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“THE FORMATION OF ORNAMENT”

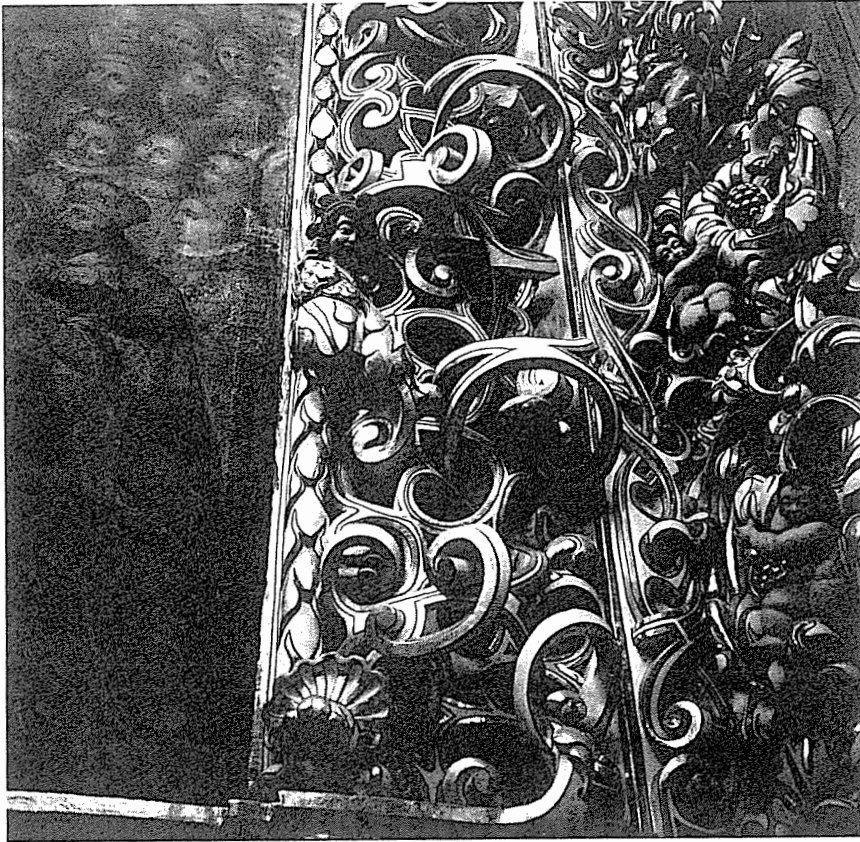


Fig. 8. Motif mexicain, chapelle du Rosaire, église Santo Domingo (XVIII^e siècle), Puebla, photo K. B.

THE FORMATION OF ORNAMENT

Grecian frieze, Chinese volute, Pre-Columbian spiral, interlaces, scrolls, palmettes... Beneath these figures the prime function of ornament remains: to arrange, scan or underscore passages between inside and outside, here and there, the natural and the artificial.

In the early years of my practice I became fascinated by the border designs of traditional carpets. They usually have repetitive figuration which flip-flops alongside the edges. If we imagine that figuration to be dynamic it appears to be simultaneously pushing inward and outward. The borders are like the ambivalent zones of combat which engage forces and figures impinging from both sides. Eventually I realized that those border patterns reveal the most essential function of ornament which is to mediate between different things, forces, and domains such as inside/outside; here/there; natural and artificial. The art of the border pattern flourishes when it articulates the lively psychological activity occurring within the interstices of transitional space. Great ornament also manages to establish moments of repose.

The ancient Greek function of ornament, and I presume today's function as well, was to succeed chaos and make "kosmos" visible. Within a chaotic world picture the ancients perceived the elements as being scattered, unlimited, and disorderly. Along the borders of their amphorae and temples figments of those disparate elements could be momentarily gathered and rhythmically organized.

Triumphing of chaos

While the most ancient formations of ornament were quite simple, perhaps just a series of marks or zigzags. More complex patterns developed over time. Spirals and interlaces allowed the line work to display more directions of movement. It is interesting to note that most cultures produced formations that seem to be fundamentally similar regardless of national origin, epoch, or politics. The line work is almost always organized by a remarkably limited and discrete set of motions and shapes. Indeed the motility of border ornament seems to rely on an inventory of symmetry operations such as translation, zigzag, rotation, the spiral, and the interlace. In the most sophisticated examples those operations are driven by the syncopation of rhythm rather than the monotony of regular

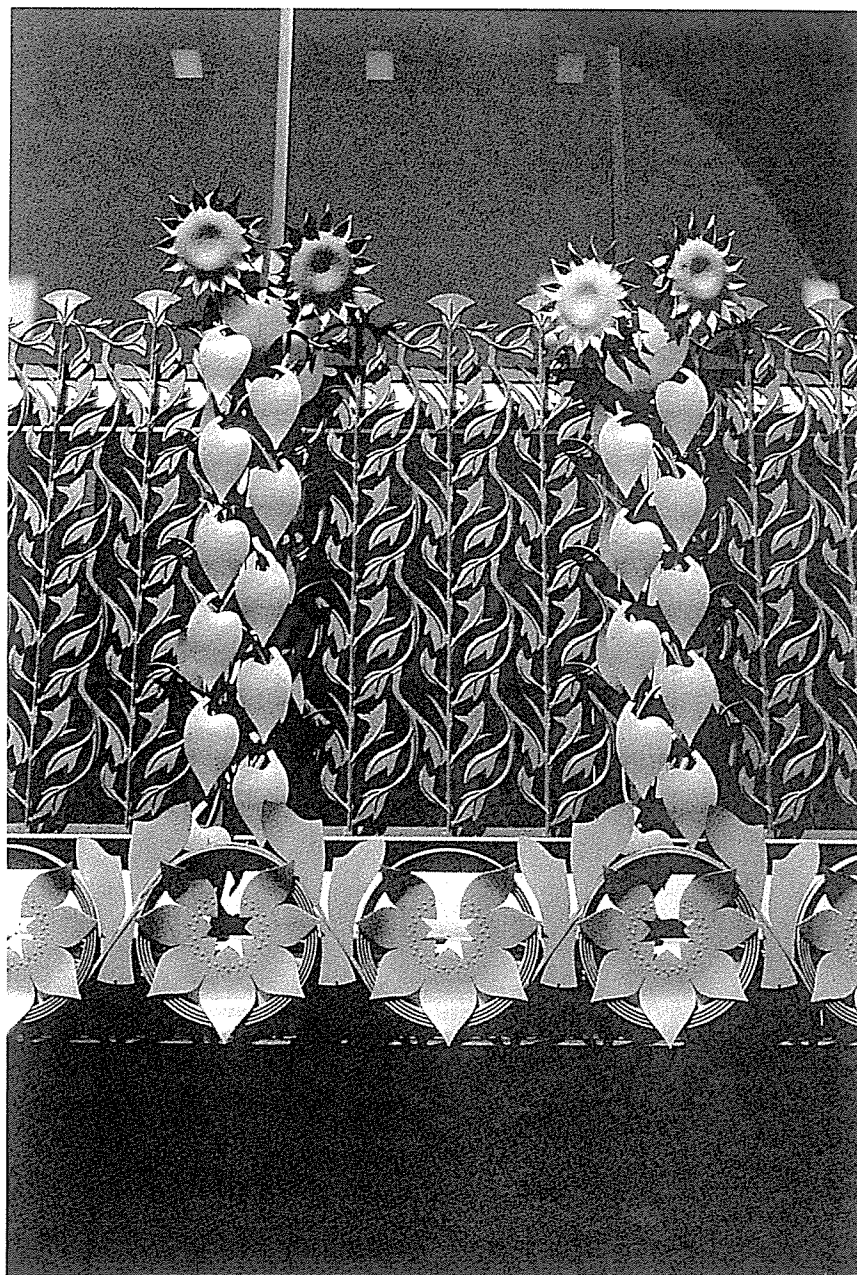
repetition. As ornament reached its highest levels of expression among most great traditions certain motives, such as conventionalized serpents, or the lotus and acanthus were included. The motives, in addition to articulating local meanings, manifested microcosmic gestures of radiance, convergence, opening and closing. Let us assume that visual ornament consists of its basic motility and its particular motives.

The range of motifs in a universal grammar

If we compare ornament to spoken language we might regard its motility as its "grammar" and its motives as its "vocabulary". Its grammar is primarily gestural and abstract as it inflects, relates, and combines the elements of vocabulary which are more pictographic and evocative of specific things that appear to have originated in the world-at-large. The grammar of ornament, like the grammar of speech, appears to be innate and universal while its vocabulary is more culturally specific and must be learned like the words of spoken language. Let me try to illustrate these fundamental ideas by reviewing several outstanding examples of ancient ornament.

The universality of ornament's grammar is evident in the frets or keys (fig. 1) belonging to three major world cultures. All three have geometrized scrolls, regular

Fig. 13. Treillis, université de l'État du Kansas, États-Unis, 1992, architectes : Th. Beeby (HBA) et B. Bowman (BBA), ornemaniste : Kent Bloomer, photo K. B.



repeats, and absolute bi-axial symmetry; yet the Greek exhibits a rigorous geometric idea (the regular grid); the Chinese can be distilled into the cosmology of Yin-Yang; and the Mexican introduces the step figure as a sort of vibration between the spirals. The Mexican formation seems to be especially Mexican in spirit when we recall their stepped pyramids and observe the rhythms of their native dances. In these keys the "vocabulary" is inextricably imbedded in the "grammar." By contrast most refined examples of ornament are less abstract and much more regionally specific by incorporating a more explicit and evocative vocabulary. For example, in the ancient Necropolis at Thebes we find the wave and the scroll (fig. 2) accompanied by flip-flopping lotuses which emerge out of cusps. The spirals contain a plan of the lotus. The entire formation repeats along a border. At about the same time zigzags and spirals governed the ornament of the Ting Dynasty (fig. 3) of China. Growth-like figures also emerge from the cusp between scrolls. The border upon a ritual disc (fig. 4) in China has all the features of wave and scroll but with the more pictographic evocation of a serpent's head whose writhing body interweaves with geometric arms. In ancient Panama a serpent motif emerges out of scrolling line work which repeats along

the border of a bowl (fig. 5). The exchange between figure and ground is particularly powerful in the Panamanian example. Upon an Attic bowl from Aegina (fig. 6) the waves, flip-flops, lotuses and palmettes appear in a more elaborate interlace with the spirals capriciously exploring space.

I emphasize the formation of ancient ornament because it is seminal and therefore instructive. The repetitive wave and scroll continued to organize the motives on great border ornament for thousand of years. A few

examples should be sufficient to reveal its phoenix-like ability to articulate local cultures. For instance the motives of Renaissance engravers included varieties of leaf-animals, which as metamorphoses, manifest that period's fascination with the grotesque. Vico's scroll (fig. 7) is a monster created by a modern "individual" who could find fantastic freedom in the line work of conventional ornament, an escapade lacking in the mainstream of sixteenth-century painting and sculpture. In mid-eighteenth century Mexico native artisans

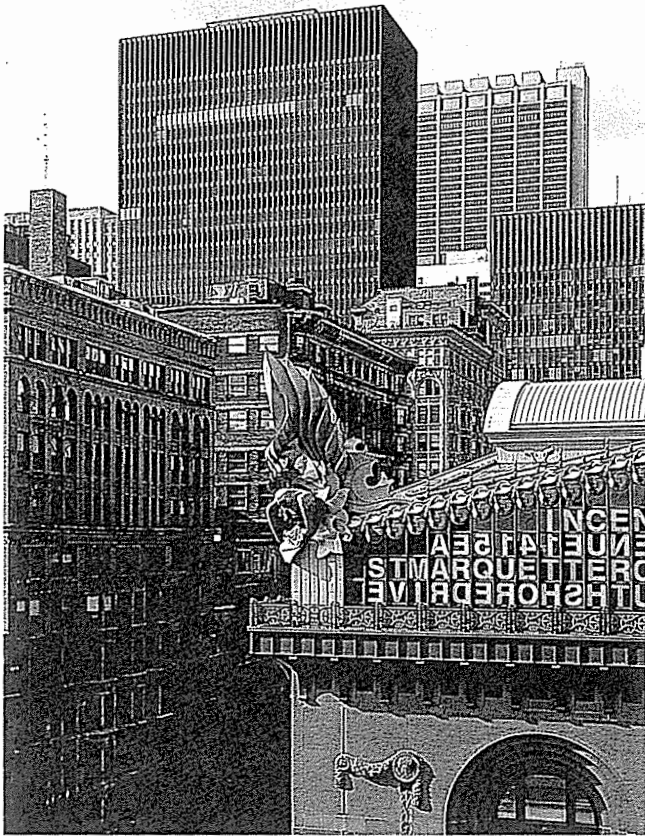


Fig. 11. Bibliothèque Harold P. Washington, Chicago, États-Unis, architecte: Th. Beeby (HBA), ornementiste: Kent Bloomer, 1992. Photo: Judith Bromley
Fig. 12. Détail de l'ornement, photo: K. B.

explored the motility of the rhythmized wave and scroll (which were probably shown to them by their Dominican clients) to produce one of the most beautiful border ornaments in the western hemisphere (fig. 8). The three-dimensional line work fashioned from plaster and wattle would be difficult to surpass in any great tradition of ornament. The local motive includes a pregnant sea-nymph, with a particularly native facial expression, dripping with fertile foliage. Is it possible that the vital pulsation of rhythm within a system of scrolling ornament managed to liberate the imaginations of both the urbane Italian and provincial Mexican artisans in a psychologically similar way?

Louis Sullivan's 'mobile balance'

Louis Sullivan, the greatest master of American ornament, distributed oak leaves and captured circular glass windows on the attic frieze (fig. 9) of the seminal American tall building or proto-skyscraper. His interweaves are both grotesque and beautiful as Sullivan achieved what he described to be the "mobile-equilibrium" of ornament. This is the work of a modern architect who understood the universal motility of ornament as well as its critical location along the borders of objects. But his ornament was not sufficiently intelligible to nourish future generations throughout the twentieth century. He declared at the end of his life that his primary motive was the germ-seed, which he regarded as an icon of man's intelligence. But was this motive readily understood or is it esoteric? If we believe that the lotus was an intelligible motive to the ancient Egyptian elect, can we assume as much for Sullivan's germ seed in the eye of the modern public? This question is reminiscent of the old twentieth-century debates about 'abstraction vs. representation' or the significance of unconscious vs. conscious percepts in modern art. However, if the history of ornament is our mentor, we must conclude that the grammar of ornament is abstract (i.e. its motility is only a bearer of meaning) and its vocabulary is representational (or at least intelligibly evocative of something like a serpent, lotus, or sea-nymph). Indeed, representational motives, even if they are extremely local or trivial in content, can make conventional ornament understandable. The value of that intelligibility must ultimately be determined by the client or the constituency.

Making the context legible

In 1964 I produced my first intelligibility failure as an "ornementer" (fig. 10). I understood the importance of rhythm and the significance of the moment of entrance as a transitional space, but my devotion to abstract sculpture, Brancusi in particular, diverted me from incorporating a legible motive and the work received the silence it evidently produced (although it still stands and has even been restored).

Some recent works have been more intelligible if judged by the intensity of public interest and review. The roof ornaments (figs 11 & 12) of the Harold Washington Library Center in Chicago benefit from a neo-classical language of architecture in which there is a recollection and conventional expectation that something extraor-

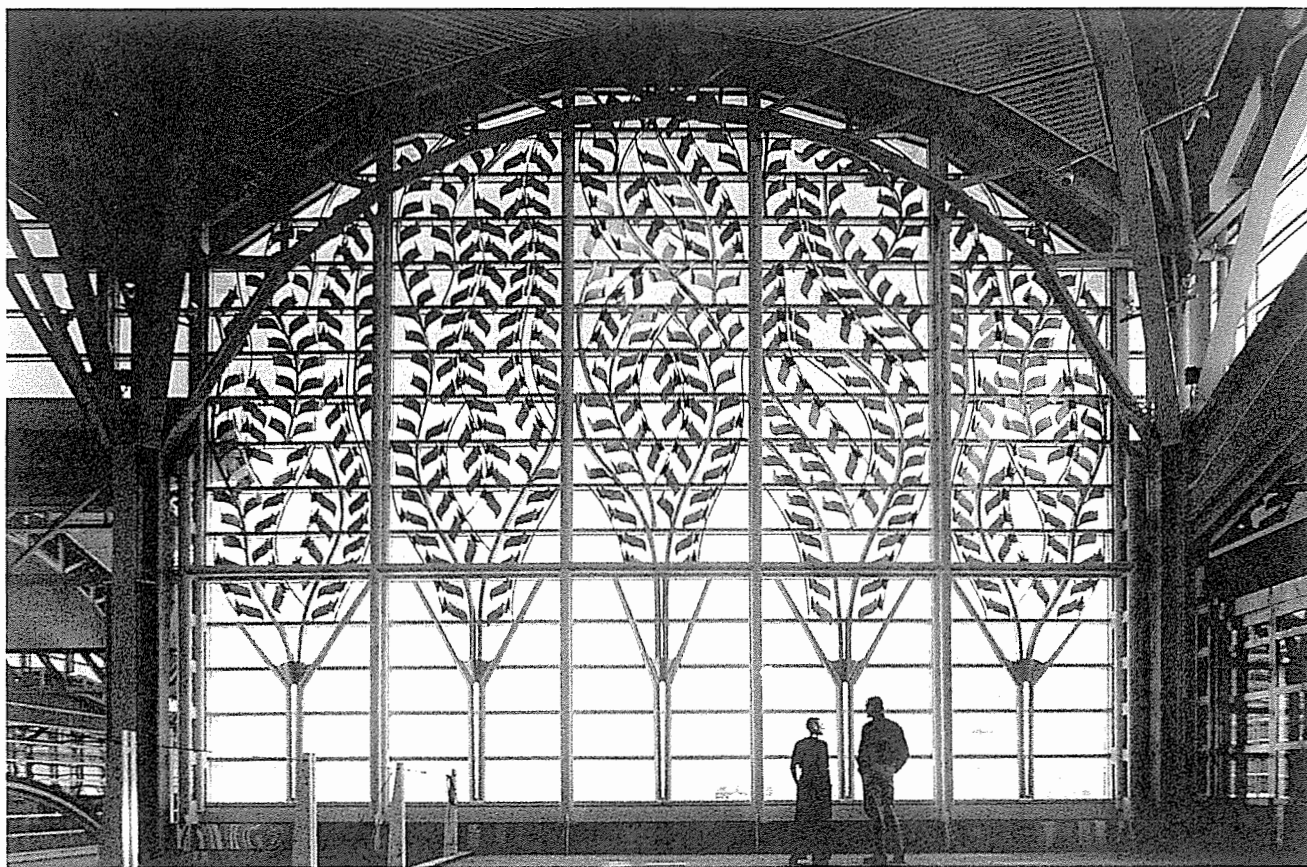


Fig. 14. Treillis pour l'aéroport national de Washington, architecte : Cesar Pelli & Ass., ornemaniste : Kent Bloomer, 1992. Photo : Jeff Goldberg/Esto

dinary can happen in the upper reaches of a building. In this project there was reliance upon traditional style. The grammar of the ornament was readily understood by the owners who also demanded an intelligible motive. The selection of owls, whose nocturnal habits are associated with scholarship, was approved while the hint of the federal eagle or a Chicago Indian head was rejected. My personal desire to incorporate giant winged seedpods on the sides (in homage to Sullivan) was allowed and is enjoyed by the public but remains opaque as an article of meaning. The entire design is identified in popular parlance as "the owls," despite their minute presence in the composition.

The procedure of incorporating a very small amount of representational vocabulary elements into a large field of grammatical elements (continuous repetitions, flip-flops, rotations, scrolls) provided an intelligible work of ornament (fig. 13) for a community at Kansas State University. The sunflower is the emblem of a state situated in a great prairie. Because ornament serves to mediate between things it must visually identify the subjects of mediation that originate both inside and outside its formation. A particular motive like the sunflower has nothing to do with building construction per se, but rather participates in a heterogeneous moment into which disparate things are admitted and combined. One of the disparate things is the object of ornamentation itself. In the matter of architecture, a building may be a technically complete object but it is also a fragment of the urban and cultural context. The physical building in its entirety or

in some of its parts must therefore be one of the subjects of mediation to be identified and made legible in the cauldron of architectural ornament. This principle is evident in the classical orders of architecture in which the column is conspicuous. Indeed architectural ornament must illuminate certain inherent elements of the material building in order to mediate with other elements beyond the building.

Along the bottom of the end wall trellis (fig. 14) in the airport at Washington, D.C., a virtual arcade is configured to mimic the primary columns and roof trusses that constitute the body of the architecture. The representation of the architectural body inside the line work of ornament is an old gothic strategy. By contrast, the evocation of leaves and birds along the tracery reflects the natural world "outside" as it simultaneously fuels the rhythm constituting the fundamental grammar of ornament.

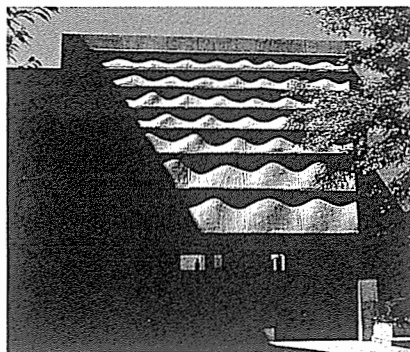


Fig. 10. Temple Rodef Shalem, Pittsburgh, 1964, photo K.B.