

## ORNAMENT DESIGNS IN SEARCH OF A SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATION

Rémi Labrusse, *Face au Chaos. Pensées de l'ornement à l'âge de l'industrie*, Lyon, Les Presses du Réel, 2018, 568 pp., ISBN: 978-2-84066-735-3; 30€

Claire Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden/Boston Brill, 2013, 708 pp., 97 ills, ISBN 978-90-04-30208-2;

Gülru Necipoglu and Alina Payne, eds., *Histories of Ornament. From Global to Local*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 454 pp., 260 ills., ISBN: 978-0-691-16728-2; \$ 60.00

### *Introduction*

Attempts at writing a history of Western ornament are rare. They are often hindered by a lack of identified creators, sources and theoretical statements, but also by more fundamental questions of method. Existing histories tend to concentrate on the formal developments in one particular artistic discipline, medium or object type, such as furniture, Gothic architectural ornament, or chimney pieces. There exist no long-term histories of such old and universal decorative objects as the candelabrum or the tripod; nor of ornamental motifs such as the acanthus leaf. Another complicating factor is that ornament is very often not connected exclusively to one medium, discipline, material or genre: the acanthus leaf migrates from pottery to architecture and sculpture, from wood to ceramics to marble, and from temples dedicated to Apollo to Rococo boudoirs.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence of this mobility and capacity for metamorphosis ornament disappears as a general historical or theoretical issue the moment medium, period or material specificity becomes a prime concern in art theory and aesthetics, for instance following the debates about the unique character of the visual arts sparked off by

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<sup>1</sup> A notable recent exception is the exhibition in the Rijksmuseum devoted to the so-called auricular style or 'kwabstijl' and its migration from silverware to furniture to plaster decoration of façades in the Dutch Republic in the 17th century; see the catalogue by Reinier Baarsen and Ine Castelijns van Beek, *Kwab*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 2018.

Lessing's *Laocoon*. The first attempt to write an history of ornament in Europe was by the Dresden architect Friedrich August Krubsacius (1718-89), but this is still largely based on the mythological accounts of the origins of ornament myths in Vitruvius, and rehearsed by Alberti.<sup>2</sup> It is only with the arrival of artefacts from all over the world in the later 18th century that histories of ornament begin to be written that move beyond the parameters of classical rhetoric and Vitruvian theory, until then the two main sources of theories about ornament in the West.

In the rhetorical treatises by Aristotle, Cicero, and in particular Quintilian, a distinction was introduced that remained fundamental for most Western theories of ornament: between *what* is said, done or made, and *how* it is said, done or made. In rhetorical handbooks, this is the distinction between *res*, the subject matter and substance of a speech, and *verba*, the words used to present that substance in the most persuasive manner. This distinction only works when there is a choice in how to formulate subject matter. In classical rhetoric such choices depended on the occasion, subject matter, and audience, and the speaker had to observe decorum while aiming for the greatest power of persuasion. It is precisely this notion of choice that also informed most Western thought about ornament, since it was almost always associated with outward appearance and surface adornment, and not with the substance or essence of a speech or any other cultural artefact. Although developed originally as a theory of persuasive speech, rhetorical theory included all human communication, in speech, gesture, or image. Therefore the major classical treatises, those by Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian and Longinus, all discuss the use of art to persuade an audience. Written as a handbook for young orators, Quintilian's *On the Education of the Orator (Institutio Oratoria)* gives a synthesis of Greek and Roman theory and practice of rhetoric that never went out of use. He used some highly influential visual examples to illustrate the use of figures of speech to make a speech more gripping and thereby more persuasive.<sup>3</sup> For instance, his use of the *Discobolus* by Miron to illustrate the effects of *antithesis*

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich August Krubsacius, *Gedanken von dem Ursprunge, Wachsthum und Verfalle der Verzierungen in den schönen Künsten*, Leipzig, Breitkopf, 1759.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline van Eck, *Classical Rhetoric and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, p. 13-29.

would have a long progeny in Renaissance discussions of *contrapposto*.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Quintilian introduced another very influential connection: that between ornament and style, because he made a first attempt at classifying sculpture on the basis of stylistic features, derived from rhetorical definitions of speaking styles based on local schools (Attic was sober, whereas Rhodian was more florid and elaborate); that is, in terms of the use of figures of speech and thought and other features contributing to a speech's ornateness or *ornatus*.

The second major source for Western thought about ornament is Graeco-Roman architectural theory, as it survived in Vitruvius' *Ten Books of Architecture*. Much informed by rhetorical notions of decorum and *ornatus*, he considered the orders of architecture and the entablature they support as the chief ornament of architecture. They are also the source for most ornamental features used on the outside of buildings. When he discusses the orders, the word he uses is 'ornamentum'; but in the sense of a representation in stone of the primitive wooden construction, not in the sense of an added ornament. Their use is codified by custom, tradition, and decorum.<sup>5</sup> Vitruvius' condemned Pompeian mural painting of the Second Style, with its elaborate confections of candelabra, theatrical masques, and porticos, combined without any heed for structural logic, because he felt art should only depict what can exist, and obeys the laws of nature. The terms he used in this rejection would have a long afterlife, used in the Renaissance for instance by Vasari to dismiss the Gothic, or by 18th-century Neo-Classicists to condemn the irregular shapes of the Rococo and their lack of a clear iconography.<sup>6</sup> Thus the main conceptual framework to theorize ornament in the West consisted of two axes: one, rhetorical, based on the distinction between what to say and how to say it; the other, architectural, revolving around the opposition between structure or function and appearance. They were often combined, for instance in Alberti's decision to discuss the orders twice in *De re aedificatoria*, first as a structural feature of buildings, and second as their chief ornament, whose usage is guided by rhetorical considerations of persuasiveness and decorum.

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<sup>4</sup> David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 76-77.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Gros, "The Notion of Ornament from Vitruvius to Alberti", *Perspective* 1 (2010), p. 130-36.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Gombrich, "Style", in David L. Hills, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, New York, MacMillan, 1968.

This conceptual framework largely broke down in the nineteenth century. The geographical and chronological range of ornament studies widened considerably, and contributed to the development of a new, anthropological way of thinking about ornament. The arrival of Pacific artefacts in Europe in the 1760s inspired the first attempts at developing a global, ethnographical perspective. Thus the archaeologist Carl August Böttiger proposed tatouage as one of the first varieties of human ornament, a suggestion that Gottfried Semper would take up.<sup>7</sup> In 1856 Owen Jones published *A Grammar of Ornament*, the first sustained attempt to develop a global morphology of ornamental motifs. In a fundamental paradigm shift Jones no longer followed the rhetorical and architectural framework, but instead adopted a linguistic model. Inspired by the emerging discipline of comparative linguistics he considered original motifs and their transformations over time and space to structure the development of ornament.

The linguistic model was also an important inspiration for Semper. Instead of Jones's linguistic model he argued that the four primary human crafts (weaving, carpentry, masonry and metalwork) provide the basic elements from which all ornament was developed, thus moving from a linguistic paradigm to an anthropological one, in which human action not language is the origin of ornament as of all human material culture. The representation of these crafts over time in different materials, for instance representing weaving knots in pottery decoration, or depicting tapestry borders in framing devices, constitutes the core of human ornament from prehistory to the present.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 not only extended the horizon of ornament study to the entire globe. It was also the catalyst for a systematic reflection on the industrial arts and the implications of mass production on artistry and design. Gottfried Semper's *Science, Industry and Art* of 1852 was one of the first attempts to chart the new relations between architecture and the industrial arts, and their implication for design education. In his major work, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts, or Practical Aesthetics* (1860-63) Semper set out the development of the four basic crafts from their earliest beginnings in the Caribbean and the Pacific, through their transformations in Egyptian,

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<sup>7</sup> Caroline van Eck, "Cannibalisme, tatouage et revêtement: de l'histoire de l'architecture à l'anthropologie de l'art", *Gradhiva. Revue de l'anthropologie et des arts du Musée du Quai Branly* 25 (2017), p. 26-48.

Assyrian and Roman textile, ceramics and brickwork, ending in the early modern period. Because he considered masking and dressing, that is the decoration of surfaces, as the essence of art, he also radically transformed the status of ornament. Instead of Kant's marginalizing appraisal of ornament as the manifestation of purely formal, disinterested beauty, he put ornament back into the heart of the artistic development of mankind.

*The original lustre of ornament*

The three books under review here all throw important new light on this complex history. Clare Guest's *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* in fact offers much more than its title suggests. It is not merely an overview of ornament theory in the Renaissance, but an extremely ambitious and highly learned attempt to recover the pre-history of concepts of ornament as they evolved from the end of the 18th-century, as a result of the emergence of aesthetics, and particularly Kant's arguments that aesthetic judgments are the expression of the free interplay of cognitive and perceptual powers; and, corresponding to this, that ornament is the realm of free, unfettered, but inherently purposeless, beauty. Guest goes back to the beginning of Western thought on ornament, in the Old Testament, in Greek Platonic, Aristotelian and Sophistic thought, and in Scholasticism, to retrieve a conception of ornament and beauty that is not predicated on a relational concept of beauty, and still resonates with the Greek idea, resumed in the Middle Ages, that ornament is the splendor of truth and beauty. 'Ornament', the author argues in the Introduction, was 'not just a thing, but a way of perceiving and conceiving'; it was conceived as an inherent not relational, and applied equally to humans, objects and behavior.

In the course of this very erudite exercise she revisits Renaissance views on ornament such as Alberti's, revisits the grotesque, the triumph and the fragment, and argues that actually in the Renaissance, with Castiglione's *Courtisan* as the pivotal moment, the foundations for the 18th-century aesthetic concept of ornament were laid. The book stands out for its great learning, philological expertise, and philosophical scope, and it substantially revises the traditional arthistorical view that much thinking about ornament in the Renaissance derives from architectural theory. At the same time there is a strange anachronism at the heart of this exercise in aesthetic archaeology: most currently

held views on the history of Renaissance thought on ornament and beauty are thoroughly examined and revised in the light of an unprecedented richness of sources, but the view of Kantian aesthetics and its impact on ornament theory as interpreted by Gadamer and Derrida is not questioned; nor is the 'historicism' elaborated that Guest attributes to Renaissance thought. Thus this revisionist project in the end serves a rather unrevised view of Kantian aesthetics and its impact on the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, any future in-depth treatment of Classical, Mediaeval or Renaissance thought on ornament will have to take into account Guest's arguments.

### *Paradigm shifts*

Rémi Labrusse's book is an equally dense, highly sophisticated study of 19th-century attempts to rethink ornament, its design and history, in the face of the challenges outlined above: the emergence of an awareness of the global nature of human art and ornament-making, and the radical changes on artistic production imposed by the Industrial Revolution. It is a fundamental new departure compared to existing studies on 19th-century ornament and its main theorists -- Jones, Semper, Bötticher, Charles Blanc -- because its focus is not ornament design or the impact of these theorists on artistic production or the collection and display of ornament and craft, but on the underlying intellectual paradigms that produced their new theories. The trajectory the book charts is a double one: methodological, because Labrusse no longer uses historicism or revivalism as the guiding principle to order the history of 19th-century ornament theories, but instead uncovers the paradigms -- or sometimes only metaphors -- used by the authors themselves. The main one is the linguistic paradigm, and in particular the concept of grammar. This informs the second trajectory of the book: the development of grammars of ornament and the underlying transformations of that concept. Grammar, with its prestige in French society from the 17th century onwards, had been an important metaphor to order varieties of ornament in design handbooks. As Labrusse argues, it became a powerful antidote against the profusion of ornament styles presented within a historicist framework by Claude-Aimé Chenavard for instance in his *Album de l'ornemaniste, recueil composé de fragmens d'ornemens dans tous les genres et tous les styles* of 1836 (fig. 1=fig 1 from Labrusse). From a heuristic metaphor the concept of grammar evolved into a scientific paradigm as the century proceeded, informed by German

advances in comparative linguistics by Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Hellenist Karl Otfried Müller or Franz Bopp, founder of the discipline of comparative grammar of Indo-European languages. Their work developed a framework to understand the development and variety of these languages by means of models that trace the transformations from original elements into fully-formed languages. Grammar here becomes the model to understand the underlying laws of linguistic evolution. But their work also demonstrated that Greco-Roman, as well as most European languages, are part of a much wider family of languages that extends from Iceland to India. By implication, Jones for instance realized, human ornament, conceived as largely similar to human utterances, should be shown to obey to the same grammaticality. But it should also, like language, be studied within a global context. As Labrusse shows in one of his many very illuminating analyses, a strange *décalage* occurs here. Whereas the linguists considered the Orient primarily as Hindou, the ornament theorists concentrated on Islamic ornament, and particularly Iranian, because they were believed to be Arians like Europeans, and the instructors of the Islamic world, unlike their Arabian followers.

All this is already highly instructive and illuminating, but the most innovative part of Labrusse's book is the very substantial chapter on Bötticher and to a lesser degree Semper. Whereas the latter has been partly translated into French, and Isabelle Kalinowski is preparing a complete, scholarly French edition of *Der Stil*, Bötticher is still virtually unknown in France. He is slightly better known in the Anglo-Saxon world because his key notion of tectonics was taken up by Modernist architects, and in the 1980s and 1990s by the theorist Kenneth Frampton. Labrusse's chapter is much more, because it is the first in-depth reconstruction of the intellectual context and ideas of Bötticher. He matters, despite the difficulty of his work, and the fact that many of his archaeological views turn out to be mistaken, because he completely rethought the nature of ornament. He left behind the grammatical paradigm, and was inspired instead by German idealist aesthetic views on art as primarily representation, and thematization of such representation; as well as by the linguistic theories of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who conceived the formation of words as a concentration of energy, based on the mental images a speaker forms before enunciating a word. His key concepts are *Kunstformen* (art forms) and *Werkformen* (working forms): the first are the visual appearance or manifestation of the tectonic forces -- weight, support -- invisibly at work in a building. Drawing on the emerging

awareness in physics that forces are abstractions, not concrete phenomena, Bötticher famously stated that without art forms a building would be mute and motionless; only through its art forms or ornament is it able to speak, that is, becomes comprehensible to its viewers: ‘lautlos und starr, verräth sich Gedanke und Begriff nur durch characktervolle Zeichen.’<sup>8</sup>

It would take us far beyond the boundaries of this review to draw out all the new insights and implications of this in-depth reading of Bötticher by Labrusse, but one point needs to be singled out because of its importance for subsequent attempts at devising global histories of ornament: by leaving the traditional rhetorical, Vitruvian or grammatical paradigms behind, and instead developing a theory of ornament that is both ontological and hermeneutical, in that Bötticher establishes degrees of reality for art forms and work forms related to their manifestation in the visible world, and at the same time makes ornament the guide to understanding ornament, he made possible a transformation of ornament theory from mainly aesthetic or artistic towards an anthropological theory.

Semper would complete this transformation, in an equally radical way but different way. Whereas for Bötticher Graeco-Roman architecture was the ultimate inspiration and testing-ground, and ornament derived from the orders his main field of enquiry, Semper radically did away with the primacy of the classical tradition. For him the four basic human crafts as exemplified in the primitive huts of the Caribbean were the starting point for what would become the first global history, not of art, but of human material culture. But as for Bötticher, ornament was at the core of this project.

Labrusse's book is a difficult, but ultimately very rewarding one, that brings a wealth of new knowledge and insights to a Francophone audience. It should be translated into English, not in the least because there exists no equivalent attempt at a synthetic, intellectual history of ornament studies in the 19th century.

#### *Towards a global history of surface ornament*

Where Labrusse charts the replacement of the rhetorical and Vitruvian ornament paradigm by linguistic and anthropological models, the volume *Histories of Ornament. From Global to Local*,

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<sup>8</sup> Bötticher, *Die Tektonik der Hellenen*, Berlin, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1844-52, p. xv.

edited by Gülru Necipoglu and Alina Payne, questions the Modernist paradigm, or rather, rejection of ornament, inspired by the resurgence of surface ornament in the work of contemporary architects such as Herzog & De Meuron or Farshid Moussavi (fig. 2=fig. 2.4: Herzog & De Meuron, Ricola Europe-SA, Production and Storage Building, 1992-93, Mulhouse-Brunstatt, France). In their Introduction the Editors signal that the revival of ornament in design as well as in architectural theory or art history is as complex as it is striking. The use of surface ornament in architecture cuts itself off from traditional Western ornament, derived from the orders, or conceived as a representation of function and materials. It can play on texture, suggesting a textile surface, plant surface or skin, uses the façade as a projection screen for photos, as Herzog & De Meuron did in their Eberswalde Technical School Library of 1994-99. In these designs there is a deliberate departure from local and historical contexts, but at the same time these ornamented façades derive their suggestiveness from the traditions, such as decorative patterns derived from plants, that continue to resonate in them. Recent architectural surface ornament is thus a global phenomenon, but with local roots and resonances. The editors locate the origins in this resurgence of interest in a rather varied set of phenomena: a shift in art history towards an interest in the miniature, the crafts, in particular textile, and the *Wunderkammer*; the impact of Alfred Gell's game-changing *Art and Agency* of 1998, which not only put agency on the arthistorical agenda, but also opened up fresh ways of thinking about ornament because intricate surface ornament is among his key examples of artefacts acting as man-traps.<sup>9</sup> Arthistorically speaking this interest was prefigured in the intersections between art history and anthropology in the work of Semper, Klemm or Riegl, who considered in their various ways ornament to be such an important feature of a culture that it could provide the foundation for stylistic classification.

The ambition of this book is to develop a new theoretical framework for architectural ornament across the globe, from the Middle Ages to the present. It focuses on the relation between portability and dissemination of patterns and shapes across the ages and parts of the world. The editors thus revisit the core of the problems that exercised Semper and Riegl, and continue to exercise present-day archaeologists and anthropologists: how to account, particularly where external, textual

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred Gell, "Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps", *Journal of Material Culture* 1/1 (1996), p. 15-38.

documentation is lacking, for the spread and intermittent resurgence of motifs such as the arabesque or the grotesque across wide distances in time and space. Together the essays offer an incredibly rich array of case studies of ornament across the globe, with a special focus on Islamic art. Finbarr Barry Flood's essay on the patterns in Safavid carpets for instance revisits Alois Riegl's attempt to explain in his *Stilfragen* the *longue durée* of carpet motifs in terms of a teleology driven by *Kunstwollen*, which failed to deal with the interruptions and disjunctions in their development -- and, one might add, was hindered by a set of unproven assumptions about the nature of ornament, or the evolution from naturalism to abstraction. Riegl could not solve the formal hybridity of such carpets, displaying both naturalistic and more abstract ornament. Instead, Flood proposes what one might call a poetics of disjunctive continuity: an ornament history inspired by figures of speech and metaphors that all name discontinuity: *katachresis*, *parataxis*, and *iuxtaposition* are the features he looks for. But this relinquishing of the ambition to write a chronological narrative that favours cohesion perhaps involuntarily suggests the need for a larger theoretical framework that would explain how and why these motifs travel and change. Such larger frameworks are developed in archaeological studies of the *longue durée* of styles, such as Ann Guter's recent work on Greek art and the Middle East, which reconstruct trade networks, or patterns of the dissemination of materials and techniques.<sup>10</sup>

Alina Payne's own essay on *sgraffito* decoration of Renaissance façades (fig. 3=fig. 22.5b, detail of courtyard façade, Palazzo Spinelli, c. 1460-70, Florence) is another case in point of a very stimulating revisit of a topic that was treated by Semper, but had been largely neglected since, because it did not fit the variety of sculptural façade ornament promoted by Serlio or Palladio. Semper saw it as a late descendant of tattooage, one of the earliest manifestations of the universal human urge to create surface ornament. Payne takes a different road, that of lateral juxtaposition and connection with techniques similar to *sgraffito* in pottery, engraving, or silk and brocade weaving. She also shows how such façade ornament blurs the distinction between solid architecture and moving objects, between stone and clothes, the interior and exterior. Her essay is paradigmatic for the rethinking of surface ornament displayed in the entire book in a series of essays that present, one could say, a mani-faceted

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<sup>10</sup> Ann Gunter, *Greek Art and the Orient*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

display of this phenomenon. She also shows how *sgraffito* forces one to break both with rhetorical and Vitruvian distinctions and oppositions between function and decoration, or form and content; or the Modernist ambition to present architecture as the prime art; instead, she shows how such surface ornament can only be understood when juxtaposed to other arts and techniques.

Where the studies by Guest and Labrusse uncover the quest for founding theories in the early modern period or the 19th-century, when ornament theorists looked outside their discipline to rhetoric, theology, linguistics, anthropology or other more or less stable and circumscribed bodies of knowledge, Necipoglu and Payne offer the building blocks for a radically new way of thinking about surface ornament, that breaks away from these traditions, as well as from Modernist ambivalences. They propose a global history, concerned with portability and conjunctive disiunction. In the genealogy of their project they cite Gell and late 19th-century anthropologists of art. Their book, in the richness and range of case studies offers so many new avenues of research; but it also advocates an opening-up of ornament studies in art and architectural history to recent work on the spread of styles and techniques inspired by the material turn in archaeology and anthropology.

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