

The decorative arts within art historical discourse: where is the dialogue now and where is it heading?

Christina M. Anderson & Catherine L. Futter

This Introduction and the two contributions that follow grew out of a panel with the same title that Christina Anderson and Catherine Futter organised for the College Art Association (CAA) annual meeting in New York in 2013. Anderson is a research consultant to museums, collectors and dealers as well as a research fellow in the university setting; Futter is a senior curator of decorative arts. They had had many conversations about how the decorative arts were regarded by other art historians. Their meetings led to the impression that there was still a hierarchy in place within the discipline that disadvantaged the study of the decorative, as opposed to the fine, arts. They desired to continue the discussions about this with the wider scholarly community. To put it informally, the panel was created to 'take the temperature' among art historians of the state of the study of the decorative arts within art historical discourse. To the organisers' delight, there were approximately 125 people who came to listen to the papers, and discussion after the presentations was robust and drew in many members of the audience. Thus, the organisers were gratified by the interest in what was recognised as an area in which more work needed to be done within the discipline. Although the organisers take no credit for them, it has been noted with satisfaction that the dialogue has continued with, among other things, a panel titled 'Exploring hierarchies within the historiography of the fine and decorative arts' at the annual meeting of the Association of Art Historians held in London in 2014, and another panel for CAA's annual meeting in 2015 titled 'Guerrilla Approaches to the Decorative Arts and Design'. With the obvious interest in this topic, the organisers wanted to record, in these three contributions, both the content and outcome of the CAA panel.

One of the characteristics of the CAA panel was that a term already as broadly defined as 'decorative arts' was stretched to include paintings, a category of artistic production normally thought of as fine art; and ornamental plasterwork, the study of which is usually regarded as an element of architectural history. That art historians working on such topics should have been interested in contributing papers to the panel demonstrates the ambiguity of the term 'decorative art'. While this may be considered an impediment to discussions about the place of the decorative arts within art historical discourse, the breadth of subject matter reflected in the panel proved that there is a genuine willingness among art historians to look at what may have previously been considered liminal material and not only

integrate it into mainstream art history but also, perhaps, change the nature of the discipline itself. How, of course, the discipline may change, and has been changing, has not been a matter of consensus and was a major component of the discussion held at the CAA conference.

The organisers were not the first art historians to notice that the decorative arts seemed to hold a different status from that of the fine arts within the academic and museum environments. Indeed, this dialogue has been going on for at least a century, if not longer, becoming especially intense within the last few decades. Michael Martin, in his article 'Relics of Another Age: Art History, the "Decorative Arts" and the Museum', provides a clear overview of how the status of the decorative arts has changed over the centuries, particularly as a result of the Enlightenment.¹ He notes, for example, the bequests of Isabella d'Este who left carved ivories to her daughters, a carved emerald to one son and, to her son Federigo, who became the first duke of Mantua, her *grotta*, while to her ladies-in-waiting she left their choice of a painting each. Martin uses this to demonstrate the very different approach to the value of objects – and relative lack of value of paintings – during the medieval and Renaissance periods. At the time, 'art' referred to craft or skill and an object's importance was determined principally by the monetary value and properties of its materials, the prestige of the commissioner or owner and its social or devotional (or other) function. Although Martin refers to Vasari as being the first to propose a hierarchy of the arts, he cites the 1751 publication of Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, in which the fine arts were defined as painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and music, and the authority the publication carried, as having created a clear hierarchy based on what was perceived as intellectual, as opposed to manual, activities. However, while Martin does refer to later nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempts at reform, his argument really only provides a basis for re-evaluating pre-Enlightenment 'decorative arts'. Are examples of the decorative arts created after this condemned to a lesser status?

One answer to this question was put forward, in the panel, by Megan Aldrich, who gave an example of what she terms 'moveable culture', a critique of what she perceives as the preoccupation of material culture with context as opposed to the object itself.² As an alternative, Aldrich advocates a deeper intellectual understanding of decorative art objects as vehicles for the expression of high culture. In this sense, both the creator and viewer/owner are of importance. Aldrich draws a distinction between those art objects created within the context of courts, which can symbolise 'deep-rooted cultural stability and continuity, as well as power' and non-court art objects. The latter, once removed from their original

¹ Matthew Martin, 'Relics of Another Age: Art History, the "Decorative Arts" and the Museum', *ABV49: The Annual Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria*, 2010, 7-21; reprinted in *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 3, December 2010.

² Megan Aldrich, 'Not Material Culture but Moveable Culture: the decorative arts within art historical discourse', part of the panel, 'The Decorative Arts with Art Historical Discourse: Where is the Dialogue Now and Where is it Heading?', College Art Association conference, 13-16 February 2013.

environment or purpose, 'acquire an "afterlife" which imbues them with additional meanings generated by the changing settings in which they are deployed.' In this way, the perception of what an object is and its origins can prove totally false, but nonetheless give rise to distinctive cultural meanings; as Aldrich stated, the expression of constructed 'cultural memory' that is 'factually incorrect but conceptually genuine'. She gives as an example a set of eighteenth-century ebony chairs that are actually hybrid models made in Southeast Asia for the European market but had, through their being collected by Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century for his neo-gothic villa Strawberry Hill, become thought of as medieval. This misinformation remained attached to the chairs as they passed from one location to the other, including through the library designed by John Soane at Stowe House in the early nineteenth century. The 'truth' about the chairs had nothing to do with the surroundings in which they were placed and the role they played in their successive new environments.

One of the aims of the CAA panel was not only to look at the status of the decorative arts, but also to open up the dialogue about what 'decorative' means. Two of the contributions did this. The first, 'The Decorative and Warhol's Flower Factory, 1964-5' by Liam Considine considered a series of paintings by Andy Warhol in light of the term 'decorative'. Considine defines decorative painting, as presented by Warhol, as 'a mediation between art and design, nature and artifice, two and three-dimensional modes of perception'. Warhol's *Flowers* became the backdrop to performances, parties and fashion shoots and was compared by various writers to decoration and wallpaper. Considine described how Warhol, with this series, had set out to undermine the authority of the Abstract Expressionists. He cited how Warhol attempted to bring into plain view just what Abstract Expressionists were trying to subordinate and how, in fact, contemporary criticism had cited similarities between Abstract Expressionist paintings and wallpaper. Indeed, Pop Art began to influence the field of commercial design, which had served as a source of its inspiration, and, in this way, the flower became an important motif found not only in visual contexts but also in the 'Flower Power' protest movement of the 1960s and in Jean Genet's prison novel of 1963 *Our Lady of the Flowers*, which had served as inspiration for Warhol's *Flowers*. As Considine concluded, 'Warhol's *Flowers* suggest that decoration need not diminish but can rather extend art into an expanded field of cultural production – one newly receptive to marginalized identities and countercultural values.'³

This positive re-evaluation of the term 'decorative' also played a central role in the contribution of Conor Lucey in his paper 'Plastering over the decorative arts'.⁴ Lucey addressed the difficulties those studying ornamental plasterwork have encountered as the topic languishes 'in the margins of both architectural history proper and the burgeoning revisionist literature devoted to the eighteenth-century

³ Liam Considine, 'The Decorative and Warhol's Flower Factory, 1964-5', part of the panel, 'The Decorative Arts with Art Historical Discourse', 2013.

⁴ Conor Lucey, 'Plastering over the decorative arts', part of the panel, 'The Decorative Arts with Art Historical Discourse', 2013.

domestic interior.' As Lucey also stated, 'despite the proliferation of ornament in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture, there has been relatively little discussion of architects as designers of ornament; of the function of ornament as a concomitant part of architectural design; or of the professional interaction between architects and craftsmen.' Identifying some of the change within art history signalled by a turning away from traditional preoccupations with connoisseurship and toward, instead, an interest in a sociological approach to meaning, Lucey discussed the use of decoration, and symbolic or iconographic compositions, to indicate cultural capital in the stuccowork of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This sociological interest recognises that there are two parties to meaning, and that the significance of a specific ornamental configuration only becomes apparent when it is viewed by others. As with other forms of the decorative arts, ornamental plasterwork could be enjoyed, therefore, both intellectually and sensually. This also relates, then, to the recent interest in the *process* of making art, one of the ways of integrating the decorative arts with mainstream art history being explored by scholars such as Paul Greenhalgh, Helen Rees, Glenn Adamson and Richard Sennett.⁵

David Brett, in the 'Introduction' to his *Rethinking Decoration. Pleasure & ideology in the visual arts*, makes a statement similar to ones found in many works that attempt to integrate the decorative with mainstream art history. He writes that his book 'aims to restore to the ornamental, the decorative and the pleasurable some theoretical dignity.' He goes on to say that 'during the nineteenth century...the "discourse of decoration" was a major feature of intellectual life all across Europe and a great deal of North America. It was especially so in Great Britain where it did similar cultural work as the debates around painting did in France: it was a forum of modernity.'⁶ Brett, like other art historians offering solutions to the divisions within art history between the 'fine' and 'decorative' arts, utilises an interdisciplinary approach. He calls his theoretical methodology 'horizontal' in that it takes into consideration aspects of culture not normally thought to be part of the study of material culture, design history or cultural history. For Brett, this approach, which includes sociology, the perceptual sciences and developmental and cultural psychology, among others, does not sublimate the individual, either as the creator or the receiver, to society, but rather concerns itself with 'the social and ideological function of decoration' and, more specifically, 'with the way in which the social and the individual merge in pleasure.'⁷

Thus, while Martin has provided a rationale for integrating the fine and decorative arts in the pre-Enlightenment period; and Brett, Considine and Lucey have shown decoration to be a unifying factor across all 'art', what about the

⁵ Paul Greenhalgh, *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Now*, London: A & C Black Publishers Ltd, 2002; Helen Rees Leahy, 'Thinking and Making in Industrial Design' in *The Culture of Craft*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997; Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, Oxford: Berg Publishers/V&A Publications, 2007; Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

⁶ David Brett, *Rethinking Decoration. Pleasure & ideology in the visual arts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 1.

⁷ Brett, *Rethinking Decoration*, 2-3.

decorative or art objects of more recent centuries? How do we join the fine and decorative arts of the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Deborah Krohn, whose essay, revised from her CAA panel paper, is included here, describes how the increasingly prevalent material culture approach can offer a way forward. Michael Yonan has already made a very broad appeal to fuse art history and material culture.⁸ However, he is not beginning from the standpoint of trying to give equal footing to the decorative arts with the fine arts. Rather, he is seeking to show how understanding paintings should include consideration of their materiality, something he sees as currently lacking, or at least underplayed, in the art history discipline. In this way, paintings and the decorative arts become 'equal' (although he does not say this explicitly) through the material culture approach. Yonan also discusses the way in which art historians currently tend to use the term material culture to refer to the decorative arts, thus keeping the fine arts separate, and aligned to the Marxist interpretation of materialism. In addition, he offers a critique of visual culture, a term with which art history is becoming inextricably linked. As articulately advocated by Yonan, for material culture and many other approaches 'meaning' becomes the Holy Grail, and the artist or creator, along with their technical level of expertise, experience and expression, fades into the background. Deborah Krohn, in using an exhibition she curated as an example, makes a slightly different use of the term material culture. Instead, she sees the context of objects as influencing and even determining the stories that can be told about them and of which they become part. As in Megan Aldrich's example of moveable culture, these contexts can change over the lifetime of the object, providing the opportunity to tell different stories. Ultimately, for Krohn, this means that one can move beyond terminology when referring to art objects.

Terms such as design and craft, used to help refine the differences among objects, offer further opportunities for exploring new perspectives from which to study the decorative arts. An approach that looks at the decorative arts from the standpoint of their makers or creators was missing among the papers from the panel. Nevertheless, there are a number of published sources that deal with this viewpoint. As Harold G. Nelson and Erik Stolterman, for example, state in the 'Prelude' to *The Design Way. Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World*, 'we continuously create things that help reshape the reality and essence of the world as we know it'. In justifying their 'new philosophical look at this seminal human tradition' they further state that 'design is a natural and ancient human ability – the first tradition among many traditions of human inquiry and action'.⁹ There is also David Raizman's *History of Modern Design* that, as an introductory book to the field, tries to encompass many of the issues concerned with craft and design.¹⁰ In addition, there is the approach exemplified in the exhibition *Taking Shape: Finding sculpture in the decorative arts* held in 2008-2009 at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds

⁸ Michael Yonan, 'Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies', *West* 86th, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall-Winter 2011, 232-248.

⁹ Harold G. Nelson and Erik Stolterman, *The Design Way. Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012, 1.

¹⁰ David Raizman, *History of Modern Design*, 2nd ed., Upper Saddle River; Pearson Prentice Hall, 2010.

and the Getty Center in Los Angeles that finds areas of similarity, overlap and fusion between the fine and decorative arts. Martina Droth, however, writing in the exhibition catalogue, still finds prints and drawings to be the only true points of intersection of sculpture and furniture; in these, the divisions of materials, function and expression are erased.¹¹

Artists, of course, have also contributed to and continue to contribute to this dialogue about the relationship between the fine and decorative arts, craft and design. Roger Brown (1941-1997), for example, created the series 'Virtual Still Life' in 1995, consisting of twenty-seven works that combined paintings with ceramic objects. The two-dimensional element appears to have been inspired by – even extracted from – the three-dimensional aspect of the works. In this way, the notion of a hierarchy placing painting above the 'decorative arts' becomes blurred and, arguably, irrelevant.¹² In addition, artists such as Peter Voulkos and Dale Chihuly strove to elevate craft to the level of art in the 1960s and 1970s; while more recently, Laura de Santillana, who 'sculpts' in glass,¹³ and Tom Price, who incorporates unexpected materials in his work, have blurred the lines between decorative and fine art.¹⁴

Discussion about the role of terminology is also far-ranging and on-going. Jerry Palmer's introduction to *Design and Aesthetics: A Reader*, for instance, asserts that it is difficult to 'reconcile the criteria for design-based artefacts with traditional aesthetic criteria applied to the arts', and posits that the distinctions might not be worth even attempting. Palmer also examines the *relativist* and *absolutist* positions for art and design and the placement of meaning and context.¹⁵ Matthew Rampley, through including Juliette MacDonald's essay 'Concepts of Craft' in the volume *Exploring Visual Culture. Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, has attempted to bring together what have often been seen as two different and increasingly divergent terms, craft and decorative arts.¹⁶ In her contribution, MacDonald describes the changing understanding of craft, from a practice that implied intelligence, expertise

¹¹ Martina Droth, 'Truth and Artifice: Transforming the Real with Sculptural Form,' *Taking Shape: Finding Sculpture in the Decorative Arts*, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2009, 16.

¹² The series was first shown at the Phyllis Kind Gallery in 1996. It has since been the subject of exhibitions at the Hyde Park Art Center in 2010 and Russell Bowman Art Advisory in 2014.

¹³ Her brother, Alessandro, 'paints' in glass. *SCAPES: Laura de Santillana and Alessandro Diaz de Santillana*, Museum of Glass, April 2012 - January, 2013.

¹⁴ *Abstract Expressionist Ceramics*. Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 28 October - 27 November 1966; Diane Charbonneau, ed., *Chihuly*. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 2013; Attila Dorigato. *Laura de Santillana, works*. Milan: Musei Civici Veneziani, 2001; *Presence & Absence:*

New Works by Tom Price. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; 20 June 2014–4 January 2015.

¹⁵ Jerry Palmer and Mo Dodson, eds, *Design and Aesthetics: A Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 3-5.

¹⁶ Juliette MacDonald, 'Concepts of Craft' in Matthew Rampley, ed., *Exploring Visual Culture. Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 34-49. The author has another essay in the collection titled 'Design and Modern Culture', 50-65, which further stretches the usual understanding of 'visual culture'.

and deliberation, to a category of objects. Matthew Kangas has furthered the discussion in works such as *Craft and Concept: The Rematerialization of the Art Object*, in which he states that 'craft and art come together only in the presence of concept and meaning.'¹⁷ In editing the volume *Objects, Audiences, and Literatures. Alternative Narratives in the History of Design*, moreover, David Raizman and Carma R. Gorman have highlighted the impact that the way scholars write, and those in the past have written, about objects shapes one's understanding of them. In one of the essays, 'Reading Japanned Furniture' by Ethan W. Lasser, for example, the author sets as his task 'to reveal period-specific meanings of furniture by considering several different genres of literature'.¹⁸ This compendium of papers, presented at a CAA conference in 2005, presents a compelling argument that contemporary texts and visual culture lead to a greater understanding of the object; reinforcing the interconnectedness of objects and their context.¹⁹ Matthew Martin, in reviewing Robert Bagley's *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes. Style and Classification in the History of Art* tells us that Bagley's book raises fundamental questions about art, such as whether 'art' refers to an object itself, or rather to the process (here he says the *cultural process*) of its production.²⁰ This leads us to the second contribution from the panel published here.

Erin Campbell, in her revised CAA paper, proposes an ecological consideration of art that promotes phenomenological approaches to the object as well as theories of vital materialism. Using European domestic interiors between 1400 and 1700 as her 'laboratory', her thesis bears some resemblance to that of Matthew Martin who holds that pre-Enlightenment 'art' is inclusive of both decorative and fine art. He also, however, emphasises prestige and the status of the patron, whereas Campbell instead begins her search for a new methodology with domestic pre-Enlightenment interiors, and uses anthropological and related approaches to expand this to the wider issue of the relationship between the fine and decorative arts. She proposes that new insights can be gained through examining the relationships and interactions between all elements in the domestic interior (people, objects and space).

In addition to the contributions, it is worthwhile recording some of the questions posed during the presentation of the CAA panel: for example, whether there were any impediments to the teaching of the decorative arts in the university setting. Notably, despite the observation by Deborah Krohn, one of the contributors

¹⁷ Matthew Kangas, *Craft and Concept: The Rematerialization of the Art Object*, New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2006.

¹⁸ Ethan W. Lasser, 'Reading Japanned Furniture' in David Raizman and Carma R. Gorman, eds, *Objects, Audiences, and Literatures. Alternative Narratives in the History of Design*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, 1.

¹⁹ The introduction to *Objects, Audiences, and Literatures* states that the starting point for their panel was the historiography of design history and therefore is a useful indicator of the development of the discourse.

²⁰ Matthew Martin, 'Style and Classification in the History of Art. Review of: Robert Bagley, *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes. Style and Classification in the History of Art*. Cornell East Asia Series 141, Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Program, 2008, *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 5, December 2011.

here, that there are several graduate programmes that offer advanced degrees in the study of the decorative arts, there is still a lack of provision of teaching in this area at the undergraduate level. It was pointed out that the periodization and/or description of the decorative arts uses terms like 'Georgian' whereas the fine arts use words like 'Baroque' and 'Neo-Classical' to depict both style and period. Some panellists felt that as long as the terms used to place the decorative arts within their historical context differ from those used for the fine arts, there will continue to be a difference in the way they are taught. Another question addressed the place of the decorative arts within the academy. There seemed to be general agreement that so long as graduate and undergraduate programs insist on marginalizing if not ignoring the study of the decorative arts, their scholarly position will stay on the fringes of art historical study. Few courses, let alone programmes, both in American and British universities, focus much attention on the decorative arts. The discomfort of art historians with material culture and the decorative arts relegates the subject to area studies, not art historical courses. There does, however, appear to be some progress outside of the academy. Recently, museums, especially those without deep holdings of either fine or decorative arts, such as the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Nelson-Akins Museum of Art, in the United States, have increasingly incorporated paintings, sculpture, decorative arts and other media into their permanent and temporary installations. This focus on interrelationships and interdependencies has encouraged a more multifaceted and multipronged investigation of the object for both the scholar and the general public.²¹

The aim of the panel was to assess the current state of art historical discourse in relation to the decorative arts. It was found that many of those who work with the decorative arts feel that there continues to be a disparity in the way the fine and decorative arts are taught and are displayed in museums, among other things. Approaches and methodologies continue to be proposed to address this 'gap'. The two contributions included here present one that has been gaining in use, material culture, and a new ecological approach. Although the purpose of the panel was simply to advance the dialogue about this issue, if any conclusion can be drawn, it is that, at this time, no single approach will encourage those who work on the decorative arts to feel that there is parity between the fine and decorative arts within art historical discourse. The most important outcome of the panel was the opportunity it provided to continue this vital and on-going discussion and to bring a variety of perspectives to it.

Christina M. Anderson is Decorative Arts Research Consultant, Anderson Art Research; Research Fellow in the Study of Collecting, Ashmolean Museum, and British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, History Faculty, University of Oxford; Author

²¹ Permanent collection installations include the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and exhibitions such as *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (18 November 2008–16 February 2009) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and *Dutch New York Between East and West: The World of Margrieta van Varick* (18 September 2009 – 24 January 2010) at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery.

Christina M. Anderson & Catherine L. Futter The decorative arts within art
historical discourse ...

of articles on nineteenth-century London furniture makers; General Editor of the
six-volume series *A Cultural History of Furniture*.

cm.anderson@usa.net

Catherine L. Futter is Senior Curator, Architecture, Design and Decorative Arts,
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, co-curator and author of 'Inventing the Modern
World: Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851-1939' as well as studies on cross-
cultural influences in the decorative arts.

cfutter@nelson-atkins.org