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THE ORNAMENTAL DIMENSION: CONTRIBUTIONS TO A THEORY OF ORNAMENT

*Est ornatus mundi quidquid in singulis
videtur elementis, ut stellae in coelo, aves
in aere, pisces in aqua, homines in terra.*

Guillaume de Conches¹

*Il fallait être peint pour être homme; celui
qui restait à l'état nature ne se distinguait
pas de la brute.*

Claude Lévy-Strauss²

ARGUMENT

The concern for ornament might seem extravagant, if not obsolete and marginal. And yet, the impressive number of issues relating to this topic that came to light in recent decades testifies to the particular fascination it exerts upon the postmodern sensitivity. In its traditional acceptance, ornament was first theorized in the arts of language (rhetoric, poetics), and then in architecture. Its becoming a bone of contention marked the modern split between reason and sensitivity, the useful and the beautiful, structure and revetment. The effort to reconcile industry and the applied arts has kept ornament at the core of the aesthetic debate, and the end of the 19th century and the whole of the 20th century saw concomitantly its banishment and the revealing of entirely new understandings or *modi operandi*, together with an increased interest of philosophers, art theorists, anthropologists and sociologists.

Most theorists agree that the question of ornament cannot be set in proper terms unless it is studied in a precise historical context since the significations, acceptations and functions of ornament are changing permanently. However, the presence of certain constants that can be traced in the evolution of ornament and within its innumerable avatars belongs to a hypothesis – which this study intends to turn into a thesis –

of the existence of a general ornamental dimension with a multiplicity of expressions, rather than a succession of different culturally-determined conceptions on ornament. Finding an eventual common denominator, or an invariant substratum of the infinite variety of ornamental species, would contribute to a more substantial and comprehensive definition of ornament and its essential nature, and the specific intention that can turn almost everything into ornament. The identification of constant properties or aspects in the study of the main functions of ornament, its use as means of expression and the way it is perceived – analyzed in various domains and historical periods – is meant to create the framework for a possible *Homo ornans*.

Although focused on the field of visual arts, and in particular the so-called “arts of the environment” (architecture, landscaping, urban, interior and industrial design, and fashion), this study will use the term “ornament” in its widest sense, allowing the syncretic inclusion in a single category of such varied items as a judge’s robes, a piano improvisation, a capital, a literary description in a novel, a tattoo, a streamlined radio-set, a pagoda in an English garden, and a wallpaper pattern.

A UNIVERSAL CONCEPT

“What is ornament?” This has remained a practically unanswerable question due to the complex, protean and paradoxical nature of the concept. Viewed ironically, it might appear easier to first find out what isn’t or what couldn’t be an ornament, since any object, gesture or phenomenon, in a certain context, may act as an ornament or acquire an ornamental value. A song in a non-musical film, a bullet worn as pendant, a painting on the wall, an old flat-iron used as a vase, a rooftop advertising billboard; all these are but ornaments. For Saint Augustine, the penitence of the sinful slave whose punishment is to clean the drains becomes their ornament by his very shame, thus purifying and re-balancing both human soul and place.³ For Bossuet, God made of men “*ces belles lumières de l’esprit, ces rayons de son intelligence, ces images de sa bonté*” not for their own happiness, but as decoration of the universe, as an ornament of the present century.⁴ For Kant, everything is ornament that brings an increase in the satisfaction of taste solely by its form, such as the frames of paintings, draperies of statues, colonnades around palaces, and a woman’s ballroom evening dress.⁵ For Heidegger, ornament, understood

as *Zier* (in its ancient sense of *parure*) is the glitter that makes things appear and become part of a unique assemblage, part of the presence.⁶

An exhaustive effort of gathering and cataloguing the existing definitions and acceptations (still to be done) would probably prove that, even in the classical treatises of rhetoric and architecture, ornament is defined vaguely, metaphorically, incompletely, or indirectly, by means of the functions assigned to it. The content of the term has always slipped out of grasp and eluded the rigor of scholars, remaining *überflüssig*, as in Georg Simmel's characterization of ornament itself.

Unlike the far more "innocuous" *décor* or decoration, ornament has often been treated as a universal concept or endowed with the broader and more profound connotations of the magical, esoteric, sacred or even diabolical. Also, as Elisabeth Lavezzi notices, its capacity for modifying and multiplying itself renders almost impossible the integral seizure in a discourse of this "polymorphous and versatile object" connected with the metaphor of the divine creation.⁷

Ananda Coomaraswamy's etymological analysis of the Greek *kosmos* and of its Latin translation, *ornamentum*,⁸ explains eruditely the origin of the sacred aura of ornament, progressively eroded by the ascent of rationalism. The ancient *kosmos*, meaning "order" and also "ornament" (as equipment or embellishment), establishes relevant aspects which henceforth will constantly characterize, more or less explicitly, any understanding of the concept: the connection operated by ornament between the structured unity of the whole and the structuring power of the significant detail, on the one hand, and simultaneously between the intelligible truth of the universe and its manifestation in perceptible phenomena, on the other. Christian tradition preserves and perpetuates this original content of universality in referring to God's creation of living beings – in order to occupy the already created world – as a "work of adornment", *ornatus mundi*.⁹ In particular, the cosmology of the School of Chartres (12th century) distinguished between the creation of the world (*creatio*) and its subsequent adornment by God (*exornatio*), which compares God to an architect and to a goldsmith that perfects his work.¹⁰ A third aspect of the concept is thereby emphasized, closely related to the preceding two: the connection between work (*opus*) and ornament as between creation and its sense-giving accomplishment or enhancement.

In the first architectural treatise since antiquity, *De re aedificatoria* (edited in 1486), Alberti preserves this status of a universal concept by devoting four of its ten books to ornament. At first sight, Alberti operates

a “modern” distinction between ornament and construction on the one hand, and ornament and beauty, on the other. However, as Alina Payne has shown, “the move to isolate ornament in an architectural context – something that Vitruvius had certainly not done – cannot be attributed to a form of structural rationalism *avant la lettre* or to a conception of ornament as a secondary or lesser category”, but to the influence of “the treatises on rhetoric where the choice and arrangement of ornament ranked as the truest sign of an orator’s artistry and the category *ornatus* was independently and systematically structured”.¹¹

Alberti’s definition of ornament as “a form of auxiliary light and complement to [innate] beauty”¹² might echo, according to Joseph Rykwert, “the scholastic tag about beauty itself being the light of truth”.¹³ But beauty is intellectual, whereas ornament is “corporeal” and its task is that of welding the abstract model to the concrete reality of the work. For Alberti, ornament appears as the necessary link between idea and phenomenon, between the perfection of beauty and the imperfections of brute matter.¹⁴

No other treatise of the Renaissance and classical theory gives such a broad interpretation to the concept of ornament, though it remains, more or less explicitly, an essential component of beauty and *decorum*. Paradoxically, within the apparently continuous process of reducing ornament to the status of a dispensable accessory, starting with Claude Perrault and culminating in its condemnation by Adolf Loos, a parallel counter-trend, less concerted and coherent, grows in a renewed recognition of ornament as a universal concept. For instance, John Ruskin, in sustaining the Gothic cause, returns to a certain divine sense of ornament as “the expression of man’s delight in God’s work”.¹⁵ God’s creation appears as the model of every ornament, whose function is to please man.

The less moralizing *fin de siècle* aestheticism, especially in its expression in French culture, asserts the preeminence of ornament in nature as well as in art, and, by associating it with the art for art’s sake movement, founds a sort of legitimacy for the latter. “Everything, in nature is ornament”, stated the printmaker, painter, ceramist and theorist Félix Bracquemond in 1885: “from a simple agent of embellishment [...] ornament has been transformed and elevated by its principle even to becoming the complete essence of art.”¹⁶ And Mallarmé exclaims: “*La Décoration, tout est dans ce mot.*”¹⁷ In his *Théorie de l’Ornement* of 1883, Jules Burgoin makes the distinction between decoration, that can be either added or inherent to form, and ornamentation, defined as “the

power of invention and creation beyond the necessary and utilitarian form” and seen as “purely and solely art”.¹⁸

In the same period, the most prominent art historians and theorists begin to identify in ornament the origin and essence of all art (Riegl, Worringer), the “purest and most unobscured” cultural expression of a people, “the point of departure and the fundament of all aesthetic considerations of art”.¹⁹ The problems raised by ornament appear now, as Rae Beth Gordon remarked, “at the very heart of the aesthetic experience: limits and their transgression, illusion and reduction, pleasure and tension, harmony and confusion, excess, marginality, and the notion of ‘pure art’.”²⁰

Concern for the question of ornament in the cultural context of postmodernism, circumscribed by the effort of reconsidering the traditional values rejected by modernity, results in a corpus of heterogeneous theoretical issues which, as a general tendency, converge in recognizing the universality of the concept. Sociological studies identify manners, fashion and language as ornamental systems in social life, or even speak about an “ornamental pact” (opposed to the social contract), acting as the general binder of a community and integrating each person, gesture or thing in a convention which represents society itself.²¹

In the theory of architecture, ornament appears as “a natural and universal system of communication that can present a valuable segment of human thought.”²² In fact, contemporary architects began to resort to the forgotten values of local or historical tradition, of collective and individual identity, of closeness to materials and crafting details, all of them based on ornament, in order to reestablish a communicative link with their users. The well-known architect-designer, Ettore Sottsass, considers the term ornament to mean everything and nothing at the same time, since all his decisions, from choice of materials and techniques, to the positioning of windows and doors, already come “under the heading of decoration”; however, as an operative definition, ornament would be everything that is “added on” and passes beyond practical necessity, but becomes necessary “so as to broaden the perception and use of architectonic spaces”,²³ that is to increase the communicative function of architecture and man’s attachment to his environment.

A complex interdisciplinary study mainly concerned with the passage from modernity to postmodernity (*Critique de l’ornement de Vienne à la postmodernité*, directed by Michel Collomb and Gérard Raulet, 1992), which proposes ornament as a fundamental criterion for the analysis of

the artistic, architectural and literary phenomenon, offers eloquent examples of this renewed understanding of the general dimension of ornament. Thus, according to François Schanen, “most linguists incline to think that any use of the language is an act of ornamentation, meaning that the signifiers are the expression, the ‘clothing’ of what is understood as cognition, signification, sense [...] i.e. the ornament of a spiritual world made of representations of reality and of experience.” But “the linguistic means of expression [...] also *in-form* the content”,²⁴ so that ornament also pervades the territory of the *signified*, articulating the entire field of the communication process and representing “a permanent and structuring constituent of the work of art”.²⁵

The question as to whether each art, or art in general, is ultimately ornament²⁶ joins the philosophical statement of the ornamental (decorative) essence of art postulated by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, as discussed further on. 20th century researches in anthropology, psychology and aesthetics also draw conclusions that lead to the assumption of a natural human predilection for ornament. Our reductive and schematizing perception of physical reality, analyzed by the Gestalttheorie and interpreted as a psycho-physiological predisposition, might be seen as a “*mise en forme ornementale*” or “*aperception ornementale*” of the world,²⁷ which, by stripping the *Gestalt* of its accidental traits and reaching its primary meanings, produces an aesthetic pleasure similar to the one produced by ornament.

In the same vein as the previous assertions, this study intends to bring further arguments for the existence of a transcultural and transchronological “ornamental dimension” that can be detected in the way man relates to reality. From this perspective, ornament appears as the paradigm of the specifically human need of “more than enough”,²⁸ i.e., for transcending the primary necessities of his biological existence – a paradigm that acts from the scale of minor detail up to the meaningful organization of physical space and the general condition of art.

THE FUNCTIONS OF ORNAMENT

Study of the main functions of ornament (or of the major aspects of its generic manifold function) remains a necessary step in construing a comprehensive definition. Some of the best arguments in favor of the existence of a general ornamental dimension also proceed from the

analysis of the evolution or variation of these functions, with the possible discovery of transgressive constants or elements of continuity.

The four main functions that will be emphasized are closely interconnected, and remain available to any ornamental species, though in varying proportions. Together, they achieve the complex *modus operandi* which describes ornament essentially as a means of producing, articulating and enhancing meaning.

The symbolic (representational) function appears as the generating function of ornament, which actually does not originate from a ludic or aesthetic impulse (however undeniable), but from a need for efficiency. Ornament was probably created as an indispensable accessory to public and private rituals or ceremonies, and became the sense-giving detail of the things, beings and places involved in the symbolic scenography of human existence. As a material bearer of ritual, social or cultural significations, ornament endows the objects with the necessary investiture to perform efficiently the function assigned to them within an already established system of order.

The world can exist without ornament, but cannot function properly. Thus, "the pair of eyes painted on the prow of a boat in ancient Greece or in New Guinea is as essential to a safe journey as the proper shape and wood for the boat 'itself'."²⁹ Similarly, the architectural frames of windows and portals are as important for our perception as the reinforcement of the structure around the openings for the actual resistance of the wall. The "decorative" expression of structure becomes a psychological necessity, particularly in the case of special constructive problems (large openings, spans or heights), and consequently the structural form becomes ornament.

Ornament amplifies or completes the bearing object and its function, connecting the physical form to a metaphysical content. For example, the Greek order is more than a supporting structure providing stability and equilibrium: it is a "poetic" expression of stability and equilibrium, the architectural ornament *par excellence*. Similarly, at the very core of modernism, Mies van der Rohe's steel grid (e.g. at Lake Shore Drive or at Seagram Building) is a refined ornamental device concealing the reality of the fire-resisting concrete layer and displaying the metaphor of an ideal, immaterial metallic structure.

In his fundamental study of the matter,³⁰ Coomaraswamy showed that, according to its etymological origin and to its function in the traditional

cultures, “cosmetic” ornament refers to the necessary equipment which empowers their bearer to fulfill its social or ritual task, and not to a gratuitous or superficial prettification. The modern age has marked a progressive decline and impoverishment of the symbolic function related to the depreciation of the transcendent support of the *Weltanschauung*. And yet, even in our time, the judge’s robe, the king’s crown or the mayor’s chain are the requisite accessories for attributions that need to be not only exercised, but also represented.

The symbolic function of ornament is still at work, connoting values, concepts or categories: ideological contents and connected abstract notions (Justice, Liberty, Progress, and the modern State), social or individual status, corporate identity, practical or representational functions of buildings and objects, subjective interpretations of design themes. According to Theodor Adorno, as to what regards purposeful objects, “there is barely a practical form which, along with its appropriateness for use, would not therefore also be a symbol”; all the more so since psychoanalysis and mass psychology have demonstrated that “symbolic intention quickly allies itself to technical forms, like the airplane” or the car, thus providing a psychological basis for ornament which undercuts aesthetic principles and aims.³¹

The ideological and communicative value of ornament underwent substantial development during the French Revolution, when Phrygian caps, cockades and other symbols became the most frequent motifs in decorating buildings and objects. As pointed out by Stéphane Laurent, this “political appropriation of ornament” was to mark the 19th and 20th centuries, becoming propaganda, particularly during the dictatorial regimes, and creating powerful emblems that proliferated in public places, on coins, flags or printed materials – from Napoleon I’s bee and eagle to Stalin’s five-pointed star, Hitler’s swastika or the Roman fasces of the Vichy government, with the axe and the sheaf of wheat. “After 1945, the suggestive power of ornament assumes a more commercial dimension”, inaugurating the age of logotypes - mainly developed in the field of graphic imagery.³² Also an interesting modern hypostasis of the symbolic function can be detected after the First World War in social realism, in close connection, as Kenneth Frampton has remarked, with the need of representing the authority and ideology of the State, which could not be satisfied by the modernist tendency of reducing any form to an abstraction.³³

Subordinating itself to the object and making no sense without it, genuine ornament is never an end in itself. Similarly, in classical and medieval rhetoric, eloquence is considered not as art for art's sake, but as the art of effective communication.³⁴ A naked object, not "invested" by ornament, is merely utilitarian and devoid of any signification or unable to fulfill its purpose; at the same time, excessive or inappropriate decoration prejudices the efficacy of an object and becomes truly superfluous, even immoral.

Here, the symbolic function of ornament joins the ancient concept of *decorum*, which designates convenience, appropriateness, fitness-to-purpose. Its moral and social implications have generated in classical architecture "a theory of representation of social structures through built form"³⁵ and turned ornament into an instrument of social integration, as in the case of clothing and jewelry. A decoration was not admired for its intrinsic beauty, but for being assigned to a building, object or person entitled to it. As Cordemoy wrote in his treatise: "*Car il serait contre le bon sens [...] que des portiques bien entendus et bien magnifiques régnassent le long des halles ou des boucheries et que de superbes vestibules ou salons servissent à introduire le monde dans les magasins des marchands.*"³⁶

However, representing is, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, an ontological role of architecture, as well as of the other arts that it embraces, and here ornament plays an essential part. For Gadamer "ornament is not primarily something by itself that is then applied to something else, but belongs to the self-presentation of its wearer. Ornament is part of the presentation. But presentation is an ontological event; it is representation."³⁷ Ornament is not, or no longer, a symbol, as in Riegl's famous aphorism,³⁸ but preserves, as a reminiscence of its origin, a symbolic dimension in "representing" the meanings assigned to objects.

The qualifying (adjectival) function. Within its class, each object is particularized by a sum of qualities or "accidents" that can be regarded as ornamental. "Ornaments are the necessary accidents of essence, whether artificial or natural", as Coomaraswamy has pointed out,³⁹ which suggests the interconnection of the symbolic and of the qualifying function. And further: "Ornament is related to its subject as individual nature to essence [...]. Ornament is adjectival; and in the absence of any adjective,

nothing referred to by any noun could have an individual existence, however it might be in principle."⁴⁰ The initial connection established by the two major senses of the Greek *kosmos* between unity and multiplicity actually corresponds to the ornamental function of transposing the general into particular, the essential into phenomenon, the typological into morphological. This very function unites the abstract model of an object with the concrete decorated object itself, as well as the theme to its development in music or poetry.

Alberti's architectural treatise clearly presents ornament as the main agent charged with the projection of the mental model (the *lineamenta* or lineaments, also identified by Panofsky with "form" as essence), participating in the concept of Beauty, into a particular object. The ornamental work operates the necessary differences between spaces, buildings and parts of buildings, by choosing the most appropriate variants from all the possible projections of the required lineaments. For instance, the vault as a possible variant of roof is an archetypal form which, in its turn, can offer multiple variants of shape (barrel, spherical, cross vaults) or material (stone, brick);⁴¹ furthermore, on a minor level of ornamentation, the architect can choose the surface articulation – painting or patterns with quadrangles, octagons and other regular polygons.⁴²

Alberti's familiarity with the figural arts and the language arts allows him to establish a close relation between ornament and *inventio* that is later sanctioned by the treatises of the late Renaissance (Cellini, Lomazzo, Serlio). By the third decade of the 16th century, at the height of mannerism, ornament becomes the essential means of displaying inventive virtuosity and appears in the theoretical discourse of architecture and the other arts "as the domain of the painter's boundless imagination creating a fictional world of visual delight as copious as nature".⁴³ Late 19th century "mannerism" exalted ornament as the art that "contains the greatest degree of creativity", although "one commonly does not attach [to it] a large enough philosophical importance".⁴⁴

In fact, ornament can be equated with formal invention, either *ex novo*, i.e. giving shape to an innovative idea, or as an interpretation of "past solutions deposited and synthesized schematically in the <type>".⁴⁵ It is by an ornamental treatment that different objects within a category/class manifest themselves as individual expressions of a common intellectual scheme, e.g. the Italian *palazzi* of the Renaissance and Baroque period which, though sharing the same pattern (the compact

rectangular block with a square inner court), differ from one another and exhibit well-defined identities due to a great variety of decorative systems.

By virtue of both symbolic and adjectival functions, ornament engenders the representational stratum necessary to any individual or group for expressing his/its identity. Along with the eradication of ornament in its traditional acceptance, the uniformity and standardization imposed by the industrial production of objects, buildings and environments, as well as by the egalitarian ideology of the Modern Movement, resulted in alienation and kitsch. There is no better example for the failure of the modernist project than the experiment at Pessac (1926), a residential complex near Bordeaux, where Le Corbusier's standardized houses, designed as perfect *objets-types* meant to satisfy essential and typical human requirements, totally ignored the equally human need for expressing cultural and individual meanings; the housing was transformed afterwards by its inhabitants into "homes" by the ornamental addition of traditional or personalizing details, i.e. pitched roofs with wooden gables, stepped cornices, colored window shutters, hanging flower-stands, beveled corners for the openings.⁴⁶ The end of the modernist utopias was marked precisely by the concern for the particularizing significations of the environment, which explains the revival of interest in the façade as a decorated plane liable to exalt individual values, cultural memory or the *genius loci*.

The ordering function. Ornament as a signifying detail represents the reflection of the whole in the part, of the general order in the individual phenomenon (according to the preceding adjectival function), and conversely a structuring factor for the physical reality, often perceived as chaotic or amorphous. The ordering principle contained in ornament refers both to a formal and to a social order. The latter aspect is in fact the first to have been theorized in rhetoric and subsequently in visual arts as *decorum*, a concept later translated as convenience and closely related to the representational function. The formal aspect of the order established by ornament, though permanently pervading the artistic phenomenon of all times and intuitively experienced by artists and aestheticians, did not find a substantial theoretical argumentation until Ernst Gombrich's *The Sense of Order* (1979).⁴⁷ Nonetheless, as we have seen, the "sense of order" appears as immanent to the nature of ornament in the etymological sense of the word itself, in Greek and also in Latin, connoting both aspects

of order.⁴⁸ This complex understanding of ornament as a principle of order can be detected up until the age of the Enlightenment, when the “modern” apprehension of its subordinate and additional character prevailed.

With the concept of *decorum*, classical theory articulates the conception of a harmonious and coherent universe in which everything has a well-determined place and significance established once for all. The divine order is materialized in the order of society and art, and made manifest through ornament, which is conceived according to the paradigm of *parure*.

Developing the Greek concept of *prepon*, Cicero defined *decorum* as a distinct aspect of eloquence (*elocutio*) – the other being *ornatus* or the means of expression – which concerns the congruity between the rhetorical discourse and its destination as to place, time or type of audience (varying in condition, dignity, authority, age).⁴⁹

Vitruvius’s *decor*, which is probably much indebted to the rhetor’s *decorum* and shares its association with Beauty and its social and moral implications, is a complex aesthetic category that demands that the aspect of a building be correctly composed with appropriate details, according to authority.⁵⁰ The building will find its place in the overall order by means of a rigorous selection of ornaments, controlled by three agents of authority: convention or suitability of form to content (namely the personality of the god to whom the temple is dedicated), custom or the repeated use of certain combinations of forms (e.g. the specific elements of the architectural orders), and nature or the appropriate relation with the context (more in the sense of utility than ornament).⁵¹ For Vitruvius, *decor* refers to the strict observance of the social and cultural conventions, as well as the artistic canon – all represented by generally accepted ornamental themes.

Alberti’s theoretical system does not include the Vitruvian *decor* as such, but nonetheless focuses upon the necessity of coherence between ornament and the external (extra-architectural) factors which command the reception of a building: its destination and its relationship with the urban or suburban context. Ornament becomes the main criterion for classifying buildings since the second part of the treatise, which is entirely devoted to it, is structured by building types (i.e. functions) and by their required ornamental treatment. It also provides the necessary means for representing the hierarchical system of social-political relations and for highlighting its well-established values of dignity and civic order.

Classical theory further develops the concept of *decorum* as *bienséance* or *convenance*, mainly focusing upon the legitimacy of any assigned ornament and condemning its excess and vulgarization (though that was already in process). When Laugier recommends “*beaucoup de propreté et de commodité, point de faste*”⁵² for poor housing, he sees in the absence of ornament not an economic or hygienic requirement, as we might expect from one of the first promoters of rationalism in architectural theory, but the distinctive investiture of a status, a necessary manifestation of social hierarchy. The posterity of *decorum* permeates the whole modern period, grounding the functionalist premises of the Arts & Crafts movement and functionalism itself, although the fitness-to-purpose refers no longer to a God-given order of things, but to a secular order determined by social-political, ethic, aesthetic and practical reasons.

As to the formal aspect of the ordering function of ornament, which is also responsible for the relation between whole and parts, it operates on the level of the aesthetic dimension of reality, particularly in the artistic field, and is therefore connected with the decorative function.

In fact, ornament is the essential means of articulating an artistic composition with regard to coherence, variety, hierarchy and unity. This is obvious, especially in architecture, music and literature, where ornament, in the traditional acceptance of motif or trope is easier to identify than in the figural arts.

The ordering force of ornament is visible in differentiating and hierarchizing the elements of a composition by the choice and the disposition of the iconographical and decorative motifs, the materials and their treatments, by the degree of the detailing or the craftsmanship involved. For instance, at Campidoglio, Michelangelo reinforced the emphasis of the central building, Palazzo Senatorio – already established through the axial symmetry of the composition – by distinctive ornamental traits: the tower, the two-sided frontal stair sheltering a fountain, and, above all, the colossal order displayed on the monumental pedestal of the entire rusticated ground-floor, clearly subordinating the lateral palaces with their porticoed colossal orders rising directly from the ground.

Ornament also constitutes the material support for the syntactic rules that control the joining together of the architectural elements, e.g. the articulation between column and architrave through the capital, between wall and roof through the cornice, or between opening and wall through the frame. Coherence and unity of an architectural object or space is achieved through the use of moldings or repetitive motifs. In Islamic

architecture, compositional order and unity is obtained by repeating the same symbolic theme, the *mihrab* (a niche that marks the liturgical orientation towards Mecca) on different scales: as a monumental portal, as a window or blind arcade, or as a diminished and infinitely multiplied motif (the *muqarnas* or stalactites). A most ingenious ornamental device was used by Bernardo Rossellino at the piazza in Pienza, the first example of urban design since Antiquity, in order to structure a heterogeneous mix of medieval and early-Renaissance buildings: the white stone stripes of the pavement join the wall pilasters of the newly-built church and *palazzo*, thus projecting the square grid into a third dimension and creating a spatial network that visually connects the disparate objects. (The same idea appears later at the Medici Chapel by Michelangelo, where the three-dimensional grid emphasizes the geometrical perfection of a homogeneous space.)

Since the end of the 19th century, the ordering function continues to be exercised both by the traditional and by the new hypostases of ornament. Of particular relevance are the new structures and their exaltation as ornamental systems (from Auguste Perret's classicizing concrete grid to the latest aerial cobwebs of high-tech architecture) or the sophisticated detailing which establishes a dialogue between different scales and generates the full text of a spatial organization (as in the work of Carlo Scarpa). Probably the most spectacular example of ornament as principle of order, however, is to be found in Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Houses (1892 – 1915), where the same laws of organic growth operate on different levels of complexity: in the decoration of the stained glass windows, the shape of the inkpots or candlesticks, the disposition of the wall panels or in the articulation of volumes and spaces.

In each art, the structuring rules of syntax and composition form an abstract framework which organizes the elements of a work of art in the same way a pattern organizes ornamental motifs. By submitting to the ordering matrix, the elements of the composition, whether simple or complex, acquire an ornamental status, which they transmit to the whole. The more regular and striking the scheme, the more "decorative" becomes the work, even in the figural arts, as shown in the chapter on ornament as expression.

The decorative function has most recently been ascribed to ornament by virtue of its ludic and hedonistic component, and also of its capacity to turn a common object (person, thing, context, action) into an aesthetic

object. As a material component of the environment, ornament appeals to the senses and contributes highly to the creation of a sympathetic relationship between man and reality and a meaningful “frame” or setting for his existence.

Work and its product have always constituted a source of pleasure, together with the sensuality of materials and textures. Medieval admiration for the variety and multiplicity of Nature represented not only a means of adoring God in his material manifestations (particularly from the 12th century onwards and for the school of Chartres), but also a recognition of the joy of creation, which man was allowed to share with God. Besides, as Ernst Fischer has noted, since ornament is a reflection of the order of nature in our conscience, an essential role for the sentiment of pleasure it provokes revolves around the principle of order.⁵³ The revelation of this cosmic harmony that is also reflected in the ordering function appears as a major source of the aesthetic pleasure produced by ornament, irrespective of its symbolic or representational content.

The decorative function could be equated to the satisfaction of purely aesthetic needs recognized by anthropologists as even (partially) motivating the body adornment practiced in most tribal cultures (yet traditionally considered a matter of symbolic signification).⁵⁴ The aesthetic reason in theory for ornament can be regarded as a gratuity or pleasure of the material form *per se*, reminiscent of the Kantian idea of the disinterestedness (*Interesselosigkeit*) of aesthetic pleasure characterized by the suspension of any practical interest and content. Ornamental motifs such as the Greek frieze, the scrolls for frames or on wall-paper, and the musical fantasies without a theme; all are examples chosen by Kant to illustrate the concept of *free beauty* (*pulchritudo vaga*), which forms the basis of his famous thesis of the aesthetic autonomy of art. But identification of a “decorative” (i.e. non-representational) type of artistic beauty, purely consisting in the harmony of form and opposed to the “functional” beauty of a satisfactory representation of the subject, can be traced back to Aristotle, and then to St. Bonaventura and St. Thomas.⁵⁵

The complementarity of pure form and content is also the source of the famous dichotomy established by American art critic Bernard Berenson of the “decorative” and the “illustrative” aspects of a work of art.⁵⁶ Berenson defined as *decoration* the elements of a work of art that are addressed directly to senses (color, tone) or stimulate imaginative sensations (form, movement, composition), achieving the actual aesthetic function, whereas *illustration*, equated with the “subject” (iconographic

content, anecdote, narrative), would belong to the extra-aesthetic field. Although no rigid separation of the perceptible and the conceptual aspects can actually break the unity of a genuine work of art, the definition of decoration implied by this distinction is most fertile in the study of ornament and its functions. For instance, it is verifiable that “mimetic” realism in an artistic or literary work usually appears in an inverse ratio to its “decorative” character, manifested as formalism, stylization, abstraction or symbolism. Furthermore, the classical ornaments derived from naturalistic models, such as the vine-scroll or the palmette (which, as Riegl has shown, originated in the Egyptian lotus and engendered the Corinthian acanthus),⁵⁷ are completely devoid of their figural content when “set into work” and follow strictly the intrinsic laws of artistic composition. But this “ornamental principle” is not restricted to decorative arts: it constitutes a major component of the aesthetic attitude, an agent of transformation essential for interpreting and metamorphosing reality in art.

Since modernism painting has “discovered” and emphasized the experience of covering the canvas the same way as decoration “fills the space”. The painting was no longer Alberti’s “opening in the wall”, but a covered surface, liable to be multiplied infinitely, like a wall-paper motif (as in the cases of Andy Warhol, Claude Viallat or Niele Toroni) or to transform the spatiality of a room (from Whistler and Mondrian to Daniel Buren). The error of considering the covering of a surface as the only merit of a work of art led, in the writing of Pierre Francastel, to the confusion between “*le savoir du décorateur*” and “*le sentiment décoratif*”.⁵⁸ The former would consist in an embellishment by filling a previously defined surface, whereas the latter would be defined as “a sentiment of the aesthetic nature procured by displaying in space a work of art with its colors and lines”,⁵⁹ i.e. the pleasure provoked by the perception of pure material form.

The hedonistic character assumed by the decorative function was and still is regarded as defining in respect of the concept of ornament. According to one of the latest pronouncements on this topic, “ornament is the only visual art whose primary if not exclusive purpose is pleasure”.⁶⁰ Whether innate or having appeared at an early stage of cultural development, the faculty of aesthetic pleasure has been always connected to the ornamental attitude. Without insisting on the arguable limitation to the domain of art, and since obviously not every ornament is entitled to aspire to an artistic status, but to an aesthetic one (e.g.

fashion accessories, hand-made or industrial decoration of useful objects), the hedonistic dimension is indeed fundamental.

Ornament as decoration inherits the ambiguous condition of the aesthetic pleasure, situated, as admitted by St. Thomas Aquinas, half way between biological sensuousness and the intellectual character of the moral sentiments. Aesthetic pleasure is considered a privilege of man, the only being capable of appreciating sensible beauty (St. Thomas), but also a *mira, sed perversa delectatio* (wonderful, but perverse delight, according to Hugues of Fouilloi, a member of the Cistercian order) and sometimes a dangerous enemy of pious meditation.⁶¹ The dark side of ornament and its association with evil are ancient themes: the artisan and his “ornamental” productions, though sacralized in Plato’s *Timaios*, “carried with them a constellation of notions that include artifice, ruse, trap (the labyrinth of Daedalus), seduction, charm, veil, secret”.⁶² Also, in rhetoric, the Asiatic style was criticized by the Atticists for its elaborate imagery, rhythms and turns of phrase, supposed to diminish the faculties of logic, reason and taste.

In any case, until the modern age, the aesthetic experience, not subordinated to ideal or spiritual ends, was generally regarded, in a Platonic filiation, as inferior, but managed progressively to consolidate its status as a consequence of Renaissance individualism and the rise of Empiricism – with its stress on the sensorial and subjective character of beauty. The 18th century, which understood (and undertook) the pursuit of pleasure as wisdom and its production as virtue, according to Étienne de Senancour’s famous formula, founded an authentic philosophy of pleasure. In his *Dictionnaire d’Architecture* (1788-1825), Quatremère de Quincy defined ornament as raising “that which had been dictated by necessity to the realm of pleasure”,⁶³ still preserving for it a certain “aristocratic” aura. Later, in the context of a consolidated bourgeois system of values, William Morris understood that to make men pleased with the objects they necessarily use constitutes one of the great tasks of decoration. From a vehicle of meaning, ornament had become an instrument of pleasure or, more precisely, an instrument for turning useful objects into objects of pleasure.

On the other hand, the complementary attitude of blaming ornament by moral and social criteria could always be sensed in the classical rules of *decorum*, which, in the 18th century, were still reproving as senseless the classical ornaments assigned to “vulgar” purposes or the exotic motifs of gothic (*sic*) and Moresque. The end of classical theory witnessed the

ascent of new principles of *auctoritas* such as, for instance, the ideological reasons which condemned the rococo caprices as symbols of the decadent Ancien Régime and promoted the moral regeneration of society through the return to the primary simplicity of the origins or past models of virtue – namely Athenian democracy and the Roman republic. As Rousseau wrote at the end of the 18th century, “ornamentation is no less foreign to virtue, which is the strength and vigor of the soul”.⁶⁴

In the theory of architecture, *decorum* was replaced by rationality, mainly understood as truth to structure, function and materials, and having a strong ethical component. From Lodoli and Laugier to Viollet-le-Duc and then to Le Corbusier, the rationalist doctrine proposed a new type of beauty (and of aesthetic pleasure), founded by necessity and rejecting the artifice of the applied ornament.

Furthermore, the aesthetic puritanism of modernism, refusing “to betray us into delight” (to use the words of Ruskin’s prediction), pretended that all we need is the essential, attainable exclusively by subtraction: the suppression of pleasure, i.e. of ornament.

Adolf Loos’s radical assertions, although recognizing that “the urge to ornament one’s face, and everything within one’s reach is the origin of fine art”, assimilated to crime the modern creation and use of ornament, and proclaimed that “to seek beauty in form and not in ornament is the goal toward which all humanity is striving”.⁶⁵ The elitist and highly moral axiom of modernism, “less is more”,⁶⁶ exiled traditional ornament in mass culture and kitsch, despising its primitivism and *mauvais goût*. Recalling Loos, Le Corbusier wrote: *Le décor est d’ordre sensoriel et primaire ainsi que la couleur, et il convient aux peuples simples, aux paysans et aux sauvages (). Le décor est le superflu nécessaire, quantum de paysan.*⁶⁷

It is most probable that the commonly invoked superfluity of ornament, often associated with excess and immorality, is due to the erroneous reduction of ornament to the decorative function and to its progressive transformation, during the modern age, into mere “decoration” (through the erosion of the symbolic dimension).

By admitting that it was the decorative component that was targeted with the accusation of superfluity and the modernist anathema, the fact that ornament has survived and found new possibilities of manifestation demonstrates both its complex nature, which exceeds the purely decorative ends, and the universality of its decorative function, still active

since it responds to ever-lasting needs and extends itself to the very condition of art.

Hans-Georg Gadamer stated the ornamental essence of all art, understood both as “representation” and as “decoration” (as mentioned before, when speaking of the symbolic function). “Even the free-standing statue on a pedestal”, wrote Gadamer, “is not really removed from the decorative context, but serves the representative heightening of a context of life in which it finds an ornamental place [...] 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.”⁶⁸ Gadamer’s definition is relevant both for grasping the decorative function of ornament, which implies the aesthetic pleasure, and for apprehending the essential nature of ornament and its *modus operandi*.

EXPRESSION AND PERCEPTION

The four functions of ornament analyzed so far prove a double orientation: each exerts both upon the bearer (the supporting object: person, thing, act or context) and upon the observer (the perceiving subject). Ornaments are not self-referential, they make manifest or enhance the meaning of an object, qualify and individualize it within its class, organize its appearance or inscribe it in a given system, and, last but not least, they simply and solely adorn it. In fact, ornaments complete the objects and give them an expressive form, turning them from the status of object *per se* to that of object-for-the-subject. At the same time, by acting as stimuli for the observer, ornaments clarify and improve his perception, then connect him to the object and its context. Thus, the meaning of objects is translated into the language of perceptual expression and becomes accessible to the subject, who, in turn, experiences a more intense relationship with his *milieu* (as physical environment and ethereal network of significations).

Ornament as expression. Aberti is perhaps the first to have intuited the expressive nature of ornament within the mediation it operates between intelligible form and perceptible materiality. By constructing or highlighting the sensible appearance in accordance with the sense or

meaning assigned to an object, ornament becomes synonymous with expression, generically defined as “the process of ‘translating’ a certain entity by another entity with an observable character”.⁶⁹ It is an expressive image or sign with an increased communicative value, which transcends the mere practical needs of communication, though not necessarily acquiring an artistic dimension.

We might conclude, with a tempting *jeu de mots*, that content is mental and expression is orna-mental, which is generally true, but not completely. The frontier between the formal and the semantic aspects of a sign (or system of signs) is hard to trace, and in the process of perception they act inseparably. The content can be shaped by the means of expression or can have its own ornamental value, whereas expression has its own semantic charge. Concrete forms are never innocent: even in the highest degree of abstraction represented by an ornamental pattern, they are endowed with meaning, by becoming associated with our past experiences – be they personal or belonging to our cultural and biological memory.⁷⁰

Ornament can also be equated with expression because it acts as a particular type of sign, whose original content fades almost completely in favor of the meaning it has to embody or enhance in a given context. Its own content being reduced or inessential, the ornamental sign acts as pure expression, although its form cannot be totally devoid of its primary sense and is, in fact, chosen precisely for its signifying potential. The best example is the vine-scroll motif, which departs from the mere figural representation of a vegetal element and, combined in a rhythmic pattern, becomes a hieroglyph of its initial sense or simply an abstract image of an essential aspect of reality (dynamism, organicity). However, its concrete content made it appropriate at the beginnings of classical Antiquity, mainly for bacchic rituals and decoration of drinking vessels (e.g. the cantharus or the thyrsos), and in the Middle Ages, by a typical process of re-semantization, for a symbol of Christ.

Ornament as expression does not refer necessarily to the artistic field.⁷¹ However, the most relevant illustrative material for the ornamental value of expression is to be found in art. Not only in literature, architecture and the applied arts, but also in the figural arts and music, ornament is the basic constituent of what we usually call “stylistic manner”, or simply “style”. Whether figures and tropes, vocabulary and repertory of motifs, texture and chromatics, technique and organizing schemata, syntax and composition, all artistic devices can be regarded as means of expressing

or emphasizing a content in order to raise aesthetic emotions, i.e. as ornaments.

In the current acceptance, ornament has insinuated itself in easel painting - along with the new conception of the image proposed by Romanticism – as a conventional representation or as a personal vision of the artist which departs from the mimetic canon and inaugurates the way to abstraction (e.g. the scroll motif in Philip Otto Runge’s series of etchings *Die Zeiten*).⁷² However, it is not only modern art that is progressively invaded by the decorative spirit, which replaces the narrative and the representational with stylization and abstraction, but the whole tradition of pictorial illusionism is also based on ornamental “methods”.

The reality of an object can be rendered in an infinity of manners: photographic, conventional, stylized, distorted, deconstructed, in *sfumato* or *chiaroscuro*, privileging volumes or surfaces, contours, masses or colors. Such manners or devices enhance the appearance of the object, in fact an ornamental revetment of reality which best suits the artist’s intentions of communication. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant considers drawing (contour) to be essential, and whereas the appeal of colors and of sounds can be added (*hinzukommen*), they are only ornaments (*Zieraten*), *parerga*.⁷³

Iconographic content itself may also make use of ornamental devices other than the proper representation of jewelry or decorations, of symbolic or allegoric figures: drapery (remarked by Kant as ornament for statues), attitude, mimicry of faces, gesture, movement or rest, foliage, elements of landscape, shadows, reflection in water or mirror. Analyzing the landscape in the Florentine Quattrocento, Alison Cole shows that, in the workshop practice and in manuals such as Cennino Cennini’s *Il Libro dell’Arte*, iconographic elements are used “ornamentally” as pre-existing conventions, literary allusions or pure embellishments. Mountains and rocks are important “because from Byzantine times onwards they have denoted the biblical *locus* in general”, while “fruits, flowers, fishes and birds are the ornaments of nature (embraced by the term *ornamenti* or ‘usual (*consueto*) decoration’ in Quattrocento contracts), and landscapes can be embellished with these as and when the painter sees fit.”⁷⁴ In Botticelli’s *Primavera*, an “ornamental naturalism, so in tune with contemporary Florentine taste” (grass carpeted with copious flowers, a dense grove of orange trees, simultaneously blossoming and fruiting, dark radiating foliage of myrtle – the tree sacred to Venus) turns the landscape into a gracious and attractive setting “as elaborately rich and decorative

as the Nederlandish tapestries so prized by the Medici” and similar to “a painted panel used to decorate a room”.⁷⁵ Also, on the confines between content and manner, the Hellenistic *figura serpentinata* – from *Laocoon* and the *Belvedere Torso* to Michelangelo’s *Captives* for the Julius II tomb and his *ignudi* on the Sistine Ceiling – explicitly suggests the ecstatic passion of the human soul through its torsion and flame-like spiraling movement of the body;⁷⁶ it is a formal configuration most fitted to convey a spiritual meaning, a complex ornamental device which Mannerism will often turn into sophisticated decorativism.

However, the most evident interference of the ornamental in any art appears as an ordering and decorative function on the level of its *ars combinatoria*, i.e. of the system of rules and structural principles (usually designated as grammar, syntax, composition or pattern) which organize and assemble the elements of a work of art into a single whole. Gian Paolo Lomazzo, in his *Trattato dell’arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* (1584), asserts that the secret of painting consists in an abstract scheme that orientates the work, whereas the forms should follow a regular ornament arisen from symmetry and doubling.⁷⁷

The organizing scheme generally associated with ornament is “pattern”, so that any structure of order manifesting a pronounced regularity and liable to be referred to as “pattern”, from the scale of the minor decorative motif to that of the entire artistic or architectural work and even of urban design, receives an ornamental connotation and, above this, acquires an ornamental value for the whole composition. In fine arts, the symbolic or the purely decorative works usually tend towards a clear manifestation of pattern, while deliberately departing from the naturalistic approach of reality. Thus, the geometrical stylizing and the biaxial symmetry of the famous prehistoric idol known as *Venus of Lespugue* enables the exclusion of the female image from the real world and its projection in a supernatural range, while turning it into a highly decorative object. History of art proves that the mimetic representation and the rigor of pattern are not incompatible, yet their demands are mutually restrictive.

Analyzing the attraction for primitivism experienced by the modern world, Ernst Gombrich develops Goethe’s remarks about the superiority of the primitive masters, whose respect for symmetry, orderly distribution and lucid composition, accompanied by a certain rigidity and stiffness of style, enabled them “to fulfill the most exalting task of the figurative arts: the task of decorating a particular space such as an interior”.⁷⁸

In the three-dimensional purposeful arts (architecture, industrial and furniture design), syntax can remain purely utilitarian, dictated by functional or structural reasons, as in the current production of buildings and objects of use, or can turn into an “ornamental” syntax when an intention of surpassing mere utility raises the material support of the relations between elements (joint, seam, articulation) to the rank of ornamental detail. The simple problem of joining together two surfaces has multiple solutions, and it is at this point that the ornamental detail may occur. The intersection of the two planes can remain unmarked, a simple edge, as in the “vulgar” syntax of the utilitarian object or in the minimalist, but stylish modernist idiom; the edge can be rounded, as in the streamlined aesthetics of the 1930s, faceted or stepped; it can even be annulled, as in the exploded syntax of Neoplasticism, or, on the contrary, emphasized by a linear element (a tore, a rope, a colonnette, a corner pilaster). For instance, in the stone buildings of Ancient Egypt, the vertical edges and the horizontal bases of the concave cornices were underlined by a continuous astragal, a decorative reminiscence of the archaic building technique in wood, reed and clay. Similarly, the crystalline volumes of Josef Hoffmann’s Stoclet Palace in Bruxelles (1905-1911), coated in thin marble-slab veneers, are contoured with linear bronze moldings that articulate a refined graphics, accentuated by the a-tectonic continuity of the identical horizontal and vertical profiles (not specific to architecture, but current in decorative and graphic arts).

The arguments above are meant to illustrate the global dimension of the analyzed concept, by drawing attention to the ornamental value of what we call expression (in both artistic and extra-artistic fields), and reciprocally to the omnipresence of ornament as a fundamental expressive means in the process of communication.

Figure and ground. Paradoxically, in spite of its defining ancillary condition as means of expression and necessary accessory, ornament is usually perceived as an event in a neutral structure. This can be either the supporting object or a context, which ornament enhances and invests with a certain meaning, status or identity (e.g. an antique piece of furniture in a modern interior). Events experienced by man, generally connected with social life (family, group, community), are always marked/ accompanied by “ritual” accessories and settings which materialize the status of event and favor the raising up to a superior emotional range, corresponding to the significance of the occasion. Hence ornament

introduces the necessary differences and accents in man's existence, as well as in his environment. A church in a residential area can be interpreted in an ornamental key, as Alberti had proposed:⁷⁹ it is an urban event through its meaning for the community, as well as through its physical revetment, actually the architectural form, which provides an appropriate frame for experiencing the sacred, and a dignified landmark for the built environment.

Mainly referring to the decorative motif, Hans Sedlmayr noticed the essence of ornament as a model against a background, which is also available for the scale of a monument and of its site. The formal characteristics of the ornamental motif – clarity and precision of the line work, texture, color – or of the monument – a distinct shape or silhouette, size, position, materials, architectural treatment, entitles them to the status of figures contrasting with an unstructured or homogeneous background. The figure-ground relationship, established by the Gestalt psychology as fundamental for our perception of reality, appears therefore as an important instrument for the study of ornament.

Paradoxically, the relations between figure and ground are best emphasized in the equivocal case of the reversible figures, which turn into ground when fixed for a long time. The approach of ornament as a figure interacting with the ground is liable to clarify its intrinsic ambiguity of being simultaneously a superfluous accessory and an essential attribute, a means and an accomplishment, frame and centre, expression and event

The wood and ivory frame that surrounds the three centimeters in diameter of the objective lens first used by Galileo for his telescope offers an interesting example of specifically ornamental reversibility. The frame, evoking the reliquaries of the late 17th century, "calls attention to an object that could otherwise be easily missed, and gives it the character of a revered relic".⁸⁰ By limiting our field of vision to the exterior contour of the frame, we react firstly to the strong stimulus of the elaborate frame and read it as figure, but subsequently we focus on the lens, by virtue of one of the rules in perceptual psychology which predicts that surrounded shapes are seen as figures unless no other factors intervene.⁸¹ The frame is alternatively perceived as figure and ground, and moreover, if we enlarge our visual field, embracing the surrounding space (probably a neutral exhibiting panel), the entity that results from adding the ornament to the object becomes a single figure against the new background.

It follows that the contradictory perception of ornament is partly due to the figure/ground reversibility, but also to the shift of the reference

system or the scale (by enlarging or reducing the perceptual field). In the case of a framed window, for instance, in repeating the perceptive pattern above in reverse order, we begin by considering it as a figure with the wall as background, an ornament of the façade, while by “zooming” to the scale of the frame and limiting to it the visual field we may experience successively as figure either the frame (the ornament proper) or the opening (the supporting object); a further reducing of the visual field to an element of the frame (pediment, cornice, colonnette) is also possible, involving the same process on a diminished scale.

The mutual switch of figure and ground is most evident in the case of the passage between exterior and interior space: the architectural shell of a church, perceived from outside as a positive figure (monument) framed by its context, becomes itself an ornamental frame or background for the altar, and for the liturgical ritual as well. Likewise, the procedure of the reversible figures in concentric visual fields can be applied on an urban scale since, as Alberti was hinting, a street or square can be regarded as an ornament of the city, and similarly a monument, an ornament of urban space, an architectural element (portico, dome, portal, window, column, frieze) an ornament of a building, a detail (profile, joint, motif) an ornament of an element, etc.⁸² The ordering function of ornament manifests itself at several levels, generating a hierarchic structure which allows the observer to discover successive layers of signification within the unity of a complex whole.

According to Rudolf Arnheim, “successful patterns are organized in such a way that all details are understood as elaborations – *diminution* was the term used by the medieval musicians – of superordinate forms, and that these, in turn, similarly conform to their superiors.”⁸³

On each level, what had been previously perceived as figure or event at a superior scale becomes the background or context of a new figure or event lower down the scale. This shift of perspective might explain why the same object may appear both as ornament and as ornate, and why an ornament of any type can simultaneously be treated as a centre of interest, with its supporting object as background, and as a marginal element, subordinated to a higher centre represented by the same object.

The paradigm of the concentric fields of perception offers a possible solution to the ornamental *aporia* when completed by the ontological paradigm of the unity of ornate and ornament – “*unité indéfectible de l’orné et de l’ornant*” – suggested by the two meanings of the term *ornamentum* (a means of ornamenting and the result of the act of

ornamenting) which correspond to the meanings of the suffix *-mentum*.⁸⁴ An object that receives an ornament increases in its being and becomes itself an ornament for its immediate context in a dynamic process of enriching reality. The symbolic function of ornament proves here its axiological dimension since only significant objects worthy of attention and concern are ornamented in order to invest our gestures with the sense of ritual legitimacy we are unconsciously longing for.

CONCLUSION: THE ORNAMENTAL PARADIGM

Analysis of the functions of ornament and the specific binomial expression/perception has attempted to provide valid arguments for the thesis of a general ornamental dimension, characteristic for man's relation to reality and his very condition. This would explain why, despite the continuous metamorphosis (otherwise a typical ornamental device) of its acceptations, hypostases and significations, ornament is a constant presence in man's historical evolution, which it interlaces in an endless arabesque.

Any definition of ornament as a universal concept would certainly appear as vague and incomplete by dint of attempting to cover all its *genera*, functions and domains. At any rate, any such definition should include elements characterizing ornament as a sign (or system of signs) that articulates, emphasizes or makes manifest a signifying aspect of an object (phenomenon) and/or marks its specific place within a particular context, generally implying an aesthetic intention. A more concise, but percussive formula, inspired by Heidegger's definition of art as "setting-into-work of truth",⁸⁵ would be that of "ornament as setting-into-work of meaning", which suggests equivalence with the concept of expression, and implicitly the mediating role of ornament. As expression or vehicle of meaning, ornament turns the idea into a phenomenon, making the former comprehensible to the observer. In the process of perception, acting as event, it draws the attention of the observer to itself in order to redirect it towards its supporting object (or context), understood both as concrete presence and as abstract representation. In fact, in this second type of mediation, ornament relates man to the physical reality of his environment, as well as to the metaphysical reality of his significations.

However, ornament is not only a binder, a means or an instrument. It can also be regarded as an accomplishment. More than simply

embellishing, it completes and perfects the object, revealing its true finality and enabling it to participate efficiently in the harmony of the whole. Ornament always brings a surplus, “more than enough”, a vocation of exceeding the practical needs.

Commenting upon this condition of *parergon*, which Kant attributed to ornaments such as the colonnades around palaces or the drapery of statues,⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida wrote: “*Ce qui les constitue en parerga, ce n’est pas simplement leur extériorité de surplus, c’est le lien structurel interne qui les rive au manque à l’intérieur de l’ergon. Et ce manque serait constitutif de l’unité même de l’ergon, sans ce manque, l’ergon n’aurait pas besoin de parergon. Le manque de l’ergon est le manque de parergon, du vêtement ou de la colonne qui, pourtant, lui restent extérieurs.*”⁸⁷ Derrida finds an ontological, or rather teleological legitimacy for ornament, which, by supplying a structural lack within the object, would become essential for restoring and achieving the unity of the existent. The need for ornament is thus sanctioned as fundamental since it corresponds to an intrinsic and not a superficial requirement.

The paradox of the essential inessential results from our logical incapacity of accepting simultaneously as essential both the *ergon* and the *parergon*, and all the more so since the latter refers to the sensible appearance. Under the impact of the platonic tradition reinforced by the Christian spirituality, philosophy has accustomed us to favor the essence and the metaphysical in the deficit of the appearance and of the physical, identified with falsehood, deceit and vanity. Belonging to the phenomenal aspect of things and shaping their appearance, ornament does not necessarily embody or enhance their proper essence; most frequently, ornament expresses the abstract content of the status or place assigned to an object (or to an aspect of an object) in a particular context, hence changing its reality and meaning.

Therefore, ornament is indeed essential to the construction of the sensible appearance and of its supersensible framework of significations, but remains an artifice subordinated to the object and peripheral to its essence, i.e. an inessential accessory.

The solving (and dissolving) of this contradiction inherent to the nature of ornament, previously considered in terms of perception (as figure/ground and ornate/ornament reversals), was also examined by Gianni Vattimo *via* Heidegger in terms of “weak ontology” (or centre/periphery reversal). In following Heidegger, Vattimo shows that ornamental art, traditionally regarded as marginal,⁸⁸ is an intrinsic part of the work of art, which is

itself an example of “weak ontology” and has a decorative nature. For Heidegger, as Vattimo remarks, ornament “becomes the central element of aesthetics and, in the last analysis, of ontological meditation itself”, actually a paradigm of “weak ontology”. Being is no longer defined by its “strong traits” (reason mainly), it “is not the centre which is opposed to the periphery, nor is it the essence which is opposed to appearance, nor is it what endures as opposed to the accidental and the mutable”, but it becomes “an unnoticed and marginal background event”.⁸⁹

Postmodern thought promotes paradox and legitimates it since in response to the radicalism of modernity it has learnt to consider the world not in terms of opposition, but in terms of difference,⁹⁰ not in black and white, but in full color. In this context, the return to ornament is emblematic for the rehabilitation of “weak” values such as *bien-être* and *joie de vivre*, pluralism and ambiguity, ludic and hedonistic, as well as for the postmodernist intention of reconciling man with his environment and with himself.

We might add that ornament, as man’s first mark upon the world, is a manifestation of his detachment from his animal nature, achieved not only by means of his “strong traits” (rationality, creativity, symbol, sociability), but also by a superfluous or “ornamental” impulse to heighten the content of life and to frame it congenially (and, for that matter, jovially), which could be designated as the ornamental dimension. Moreover, from the perspective of man’s biological existence, the “strong traits” also appear as inessential, i.e. as “weak” and ultimately “decorative”. Ornament is seemingly the paradigm of the paradoxical human condition; strong in his weakness, sublime in his vanity, is man not the accomplishment of Creation and its minor detail that leads to God? Or in St. Augustine’s words: “...the road is provided by one (Christ) who is himself both God and man. As God, He is the goal; as man, he is the way.”⁹¹

NOTES

- 1 Guillaume de Conches, *Glosae super Platonem*, Texte critique avec introduction, notes et tables, pur Édouard Jeuneau, Paris: J. Vivrin, 1965, p. 144: "The *ornatus mundi* (beautiful order of the world) is all that appears in each of its elements, such as the stars in the sky, the birds in the air, the fish in the water, the men on the earth."
- 2 Claude Lévy-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955.
- 3 Cf. St. Augustine, *On free will*, III, 27, quoted in G.S., "Saint Augustin: Le pêché orne la chair", in *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 333, 2001.
- 4 Quoted by Daniel Roche, "Piranèse et la splendeur obscurcie", in Didier Laroque, *Le Discours de Piranèse*, Les Éditions de la Passion, Paris, 1998, p. XVI.
- 5 Cf. Emmanuel Kant, "Critique de la faculté de juger", I, §14, in *Œuvres philosophiques*, trans. J.-R. Ladmiral, Pléiade, Paris, 1985, vol. II, p. 986.
- 6 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Aufenthalte*, 1983, quoted in Didier Laroque, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 7 Cf. Elisabeth Lavezzi, "L'ornement en architecture et en peinture dans les dictionnaires des Beaux-arts de Félibien, Marsy et Pernéty, et dans le dictionnaire d'architecture d'Aviler", in *L'Ornement* (collective volume, in print).
- 8 Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Ornament", *Selected Papers I. Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1977, p. 241 ff.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 10 Cf. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, trans., Ed. Meridiane, București, 1978, vol. II, p. 294.
- 11 Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 75.
- 12 Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans., MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1989, Book VI, 2, p. 156.
- 13 Joseph Rykwert, "Inheritance or Tradition?", in *Architectural Design*, Vol. 49, no. 5-6, 1979, p. 3
- 14 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 2.
- 15 John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. I, ch. 20, quoted in Hanno Walter Krufft, *A History of Architectural Theory*, trans., Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1994, p. 332.
- 16 Quoted in Rae Beth Gordon, *Ornament, Phantasy and Desire in Nineteenth-century French Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992, p. 1.
- 17 Stéphane Mallarmé, "La Dernière Mode", 1874, quoted in Stéphane Laurent, 'Petite chronique de l'ornement', in *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 333, 2001, p. 54.

- 18 Jules Burgoin, quoted in Rae Beth Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
 19 Wilhelm Worringer, quoted *ibid.*, p. 27.
 20 *Ibid.*
 21 Cf. Louis Maitrier, *La localisation (le privé/le commun/le public). Recherches sur les fonctions sociales de l'ornement, comparaisons entre le XVIIIème et le XXème siècle en France.*, PhD thesis, 1998, unpublished, pp. 341-343.
 22 Kent Bloomer, *The Nature of Ornament – Rhythm and Metamorphosis in Architecture*, W. W. Norton, New York, 2000, p. 12.
 23 Cf. Ettore Sottsass, "Nécessité de la décoration", in *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 333, 2001, p. 87.
 24 Quotations from François Schanen, "D'une ombre à l'autre: ornement et référence dans l'oeuvre poétique de Georg Trakl", in Michel Collomb et Gérard Raulet (dir.), *Critique de l'ornement de Vienne à la postmodernité*, Méridiens Klincksieck, Paris, 1992, p. 74.
 25 Michel Collomb and Gérard Raulet, "Présentation", *ibid.*, p. 17.
 26 Cf. Marianne Charrière-Jacquin: "Ne peut-on pas dire à la limite que toute littérature est ornement? Et le [...] problème se pose dans les mêmes termes en musique..." , *ibid.*, p. 48; also Burghart Schmidt: "...l'architecture est par elle-même déjà ornement.", *ibid.*, p. 250.
 27 Cf. Jacques Le Rider, "L'écriture à l'école de la peinture. Hofmannstahl et les couleurs", *ibid.*, p. 96.
 28 The expression was coined by the architectural critic and theorist Talbot Hamlin in the essay "The International Style Lacks the Essence of Great Architecture", in *The American Architect*, January 1933: "The root of any great architecture [...] is spontaneity, delight in form. It is a superfluity – almost always a sense of "more than enough". It is a play of creative minds that makes living and building a delight as well as a task."
 29 Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1977, p. 250.
 30 Cf. n. 8 above.
 31 Theodor W. Adorno, "Functionalism Today", in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p. 10.
 32 Stéphane Laurent, *op. cit.* (cf. n. 17 above), pp. 54-55.
 33 Cf. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture, a Critical History*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1985, p. 247.
 34 Cf. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
 35 Alina Payne (taking over a remark from John Onians), *op.cit.*, p. 56.
 36 Jean-Louis de Cordemoy, "Nouveau Traité de toute l'architecture" (1706), quoted in Jack Soullou, *Le Décoratif*, Éditions Klincksieck, 1990, p. 20. For the conventions of dress and etiquette mainly in the Renaissance, cf. Jane Bridgeman, "Condecenti e netti...: beauty, dress and gender in Italian Renaissance art", in Frances Ames-Lewis and Mary Rogers (eds), *Concepts of Beauty in Renaissance Art*, Ashgate, Aldershot, England, 1998.

- 37 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative", in Neil Leach (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 136.
- 38 "...every symbol bears in itself the predestination of becoming an ornament." Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen*, 1893, quoted in Ruxandra Demetrescu, foreword, in Alois Riegl, *Istoria artei ca istorie a stilurilor*, trans., Editura Meridiane, București, 1998, p. 15.
- 39 Ananda Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 244, n. 4.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 41 Leon Batista Alberti, *op. cit.*, Book III, 14, p. 84-85.
- 42 *Ibid.*, Book VII, 11, p. 222.
- 43 Alina Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
- 44 Théophile Gautier, quoted in Rae Beth Gordon, *op.cit.*, p. 5.
- 45 Giulio Carlo Argan, "On the Typology of Architecture", in *Architectural Design* no.33 (December 1963), p. 565.
- 46 On Pessac cf. Philippe Boudon, *Pessac de Le Corbusier*, Ed. Dunod, Paris, 1977.
- 47 Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1979.
- 48 Cf. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-250, and also Claude Moussy, "Le vocabulaire de l'ornement en latin classique", quoted in Didier Laroque, *op.cit.*, p. 118, namely: "*On explique habituellement ornare comme un ancien ordinare, qui n'est plus attesté.*"
- 49 Cicero, "De Oratore", quoted in Jack Soullou, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
- 50 "*Decor autem est emendatus operis aspectus probatis rebus compositi cum auctoritate.*" Vitruvius, *De Architectura. On Architecture*, William Heinemann, London and Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983 (I,2,5).
- 51 Cf. Alina Payne, *op.cit.*, pp. 35-41.
- 52 Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture*, Pierre Mardaga éditeur, Bruxelles, 1979, p. 169.
- 53 Cf. Ernst Fischer, *Kunst und Menschlichkeit*, Viena, 1949, quoted in Georg Lukács, *Estetica*, trans., Editura Meridiane, București, 1972, vol. II, p. 146.
- 54 Cf. Carol R. Ember, Melvin Ember, *Anthropology*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 1992, pp. 440-442.
- 55 Cf. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *op.cit.*, vol. II, p. 258.
- 56 Bernard Berenson, *Mittelitalienische Malerei*, München, 1925, trans. *Pictorii italiani ai Renasterii*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1971, pp. 128-132.
- 57 Cf. Alois Riegl, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
- 58 Quoted in Jack Soullou, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2001, p. 14.
- 61 Cf. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 227, 249-250, 358, 371.
- 62 Rae Beth Gordon, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

- 63 Quoted in Philippa Lewis and Gillian Darley, *Dictionary of Ornament*,
Macmillan, London, 1986.
- 64 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les arts et les sciences*, Gallimard,
Paris, 1986, p. 4.
- 65 Quoted in Rae Beth Gordon, *op. cit.* p. 25.
- 66 Modernist slogan proposed by Mies van der Rohe, possibly inspired from
Robert Browning's poem *Andrea del Sarto*.
- 67 Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, Éd. Vincent et Fréal, Paris, 1958, p. 112.
- 68 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
- 69 Cf. Roland Doron and Françoise Parot (dir.), *Dictionar de psihologie*,
Humanitas, București, 1991.
- 70 The significations attributed to forms in the process of perception can be
distributed on three levels corresponding to the analogous levels of
experience: general or natural significations (suggestions of weight, movement
and sensorial qualities of materials), related to our bodily experiences and
common to all men as biological individuals; conventional or symbolic
significations, shared by the members of a cultural group and sanctioned by
use; and individual significations, due to the personal experience of each
man. Cf. also Thomas Thiis-Evensen, *Archetypes in Architecture*, Oxford
University Press, Oxford and Norwegian University Press, Oslo, 1987.
- 71 The problem of the relative situation of ornament, aesthetic expression and
art constitutes the topic for a separate discussion. Without attempting to
define rigorously art or aesthetic attitude, my arguments start from the premise
that the domain of the "aesthetic" is much broader than art and includes it,
but is distinct from the domain of ornament, though having a large zone in
common. Ornament is not a mere aesthetic category, it tends rather towards
a wider anthropological dimension, comprising social, cultural, symbolic,
normative, cognitive and pragmatic aspects.
- 72 Cf. *Ornament and abstraction*, catalogue and explicative notes of the
exhibition, Beyeler Foundation, Riehen, June 10 – October 7, 2001.
- 73 Cf. Emmanuel Kant, "Critique de la faculté de juger", I, §14, *op. cit.*, p. 983,
986.
- 74 Alison Cole, "The perception of beauty in landscape in the quattrocento", in
Francis Ames-Lewis and Mary Rogers (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 76 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 150-155. The *figura serpentinata* is defined as "a calculated
construction of the movement of the body to obtain the maximum of torsion
in the minimum of space", p. 150.
- 77 Cf. Alina Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- 78 Ernst Gombrich, "The Priority of Pattern", in *The Listener*, 1 March 1959,
p. 311.
- 79 "...a well-maintained or a well-adorned temple is obviously the greatest and
most important ornament of a city; for the gods surely take up their abode in
the temple." Leon Battista Alberti, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

- 80 James Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- 81 Cf. Rudolf Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 82 Alberti had the intuition of the zooming perspectives in the analysis of ornament. On the scale of the territory, it consists in works of landscaping or transforming the site: sculpting rocks (e.g. the Mount Athos as an effigy of Alexander), creating artificial islands or canals, planting trees, erecting monuments or exploiting the natural attractions (promontories, grottoes, springs) (VI, 4, pp. 160-161). On the urban scale, "The principal ornament to any city lies in the siting, layout, composition, and arrangement of its roads, squares and individual works"(VII, 1, p. 191) and in an appropriate distribution of the zones and facilities; also every public building (temple, triumphal arch, theatre, circus, port) is actually an ornament for the city, as well as the porticoes, statues or obelisks. On the scale of the building and of any object, the "chief" ornament is a convenient partition (VI, 5, p. 163), which acts as a principle of composition. However, in the whole art of building the column remains undoubtedly the principal ornament, which has grace and confers dignity (VI, 13, pp. 183-4), but the openings (VI, 12 p. 180) and, for the wall and the roof, the revetment (VI, 5, p. 164) also bring great delight to the work.
- 83 Rudolf Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
- 84 Baldine Saint Girons, "Le petit cercle de la paix", in Didier Laroque, *op. cit.*, p. XVIII.
- 85 Martin Heidegger, "Art and Space", in Neil Leach (ed.), *op. cit.*
- 86 Cf. n. 5 above.
- 87 Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*, Éd. Flammarion, 1978, p. 69.
- 88 An art that "is the object of a strictly lateral interest on the part of the spectator", unlike a major art which "points openly and self-reflexively to itself". Gianni Vattimo, "Ornament/Monument", in Neil Leach (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 158.
- 89 *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.
- 90 Cf. Gérard Raulet, "Stratégies consensuelles et esthétique postmoderne", in Michel Collomb and Gérard Raulet (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 206.
- 91 St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans., London, 1972, pp. 694-695.