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ORNAMENTAL CRIME

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I have discovered the truth and here I offer it to the world: the evolution of culture is synonymous with the disappearance of ornament on useful objects.

Adolf Loos (1870 – 1933), *Ornament and Crime* (Vienna, 1908)

As a people grow more cultivated, decoration disappears.

Le Corbusier, *L'art décoratif aujourd'hui* (Grès, Paris, 1925)

The attempt to strip away “decoration” and establish a “true architecture” would destroy not only the achievements of the past 3,000 years, but architecture itself.

Anatole Lieven, *Tale of two Cities*, in *Prospect* (London, August/September 1999)

One of my earliest memories is of myself as a small boy, in the late 1940s, complaining that while old houses had cornices around their ceilings, modern houses lacked them; that while traditional door handles and other fittings always had at least a touch of ornamentation, new ones were severely plain.

My views on this subject have never changed. Half a century later I married a lady whose curtains and cushions sport ornate trimmings, whose wraps and lampshades are decorated with beautifully intricate fringes, who refuses, with my full encouragement, to tolerate rooms without cornices.

The twentieth-century hatred of ornament is an odd phenomenon, for it contradicts virtually the entire history of human culture. According to one writer, *ornament has been part of the tradition of architecture at all times and places in human history. The exception of twentieth century modern architecture, although familiar to this generation, is a historical aberration.* That is surely true. Think of Roman and Greek structures with their decorative capitals, friezes and cornices; think of Gothic cathedrals; think of Arabian mosques with their intricate traceries in wood and plaster; think of the exuberantly-sculptured buildings of the Mayas in Central America; think of splendidly ornate Indian, Chinese, and Japanese architecture. Throughout history, the world's various cultures have valued ornament, and have made great efforts to create it wherever circumstances permitted.

Suddenly, shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century, all that came to a halt. The use and development of ornament stopped abruptly after a final extravagant efflorescence in the *fin de siècle* movement we call *Art Nouveau*. As art historian Paul Greenhalgh observes, *Art Nouveau was the first deliberate attempt to create a modernist style based on decoration. It was also the last.*¹ Born in the 1880s, by 1910 it was already in decline, though a few notable practitioners like Gaudí in Barcelona, Tiffany in New York, Guimard in Paris and Coppedè in Rome kept it going a little longer.

Since then, as design writer Alice Twemlow reminds us, *the design climate.... for the larger part of a century has been famously hostile to the generation, application or even mention of decoration.*² We have been obsessed with what *Financial Times* columnist Gerald Cadogan called *the starkness of good design.*³ Since the 1920s, it has been normal to assume without question that good design has to be stark. Indeed, many people have even come to feel guilty about enjoying old-fashioned decoration. Alice Twemlow called her article *The Decriminalisation of Ornament*. But why on earth should we who love decorative design have to feel guilty?

The Czech architect Adolf Loos, whose notorious theory heads this article, was one of the first to “criminalise” ornament. His short essay *Ornament and Crime*, published in 1908, created a stir, appearing as it did at a time when the superabundant decoration of *Art Nouveau*, in all its luxuriant colours, fantastical flower-forms and sensuous curves, was still fashionable. This style, in its more lurid versions, was so overblown that a reaction against it was inevitable. Yet reaction against a short-lived and somewhat crazy fashion cannot explain a century of its extreme opposite.

Loos’s famous essay is an amusing read, but is so cranky that it seems absurd to take it seriously. Yet Loos was not joking, he meant what he said; and the arts and design

¹ Paul Greenhalgh, *A surprising decline in L’Art Nouveau en Europe 1890 – 1914* (Tournai : La Renaissance du Livre, 2002).

² Alice Twemlow, *The Decriminalisation of Ornament*, in *eye magazine* (London : Haymarket Publishers, winter 2005).

³ Gerald Cadogan, *Clean lines from the modernists*, in *Financial Times* (London, 24 May 1997).

community ever since has indeed shown a strong tendency to take him at his word. So what exactly did he say, and why did he have so much influence?

He put forward a plethora of arguments, most of them fanciful. First: one of the oldest forms of ornament is the tattoo, and most criminals are tattooed; 80% of the inmates in some jails, according to Loos. *Those who are tattooed but not in prison are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats.*⁴ Therefore, ornament is a sign of criminal tendencies and moral degeneracy!

Second: the original ornament – the first work of art – was the figure of a cross (+). This, says Loos, was an erotic symbol: the horizontal line represented a woman; the vertical, you know what. *He who created that...was in the same heaven as Beethoven when he created the Ninth Symphony.* But today, Loos continues, we don't think much of people who inscribe erotic symbols on any convenient surface. *One can measure the culture of a country by the extent of the graffiti on lavatory walls...defenders of ornament believe that my preference for simplicity is equivalent to castration.*⁵

Next, he argues, we have lost (in the age of *Art Nouveau*!) the ability to design new ornaments, and this shows that the art of creating ornament is obsolete, played out, exhausted.

Fourth: an economic argument. Ornament, says Loos, is a waste of time and materials. Moreover, it depresses the workers' wages, believe it or not. One would think that demand for ornament meant more work to be done, hence more demand for workers, hence higher wages. But no! in Loosian economics, a decorated chair takes thirty hours to make and sells for \$100, while a plain chair can be made in ten hours and sold for \$200, so the chairmaker earns more money for less work!

Fifth: Loos argues that ornament debases the materials to which it is applied; these ought to be displayed pure and unadorned. In fact, Loos liked to use very fine materials in his designs;

⁴ Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime* (Vienna, 1908).

⁵ Ibid.

his *American Bar*⁶ in Vienna is resplendent in black, white, rose and grey marble, coral and onyx. One might indeed argue that the use of such materials is in itself a kind of ornament, but Loos seems to have deemed this kind to be innocent.

Sixth: Loos argues for a complete divorce between “art” and the creation of useful objects. Ornament, he says, can be tolerated in works of art having no practical function, in buildings that are not meant to be lived in or used, such as memorials and mausolea.⁷ Moreover, in a curiously sexist attitude, he has no objection to women using ornament for personal adornment: *ornament in the service of woman will live forever*.⁸ However, *wasting art on objects of practical use is uncultured*.⁹

Precious little of this makes any real sense. One might conclude that Loos’s arguments, though flimsy, gained wide acceptance simply because they captured the mood of the times. They expressed strikingly and memorably, though absurdly, what many people were coming to feel at that moment. This would have explained a transient wave of anti-ornamental fashion, a natural reaction to *Art Nouveau*’s excesses.

But, sad to say, anti-ornament did not prove to be a passing fad. It has dominated the world through most of the last century. Look at architecture! Under the influence of Loos himself and of Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe with their countless imitators, buildings with flat featureless surfaces, of unadorned box shapes, with the colours only of grey concrete and white paint, display the ornament-free “international modernist style” that has swept and disfigured the world. But today, architects endlessly complain that most house-buyers do not want their truculent modernism. They want traditional houses, preferably with a certain amount of ornament.

⁶ This bar, in the Kärntner Durchgang (near the Opera) dates from 1908 and has been recently restored.

⁷ Adolf Loos, *Architecture* (Vienna, 1910).

⁸ Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Education* (Paris, 1924).

⁹ *Ibid.*

There are, or were, better arguments than those of Loos against the misuse of ornament. It could, for example, be considered morally dubious because, historically, it was a means of showing off one's wealth. That was in the days when hand-crafted decoration was very expensive; the argument no longer works, now that ornament can be machine-made at modest cost. In any case, good ornament has never been valued solely as ostentation. Traditionally, it has been seen to have real aesthetic merit.

No doubt the cheapness of ornament, once it could be mass-produced by industrial methods, was one reason for its ceasing to be considered desirable. Another argument deployed in the early twentieth century was that many manufacturers used decoration to conceal the poor quality of cheap products. Understandably, therefore, there arose a demand for "honest" products of good quality, which needed no frills to hide their flaws.

Excessive ornament could be said to be aesthetically bad; in my view, some of the more extreme *Art Nouveau* creations fall into this error. There remain certain buildings of that period whose overdecoration is truly grotesque; see, for example, Coppedè's buildings in the Via Dora and neighbouring streets in Rome. But that is no reason to condemn ornament in general.

Loos argued that the production of ornament was a waste of time which demanded superfluous work. Without it, the working classes could have more leisure. But in our modern automated world, one may very well argue that the workers need more work, both for economic reasons and because the creation of beautiful things can be, in itself, a satisfying activity. The ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement remain pertinent today.

Loos also reasoned that ornament requires wasteful consumption of materials. All the yards of thread in those trimmings on my wife's curtains! Well, there is a solution to that problem. Instead of making plain things that are frequently discarded and replaced, let us make ornate things of good quality that last. My wife and I have well-trimmed curtains that have been in use for more than twenty-five years and are still in good shape.

History proves that, normally, human beings have a natural fondness for ornament. Perhaps the abnormal ideology of ornament-hatred is at last fading away. Certainly there seems today to be plenty of demand for decorative plasterwork, luxuriant trimmings, flamboyant

glassware; sometimes even for elaborately-frilled skirts, that even Loos might have anomalously admired.

But the history of ornament in the twentieth century demonstrates a sad old truth: perverse ideas can be remarkably persistent.

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