

Ornament and European Modernism: from art practice to art history

Review of:

Ornament and European Modernism. From Art Practice to Art History, by Loretta Vandi (ed.), New York and London: Routledge, 2018, 198 pp., 38 colour & b/w illus. £110,00, ISBN: 978-1-138-74340-3

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After a rejection that lasted almost one century, ornament has made a comeback that is no longer possible to ignore. This renewed interest in ornamental and richer decorative forms has spread from architecture to design, fashion and the visual arts in general. Ornament seems to have finally regained its place among the arts and has become once again a matter of reflection and experimentation, involving various materials and media. Adolf Loos' aggressive condemnation in *Ornament und Verbrechen* (1910) appears now a long way off.

This renewed interest has not left untouched the field of art and architectural history. Since the 1990s, and even more so since the beginning of this new century, studies have multiplied all over the world, involving an ever broader temporal and cultural panorama. This has led to numerous publications on the use, function and history of ornament, as well as the promotion of new editions of historical treatises, drawings and pattern books, in both printed and digital versions.¹ These studies, which seem to increase every year,² have not been limited to the Western arts, but

¹ A recent example in this sense is Sabina de Cavi, ed, *Giacomo Amato. I disegni di Palazzo Abatellis. Architettura, arredi e decorazione nella Sicilia Barocca*, Roma: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2017.

² These include: Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament. A Social History Since 1450*, New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1996; Peter Fuhring, *Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier: un génie du rococo, 1695-1750*, 2 vols, Torino: Umberto Allemandi, 1999; Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance: Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Patrice Ceccarini, Jean Loup Charvet, Frédéric Cousinié and Christophe Leribault, eds, *Histoires d'ornements, actes du colloque tenu à Rome, Académie de France, Villa Médicis, 27-28 juin 1996*, Paris-Rome: Académie de France-Klincksieck, 2000; James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, Seattle-London: University of Washington Press, 2003; Alina Payne, *From Ornament to Object. Genealogies of Architectural Modernism*, New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2012; Ralph Dekoninck, Caroline Heering and Michel Lefftz, eds, *Questions d'ornements. XVe-XVIIIe siècles*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2013; Ariane Varela Braga, ed, *Ornament, between Art and Design: Interpretations, Paths and Mutations in the Nineteenth Century, proceedings of the international study day of April 23, 2009, Istituto Svizzero di Roma*, Basel: Schwabe, 2013; Sabine Frommel and Eckhardt Leuschner, eds, *Architektur und Ornamentgraphik der Frühen Neuzeit: Migrationsprozesse in Europa*, Roma: Campisano, 2014; Lucie Fléjou and Michaël Decrossas, eds, *Ornements, XVe-XIXe siècles. Chefs-d'œuvre de la Bibliothèque de l'INHA, collections Jacques Doucet*, Paris: Mare & Martin-INHA, 2014; Ariane Varela Braga, *Une théorie universelle au milieu du XIXe siècle. La Grammar of Ornament d'Owen Jones*, Roma: Campisano, 2017; Rémi Labrusse, *Face au chaos – Pensées de l'ornement à l'âge de l'industrie*, Paris: Les presses du réel, 2018.

have evolved in parallel with the 'global turn', leading to transversal and cross-cultural analysis, as exemplified by Alina Payne and Gülru Necipoglu's *Histories of Ornament From Global to Local* (2016). In most of these recent publications, ornament has been finally perceived as a complex phenomenon, situated at the crossroads of practice and theory, understanding of which cannot be limited to the single aesthetic or stylistic sphere. On the contrary, its study must involve a transdisciplinary approach, taking into account, for instance, its anthropological, economic or social dimensions. Only then may ornament become a powerful key in the narrative of a broader cultural history.

The book under review clearly participates in this trend. However, the editors have not aimed at expanding the field of knowledge but rather at turning the attention back to a crucial period in the history of ornament and Western art, by proposing a re-interpretation of its different meanings and theoretical functions in the formation of European Modernism. Nonetheless, and despite the volume's title, the focus is exclusively on England, Austria and Germany, and the essays are more concerned about proto-Modernism and the aftermath of the movement, rather than Modernism itself, if one situates its maturity between 1910 and 1940.

This edited volume may thus be situated as a continuation of the works of Herbert Read and Nikolaus Pevsner who, among others, laid the foundations of a genealogy of Modernism dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century and the debate on ornament and the decorative arts that developed in England at the time. In this context, the reflections that arose in the framework of the first World Exhibition, the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations' organized in London in 1851, mark an important stage in the history of proto-Modernism. The contributions of the so-called 'Cole Circle' as Pevsner named it,³ a group of artists, architects, decorators and theorists that included Richard Redgrave, Owen Jones, Matthew Digby Wyatt and Gottfried Semper, have been read as a first step leading to a more functional approach to ornament and the quest for a stronger union between art and industry. Also known as the reformers of design, these men were all concerned about the loss of stylistic unity in contemporary decorative arts and related in one way or another to the figure of Henry Cole, whose contribution was crucial for the organization of the Great Exhibition, as well as for the reform of the teaching of decorative arts in Great Britain and the creation of the Museum of Ornamental Art, ancestor to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

This general context constitutes the starting point of the present volume, which is made of five essays written by authors coming from the fields of art and architectural history as well as literature and psychology, some of whom had treated the argument in previous studies.⁴ Originating from a session organised by

³ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Cole Circle', in Nikolaus Pevsner, *Some Architectural Writers in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 157-167.

⁴ See Isabelle J. Frank, ed, *The Theory of the Decorative Arts. A Critical Anthology of European and American Writings (1750-1950)*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000; Isabelle J. Frank and Freia Hartung, *Die Rethorik des Ornaments*, Munich: Fink Verlag, 2001; Debra Schafer, *The Order of Ornament, the Structure of Style. Theoretical Foundations of Modern Art and Architecture*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003; Loretta Vandi, *La trasformazione*

editor, Loretta Vandi, at the College Art Association Annual Conference of 2010, it offers an in-depth contribution to the theoretical interpretations of ornament and its role in the development of a crucial period in Western art and architecture. The book is therefore not concerned with presenting a new history of ornament but in providing an up-to-date reading of the contribution of key-figures to this argument, starting with Owen Jones, Gottfried Semper, Wilhelm Worringer and Adolf Loos. Besides these central characters, it also examines the lesser known contribution of German art historian August Schmarsow to the theory of ornament and offers a new reading of Ernst Gombrich's theory of perception. While some of the essays provide a deep contextual analysis, others are more focused on the discussion of specific and complex theoretical issues, but all of them share a common concern about the question of the dissociation between non-representational and representation art and the problem of the unity of art.

The book opens with Isabelle J. Frank's very interesting analysis of Owen Jones's seminal publication, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856). A hybrid volume that simultaneously offers the largest collection of historical ornamental patterns ever published at the time, an atlas of styles classified by historical and cultural areas, and a general grammar of formal composition based on geometrical rules, it stands as a central work for the history of ornament and the theory of mid-nineteenth-century decorative arts. The original in-folio volume is composed of twenty chapters, starting with to the so-called 'primitive' cultures and closing up with a selection of botanical specimens that exemplify the laws of formal composition in nature. It is illustrated by one hundred chromolithographed plates, offering more than two thousand ornamental patterns from all over the world, with a specific attention given to Islamic styles, a reason why the volume has been considered essential for the reception of Islamic art in Western art.

This however goes beyond the topic of the present volume and Frank is here specifically concerned with the analysis of the relation between text and image in the book itself and how it impacted on the meanings given to ornament. As she points out very well, perhaps one of the major contributions of the *Grammar of Ornament* to the development of nineteenth-century theory of ornament lies in Jones' two-dimensional treatment of forms. On the plates, all ornaments are presented already extracted from their original material context, as pure patterns. This not only permitted its easy adaption to serial production, but also paved the way to ornament being considered as an independent form of art, as other authors have also demonstrated.

Central to Frank's examination is the equal attention given to the book's textual and visual components: on the one hand the theoretical principles and chapters' textual commentaries, on the other hand the black and white illustrations integrated in the chapters and the chromolithographic plates.⁵ As she recalls, and as has been pointed out ever since its publication, one of the volume's main problem

del motive dell'acanto dall'antichità al XV secolo. Ricerche di teoria e storia dell'ornamento, Bern: Peter Lang, 2002.

⁵ For an analysis of this aspect, see also Ariane Varela Braga, *Une théorie universelle au milieu du XIXe siècle. La Grammar of Ornament d'Owen Jones*, Roma: Campisano, 2017, 153-187.

lies in the apparent contradiction between text and images: whereas the initial list of thirty-seven theoretical principles and the following twenty chapters present Jones' condemnation of all forms of stylistic revival, the one hundred chromolithographed plates invite instead the copying of historical styles. Frank situates this paradox in the fundamental problem of the book's organization – where chapters and plates are clearly separated – leading to the 'independent life' of the images. This fact is of course also related to a publication practice that is no longer ours, an aspect that might have been worth mentioning. Illustrated volumes like Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* – but the same applies to other large compendia such as Séroux d'Agincourt's *Histoire de l'art par les monuments* (1810-1823), very well analysed by Pascal Griener and Daniela Mondini –⁶ were sold in parts, often with the plates being diffused before the text. This was part of a commercial strategy to attract the attention of potential buyers, an aspect that from the start conditioned the reception of these large illustrated volumes, text and images living separated lives *de facto*.

After briefly recalling its context of publication, Frank turns to the analysis of the *Grammar* itself. Reframing Jones' principles in the broader historical tradition of ornamental and architectural theory, she insists on the importance of previous authors, from Leon Battista Alberti to William Dyce's *Drawing Book of the Government School of Design; or Elementary Outlines of Ornament* (1842-1843), as well as Michel-Eugène Chevreul's theory of colour and simultaneous contrast, on which many of Jones' propositions are based (ignoring however the no less important role of British theorist and pigment producer George Field). Arguing that Jones' principles are not particularly original in themselves, she concludes that his major contribution was to the 'history' of ornament and not to the 'theory' of ornament. Frank then concentrates her analysis on those chapters where Jones explores in more detail his views about ornament: the chapters on primitive or 'savage' ornament, as well as Egyptian, Greek and Moorish ornament, the later representing for him the summit of perfection, as a result of his studies on the Alhambra realized in the 1830s.⁷ A critic of contemporary use of decorative forms, Jones regrets the lack of unity and quality induced by serial production, a point that brings him near to John Ruskin, with whom he does not share, however, a rejection of industrial progress. For Jones, ornament corresponds to stylized forms, which brings him to consider, by extension, all forms of stylized narrative art as ornament as well. Frank also stresses the agency given by Jones to ornament, which becomes not only a marker of style but a potentially true promoter of architectural renewal.

Frank's attention towards the images is divided in two categories: firstly the black and white illustrations included in the text (which could have been further subdivided between actual ornamental reproduction and abstract schemes) and secondly the coloured plates, realised in chromolithography, a technique that strangely enough she qualifies as new, although it has been in use for almost twenty

⁶ Pascal Griener, 'La fatale attraction du Moyen Âge. Jean-Baptiste Séroux d'Agincourt et l'Histoire de l'art par les monuments (1810-1823)', *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte*, 54, 1997, 225-234; Daniela Mondini, *Mittelalter im Bild – Séroux d'Agincourt und die Kunsthistoriographie um 1800*, Zurich: zip Zurich InterPublishers, 2005.

⁷ Jules Goury and Owen Jones, *Plans, elevations, sections, and details of the Alhambra*, 2 vols, London: O. Jones, 1836-1845.

years. She insists on the difficulty of relating text and image in an effective manner, remarking that the textual comments are placed far away from the plates. Frank gives a remarkable account of the book's limitations, pointing to Jones' ultimate failure to engage the reader in a proper dialogue between text and image and concluding that both parts end up functioning separately.

The last part of the chapter is devoted to a brief presentation of the *Grammar of Ornament's* legacy, focusing on two figures. The first is British designer Christopher Dresser, considered to be Jones' best pupil, but whom, as Frank recalls, had more interest than Jones in the relation between material and design and for whom ornament clearly integrated the realm of fine arts. The second figure is Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, who was a reader of the *Grammar of Ornament*. Frank observes that in Jones, Riegl could find clues for his argument about ornament as independent from material and as the sole result of human imagination, concluding that the *Grammar* provided him with a model to construct a continuous line for a history of ornament.

The second chapter, by Debra K. Schafer constitutes a perfect transition from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first years of the next century. Focusing on four major figures – Gottfried Semper, Alois Riegl, Wilhelm Worringer and Adolf Loos – she pays a particular attention to the connections between their theoretical positions and the cultural context in which they were elaborated, presenting a well-balanced and structured reading of changing attitudes towards ornament in this period of time.

Starting with Semper, who had taken part in the organization of the Great Exhibition in 1851 and later collaborated in the first years of the Department of Practical Art, she provides a clear and suggestive analysis of his main theories. The focus is on his 1851 *Die vier Elemente der Baukunst* (The Four Elements of Architecture) and his famous *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten* (Style in the technical and tectonic arts), published between 1860 and 1863. She analyses Semper's ideas about the origin of architecture and its main elements (the hearth, the roof, the enclosure and the mound) and how it relates to ornament, insisting on the importance of creative process and the laws of nature that prevail over form. In spite of Semper having been considered a materialist, Schafer reminds us he placed the urge to create, the impulse, at the core of his ideas – as Owen Jones also did in the same years. This was a fact that Alois Riegl recorded as well, distinguishing between Semper's theories and their interpretation by his followers.

The second part of the text is about Riegl and his 1893 *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Problems of style: foundations for a history of ornament), written when the Austrian art historian was director of the textile department at the Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie in Vienna. In this well-known volume, Riegl proposes to lay the foundation for a history of ornament through the examination of its main principles. His argument is set against the technical and materialistic interpretation of the origins and development of ornament adopted by the semperian school, which sustained that all forms of art were the direct result of materials and techniques. Instead, Riegl, attentive to the contemporary developments of science and art history, proposes to

look for psychological motivations as the basis for a history of artistic style and ornament. Shafter discusses the famous creative drive or *Kunstwollen* (art's will) that she defines as representing both the 'creative potential contained within forms and the artist complying with it according to artistic needs' (p. 45). Contrary to Jones and Semper, Riegl sustains that man's primordial instinct was to imitate nature by reproducing its three-dimensional forms, thus inverting the chronology proposed by the British and German architects, and arguing that abstract manifestations of ornament only occurred at a later stage. Despite these differences, Schafter concludes that both Semper and Riegl wanted to provide ornament with a continuous and collective history: Semper considering the importance of man's relation to material, whereas Riegl was more concerned with how intentions affected aesthetic appearances.

From Semper and Riegl, Schafter then passes to German art historian Wilhelm Worringer, who further expanded their thoughts on ornament by uniting it with the theory of empathy that was developing towards the end of the century. In his 1908 *Abstraktion und Einfühlung. Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (Abstraction and Empathy: Essay in the Psychology of Style), based on his PhD dissertation presented the previous year at the University of Bern, Worringer offers a psychological justification for the need for arts. However, he rejects Riegl's interpretation based on the dichotomy of the representation/abstraction impulse, dismissing his idea that man's first creative act was expressed through natural and three-dimensional representation. Instead, he argues that abstract ornament was man's first creative art form, thus taking back an idea that had already been promoted, but for different reasons, by Owen Jones and Gottfried Semper. As Schafter clearly shows, all three shared a common view on the origins of art as abstract, partaking in a common interest in an aesthetics of the non-representational that explains why the book has been considered as supporting the Expressionist forms of art and related to the Fauves, die Brücke or der Blaue Reiter.

The last part of the essay is instead devoted to Austrian architect Adolf Loos and his provocative lecture *Ornament und Verbrechen* (Ornament and Crime) given in Vienna in 1910 and published two years later, in which he stated that the evolution of culture would naturally lead to the abolition of ornament. Schafter rightfully places Loos' condemnation in its proper historical and cultural context, recalling that it was primarily an attack against the ornamentation of the Wiener Secessionist architects and designers. In fact, as is well known, Loos' dead blow to ornament did not impede him from turning to other forms of material 'ornamentation', such as coloured marbles, whose abstract decorative qualities constitute an essential part of his architectural realizations, of which the Looshaus in Michaelerplatz in Vienna is a good example. Although he agreed with the many nineteenth-century theorists who had lamented the lack of aesthetic unity in contemporary culture – but had tried to create a new form of ornamentation that represented their own times – Loos decided to follow an opposite direction, concluding that it was no longer time to reform ornament: instead it was time to ban it from the arts. Interpreting ornament as a symptom of primitive, tribal and backward art, he also considers it a sign of the corruption of modern times. Jones and Semper's interest in tattoos as one of man's earliest form of ornament thus becomes for Loos a perfect expression of moral degeneration that needs to be

eradicated from modern society. Using in his favour contemporary theories of crime and degeneracy, such as the ones developed by Cesare Lombroso, he thus relates ornament to the underworld of criminality and eroticism, providing a condemnation of ornament that would leave its mark until the end of the twentieth century.

The third chapter, by Christiane Hertel, is not an easy read but provides a very welcome and original contribution on a figure whose name is usually not related to theories of ornament: August Schmarsow. The German art historian is indeed more often recalled for his contributions to Italian art history, his theory of architectural space or as the founder of the *Kunsthistorisches Institut* in Florence. This is perhaps the reason why Hertel first starts by giving a precise biographical and intellectual presentation. A representative of the *Kunstwissenschaft*, like Aloïs Riegl or Heinrich Wölfflin, Schmarsow studied in Zürich, Strasbourg and Bonn, then went on to teach art history at Göttingen, Breslau and Berlin. His 1892 seminar on Masaccio and Italian sculpture, is famous for having given origin to the *Kunsthistorisches Institut*. One year later, he was appointed to the chair of art history at the University of Leipzig, succeeding Anton Springer.

As Hertel remarks, Schmarsow's presence at the University of Leipzig occurred at a crucial moment when an increasing divergence between the natural sciences and the humanities was going on. This situation would lead to an intensive search for new methodological approaches and scientific principles for the humanities, the result of which would be the move from *Kunstgeschichte* to *Kunstwissenschaft*, the focus on history being gradually replaced by more theoretical and scientific approaches. It is no surprise if Schmarsow was thus criticized by the Vienna School of Art History for not having the notion of historical research, as Hertel recalls. Consequently, the attention of this essay moves away from questions related to the history of ornament, which remained present in an underlying way in the previous chapters, and broadens the topic to include and discuss other forms of artistic expressions, in particular sculpture, drawing and painting, following a far more theoretical perspective.

Hertel's analysis of Schmarsow theory points out the importance of ornament for his concept of human *Kunstsinn* (sense of art), which has to be understood as both a 'creative capacity for art and the receptive disposition towards art' (p. 67). Her analysis is principally based on two series of essays published in the *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und Kunstwissenschaft* in 1910 and 1924 respectively,⁸ in which the art historian dismisses the idea of a proper history of ornament, arguing that ornament represents both the foundation of art and its perceptual trace. The core of the chapter is devoted to the examination of three interrelated aspects: the impact of Schmarsow's interest in ornament and modern sculpture on his theory of ornament with regards to the human body; the role of ornament in his art historical practice; and the relation between ornament and his interest in modern art and art education.

⁸ August Schmarsow, 'Anfangsgründer jeder Ornamentik', *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und Kunstwissenschaft*, 5, 1910, 191-215, 321-355 and 'Die reine Form in der Ornamentik aller Künste', *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und Kunstwissenschaft*, 17, 1924, 1-14, 129-145, 209-220, 220-234.

As Hertel shows, his approach to ornament owed much to the thought of Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt, considered as the father of experimental psychology and founder of the first psychology laboratory. Thus ornament becomes for him the meeting place between art history, ethnography and psychology. In line with Riegl's approach – but also, as we have seen, with Jones and Semper's – Schmarsow therefore broadens his field of inquiry to include non-European art in his appraisal of ornament. Interested in pure ornament, which he does not consider as art, he differentiates it from symbolic ornament that in his view already enters the realm of fine arts. For him, ornament is first of all a sign of communication of a value, but, as Hertel explains, it does 'not bestow an external and detachable value on its bearer, as was often claimed; instead it expresses a value believed to inhere in its bearer who (or which) is the autonomous mark ('Mal') of the adornment or ornamentation' (p. 71). Like Riegl before him, he situates the origin of all ornament in a psychological need, which he relates to the practice of body adornment, leading to rules of symmetry, proportion and rhythm. But contrary to the later, his discussion of the origin of ornament stands outside of history, his attention remaining placed on psychological questions, which leads him to differentiate between expressive and mimetic adornment.

In a second phase, Schmarsow gave particular consideration to creative and receptive processes, which Hertel examines in relation to his 1924 essay, especially its parts dedicated to mimic expression and sculpture. As she explains, for the art historian, 'there is something foundational, pre-iconographic, and ahistorical in creativity's ornamental trace and its ability to communicate' (p. 75). She then goes on to discuss the implication of his views for his own practice as an art historian, with special regards to his comments on Max Klinger's graphic work. Giving great attention to Klinger's print cycles, in particular *A Glove* (1881), she discusses these works in terms of Schmarsow's ornamental and structural elements (symmetry, proportion and rhythm). The next part of the essay brings the reader back to 1903 and a series of lectures Schmarsow gave on art education, published as *Unser Verhältnis zu Bildenden Künsten. Sechs Vorträge über Kunst und Erziehung* (Our Relationship to the Fine Arts: Six Lectures on Art and Education), which in large part centres on sculpture and the importance of cultivation of the *Kunstsinn* in art education. Finally, a last few pages are devoted to the impact of Scharsow's ideas about ornament for the development of art history, which Hertel discusses especially in relation to Jonathan Crary's work.

Ole W. Fischer's contribution – the only one written by an architect and architectural historian, as well as the main essay properly concerned with what one may expect when reading about Modernism – concentrates on the emergence of abstract architecture and its relation with ornament and design. Fischer give a very detailed and clear presentation of the conflicting positions held within the German *Werkbund*, an association founded in 1907 to lobby for modern design and that would play a key role in the development of the Bauhaus, focusing on the opposition between Hermann Muthesius and Henry van de Velde.

In the first part of the essay, the focus is on modernist architects Joseph Hoffmann, August Mendell, and Henry van de Velde. Fischer starts his analysis with Hoffmann's two panel reliefs at the fourteenth exhibition of the Viennese

Secession in July 1902, that exemplified a first movement away from the floral and organic tendencies of the Art Nouveau, towards the exploration of crystalline and geometrical forms, an interest that had precedents in the research of British art critic John Ruskin and French neo-gothic architect and historian Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.⁹ Hoffmann's geometric patterns are then contrasted to Endell's attention to the psychological and emotive effects of form and colour. Considering that Endell replaces the Albertian mimesis of nature with a mimesis of psychological effect, Fischer discusses his use of natural forms, arguing that he does not succeed in dissociating himself totally from nature, as shown in his *Photo Studio Elvira* (1896-1897) in Munich, qualified as an experiment in 'psycho-perceptual design' (p. 108). Fischer then comes to the Flemish artist Henry van de Velde, whose name is linked to linear abstract ornament and to the motto 'line is a force',¹⁰ as well as to the exhibition *L'Art Nouveau* of Sigfried Bing in Paris in December 1895. Returning to the first stages of his career as a painter, he stresses the fact that van de Velde always accompanied his research with a theoretical reflection in which ornament played a central role as an element that united all artistic expressions. Conceiving ornament as non-representational, his aim was to rethink architecture and decoration and free them from the imitation of both nature and history, imagining form and ornament as one. Focusing on principles, his concern was to create an organic ornament that would express structure. As Fischer points out, the term 'organic' therefore needs to be understood on the one hand as structural rather than formal imitation and, on the other hand, as an approach where all parts contribute to something larger than the sum. Looking at primitive art – in this case prehistoric art – van de Velde situates ornament as a primordial and universal force that precedes any rational, linguistic or gestural affect.

Fischer then turns to the role of Hermann Muthesius, initially a supporter of van de Velde, before becoming one of his strongest critics. As a cultural attaché of the German Embassy in London (1896-1903), he was strongly influenced by its cultural and intellectual context (such as the moralistic views of Ruskin or Pugin and their call for honesty and authenticity) which constitute the background for his future theoretical positions. Although at first enthusiastic about the development of Art Nouveau, he later violently attacked it, considering it too dependent upon individual taste. Instead, he promoted a return to the vernacular and national traditions, advocating for a style-less style that would emerge from mechanical reproduction as well as national traditions.

This would culminate in a debate opposing him to the ideas of van de Velde during the Werkbund annual congress of July 3-4, 1914, and which constitute the focus of the third part of Fischer's essay. Fischer presents a meticulous and very clear reconstruction of Muthesius' strategy to gain control over the Werkbund and marginalize its artist, by progressively putting more emphasis on products rather

⁹ See for instance Nikolaus Pevsner, *Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc: Englishness and Frenchness in the Appreciation of Gothic Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969; Bary Bergdoll, 'Of Crystals, Cells, and Strata: Natural History and Debates on the Form of a New Architecture in the Nineteenth Century', *Architectural History*, 50, 2007, 1-29.

¹⁰ Henry van de Velde, 'Die Linie', in Henry van de Velde, *Essays*, Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1910, 43.

than personalities or individuals. A clash that was later interpreted as a sign exemplifying the contrast between functionalism and standardization, but which, as Fischer very well shows, was much more complex, involving diverging ideological, economic and political views between characters who nonetheless all believed in the importance of machine industry (with Muthesius representing the national-liberal goals of the emerging middle-class and van de Velde international, pro-French and socialist-anarchist ideals, as well as the aristocratic and upper-bourgeoisie clientele).

Fischer concludes by providing a very welcome insight into contemporary times, briefly discussing the return of ornament in present day architecture, between digital abstracts and neo-tribalism, considering Herzog & De Meuron's use of serial ornament as a critical comment to both postmodernist architectural semiotics and operational linguistic formalism.

The last chapter is a discussion of Ernst Gombrich's work on the psychology of perception by Loretta Vandi and Pavlos Jereni. With this essay, the reader is thus projected to the second half of the twentieth century and presented with a text that has less to do with the theory of ornament than the theory of perception in general. Building their argument around the analysis of Gombrich's *Art & Illusion* (1960), *The Image and the Eye* (1979) and *The Sense of an Order* (1979), Vandi and Jerenis argue that, contrary to prevailing views, Gombrich tried to merge perception of nature and perception of ornament under a general theory of visual perception, which they here present under the newly coined term of 'G-model' of perception (p. 152). The G-model is thus, for the authors, an attempt to solve the problem of the tension imbedded in the simultaneous perception of subject matter and surface pattern that Gombrich raised in both *Art and Illusion* and *The Image and the Eye*. The G-model provides a new concept to explain the properties of vision that can be said to be central and peripheral (with the former concentrating on meaning and the latter on processes patterns). Due to its very precise orientation, this final essay might be of more interest to specialists of Gombrich's theory of perception than to those concerned with the theory of ornament and Modernism in general. Nonetheless, Vandi and Jereni's original contribution succeeds in showing the importance and impact of previous discussions on ornament on the larger topic of the psychology of perception, pointing to the transdisciplinary power of ornament and the manifold interpretations to which it can lead.

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Displaying and Appropriating Islamic Art and Architecture in the 19th and early 20th centuries (with F. Giese and M. Volait, Leiden/Boston: Brill, forthcoming 2019), *Der Orient in der Schweiz. Neo-islamische Architektur und Interieurs des 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (with F. Giese and L. el-Wakil, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) ; *Roma e gli artisti stranieri. Integrazione, reti e identità (XVI-XX s.)* (with T.L. True, Rome: Artemide, 2018).

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