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The crisis of ornament: evaluation and intercultural divergences in the visual arts of the 19th and early 20th centuries

A crise do ornamento: avaliação
e divergências interculturais nas
artes visuais do século dezanove e
princípios do século vinte

La crisis del ornamento: evaluación
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las artes visuales de los siglos xix y
principio del siglo xx

Abstract

From the beginning of the 19th century up to the present, ornament has faced different crises because it is not an autonomous art but traditionally attached to a surface, be it architecture or applied arts. The fate of ornament has varied, according to leading theorists and critics in these fields. In 1812, Percier and Fontaine exhorted architects and artisans to use ornament with consciousness and care. Gottfried Semper could even conceive of applied arts without ornament, and his utmost concern was to show the original function of objects that they had lost over time. He wanted to clarify the purpose of an object, not only from a functional point of view, but also iconographically. Christopher Dresser, with a background as a biologist and 'ornamentist', was the first industrial designer to create objects without ornament, following the influence of Japanese art. The death knell apparently tolled for ornament in 1908 with Adolf Loos' talk on Ornament and Crime. The subsequent opposition of Art Deco and Modernism was a clash of cultures, perceptible even nowadays among architects and art historians. At a certain point, as recent studies have pointed out, there was a merging of these two art movements. At present, ornament has made a comeback and been reintegrated into architecture in a new way and spirit.

Key-words: ornament; architecture; applied arts; design; 19th century; Art Deco, Modernism

Resumo

Do começo do século XIX até o presente, o ornamento enfrentou diferentes crises em virtude de não ser uma arte autônoma, mas tradicionalmente ligada a uma superfície, seja ela arquitetura ou artes aplicadas. O destino do ornamento variou, de acordo com os principais teóricos e críticos destes campos. Em 1812, Percier e Fontaine exortaram arquitetos e artífices a usar o ornamento com consciência e cuidado. Gottfried Semper poderia até conceber as artes aplicadas sem ornamento e sua preocupação máxima era mostrar a função original que os objetos haviam perdido ao longo do tempo. Ele queria elucidar o propósito de um objeto, não somente de um ponto de vista funcional, mas também iconográfico. Christopher Dresser, que possuía experiência como biólogo e "ornamentista", foi o primeiro designer industrial a criar objetos sem ornamento, seguindo a influência da arte japonesa. O sinal de morte do ornamento aparentemente soou em 1908, com a conferência *Ornamento e Crime*, de Adolf Loos. A subsequente oposição entre Art Déco e Modernismo foi um choque de culturas, perceptível até hoje entre arquitetos e historiadores da arte. Em determinado momento, como estudos recentes apontaram, houve uma fusão destes dois movimentos artísticos. Atualmente, o ornamento retornou e foi reintegrado à arquitetura em uma nova maneira e espírito.

Palavras-chave: ornamento; arquitetura; artes aplicadas; *design*; século dezenove; Art Déco, Modernismo

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Resumen

Desde principios del siglo XIX hasta el presente, el ornamento ha enfrentado diferentes crisis porque no es un arte autónomo, sino que tradicionalmente está unido a una superficie, ya sea arquitectura o artes aplicadas. El destino del ornamento ha variado, según los principales teóricos y críticos en estos campos. En 1812, Percier y Fontaine exhortaron a los arquitectos y artesanos a usar ornamentos con conciencia y cuidado. Gottfried Semper incluso podría concebir las artes aplicadas sin ornamentos, y su mayor preocupación era mostrar la función original que los objetos habían perdido con el tiempo. Él quería aclarar el propósito de un objeto, no solo desde un punto de vista funcional, sino también iconográficamente. Christopher Dresser, con experiencia como biólogo y "ornamentista", fue el primer designer industrial en crear objetos sin ornamentos, siguiendo la influencia del arte japonés. La sentencia de muerte del ornamento aparentemente fue cobrada en 1908 con la conferencia de Adolf Loos *Ornamento y Delito*. La posterior oposición entre Art Déco y el Modernismo fue un choque de culturas, perceptible incluso hoy en día entre arquitectos y historiadores del arte. En cierto punto, como lo han señalado estudios recientes, hubo una fusión de estos dos movimientos artísticos. En la actualidad, el ornamento ha regresado y se ha reintegrado a la arquitectura de una nueva manera y espíritu.

Palabras clave: ornamento; arquitectura; artes aplicadas; *design*; siglo diecinueve; Art Deco; Modernismo

Introduction

Ornament, as the subject of this contribution, has traditionally been understood in the sense of an addition and of secondary importance for the function of an object, be it architecture or applied art. In terms of medium, ornament is not limited to two-dimensional works such as graphic arts and painting, but can expand into the third dimension in fields such as architecture, interior design, sculpture, and applied art. The Latin *adornare* expresses, in the English translation 'to ornament,' different aspects of ornamentation—decorating, garnishing, embellishing—and turns negative with meanings like bedizened, florid, fussy, or overwrought¹.

According to this traditional view, ornament (*ornamentum*) is not independent and was not considered to be a form of art in itself. This discusses two theses: first, that in all epochs artists and architects were conscious of the fact that richly ornamented objects or buildings existed alongside buildings scarcely or not at all decorated; and second, even oppressed by different artistic movements, especially at the beginning of the 20th century, ornament returns to architecture and art, like waves returning to shore, recurrently, though with different strength. Because the resulting arguments mirror each other, two theses will be presented diachronically, embracing both aspects. Absence of ornament and presence of ornament, both in the artistic context, will enter in dialogue, starting at the beginning of the 19th century. We bear in mind, however, that our research could begin even earlier, in the Renaissance for example, but this would exceed by far the scope of our contribution. In this context, bear in mind the observation of Friedrich Piel (1962), in his book on grotesque ornament in the Italian Renaissance, on the possibility of form without ornament because ornament is never autonomous, but—as explained—is dependent on a supporting structure².

Crisis of ornament in the French Empire

Charles Percier (1764–1838) and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine (1762–1853) were the supporting pillars of the reign of Napoleon I. In their interior design, in particular, but also in conceiving ephemeral architecture—such as on the occasion of the coronation ceremony in Notre-Dame de Paris in 1804—they provided Napoleon I the necessary decorum, demonstrating power and wealth. Speaking of modern societies (i.e., the society of their time), Percier and Fontaine foregrounded the individual as actor in both public and private spaces³. Having published, in 1798, *Palais, mai-*

1 The last four expressions are mentioned in: MERRIAM-WEBSTER. Entry: ornate. Address: <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/ornate#other-words> (accessed 16.03.2020).

2 PIEL, Friedrich. Ornament-Groteske in der italienischen Renaissance: zu ihrer kategorialen Struktur und Entstehung. (Neue Münchner Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte 3), Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962, p. 11: "So ist das Wesen des Ornaments durch eine Relation bestimmt, die kategorial ist: Eine Form, die im Bereich der Kunst nicht autonom sein kann, steht in Beziehung zu einem Träger, der – architektonisch – auch ohne die ornamentale Form sein kann."

3 PERCIER, Charles ; FONTAINE Pierre-François-Léonard. Recueil de décorations intérieures, comprenant tout ce qui à rapport à l'ameublement, comme vases, trépiéds, composé par Charles Percier et Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, exécuter sur leurs dessins. Paris: Didot l'ainé, 1812, p. 9. "La manière d'être et l'habitude des sociétés modernes, qui mettent tous les individus en spectacle dans les lieux de promenade, de conversation, de jeux, et de plaisir, ont éveillé au plus haut point l'envie de plaire d'une part, et le desir de se distinguer de l'autre. De là cet empire de la mode dans tout ce qui tient à l'habillement, à la parure, et aux manières [...]."

sons et autres édifices modernes dessinés à Rome (Palaces, houses and other modern buildings drawn in Rome), Percier and Fontaine printed their best seller *Recueil de décorations intérieures (Empire stylebook of interior design; fig. 1)* in 1812. This contained their critique of an inflationary use of ornament, for which they use arabesque ornament as an exemplar: "If the lightness of the arabesque and its playful ideas are suitable for small compartments, and agree with pieces whose size and character only require cheerfulness; soon, if fashion takes hold of this taste, the arabesque will become the universal ornament" (PERCIER; FONTAINE, 1812, p. 11). Let us here clarify what is meant by the so-called 'arabesque' ornament mentioned by Percier and Fontaine: it has nothing to do with Islamic ornamentation, but meant the Pompeii-inspired grotesque, a type of ornament quite often used in vertical ranges, with wide adoption during the Renaissance. In the *Report from select committee on arts and manufactures*, James Morrison was examined by William Ewart on July 30, 1835, who asked: "Does not the Arabesque style, which was a style peculiar to Pompeii, prevail very much at Paris?" Morrison answered: "I have observed it in France, and also in Italy, and I am told the Arabesque, about 35 years ago prevailed in this country" (Report from select committee on arts and manufactures, 1835, question and answer 186). We conclude that the arabesque ornament, at least until 1835, then, arabesque ornament meant an ornament of the Empire style, applied by Percier and Fontaine between 1804 to 1814 for Napoleon I. The ornament is rooted in the Roman Pompeiian style and, when discovered about 1580 in the *Domus Aura*, it was called "grotesque" (fig. 2)⁴.



Fig. 1: PERCIER, Charles, FONTAINE, Pierre-François-Léonard. Title page of *Recueil de décorations intérieures, comprenant tout ce qui à rapport à l'ameublement, comme vases, trépieds, composé par Charles Percier et Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, exécuter sur leurs dessins*. Paris: Didot l'ainé, 1812.

⁴ BURKE, Peter. *Die europäische Renaissance: Zentrum und Peripherien*, transl. by Klaus Kochmann, Munich: C. H. Beck, 2012 (2nd ed.), p. 102; (English edition: *The European Renaissance. Centers and Peripheries*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).



Fig. 2: PERCIER, Charles, FONTAINE, Pierre-François-Léonard. *Recueil de décorations intérieures, comprenant tout ce qui a rapport à l'ameublement, comme vases, trépiéds, composé par Charles Percier et Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, exécuter sur leurs dessins.* Paris: Didot l'ainé, 1812, plate 60. Ornamentation in Roman Pompeiian style.

The crisis of ornament perceived by Percier and Fontaine not only meant an unreflective and inflationary way of applying ornament, but also mass production, which they explicitly called “prostitution.” Due to a labor economy striving for fast production and cheap materials, the perfection of execution and the feeling for the original was lost. The use of templates and models added another negative aspect to this low-quality production⁵. For Percier and Fontaine, mass production possessed the intrinsic evil that, by using decorative elements in an inflationary manner, ornament lost its original meaning and function. As can be seen from their own projects and executed works, in observing a crisis of ornament, they did not want to eliminate ornament, but to advocate for reasonable use of ornament by artists cognizant of its origins and meaning.

Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s problem with Islamic ornament

Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), too, saw that ornament was in crisis, but did not identify it within his own culture, but rather located it in Islamic ornament. The Berlin architect claimed that oriental ornament lacked ideas and was unable to express a higher idea, an incompetence he grounded in the deficiency of higher education, since the so-called “epochs of half education” led to the neglect of the figure and to ornaments of bad taste. It “confirms all examples in history [...] that in every epoch of higher education the human figure [...] was the main subject of the fine arts. In all periods of low [half] education, the figure is neglected or distorted; they are replaced by stiff, mummy-like, inanimate figures or ornaments full of bad taste, often just scripture, as with the Moors, where all vivid art is lacking [...]” (SCHINKEL, 1863, vol. 3, p. 350). Schinkel did not realize that ornament has a completely different function in Islamic culture than in European art. The basic forms have to expand beyond comprehension through infinite repetition and thus mutate into transcendental orders, a spiritual-religious dimension of Islamic ornament that Schinkel did not recognize. Rolf Thomas Senn explains: “The realistic form is perfected in the abstraction up to the elimination of the figure. This corresponds to the monotheistic view of Islam, according to which the creation – like a requirement (not a machine as one has said in Europe since Descartes) of the highest precision – with the means of geometrics understands to the limit of ecstatic vision. The preference of Muslims for geometric shapes has its origin in this constellation” (SENN, 1995/1996, pp. 206–207).

It was Oleg Grabar who gave Islamic ornament its credentials in his A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts in 1989: “Ornament, in this sense, exists everywhere, in every artistic tradition, but it is generally acknowledged that, whatever is meant by the term, its most engaging and best-known examples belong to the arts developed in regions of predominantly Muslim culture” (GRABAR, 1992, p. 6).

⁵ PERCIER, Charles, FONTAINE Pierre-François-Léonard (1812), p. 12–13. “Mais l’abus le plus grave attaché à la prostitution qu’on ne cesse de faire des inventions de l’art et du goût, c’est de leur enlever par l’économie du travail, la la contrefaçon des matières, et par des procédés méthodiques ou mécaniques, cette perfection d’exécution, ce fini précieux, cette touche d’un sentiment original, que la théorie seule sépare de la conception et de l’invention, mais qui véritablement en est inséparable”.

Grabar further reminds us, that researching ornament “within a Muslim context is of intellectual and hermeneutic value” (GRABAR, 1992, p. 6). We can add that this not only applies to a Muslim context of ornament, but to the context of ornament everywhere.

Gottfried Semper and ornament

Around the middle of the 19th century, the crisis of ornament appeared on the occasion of the World Exhibition in London in 1851. In 1846, Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, was council member of the Society of Arts. In the same year, Henry Cole (1808–1882) was introduced to the prince. Cole is often named as the driving force behind the idea of the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* (or *Great Exhibition*) and its realization. The following year (1847), the Society of Arts changed its name to the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, and the direction of impact became quite obvious: to support English industry by improving the design of its production. After the great success of the Great Exhibition, funds were set aside to establish the *Department of Practical Art* and to begin a collection of design, the Museum of Ornamental Art, later the South Kensington Museum, which finally became the Victoria & Albert Museum⁶. The *Department of Practical Art*, largely due to Cole’s activities, was newly formed in February 1852 as the central administration of the Schools of Design, which had existed for 15 years⁷. Cole was named General Superintendent, with Richard Redgrave (1804–1888) as Superintendent. On September 11, Gottfried Semper was named professor for the *Department of Practical Art*. His letter of employment read: “I am directed by the Lords of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade to inform you that they propose to establish a class in order to afford instruction in the principles and practice of Ornamental Art applied to Metal Manufactures, and that they have been pleased to appoint you to conduct the same” (HERMANN, 1978, pp. 70–71).

Henry Cole, Richard Redgrave, and Gottfried Semper endeavored in their publications and in their design activities to bring English design to a higher level. This was not only about form, but also included ornament. Cole, Redgrave, and Semper belonged to the London circle of Prince Albert, although Semper, as active member of the Dresden insurrection of May 1849 against monarchy and thereafter German refugee in France and England, was not allowed – due to political reasons – a direct contact with Queen Victoria’s Prince Consort. Prince Albert’s role as a promoter of industry and the arts can be compared to that of a *spiritus rector*.

Interesting enough, the expression “design” in the modern sense appeared at

6 For this, see: ORELLI-MESSERLI, Barbara von. Gottfried Semper (1803–1879): Die Entwürfe zur dekorativen Kunst, Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2010, p. 386.

7 HERMANN, Wolfgang. Gottfried Semper im Exil: Paris London, 1849–1855. Zur Entstehung des „Stil“, 1840–1877, Bern, Stuttgart: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1978, p. 71.

the same time. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, design in the modern sense has only been connected with decorative art since 1851⁸. In the same year, Richard Redgrave wrote the expression “design” in quotation marks and put it in plural, but the meaning of aesthetically designed form was already present⁹. In respect to ornament he wrote: “Ornament is thus necessarily limited, for, so defined, it cannot be other than secondary, and must not usurp a principal place; if it do so, the object is no longer a work ornamented, but is degraded into a mere *ornament*” (REDGRAVE, 1852, p. 3). He sees the crisis of ornament in that the preeminence of form over ornament is no longer valid: “Now the great tendency of the present time is to reverse this rule; indeed, it is impossible to examine the works of the Great Exhibition without seeing how often utility and construction are made secondary to decoration” (REDGRAVE, 1852, p. 3). Redgrave’s consideration, that “objects of absolute utility where use is so paramount that ornament is repudiated”, that they will remain without any ornamentation, leads—according to Redgrave—to a design of “noble simplicity” (REDGRAVE, 1852, p. 3).

The crisis of ornament was also clearly discussed by Gottfried Semper, the foremost theorist of Prince Albert’s circle. While the general criticism of his time primarily concerned the form and application of ornament, Semper went one step further. He denounced the meaningless application of ornament in mass production, much as, forty years earlier, Percier and Fontaine had done. The aim of Semper’s criticism was to give back to ornament its functional, iconographic, and art historical unity. At this point, Semper went further than Schelling, who called for the inorganic to be seen as an allegory of the organic. In addition to a functionally correct application of decorum, to be found in Antiquity and its models, Semper called for meaningful decorum in architecture and the applied arts. Recalling that the original function of objects had been lost over the times, he wanted to emphasize or clarify the purpose of the object, not only functionally, but also iconographically. It thus appears that Semper saw not only a crisis of ornament due to machine production, but also a crisis of form. Decorum had, according to Semper, to engage in a discourse with the object on which it was applied. In an even more extreme approach to the discussion of ornament, Semper advocated form without ornament: “A form will need ornamental characteristics to complete and complement its expression, the less it satisfies in itself and as such the aesthetic sense [...]” (SEMPER, 1863, § 107, pp. 84–85; see fig. 3). He concedes, though, that in some cases, “equipping them [forms] with such ornaments is often necessary in order to correct certain vaguenesses or certain limits of the pure form and to dissolve those dissonances that are inevitable, even indispensable in higher art works, into rich chords” (SEMPER, 1863, § 107, p. 85).

⁸ See: The Oxford English Dictionary, edited by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 20 vols., (2nd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, vol. 4, p. 519, keyword Design: “7.a. The combination of artistic details or architectural features which go to make up a picture, statue, building, etc.; the artistic idea as executed; a piece of decorative work, an artistic device. [...] 1851. D. Wilson Preh. Ann. (1863) II.III.V. 133 A silver bracelet of rare and most artistic design.”

⁹ REDGRAVE, Richard. Report on Design: Prepared as a supplement to the Report of the Jury of Class XXX of the Exhibition of 1851, at the desire of Her Majesty’s Commissioners, by Richard Redgrave, Esq. R.A. Superintendent of Art in the *Department of Practical Art*, [Reprint from the Original Edition], London 1852, p. 3. – “Design’ has reference to the construction of any work both for use and beauty, and therefore includes its ornamentation also. ‘Ornament’ is merely the decoration of a thing constructed.” Redgrave dated his report November 1851. It was published in the following year (p. 96).

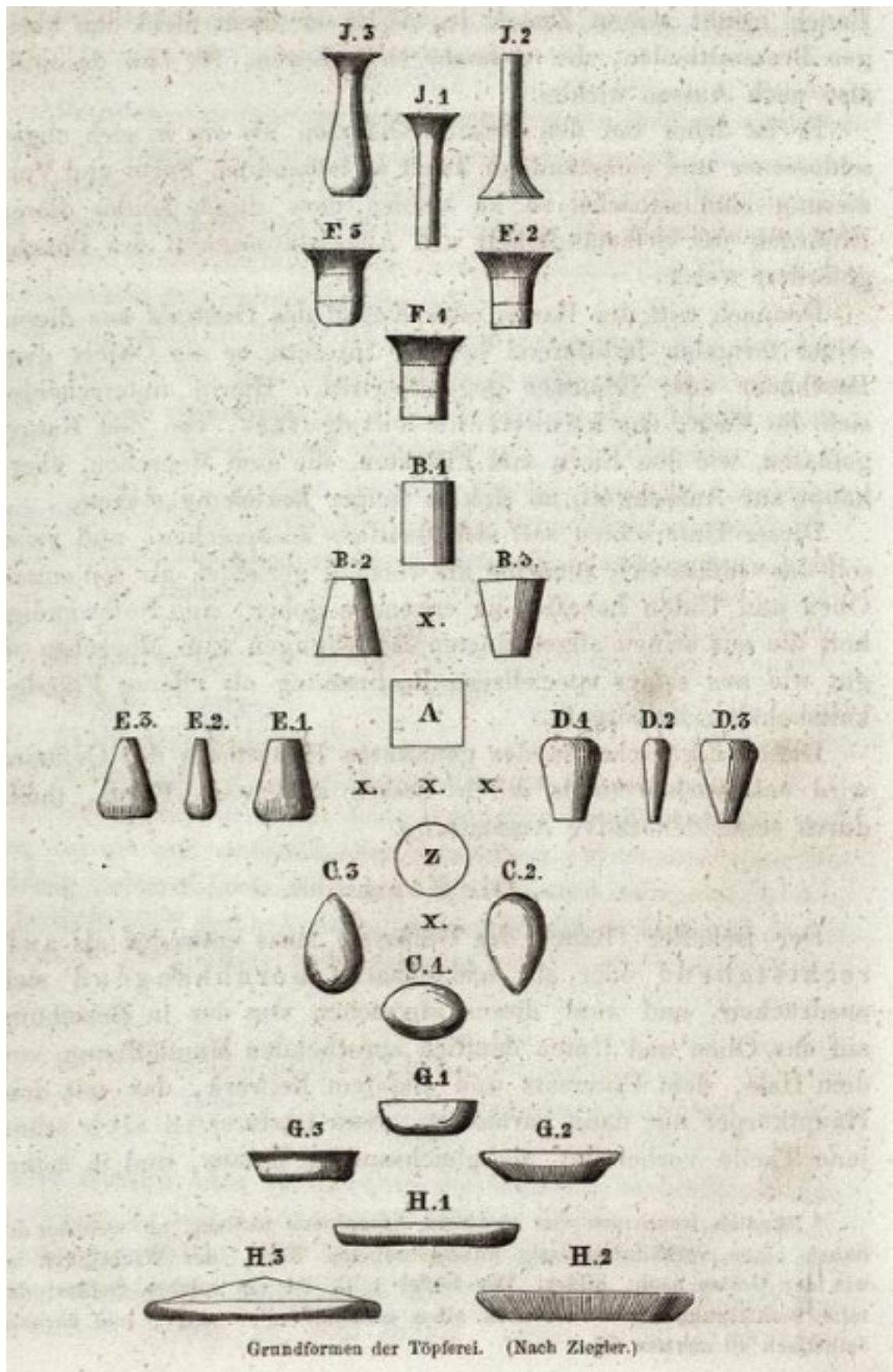


Fig. 3: Gottfried Semper (after Jules-Claude Ziegler): Basic forms of pottery. In: SEMPER, Gottfried. *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten*, 2 vols., vol. 2: *Keramik, Tektonik, Stereotomie, Metallotechnik für sich betrachtet und in Beziehung zur Baukunst*, München: Friedrich Bruckmann's Verlag, 1863, p. 60.

Design without ornament: The case of Christopher Dresser

If thinking of early designers, not only in England, but also in Europe and the United States, we have to mention Christopher Dresser (1834–1904), who can be considered the first designer of industrial products in the current sense¹⁰. Unlike William Morris, who was born in the same year, Dresser approved of machine production standards, and can thus be seen as occupying the position antithetical to Morris, who defended the legacy of handicraft rooted back in the Middle Ages. Accepting the needs and exigencies of a modern, industrial production, Dresser thus profited from the new means of manufacturing. In his studio, he employed twelve assistants and apprentices as well as a manager. At the beginning of his career, Dresser considered himself an “ornamentist,” given his background in botany¹¹. Owen Jones gave him the opportunity to publish a plate “Leaves and flowers from nature no. 8” in his *Grammar of Ornament* (1856; see fig. 4)¹². Dresser’s scientific research in the field of botany, *The Rudiments of Botany*, was published in 1859¹³, and he received his doctoral degree from the University of Jena, Germany, in the winter term of 1859/60 in absentia “in consideration of services he has rendered to the cause of botanical science” (*Art-Journal*, January 1860; quoted in: DURANT, 1993, p. 13). What was the turning point at which Dresser began to create design based on pure form without any ornamentation? A first step in this process can be seen in Dresser’s fascination with the way Japanese artists stylized botanical motifs in decor and ornamentation. The first time he saw a wide range of Japanese objects was at the International Exhibition of 1862 in London, “Britain’s first wide-scale exposure to Japanese objects” (KRAMER, 2009, p. 169). In the publication of the exhibition in 1863, there are plates with specimens of Japanese art, sometimes together with Chinese art¹⁴. The impact of Japanese Art on Dresser can be measured by his decision to purchase objects from the collection of Rutherford Alcock—one of the early Western travelers to Japan—displayed at the 1862 Universal Exhibition. Dresser also made about 80 drawings of the objects exhibited¹⁵. The London exhibition was also the beginning of his artistic analysis of Far Eastern art, as shown by a short article in *The Building News* about his lecture “The Prevailing Ornament of China and Japan” on May 19, 1863, at the Architectural Exhibition of the Department of Science and Art¹⁶.

10 DURANT, Stuart. Christopher Dresser. New York 1993, p. 7. See also: ORELLI-MESSERLI, Barbara von. Japanese Forms and Ornamentation in Early British Design: The Example of Christopher Dresser. In: Christoph Wagner (Ed.). *Word-Image-Assimilations. Japan and Modernity*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 94–111.

11 DRESSER, Christopher. Leaves and flowers from nature no. 8. In: JONES, Owen. *Grammar of ornament*. London 1856, plate XCVIII.

12 JONES, Owen. *Grammar of ornament*, London: Day, 1856, plate XCVIII. 3: “It remains for me to offer my acknowledgement to all those friends who have kindly assisted me in the undertaking. [...] Mr. C. Dresser, of Marlborough House, has provided the interesting plate No. 8 of the twenties chapter, exhibiting the geometrical arrangement of natural flowers.”

13 DRESSER, Christopher. *The rudiments of botany, structural and physiological: being an introduction to the study of the vegetable kingdom, and comprising the advantages of a full glossary of technical terms*. London: James S. Virtue, 1859. For the complete bibliography of Christopher Dresser see: PASCA, Vanni, PIETRONI, Lucia. *Christopher Dresser, 1834–1904. Il primo industrial designer. Per una nuova interpretazione della storia del design*. Con testi allegati di: Henry Cole, Christopher Dresser, Owen Jones, Niklaus Pevsner, Richard Redgrave, Gottfried Semper, Exhib. cat., Milan, 2001.

14 WARING, J. B. *Masterpieces of industrial art & sculpture at the international exhibition, 1862*. 3 vols. London: Day, 1863, vol. 1, plate 248.

15 HALÉN, Widar. Dresser and Japan. In: WHITEWAY, Michael (ed.). *Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser’s Design Revolution*. New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum (et al.), 2004, p. 128.

16 DRESSER, Christopher. *The Prevailing Ornament of China and Japan*. Lecture at the Architectural Exhibition of the Department of Science and Art. Reported in: *The Building News*, London, Friday, May 22, 1863, p. 387.



Fig. 4: Christopher Dresser: Leaves and flowers from nature. In: Owen Jones, *Grammar of Ornament*, London: Day, 1856, plate no. 8.

The next milestone in Dresser's study of Japanese art was his journey to Japan; he arrived in Japan in December 1876 and lived there for three months. During his stay, he compiled photographs, drawings, and objects, and Dresser published his book on

Japan in 1883¹⁷, which resonated widely and was reviewed in the *New York Times*¹⁸. After his journey to Japan, Dresser's designs developed that pure form, without any ornament, which stuns us even today. Foremost in metalwork, he designed toast holders, teapots, and other objects for daily use without any ornament, displaying strong and clear forms, pretending a functionality that is, in reality, not always given (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Christopher Dresser: Teapot, 1879, Electroplated nickel silver with ebony handle, made by James Dixon and Sons, 1879. Victoria & Albert Museum, inv. no. M.4-2006.

Ornament becomes art

At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, one notices a unique situation concerning ornament in applied arts and architecture. Art Nouveau ornament took a genre-specific hurdle by and found its way into painting. During the 19th century, ornament was primarily limited to the genres of architecture and applied arts, it developed a new impact in the autonomous, purposeless arts such as painting, graphic art and sculpture, where it took the role of a pacemaker which can also be defined as the emancipation of ornament. Markus Bröderlin pointed out the importance of ornament for the development of abstract art, citing František Kupka and Henri Matisse, and could take this strand of art history to the present day¹⁹.

17 DRESSER, Christopher. *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Manufactures*, London, New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1882 (reprint Bristol: Ganesha, 1999. (Series: Japanese Art and Japonism, vol. 3).

18 *New York Times*, December 17, 1882, p. 6; quoted from: HALÉN, Widar, 2004, p. 138. DURANT, Stuart, 1993, p. 7.

19 See for this: BRÜDERLIN, Markus (ed.). *Ornament und Abstraktion: Kunst der Kulturen, Moderne und Gegenwart im Dialog*, Exhibition Catalogue, Fondation

The high tide of Art Nouveau ended around 1910, when another crisis of ornament emerged, opposing Modernism and Art Deco. This clash of cultures still has repercussions in research work today; in German-speaking countries, for example, art historic research has largely banned the term Art Deco from its vocabulary, describing it with the prefix neo—thus we find buildings named neo-Greek, neo-baroque, or neo-classical, but which can generally be attributed to Art Deco. Guy Amsellem rightly reminds us, “A complex and multiform movement, Art Deco concentrates stylistic, aesthetic and historiographical challenges” (AMSELLEM, 2013, Introduction. In: BRÉON, RIVOIRARD, Philippe, 2013). Examples of this phenomenon are the Zurich *Kunsthhaus* (1907/1910) and the main building of the University of Zurich (1909/1914), both of which were designed by the Swiss architect Karl Moser (1860–1836). The *Kunsthhaus* is categorized by Ulrike Jehle-Schulte Strathaus as “Secessionist” (JEHLE-SCHULTE STRATHAUS, 1983, p. 41)—that is to say, with influences coming from the Vienna Secessionist Movement. Traditionally, the university building is seen as a follow-up of the German *Jugendstil* (Art Nouveau) and especially of the *Karlsruher Schule* (School of Karlsruhe), a town where, at the beginning of the 20th century, Curjel & Moser had their architectural practice and offices²⁰.

In this context, it is still necessary to investigate and analyze the connections between Karl Moser and the French architect Auguste Perret (1874–1954), not least because Perret’s *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* had an undeniable influence on Moser’s *Kunsthhaus* (figs. 6 and 7). The main façade of the university building—in its classical attitude as well as the sculpted figures within and without—give us clear suggestions of French Art Deco. Other influences can be presumed to come from Vienna and the *Wiener Werkstätte GmbH*. In denying these intrinsic affiliations, a deeper understanding of the ornamentation of this building is not possible, as shown by recent publications: “Lush swelling volumes and a baroque-like abundance of shapes break out of the facades in some places and proliferate around isolated doors and windows with a surreal self-magnificence that mocks every plausible representative function” (MÜLLER, 2014, p. 310). In French-speaking areas, however, art history has already shown the global impact of Art Deco, which began deploying its new design language about 1911 and clearly emerged with Auguste Perret’s *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*²¹.

Stanislaus von Moos and Sonja Hildebrand were quite conscious of the complex relationship between architecture and ornamentation in their discussion of the University of Zurich main building; They drew attention to the unassertive manner in which the architecture of Karl Moser found its way into Swiss architectural history: “Was this related to the tendency at the Swiss Institute of Technology to see 20th century architecture through the glasses of New Building [Modernism]? Which would then also justify the prejudice common among architects that ‘pre-modern’ – as the expression already testifies – is at best relevant as a historical interlude” (MOOS, HILDEBRAND, 2014, p. 14).

Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Cologne 2001.

20 MOOS, Stanislaus von, HILDEBRAND, Sonja (éds.). *Das Zürcher Universitätsgebäude von Karl Moser*, Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014, p. 120.

21 BRÉON, Emmanuel, RIVOIRARD, Philippe (eds.). *1925, quand l'Art déco séduisit le monde*, Paris: Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Norma, 2013.



Fig. 6: August Perret: Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 1911/1913.



Fig. 7: Karl Moser: *Kunsthaus Zurich*, 1911.

The consequences of this questioning, however, could appear more clearly, and we hope that normative architecture found its closing stages with the ending of Modernism, not only in architecture, but also in architectural history. The merging of Art Deco (as architecture with ornament) and Modernism (as architecture without ornament) and the branching out of the latter as the Leitmotiv in the architecture of the second and third quarter of the 20th century requires further research.

Ornament is dead: Adolf Loos and his 1908 lecture

In the period following Art Nouveau, two divergent and disputing artistic movements can be identified in architecture and the applied arts. The interest of the bourgeois classes in Art Nouveau waned as early as 1905, but a new design language did not appear until around 1911 with Perret's *Théâtre de Champs-Élysées*. On its inauguration on March 31, 1913, the new art movement, Art Deco, had definitely gained a foothold in France and begun its global triumph. Architecture was not the field affected—Art Deco found its way into all areas of life, including purpose-based art and interior design, autonomous art such as painting, sculpture and graphics, and also into fashion and transportation. One characteristic of this art movement is ornament and, where it could not be attached, such as in the case of airplanes, railway trains, automobiles, and ships, the outlines of the design were stylized as ornaments.

The beginning of the crisis of ornament in the 20th century is usually ascribed to Adolf Loos (1870–1933) and his 1908 lecture "Ornament and Crime" in Munich²². Loos stated that, for him, the evolution of culture meant the elimination of ornament from all everyday objects and he never deviated from this position²³. His Munich talk was first published in French in *Les Cahiers d'aujourd'hui* in June 1913 with the title *Ornement et Crime*²⁴; Perret's *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* had featured its first concert only two months earlier on April 1, 1913, with contemporary music from five of the foremost French composers of the time—Claude Debussy, Paul Dukas, Gabriel Fauré, Vincent d'Indy, and Camille Saint-Saëns. The article of Loos was thus a formal declaration of war against Art Deco and ornament. His article was published a second time in France in 1920, in Le Corbusier's revue *L'Esprit nouveau*. In his foreword, the editor praised Loos:

Mr. Loos is one of the precursors of the new spirit. In 1900, already, when the enthusiasm for modern style was in full swing, in this period of excessive décor and its untimely intrusion of Art in everything, Mr. Loos, clear and original spirit, began his protests against the futility of such tendencies. One of the first to have sensed the greatness of the industry and its contributions in aesthetics, he had started to proclaim certain truths which seem today still revolutionary or paradoxical. (LE CORBUSIER, 1920, p. 159)

Loos was not the first to initiate a period without ornamentation; Hermann Muthesius (1861–1927) had already pushed for the objectification of art in 1902, observing that the art of his time should now emphasize the useful, the sober, and the undecorated. Modernism—the new art and architectural movement—was clearly revealed at the 1914 exhibition of the German Werkbund, founded in Cologne seven years earlier. In his lecture at the University of Zurich, Bernd Nicolai also referred to it as the "litmus test of the modernity" (NICOLAI, 2014). The Cologne exhibitions not only hi-

22 See: Orelli-Messerli, Barbara von. Ornament und Verbrechen. Adolf Loos' kontroverser Vortrag. In: Josette Baer, Wolfgang Rother. Verbrechen und Strafe. Basel: Colmena, 2016, pp.79-95.

23 LOOS, Adolf. Ornament und Verbrechen. In: IDEM., Gesammelte Schriften, hrsg. von Adolf Opel, Wien 2010, S. 363–373. (First publication in German in: Frankfurter Zeitung, October 14, 1929).

24 LOOS, Adolf. Ornement et Crime. In: Les Cahiers d'aujourd'hui, publiés sous la direction de George Besson de 1920 à 1924, Paris: Éditions G. Crès, no. 5, June 1913.

ghlighted the tensions within the discourse of German art and architecture, but also within the broader European discourse. This dispute swayed between the representatives of individualism, with Henry van de Velde (1863–1957) as the standard-bearer, and the representatives of standardization, with Muthesius as the main spokesman.

From the present perspective, the Cologne dispute and the supposed incompatibility of the positions of Art Deco and Modernism must be seen in a new light²⁵. Here, too, this controversy between architects and designers can still be felt in the 21st century. In the comprehensive overview by Maria Ocón Fernández, *Ornament und Moderne* (2004), the expression “Art Deco” cannot be found, and in this context refers to “expressionism.” Ocón Fernández sees this art movement as a consequence of losing the war and the revolutionary mood in Germany²⁶. In 1924, the *Deutsche Werkbund exhibition Die Form* (The Form) took place in Stuttgart, organized by the regional association of the Werkbund. An accompanying publication is explicitly titled *Form without Ornament (Form ohne Ornament)*. In Switzerland, Alfred Altherr (1911–1972), architect and museum director, organized two exhibitions in 1927 with the title *Form without Ornament* in the museums of handicraft (*Gewerbemuseum*) in Zurich and Winterthur, showing that the crisis of ornament had also reached Switzerland²⁷.

The antonymic relationship between Art Deco and Modernism was noticed in France, too. In 1925, the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris*—which gave the name Art Deco to this movement—was organized by the French Ministry of Commerce, Industry, Post, and Telegraphs. Le Corbusier’s participation in this event had long been planned, because the exhibition management had commissioned him to build the “house of an architect.” Le Corbusier questioned this assignment, as he did not want to build a house just for an architect, but for everyone. When Le Corbusier’s design was available, however, it was clear to everyone involved that this was not a house that paid homage to the decorative arts, but rather questioned them. This led to divergences between Le Corbusier and the exhibition management, which could only be overcome with the intervention of the Minister of Culture, Charles de Monzie²⁸.

Sigfried Giedion recognized that in architecture, Art Deco and Modernism had their origins in the industrial development around 1830²⁹. He chose the factor of “construction”—namely in iron and concrete—as the common basis for various architectural trends and was thus able to present the different architectural positions of his time, as exemplified by Perret or Le Corbusier, and designate them within the great stream of development in architecture³⁰. In his book *Bauen in Frankreich. Eisen.*

25 See for this: Art Deco by the Sea, exhibition at Sainsbury Center. HEATHCOTE, Edwin. All hands on Deco. In: Financial Time, House & Home, FT Weekend, February 29/March 1, 2020, p. 2.

26 OCÓN FERNÁNDEZ, 2004, p. 53.

27 Form ohne Ornament, exhibition at the Gewerbemuseum Winterthur, April 24 – June 4, 1927. For this, see: MESSERLI-BOLLIGER (ORELLI, Barbara von). Paul-Ami Bonifas: The Necessity of Unity. In: The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, Issue 19/Swiss Theme Issue, published by the Wolfson Foundation of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, Miami Fla. 1993, pp. 42–53, esp. pp. 43–44, fig. p. 46.

28 MOOS, Stanislaus von. Le Corbusier. Elemente einer Synthese, Frauenfeld, Stuttgart: Huber, 1968, pp. 96–99 (Pavillon de L’Esprit Nouveau).

29 GIEDION, Sigfried. Bauen in Frankreich. Eisen. Eisenbeton, Leipzig, Berlin: Klinckschardt & Biermann, 1928, p. 2.

30 GIEDION, 1928, p. 2.

Eisenbeton (1928), however, he later discusses the divergence of the two mainstreams, Modernism and Art Deco, which he describes as the functional architecture of rationalism and academism, respectively. For Giedion, the divergences of Art Deco and Modernism were based on a generation gap: Auguste and Gustave Perret (as well as Tony Garnier, the architect of the Paris opera building), were bound to the classic French ideal in their design (i.e., Art Deco), which, according to Giedion, in their application showed their limits as architects³¹.

Modernism and Art Deco, architecture without and with ornament, subsequently became a matter of belief among architects. The banishment of ornament was a decided fact for the representatives of Modernism, while architects building in the Art Deco style were quite interested in the technical innovations described by Giedion and applied such innovations in their own buildings. As a result, both Modernism and Art Deco developed into international movements. Thanks to ornament, Art Deco became easier to disseminate in East Asia. Modernism ended, according to Charles Jencks, with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project (architect Minoru Yamasaki) in St. Louis. Jencks commented: "Modernist architecture died in St Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3.32 pm (or thereabouts)" (HEATHCOTE, 2019, p. 7).

Modernism did not extinguish ornament; as mentioned earlier, ornament came back in architecture as well as in art, like waves hitting the shore, indelibly, as a sort of law of nature. There has been a fundamental change, however: ornament is no longer additive, something put on, but an intrinsic part of architecture and design. Herzog & de Meuron, the globally renowned architects located in Basel, Switzerland, are an example of this, having gained "an international reputation for the exquisite ornamentation and detailing of its Modernist buildings" (LUBOW, 2006). Ornamentation is even more visible in the Eberswalde Technical School Library (1997), designed by the same architects. The artist Thomas Ruff composed a façade that gave the building the allure of a printed concrete-cube: "Dusseldorf artist Thomas Ruff, who has been working with Herzog & de Meuron since 1991, has been collecting pictures from newspapers for a long time: 'I find the gray, rasterized newspaper photos beautiful things that I like to cut out.' He chose the motifs from his archive that relate to the location and the teaching content of the Eberswalde University of Applied Sciences. The concrete slabs were printed using a screen printing process" (BETON, *Bedruckter Betonkubus*). The repetition of the rasterized newspaper photos forms horizontal lines on the façade and are thus perceived as ornament. Another hint of ornamentation is given by the open work structure of the wall in the National Stadium (2006) in Beijing by Herzog & de Meuron. Indeed, we find other buildings using such open work design, including the entry of the underground multi-story car park on the square of the Opera in Zurich by Zach + Zünd architects (2012; fig. 8) or the building by Burckhardt and Partner (2014) in the Flon quarter in Lausanne (fig. 9). Ornament has definitely made a comeback.

³¹ GIEDION, 1928, p. 69.



Fig. 8: Zach + Zünd Architects: Multi-story car park, Opéra in Zurich (2012).



Fig. 9: Burckhardt + Partner SA: Les Pépinières (2014), Esplanade du Flon, Côtes-de-Montbenon 20, Lausanne.

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