situation, a role reversal occurs: the feminine is often ridiculed as 'monstrous'—but rarely as 'sublime'—and the masculine derided as 'affected' but as rarely 'sweet'.

Thus the activity of decorating the chic nineteenth century home became feminised—complete with a spectrum of emotional sensations—but what of the object? Several theorists used empirical knowledge to suggest decoration was integral to the work of art, for example Gottlieb Semper's (1803-1879) discovery that the marble temples of the antique had originally been painted in quite vibrant colours contradicted the insistence by Neo-Classical theorists that purity of form and more profound *sensibilité* equalled absence of colour. Here was the chance to reinsert decoration into the equation, but it was not taken up: it seemed that no amount of empirical evidence could deflect from the momentum of the new industrial age and its appeal to the ideas of progress. Decoration became increasingly irrelevant in the face of the new, clean machine aesthetic, and it was doubly insulting if produced mechanically, for its previous value lay in the subtle and unique remodelling of previous forms—a methodology denied in industrial manufacture.

The work of Victorian theorist John Ruskin (1819-1900) is important in presenting an argument for ornamental decoration which appears reactionary in the face of modernist devotion to industrial progress. He saw ornamental decoration as a natural outcome of an idealised past, when workers celebrated their labour and were not enslaved by the machine. Because the new machine age was perceived as progressive by the enlightened and cultivated men who embraced 'the new', Ruskin's position is seen as retrogressive, and his theories on ornamental decoration need to be viewed in this light.

Ruskin was not alone in criticising the burgeoning age of industrialisation, and many artists shared his concern. In a letter to Henry Mottez, August Renoir exclaims:

One no longer wants gods, yet gods are essential to our imagination. We can't get around it, modern rationalism, if it is able to satisfy the learned, is a way of thinking incompatible with any conception of art...Machinism, the division of labour, have transformed the worker into simple automaton and have killed the joy of working. In the factory, the worker, tied to a machine which asks nothing of his brain, sadly

Modern rationalism and learning are conflated with a joyless, godless production line by artists who valorised the hand made. The products of industrialisation—identical objects created by anonymous workers—were also anathema to Ruskin, who argued for the reinstatement of ornamental decoration through creativity born of *enjoyment*, where the imagery was visually derived from the superiority of God's work, that is, from nature, not culture. Thus designs based on nature—God's work—were acceptable, but from man's work, for example heraldry or symbols of machines, were not.<sup>87</sup> His theoretical position took a strong moral stance based on his religious beliefs: 'good' art was seen to express man's delight in God's work, but 'ignoble ornamentation' was the expression of man's delight in his own work—resulting in vanity. He saw the Gothic as the ideal model for its infinite variability and close relationship between the maker and the object—and to God: 'This is the glory of Gothic architecture, that every jot and tittle, every point and niche of it, affords room, fuel, and focus for individual fire'.<sup>88</sup> His support of the Gothic put him in direct opposition to the advocates of classicism, who considered it to be the result of barbarian taste and lack of refinement.

Ruskin's criticism of the industrial age stems from its potential to devalue manual skill and thus rob the artist of his most creative role. The machine symbolised death (of creativity) whereas evidence of the hand demonstrated the presence of a vital life-force.

...at all events one thing we have in our power—the doing without machine ornament and cast-iron work. All the stamped metals, and artificial stones, and imitation woods and bronzes, over the invention of which we hear daily exaltation—all the short, and cheap, and easy ways of doing that whose difficulty is its honour—are so many new obstacles in our already encumbered road. They will not make us happier or wiser—they will extend neither the pride of judgment nor the privilege of enjoyment. They will only make us shallower in our understanding, colder in our hearts, and feebler in our wits. And most justly. For we are not sent into this world to do any thing into which we cannot put our hearts.<sup>89</sup>

Cheap, false, imitation ornament was not the road to salvation, but only afforded the viewer a paltry counterfeit of the real thing, which alone could possess an 'aura' of

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<sup>86</sup> August Renoir, Letter to Henry Mottez, Cennino Cennini (ed.), *Le Livre de l'Art*, Paris, 1911, pp. x-xi

<sup>87</sup> Ruskin listed the proper order of materials for ornament:

1. Abstract Lines; 2. Forms of Earth (crystals); 3. Forms of Water (waves); 4. Forms of Fire (flames and rays); 5. Forms of Air (clouds); 6. (organic forms) Shells; 7. Fish; 8. Reptiles and insects; 9. Vegetation a. Stems and trunks; 10. b. Foliage; 11. Birds; 12. Mammalian animals and man. *The Stones of Venice*, Everyman's Library, London, New York, 1907, p. 196

<sup>88</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 1, Dent and Co., London, n.d., p. 216

<sup>89</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, published in E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *Library Edition, The Works of John Ruskin*, George Allen, London, 1903-10, vol. VIII, p. 219



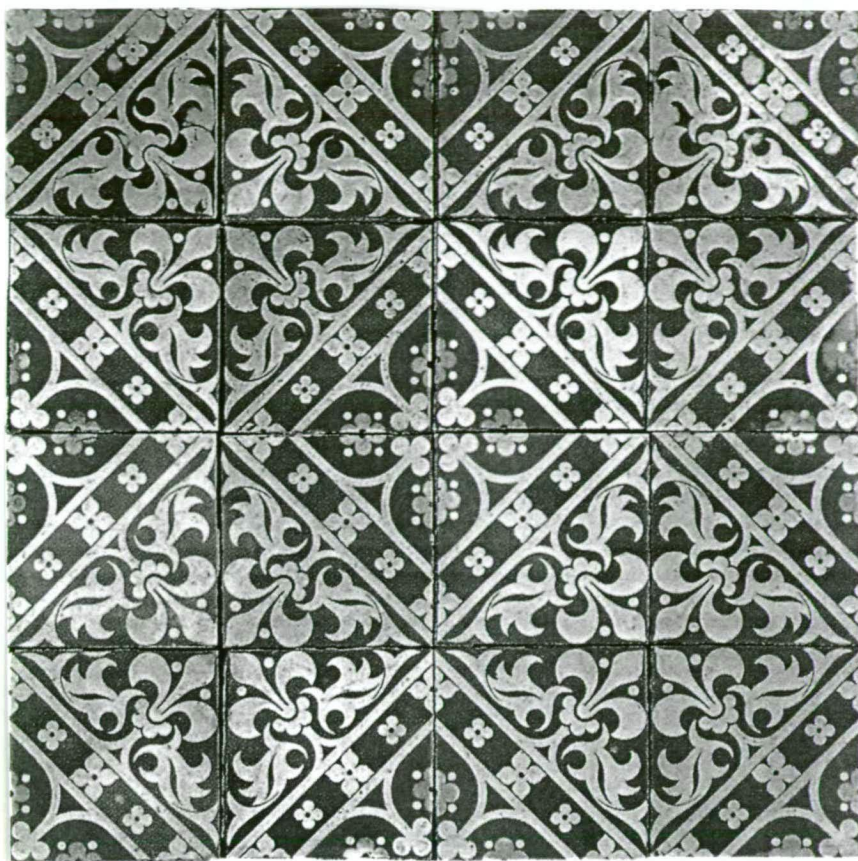


Fig. 21 Section of encaustic floor made for the Palace of Westminster, designed by A. W. N. Pugin, c. 1850, London

originality.<sup>90</sup> Despite his idealistic socialist leanings, by advocating only well-made, enjoyable (because the maker had enjoyed making it) objects, Ruskin was limiting his audience only to those wealthy enough to afford them—unless the workers were paid a pittance, which was often the case. The bourgeois consumer would have to be content with mass-produced objects and risk the accusation of 'vulgar' taste and *kitsch* that Ruskin's contemporary Augustus Pugin (1812-1852) levelled against those uneducated in matters of taste.

Ruskin was obviously aware of the attacks made on ornamental decoration by writers such as Pugin, whose criticism focussed upon what constituted 'good' ornament. For example, he advocated the use of flattened pattern for flat surfaces of walls and floors—and in this way could be seen as an early advocate of the concept 'form follows function': flat surfaces require flat patterns, as for example in Figure 21. Such designs could be derived from nature, but must not imitate it. Nature, as

<sup>90</sup> The concept of 'aura' is discussed in detail in Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1985





Fig. 22 Carpet design from the catalogue of the Great Exhibition, 1851

indicated by theorists such as Ruskin and Pugin, could be used to *inspire* design: for Ruskin the forms of Nature were the essential basis of ornamental decoration, but for Pugin Nature needed to be abstracted, refined and designed in accordance with, and reflecting the concerns of the object in question. Imitation of nature was the domain of the finer arts of sculpture and painting where the Sublime could be investigated through studying and drawing from nature, and was not appropriate for ornamental decoration.

The design for carpet in figure 22 would have been anathema to Pugin, whose radical reforms were the subject of comment from authors such as Charles Dickens. Dickens wrote of a meeting between a Pugin-esque design reformer and a girl who little understood his contemporary theory in *Hard Times*. When asked if she would have a design of flowers on her carpet, she replied positively, and was asked then if 'she would put tables and chairs upon them and have people walking over them with heavy boots'...

"It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither, if you please, sir. They

would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy..." "Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy", cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point.<sup>91</sup>

Pugin's reforms were almost moralistic. He assessed 'Brumagem Gothic', a very ornate and gothic-inspired style of metalwork, as being of 'bad taste' where 'neither relative scale, form, purpose, nor unity of style is ever considered by those who design these abominations', and utilised by those who were obviously not versed in his theories.<sup>92</sup> Ruskin countered his accusation, and claimed a familiar attribute as necessary for all art, not just ornament: appropriateness. Decoration was not to be degraded in the face of 'portable' art but showed a higher calling:

Get rid, then, at once of any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or a separate kind of art. Its nature or essence is simply its being fitted for a definite place; and, in that place, forming part of a great and harmonious whole, in companionship with other art; and so far from this being a degradation to it—so far from Decorative art being inferior to other art because it is fixed to a spot—on the whole it may be considered as rather a piece of degradation that it be portable. Portable art— independent of all place—is for the most part ignoble art.<sup>93</sup>

His criticism of portable art could be applied as much to an ornate ink-stand as an easel painting, where its apparent autonomy in whatever situation it was placed implied that it was no longer part of an ensemble that embraced the total environment, but was a tradeable consumer object, always and never fitting each situation. The autonomous art object was an 'object of an aesthetic experience' alone, floating 'outside of all space and all time'.<sup>94</sup> Thus 'appropriateness' was, theoretically at least, no longer an issue. Consumption of mass-produced objects through the department stores was promoted over Ruskin's idealised view of art being fitted for a place. The autonomous art object was beyond subservience to any schema of appropriateness, and necessary for the capitalist idea of 'the free market place' to be introduced. Yet Ruskin defended his position:

And all the greatest art which the world has produced is thus fitted for a place, and subordinated to a purpose. There is no existing highest order art but is decorative. The best sculpture yet produced has been the decoration of a temple front—the best painting, the decoration of a room. Raphael's best doing is merely the wall colouring of a suite of apartments in the Vatican, and his cartoons were made for tapestries<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 35

<sup>92</sup> Augustus Pugin, quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 36

<sup>93</sup> John Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, delivered 1858-1859, published in E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *Library Edition, The Works of John Ruskin*, George Allen, London, 1903-10, vol. XVI, pp. 320-23

<sup>94</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1975, pp. 140-141

<sup>95</sup> John Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, delivered 1858-1859, published in E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *Library Edition, The Works of John Ruskin*, George Allen, London, 1903-10, vol. XVI, pp. 320-23

For Ruskin and his associates, decoration was fundamental to the artistic design, which emphasised the value of labour—but as a living, enjoyable act, not as a mass-produced commodity. Like the example of Raphael, ornamental decoration served to integrate the whole environment and provided the opportunity for a collaboration between artist, client and society, epitomised by the movements of Art Nouveau, Jugendstil and the Viennese Secessionists. With their fluid spaces, curves, colours and holistic approach to both the exterior and interior spaces, these movements would necessarily be identified as 'feminine' when compared to the machine age aesthetic of clean lines and mass-production. As such, they risked criticism of excess (both decorative and economic), to the extent of being labelled monstrous.

The final word in Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, draws on the historical link between ornamental decoration and morality, and warns of the dangers of mismanagement of ornament (and its power to seduce):

As an architect, therefore, you are modestly to measure your capacity of governing ornament. Remember its essence,—its being ornament at all, consists in its being governed. Lose your authority over it, let it command you, or lead you, or dictate to you in anywise, and it is an offence, an encumbrance, and a dishonour. And it is always ready to do this; wild to get the bit in its teeth, and rush forth on its own devices. Measure, therefore, your strength; and as long as there is no chance of mutiny, add soldier to soldier, battalion to battalion; but be assured that all are heartily in the cause, and that there is not one of whose position you are ignorant, or whose service you could spare.<sup>96</sup>

It seems that even those who were strong advocates for the use of ornament knew that it could overwhelm the senses and result in loss of (male) authority. Ornament is the wild beast to be tamed, and requires confident and authoritative handling. Only then can it serve. Whereas Diderot's conclusions and change of heart were the result of his own experience with the flesh, Ruskin used the military analogy of marshalling ornament with the skill of a battalion official, as the only way to win a war. Through its military analogy, this passage indicates Ruskin's thinly disguised fear of being overtaken by the 'feminine'.<sup>97</sup>

Both Ruskin and Pugin's stern warnings about the appropriateness of subjects used in decoration are echoed in this comment by the Reverend T. James, who criticised a contemporary embroidery that had ceased to be 'governed' by good taste:

...gigantic flowers, pansies big as peonies; cabbage roses which deserve the name, suggesting pickle rather than perfume; gracefully falling fuschias big as handbells.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 1, Dent and Co., London, n.d., p. 230

<sup>97</sup> Ruskin, it is suggested, had difficult relations with women, to the extent that his first marriage was never consummated.

<sup>98</sup> The Reverend T. James, quoted in Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, The Women's Press, London, 1989, p. 34

The monstrous feminine returns, chastised, denigrated and put in place: nature was imitated according to Ruskin's advice, but it was imitated to *excess*. The embroiderer's overtly ambitious work rendered the beautiful as the powerful, overstepping the mark, and thus required chastising and ridicule to reinsert it into its appropriate position. One could suggest that the excessive, vulgar cabbage roses metaphorically paralleled the embroiderer's own situation, where the restrictions on the 'proper' use of ornamental decoration corresponded to her own stifled creative position—reduced to arranger of mass-produced objects, embroiderer of other people's designs—and erupted as an overblown floral effusion when given a fertile imagination and an ambition to go beyond the acceptable bounds of decorum.



When Adolf Loos (1870-1933) pronounced in his influential essay 'Ornament and Crime', (1908) that:

We have overcome ornament, with effort we have liberated ourselves from ornament. Look, the moment is approaching, we await the conclusion. Soon city streets will gleam like white walls! Like Zion, the holy city, the capital of Heaven. Then the task will be complete<sup>99</sup>

he was reacting to the overly self-conscious use of ornament by artists of the Art Nouveau and Viennese Secession movements, who took Ruskin's ideal to extremes—a totally controlled Art Nouveau environment. Interestingly, Loos' comment refers directly to the biblical tract where the daughters of Zion have reduced the faithful city to 'an harlot' through their actions, prompting the Lord to 'take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments around their feet...and the chains and the bracelets...the rings and nose jewels...' so 'Zion can be redeemed with judgement, and her converts to righteousness' (Isaiah, 1:21-27, 3:16-21). Ornamental decoration, in the guise of the monstrous feminine had, at the beginning of the twentieth century, become a sexualised seductress who beguiled and entranced, and the new century modernists took on the mission to convert art and architecture to righteousness.

Loos' passionate distaste for ornament remains only paralleled by that of Le Corbusier, who, with Amedée Ozenfant, asserted the following in 1918:

There is a hierarchy in the arts: decorative art at the bottom, and the human form at the top. Because we are men.<sup>100</sup>

These comments by venerated architects have fuelled the antagonism to ornamental decoration in the twentieth century. Le Corbusier stated clearly that the only place for decorative arts in the new system was at the bottom of the pile, while Loos equated ornamental decoration with barbarians and ignorant savages, and questioned the psychological deficiencies of anyone who considered its use. Comments such as 'The modern producer of ornament is, however left behind or a pathological phenomenon', or 'The lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power' helped to demote the position of ornament at the beginning of the century and signalled a complete break with the past. Or was it? For Loos' criticisms echoed those of the Neo-Classicists who took it as their mission to rid the *Salon* of all vulgar excesses.

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<sup>99</sup> Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*, 1908, reprinted in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1985, p. 100

<sup>100</sup> Le Corbusier and Amedée Ozenfant statement made in 1918, reprinted in Norma Broude, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the Seventies*, New York, 1994, p. 208



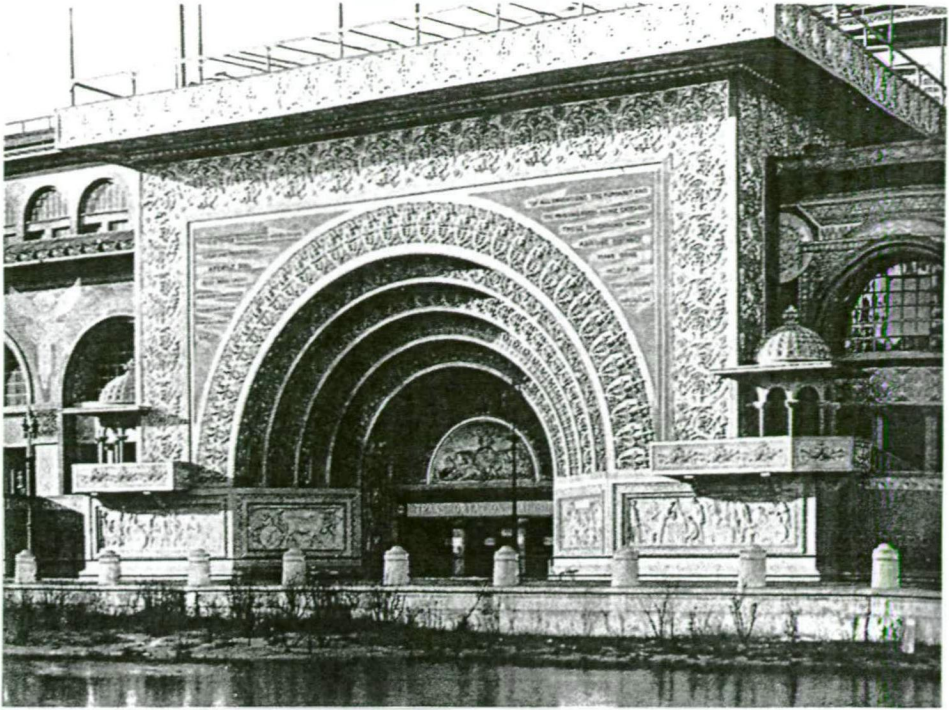


Fig. 23 Louis Sullivan, *Golden doorway of the Transportation Building* at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893

But Loos was also at the beginning of a new era, and the conditions were different.

The elevation of form and the denigration of ornamental decoration as 'excessive' and useless to this pursuit became clearly articulated at the beginning of the century. The polarisation suggested by Winckelmann during the Enlightenment, of ornament as excessive to form, took on wider ramifications in keeping with the aesthetics of the new century. Now it seemed that any use of ornamental decoration was inappropriate. Its historical use since ancient Greece—specifically through covering form and articulating a surface in a visually seductive way—became increasingly associated with the feminine, to the extent that anything not clearly identified as masculine was to be avoided and denigrated. Ambivalent sexuality was dangerous and weakened the clean, pure 'streets of Zion'.

An example may serve to illustrate the effect of this shift in attitude on the subsequent (mis)reading of gender. The Chicago-based architect Louis Sullivan was at the peak of his career when he constructed the Transportation Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. (Fig. 23) After this, his architectural career was described as having 'fallen into a steep decline'<sup>101</sup>, in spite of

<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Bloomer, 'D'or', in Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality & Space*, Princeton Papers on Architecture, Princeton University School of Architecture, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992, p. 169



Fig. 24 Louis Sullivan, *Schlesinger and Mayer Store*, 1898 (now Carson Pirie Scott) Chicago (detail over door)

two major refurbishments in Chicago, the Schlesinger and Mayer Store (now Carson Pirie Scott) in 1898 (Fig. 24) where he constructed the facades in an almost woven ornamental style, and the Gage Building 1898-99 (Fig. 25). The criticism of his work is telling, as it suggested that it was improperly effeminate due to its use of decoration.

Sullivan's biographer Robert Twombly, suggested his fall from grace was not a result of his style being superseded by the new machine age aesthetic, but through his (latent) homosexuality where 'his imagery was never entirely masculine' (read: suspiciously like feminine) and 'His obvious artistic inclinations could have been used to support rumours of lack of manliness' (where his choice of decorative style leads us to believe he is not actually a man).<sup>102</sup> By not clearly articulating the masculine—through his overt use of ornamental decoration—the newly emerging 'virile' modern style was threatened: it was important that a man be seen as a man, act like a man and not use ornamental decoration. In Sullivan's work, the 'feminine' erupted as decoration that smothered the 'masculine' architectural form, exposing his sexual

<sup>102</sup> Robert Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Works*, New York, Viking Press, 1986, p. 211



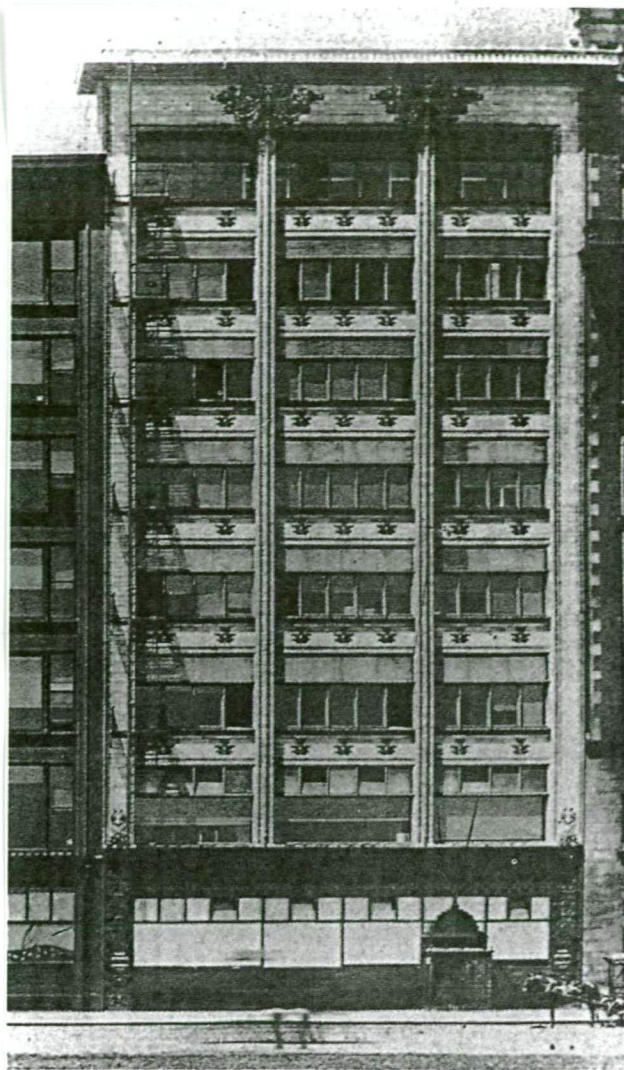


Fig. 25 Louis Sullivan, *Gage Building* 1898-99

identification as not entirely masculine and, by extension through his use of ornamental decoration, cast doubt on whether he could actually *be* a man.

Both (the Baynard and Gage) buildings' columns can be read as part of the geometric male form, but when they exploded into huge decorative symbols of femininity at the Gage, the imagery was almost ejaculatory: the male sexual organ emitting a female form. Had Sullivan meant the male to *support* or *give birth* to the female, he would have violated his own reading of universal truths wherein the female was vital and primary. Rather, the Gage imagery was of the male *becoming* female.<sup>103</sup>

Sullivan's architecture confused issues of female and male form, the female being 'vital and primary' yet betraying its own intention through 'ejaculating' across the *surface*. According to Twombly, Sullivan's celebratory approach certainly challenged notions of propriety that had underscored the use of ornamental decoration *since* the Antique:

<sup>103</sup> Robert Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Works*, New York, Viking Press, 1986, p. 401

Through a variety of strategies he pushes ornament to the brink of its architectural possibilities, sometimes, to be sure, over the edge of propriety.<sup>104</sup>

Vitruvius' concept of propriety was employed to rein in the excessive use of ornamental decoration and its eroticised and confused surface was brought into line. The new modernist style rejected any ambivalence or fluidity—whether in art, architecture or gender—and elevated logical space and geometric form. The style of the new age was definite in its masculinity. Sullivan saw the new style emerge, and was not part of it.

The new century positively embraced the industrial age as a means to progress. It was at once separate from and beyond the restrictions of the previous century. Unlike Ruskin's abhorrence of the industrial age as modern slavery, architects such as Loos and Le Corbusier embraced the new vision for society, and maintained that a man's home should reflect the modern age and the progress that it represented. The home should be 'a machine for living in' and not an oasis of sentimental domestic comfort. Art should also reflect that position.

Although only established in the early 1800s as a space separate from work, as early as 1904 the (feminised) domestic home was under scrutiny and was seen to be the guilty party in rendering art impotent:<sup>105</sup>

The dwelling has become a place for recuperation, and this determines the character of the busy man's domicile...Art under such conditions ceases to be divine, she is no longer the enchantress who brings men to their knees before her, but rather a gentle little housewife, who surrounds us with tender attentions, and eagerly produces the sorts of things that will distract tired people after a day's work.<sup>106</sup>

Art, once the temptress is reduced to playing the hostess, but for whom?—a tired business man. It would appear that the separate spheres of public and private were benefiting neither men, women, nor art. The solution was to bring the aesthetic of the workplace home: cast out the feminised chic, frivolous, elegant, dainty, affected sensations that rendered men impotent and replace them with a new, strong, masculine form, angular and cubist—the antithesis of the previous century. It goes without saying that ornament was extraneous to this new form and was also seen as a threat to its reception. Art dealer Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler (1884-1976) promoted

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<sup>104</sup> Robert Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Works*, New York, Viking Press, 1986, p. 133

<sup>105</sup> Walter Benjamin said it was in the early 1800s that 'for the first time the living space became distinguished from the space of work', 'Louis-Philippe or the interior', *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, Verso, 1973, p. 167

<sup>106</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, 'The mediums of Art, Past and Present', originally published in *Moderne Kunst*, 1904, reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, Blackwell, UK, 1994, p. 57-58

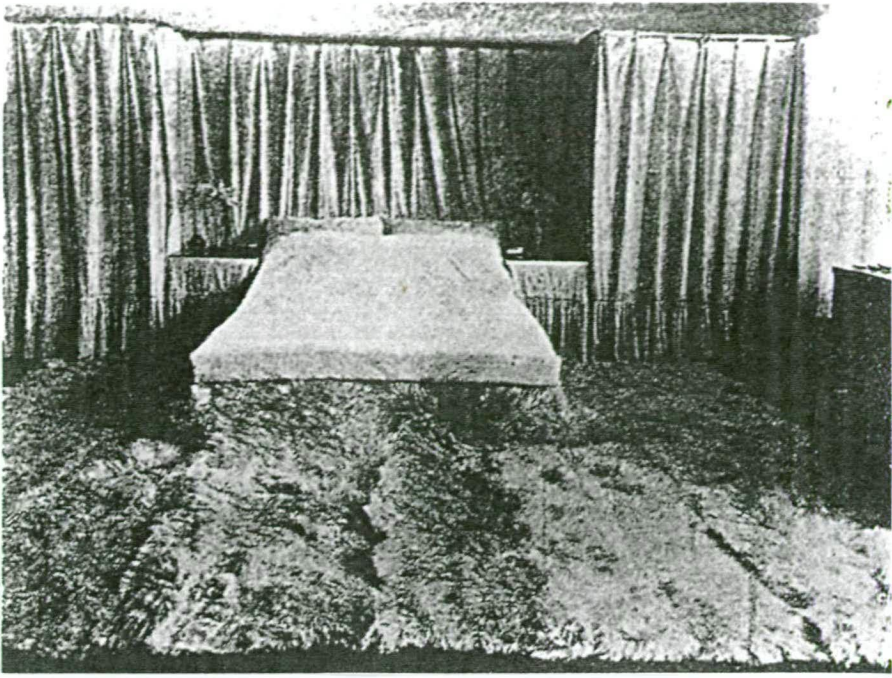


Fig. 26 Lina Loos' bedroom, Adolf Loos' flat

the new style of cubist art, and was also a follower of Kant. Here, he spells out the problem:

(...) In the year 1906, Braque, Derain, Matisse and many others were still striving for expression through colour, using only pleasant arabesques, and completely dissolving the form of the object. Cezanne's great example was still not understood. Painting threatened to debase itself to the level of ornamentation; it sought to be 'decorative', to 'adorn' the wall.<sup>107</sup>

Even though the critics showed obvious antagonism to it, ornamental decoration was not completely excluded. Both Loos and Le Corbusier continued to work discreetly with decorative arts: Loos in the interiors of his structures which were often sumptuously decorated (eg. Lina Loos' theatrical bedroom of fur and cloth, Fig. 26) and Le Corbusier's designs for tapestries, created in collaboration with the weaver Pierre Baudouin (Fig. 27). But importantly, both assumed a spectatorial role closely bound to the concept of the male gaze: Le Corbusier and Loos both affected decorative art as theatre design. The best way to appreciate their interiors is not by living in them, but by observing them. This stands in marked contrast to the view of women as consumers who gather objects for their personal appreciation, who become part of the decor, as ornaments to their homes.

<sup>107</sup> Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, first published as *Der Weg zum Kubismus*, Munich, 1920, reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, Blackwell, UK, 1994, p. 203



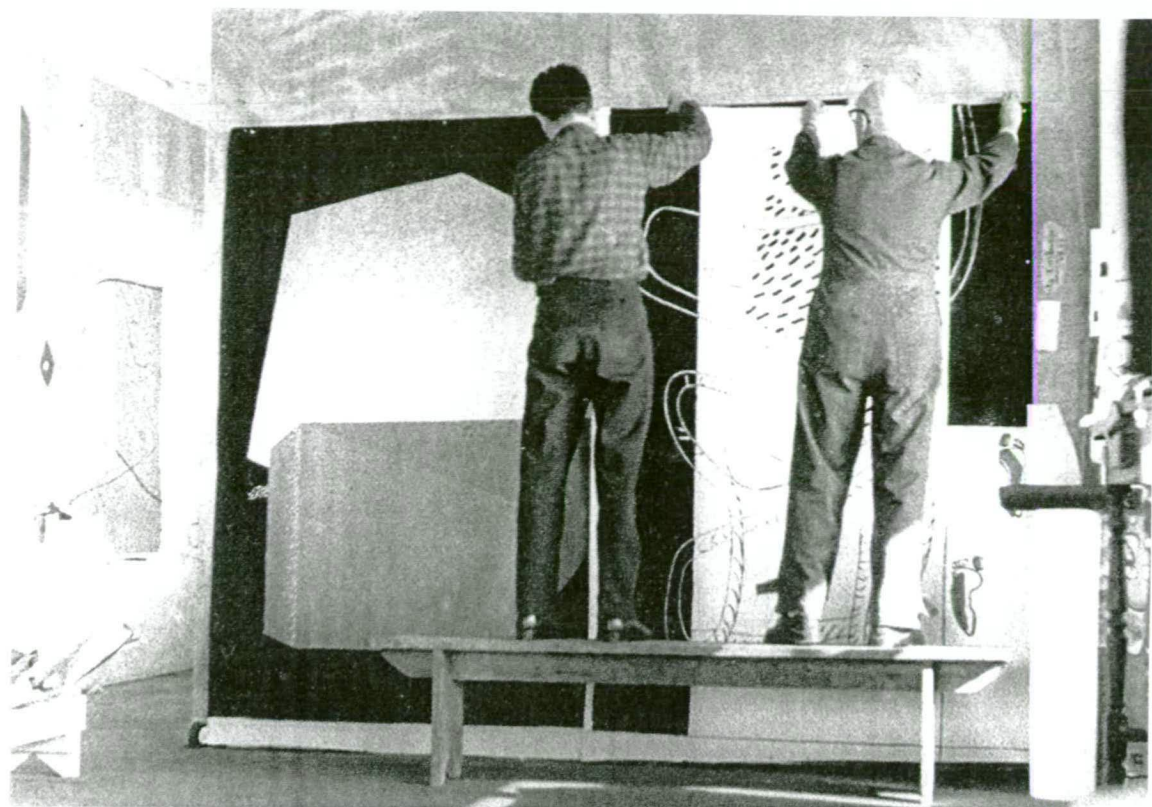


Fig. 27 Le Corbusier and Pierre Baudouin, in the Bercy atelier, working on *Traces de pas dans la nuit*, 1951

The linking of ornament with the feminine strengthened with the rise of modernism, which eschewed extraneous detail in favour of an essential 'pure' form, Kantian in its ideal and able to transcend material and sensuous distractions. Jenny Anger, in her essay entitled 'Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory 1900–1915'<sup>108</sup> pinpoints the period between 1901 and 1908 as the time when all forms of ornamental decoration became synonymous with the feminine. Anger uses the work of German critic Karl Scheffler to illustrate the rapid downward mobility of ornament as the first decade unfolded.

In 1901 Scheffler saw ornament and abstraction as being inextricably intertwined: 'Abstraction is therefore the essential domain of the ornamentalist'.<sup>109</sup> Later came a concern in keeping abstraction 'pure', independent of and at the expense of ornament. Where ornamental decoration acknowledged tradition and place as integral, the new, pure abstraction, in its ideal state, apparently had no forebears but arose as a result of the modern *zeitgeist*—as a response to the spirit of the times. In this way it

<sup>108</sup> Jenny Anger, 'Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory 1900–1915' in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, 1996, pp. 130–46

<sup>109</sup> Karl Scheffler, 'Meditations on ornament', 1901 in *Die Kunst*, vol. 4, no. 10, 1901, p. 401

cut through the sense of appropriateness for a situation (ornament was associated with decoration/decorum) and became a free-floating, independent form unsullied by links either to the past, or to the present in a site-specific manner.

As a rule, ornament relies on repeated forms; it operates as part of a genealogy that connects current use to traditional designs that are shifted slightly to maintain visual connection with the past, and to indicate current trends. This stands in total contrast to the Kantian idea of original creativity or authenticity, those very ideas that lay at the heart of modernism. To use ornament is generally to acknowledge that the design has been used previously, and will be used again afterwards. It is to fit comfortably into a cycle of inherited cultural wealth, where the artist does not stand at the end point of a genealogy, but is a participant within it. Metaphorically, the artist is no longer 'the last of the line' but is both parent and child, and stands in marked contrast to the existential individual who exists in creative isolation.

Anger suggests that for Scheffler ornament, the feminine, the decorative and mass culture together constituted an expendable 'other' to the Modernist autonomous art object.<sup>110</sup> This 'other' functioned in the Cartesian dualist sense of subordination to the dominant pure form.<sup>111</sup> Ornament was linked to superfluous detail, to the feminine lived-in contrast to the observed-domestic interior; the decorative was linked to the arrangement of forms—in contrast to their creation, and mass production was linked to commodification—without the possibility of attaining an authentic, original 'aura'. All of these negative 'feminine' features the protagonists of the autonomous art object sought to eschew, to disregard and denigrate anything other than the potential of the creative impulse to express 'an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point'.<sup>112</sup> Aspects of art determined historically as 'feminine' lost out on many levels.

This conflation of 'others' was perpetuated by authors such as Greenberg in his essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', where mass culture was opposed to high art (avant-garde) and ornament, long associated with mass culture, was further suppressed through this association. 'Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanised the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy'.<sup>113</sup> Greenberg, as advocate of the avant-garde, saw such

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<sup>110</sup> Jenny Anger, 'Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory 1900–1915' in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, 1996, pp. 136–138

<sup>111</sup> Descartes philosophical revelation 'I think, therefore I am' distils the dualism as mind governing the body, one that underscores the elevation of the intellect at the expense of the body.

<sup>112</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, p. 5

<sup>113</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, p. 9

literacy as removing 'high art' and culture from the elite and opened it to the masses—to its detriment. The association of ornament with reproduction, with architectural decoration and the decorative arts in particular connected it to Greenberg's notion of *kitsch*: the mass produced object can express individuality only by arranging it after it has come off the assembly line, as opposed to the unique object which bears the traces of an artist's expression. There is a distinction between arrangers of ready-made mass culture (women) in opposition to the avant-garde creators (men).

In retrospect, the reversal of ornament's position to one of disdain was abundantly clear. Authors such as Gombrich wrote:

During these times of ferment around the turn of the century the words ornament and decorative were not yet dirty words in the criticism of painting...

Admittedly this is a sensitive, not to say neurotic point in twentieth century criticism. There is nothing the abstract painter used to dislike more than the term 'decorative', an epithet which reminded him of the familiar sneer that what he had produced was at best pleasant curtain material. The abstract art of the twentieth century looks for an ancestry far removed from the humble craft of decorative design.<sup>114</sup>

Again Gombrich points out the link not only to production in the mass culture market (curtain material), but to the domestic interior which is decorated, usually by a woman—two alliances that were in opposition to the transcendent possibilities of painting. Scheffler's abstraction as an essential tool for the ornamentalist has been excised: abstraction is not a tool, but a pre-eminent position in avant-garde modernism.

During this time, the 'decorative' works of many modernist artists were generally denigrated, relegated to the appendices of monographs, or not discussed at all. Greenberg in particular went to great lengths to remove any notions of the decorative from the oeuvre of artists he admired, sometimes to an extraordinary extent. Matisse was obviously a favourite of Greenberg, as he referred frequently and admiringly to his work—but not the decorative work for which Matisse was renowned:

The unconscious irony of the frequent references to Matisse as a "mere" decorator lies in the fact that pure decoration is the department in which he has failed most often. Most of what I have seen of his tapestry designs, book decorations, smaller paper cutouts and even of his murals leave me cool, and only the more persuaded that he is an easel painter from first to last<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 62

<sup>115</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Partisan Review "Art Chronicle"', 1952, in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press Boston, 1984, p. 148

The easel painting, created in the studio embodied the Kantian ideas of natural talent, originality and creativity. Its independence from place rendered it diametrically opposed to any decorative arts scheme, as the easel painting could transcend space and time. The 'decorative' works, however, depended on site-specificity (a particular wall, a patron's request, a commission) which rendered them dependent on external factors and therefore open to accusations of compromise. Despite this, many of Matisse's unabashedly decorative works were attractive to Greenberg. His footnote to the above comment is even more revealing:

At the time of writing, I had not seen—nor were most of them yet in existence—the huge cut-out designs to which Matisse devoted his very last years. For me, some of these constitute...the supreme achievement of French pictorial art in the 1950s. I say 'pictorial' advisedly, because these cutouts confirm my point by being more truly pictorial than decorative, in spite of the fact that Matisse intended several of them to serve mainly decorative ends<sup>116</sup>

Greenberg could not reconcile his own admiration for the art of Matisse with Matisse's own insistence of its decorative qualities. Indeed, Matisse himself would appear to argue exactly the opposite to that which 'pure' abstract art attempted to invoke:

What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue...<sup>117</sup>

Greenberg's only recourse was to suggest that Matisse had got it wrong, or at the time did not know any better. Greenberg described the paper cutouts as pictorial. *Anything* was preferable to the decorative.

Loos' 'Ornament and Crime' is often incanted when critics attempt to ridicule or denigrate the presence of ornamental decoration in art. Curiously, his retraction to this earlier argument is rarely acknowledged. For he later wrote: 'I have never maintained, as have the purists ad absurdum that ornament must be eliminated in systematic and radical fashion'.<sup>118</sup> It remained a hallmark of modernism to rebuke the dependent, feminine decorative, and celebrate the transcendent qualities of pure abstraction. Abstraction in its infancy struggled to define its territory, and one solution was to define it against what it was not—namely decoration. In this way the

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<sup>116</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Partisan Review "Art Chronicle"', 1952, in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press Boston, 1984, p. 148

<sup>117</sup> Henri Matisse, 'Notes d'un Peintre', *La Grande Revue*, vol. LII, no. 24, (25 December, 1908), pp. 731-45, reprinted in Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, New York, Phaidon, 1973, pp. 35-40

<sup>118</sup> Adolf Loos, in *Adolf Loos, Pioneer of Modern Architecture*, New York, Praeger, 1966, p. 309

historical association between the feminine and ornamental decoration was cast in stone. It was this aspect that precipitated the counter movement of feminist artists in the seventies and post-modern artists of the eighties who used ornamental decoration to critique issues of gender.





### 3. Synchronic critique

The second half of this thesis is divided into two sections. The first deals with the feminist rehabilitation of ornamental decoration through the American *Pattern and Decoration* movement of the 1970s. While they criticised modernism for being dismissive of women's contributions, they did not necessarily provide solutions. In fact, often their analysis compounded the problem. The second section deals with contemporary uses of ornamental decoration that acknowledge the ideological shift that occurred as a result of the feminist attempt to rehabilitate ornamental decoration, and are aware simultaneously of the limitations of this attempt.

Questions arise such as: where is the place for ornamental decoration in contemporary art? Is it solely the concern for marginal groups, the 'others' that help define a centre which keeps them on the margins? How has recent work 're-theorising' the body as fluid and mobile challenged the idea of gender as a static concept bound closely to a universal experience that we all apparently share? Can this assist in wrestling the constricting equation feminine=ornamental decoration, or can artists capitalise on it? In a multi-layered, complex society where more information is gleaned from the non-hierarchical 'egalitarian' internet<sup>119</sup> than from a central source, how relevant is the idea of a centre? How has this impacted on ideas of ornamental decoration? The project of deconstruction has helped to dismantle the rhetoric that reinforced historical constructions as 'truths', yet the relativism that resulted may prove as unhelpful when comprehending specifics. It does, however, open the way for a discussion of issues such as ornamental decoration and gender, unhindered by presumptions of gender specificity.

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<sup>119</sup> The internet is only egalitarian if you have access to it. This is not an issue in places without electricity, for example where the everyday use of a computer remains a fantasy.

### 3:1: The feminist rehabilitation and analysis of ornament: the *Pattern and Decoration* project and its shortcomings.

The association of ornamental decoration with the feminine heightened during the early to mid twentieth century. Any attempt to rehabilitate ornament or decoration was seen as the antithesis of the modernist project which had sought to strip away the inessential aspects of the art object in order to reveal an 'essence', a core, which would have the possibility of transcending a personal context and claim universality of experience. The advocates of modernism could not conceive of decorative and formalist elements coexisting, they were diametrically opposed to each other. Abstract expressionist, minimal and conceptual artists produced works of heroic scale and implied grand action (either emotional or physical), which connected them to the eighteenth century concept of the Romantic sublime, Kant's concept of the artistic genius and could also be analysed in rationalist formalist terms, which defined borrowed, decorative imagery as inessential and vulgar.<sup>120</sup> Curiously, although this style of painting was dominated by men, it was often advocated as the 'natural' and inevitable evolution of art during modernity, curiously perceived as androgynous and pure—even by many women artists (the works of Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell in particular come to mind). Criticism of its sexist nature was dismissed as being made by 'militant feminists' whose work was about inferior subjects. Artists such as Miriam Schapiro, for example, were criticised for turning their backs on a successful career within the accepted high art idiom and working with its antithesis, 'the decorative'.<sup>121</sup>

As a reaction to the perceived strictures in style (gestural, minimal or conceptual), marketing (exhibitions and galleries under representing women artists) and reception of art (its necessity to be perceived as avant-garde), there arose a renewed interest in the use of ornamental decoration, specifically non-illusionistic and semi-abstract pattern, which was seen as a feminine counter to the cool, pared-down masculine abstraction. Exhibitions of this work provoked a divided critical response that was based as much on emotion as intellect. Needless to say, the majority of criticism was negative, but the passion and vehemence with which the *Pattern and Decoration* artists were denigrated far outweighed the ambition of their works. It would appear that *Pattern and Decoration* had struck the Achille's Heel of the modern movement.

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<sup>120</sup> Perhaps best exemplified in works by artists such as the Romanticist Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) to the twentieth century artist Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and the Abstract Expressionist movement.

<sup>121</sup> Judy Chicago, in Lucy Lippard, *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, Dutton, New York, 1976, p. 218

The *Pattern and Decoration* movement that arose in America during the seventies initially gained critical attention from an artist-organised exhibition entitled 'Ten Approaches to the Decorative'<sup>122</sup> held in a Soho Gallery in New York in 1976. Various other artists had been exhibiting work with a decorative 'tendency', but 'Ten Approaches' was the first exhibition to directly address the topic as part of a larger issue. Following its success, other exhibitions followed, eagerly embraced by an art-going public who had been hungering for a less reductive art.<sup>123</sup>

The movement based its revisionist strategy on reassessing the role of decoration in the development of modern abstract art. Decoration was perceived to have always played a vital role—as witnessed through the works of Wassily Kandinsky and Henri Matisse—that modernist critics such as Greenberg chose to ignore. Critical of the art styles favoured at the time (minimalism, conceptual art) *Pattern and Decoration* proposed a 'non-Minimalist, non-sexist, historically conscious, sensuous, romantic, rational, decorative' art, where 'Its methods, motifs and referents cross cultural and class lines.'<sup>124</sup> The artists in this movement sought to question 'that entire segment of twentieth century art which seeks to convey content and meaning through abstract and non-objective forms'.<sup>125</sup> Designs from other cultures were used as subject matter where, rather than signifying the exotic 'oriental', they were used to suggest the inherent Eurocentrism of western art practices that marginalised art other than its own, and also pointed to the false presumption that the production of and interest in the 'decorative' is biologically determined female: non-western art does not share the presumption that decoration is gendered. By conflating the marginal with the overlooked, and including aspects of traditional feminine practices (embroidery, fabrics, pattern) they sought to challenge the *status quo* and elevate pattern and decoration to the status of high art.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> 'Ten Approaches to the Decorative' opened at the Alessandra Gallery in Soho on September 25, 1976. It was curated by artist Jane Kaufman, and presented works by Kaufman, Joyce Kozloff, Valerie Jaudon, Tony Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Arlene Slavin, George Sugarman, John Torreano, Robert Zakanitch and Barbara Zucker.

<sup>123</sup> The concept, of using the modernism's 'other'—decoration—was also embraced by Australian artists during the seventies.

<sup>124</sup> John Perrault, 'Issues in Pattern Painting', *Artforum*, November, 1977, p. 33

<sup>125</sup> Norma Broude, 'Miriam Schapiro and Femmage: Reflections on the Conflict Between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Art', in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (eds.) *Feminism and Art History, Questioning the Litany*, Harper and Row, New York, 1982, pp. 315-329

<sup>126</sup> Norman Bryson pursued a similar argument in his book on still life *Looking at the Overlooked*, Reaktion Books, London, 1990, which could parallel the situation of ornamental decoration in relation to form at this time. Bryson described his subject as 'rhography' (from rhopos—trivial objects, small wares, trifles), the depiction of things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks. This he opposed to 'megalography', those things in the world that are great, the legends of the gods, battles of heroes, various crises of history that have been important subject matter in art. (Bryson, p. 61)

Bryson suggested that each still life was meant to enter the still life series where 'there is no essence, only a variety of family resemblances; (where it is) not a linear series (that implies progress) but a category'. (Bryson, p. 11) He suggested that it would be impossible for still life to be accepted on the same terms as megalographic subjects—it would be ludicrous to suggest that they address the same concerns—but to accept a 'lower' position on the hierarchy does not necessarily indicate that still life

However, the *Pattern and Decoration* movement owed as much to developments in minimal and conceptual art which it sought ultimately to subvert. Initially artists employed the scale, materials and exhibition venues intrinsic to modern art—chiefly oil paint and collage on large canvases presented in art galleries.<sup>127</sup> Many *Pattern and Decoration* artists used the grid format as the basis of their structure, claiming its non-hierarchical structure which depended less on 'focus' than 'scanning' to read the work was liberating. This move was seen by the artists as a subversion of the prevailing abstract style of minimalism, but could also be seen as an extension of it, as the grid was integral to both. Rather than using a reductive strategy of 'paring down' the grid to 'reveal its essence', as in minimalism (less is more), the *Pattern and Decoration* artists used additive practices of embellishment and adornment, creating an eroticised surface of colour and texture that became as important a subject matter as the images depicted. Where both styles began with a similar format, their approaches diverged: the *Pattern and Decoration* artists celebrated the sensuous and pleasurable through appealing visually to the senses, and was deemed antithetical to the aims of minimal art that appealed to the intellect.<sup>128</sup> They also relied on their opposition to minimalism to define an alternative 'feminine' territory, much as abstract art had denounced 'decoration' to maintain its own integrity and distance.

At the time criticism was divided, either stridently for or equally vehemently against the new decorative style. The main protagonist was Amy Golding, who had taught many of the artists while visiting Professor at the University of California at San Diego and was a driving force behind many of the ideas.<sup>129</sup> Jeff Perrone, John Perrault and Carrie Rickey spiritedly argued their cases through the art magazines, many times publicly debating with antagonists such as Corrine Robins and Donald Kuspit. These opponents claimed militant feminists were attempting to reverse the order of things: 'these strong, upfront—blatant—patterns seemed to function like the clenched fist of a rebellious military salute'<sup>130</sup> (Kuspit); and that the artists were not dealing with 'life and death issues' so could not be taken 'seriously' (Robins). Robins actually attacked the work using the familiar clichés of decoration representing the 'disintegration or vulgarization' of serious art (I am surprised she didn't use 'degenerate' as well, but that would have elevated the work to the status of radical

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does not have artistic validity. Its meaning is complementary to and distinct from megalographic concerns.

<sup>127</sup> Later many artists became involved with installation and public art projects that took them out of the gallery.

<sup>128</sup> The opposition of these two practises, additive versus reductive, has its precedent in the Enlightenment analysis of the Antique, for example in the smooth taut surface of the *kouros* and the embellished *kore*.

<sup>129</sup> Norma Broude, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York, 1994, p. 211

<sup>130</sup> Donald Kuspit, 'Betraying the Feminist Intention: The Case Against Feminist Decorative Art', *Arts Magazine*, November, 1979, p. 126

avant-garde through its association with *Entartete Kunst*) and bemoaned the decline in several of the artists' works from their previous exhibitions where they had addressed the serious issues of 'figure/ground' relationships and 'personal sense of boundaries'—which apparently reflected more substantial 'life and death issues', as Perrone succinctly pointed out in his response.<sup>131</sup>

Perrone was at pains to point out the difference between the 'new' decorative artists and the older generation who had tired of working in a formalist manner.

Decorative refers to pictorial creation which does not express the ego desires of a single artist...It is, for example, impossible to reconcile the decorative with any form of violence or aggression, these being extreme manifestations of egocentric desire. Samaras' spiky chairs, his sado-masochistic fantasies, even his 'quilts', exhibit a personal horror, a frightening destructiveness which is anti-decorative. Stella's latest works, sharp, cut-out metal reliefs, jut out into space with an aggressive force: the razor-blade edges speak of a sensibility exploitative, sarcastic, cold, manipulative, utterly lacking the self-effacing qualities of decoration.<sup>132</sup>

Such artists did not share the spirit of decoration, which appeared decidedly moral, passive, benevolent and altruistic by comparison. Perrone also indicated that where the others were subject to the vagaries of style—picking up on pattern and decoration as the next fashionable style—the *Pattern and Decoration* artists shared a kindred aim that transcended 'fashion', and would presumably continue for evermore.

Joyce Kozloff (Fig. 28) and Valerie Jaudon (Fig. 29) worked in the time-honoured fashion of decorative artists, where their subject matter which was derived from Islamic and Celtic patterns, was copied directly from books of patterns, the modern women's art manual. Their use of these books recalls the popular grammars of ornament, in which ornamental decorations from diverse cultures were produced in book form to satisfy the nineteenth century enthusiasm for decorating in an exotic style, homogenising different cultural ornamentation into context-less taxonomic illustrations.

Whereas initially this was seen as an act of liberation and celebration of the rich visual history of cultures marginal to western art, eventually the artists became aware of the cultural imperialism in which they were unwitting participants. Kozloff later recalled her discomfort when she found she

...could not simply celebrate what was sometimes a form of oppression (little

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<sup>131</sup> This argument developed in the pages of *Arts Magazine*: Corrine Robins, 'Late Decorative: Art Artefact and the Ersatz', *Arts Magazine*, September, 1980, vol. 55 #1, pp. 150-151 and Jeff Perrone's response, 'Seriously, Folks', *Arts Magazine*, December, 1980, vol. 55 #4, pp. 104-106

<sup>132</sup> Jeff Perrone, quoted in Norma Broude, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York, 1994, p. 215



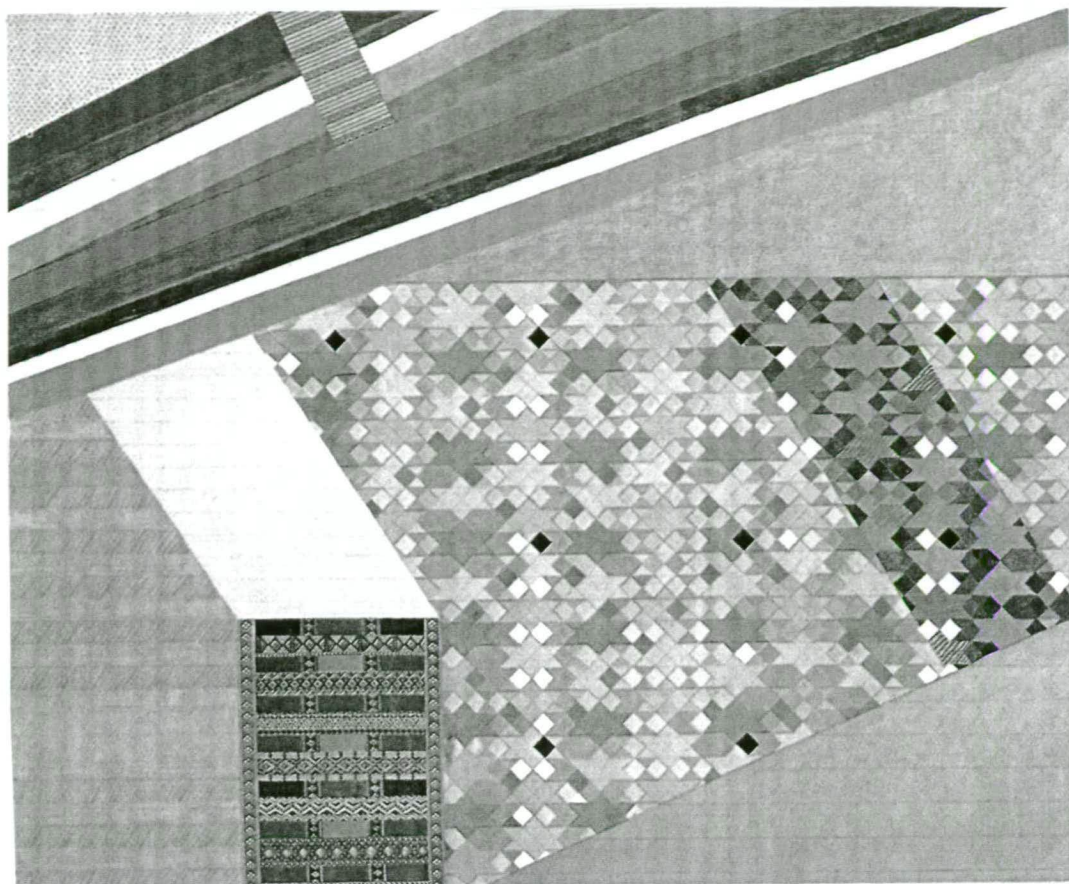


Fig. 28 Joyce Kozloff, *Tent-roof-floor-carpet, Zenmour*, 1975

girls going blind making lace in Europe or weaving in the Near East) or devalued in its own context...I think about how I began to feel dishonest claiming to break down the hierarchies between high art and craft while continuing to take from decorative art sources to make paintings!<sup>133</sup>

She later abandoned the 'high art' materials of oil paint and canvas to execute large public art commissions using ceramic tiles, where subject matter was derived from local content and applied in consideration as to how the architectural space was used. In a way, she returned to the fold: (extrinsic) decoration added to (intrinsic) form—architecture. Kozloff went to great lengths to identify connections between local culture and decoration by incorporating aspects of indigenous ornament, but it remains that the work was an addition to, not an integral part of the structure, and the content was appropriated from indigenous 'others'.

<sup>133</sup> Joyce Kozloff quoted in Norma Broude, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York, 1994, p. 224



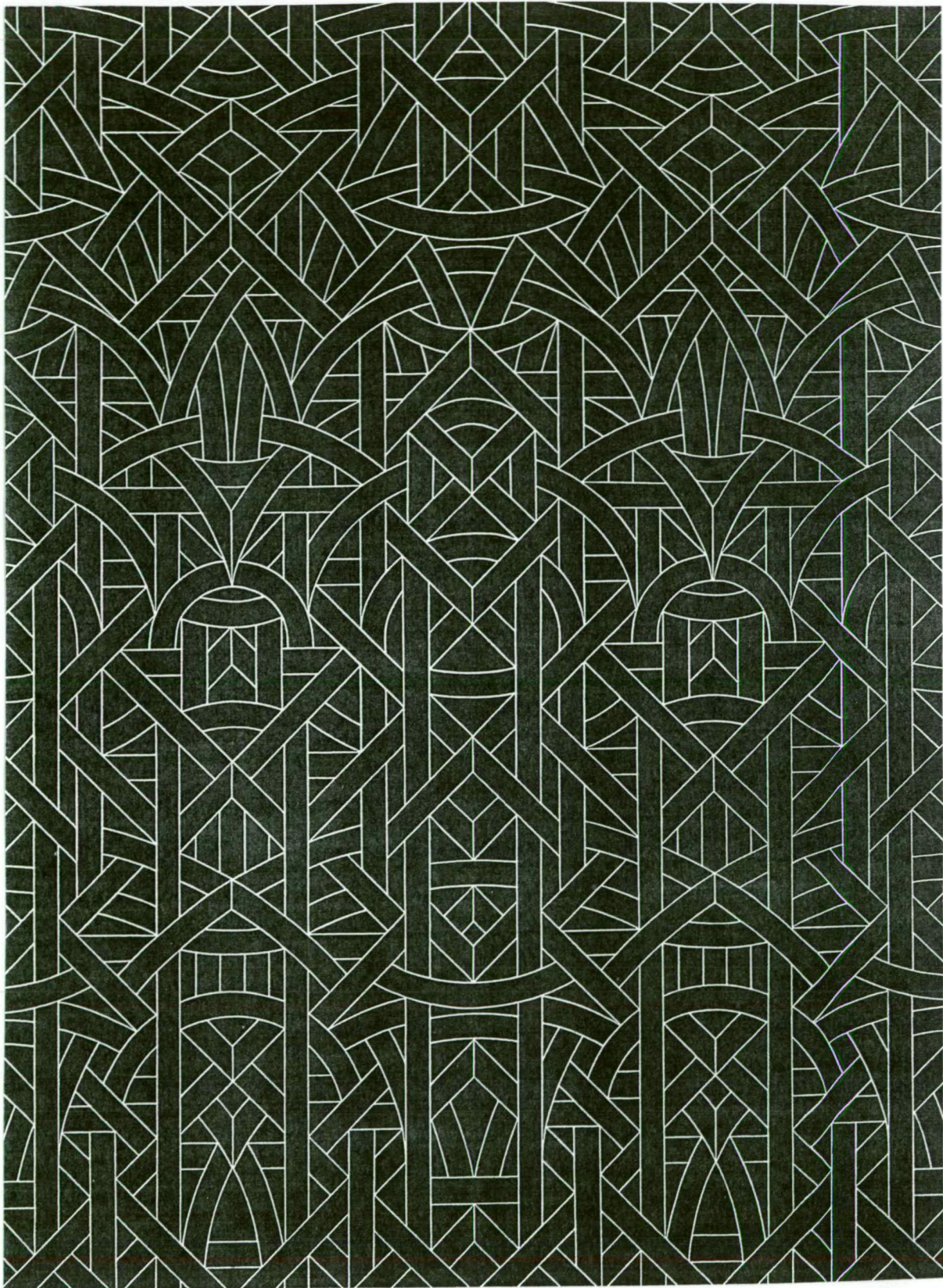


Fig. 29 Valerie Jaudon, *Pantherburn*, 1979

*Pattern and Decoration* was seen positively as a flagship for the feminist movement of the seventies, a time of increased awareness, politicisation and experimentation in the art world. Although not all the artists shared the politics of feminism, they all exploited 'feminine' sensibility to advantage. In this atmosphere it was not sufficient, nor responsible for an artist to create autonomous art objects that spoke of universality, or essences. Yet, curiously that is what the *Pattern and Decoration* movement was doing.

In philosophical terms, the Cartesian mind/body, masculine/feminine split was played out in full: the artists of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement maintained the dichotomy between form and decoration, but reversed the terms of the dichotomy by giving ornamental decoration a positive rather than negative value. This reversal ultimately led the movement to an ideological dead-end. For if its intention was to elevate the neglected 'other', the *Pattern and Decoration* movement succeeded in reinforcing its 'otherness'. Its main problem was its perceived strength: the artists viewed ornamental decoration *positively* as a biologically-determined tradition designated as feminine. By simply reversing the terms of the dichotomy—elevating 'feminine' ornament as distinct from the perceived 'masculine' strategy of reduction—they left unchallenged the assumption that ornamental decoration was inherently feminine. This position also underscored the 'inappropriateness' of ornamental decoration within a high art tradition which is equally gendered masculine. One of the integral concepts of decoration, that of 'decorum' or appropriateness, could be used as a criticism against itself: it was deemed *inappropriate* for 'the feminine' to mimic a 'masculine' mode of presentation. Abstract motifs derived from ornamental decoration were perceived by critics, such as Robins, as lacking 'seriousness' when compared to abstract artists of the time who valorised logic and rationality through the use of minimalism. This feminine 'lack' was again underscored when artists used the same mode of presentation, that is, large oil paintings viewed in clean white galleries: the 'feminine' was shown to be wanting within a 'masculine' space, and critics again used ridicule as a tool against women to point this out.<sup>134</sup>

The use of pattern and decoration certainly questioned the assumption of formalism as androgynous by showing that its opposite, pattern and decoration, was gendered female. But did this improve the situation, or reinforce the duality that had positioned pattern and decoration as extrinsic to the predominant mode of working? Women artists acknowledged themselves as marginal to the mainstream by employing the recognised language of 'others', yet almost revelled in their anonymous, homogenous 'otherness'. Simultaneously, they also wished to be

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<sup>134</sup> The 'monstrous feminine', the 'ferocious lamb' reappeared in various guises to reassert authority.



accepted as part of that same establishment, the 'other' to be accepted into the mainstream.

The work of psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva assists in clarifying the position of artists in the *Pattern and Decoration* movement and the inevitable impossibility of their project. In her article 'Women's Time'<sup>135</sup> Kristeva identified female subjectivity as linked with *cyclical* time (repetition) and *monumental* time (eternity), through the interrelated biological conditions of motherhood and reproduction, of 'cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock'.<sup>136</sup> This, she argues, is at odds with the concept of *linear* time, as experienced through 'time as departure, progression and arrival—in other words, the time of history'.<sup>137</sup> It is also the manner by which language is understood—the sentence which unfolds in a linear manner, word after word towards a logical end—which reinforces this concept on a daily basis. Ornamental decoration, and the work of the *Pattern and Decoration* artists, may be understood in the former manner, for its cyclical repetition. Its genealogical heritage and mimicry leaves it standing outside of a system that valorises logic and conclusivity, and places it directly within the framework of 'feminine' time.

Kristeva suggested that many of the problems feminists faced were a result of the irreconcilability of these two concepts of time. For example the first suffragettes aspired to gain a place in linear time (equal pay for equal work) and risked losing the attributes considered feminine or maternal in order to do so through the *logic of identification*. The post-1968 feminists held a different relationship to their predecessors, one of almost refusal of any point of contact with linear time through emphasising women's difference, and situated women's experience as outside of history. The *Pattern and Decoration* movement can be viewed as a 'mixture of these two attitudes—*insertion* into history and the radical *refusal* of the subjective limitations imposed'<sup>138</sup> which defined their position as a reaction to the predominant, understood concept of time. Through emphasising difference, the artists understood that their history was also different, but simultaneously demanded that it be accepted on the same terms as activities that worked to reinforce and validate the concept of linear time. This was not possible, and served to underscore the powerlessness of their situation in the face of a larger task.

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<sup>135</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', first published as 'Le temps des femmes' in 33/44: *Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents*, 5, Winter 1979, reprinted in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, UK, 1986, pp. 187-213

<sup>136</sup> Julia Kristeva, reprinted in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, UK, 1986, p. 191

<sup>137</sup> Julia Kristeva, reprinted in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, UK, 1986, p. 192

<sup>138</sup> Julia Kristeva, reprinted in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, UK, 1986, p. 195

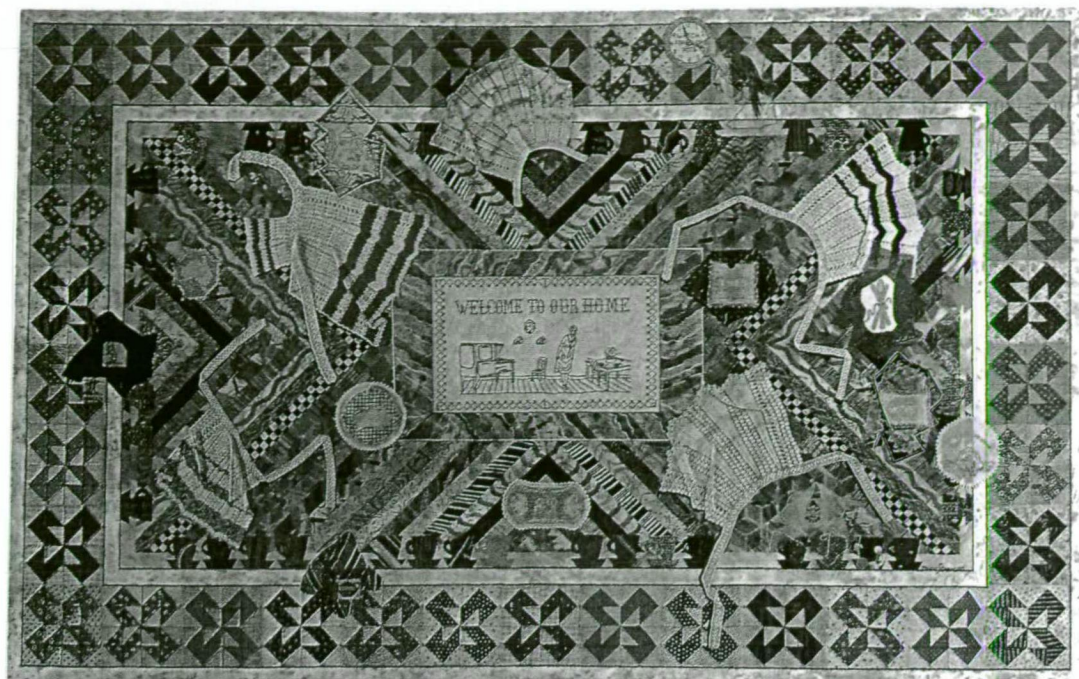


Fig. 30 Miriam Schapiro, *Wonderland*, 1983

One artist who would appear to exemplify this position is Miriam Schapiro, who had developed a reputation in the 'high art' world before setting up the Feminist Art Program with Judy Chicago at CalArts in the early seventies.<sup>139</sup> Her epiphany occurred in the 70s, and she coined the term 'femmage' to describe her works at the time. 'Femmage' was a feminine variant on the commonly accepted 'high art' term of collage and included various 'low art' materials gathered from a variety of non-art sources. (Fig. 30) Her artist's statement, written in the third person, reveals her position:

Miriam Schapiro is a painter who superimposes found, patterned fabric in tissue-thin layers on painted canvas. Sometimes she paints again on the final surface. Her sources lie in the utilitarian objects of all countries, throughout her time. Her passion for needlework, quilts and clothing by anonymous American women inspires her to create works of art in their image. She travels and lectures extensively on the art of all women and frequently receives souvenirs (handkerchiefs, aprons, bits of lace, embroidered tablecloths) which she then incorporates into her art. She calls this aspect of her work 'femmage'.<sup>140</sup>

An underlying feeling of benevolent sentimentality pervades both her ideological stand and the choice of subject matter, where 'celebration' appears conflated with

<sup>139</sup> Judy Chicago, in Lucy Lippard, *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, Dutton, New York, 1976, p. 218

<sup>140</sup> Carrie Rickey, 'Decoration, Ornament, Pattern and Utility: Four Tendencies in Search of a Movement', *Flash Art*, June/July, 1979, p. 23



sympathy borne of naïvete. 'Women' are addressed as an homogenous group, where the problems of one are shared by all, rather than as a group of individuals with many identities. She became the self-pronounced artist for 'all' women, where she perceived a universal problem through the eyes of a white, first-world artist with newly found feminism. She 'wanted to speak directly to women—' with her large-scale work *Anatomy of a Kimono*, but 'Later I remembered that men also wore kimonos, and so the piece eventually had an androgynous quality.'<sup>141</sup> If androgyny could be signified simply through an item of apparel worn by both men and women—and this was only a late discovery—I would suggest that Schapiro overlooked any significant social, sexual or cultural aspects of the kimono in favour of its purely formal appeal.

Schapiro's passion for 'needlework, quilts and clothing by anonymous American women' was professed, yet she addressed their anonymity in much the same way that modernist men used anonymous African masks as the basis for early abstraction: as inspirational subject matter. It is easier to maintain a political stance on marginalisation by perpetuating the myth of anonymity, which also avoids delving into the cultural reasons as to why this has occurred. Many of Schapiro's 'souvenirs' would have had individual, traceable histories that were subsumed into the artist's ambitious work.<sup>142</sup> Schapiro's work, like Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party*, relied heavily on the work of others to uphold their positions in the role of traditional artists.<sup>143</sup>

Installation as a mode of presenting work challenged conventional art practices at the time, and was employed by the artists of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement. For these artists, 'installation' was associated with reinterpreting the 'feminine' domestic

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<sup>141</sup> Miriam Schapiro quoted in Norma Broude, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York, 1994, p. 216

<sup>142</sup> Schapiro did create a series of etchings entitled *Anonymous Was a Woman* in 1977 in which, it has been argued, Schapiro reveals the original objects (lace collars, crocheted doilies etc) as having their own 'aesthetic value and expressive significance' (Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Harper and Row, New York, p. 322). Beyond saying that these objects are anonymous, and most probably made by women, Schapiro's work ultimately reinforces the concept that 'women's art' has a separate agenda and as such has been omitted from art history. But she also attempts to insert this separate art forms through using them as beautiful subject matter for her 'high art' etchings. It reinforces the distance between the real object, now transformed into a medium of reproduction and further commodification, and its origins—yet it is their origins which may prove more insightful into the reason as to why 'anonymous' may (or may not) have been a woman.

<sup>143</sup> Australian artists also embraced feminism through art. In 1979 Elizabeth Gower employed rediscovered women's skills in her works:

The techniques used to join these units includes such skills as weaving, sewing etc. These methods of construction and sources of reference have traditionally been put down as 'women's work' and not considered Art. By proudly referring to women's traditional artmaking, these techniques are seen not only as a means of construction and process but as a major content of my work.

One of the most important developments in Art over this decade has been the emergence of the feminist movement.

*European Dialogue: 3rd Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1979

interior, rather than questioning the notion of art as a consumable object through creating environments, happenings, or moving to the great outdoors (as in the case of earth artists), and was probably the most subversive of forms practised by the *Pattern and Decoration* artists.

Cynthia Carlson has perhaps left the most intriguing legacy for contemporary artists, where she literally turned the walls of galleries into paintings, through glueing the trade-marks of 'artist'—pieces of acrylic paint that appeared to be hardened gestural brushstrokes—onto the white walls at regular intervals from floor to ceiling to resemble patterned wallpaper.<sup>144</sup> The public gallery was decorated as if it was private domestic space, and the aesthetics of domestic decoration were questioned through the sign of artist. In a quiet manner, Carlson's wallpaper pieces criticised the previous centuries' authoritative separation of the two spheres of (public) masculine and (domestic) feminine.

This mode of working struck at the heart of the art system at the time in a truly subversive manner, through the idea that visual art might all be decorative, in both form and function. Such a strategy challenged the modernist belief that the function of decoration was antithetical to true 'serious' artistic endeavour. 'But art *is* decoration and decoration *is* a noble aspiration' an exasperated Carrie Rickey claimed.<sup>145</sup> It is precisely this last point in which the antagonists at the time found their ammunition, and where many contemporary artists have since found fertile ground.<sup>146</sup>

Corrine Robins' criticism of art attempting to trespass into the domestic realm, or worse, the utilitarian, was too much for her to bear:

What we in the art world recognize as art are works which are not domesticable, sculptures and paintings which call attention to their own, sometimes alien values, works which either dominate or coexist with, rather than enhance, a luxurious environment. Every kind of non-applied art is non-utilitarian. Our lives require

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<sup>144</sup> Writer and critic Amy Goldin analysed the practice and theoretical underpinnings of pattern painting and was a contemporary of the *Pattern and Decoration* artists. She made the simple but acute observation that pattern relies not so much on the repetition of a motif, but on the interval between each motif. Random intervals will not make a pattern, even if the motif remains constant. Regular intervals will result in a pattern emerging, and can be made increasingly complex through the superimposition of layers. Amy Goldin, 'Pattern and Print', *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, 9, March/April, 1978, pp. 10-13. It is this regularity that Carlson used to effect.

<sup>145</sup> Carrie Rickey, 'Pattern Painting', *Arts Magazine*, January, 1978, p. 17

<sup>146</sup> Goldin recognised the impossible dilemma of decoration versus form and pointed to the difficulty that artists faced as 'rarely, if ever, has (pattern) been expected to provide an experience of form itself'. Amy Goldin, 'Pattern and Print', *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, 9, March/April, 1978, pp. 10-13. Where content is closely linked to iconic form, and 'intellectual' art is based on the human condition represented by the idealised body, pattern painting certainly set itself a difficult task. Andy Warhol, in his use of pattern to represent political icons (as for example in his *Chairman Mao* installation) was acutely aware of the association of pattern with banality, and how repetition can reduce the potency of a single image to 'mere' pattern.

furnishings, lamps, utensils, all of which may in time assume the status of artefacts.<sup>147</sup>

Her criticism was addressed to sculptural works where the form was derived from domestic objects—chairs, tables—which had a dual purpose of aesthetic form *and* function. Robins offers a convoluted explanation as to the difference between 'art' and 'decorative utility', which even she begrudgingly admits is difficult, at times, to ascertain. For example she describes 'chair sculptures' sold through a gallery as works of art that 'offer a rather witty commentary on contemporary art movements', in contrast with the '*Proust Chair* sold in the Soho store called Art et Industrie (which) is an expensive conversation piece meant to be sat on as well as talked about...The chair is an item of consumption', and thus obviously not a work of art. The plea to keep galleries away from the domestic, and maintain a separation from consumerism is almost desperate: 'remember the Mondrian dresses?' Robins' argument was that high art was cheapened by introducing it into the marketplace, and worse, it was the marketeers, not Mondrian 'who reaped the artist's rewards'.<sup>148</sup>

Many of the issues in current art practice can be identified within the *Pattern and Decoration* movement: appropriation, using utilitarian craft as both subject matter and end-product (as opposed to non-functional art), identity (presenting the 'personal as political') and experimenting with installation have become central concerns, that were initially means by which conventional artistic practices were challenged. This was not restricted to the *Pattern and Decoration* artists, but was part of the growing momentum whose intention was to deconstruct the perceived limitations of the art world at the time.

In retrospect, it would appear that many of the *Pattern and Decoration* artists appropriated ornamental decoration as mere pattern, abstract and free of meaning, as a feminine version of abstract art. If ornament was seen as abstract design and free of significant content, then the Islamic tiles and knotwork patterns of Celtic art, Oceanic and Indigenous art could be used purely for their formal appearance, much as the African masks were used by Picasso, with little consideration of their specific historical, cultural or symbolic significance. Ornamental decoration, despite its significance when *in situ*, was rendered meaningless when out of context, becoming trivial and easily rewritten in other forms, in particular being rewritten as firmly tied to gender. In attempting to define a feminist position in opposition to the prevailing masculine hegemony, they only succeeded in perpetuating the dichotomy.

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<sup>147</sup> Corrine Robins, 'Late Decorative: Art Artefact and the Ersatz', *Arts Magazine*, September, 1980, vol. 55 #1, p.150.

<sup>148</sup> Corrine Robins, 'Late Decorative: Art Artefact and the Ersatz', *Arts Magazine*, September, 1980, vol. 55, #1, p.150. Mondrian had been dead over 20 years when Yves Saint Laurent showed his *Mondrian Dress* in his '65-'66 collection.

Ultimately, the artists of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement left unchallenged the historical convention 'ornament=feminine'. Through celebrating ornamental decoration as a 'feminine' form of expression, as distinct from the perceived 'masculine' styles that prevailed at the time, ornamental decoration and (feminine) gender became even more identified. By using ornamental decoration to expose the patriarchal nature of the art world at the time, they succeeded in politicising it as a style irrevocably linked to 'the feminine'. It remains a problematic area for women to investigate without the presumption of subjective or political involvement. Men, it seems, can remain detached and objective when using ornamental decoration, women cannot, as within patriarchal discourse, it is seen as inextricably bound to the 'essential' nature of femininity. What was not examined by these artists, and would be taken up later, was the historical construction of both masculine *and* feminine visual languages, and the difficulty of escaping these historical legacies.





### 3:2: Contemporary use of ornamental decoration.

Contemporary artists who use ornamental decoration often actively engage in critiquing the dichotomy that was identified with the *Pattern and Decoration* movement. By taking what was previously 'taboo' in visual art, and now celebrating its denigrated status, a position of difference to the previous era may be declared. It is inevitable that ornamental decoration, previously anathema to adherents of modernism, would become an ally to those espousing post-modern concerns based on a simple inversion of the dichotomy. But is this simply continuing the project pursued by the *Pattern and Decoration* movement—complete with its attendant problems—or is it possible for artists to engage critically with the dichotomy without reinforcing its hegemony?

The *Pattern and Decoration* movement sought to identify a link between ornamental decoration and 'the feminine', whereby their 'otherness' to the mainstream could be exposed. As I have suggested, in recent years this has been extrapolated into ornamental decoration being identified as a 'definitive feature within discourses of marginalised cultures (the feminine, the crafts, and the 'traditional')...' <sup>148</sup> Thus the cultures of others deemed marginal to the mainstream—particularly those whose visual language embraced ornamental decoration—have been rewritten as 'feminine'. However a problem arises when ornamental decoration is seen as a representation of 'otherness' in which all 'marginal' discourses are conflated as homogenous and rewritten as 'feminine'. For a start, it is patently inaccurate. It also wilfully continues the dichotomy that has disenfranchised many aspects of artistic practice, in favour of a singular approach.

I would suggest that a point of departure that heralds 'difference' based on opposition grossly simplifies the relationship between ornamental decoration and gender, modernism and post-modernism. The complex nature of contemporary experience makes such a simple break with the past a difficult task, and the previous definitions of gender are increasingly under challenge. Even if the artist has used ornamental decoration as a sign against the 'modern', often the work itself reveals more than an easy solution to a simple equation: a dichotomy presents as many problems as it sets out to resolve.

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<sup>148</sup> Merryn Gates, *Patterning in Contemporary Art: Layers of Meaning*, The Asialink Centre, University of Melbourne and the Canberra School of Art Gallery, ANU, 1997, p. 5

### 3:2:1: The legacy of *Pattern and Decoration*: working with ornamental decoration as the 'other'.

After *Pattern and Decoration*, artists who use ornamental decoration have been required to negotiate their subject matter in terms of the feminine, as 'other' to the mainstream. Even if it is not the prime *raison d'être* of the work of art, this cannot be ignored. Indeed, some artists work with this as a strategy to critique what they perceive as a prescriptive and narrow view of what constitutes artistic practice.

In this section, I propose to investigate works by artists who consciously appropriate elements from art historical sources that represent 'the feminine, the crafts, the traditional', aspects which, in this case, serve to position ornamental decoration as the marginalised 'other'. Each artist appropriates ornamental decoration to define a critical position that looks at art history's role in determining its marginalisation, effectively countering generalisations that define the modern (as male, original, high art) against ornamental decoration (as female, traditional, craft). In the examples chosen, artists use ornamental decoration as the antithesis of 'the modern', yet they also expose the interdependent relationship that exists between the two. The existence of the mainstream necessarily relies upon maintaining the 'other' in a denigrated position, and *vice versa*.

Importantly, the imagery is decontextualised and has been historically reinscribed as the 'feminine'. In a way, these artists may be seen to continue the *Pattern and Decoration* project, but with a significant difference: they recognise the marginal status attached to ornamental decoration is a product of historical construction, are acutely aware of the *Pattern and Decoration* movements' failings, and know that their works will be viewed according to these criteria. They are also aware that ornamental decoration can be the bearer of other meanings of significance to the original context, and that viewing it as *representing* 'the feminine' is a relatively recent accretion of meaning. Thus, despite arguing from a position that relies on the dichotomy to play out the polemic, a more complex set of relationships is nevertheless revealed.

One such relationship is that between the east and west, where the seductive oriental style was readily opposed to the sedate logic of the Atticists. In the late twentieth century the metaphor still rings true, and it is this aspect that the American artist Philip Taaffe exploits, through appropriating highly decorative Islamic ornamentation, which he then opposes to the iconoclasm of the west. He desires his work to have 'something which has history pouring out of it, which has a grandeur of

scale but which is also specific and starkly detailed' thus linking it to the western concept of the sublime, and removing ornamental decoration from having a purely 'decorative' role.<sup>149</sup> (Fig. 31)

Superficially his imagery is similar to *Pattern and Decoration* artist Joyce Kozloff, who eventually felt 'dishonest claiming to break down the hierarchies between high art and craft while continuing to take from decorative art sources to make paintings!'<sup>150</sup> Where Kozloff attempted to elevate ornamental decoration to the status of high art, Taaffe depends on its status as marginalised to make his point. His use of Islamic decoration points out the perceived iconoclasm in western art towards 'feminine' decoration. Where in Islamic art, the representation of the human form is overlooked in preference for elaborate geometric decoration that celebrates the perfection of god, in western art the human form is held to be the ultimate vehicle of expression. Ornamental decoration has, until recently, been seen as 'forbidden' territory. Taaffe's work addresses a perceived western iconoclasm through the use of Islamic iconography but, like the *Pattern and Decoration* artists, he risks accusations of simplifying the culture of others through not negotiating the cultural context of his appropriations.

Taaffe's work can be criticised for perpetuating the western concept of 'orientalism' that sees 'The East' as an exotic fantasy, feminine and dangerous to western men, which does not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation, particularly when considering ornamental decoration. Ornamental decoration serves as a metaphor for the 'feminine' east, discovered, colonised, and collected as one exotic, meaningless decorative pattern among many. In western terms, Taaffe fulfils the role of contemporary orientalist, whose gaze is turned towards the metaphoric feminine.

In contrast to western concepts, Islamic art does not conceive of ornamental decoration as gendered, effeminate, or the sole domain of women, but it is instead integrated into a system by which a love of god is expressed through architecture, calligraphy, mathematics and art. A medieval Jewish saying from the Book of Ben Sirach suggests that 'A mind settled on an intelligent thought is like the stucco decoration on the wall of a colonnade'<sup>151</sup> suggesting that, in 'oriental' art at least, ornamental decoration is engaged with intelligence, and is not its antithesis, as it is perceived in the west. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse the importance

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<sup>149</sup> Philip Taaffe quoted in Lily Wei, 'Talking Abstract, Part II', *Art in America*, December, 1987, p. 171

<sup>150</sup> Joyce Kozloff quoted in Norma Broude, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York, 1994, p. 224

<sup>151</sup> Attributed to Ben Sirach, quoted in Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament: the A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1989*, Bollingen Series XXXV, 38, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1992, p. 25

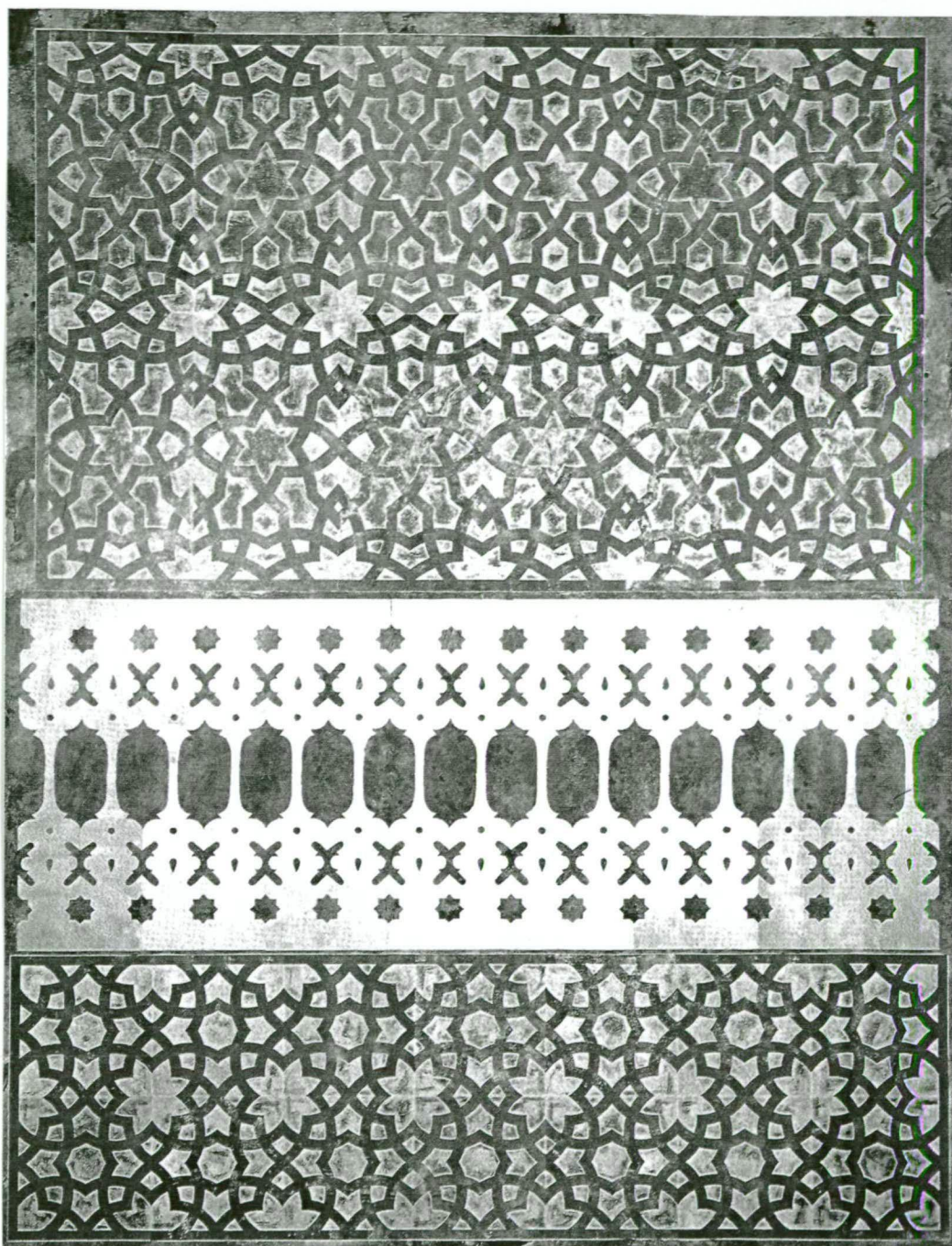


Fig. 31 Philip Taaffe, *Screen with double lambrequin*, 1989

of ornamental decoration in Islamic cultures, but its perception by western artists is fundamental to my concerns.

Until the late twentieth century, the 'orient' has been viewed as the west's 'other', as exotic, different, sensuous: the place of male dreams and fantasies. It has been perceived as the exotic feminine to the western rational masculine, and it is therefore not surprising that the ornamental decoration that is integral to the 'orient' is viewed as symptomatic of the feminised realm. In his influential book *Orientalism*, Edward Said suggests that the 'orient' is associated with the feminine, and as such is alien from 'occidental' or western society:

Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was thus linked to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over.<sup>152</sup>

This has profound effects on how imagery from the 'orient' is received and understood. Looked at from the position of western orientalist, it is a place of sensuality, abandonment and excess.<sup>153</sup> (Fig. 32)

Here, in the orient, the fantasy of male power over women could be played out in an environment that embraced libertinism, that was imaged as highly ornamented, tactile and richly coloured—Diderot would have been in dangerous territory.

...women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*, Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 207

<sup>153</sup> Théophile Gautier, one of the nineteenth century's authorities on matters oriental, wrote of a work by Henri Regnault:

One might say he was an Oriental Manfred or Don Juan who perhaps has known another civilisation and is looking for new diversions. His thin and nervous body, consumed with ardour, reminds us of the hero of *Namouma*, of Alfred de Musset's Hassan, who went off to brighten his scepticism in the land of the sun, quitting his cigar for hashish.

The painter probably did not intend this interpretation, but his watercolour suggests it: the boredom with luxury, the desire for the unknown, the weariness of 'artificial paradises', as Baudelaire calls them, can be read on his drawn countenance, still young despite all the excess.

Théophile Gautier, *Oeuvres de Henri Regnault exposées à l'école des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, 1872, pp. 32-3, reprinted in Roger Benjamin, *Orientalism*, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, p. 120

<sup>154</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*, Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 207





Fig. 32 Henri Regnault, *Hassan and Namouna*, c. 1870

The heightened colours and richly patterned ornamental decoration which accompanied such scenes could be viewed as symptomatic of excessive and dangerous ways, regardless of its real meaning to the Islamic mind. This situation was further complicated by appeals to sensuality and romanticism, which served to further misinterpret ornamental decoration by its association with the wild, untamed darker artistic side as viewed by the orientalist man.

Taaffe insists that 'there is a romantic aspiration in my work which has been tempered by my involvement with critical theory'<sup>155</sup> which is almost a reiteration of Diderot's dilemma of libertinism (romantic) tempered by the rational (critical theory). Taaffe's appropriations appeal on a sensual level to the romantic artist but are to be mistrusted for their 'self-indulgence' if used to excess. He guards himself 'against being too romantic; it can become unrealistic and self-indulgent. I look at the world. I want to be as truthful as possible to an external reality.' It would appear that Taaffe is attempting to marry two concepts of sensuality and truth, but by embracing the ornamentation of Islamic cultures he is not necessarily acknowledging *its* truth,

<sup>155</sup> This quote and the following by Philip Taaffe, in Lily Wei, 'Talking Abstract, Part II', *Art in America*, December, 1987, p. 171

except insofar as it can be used as a strategy to disengage his work from a reductive modernism. Ornamental decoration remains a sign of the 'oriental' and becomes sensuality *versus* truth, and self-expression is the vehicle. His comment 'I have a reductive streak, which I fight', suggests that Taaffe also holds onto the romantic ideal of the creative struggle within the artist that lies at the foundation of modernity. For Taaffe, it is important that ornamental decoration remain linked to the feminine, for it is in this way that his argument holds any meaning.

To perceive of a culture as marginalised requires an objectivity which is not available when it is the artist's own history. For Wilma Tabacco, ornamental decoration is not appropriated from another culture to address a visual taboo or a lack of sensuality in western culture, nor does she use it to comment on the rewriting of images as 'feminine' that may not have had that intention, but she has utilised the visual traditions from her own cultural heritage to inform her work. Specifically, in the series entitled *Fabrications*, she has focussed her attention on the women's crafts of her Italian ancestors. The result is not an exoticised 'other', observed through turning an objective or romantic gaze towards the 'exotic' by someone outside of that position, but an image is created that integrates several co-existing positions, sometimes as a hybridised form that conflates both past and present experience, or personal and theoretical concerns in the one work.

Tabacco draws on issues of gender and culture in her work, where her Italian heritage—best known in art historical terms for the work of major male artists—is investigated through the use craft. Drawing on the work of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement who recognised that traditional work by women could be used as valid subject matter in art, Tabacco is also aware of her debt to minimal-formalist artists through the use of the grid, geometry and rationality and the use of serial imagery. She does not see these as opposing forces, but as working together to create a hybrid form that pays homage to both traditions yet is not solely reflective of the concerns of either.

Her use of vibrant colour both celebrates her Italian ancestry, and refuses the modernist denigration of colour as 'the feminine part of art, second in place to 'masculine' drawing'.<sup>156</sup> Tabacco is critical of the place denied both ornamental decoration and colour in art history. She says:

Isolating and relocating elements of decoration and ornamentation into the realm of painting and drawing accords motifs a significance as subject matter for fine art practice: a position historically denied. The real content, however is not the motifs

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<sup>156</sup> John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993, p. 14

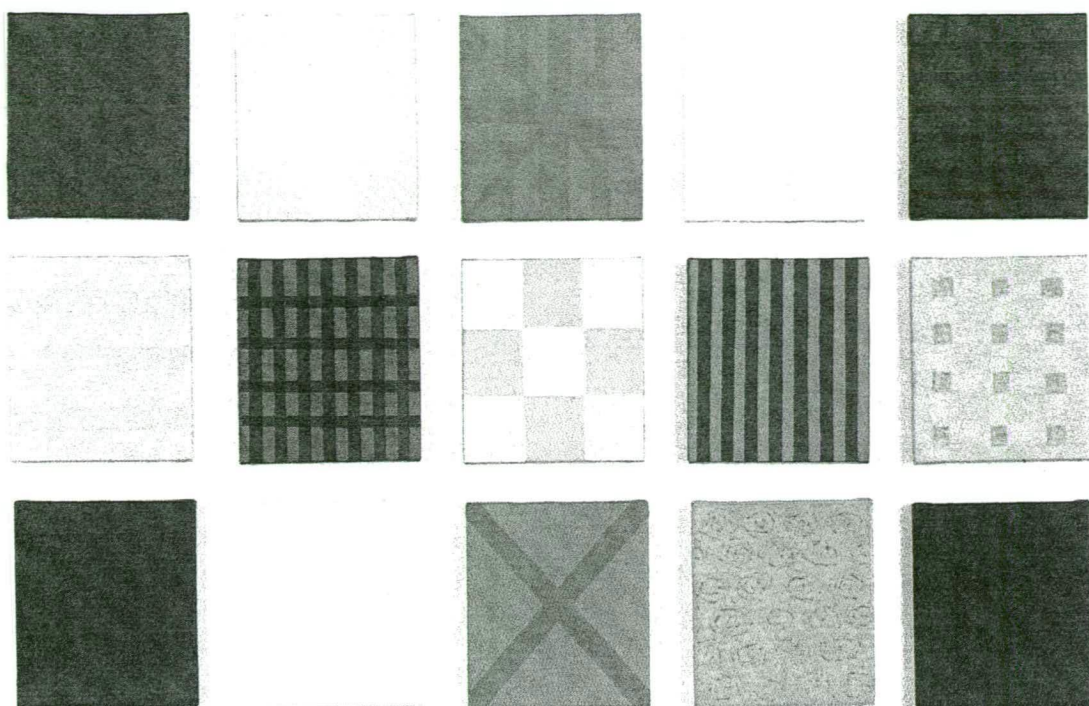


Fig. 33 Wilma Tabacco, *Fabrications* (detail), 1993-5

depicted but their engagement with gender and cultural considerations, and their potential use as carriers of meaning.<sup>157</sup>

Thus Tabacco acknowledges that any meaning in ornamental decoration is not understood from reading the appearance of motifs, which would result in an iconic mode of understanding more in line with narrative, but that it exists in the historical meaning that those motifs carry. For a contemporary artist, this includes the recent accretions concerning gender.

That Tabacco's works appear simultaneously as formalist colour-field paintings, sections of repeat patterns, appropriations from modernist designs or hand-me-down fabrics adds to the complexity within the simple geometric designs that act as 'carriers of meaning' beyond their initial appearance. (Fig. 33) She also touches on the art historical concept that women are the bearers, but not the makers, of meaning.

Tabacco's use of colours, from pale to shocking pink, are redolent of 'sugar and spice and all things nice' and are the colours most reviled by 'serious' artists as superficial, yet their symbolic power—as witnessed through the extreme response evoked—shows how deeply that feeling is held. Their use is both painful and self-consciously *outré*.

<sup>157</sup> Wilma Tabacco, *Fabrications*, (catalogue essay) aGOG, 1995

Tabacco is aware of the multiple readings of the work, to which she alludes in the title: *Fabrications*.

The idea that a fabrication can be a falsehood or an invention requires the viewer to corroborate that these works are not necessarily what they seem, on first appearance, to be.<sup>158</sup>

Unlike the work produced by the artists of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement, Tabacco's work does not immediately present itself as holding an overtly feminist position, despite her engagement with the subject of women's craft, but the viewer becomes aware of her concerns through a prolonged engagement with the work. As I have argued elsewhere, craft is often the only creative outlet for many women, and is regularly treated with disdain from a 'high art' perspective. It is through Tabacco's engagement with both craft and high art concerns (of which the craft of painting is also important) that the work oscillates between elegant minimalism and resolute feminism, only one reading is ever possible at any one time, but both are visible. More importantly, the work can be read as critiquing the concept of ornamental decoration linked implicitly to the feminine or, indeed, oil painting with the masculine, as being itself a falsehood, as indicated in the title.

These conceptions can also be exposed by using art historical images to address contemporary issues, when ideas of originality and authorship fundamental to modernism can be questioned and the entire creative artistic process linked firmly to the conditions determined by historical experience. By reinterpreting and recontextualising specific art historical images, a particular meaning is revealed that can comment on and critique contemporary experience.<sup>159</sup> Specific images that use ornamental decoration can be employed by artists to question the traditional equation of ornament with the feminine, and also assist in critiquing the history that helped to devise it.

Although the traditional of ornamental decoration is not much different to appropriation in terms of approach—taking an existing element and reworking it into a contemporary context—in intent the two are very different. Previously both artisans and artists created designs using pre-existing motifs in pattern books, but modernism prized the unique work of art born of artistic genius and overthrew the shackles of

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<sup>158</sup> Wilma Tabacco, *Fabrications*, (catalogue essay) aGOG, 1995

<sup>159</sup> Curiously, this is how ornamental decoration has historically operated: motifs and images have been used, copied from pattern books and altered slightly according to contemporary requirements. In the space between the original and the (slightly altered) copy, both creative artistry and audience demand can be identified—the need for more or less detail, a different placement, grouping or size, a changed outline, border or frame—and can represent a shift in thinking between the concerns of the past design and the present interpretation. The most common contemporary version exists in women's magazines, craft books, 'How to Draw' books or books on heraldic devices, mostly used by amateurs or artisans.



tradition. This belief in the autonomous art object as unique, original and transcendent of the material world meant that to appropriate from a modernist repertoire was to dissolve any distinction between the unimaginative copyists' 'pattern books'—previously the domain of the artisan steeped in tradition (and in the twentieth century the domain of women)—and the genuine creative concerns of the artist. It was effectively denying the potency of the modern artist and collapsed the distinction between (masculine) producer of art, and (feminine) reproducer of existing imagery.

Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* has been a source book of patterns for designers, illustrators and artisans from last century. It has also been of interest to contemporary artists who have appropriated Jones' designs in order to address issues such as the rewriting of all ornamental decoration as feminine, regardless of origin. In his book, Jones disregarded the cultural significance of examples of ornamental decoration and presented them as taxonomic illustrations from far-flung countries devoid of cultural context. They were instead seen as one of many exotic motifs in his book, as specimens from the colonies, the orient, or the primitive which one could view as 'free' beauties in the Kantian sense—appreciated for their aesthetics alone. Devoid of context, they were rewritten with this new meaning firmly attached. In the late twentieth century, there have been the accretions of 'the feminine' and the 'traditional' attached to Jones' book, providing fertile ground for analysis.

Elizabeth Pulie sourced ornamental decorations from the *Grammar of Ornament* to produce a series of paintings that exploited Jones' own 'appropriations'. (Fig. 34) Her works explored the idea of ornamental decoration as being emptied of, and then reinvested with meaning when rendered in a different context. The ornamental elements, previously of significance when used to decorate a particular piece of architecture or clothing, were wrested from their original context to become pattern book illustrations, from which Pulie reinvented them as works of art: but with a post-modern accretion of meaning. Her work acutely addresses a challenge to a dichotomy that requires opposing factions to remain separate. In Pulie's work, art coexists with artisanry, creation coexists with reproduction, and traditional ornamental decoration represents contemporary art. These serve to confuse issues of gender and its link to ornamental decoration, as appropriation can be read as both an historical and a contemporary device.

Pulie's later work in the exhibition *Ornamentalism*<sup>160</sup> exposed a less familiar aspect of modernist history, where she used the decorative work of revered masters as the

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<sup>160</sup> *Ornamentalism*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1997





Fig. 34 Elizabeth Pulie, 150, 1995

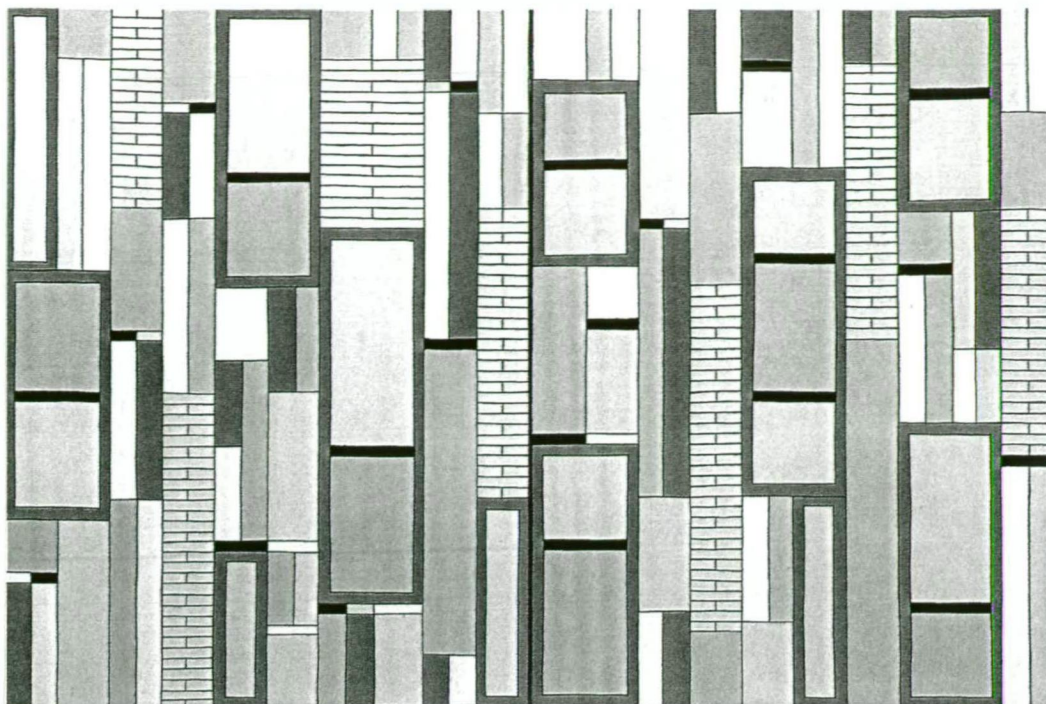


Fig. 35 Elizabeth Pulie, *182 (Modern)*, 1996

basis for her subject matter. She again used appropriated imagery, but the images chosen were based on designs by Frank Lloyd Wright, quintessential modern architect of the twentieth century who was best known for his uncompromisingly masculine geometric forms that eschewed tradition. Pulie has, not without irony, reworked one of Wright's designs for curtain material into an abstraction that appears more formalist than decorative, with its perpendicular geometry and cool colours. (Fig. 35) Here is a reversal of forms: where Wright is normally singled out as the functionalist architect *par excellence*, whose 'masculine' spaces are clean, clear and geometric, orderly and 'appropriate', Pulie has taken one of his 'lesser' designs for the (feminine) interior—curtain material, no less, exactly that which Gombrich had suggested was the anathema of abstract art—and created a formalist-inspired painting. Pulie makes little distinction between the ornamental tradition of Italian grotesques and the modernist tradition illustrated in Wright's design, and in effect, mimics Jones' approach of a century before, whereby any motif was available for reworking into a contemporary design.

Pulie states that 'the engagement with ornament serves no deeper purpose or content (not even a formal one) other than the appeal of surface itself'.<sup>161</sup> In part this is true, as many of her paintings literally concern themselves with suspiciously textured

<sup>161</sup> Andrew McNamara, *Ornamentalism*, (exhibition catalogue) IMA/Power Publications, Brisbane, 1997, p. 8

surfaces. There is often a schism between the thickly applied impasto paint and the surface design: the autographic mark is implied but is then denied by the image, as they do not necessarily correspond. Depth, which is so important in modernist works—depth of thought, of working processes that are borne out in the image, of the artistic struggle—are absent in Pulie's work, where 'her stated aim is to produce beautiful ornament which may be subject to, or even complicit with, the whims of fashion'.<sup>162</sup> Such frivolity directly undermines the seriousness with which modernity was understood and may be viewed as a strategy to subvert a certain macho self-aggrandisement, especially if the comments about 'life and death issues' are recalled that were used as criticisms of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement. Her work in this area provides fertile ground for further investigation, particularly in reference to the peripheral work of interior design practised by some major figures of modernism—but often neglected as a 'specialist' area.

The appropriation of ornamental decoration as a representation of, or metaphor for, the marginalised feminine, the crafts or the traditional can serve to perpetuate the dichotomy. If artists suggest its use is as a 'subversive' strategy, for example to indicate distance from the previous style, or where the intention is to invert the hierarchy, still the dichotomy remains. Indeed, this use is dependent on its existence. This strategy is too easily read in an oppositional way, where all marginal concepts are homogenised together in opposition to the prevailing hegemony and dismissed as simply representing the feminine. This 'solution' is obviously unsatisfactory. A hybrid form that is based on such an opposition is bound to fail, and will be read in terms of the dichotomy, as for example in Taaffe's work. However, when used to indicate the historical relationship between ornamental decoration and gender, readings of a complex nature can be suggested that relate more accurately to the experience of the late twentieth century. This is the approach of Pulie and Tabacco, and is one which reveals more than a simple opposition to modernism. They comment on the construction of a tradition that views ornamental decoration as a denigrated aspect of our visual culture, and indicates this view can be just as restrictive for women as it is for men.



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<sup>162</sup> Andrew McNamara, *Ornamentalism*, (exhibition catalogue) IMA/Power Publications, Brisbane, 1997, p. 8

### 3:2:2: The suburban domestic as a site of change.

Whereas in the previous chapter the three artists under discussion derived their subject matter from 'exotic' sources (the orientalist feminine, the traditional pattern book and womens' craft), the artists in this chapter find ornamental decoration in the most banal of environments: Australian suburbia. What this latter group of artists share in common is that, unlike the *Pattern and Decoration* movement, they do not seek to celebrate ornamental decoration as an exclusively female realm but, on the contrary, challenge its historical connection with the feminine by presenting it as a realm of equal significance to both genders and, notably, intimate its value as a symbol of national identity. These artists investigate notions of Australian identity which openly acknowledge a vested interest in the suburban domestic, one where ornamental decoration plays an integral, ambient role.

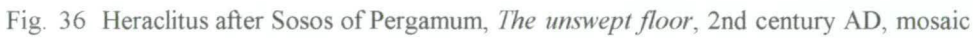
In doing so, artists have challenged the perceived notions of the suburbs put forward by advocates of modernism such as architect Robin Boyd, who denigrated the suburbs as a blight on the Australian landscape, calling them the 'great Australian ugliness' and who saw ornamental decoration as a symptom of its malaise.<sup>163</sup> They also challenge the historical construction that views the suburban domestic as feminine—as a place of interior life, of reproduction, consumption and homogeneity—by suggesting that in Australia, the reality is that most people live in the suburbs and participate in 'the domestic' in some form. As such, its 'feminisation' is a myth, but one that can be implemented to effect: many artists use the patterns of behaviour and imagery peculiar to the suburban domestic experience to challenge the preconceived idea of what constitutes 'high art'. Because the suburban domestic eschews elitism in favour of a shared experience, as a critique it is readily understood by a diverse audience.

Curiously, the artists most effective in prompting a rethinking of the meaning of domestic spaces have been male. For women to use ornamental decoration the link with the previous *Pattern and Decoration* movement is still strong, and would be read as underscoring the 'feminine', not deconstructing it. This is a continual problem, where the use of 'excessive' decoration can take on critical connotations when used by men, but is perceived as reactionary when used by women. For women artists to use ornamental decoration and to question its identification with the feminine, the path is difficult indeed, and must be trod with caution.

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<sup>163</sup> Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1960





The architecture of suburban homes, both in the arrangement of rooms and decoration of the interior spaces, creates a type of behaviour familiar to many of its citizens. It is this sense of shared (but ignored) experience that many artists now address. To investigate the domestic necessitates 'looking at the overlooked': the unswept floors, the banal, repetitive daily rituals, the forgotten or mundane tasks of life that are experienced by many—regardless of gender or social position. These are metaphorically addressed through visual means, often using repetitive imagery to provide humour amidst the dirt, pattern to the chaos. (Fig. 36)



To work with 'the domestic' means to willingly abandon exclusivity and didacticism, and embrace commonalities, even if unintentional. Grand themes may not necessarily be abandoned entirely, but resonate on many levels:

I was standing behind them, and one said to the other, 'This looks just like Dot's house.' She said it as a compliment. She got a real buzz out of the fact that she was in an art gallery and she saw something she identified with and the other woman said, 'Yes, and I bet it's the same inside.' She was responding to it in an honest, earthy way. The point is that people respond to the work on a number of different levels. This conversation was not the level I painted at, but I was pleased to hear the response.<sup>164</sup>

This comment by Howard Arkley is far removed from the previous decades where artists' works were held at a distance from 'ordinary' people's responses, and the pursuit of 'serious concerns' was paramount. The elitist nature of hermetic, conceptual art is not at home here, and in fact, an alternative ethos of inclusion is often preferred. Through his work on suburban imagery and ornamental decoration, Arkley intended to overcome the limits of the equation ornament=feminine, presenting the suburban domestic as an inclusive, not exclusive place of living and having a form of creativity shared and identified by many.

Precedents to Arkley can be found in the work of Australian artists—notably Dale Hickey and Robert Rooney—who used suburban ornamental decoration to critique the prevailing formalist hegemony, often from within the ranks. They participated in the National Gallery of Victoria's inaugural exhibition *The Field* (1968) where the International (New York) style was embraced, celebrated and shown to the Australian audience. Within the hard-edge works by Hickey and Rooney a peculiarly suburban iconography was inserted which subverted the rigorous formalism of colour field and hard edge abstraction. Rooney, for example, created his works from the illustrations on the back of 'Corn Flakes' packets, simulating the 'hard-edge' style of abstraction, but acknowledging that the real source of abstract pattern in Australia may in fact lie in the domestic realm rather than the streets of New York (Fig. 37).

Risking being attacked for provincialism or worse, Rooney and Hickey sufficiently simulated the International Style and obscured their sources, which were only revealed if you were familiar with suburban Australian imagery, and then, it was with a note of irony. Rather than presenting an overtly feminist position in opposition to formalism, their work demonstrated that ornamental decoration may in fact lie at the heart of all abstraction—including formalism.

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<sup>164</sup> Howard Arkley, 1994, quoted in Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar, *Spray: The Work of Howard Arkley*, Craftsman House, Australia, 1996, p. 115

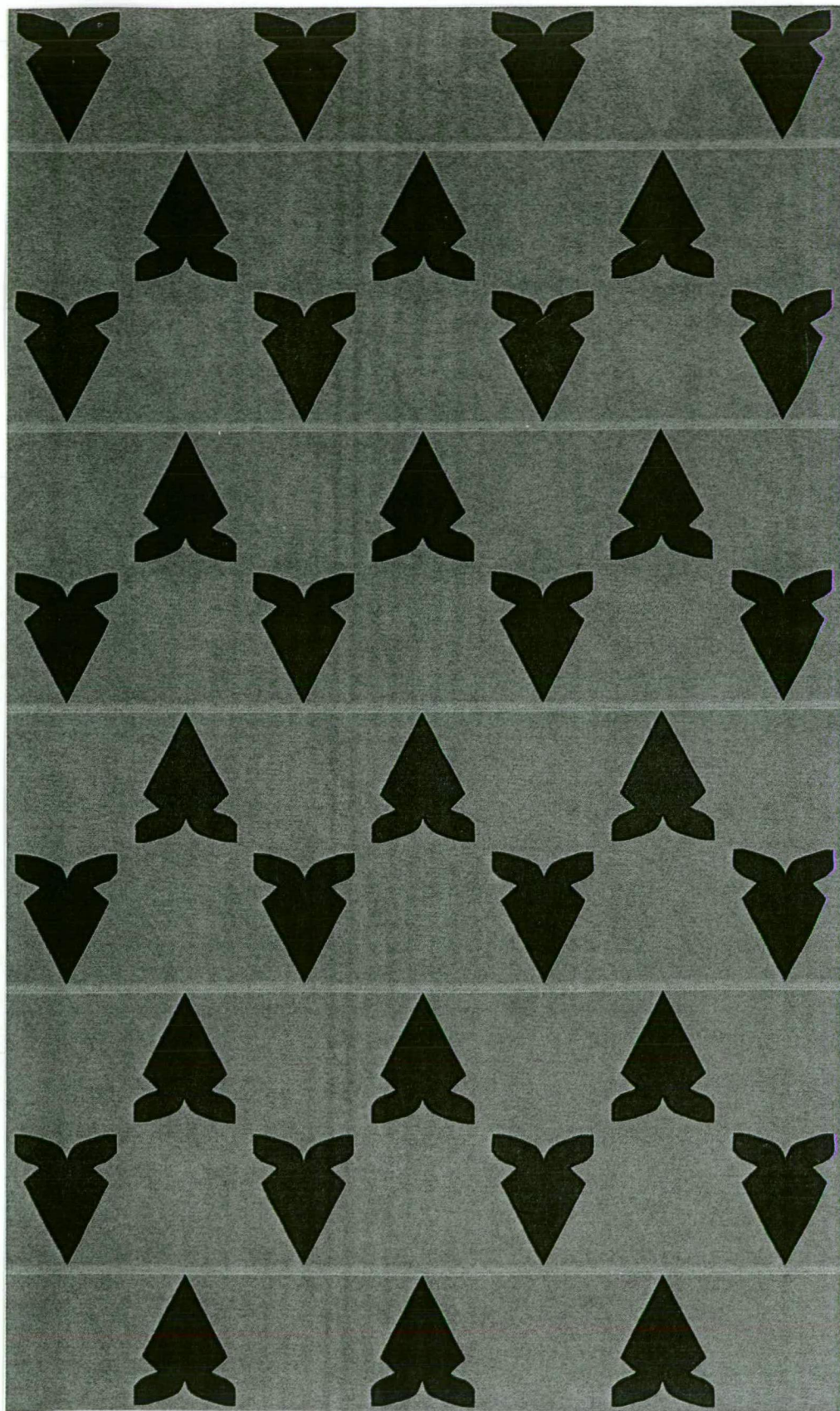


Fig. 37 Robert Rooney, *Cereal Bird Beaks II*, 1969





Fig. 38 Robert Rooney, *Superknit 5*, 1970

Rooney's later *Superknit* series of paintings exploited a link to the feminine through the subject matter based on knitting patterns in magazines. (Fig. 38) Unlike the *Pattern and Decoration* artists, no overt feminist rhetoric was claimed (but the origins of the imagery lay in the feminine 'domestic') and the works could be assessed on formalist terms, albeit with a sense of humour peculiar to the Australian condition. Unlike his female predecessors, Rooney's perceived lack of feminism allowed the work to be seen as 'art' rather than ideology, despite his reliance on pattern books intended for women's consumption.<sup>165</sup>

Rooney's work acknowledged the complacency and *ennui* of suburbia, where exhausted men returned from work to be ministered by the 'gentle little housewife' in her domestic domain, rather than challenged by the 'seductress' in a 'machine for living in'. But this was a statement of life as lived, not life as imagined by modernist architects. And life 'as lived' was imaged as mundane, boring and unheroic. The domestic space of the suburbs was seen as anonymous, never-ending and

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<sup>165</sup> One may speculate what the reception of Rooney's *Superknit* paintings would have been had the artist been a woman.

disheartening to creativity. Pop music of the 1960s reinforced the stupefying nature of domestic suburbia as witnessed in the suburbs: 'little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky...and they all look just the same'.<sup>166</sup> Rooney's ironic use of suburban imagery suggested that the boredom of the feminine suburban domestic could be found equally in the boredom of paintings in a masculine conceptual 'hard-edge' manner. This is not the elevation of (feminine) decoration to the high status of (masculine) formalism, but demotion of both to the same depths of boredom.

The connection to Pop art assisted in clearing the way for ornamental decoration to be seen as tied less to gender than to its repetitive nature—a criticism that could equally be levelled against the International Style.

Rooney's final series of hard-edged abstract paintings, *Superknit*, Nos. 1-6 (1970), posits the knitting pattern as the sublime production of structuralist abstraction. The most conceptual of Rooney's paintings up to that point, the *Superknit* series suggests that painting can be reduced to an activity that fills in time in much the same way as knitting. Pop's 'abject contemporaneity' here becomes exquisite boredom, as if the time had come for the artist, reduced to this kind of subject matter, to give up painting altogether. This terse subtext is woven through the *Superknit* series, making it no surprise that these were to be (sic) the last major paintings Rooney would execute for twelve years.<sup>167</sup>

Rooney's works were positively linked to Pop art's elevation of the banal aspects of everyday life which was celebrated in contrast to any aspirations toward the sublime. Yet in a counterthrust, Brophy posited that it was the knitting pattern that Rooney saw as the true vehicle for the sublime, and thus could be the real undercurrent of structuralist abstraction.<sup>168</sup> This is a similar point that the *Pattern and Decoration* movement were making: that abstract art is more closely linked to traditional pattern than many would like to believe, but because of their perceived overriding feminist agenda, and the resultant hostility by the critics, this point could not be distinguished from the equation ornamental decoration=feminine. Rooney, using the suburban domestic from his own life experience could make that point, as the ornamental decoration he used could be seen without a perceived feminist agenda.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Attributed to Malvina Reynolds, who wrote the song while observing the suburban development in her valley in the 1960s. <http://ingeb.org/songs>

<sup>167</sup> Philip Brophy, 'Robert Rooney as Pop' in *From the Homefront: Robert Rooney Works 1953-1988*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, 1990, pp. 22-28, p. 25

<sup>168</sup> Brophy also suggested that Rooney played out the end-game of modernist abstraction (seen as lungeing forever towards its own death—the death of painting, the death of the sublime), and with Rooney, its death was played out as a result of acknowledging its origins and endlessly repeating those same tasks. The death of modernity was a result of boredom.

<sup>169</sup> In America the use of ornamental decoration at this time was less critical, relying more on maintaining a position that underwrote the dichotomy, highlighting the suburban domestic as feminine and a site of discomfort for men. Pop artists such as Tom Wesselman used ornamental decoration to reveal the domestic interior as effeminate and complacent. In Wesselman's *Still life painting #30*, 1963 the inane industrially patterned ornamental decoration is used as a background foil for strange acts to take place—in this case the seductress taking over the place of the 'good little



It would appear that although feminist art and theory of the 1960s and 1970s has made the use of ornamental decoration increasingly difficult for women artists to employ without the presumption of making a political point on gender, it has liberated it as subject matter for men, who are taking the opportunity to then re-use it and reinscribe it with a complexity that reflects an apparently 'objective' position. Women do use ornamental decoration, but are always wary of the loaded meanings ascribed to its use, based on previous debate and assumptions.

Elizabeth Gower was active as an artist, member of the Women's Art Movement and also served on the editorial collective of *Lip* in the 70s. Her work reflected the concerns of the feminist movement at the time, and shared many of the criticisms levelled at the *Pattern and Decoration* artists, remaining understood within the feminist realm. However Gower's partner Howard Arkley, whose style was more decorative, did not come under the same scrutiny. He openly acknowledged his debt to the *Pattern and Decoration* movement, and although he shared certain sympathies for issues within the Women's Art Movement and used feminist ideas in his work, his work was not perceived as feminist.<sup>170</sup> Like Rooney, this position allowed him to work with ornamental decoration as a subject matter unhindered by a 'cause'. His images were derived from living in and viewing the domestic suburban location as a place of energetic vitality and endless variation, which was inspired by a trip he undertook to Europe and America with Gower.

I pressed the buzzer and I'm standing there waiting for the door to open and I *see* it. this flywire security door was like a revelation. There's very few times the light goes on—like in a cartoon. This was *it*. It reminded me of Paris, but it was so different. We've got our own Parisian doorways.

I had hundreds of photographs of Art Nouveau and Art Deco doorways from Paris. Then I realised that in Australia we had our own equivalent—so I got my camera and photographed the whole street—every flywire door.<sup>171</sup>

The sheer lunacy of Arkley's comparison between a Parisian Art Nouveau door and an Australian flywire screen makes for an incongruity that could only be Australian: an object representative of Eurocentric values finds its equivalent in a wrought-iron suburban response to colonial conditions. (Fig. 39) Here is ornamental decoration audaciously compared to a Eurocentric vision of established beauty: it is charming

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housewife'—where the decorative element becomes almost as an innocuous talisman indicative of past security, as if it is a silent witness to the subversive acts indulged in by the populace of suburbia. Robert Rauschenberg's assemblage *Bed* takes this polarisation to the extreme, where the lovingly sewn quilt has been witness to an act of violence. The presence of a 'feminine' textile makes the 'masculine' violence even more shocking. It relies on our complicit recognition and affirmation of this distinction.

<sup>170</sup> In Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar, *Spray: The Work of Howard Arkley*, Craftsman House, Australia, 1996, pp. 24-25

<sup>171</sup> Arkley in Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar, *Spray: The Work of Howard Arkley*, Craftsman House, Australia, 1996, p. 26

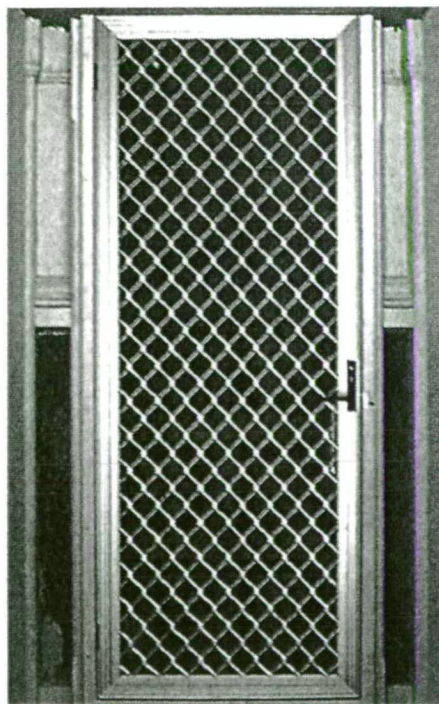
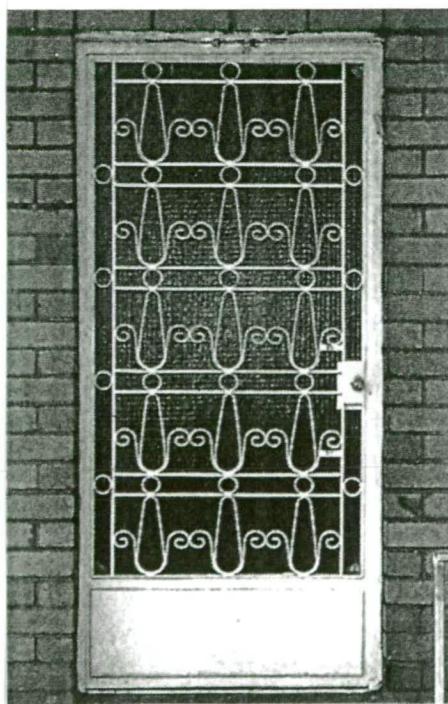
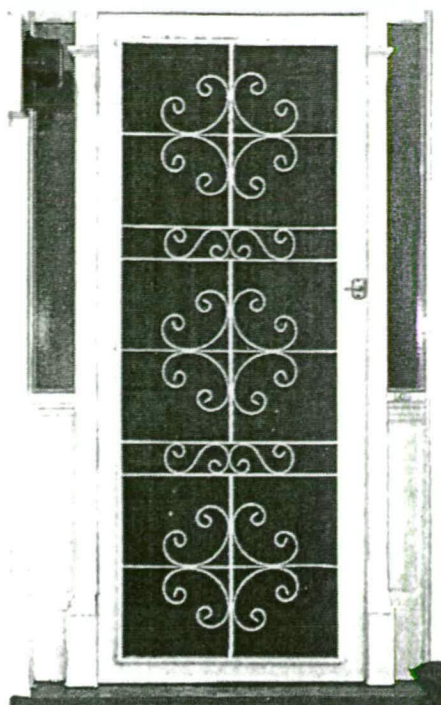
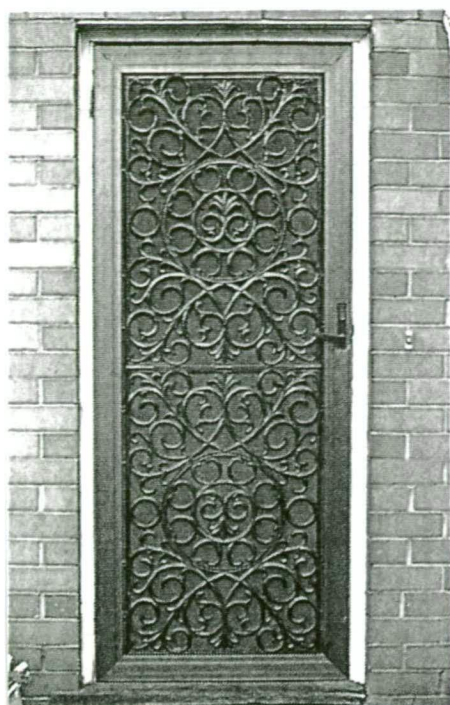


Fig. 39 Howard Arkley, Flywire screens (part of an ongoing series), 1977

quaintness combined with humour and prosaic utility—the stuff of Australian domestic life. Yet the flywire screen door holds a nostalgic place for many who have heard 'the distant constant slowly listless bang of the flywire door'.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>172</sup> John Clarke's parodic verse by Dylan Thompson 'A Child's Christmas in Warrnambool' from *The Even More Complete Book of Australian Verse*, Allen and Unwin, 1994, p. 63



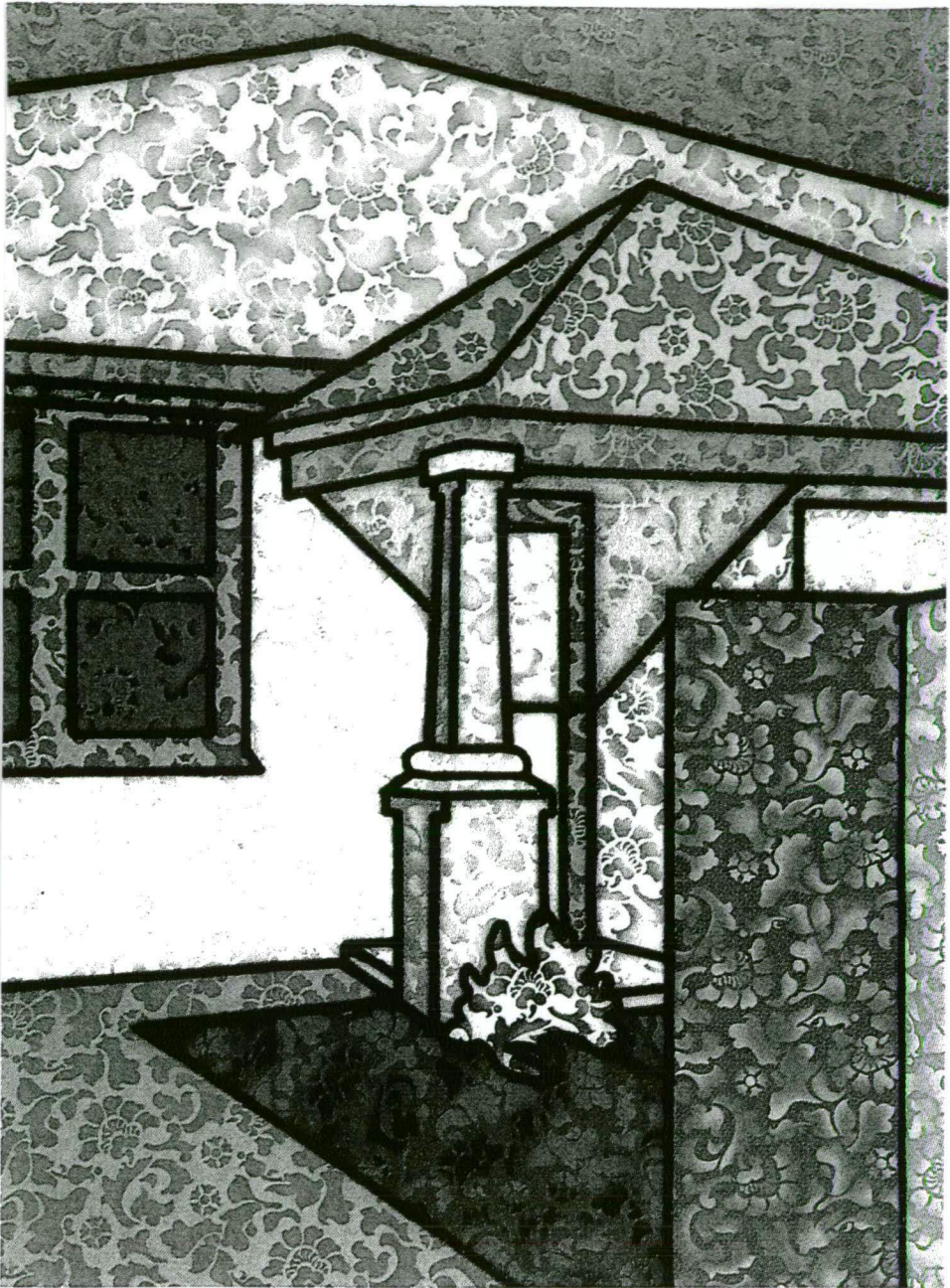


Fig. 40 Howard Arkley, *Floriated residence*, 1994

The domestic and ornamental decoration, both criticised as 'feminine' realms, can work together to create humour, nostalgia, ambition over and above one's station, which transcends a specific gender and time. Arkley has been celebrated for revealing the domestic to us in a way perceived as personal, yet also gender neutral, a privilege denied women who are viewed traditionally as unable to be separated from their domestic homes.

However, Arkley's paintings are an anomaly in a society that images the suburban domestic as a feminine-wasteland. They operate as suburban icons, but are sufficiently sublimated as to be read as post-modern parody. They are derived as much from flywire screens as from the video game *Space Invaders*, or the decorative designs based on modern artists' works.

Designers in the 40s and 50s were ripping off people like Miró and Kandinsky for inspiration, and I found myself looking at the designers rather than the originals—I was feeding off the 'tainted' version.

Again, it doesn't take very long for the penny to drop to realise that there is a connection to Australia—during my formative years in the suburbs I was surrounded by these designs. As soon as I started working with these elements I realised that it was important for me.<sup>173</sup>

His conflation of these various elements creates a spectacular confusion of signs that jar and pull, avoiding any sense of clear reading, recalling Derrida's concept of experiencing life in a fragmented, non-linear way. Arkley uses excess in a way that defies the traditional concept of decoration as inappropriate when used in excess: the excess of information, of colour, of pattern accurately reflects the individual's position in the late twentieth century which could be described as vertiginous rather than stable. It is entirely appropriate that form is dissolved and sensation is uppermost, and excess here is not tied to the feminine but to the individual in relation to his/her environment. (Fig. 40) Whereas Robin Boyd condemned ornamental decoration as unnecessary and disingenuous 'featurism' in suburban homes—a pathetic attempt by the middle-classes to salvage some aspiration to bourgeois style—Arkley has a more sympathetic view of ornamental decoration, suggesting its use reveals suburban domestic (sub)culture to be a complex and varied place where a multiplicity of events, individuals and states of being are played out on a daily basis.

Equally revealing of the suburban domestic as a problematic area is Constanze Zikos whose work features stark, geometric designs that initially appear hard-edged abstract or modern in origin. His use of materials—laminex, glo-mesh, enamel paint and 'con-tact'—ally his work with *arte povera*, but are closely attuned to his personal suburban-Greek experience. By using these materials, Zikos rejects any alliance with modernism's 'truth to materials', as the beauty of laminex, glo-mesh and 'con-tact' is their ability to mimic the honest raw materials such as metal, stone or wood. It is in their artifice, their claim to domesticity—and the feminine—that they become invaluable as tools of comment and critique. With Zikos, images denoting Australian nationhood and cultural identity are recognised in materials that are quintessentially suburban Australian, where the policies of multi-culturalism are lived out as self-

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<sup>173</sup> Arkley quoted in Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar, *Spray: The Work of Howard Arkley*, Craftsman House, Australia, 1996, p. 31



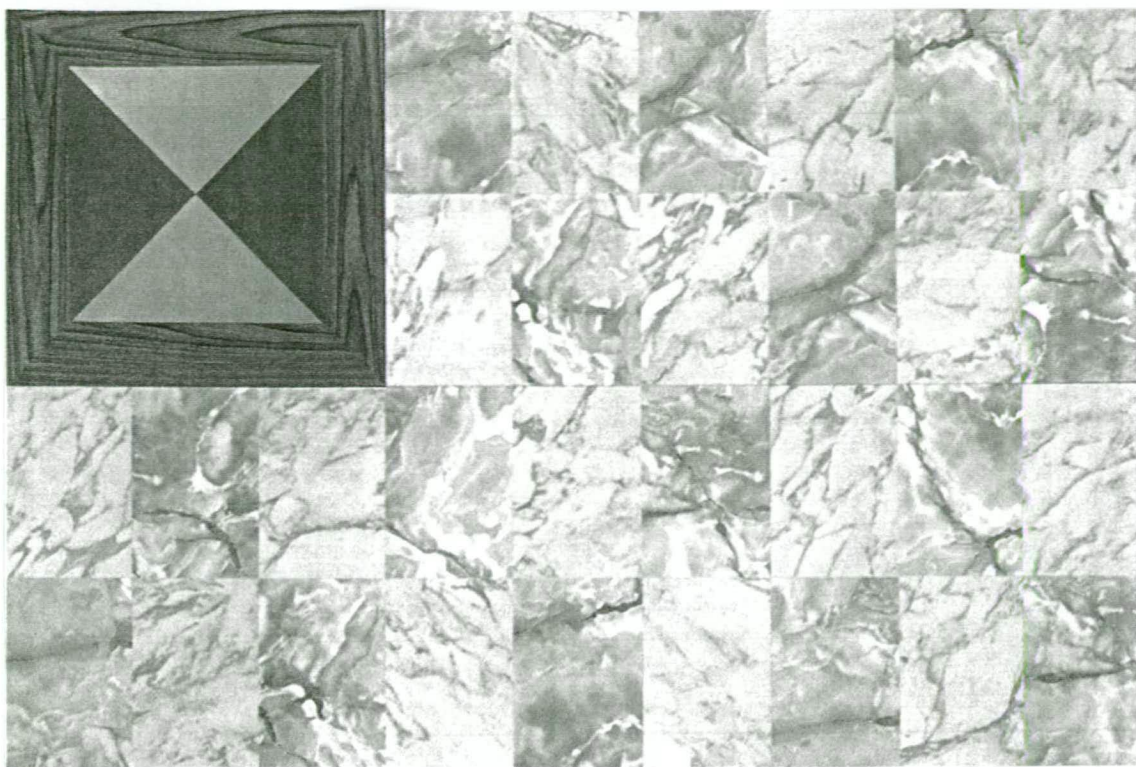


Fig. 41 Constanze Zikos, *15 August*, 1996

conscious realities. The Australian flag, the Greek vase, the egg and dart moulding from Greek temples that adorn architectural edifices are treated with the same abandonment and semi-parodic style. The personal and the political collide and the elevation of 'culture' as 'other' becomes part of the everyday environment. 'High art' is addressed as an experience of post-modern simulacrum, where Greenberg's dreaded *kitsch* rests alongside the elevated avant-garde through an unholy hybridisation of the two. These national icons normally seen in places of reverence—the Greek fretwork in Neo-Classical architecture, the flag that represents the countries' allegiances—are homogenised, but with Zikos it is with the understanding and irreverence of a suburban youth. (Fig. 41)

Domestic, imitative, design oriented, his works conflate autobiography, machismo and cliché. The suburbs are not presented as a solely feminine space, but a place of cultural clash, action and contradiction. Nikos Papastergiadis wrote in his essay for the exhibition *Constanze Zikos: Fake Project*

Who would die for a yard or two of curtain fabric, who would throw open their breasts on barbed wire fences so that others may raise pillow cases with pride? And then, I think of our mothers, embroidering the nights end, in their youth and in their age, for what, to embellish a window frame, to give symmetry to the entrance, to secure a marriage and to keep patterns alive<sup>174</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *Constanze Zikos: Fake Project*, (catalogue essay) Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 1995

With self-conscious irony, Papastergiadis suggests that ornamental decoration can be understood as having a double entendre: both as a feminine, conflict-free realm of non-essential labour, a futile labour 'of love' that has long since been superseded by mass-production; but also of importance is that love's expression for the spiritual nourishment of the family and the feminine endurance that is often a misunderstood embarrassment for young boys. If the 'feminine' is historically understood as the repository for all emotion, then ornamental decoration is its hallmark: it can be understood as an expression that is suffered (by men at the hands of women), but is also acknowledged as essential. Zikos' works exude a measure of the discomfort felt by suburban boys in surroundings designated feminine, which directly points to the problem of seeing the domestic simply in terms of the feminine. If the suburban domestic—including the responsibility of emotional well being—is reassessed as a site shared equally by men and women, then ornamental decoration will be one language among many to shape the visual vocabulary.

A less excessive and more cautious use of ornamental decoration may be found in the work of Debra Dawes. Not insignificantly, her imagery appears less based on personal experience than Arkley, Rooney or Zikos, and more aligned with formalist restraint and the minimalist aesthetic of grids and reduced monochrome use of colour. On closer inspection, however, her subject matter is derived from prosaic industrial and suburban ornamental decoration: breeze-block bricks and gingham fabric, the stuff of cheap housing and school girl uniforms. (Fig. 42, 43) However her subject, unlike Arkley's psychedelic excess or Zikos' celebration of suburban glitz, is reductive: this is ornament at the very edge of existence.

The barest, most minimal ornament is a simple black and white check; it is order *par excellence*. Dawes presents ornamental decoration to us with the least possible risk of criticism from the point of excess or impropriety, or holding an overt feminist agenda, and in doing so draws attention to its 'facture', both as an object of production (painting) and as a representation of something (breeze-blocks or gingham). Dawes utilises classicist notions of order and rationality to present an image of ornament as an inevitable consequence of industrial production and technique, the 'form follows function' aesthetic that can result in unintentional ornamental decoration. She also uses the modernist formalist tropes of the large, flat canvas and the grid, yet her paintings are positioned as neither antithetical to formalist nor feminist concerns: they seem to operate across, or within, these two concerns.

Gombrich suggests that

The subservience to structure which is so often identified with 'purity' corresponds,

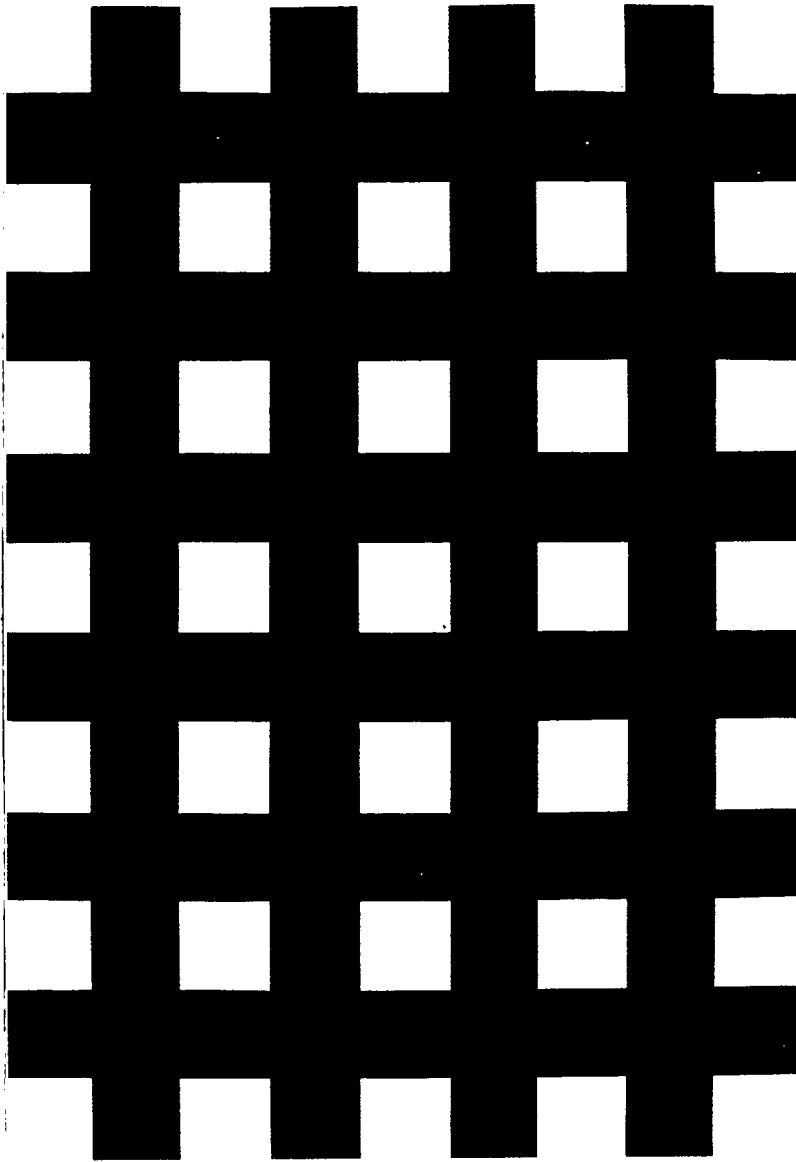


Fig. 42 Debra Dawes, *Gingham*, 1994

in our terms, to the use of 'explanatory articulation'. Ornament serves to facilitate the grasp of the object it decorates.<sup>175</sup>

In this way, Dawes' paintings articulate their own decoration, placing the domestic suburban *inside* the modern, rather than outside of, or in opposition to it. Both gingham and breeze-blocks as subjects are able to be encapsulated by the logic of formalism as espoused through the grid. However, the grid has a problematic existence with modernity, being both emblematic of a 'neutral' position (non-hierarchical, non-gender specific) and, as suggested by Rosalind Krauss, does not necessarily reflect 'originality'—one of the key tenets of modernity—through its 'doubling' of the surface it represents, in this case, the canvas weave and support.

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<sup>175</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 209

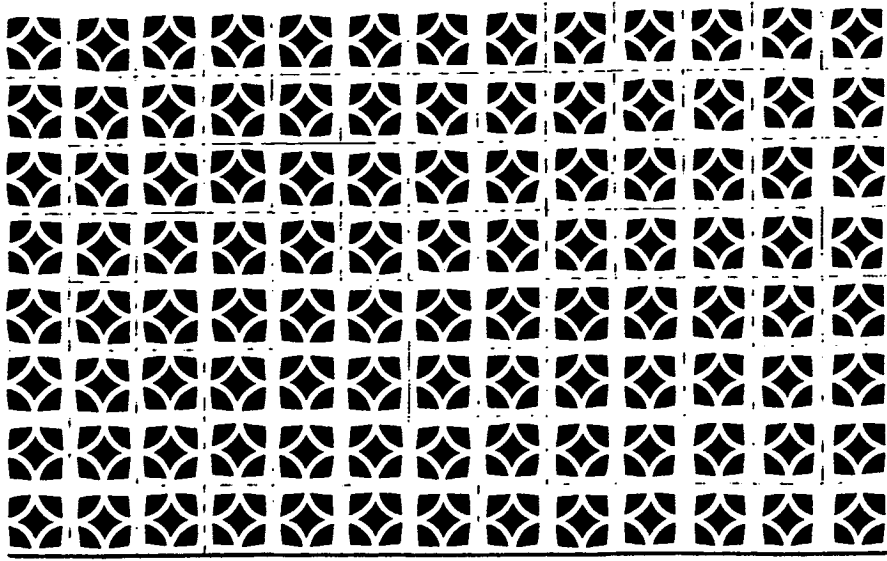


Fig. 43 Debra Dawes, *Starlite*, 1993

For the grid follows the canvas surface, doubles it. It is a representation of the surface, mapped, it is true, onto the same surface it represents, but even so, the grid remains a figure, picturing various aspects of the "originary" object: through its mesh it creates an image of the woven infrastructure of the canvas; through its network of coordinates it organizes a metaphor for the plane geometry of the field; through its repetition it configures the spread of lateral community.<sup>176</sup>

Dawes capitalises on the fluid nature of the grid, and uses it to underscore the 'decorative' while simultaneously emphasising the functional. Based on the materials of industrial production, her paintings are wrought with subtle variations, indicative perhaps of the slight imperfections inherent in the manufacturing process, but more evident in the process of making (a building, a dress, a painting) and of the inevitable impact of 'wear and tear' that slowly chips away at the literal fabric of construction. Yet the works also have a 'newness', a clarity that celebrates the production of raw consumer products destined for the domestic suburban market. The images of bricks or gingham, are caught in a mode half-way between manufacture and end-product: the stacks of bricks waiting to be laid as a wall (or a house or a sand-pit), the gingham waiting to be cut into a dress (or a table cloth, or a lampshade) imply an activity to come, that has not yet happened. Dawes' paintings exploit the nature of decoration as pertaining to an act, but an act related to industry and labour as much as decorating a form. The ornament is inherent to the object portrayed, it occurs within its actual structure and is not applied later; any sense of decoration comes through its use, for example a fence line of breeze-blocks becomes 'decorative' through the repetition or patterning of an individual motif.

<sup>176</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1986, p. 161



Dawes' paintings suggest that, almost as if without intention, function not only leads to form but also to decoration: the two are inseparable in her works. This is in contrast to Gombrich and to modernism, where the two are seen as hostile or opposing forces, one being subsumed into the other:

The demands of functionalism...threatened ultimately, to lead to the demise of decoration, and so did the abolition of all restrictions which transformed pattern-making into 'abstract art'.<sup>177</sup>

By taking a less oppositional stance, it would appear that the articulation of structure somehow inevitably leads to ornamental decoration, sometimes to the extent where there is a blurring of distinctions as to when one stops and the other begins. When, for example does the necessity for constructional strength (for example when laying bricks in alternate lines, or through riveting a metal object) lose its structural meaning and become ornamental and/or decorative? When it is in excess? Or when the engineer chooses a pattern that is not only practical but aesthetic? It is in the elaboration of ornamental decoration beyond the 'essential' which leads to accusations of impropriety and excess and its prompt denigration by criticisms of superfluity and effeminacy, and this, I have argued, is dependent on the prevailing aesthetic demands of the period. The artists discussed have used ornamental decoration in a manner which articulates a new way of looking at ornamental decoration as part of, not in opposition to, the prevailing paradigm.



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<sup>177</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 64

### 3:2:3: Ornamental decoration and the critique of gender.

Whereas the *Pattern and Decoration* movement left unchallenged—even celebrated—the assumption that ornamental decoration is inherently feminine, recent explorations by artists have sought to employ ornamental decoration to directly challenge its traditional link to the feminine. Artists have exploited aspects of recent analyses of gender construction, particularly with reference to body theory, and have re-examined past uses of ornamental decoration, with very different results in their current work. Questions are raised concerning the construction and fluidity of gender which criticise the prevailing dichotomy that maintains an idealised image of the western body (as both object of investigation and subject of enquiry) as determined and static.

Through the work of contemporary artists and writers, imagery previously designated 'gender-specific' (such as ornamental decoration) is perceived as less stereotypical, less confined to one fixed identity. As a result, a discourse can emerge that is not reliant on the simplistic polarisation of masculine *or* feminine, objective vision *or* subjective involvement, form *or* decoration. One may speak of differences *within* genders, of the importance of touch *as well as* sight, of sensuousness *as well as* rationality, implying the existence of a more complex agenda that artists attempt to address.

The theoretical work of Elizabeth Grosz has been pivotal in challenging the western concept of duality through her suggestion that the body is a fluid, not defined, state. She opposes an essentialism that in recent history has dictated a separation of mind and body (and the associated outcomes of male/mind, female/body) but which is in reality based on the 'prevailing social conceptions of the relations between the sexes'.<sup>178</sup> Beginning with Spinoza's holistic concept of monism whereby the 'mind is the idea of the body to the exact degree that the body is an extension of the mind'<sup>179</sup> she develops strategies for overcoming the essentialist dichotomy that sees the body's biological sex linked firmly to its gender (equating female=feminine and male=male), and which has repressed any idea of bodies having an historical specificity outside this biological concreteness.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA 1994, p. x

<sup>179</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA 1994, p. 12

<sup>180</sup> Grosz discusses sexuality as a non-unifying term, that is, not necessarily prescriptive of maleness or femaleness, nor gender. She identifies four senses of the term, which can be understood as a drive, an act, an identity and a series of 'orientations, positions and desires'. (Grosz, p. viii) The second use of the term she describes as 'excessive, redundant, and superfluous in its languid and fervent overachieving. It always seeks more than it needs, performs excessive actions, and can draw any

Indeed, there is no body as such: there are only bodies—male or female, black, brown, white, large or small—and the gradations in between...There are only specific types of body, concrete in their determinations, with a particular sex, race and physiognomy. Where one body (in the West, the white, youthful, able, male body) takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities.<sup>181</sup>

Retaliation against constrictive views of sexuality and gender have been investigated through artworks that use ornamental decoration as a transgressive device to subvert the perceived oppressive dualism which affects men as much as women.<sup>182</sup> This is particularly so among gay, male artists. Such a position is more complicated than the previous *Pattern and Decoration* artists, who sought to celebrate the feminine through ornamental decoration, though many contemporary artists derive their source material from this particular movement and build on its legacy.

The American artist Lari Pittman, for example, knowingly appropriates such images to celebrate his (gay) sexuality and identify his rejection of what he saw as the authoritarian dogma of art school (Fig. 44). Pittman studied under the conceptualist artists Michael Asher and John Baldessari, from whom he sought refuge—in decoration:

Pattern and Decoration was primarily linked to early feminist discourse and located in the feminine gender. [In embracing Pattern and Decoration] I actually embraced a discussion of my opposite gender as I was coming up as a young artist<sup>183</sup>

Pittman uses ornamental decoration as a defiantly gay strategy, identifying himself through its use as marginal to the predominant style and image of artist as conceptual, white, male and straight. Pittman does not use a feminist position from which to challenge the stereotype, but exploits the politicised and marginalised status of ornamental decoration as a result of its feminisation as a metaphor for his own position within art, and within the straight community. On the one hand, this could be perceived as 'safe': a man using rejected (marginalised) imagery to discuss a marginal position, as with Taaffe's approach put forward in a previous chapter. But

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object, any fantasy, any number of subjects and combinations of their organs, into its circuits of pleasure'. (Grosz, p. viii) This description parallels that of ornamental decoration, especially as seen by its critics. Grosz suggests that sexuality as a bodily act is shared by both sexes, who are drawn into a vortex of excessive pleasure beyond the necessary requirements for reproduction. Yet despite this, it is women who take on the 'function of being *the* body for men while men are left free to soar to the heights of theoretical reflection and cultural production'. (Grosz, p. 22) this has implications for how ornamental decoration has been historically viewed, variously as the monstrous, the excessive, the repository of sensuous desire, the feminine. To retheorise both the male and female body would rethink the position of women as the focus of all this excessive behaviour, and posit men as equally responsible for 'being tempted'.

<sup>181</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA 1994, p. 19

<sup>182</sup> For a further discussion of masculine oppression in architecture, read Joel Sanders *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1996

<sup>183</sup> Lari Pittman quoted in Dan Cameron, 'Sweet Thing', *Artforum*, December, 1992, p. 59

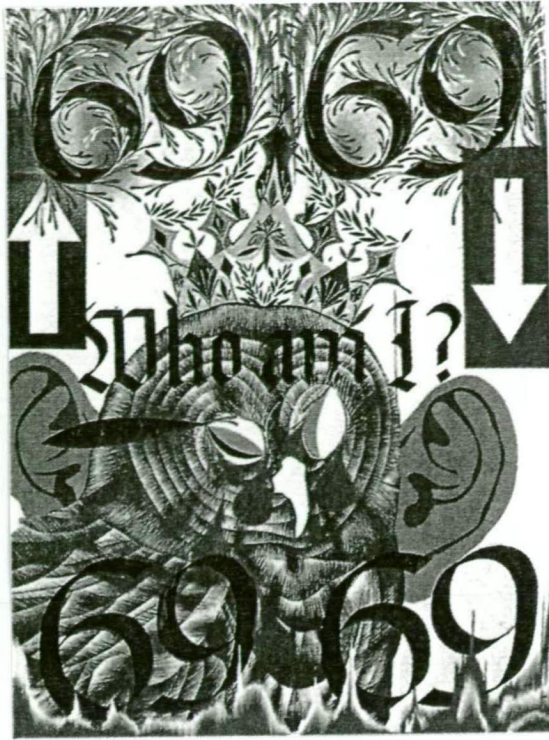


Fig. 44 Lari Pittman, *Untitled #55*, 1991

the questions raised about gender and gender stereotyping are more complex, and can be viewed in relation to 'drag' where wearing a masquerade of the 'other' can tell us more about how that 'other' is constructed. Pittman literally spells out the problem on his artwork in gothic script: 'Who am I?' The answer is less simple than female=feminine and male=male.

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler cites the work of the anthropologist Esther Newton who suggests that the 'structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place'.<sup>184</sup>

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine."<sup>185</sup>

I would suggest that Pittman is addressing this complexity: that the interior (biological) sex does not determine its outward manifestation, and through using

<sup>184</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, pp. 128-149, reprinted in Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997, p. 119

<sup>185</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 103



ornamental decoration he effectively undermines the idea that there is a gender that can be constructed as 'true' or 'real'. His work operates at a tangent to the *Pattern and Decoration* artists, whose work sought to establish an essential feminine language. Pittman, perhaps unintentionally, parodies this insistence and shows gender to be a more slippery, less definable concept. He effectively wears *Pattern and Decoration* as 'drag', and shows the mannerisms of 'femininity' which are historically constructed: anyone can wear them.

A predicament arises at this point, which serves to underscore the depth to which the dichotomy is entrenched. When male artists imitate 'the feminine', it is seen as transgressive and even assists in challenging the dichotomy. Yet the reverse, when female artists imitate 'the masculine', they are seen as dishonest and performing a pathetic masquerade, but if they continue to engage in 'the feminine', they risk reinforcing traditional notions of femininity. In Luce Irigaray's writing, masquerade or mimicry is seen as peculiar to female practice—a special form of neurosis.

Reinterpreting Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, Irigaray writes:

Women's special form of neurosis would be to mimic a work of art, to be *a bad (copy of a) work of art*. Her neurosis would be recognised as a counterfeit or parody of an artistic process. It is transformed into an aesthetic object, but one without value, which had to be condemned because it is *a forgery*. It is neither 'nature' nor an appropriate technique for re-producing nature. Artifice, lie, deception, snare—these are the kinds of judgments society confers upon the tableaux, the scenes, the dramas, the pantomimes produced by the hysteric. And if woman's instincts try to command public recognition in this way, their demand and de-monstration will be met with derision, anathema, and punishment. Or at least belittling interpretations, appeals to common sense or to reason. A society has the duty to ban forgeries. And the hysterical woman who flaunts an appearance exceeding and defying the natural, the legally sanctioned mean, must be chastised. She must be curbed, humiliated, brought back to chastity, whether she likes it or not. Asceticism, decency, shame, are the forms of 'sublimation' required of woman. Let us leave these forms 'latent' for as long as it takes to get at least a hint of how *socially* pertinent sado-masochism is.<sup>186</sup>

Where Pittman's use of mimicry as a critical position can assist us to retheorise the body as gendered, for women it remains problematic. Irigaray aligns mimicry with a psychoanalytic strategy, and suggests that woman as mimic is a form of hysteria where the hysteric mimes her own sexuality in a masculine mode since this is the only way she can rescue something of her own desire.<sup>187</sup>

Irigaray's argument recognises the dominance of phallogentric discourse through her continual reference to the masculine as a point of departure which defines the feminine as 'lack', leaving women with no escape—unless one takes the option of the

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<sup>186</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1985, p. 125

<sup>187</sup> Luce Irigaray, in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Routledge, London, New York, 1985, p. 135

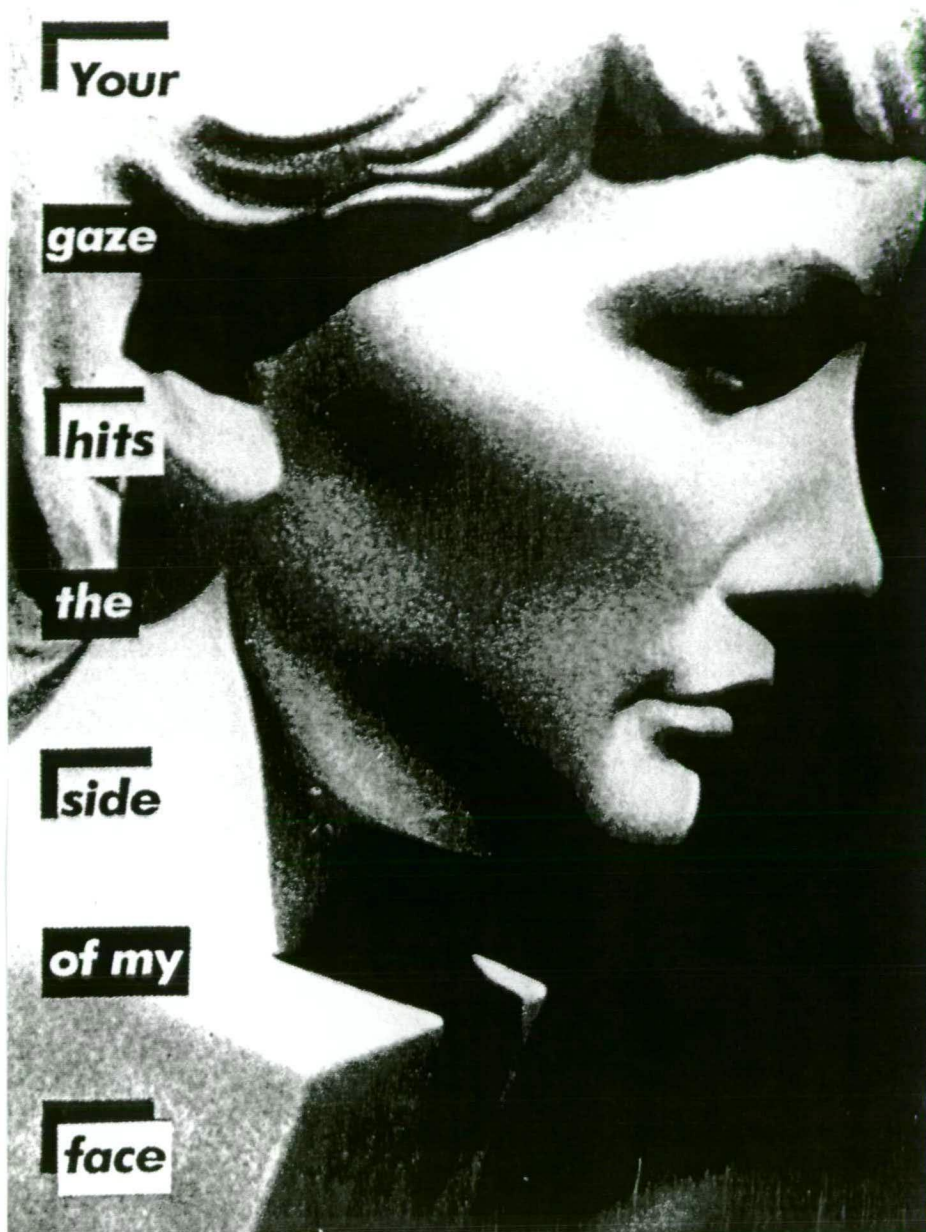


Fig. 45 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, 1981

hysteric, a position that recent 'Bad Girl' art has taken on with gusto.<sup>188</sup> Irigaray's quote also stresses that it is a punishable offence for women to mimic creating a 'work of art', that is, deal in a language which is not their own, which leaves little voice for women except as the 'other'.<sup>189</sup> Curiously the reverse, a man who copies

<sup>188</sup>'Bad Girl' art briefly challenged the expectations of women and appropriate behaviour and presented the 'other' side: the monstrous feminine. But this ultimately fulfilled historical expectations, and could be perceived as a predictable 'alternative'. Indecent, excessive and outrageous, seemingly subversive, 'Bad Girl' art exhibited the 'inappropriate' image of women who appear to subvert the dichotomy, but do not transcend it.

<sup>189</sup> This is explored through the concept of a feminine writing, an '*écriture féminine*', which I find only continues an unfruitful separation.

from the 'feminine' repertoire is considered radical and transgressive and can, in some instances as I have discussed, assist in deconstructing the dichotomy. Irigaray suggests that it is 'inappropriate' for women to imitate or make forgeries, but if they do not imitate a masculine position, as for instance when they use ornamental decoration, does that necessarily consign them to the inescapable feminine or, in psychoanalytic terms, a radical refusal of the symbolic and consignment to the pre-linguistic semiotic.

Women artists who approach mimicry from a critical position tend to use language acknowledged as masculine and often avoid 'the (overtly) feminine'. For example Barbara Kruger describes the strategy of 'stealth' as a critical position, which can then be used to undermine (masculine) language perceived as solid fact: 'We loiter outside of trade and speech and are obliged to steal language. We are very good mimics. We replicate certain words and pictures and watch them stray from or coincide with your notions of fact and fiction'.<sup>190</sup> Kruger's work has been pivotal in forcing people to rethink how we look at language in visual material. But she uses the clean, clear logic of advertising culture to question and undermine aspects of gender, and not the messy, dirty irrational world of the feminine. (Fig. 45) Dawes' work, previously discussed, also shares a clarity and brevity that *just* encompasses ornamental decoration.

Rosemarie Trockel's work appears to approximate the use of ornamental decoration in a 'traditional' manner, in both appearance and medium. Her work uses repeated images from magazines and pattern books, trademarks, and she has often employed knit as a support. Her work has been seen as 'witty parodies of Minimalist canvases rendered in a medium long associated with the female'<sup>191</sup> almost as a continuation of the feminist project started by the *Pattern and Decoration* movement, or the traditional method of ornamentalists. Other critics regard her as defiantly antagonistic to any feminist reading, suggesting

Such stitchery, with its erotics and play, is exactly the girl-talk that Trockel refuses. She is not a feminist Luddite holding onto handiwork as the badge of membership in the woman artist's guild. On the contrary her irony aims directly at this particular feminist past; her knitting cannot assert that artist's self and hands because a machine has replaced them. Trockel chooses her patterns from pattern books and women's magazines, and contracts the work out to knitting factories, where computers, machines and operatives convert the designs to gallery scale.<sup>192</sup>

Wagner defends Trockel's work as having a much broader agenda, that it is the antithesis of 'Luddite' feminists, and includes a critique of commodification in both

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<sup>190</sup> Barbara Kruger, statement for *Documenta VII* catalogue, Kassel, 1982, p. 286

<sup>191</sup> Deborah Drier, 'Spiderwoman', *Artforum*, September, 1991, p. 118

<sup>192</sup> Anne M. Wagner, 'How feminist are Rosemarie Trockel's objects?', *Parkett*, no. 33, 1992, p. 62

art and art practice as well as being critical of a 'particular feminist past'. Yet it is difficult for the public to acknowledge her work as more than a feminist statement, so entrenched is the assumption of gender when female artists address work designated as 'women's'. Wagner acknowledged that Trockel was known as the 'knit person' in New York, for her one project (among many) that was 'too easy to lay hold of, too containable by theoretical narrative—in short, just too easy to understand' from a purely feminist-critical perspective.<sup>193</sup> To only see the work as identifying with the feminine dismisses the work as simply carrying that one message, which may be only one aspect in a more complex range of issues that the artist has investigated.

Defining the meaning of a work to a reductive 'essence' or 'message', in preference to negotiating the complex route more in keeping with the artist's intention, is convenient but ultimately misleading. It is also yet another obstacle that maintains the dichotomy and prevents it being transcended, by both artist and viewer. The simple or direct message, the 'sound-bite', is even more beguiling when it underscores cultural platitudes, when it reinforces the dichotomy and the language which is used to uphold it. But what happens when this becomes an issue itself to be explored, when it is the construction of the dichotomy that is under investigation? Christopher Wool directly addresses this issue in his stark paintings of words and ornamental decoration. The paintings display the dichotomy pared back to reveal its essence, and are exhibited together. In doing so, he shows the power of each mode of expression and the potential *frisson* that exists in the space between; the space which is activated by the viewer who brings their learned preconceptions of language. (Figs. 46 and 47)

In Wool's paintings there appears to be no complexity, no hidden ambiguities, both languages are painted boldly, almost aggressively. The paintings are divided into 'words' (masculine) and 'ornamental decoration' (feminine), identified and separated as the keystones at the foundation of two discrete systems of visual practice, but, unlike the *Pattern and Decoration* movement, both are present simultaneously and equally. Neither is elevated to an 'inappropriate' status, as the artists in the *Pattern and Decoration* movement sought for their subject, but both 'words' and 'ornamental decoration' appear to be held *outside* of language, almost as specimens that are no longer integrated within their previous context.

Although he has identified the dichotomy, there appears to be no challenge made by the artist to its historical construction—any challenge is what we, as the viewer, must now negotiate. What is clearly articulated is the stolid and immovable nature of the

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<sup>193</sup> Anne M. Wagner, 'How feminist are Rosemarie Trockel's objects?', *Parkett*, no. 33, 1992, p. 62



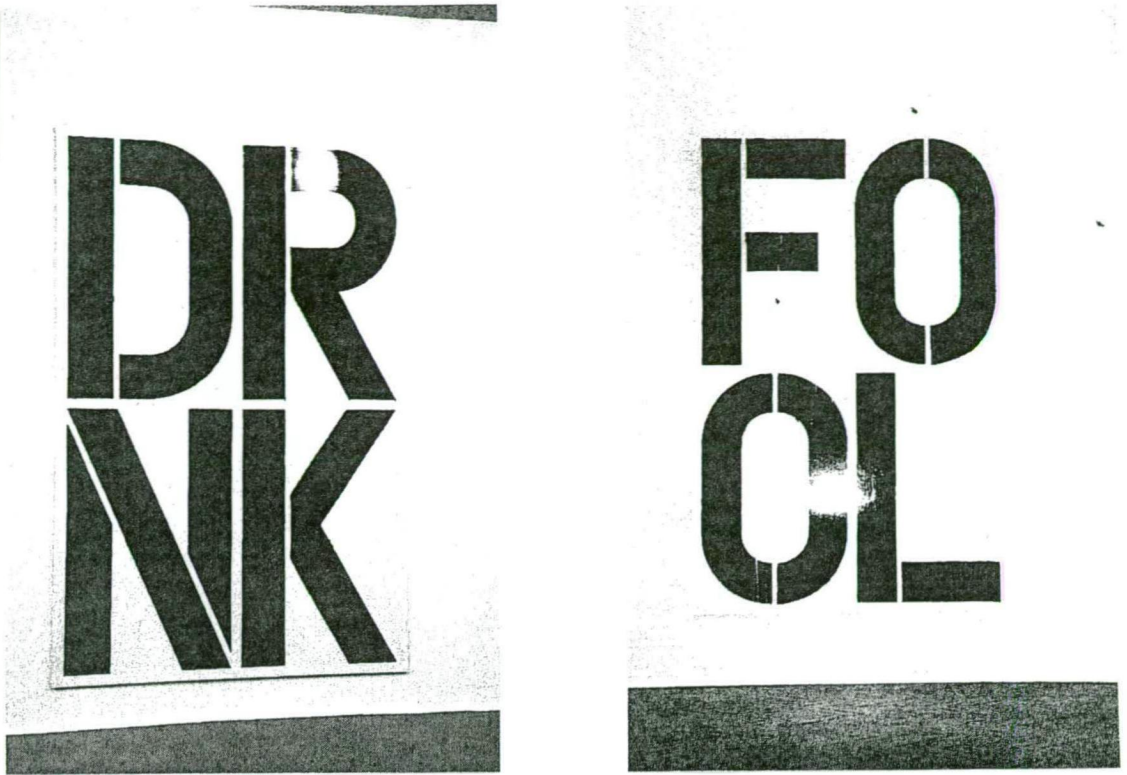


Fig. 46 Christopher Wool, *Untitled* (DR/NK, FO/OL), 1987

dichotomy that effects *both* words and ornamental decoration, and which ultimately renders the paintings dumb, mute, and equally unmovable, despite the aggressive word statements and the bold painterly approach. Through his work, Wool issues a challenge to overcome the polarity that exists, and forces the viewer to acknowledge that they read each language in a limited way.

A further insight into Wool's paintings can be gained through Kristeva's analysis of language and identity, in particular the development of Lacan's Symbolic Order and the semiotic preconscious which precedes it. This will also demonstrate the *cul de sac* that he has identified and which is difficult to overcome when addressed in a reductive or simple way.

Kristeva's concept of the symbolic relates to the acquisition of language and entry to the Symbolic Order, recognised as the Law of the Father. A clear idea of self needs to be established which is reliant on shared language. Without this, the individual is perceived as lost, neurotic and/or hysterical. On the other hand, the semiotic deals with primary processes and is linked with the mother. It is a phase of flux and drives, tactility and senses, before order (and language) is imposed, and is a position shared by all regardless of gender, as this concept is only acquired on entry to the Order.

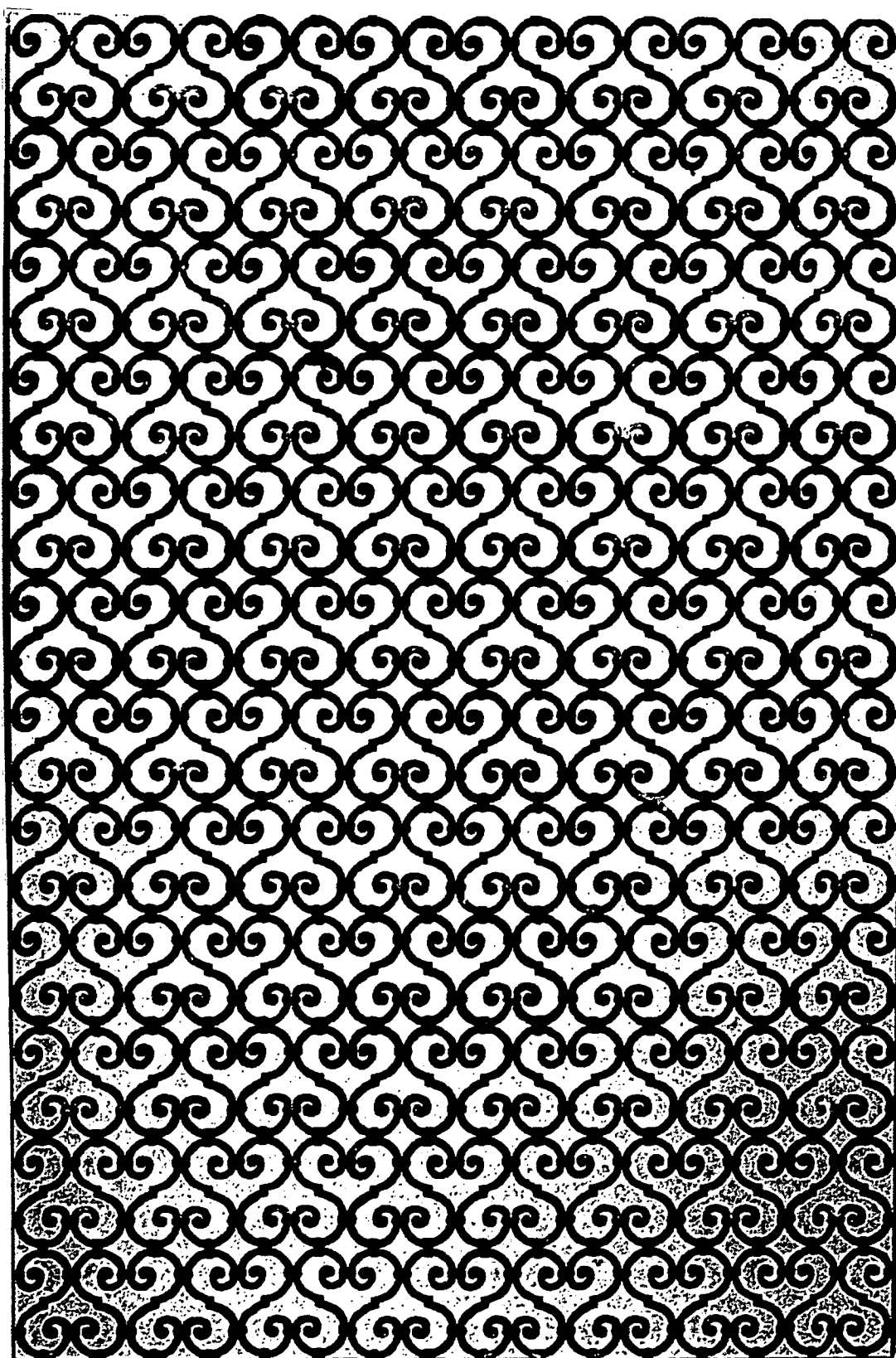


Fig. 47 Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1987

Ornamental decoration can thus be understood as belonging in the sensual and unordered domain of the semiotic. This may explain why it appeals, why it recurs and why it is eagerly sought to be transcended. The language of ornamental decoration pertains to the tactile and sensuous domain regarded as pre-linguistic and thus does not have a clear idea of 'self'. It remains in the pre-linguistic state and must therefore be considered immature by refusing to join the accepted hierarchy. Its persistence can be explained in that it always precedes the acquisition of language. It is an everpresent, tactile domain, continually superseded by the desire for communication of an accepted, linguistic kind.<sup>194</sup> When applied to ornamental decoration, Kristeva's analysis explains why it cannot transcend the dichotomy of being excessive to form, as the semiotic precedes and—under western patriarchy—is eventually marginal to language which reveres order, rationality and acceptance. The semiotic (ornamental decoration) cannot challenge language (words), as it is always rendered marginal.

Yet Kristeva acknowledges the limitations that patriarchal language places on the subject who is continually defined inadequately under patriarchal terms, usually as a lack—which are the terms under which ornamental decoration is historically described. A problem of identity emerges within a structure of polarity: 'the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival identities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics. What can identity, even sexual identity mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?'<sup>195</sup> The acknowledgment that the semiotic is a shared phase, and not necessarily redundant once language has been accepted, can create a position for ornamental decoration beyond that as defined by gender, even within the structure that has been suggested. But it is a structure where, if language (narrative, literary, theoretical) is valorised over other senses, other ways of understanding visual art are incidental.

Wool's paintings address the semiotic and the linguistic in the same manner through exposing their separate identities in basic forms—they are both constructions. Words and ornamental decoration are connected to gender only insofar as we know them historically—and psychoanalytically—to be so. Both are stripped of colour and 'excess' and are laid bare as visual languages, either through a disrupted linear format that can be read in several ways but which references a narrative tradition (words) or

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<sup>194</sup> This may also be extrapolated into the division between opticality (narrative painting) and tactility (ornamented frame), one being accepted to the extent that it is transparent, the other so opaque that it becomes problematic and retrograde. This evolutionary idea also links to the theories of nineteenth century Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, who argued that the tactile or haptic is always superseded by the optic; the tactile becomes increasingly problematic as it constantly reminds you of your own corporeality, which remains, under Cartesian duality, at odds with the mind.

<sup>195</sup> Julia Kristeva quoted in Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory*, Blackwell, London, 1994, p. 90

through calling the senses into play through expanses of repeating pattern (ornamental decoration). Wool's work challenges the dichotomy by exposing it as an extremely powerful but simple construction, one that can be fully recognised with the very barest of detail. His work also acknowledges that it is difficult to transcend, both as an artist, and for the viewer.

Grosz and Kristeva identified the essentialist core of the dichotomy and the problem of overcoming it—in theory or practice—that faces artists who employ ornamental decoration in their work. The dichotomy that links the feminine, the body, reproduction, sensuality and ornamental decoration together (and opposes it to the masculine, the intellectual, production and form) may be dismantled if a viable alternative model can be produced to challenge its primacy.

French theorists Deleuze and Guattari have proposed an alternative model for conceiving of the corporeal body that may assist, as it challenges the dichotomy of two distinct sexes—the basis of the division. They propose bodies to be 'discontinuous, non-totalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations'.<sup>196</sup> Flux and mobility exists both between the two sexes, and also in relation to the larger world:

For the two sexes imply a multiplicity of molecular combinations bringing into play not only the man in the woman and the woman in the man, but in the relation of each to the animal, the plant etc.<sup>197</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari contrast a model based on the structure of a 'tree' that gave rise to traditional concepts of the body as logically organised—which, since the Renaissance, applies only to men—to the more anarchic rhizome that has no central trunk from which branches are constantly refined, but a mass of fibrous offshoots with no fixed centre. The body is not seen as a structure per se, but subject to flows, intensities and desires that push and pull the body in (often illogical and sometimes destructive) directions.

...unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction: neither external reproduction as image-root nor internal reproduction as tree-structure. The rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is short-term memory or anti-memory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots...the rhizome is an acentered, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA 1994, p. 164

<sup>197</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (trans. Brian Massumi), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 213

<sup>198</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (trans. Brian Massumi), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 21



Suffice to say that this theory can also be used to place *rhizomatics* as feminine and leave the basic dichotomy untouched, where parallels can be made between the 'logical' language of narrative that evolves through a proud lineage, and the 'illogical' space of ornamental decoration that recurs spasmodically, appearing remarkably the same as the last time. Or even, as Grosz has suggested, replacing it with another dichotomy, that of dichotomous versus non-dichotomous thought.<sup>199</sup> She is wary of the invested phallogentrism of their theoretical position, but, even so, their investigation of the microprocesses that refuse to be organised into order, yet control the individual's 'identity' posit a challenge to the prevailing order that views the subject from 'above', pronouncing an essentialism that is shared by 'all' (men or women) and takes no consideration of difference. Deleuze and Guattari's challenge to the traditional dichotomy can liberate the way in which the responsibility for 'the body', sensuality, even ornamental decoration, is not held by one gender alone.

Artists who employ the body in conjunction with ornamental decoration as subject matter in their work immediately face a dilemma: they can choose to recognise the dichotomy as something which is unsurpassable—and either work within it or challenge it in an oppositional way—or attempt to transcend the dichotomy. It is in the latter where the theoretical positions of Grosz, Deleuze and Guattari can provide some insight.

Artists such as Stieg Persson consciously challenge traditional hegemonies, and have used ornamental decoration in conjunction with the body in a way that questions the gendering of both. Persson studied at art school at a time when 'one hegemonic version of modernism (the formalism espoused by Clement Greenberg and his antipodean acolytes) was being pushed aside by an equally hegemonic and totalizing version of postmodernism'.<sup>200</sup> But unlike Taaffe and Pitman (and artists of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement which were their immediate antecedent) who chose to use ornamental decoration in contrast to the perceived authoritarianism of modernism, for Persson, post-modernism is seen as equally limiting. Thus he attempts to negotiate modernism in a way that is critical, but shows neither unqualified support for it (perpetuating its legacy), nor as a subject for post-modern reaction. Known languages of modernism (gestural brushwork, minimal colour, large canvases) are combined with contemporary concerns: the body is presented as not logically organised; it is sexual but not necessarily gendered; the presence of ornamental decoration is not to decorate the body or the painting, but infiltrates the form. There appears to be no separation between the body and ornamental

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<sup>199</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA 1994, p. 183

<sup>200</sup> Chris McAuliffe, *Manet's Leg*, (catalogue essay) City Gallery, 1992, p. 5

decoration, but as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a 'discontinuous, non-totalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations'.<sup>201</sup>

In Persson's work as Artist-in-Residence at the Oncology Unit at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital in 1986, he combined images of the 'unhealthy body' with ornamental decoration and the poetry of John Donne, specifically addressing the medical practices of Donne's time. (Fig. 48) From this series, he developed the exhibition *Manet's Leg*<sup>202</sup> in which he addressed the problem of disease, decomposition and corruption. Manet's amputated syphilitic leg appears as a talismanic metaphor for the modernist legacy left in the twentieth century, which Persson suggested as being equally decomposed and corrupted. The subject of disease, the abject, irrational and unpredictable body—which was once significantly modern and male—is married with what appeared to be comparably controlled ornament, almost in a reversal of roles: the ideal, western body appeared as a disintegrated form while the decorative component survived, perhaps as a metaphor for resilience and futility.<sup>203</sup>

Alberti expressed the appropriate use of ornamental decoration to make beautiful that which was less than perfect. Yet he also warned of the dangers of its overly excessive use as artifice to disguise the truth. Persson used the theme of ornamental decoration in his previous work which dealt with decoration as a challenge to modernism, but in his work from the Repatriation Hospital series ornamental decoration was burdened with the role of being an appealing, but 'useless', distraction from an imperfect, decomposing form. The physical form Persson was confronted with could never again be perfect, ideal, nor made more beautiful no matter how much ornamental decoration was applied; and ornamental decoration could only appear as a beautiful but benign presence, offering visual pleasure (and suggesting also its appreciation) in spite of the abject body.

It is possible that Persson's use of ornamental decoration also operated as a metaphor for the artist's presence in a hospital where *real* issues of life and death were carried out as daily tasks. The artist, while not superfluous to the mental wellbeing of the patients (the Artist-in-Residence programme was initiated in part to improve the hospital environment) was, however, superfluous to medical treatment that focused attention on the patient's physical condition. In this way the two

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<sup>201</sup> Deleuze and Guattari quoted in Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, 1994, p. 164

<sup>202</sup> City Gallery, Melbourne, 1992

<sup>203</sup> Yet the presumption would be that Manet's syphilis, and hence decay from healthy to diseased male, would have been caused by a sexual encounter with a woman.



Fig. 48 Stieg Persson, *The sickness declares the infection and the malignity thereof by spots*, 1990



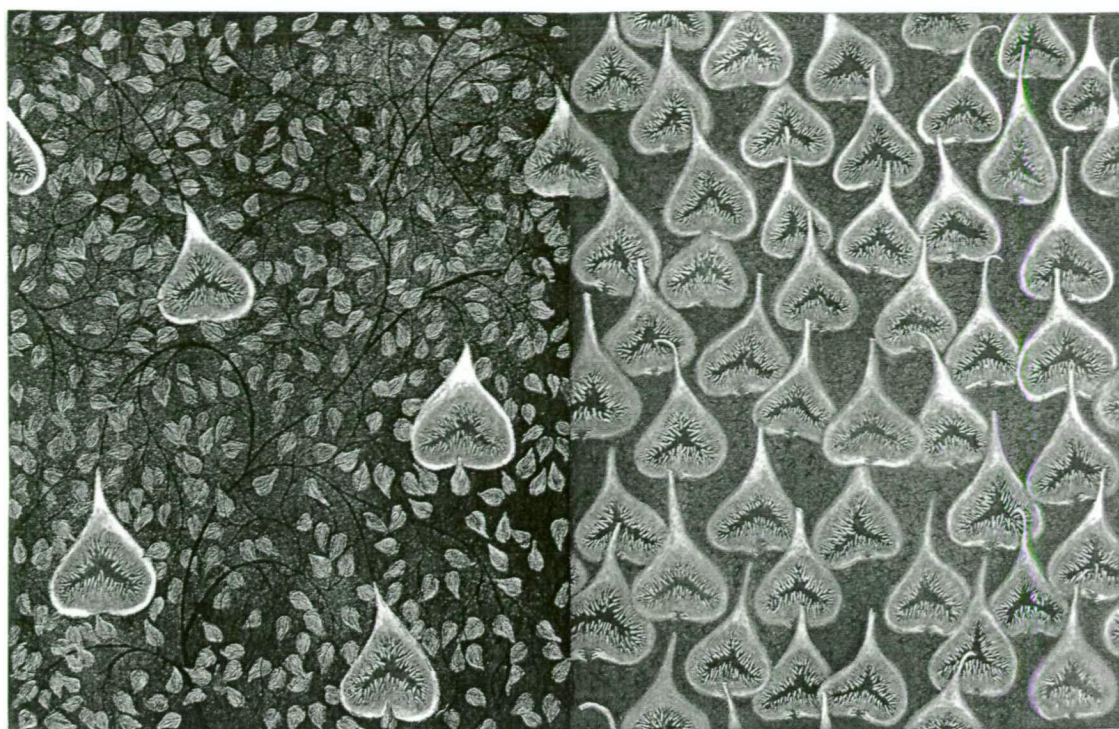


Fig. 49 Filomena Coppola, *Omphalos?* (study for two wall prints), 1995

aspects of visual language that had previously operated through having separate objectives—figure and ornamental decoration—worked together fluidly as part of the same 'cure'.

Through their work with the body as a site of intensities and flows, Deleuze and Guattari also suggested desire be retheorised as a positive act, not as evidence of a 'lack', which is how it has previously been designated in psychoanalytic theory. Rather than desire indicating that which you do not have and want, Grosz suggests that 'desire can instead be seen as what produces, what connects, what makes machinic alliances...desire is a series of practices, bringing things together or separating them...', focussing not on the object of desire, but energising the space between. This reflects directly on the experience of ornamental decoration and gender, for, under this theory, desire is not the responsibility of one gender to produce or to control.

Artist and printmaker Filomena Coppola exploits the concept of desire as energising the space between the viewer and the object to her advantage, where her large, intensely detailed etchings act on the viewer's almost involuntary response to view her work in close proximity. (Fig. 49) Desire is seen as the responsibility of the individual, and as a positive, but not necessarily conclusive, act. Like the artists of



the *Pattern and Decoration* movement, her imagery is often drawn from pattern books, William Morris designs or classical decorative schemes reflecting her Italian background. But unlike the earlier artists overtly feminist political use, or later use as postmodern critique—both of which rely on the prevailing dichotomy to underpin the positions—Coppola proposes a more subtle investigation of the power of seduction and desire which crosses gender distinctions. One could argue that the exploitation of seduction is a 'feminine' ruse, but Coppola's work suggests that seduction is a mutually performative act, and is a response by the individual to the situation.

Thus, sensuality and richness of ornamental decoration can be employed to *effect* the concept of desire as a non-gendered fluid state. Through both imaging it as a subject (detailed ornamental decoration) and enacting it in the process (through the use of sensuous, rich colour and finely wrought texture), the viewer is asked to participate in the act of desire, to be 'brought together' then separated.

Like Coppola, the work of Ray Arnold addresses this issue through large scale installations that incorporate three dimensional elements, lighting and a significant use of ornamental decoration. Arnold often creates a field into which the viewer is drawn, enticed into looking closely at the detailed ornamental motifs, and then is thrown back onto oneself. His use of mirrors and lighting which casts shadows, often of the viewers themselves, alert the viewer to the fact that seeing as an act is akin to voyeurism: the detached viewer, once 'found out', is trapped as a participant in the composition. The question is asked: what or who is being seduced? What is the end-game? What role does the artist have in relation to the viewer?

This playful, but serious use of ornamental decoration questions the traditional distinction between the beautiful 'feminine' domain of ornamental decoration and the heroic 'male' sublime. Through the use of human-scaled installation and dramatic lighting, a visual intensity is produced between the minute detail in the decoration and its repetition over a vast field. (Fig. 50) This creates an awe-inspiring, vertiginous effect reminiscent of the traditional 'sublime' and ornamental decoration is integrated as an intellectual as much as a sensual component. It is this slippage between the two realms of 'beauty' and 'sublime' that provides a *frisson*, the dynamic that transcends the notion of ornamental decoration=feminine.

Arnold has also investigated the fluid territory of gender through ornamental decoration in his series of etchings *And for each sense there is an image*. (Fig. 51) Based on the medieval tapestries *La dame à la licorne* (The lady and the unicorn),<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> *La dame à la licorne*, (The lady and the unicorn), housed at the Musée de l'Hôtel et des Thermes de Cluny, Paris

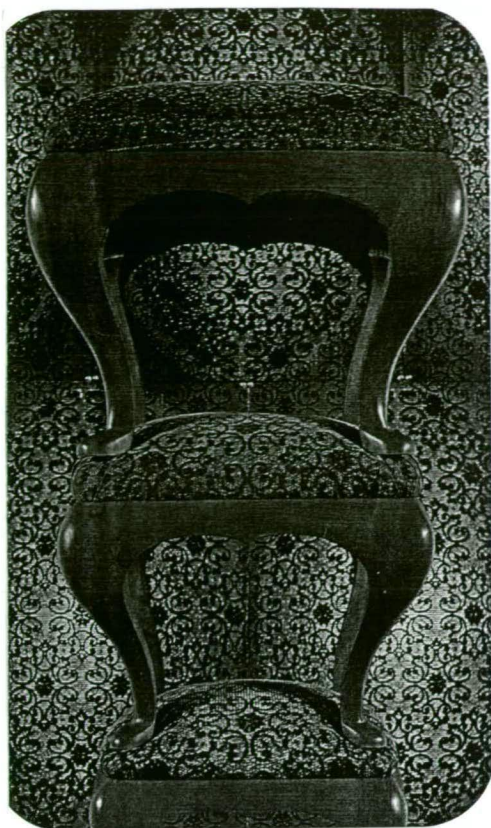


Fig. 50 Ray Arnold (in collaboration with furniture designer Linda Fredheim), *She said there is always someone on top. It's about power. What do you think?*, 1995

Arnold's work operates as a metaphor for the body: the (feminine) Lady above, the (masculine) Unicorn below. The senses are explored through the use of ornamental decoration and are not confined to any one realm: elements from the street, from industrial decoration (for example metal grating), from curtain materials and from organic sources, are employed to suggest that culture and nature coexist in the one being. Observing the protocols of the ancient Greek statues, where there is a decoration appropriate for female *Kore* and male *Kouros*, Arnold presents the two (nature-culture, Lady-Unicorn) bound as one, and not as separate beings. Nature and culture are entwined.<sup>205</sup> In this work ornamental decoration is not specifically gendered, but is used to express a fluidity of gender. The presumption of power relations inherent in the traditional concept of gender are questioned, as the horizontal seam between the images effectively splits the body in two, they remain together and separate, requiring the presence of the two to be whole.

<sup>205</sup> The Lady embodies a persona which is cultured, refined, removed from and yet identified with nature (post-Enlightenment), and the Unicorn exists as a fabricated, fantastic beast of mythology, neither nature nor culture.

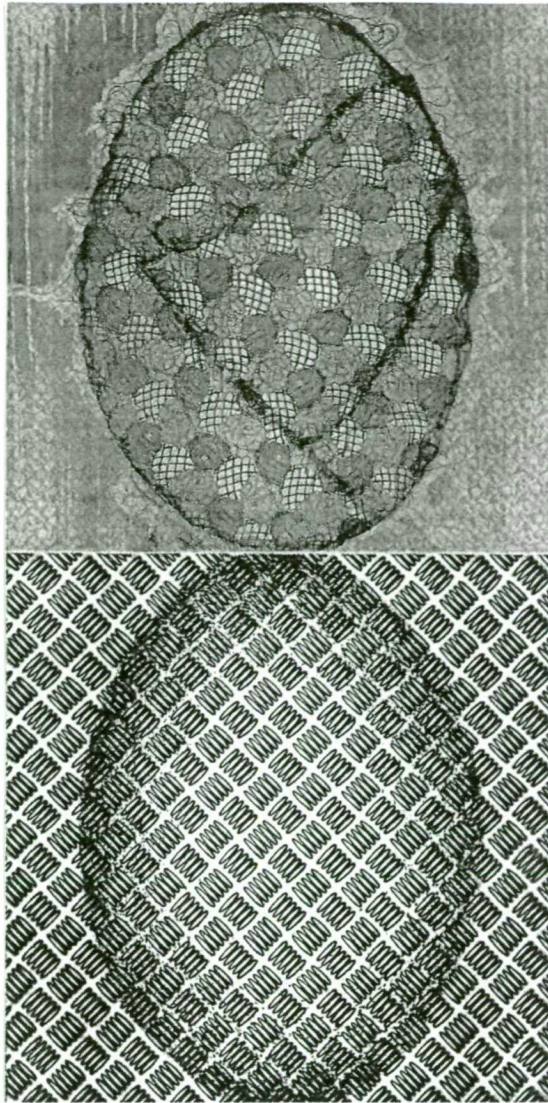


Fig. 51 Ray Arnold, *And for each sense there is an image*, II, 1994

Both Arnold and Coppola make use of seduction as a tactic in their work to show the susceptibility of the viewer to visual cues, and to point out the responsibility of the viewer over their own actions. The almost involuntary magnetism that is the power of seduction cannot be the responsibility of the 'feminine' alone. In his book *Seduction*, Baudrillard suggests that seduction can be used to challenge the dichotomy through the attraction of diacritical oppositions, and not their contrast:

Suppose that all the major, diacritical oppositions with which we order our world were traversed by seduction, instead of being based on contrasts and oppositions. Suppose not just that the feminine seduces the masculine, but that absence seduces presence, cold seduces hot, the subject seduces the object, and to be sure, the reverse. For seduction supposes that minimum reversibility which puts an end to every fixed opposition and therefore, every conventional semiology...<sup>206</sup>

<sup>206</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, Culturetexts, Montreal, 1990, pp. 103-4

But this reading requires that the dichotomy remain even if, through seduction, it can be challenged. Thus

Seduction pushes the terms towards each other, and unites them at a point of maximum energy and charm; it does not blur them together in a state of minimum intensity.<sup>207</sup>

Despite his apparent challenge to the dichotomy, Baudrillard insists it is important that oppositions are maintained in order for the magnetism of seduction between them to occur. He leaves unquestioned the source and responsibility of this desire. In the Renaissance, Alberti wrote of desire as the woman who masters men: 'truly she is a master to be fled and hated'<sup>208</sup> and where 'A most appropriate reason for taking a wife may be found in what we were saying before, about the evil of sensual indulgence'.<sup>209</sup>

For Baudrillard and Alberti, erotic pleasure and sensuality are perceived as dangerous pursuits, linked to the concept of the *femme fatale*, who directs men's passions as if they had no choice and were almost unwilling participants. This is in contrast to the work of artists such as Coppola and Arnold, who place the viewer as an active participant in their own seduction, regardless of gender. For Baudrillard, gender needs to be maintained as separate for the attraction of seduction to have maximum effect; but for contemporary artists, gender and seduction have a more complex relationship where the responses are fluid and often arise from within, rather between two oppositional forces. The continual questioning of gender—as fluid, static or changing, its relationship to the body and the power relations implicit in the prevailing dichotomy—needs to be further explored in order to successfully challenge the easy solution of creating a 'feminine' realm to cater for the sensual pleasure of seduction and act as the representative of excess.



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<sup>207</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, Culturetexts, Montreal, 1990, pp. 103-4

<sup>208</sup> Alberti, *Della Famiglia*, book II, p. 105

<sup>209</sup> Alberti, *Della Famiglia*, book II, p. 112



#### 4: Conclusion: Is it possible to transcend the dichotomy through visual means?

This thesis has examined the origins of the historical convention whereby ornamental decoration has increasingly become identified with the feminine, and was positioned as the lesser term in a dichotomy which denigrated it as inessential to more 'serious' concerns. It also investigated the implications for contemporary artists who choose to use ornamental decoration as subject matter. Many artists now acknowledge that this dichotomy—born of historical convention—is now an unavoidable legacy, to the extent that ornamental decoration is often perceived as representative of the feminine, seen as the 'other' to an ideal which is culturally determined as pure, white and male. Thus ornamental decoration is also employed as a convenient metaphor for many diverse marginalised concerns which bear little or no relation to each other—but which, under a dichotomy, have become identified as a collective 'other'.

Creating this dichotomy was as much a result of the denigration of ornamental decoration by its critics, which reached a climax in the twentieth century, as it was through the work of 1970s feminist artists who recognised an imbalance which needed addressing, and sought to elevate ornamental decoration to the same position as accepted 'mainstream' artistic practice. Through their work, ornamental decoration was claimed as a uniquely female concern. It is now difficult for artists to approach 'the decorative' without their work being perceived in a manner that equates ornamental decoration inextricably with the feminine. This would appear to be less problematic for men artists, who can work with the equally constructed conventions of objectivity and reason (which are, however, privileged terms in western art), or who can use ornamental decoration to express a subversive position. For women, who are traditionally linked with the 'feminine', and its problematic status under patriarchy, it is not. The 'feminine' is as much an historical construction as the link between it and ornamental decoration: neither are biologically determined. Yet it is still difficult to dissuade viewers from this assumption. It remains convenient to view gender and artistic practice in terms of a dichotomy.

If this dichotomy is perceived as fixed and unchanging, the choices are limited and one must somehow negotiate around its existence. An artist can recognise the dichotomy and either work within it, to expose it as the artists of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement sought to achieve, to subvert the prevailing hegemony, or to blissfully ignore it as *passé*. None of these choices are satisfactory, as they serve ultimately to reinforce exactly that which they attempt to transcend, by maintaining a tension between two opposite forces.

Another strategy is to seek to transcend the dichotomy, and to redefine ornament as a gender-neutral domain of equal relevance to men and women. While this is successful for men—particularly when critiquing the suburban domestic—it remains problematic for women, whose work is perceived as exemplifying marginal concerns, wherein the personal and domestic are entwined with the feminine. The feminist mantra 'the personal is political', while having merit in challenging the presumption that art is objective and apolitical, often results in 'personal' statements produced by women artists being regarded as embarrassing testimonials, and serves to reinforce a simplistic response to the work based on gender expectations: 'oh, it's just a personal thing'. Women artists *can* use ornamental decoration but in order to avoid the 'crime' of excess are required to use it with caution, lest they be ridiculed as monstrous.<sup>210</sup> For to truly transcend the dichotomy would also reveal a more promising direction where expectations of 'appropriate'—or conversely 'inappropriate'—behaviour that linked choices of imagery specifically to gender were left behind. To truly transcend the dichotomy, its construction as fixed and unchanging must also be challenged.

A more effective, but complex, solution would be to work with the premise that ornamental decoration is historically constructed as 'feminine' and utilise this as part of a larger critical strategy that deconstructs notions of gender itself. This, as I have argued, is the most effective way that artists can not only transcend the dichotomy, but provide a direction that future artists can use to question the simplistic, reductive presumptions pertaining to ornamental decoration and gender. Recent theoretical developments that address the fluid nature of the body and gender would be useful in effecting this change.

Therefore, it should be easy to answer the question: 'is it possible to transcend the dichotomy that sees ornamental decoration as feminine and form as masculine through visual means?' in the affirmative, and indeed it is. But to implement it will not be without difficulty, as it will require a radical rethinking of a polemic that sees gender as static, tied to sex and the expression of sexuality. If, as Grosz, Deleuze and Guattari have suggested, other models can be found to counter the essentialism with which the body has been understood, then possibilities are made available for the reinterpretation of attributes previously ascribed to both 'masculine' and 'feminine' imagery. If this can occur in visual arts practice, not just through theoretical work as has been suggested, then an affirmative answer—also in practice—is indeed possible.

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<sup>210</sup> Of course, a response of shock may be desired, for example 'Bad Girl' art where the artists exhibited works in the mock role of the monstrous feminine. Rather than transcending the dichotomy, they reinforced its presence, most obviously by naming themselves according to its terms.

This would, of course require a massive shift in thinking from accepting the received view of gender and gender expectations inherited from the Enlightenment—but which is so accepted that it appears 'natural'—to understanding the material world as it is experienced by individual beings: fragmented, diverse, constantly changing and unable to be easily defined. As there is not one body that can represent all bodies, neither is gender easily defined as masculine *or* feminine: the moral, philosophical and ethical boundaries are more ambiguous in late twentieth century western culture than ever before. Gender is acknowledged as a slippery entity, unbounded by presumptions of expected behaviour according to sex. Thus to identify ornamental decoration with the feminine becomes an irrelevance.

However, as I have argued, viewing concepts related to gender in terms of a dichotomy is very convenient, even if it is ultimately a futile pursuit. It is convenient for the body and the mind to be viewed as separate—but at what cost? An ease of definition denies the actuality, which is more often complex and relative, less often simple and absolute. The association of ornamental decoration with illogical space and subjective tactility (the body) in contrast to rational, logical space and objective vision (the mind) serves to underestimate both through seeing them as exclusive terms. The richness of possibilities where sensation and sensibility are combined, a possibility to which several artists have alluded, are forsaken for a fiction of convenient gender demarcations where one has objectivity *or* involvement, but never both.

Grosz, in her interpretation of Merleau-Ponty suggests that 'in the classical conception of vision, the seer, in seeing at a distance, is unimplicated in what is seen'. This is very different from touch, where 'the toucher is always touched' and further, that there can be a reversibility where

The subject and the object are inherently open to each other, for they are constituted in the one stroke dividing the flesh into its various modalities. They are interlaced one and with the other, not externally but through their reversibility and exchangeability, their similarity-in-difference and difference-in-similarity. Things solicit the flesh just as the flesh beckons to and as an object to things. Perception is the flesh's reversibility, the flesh touching, seeing, perceiving itself, one fold (provisionally) catching the other in its own self-embrace.<sup>211</sup>

Distance is necessary to maintain objectivity and clarity, stated clearly in the maxim 'you can't see the forest for the trees'; logical space is needed to construct the 'grand view', which cannot be otherwise understood. Tactility and illogical space threatens

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<sup>211</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, 1994, p. 103

objectivity, clarity and logic as privileged terms: the body, via the eyes, is drawn into a vortex where space becomes as convoluted as the body, and touch demands its corporeal presence: the body cannot be absent if physical sensation is a vital ingredient for understanding the work. The wilful fragmentation and convolutions of ornamental decoration remind the body of its impossible task of objectively viewing the world—the world as experienced is not viewed objectively but lived, using all senses. Ornamental decoration reminds us that the world is difficult to comprehend, a concept that undermines western thought and its desire to understand and make meaning of complexity.<sup>212</sup>

Grosz's retheorising of the body, which has assisted in exposing and dismantling many essentialist presumptions, may also reveal a manner by which ornamental decoration can be understood in a new light, independent of a dichotomy that sees it as representing the 'feminine'. For, if the body is retheorised in a more positive, inclusive way, as neither the domain of the feminine nor the 'other' to a white, youthful, able, male ideal, then the problem of its perception of being 'excess to form'—excessive to the 'pure' act of creation—can be rethought as well.

Only when the relation between mind and body is adequately retheorized can we understand the contributions of the body to the production of knowledge systems, regimes of representation, cultural production, and socioeconomic exchange.<sup>213</sup>

Grosz suggests a more inclusive model may be found in the metaphor of the *Möbius* strip, the strip of paper that, when slightly twisted and then rejoined, forms a continuous surface which although having the appearance of two distinct sides, in reality is one. The *Möbius* strip offers an interesting model for transcending the dichotomy of masculine and feminine gender, for it acknowledges that differences exist, but are integrally linked as continuous and different: it depends where, on the *Möbius* strip, a position is declared. This opens up a realm of possibilities, whereby an expression deemed previously to be 'masculine' or 'feminine', is a manifestation of the same historical construction that sees each as separate, yet in reality are intertwined.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> The 'chaos theory' is but one recent hypothesis put forward as a means by which complexity can be understood. Interestingly, most of the chaos theories are derived from and reproduce patterns in nature, but are given scientific or mathematical rationale and appropriate formulae by which they can be 'understood' in logical terms. This can be read as attempting to rationalise the previously irrational, exerting control over the previously uncontrollable, finding logic where previously none was thought to exist. In other words, attempting to find a 'masculine' system with which to understand the 'feminine'. It is thus a continuation of the dichotomy.

<sup>213</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, 1994, p. 19

<sup>214</sup> Grosz suggests six criteria that must be addressed in order to retheorise the body. Put in simplified terms, these are: that the mind/body dichotomy must be avoided, corporeality must not be reduced to one sex (as women have been identified with the body), a universal ideal must not speak for all, essentialism must be avoided, there must be an articulation between the biological and psychological (through the concept of *lived* bodies), the body needs to be addressed as being closer to



This can be extrapolated into seeing ornamental decoration and form being separate, yet continuous aspects of the same concern, both working together to present a complex whole. The eye can scan the surface, focussing on a variety of languages—or inexpressible 'non'-languages—including 'symbolic' narrative and 'semiotic' ornamental decoration, but as intertwined, connected, and not oppositional.

In his article 'Infinite Ornament', Massimo Carboni suggested that the role of ornament was not as a side issue to dominant form—as *hors-d'oeuvres* for the main course—but contained a language in and of itself. This language need not be over-interpreted as needing to be 'more symbolic' in order to align itself with the rules of pictorial narrative, or even be more 'decorative' and therefore celebrate its excessiveness to that narrative. Carboni suggested that ornament linked the dominant story to the world through a vocabulary that was external to desires that could be articulated or expressed:

Ornament is art without the artist, art without aura. It tells nothing but itself. If history is a story told, and if it is the story, whether verbal or pictorial, that demonstrates the scale of human time to us by depicting us in action, then there is something 'inhuman' about abstract ornament, which tells no tale but spins out its infinite elaboration in silence...

...Ornament contains no drama, no suffering, no tragedy. It makes no effort to resist or stand out from the passage of time, but becomes part of time's flow. A film stretched over the void, it accepts the world's mutability and impermanence. Ornament reflects no ego, mirrors no glance. It proposes no mythology of the author, or more generally, of the subject. Ornament appeals to the preconscious layers of identity that control the dynamic, generative mobility of the hand, the pulsating and kinetic rhythm of the gesture. Ornament is a seed without a father.<sup>215</sup>

Carboni, reflecting Gadamer's interpretation of Kant, recognised the fertile relationship that exists between the frame and the narrative pictorial scene it surrounds. Here was the place where at least two recognised visual methodologies coexisted in the one object, and Carboni suggested a flow occurred between the two. I have previously suggested these two interdependent worlds paralleled the symbolic and semiotic and it is therefore not surprising, in a culture that privileges the acquisition of language, that the former is usually portrayed without any other paraphernalia.<sup>216</sup> Until recently, emphasis has been placed on representing symbolic (narrative) language, with all its psychoanalytic connotations, to the neglect of the semiotic, seen as peripheral.

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the pivotal point of the binary pairs than previously admitted. She speaks of an *embodied subjectivity*, or a *psychical corporeality* that need to be developed in order to understand the nature of bodies outside the Cartesian dualism.

<sup>215</sup> Massimo Carboni, 'Infinite Ornament', *Artforum*, September, 1991, p.106

<sup>216</sup> In practical terms, illustrated art books usually depict the central image of 'Art', but there are rarely any frames or environments to be seen, which reinforces the idea of a singular way of viewing the world (narrative based), stripped of any external meanings and without context. Again, this appears so familiar it now seems 'natural'.

Kristeva linked symbolic language to masculinity, and the semiotic to femininity, but she also argued that both aspects of language were open to all individuals, regardless of biological sex, as one necessarily preceded the other.<sup>217</sup> She suggested a 'bisexuality' in language, whereby masculine and feminine exist but are not necessarily fixed to biological sex, thereby sidestepping one of the basic tenets of defining essentialism in mutually exclusive and irreconcilable terms. For Kristeva, as with Grosz, gender is less defined and more fluid, although I find Grosz's theory more applicable to the visual arts.

Kristeva and Grosz, coupled with Derrida's concept of *differance*—language as constantly being in a state of deferral or relativity, becoming and changing according to what comes before or after—assist in challenging the dichotomy and providing a means by which it can be transcended. Building on these contemporary challenges to received presumptions about language, the body, gender and gender expectations, Carboni's suggestion that differing visual strategies are absolutely necessary to enhance the object's meaning in relation to the world, may actually mean that the dichotomy will be made redundant. The problem of transcending it may be rendered meaningless.

In conclusion, the tapestries *Cybele* and *Flore* that first intrigued me and initiated my enquiries actually held part of the answer within their own fabrication. Like the Möbius strip, in *Cybele* and *Flore* the two distinct languages of elaborate frame (the semiotic, Kantian 'free beauty', tradition, ornamental decoration) and the narrative centre (the symbolic, dependent beauty, creativity, essential form) worked together, in a mutually dependent, fluid way. Concept and construction were integrated, and related to each other in ways that were not always able to be expressed in linguistic terms. The subject matter spoke of the importance of renewing tradition in innovative ways, through the use of pictorial iconography and ornamental decoration from the antique refashioned in a manner contemporary for the time. On a simple, practical level, the homogenising nature of tapestry subjected each image to the same woven treatment, the 'extrinsic' ornamental frame was fabricated out of the same material as the 'intrinsic' iconic form, both were created simultaneously and were integral to tapestries' design and construction.

The tapestries *Cybele* and *Flore* also relate to the body in a corporeal way, stressing physical *presence* through their tactile and material qualities. Often this was manifest by the tapestries literally moving in the space the viewer also inhabited, as unstretched cloth subtly ripples and floats in response to passing air currents, and the hand is always present, evidenced through labour. This materiality evinced a

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<sup>217</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory*, Blackwell, London, 1994, p. 89

different relationship to the architecture in which they were displayed and viewed from that experienced with, say, paintings. Hung from the wall into the internal space, the strength of tapestry does not lie in creating an objective window onto another distanced world, one which stresses *observation*; their important contribution is emphasising corporeal *presence*. The tapestries also related to the mind, posing enigmatic riddles of intellectual delight and historical erudition through the use of acknowledged historical motifs.

At the time *Cybele* and *Flore* were made, a position existed for both artists (creators) and artisans (copyists) within a single work and, like the *Möbius* strip, it was difficult to distinguish the boundary of each practice. In effect, they exemplified a type of cohabitation: co-operation, but with a code of conduct yet to be entirely governed by rules.<sup>218</sup> This slippage, where the rules that govern practice were equivocal, is difficult to embrace in a culture that recognises only one, unambiguous role.<sup>219</sup>

I am suggesting, therefore, that to adequately transcend the dichotomy requires firstly a shift in the perception of gender, and secondly an acknowledgment that our experience of the ambiguous, fragmented, fluid world in which we live is such that ornamental decoration is probably the most 'appropriate' visual depiction of it. The equation ornamental decoration=feminine will need to be addressed—and carefully negotiated by women artists—until the previous concept of gender is radically changed. This step, as I have argued, is underway. Meanwhile, the potential to understand the world as experienced, not as mediated through literary metaphor, coloured by historical construction or lazily accepting of received knowledge is, and has always been, present for those who wish to investigate it.



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<sup>218</sup> The tapestries also refer to the division of roles between artist and artisan that occurred during early renaissance: the artist being commissioned to create the central theme, the artisan to arrange the existing studio templates in order to create a pleasurable frame that referenced the exotic nature of both the medium and the central theme. As artists were paid each time to create new subject matter, it was convenient and cheaper to reuse patterns than to pay artists to invent anew each time. Rules governed this practice, defined for the tapestry weavers by the Painter's Guild (Brussels Guild regulations of 1476) which restricted the activities of both artist and artisan. The Painters' Guild complained about the *legwerkers* (weavers) using charcoal and chalk to do their designs without the intervention of the Painters' Guild. As a result, the Painter's Guild were used for the 'large work' and the *legwerkers* relegated to the 'small work': the flowers, trees and grass (often already in a template), and were allowed to arrange the strips of the patterns with chalk in order for the decoration to fit the dimensions of the tapestry. Alphonse Wauters, *Les Tapisseries Bruxelloises*, Brussels, 1878, pp. 48-49n

<sup>219</sup> This problem is not only confined to the roles of artist/artisan, but to many collaborative enterprises, where the question often arises 'who did what?', or works of 'questionable' authenticity where determining the artist's name is valorised over the work itself.

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