

INTRODUCTION

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When, in 1907, the Viennese architect Adolf Loos claimed provocatively that ornament was a crime, a millennial tradition of artistic form seemed to have come to an abrupt end.¹ Nor did he aim his salvo at architecture alone: everything from clothes and food, to jewelry and artifacts were his targets. Modern life, so he claimed, did not tolerate superfluity, and ornament was precisely that. Of course, change did not happen overnight, but the mantra of cleansing and purifying that he inaugurated swept across all media and underpinned a vision of form production ostensibly in keeping with a new industrial and political/social reality. This process was largely focused on architecture, which being the art form most accessible to public view, carried the charge most prominently, but other areas of the arts were likewise decisively affected. Yet, from our vantage point today, what seemed a definitive and irreversible death blow to ornament turned out to be only an ushering in of a protracted phase of its disappearance. Ornament is back—in architecture, constituting its site of greatest contention—but also in other media, as well as in scholars' rekindled interest in the subject more broadly.²

However, this very return to ornament, particularly in architectural practice, is not unproblematic if absorbed into scholarship as such. The uncanny potential of ornament to simultaneously combine pleasure with power, prestige, and hierarchy had turned it into an irresistible medium for the self-definition of pre-modern societies and elites. In the past, ornament was deployed not only to engage subjectivity, but also often to express meanings, collective memories, values, and sociopolitical hierarchies, while at the same time claiming semiautonomous formal agency. This tradition dif-

fers substantially from the present preference to regard the production of meaning as irrelevant for contemporary architectural ornament, which is used indiscriminately in increasingly global contexts. But such difference brings both attitudes into sharper focus and opens a space for reconsidering unsuspected and overlooked parallels with the past.

Most symptomatic of the current renewed interest in ornament and leading the charge has been the work of architects such as Jean Nouvel, Farshid Moussavi, or Herzog & de Meuron, who have reengaged with ornament in their buildings and in their written work. Pattern in particular has emerged as a location of renewed interest for architects. Conceived either as skin or as veil, as kinetic surface or as textured image revealing and commenting on materiality, this long-denigrated device has engaged architects' imaginations, offering new possibilities for expression once again.³ This move has gained in momentum, accompanied as it is by a rising interest among contemporary artists and curators not only in ornament per se, but also in historical styles like the baroque, rococo, and Islamic, in which ornament had been at its zenith.

As the most public art, and therefore most visible, architecture set the stage for a reevaluation of ornament across many fields, a physical backdrop that ultimately permitted its appreciation. And this trend is finally seeing its epiphany in scholarly work as well. The recent rise of interest in ornament has been accompanied by publications in many disciplines and from many perspectives, ranging from literary studies at one end to gender studies and anthropology at the other. Thus, the renewed enthusiasm of practitioners was comple-

mented and even anticipated by publications in diverse fields where the small scale, the miniature, and the detail were reevaluated as positive and intense sites of creative energy. From philosophy to literary studies to art history, a discourse about smallness converged and impacted the humanities more broadly: Gaston Bachelard (1958), Naomi Schor (1987), Patricia Fumerton (1991), Daniel Arasse (1992), Rae Beth Gordon (1992), and Susan Stewart (1993).⁴ Bolstering and reinforcing this trend was work on the *Wunderkammer* as a site of exaltation of the minuscule and the precious on the one hand, and gender studies on the other, which has drawn attention to a women's aesthetic that had been unjustly removed from the center of artistic discourse for being detail-bound, too delicate, or for privileging the minor arts (a pejorative term in and of itself) such as weaving, pottery, or embroidery.⁵ More recently, the anthropologist Alfred Gell's look at ornament from the perspective of agency (1998) added even more momentum to the urgency to address anew this much maligned category.⁶ Altogether, these scholarly contributions have played an important role in providing a theoretical background for rethinking ornament. To be sure, the leap from this work to ornament studies was not obvious and did not happen overnight, but the broad-based cultural revalorization of the minute and marginal as well as the socio-political, semiotic, aesthetic, and phenomenological dimensions of ornament nevertheless created a fertile soil for its positive reassessment.⁷

Yet the current rising profile of ornament in architectural design assumes that in a multicultural and increasingly cosmopolitan global world order, symbolic communication is difficult because of the absence of a common visual tradition. Hence, the former emphasis on culturally coded languages of ornament and decorum is being replaced by new engagements with surface, affect, and digital culture in a virtual age seeking to make the frontiers between art and cultures more fluid. These strategies privilege direct sensations capable of generating open-ended resonances and affects, as indeed many practitioners openly acknowledge.⁸ This current approach in architectural practice to minimize cultural context, accompanied by the utopia of universal visual communication through affect and sensation, is tied to contemporary concerns and opportunities offered by an increasingly globalized profession and its likewise increasingly unitary visual and discursive space. However, historically the visual communication

across different geographies and media (and ensuing interactions of genres, scales, techniques, materials, and categories) by way of ornament was very complex and may yet prove to be at work subliminally in theories and approaches of great currency nowadays. It is precisely this issue that the present volume aims to address.

Much of the renewed scholarly discourse interrogating ornament in practice as well as in scholarship has centered on the modern period and on architecture. But this has not always been the case in the past. Since the early nineteenth-century, both the premodern era and the applied arts (*Kunstindustrie*) have garnered considerable attention. In fact, the applied arts were seen at that time as the most ubiquitous repository and disseminator of ornamental forms, almost synonymous with ornament. And this was the case not only in architectural treatises, manuals, and educational ventures, but also in artistic theory and in historical scholarship. Indeed, the nearly obsessive nineteenth-century concern with the applied arts and ornament also left its imprint on the developing field of art history in the foundational years of the discipline and influenced the direction of studies on the medieval and early modern periods in both Western art and its "others."

International exhibitions played no small role in contributing to this phenomenon, giving rise to encyclopedic publications on global ornament and to museums of applied art aimed at improving design in an age of industrialism.⁹ Thus, scholars such as Alois Riegl, August Schmarsow, or Wilhelm von Bode published on Cosmatesque ornament, on Persianate carpets, on Renaissance furniture and majolica, or sculptural architectural ensembles, alongside their principal interests in painting or sculpture.¹⁰ The interaction between art history and the nascent field of anthropology at the time created synergies and invited the valorization of objects fashioned by anonymous makers.¹¹ Indeed, ornamented artifacts were understood to reveal the DNA of cultures and as such were the objects of intense scrutiny. In these early treatments of the subject, much revolved around the concept of style, and so inextricable was the connection between ornament and style that, when style lost ground as the predominant category for art historical investigations, so did ornament. In the wake of contemporary art's rejection of ornament, historical scholarship also abandoned this topic by the mid-twentieth century, by which time it had been practically excised from the scholar's repertoire of interests.¹²

However, a different trajectory characterizes the scholarship on “non-Western” traditions of ornament, including Asian, African, and Mesoamerican, which enjoyed a relatively continuous life of their own. Among those traditions, Islamic ornament arguably occupied center stage in the Western imagination, given the long-standing fascination with the “arabesque” that was often conflated with the “grotesque.”¹³ In fact, the invention of “Islamic art and architecture” as a category was largely promoted in western Europe within the context of a growing preoccupation with ornament and abstraction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a context in which Islamic visual culture was conceptualized as a purely decorative tradition. Therefore, the “arts of Islam” have almost always played a paradigmatic role in international debates on ornament and abstraction, though not historically grounded and generally focused on the premodern era.

Itself a millennial global tradition with local variants, Islamic ornament has long been essentialized as a timeless phenomenon collapsed into reductive taxonomies of the arabesque. While medieval and early modern art in the Latin West and Byzantium have generally been defined as figurative, despite recurring iconoclastic contestations of the status of images, Islamic art has been perceived predominantly as being opposed to images and hence as a primarily aniconic, ornamental tradition. Although many recent revisionist studies have challenged this polarization, the vitality of older essentialist stereotypes has not abated, especially in popular venues such as some exhibitions, museum displays, and survey books.

Rooted in nineteenth-century conceptualizations of ornament, essentialism was also the predicament of most architectural traditions that were classified at that time as “non-Western,” and primarily ornamental in their concern with surface rather than with structure. A quintessential example of this binary is Banister Fletcher’s famous genealogical “Tree of Architecture,” where the categorization of timeless “non-historical styles” permanently fixed in medieval pasts applies equally to “Saracenic,” Byzantine, Chinese, Japanese, and Central American architecture. According to Fletcher, these styles emphasize “decorative schemes, unlike those of Europe which have progressed by the successive solution of constructive problems.”¹⁴

It is precisely this search for essence that survives in some current engagements with Islamic ornament in celebrated contemporary architectural monuments such as

Jean Nouvel’s Institut du Monde Arabe (1980–87) in Paris, I. M. Pei’s Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, inaugurated in 2008, and many others. These monuments privilege geometry as the quintessential form of Islamic ornament, given its compatibility with global contemporary formal trends. Hence, Nouvel and Pei prefer to bypass other alternative genres of Islamic ornament ranging from vegetal, floral, figurative, and calligraphic to post-Mongol chinoiserie. In doing so, they respond to the current iconic emphasis on geometricism, and by extension parametricism, that is addressed by several of the essays with which the present volume begins. This emphasis, which diverges from the former craze for Islamic floral ornament and Japonism during the arts and crafts and art nouveau movements, illustrates powerfully how the uses of the past by artists/architects are inevitably conditioned by their present and its inevitable blind spots, and as such cannot constitute an accurate measure of any culture’s “essence” or “identity,” despite all the claims made to that effect.¹⁵

To give an example of the contemporary search for timeless essence in an effort to mediate the global and local, one might quote I. M. Pei’s personal statement about his guiding principle in designing the museum in Doha, which ironically houses aesthetically divergent Islamic ornamental objects from vastly different times and places:

This was one of the most difficult jobs I ever undertook. It seemed to me that I had to grasp the essence of Islamic Architecture. The difficulty of my task was that Islamic culture is so diverse, ranging from Iberia to Mughal India, to the gates of China and beyond. . . . I began to understand why I felt that Cordoba was not truly representative of the essence I was seeking. It is too lush and colourful. If one could find the heart of Islamic architecture, might it not lie in the desert, severe and simple in its design, where sunshine brings forms to life? I was finally coming closer to the truth, and I believe I found what I was looking for in the Mosque of Ahmad Ibn Tulun in Cairo (876–879). The small ablutions fountain surrounded by double arcades on three sides, a slightly later addition to the architecture [actually late-thirteenth-century Mamluk], is an almost Cubist expression of geometric progression from the octagon to the square and the square to the circle. . . . I had at last found what I came to consider to be the very essence of Islamic architecture.

Pei attempted to bring forth in the “desert sun of Doha” the very “essence of Islamic architecture, where sunlight brings to life powerful volumes and geometry plays a central role”: “I must admit that I have allowed myself another subjective decision, which was based on my feeling that Islamic Architecture often comes to life in an explosion of decorative elements. . . . The decorative art of Islam—the complexity of the geometry—is absolutely superb . . . I would have created more decorative patterns if I had more courage.”¹⁶

Given the complex and asymmetrical path that ornament scholarship has trodden in the past decades, inevitably much has been left out of the discussion. Nor has the interaction of ornament with objects of luxury, which were often the carriers and disseminators of ornament, garnered as much attention as it deserves. Likewise, the scholarship has tended to privilege certain geographies and temporal periods without asking larger questions about transnational exchange and circulation of ideas, forms, goods, and people. A global perspective has not been in the forefront of issues, just as regimes of viewing, handling, and types of contamination for ornament have in general been neglected. These, then, are some of the ideas that lie behind this volume and the thinking that informed the scope and themes broached in it.

As a group, the essays gathered here frame recent trends in relation to historical precedents, characterized by differing balances between “global” and “local” elements, that is, between simultaneously transcultural and contextually specific geo-historical significations of ornament. The volume is not intended as a comprehensive encyclopedic survey of ornament in world cultures, nor is the aim to construct an all-encompassing theory of ornament as several studies have attempted to do in the past, only to flatten the multilayered richness of the subject by painting a totalizing picture. Such studies have tended to treat ornament as if it had some universal meaning and each world location were culturally, politically, and economically independent from one another.¹⁷ Instead, the present volume offers thematic sections analyzing moments of high density for the use and definitions of ornament in diverse periods and geographies. The focus is on historiographical and theoretical problems addressed through specific case studies, varied contexts, and multiple media, with an eye to transmediality and transcultural hybridity.

This way of framing the subject is intended to help generate dialogues across time, space, and artistic media. Looking at ornament as artistic currency of exchange, most essays that are gathered here ask how it was transmitted or negotiated, how foreign modes of ornament were adapted to local traditions, and what attributes they acquired in new contexts. This is a book about the “global and local” and hence aims to de-center traditionally localized studies. Cohesion is achieved internally, instead, by authors asking interrelated questions about many different art forms. Thus, a recurrent theme of the volume is the relationship between dissemination and portability. Among other things, what connects the global with the local includes the artifacts that circulate, that are portable and capable of endless adaptation by inserting and reinserting themselves in the most varied contexts and media.

The sequence of thematic sections moves from the centrality of architectural ornament in contemporary monuments to an examination and rethinking of historical material in all art forms. Most important, the volume develops a new conceptual framework that promotes links between different fields of specialization in the arts and architecture, intersecting with the subject of ornament. It therefore integrates in a nuanced fashion into global art history both “Western” (medieval, Renaissance, baroque, modern) and some “non-Western” traditions of ornament (Islamic from Spain to Central Asia, Mesoamerican, and Chinese). In so doing, the essays gathered here counter the move that has long essentialized the latter traditions as ahistorical. Essays on those “foreign” traditions, which are often segregated as self-contained universes, here enter into conversation with each other and with Euroamerican traditions.

The present volume offers a wide range of topics and methodologies, temporally ranging from medieval to contemporary and geographically spanning the world.¹⁸ That being said, there are areas of concentration that generate synergy between essays and prevent the whole from breaking down into its constituent parts. Given our personal areas of specialization, we have unapologetically chosen to include a large dose of medieval and early modern essays, many of them focusing on the Mediterranean area. We should also acknowledge at the outset that we purposely excluded topics on ancient ornament, in the interest of promoting a more tightly integrated volume. Moreover, there is a notable cluster of essays on Islamic ornament, which can be partly jus-

tified by its numerous imbrications with other global traditions and the centrality of the “arabesque” as a category in Euroamerican discourses on and practices of ornament. These areas of concentration include: the medieval Christian and Muslim Mediterranean, with its extensions into the Abbasid lands and to Timurid Central Asia; the early modern Mediterranean lands from Christian Europe to the Ottoman Empire, with excursions into New Spain and Mughal India; international modernist and contemporary architectural practice and theory; and the historiography of ornament. Architecture receives significant attention because it is the site where most of the modern debates about ornament found the greatest echo and publicity, whether for or against ornament. But this is not only a volume about architecture, as all the visual arts, and in particular the applied arts, come under its scrutiny. Indeed, exchange between the arts on the terrain of ornament is one of its main coordinates.

Part 1, titled “Contemporaneity of Ornament in Architecture,” focuses on the ramifications of the return to ornament in current international architectural practice across the globe and the questions it poses with respect to the historical path that led here. Subsequent sections following this opening are organized according to two loosely entwined structures, chronology and theme. Intersections between historical periods and/or thematic issues illuminate the complex modalities of ornament and aspects of its troubled historiography. Part 2, “Ornament between Historiography and Theory” explores the mostly nineteenth- to early twentieth-century art historical and theoretical build-up that mediated our understanding of ornament. The following parts turn to salient episodes in the medieval and early modern periods through the eighteenth century and end with modernism, thus coming full circle. Thus, the essays in part 3, “Medieval Mediations,” examine the interconnected dynamics of ornament in medieval Byzantium, Iran, Central Asia, Iberia, southern Italy and the Mediterranean islands. Part 4, “Early Modern Crosscurrents,” analyzes some sixteenth- to eighteenth-century trends from Europe (the Protestant North and Catholic Naples) through the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran, and Mughal India. These include a fascination with floral ornament in diverse media, an emerging aniconism and iconoclasm to signify cultural difference, and an inextricable entwinement between the politics of ornament, confessionalization, and multiethnic empires.

Part 5, on “Ornament between Figuration and Abstraction,” still broadly addressing the medieval and early modern periods up to the eighteenth century, complicates the traditional binary opposition between figural representation and ornament, thereby expanding the latter’s boundaries into the realms of iconography, image, and body ornament. Part 6, “Circulations and Translations of Ornament,” examines cross-media and cross-cultural exchanges in ornamental aesthetics triggered by portability in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean space. Finally, part 7, “Internationalism of Ornament and Modernist Abstraction,” considers diverse aspects of the status and uses of ornament from the eighteenth century onward in the age of industrialization, ranging from Europe to America—that is, the history most deeply invoked and contested in today’s return to ornament.

Yet this is certainly not the only possible road map for reading the volume. One of its most exciting aspects as a carefully choreographed collective work is how various voices intersect, enter into dialogue, and offer unexpected insights. For example, luxury emerges as a strong theme that unites several essays across sections. Physical aspects of making and materials is another shared topic (artisanship, tools, materiality, transmission of patterns via designs on paper, and the migration of ornament from one medium to another), as is the object/subject relationship and the issue of agency. Other mutual themes revolve around unpacking the traditional ontological and psychological binaries that have frequently structured thinking about ornament: ornament versus structure, surface versus plastic form, decadence versus morality, anarchy versus order, luxury versus austerity, communication versus seduction, and signification versus sensation, to give some examples. The deconstruction of historiographic biases rooted in preconceived attitudes toward ornament is another leitmotif. Ornament as framing device is revisited by a number of essays to challenge the view that periphery is ornament’s place. Indeed, the increasing interchangeability of the terms decoration and ornament in the modern period illustrates how the tendency to view it as adjunct (in a supporting role, rather than as its own category) became embedded in language. The intimate relationship between ornament and cosmos (Greek *kosmos*: “order,” “universe”) is another theme explored by several essays, as is the multivalent concept of the “arabesque.” Finally, the politics of ornament and

its connection to identity (social or individual) is also a recurring thread.

Such thematic, geographic, diachronic, and synchronic breadth means that the volume deliberately shies away from offering a single, overarching definition of ornament. The very attempt would have countered the purpose of bringing these essays together. From what Archimedean vantage could such a definition even be possible once diverse cultures take center stage? Instead, this volume offers multiple perspectives from which to rethink critically the interfaces of ornament. Above all, it stresses the almost uninterrupted and instrumental function that ornament has performed, and continues to perform, with its perennial capacity to ignite the artistic imagination and give aesthetic pleasure.

The book, then, does not seek to circumscribe the definition of ornament, and whether or how it differs

from decoration, but rather to address what ornament does. Many definitions are simultaneously relevant in this approach to ornament as a potent site for inquiry, from which to interrogate problematic assumptions and to blur the boundaries between architecture, the arts, and crafts. We aimed at expanding familiar discourses on the subject instead of bringing them to a closure, so as to foster dialogue among ornament scholars with an expertise in diverse art historical traditions around the globe. Working together with the authors who contributed to our collective enterprise has been both a delight and a learning experience—for we have found much in their essays to intersect with and to enrich our personal visions, to open horizons, and to raise questions that on our own we might never have formulated. It is this inbuilt synergy that has made the experience of editing this volume so rewarding and so special, and we hope our readership will see the results at work.