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**“A CRITICAL DISTINCTION  
BETWEEN DECORATION AND ORNAMENT”**

## A Critical Distinction Between Decoration and Ornament

Today the terms 'decoration' and 'ornament' are often used interchangeably, as they have been over the centuries. That confuses the modern debate on these subjects. Modernity inherited the terms; we would hardly be able to invent them today. They come to us with a primal originality and an authoritative tradition manifest within the literature and history of material culture. To make matters worse, since World War II, especially within the academic halls of art and architecture, both these—and ornament in particular—have been cast in a pejorative light, if cast at all. Now we have to control the damage, and may benefit from erring in the direction of tightening, rather than loosening, some defining features.

One distinction between the two can be briefly summarized by proposing that decoration is a pleasurable arrangement of elements that articulate societal values, order, and beauty, while ornament is constituted by motifs that are repetitively distributed about structural and decorative elements to evoke natural cycles, efflorescence, and transformation. Thus, while decoration visualizes a human dreamscape by assembling scenic furnishings to mark and enhance the rituals of domestic and civic space, ornament alludes to a rhythmized presence of nature wandering within the basic physical framework of design. Their visual contents perform differently as they mimic formations innate to distinct worlds of the imagination.

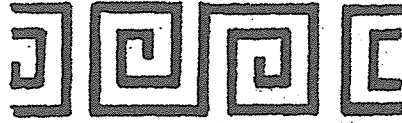
Let's explore their etymology. The Latin *decorum* is a literary standard of propriety which refers to good taste, proper custom, conduct, and correct manner. Arguably decor is the visible manifestation of a beautiful order inherent in decorum. The French words *de cour* mean "of the court" where we might imagine the social ranking of persons and things in a banquet hall visibly expressed through the composition of furnishings, colors, table settings and elements of architecture. Of course, figures of ornament may be distributed amongst elements of decoration and thus contextually be described as elements of decoration, i.e. as 'decorative elements.' However, decoration, understood in its full sense, embellishes the totality of a place with decorum in mind, while ornament performs as a detail with nature in mind.

The etymology of the term 'ornament' is more difficult to excavate. The term translates directly into neither ancient Greek literature nor the Chinese language. To further cloud matters, many written texts in the west (including contemporary dictionaries) indiscriminately interchange the function of ornament with that of decoration, suggesting that they are one and the same. In some respects this confusion is understandable. For example, in archaic Latin *ornamentum* is the product of *ornare* which denotes a function, i.e. to equip a building or person so that they are prepared to honor the god.<sup>1</sup> This usage is significant because it claims, early on, that ornament is auxiliary and requires a recipient, i.e. a person, building, or place to be ornamented. This also suggests that the ornament, once delivered, becomes a property of the fully-equipped person or building. This is a combinatory condition in which some thing(s) which originated outside the body work together with some thing(s) which originated inside to constitute the completed work. Such a hybrid state admittedly exists in the decorated object as well, in which markings of a societal order may be understood as "equipment" that has been superimposed upon the economic physical form of a place. But the archaic meaning of the term "equipment" is insufficient for our purpose.

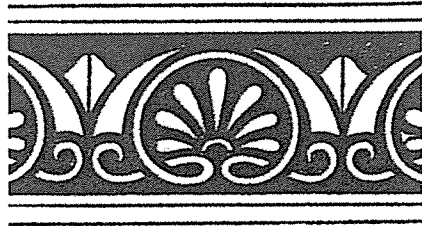
The difficulty of assigning ornament a tougher and more specific identity, one distinct from decoration, was largely overcome during the nineteenth century when figures found on ancient ceramics and textiles, for example, were archeologically examined in the light of world cultures other than the early Greeks. Repetitive and zigzag line work both dominated the earliest examples and was observed to persist over time. Key visual elements distributed in rhythmized sequence were recognized as seminal tropes that were seen to constitute a particular and clearly trans-cultural type of visual notation unlike any other in the lexicon of visual art and language. It is noteworthy that configurations of ornament in antiquity (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4) existed alongside and in addition to picture-language, sophisticated works of painting and sculpture (today regarded as 'art'), and hieroglyphic writing (now obsolete). By the mid-nineteenth-century encyclo-



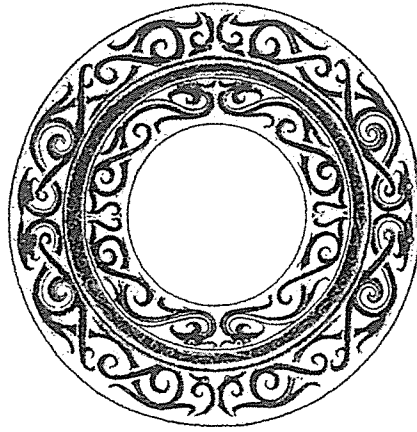
1. Greek Key, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



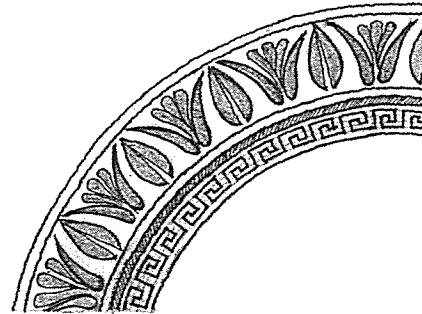
2. Chinese Key, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



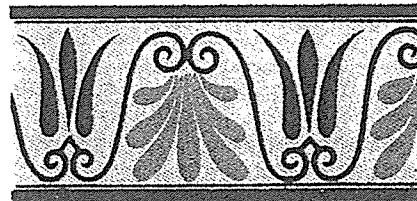
3. Greek foliate motif, drawing by Kent Bloomer after Riegl, Problems of Style.



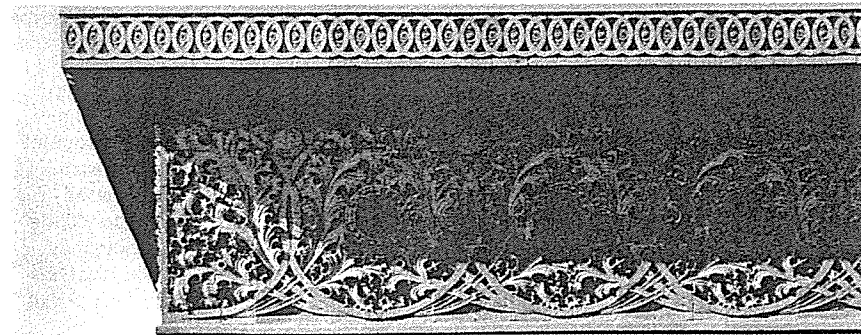
4. Chinese serpent motif, drawing by Kent Bloomer from collection, Kent Bloomer.



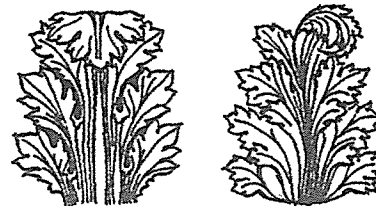
5. Bud and blossom, drawing by Kent Bloomer after Riegl, Problems of Style.



6. Classic foliated scroll, from Owen Jones, The Grammar of Ornament.



7. Sullivan, "Wainwright" photograph by Cervin Robinson.



8. Artificial acanthus, drawing by Kent Bloomer.

pedias of world ornament were published (Owen Jones<sup>2</sup>, Racinet<sup>3</sup>, Dolmetsch<sup>4</sup>...) in which repetitive figurations and their motifs were illustrated. Eventually theories about their origin and meaningful content popped up (Ruskin<sup>5</sup>, Dresser<sup>6</sup>, Semper<sup>7</sup>...). By the end of that century, Alois Riegl<sup>8</sup> succeeded in founding the armature for a history and theory of ornament in its own right. The hallmark of this accomplishment was Riegl's observation that ornament possessed an "unbroken historical continuity ... of the endless, tireless, compulsive reiteration of a very few fundamental motifs."<sup>9</sup> That severe limitation differed from the more general panoply of visual stuff such as emblems, icons, symbols, colors, words, textures, portraits, furnishings, and so forth, used by decoration to provide a specific and pleasing spectacle of society. Indeed, Riegl's observations underline the extent to which the basic moves governing ornament are apolitical, similar to the fundamental motifs found in music and dance. They only become politicized when their subordinate presence is implicated with the contents of larger and commanding decorative schemes in which they appear to function as supporting elements.

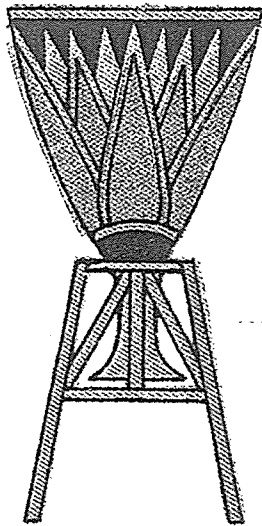
Riegl's study of "vegetal" ornament, which is the dominant motif in Western ornament, traces its beginnings to the funerary decoration of the Theban Tombs in the sixteenth century BC. Along the edges of the ancient funerary paintings and carvings, the repeating bud-blossom motif (Figure 5), representative of the procreative birth-death cycle (found also in the egg and dart) anticipates the foliated scrollwork that has survived throughout the world to this day. The foliated scroll (Figure 6), which was classically formulated in ancient Greece, generated a typical line work in which basic geometric forms coordinated with forms of 'foliation' (a leaf-like geometry) are inflected and interwoven and repeated along axes. Sullivan's 1891 frieze in the attic of the Wainwright building (Figure 7) described by him as a form of "efflorescence" issuing beside manipulations of geometry, is fundamentally the same idea. These figures of ornament are not merely illustrations of repeating leaves naturally growing out of stems. When distributed they allude to a reiterative idea of metamorphosis, an artifice in which radiating fractals, such as the radiating acanthus (Figure 8), seem to emit from or appear beside waving, spiraling, or encircling geometric line work. We can detect here a cycling procreativity often further articulated by the condensing and dilating energy of the coincident spiral motif. This is the most essential stuff of ornament, a visual 'physics' that has nothing to do with societal order. Like the universal forms of geometry, this timeless trope of ornament suggests a continuous force and movement seeming to pervade everything from within the microcosm to the natural environment and beyond.

#### Decoration can perform without ornament.

Mark Wigley's argument that the "undecorated" white wall actually constitutes a particularly pervasive form of decoration is convincing.<sup>10</sup> Whiteness, an emblem central to the modernist polemics of the twentieth century, is a condition in which ornament is utterly absent. Whiteness was championed by its proponents as a carrier of purity, high morality, and social greatness. Indeed, while white dressing flourished throughout the modernist time-period of the twentieth century, so did the decorator as a professional and popular practitioner, despite being shunned in the professional schools of fine art and architecture. It is telling that during the same period, the ornamentor (*ornatista* in Italian) all but ceased to exist, a phenomenological fact that contradicts the assumption that decoration and ornament are identical practices. Clearly the decorator's function continued to survive because decorum lives on, as long as society imagines itself to be well ordered.

Decoration promises a resolution of sorts, both as a stasis and a status that is achieved by presuming to put things in their correct place. In design that proposes pleasing contents, limited boundaries and proportions calibrated to respect a choreography of ideal behavior. This is a harmonious sort of arrangement. How then can the more dynamic, unsettled, mercurial and unlimiting pathways of ornament become a compositional property of architectural design?

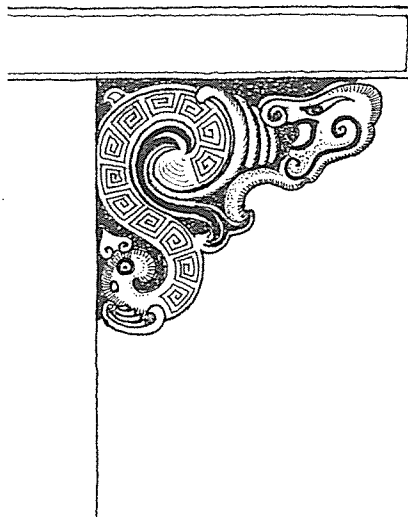
Such a property may be found in its connection with physical structure in which energetic line work, i.e. the 'physics' of ornament, appears to be attracted to the 'physics' of the object being ornamented. This is evident in utilitarian artifacts from antiquity (Figure 9). A magnetism between an 'atomic' idea about motility and the contours of an actual physical structure could be poetically described as a union of animistic like-mindedness in which the line workings belonging to a virtual physicality inflect and are inflected by the lineaments of an actual physicality. Ornament here is a parergon bringing a vitality of distinct origin into practical objects.



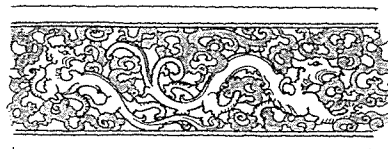
9. Ancient vessel, from Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*.



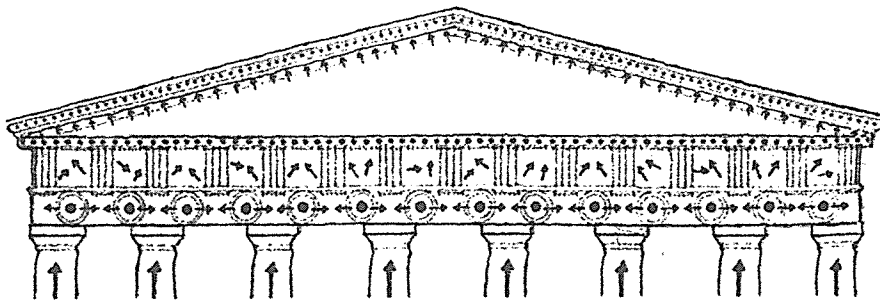
10. Classical Greek bracket, drawing by Kent Bloomer after Paris, Rome, Athens, *École nationale supérieure des beaux arts*.



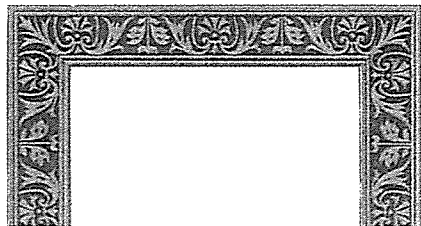
11. Chinese bracket, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



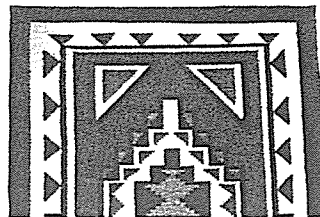
12. Ming trellis, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



13. Greek tympanum, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



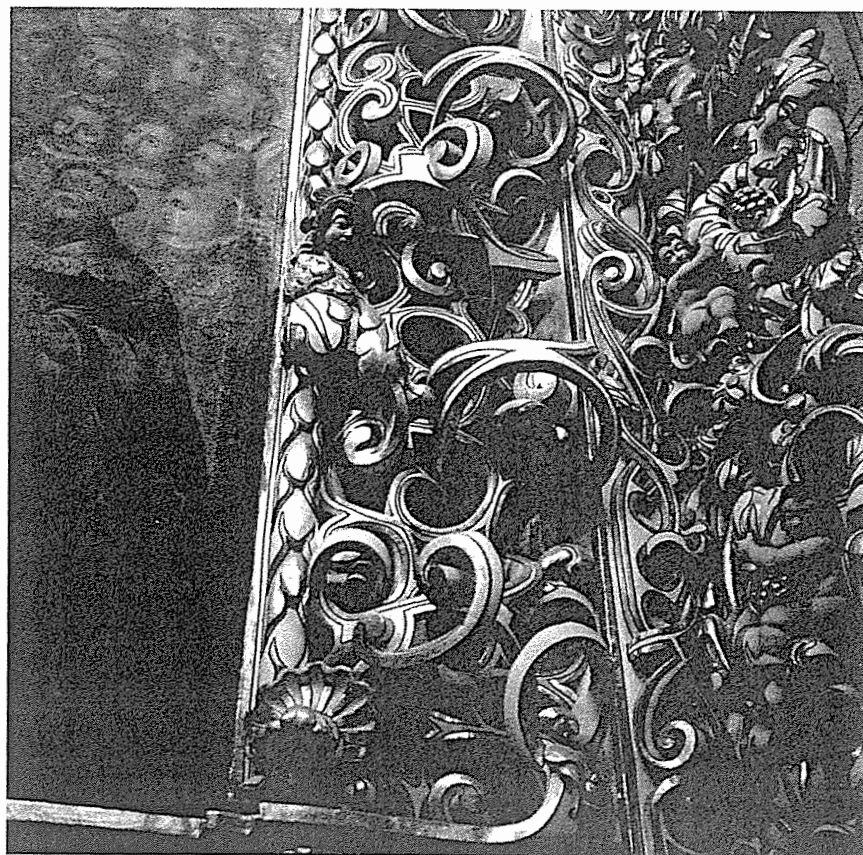
14. French 17th-century frame, from Racinet, *Polychrome Ornament*.



15. Navajo rug, collection Kent Bloomer.

In the more complex works of traditional architecture this connection is often situated at moments of energy such as joints between structural members where the working of construction is evident (Column bracket, Figure 10; Gothic tracery, Chinese bracket, Figure 11). A variation of this would be to distribute ornament into visual indications of support such as pilasters, faux shafts on Gothic piers, the upper portions of walls or within the micro-structures of trellises (particularly Chinese, Figure 12). Figures of ornament occurring at joints should not be viewed as elaborations of the elements of construction for construction's sake but rather as parallel expressions of transference. Indeed, the most significant idea presented by ornament's convergence with elements of construction is a heightened vision of imminent transformation. In Western ornament one state of power (the column) is seen to empower another more virtual statement of power (the botanic efflorescence). By comparison, in Ming China a virtual state of power (the dragon), may be seen to structurally stabilize a table by being located at the joining of the leg. The internal motifs, which are the figural cells from which ornament is constituted, may be seen as metamorphoses in their own right, i.e. geometry issuing foliation, scrollwork winding into dragon heads, and so on.

In a segment of a Classical architectural elevation, such as the pediment of a Greek temple, pathways of ornament run along the perimeter of the tympanum (Figure 13): while their axes form a triangle, their internal motifs drive in multiple dimensions. Indeed, the radiations from the scrollwork seem to be as concerned with worlds on either side of the pathway as with their forward mobility. Such laterality is striking in the ornament of many traditional picture frames and carpet borders. The ornament of the picture frame (Figure 14), besides corresponding with the physical structure made of wooden bar stock, empowers both the space within the picture and the wall without. Similarly, the figuration within the carpet border (Figure 15) activates both the body of the carpet and the surrounding room. A brilliant instance of interwoven sculptural line



16. 18th-century Mexican ornament, photograph by Kent Bloomer.

17. See page 8.



work in an eighteenth-century Mexican chapel (Figure 16) mediates between a portrait of conquistadors on one side and a turbulence of babies and flower petals on the other, while the interior architecture of the chapel is a supreme work of decoration that situates the goddess in the society of heaven (Figure 17).

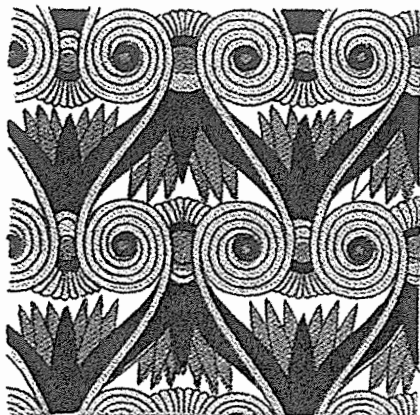
The great cartouche around the ceiling of Die Weis (Figure 18) harbors rocaille motifs<sup>11</sup> that create a turbulence between the congregation below and an enclosed vision of heaven above. This colossal rococo ornament plays with, inflects, and rhetorically dissolves any remaining alliance with construction as it transforms from sculpture into pictorial fragments of cornice alternating with images of splashing water. A bizarre descendant of the foliated scroll, this rhythmized rocaille presents a bewildering extreme of the figural power of ornament exploding within a virtual parcel of space between heaven and earth. In secular architecture, cresting and ridge ornaments both proclaim the interval and dissolve the mass of construction even as they make a threshold between building and sky.

Ornament is not confined to pathways and structural joints. Egyptians tried packing their seminal motifs into regular two-dimensional patterns (Figure 19), whereas the ancient Greeks allowed tendrils, spirals, and foliation to freely range the asymmetric surfaces of pottery (Figure 20), as did Sullivan at the entrance to the Carson, Pirie, Scott store (Figure 21). The Victorians mastered the art of diapering whorls of foliation over the surfaces of walls (Figure 22). The skin or shell of an object can be the primary element of its physical structure. Throughout history repeating motifs have radiated from centers, dilated and twisted, or remained rigorously uniform on planar surfaces. Certainly the ornament covering the walls of Islamic architecture displays splendid rhythmic patterns of an interlaced line work (Figure 23) thought by Semper<sup>12</sup> to be descended from the textile wall of antiquity.

How then can we further distinguish between flat patterns of ornament and types of flat pattern that might belong more directly to decoration per se? Recall that ornament



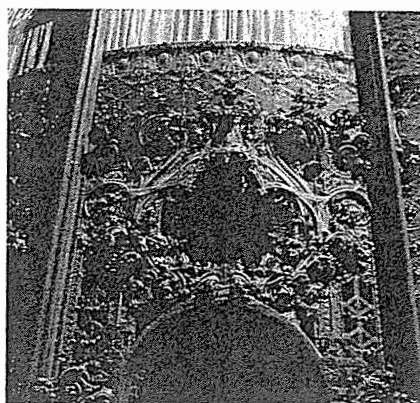
18. Die Weis cartouche, from Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church*.



19. Ancient Egyptian, from Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*.



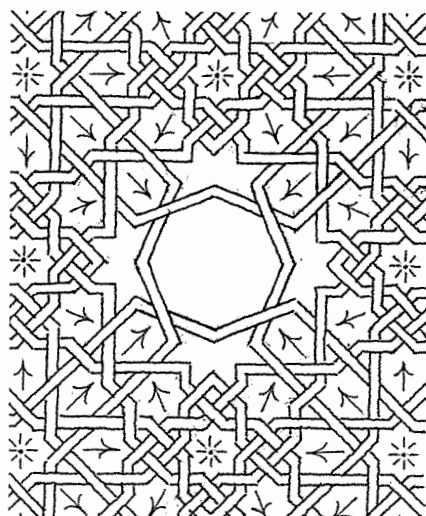
20. Greek free range, after Riegl, *Problems of Style*.



21. Sullivan, "Carson, Pirie, Scott" photograph by Kent Bloomer.



22. English 19th-century, collection Kent Bloomer.



23. Moorish interlace, drawing by Kent Bloomer after Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*.



24. Dots, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



25. Rhodian amphora, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



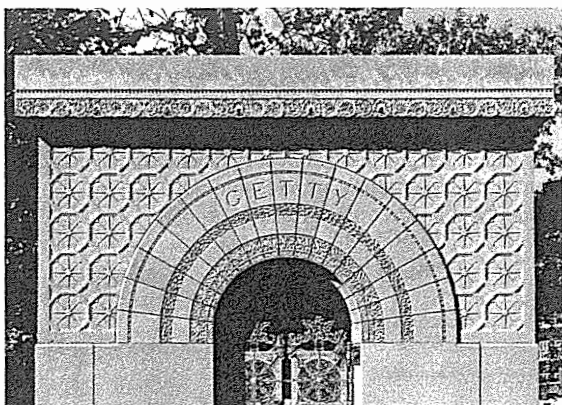
originated as a visual system of visible and intricate line work capable of forming motifs constituted to repeat and indefinitely wander in a variety of ways. Bernard Cache<sup>13</sup> locates this motile and indefinite line work of ornament within an "auxiliary system of rationality" more in keeping with Anaximander's notion of "apeiron," i.e. a pervading chaotic force of nature that wanders about things. By contrast, patterns selected to arrange and display good decorum tend to be more 'fundamentally rational' or monochromatic in their function to firm up and congeal an ordered and bounded harmony. Rectangular bricks or square tiles governed by a grid, for example, can contribute to a compositional continuum of orderliness by being the 'right' amount and size and knowing when and how to stop. In elegant decoration, a governing state of orderliness requires that the elements of decoration appear to be disciplined. Such arrangements, as they become 'perfected,' are more about good behavior than the transferential antics of ornament. Abetted by their own mercurial, revolving indefiniteness, patterns of ornament refuse to be arrested for more than a moment, just enough time needed to turn into something else. Repetitive procreativity and exchangeability reside at the core of ornament's capacity to perform as a visual system that, while curiously mediative, exists in a perpetual state of uncertainty.

### Summary

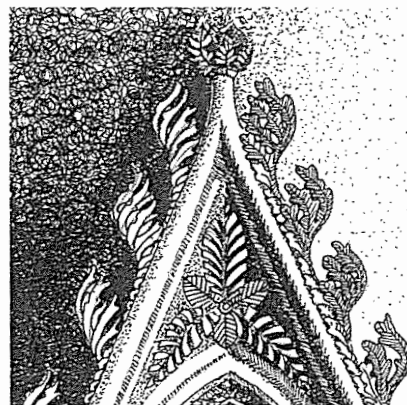
This brief exercise, the consideration of the distinction between decoration and ornament, may be suspect for counting too much on 'genetic coding' that issues from historic verbal and visual etymologies. That focus is not intended to make it only an academic exercise. Presenting the most strident distinctions and examples, especially of ornament, and examining their persistent traces over the millennia, serves to better critique their timeless ways of appearing as well as their presence, non-presence, and potential in today's debate. For example, the writhing contours of a building composed in an apparently curvaceous or turbulent manner may be superficially confused with the fickle motility of ornament and thus be regarded as "ornament constructed"<sup>14</sup> rather than considered as decoration gone amok. Alternatively, by recalling the seminal wildness of ornament we can still detect its presence when it quiets down and minimally performs by simply becoming an orderly row of dots (Figure 24) or a chain of peaceful rhombuses aligned between panelized bodies of decoration. These minimal and less active motifs might easily be overlooked and conflated with neighboring patterns of decoration, and thus be critically lost rather than appreciated as separate moments of freedom.

Perhaps of greatest importance is to know that *synthesis*, decoration's ally, is ornament's nemesis. In order to function, figures of ornament must reveal themselves, be legible and perceived as distinct outsiders both belonging to and being on an even visual footing with their objects and surrounds. Ornament is an intensely visual phenomenon requiring patience and attention. It belongs to a particularly precise and conscious grammar of visual language in which much of its figuration is descended from an innate type of abstraction that cannot be further abstracted without risking invisibility. To perform optically, its figuration must be visibly legible as one of at least two types of forms appearing simultaneously such as fleeting figures upon the autonomous shape of a bowl (Figure 25), the consequent figure of a metamorphose, such as Sullivan's efflorescence, or a discreet distribution of foliage embedded in construction (Figure 26). Performing inside two architectural elements, for example, a column capital almost establishes a measure of independence from its posts and beams, as picture frames may also seem to have a life apart from their service to portrait and wall. It is remarkable that a very small amount of ornament can visually authorize the architecture of a large room by just residing upon an autonomous object located in an important spot. (This sort of outward radiation of ornament from smaller objects was conventionally practiced in Chinese architecture, e.g. the ornament upon a throne informing an entire chamber.)

Ornament's essential uncertainty, perhaps more than decoration's resolve, should flourish within the indefinite nature of Modernity and the politics of multiplicity. Extremely conventionalized and frequently oversimplified, reductive, or sanitized works of design (and this includes latter-day unornamented classical as well as canonical Modernism) are always subject to intercalation (from small stains on white walls, posters and graffiti in public places, sporadic interventions of fashion, ping pong tables and Coke machines furnishing stately dining halls, and from a galaxy of small contradictions resulting from inevitable technological changes in the details of construction or the gloss of new lighting, and plumbing fixtures). In that regard is it possible that the energetic and ambivalent nature of a firmly embedded ornament might be well suited to mediate with the detritus



26. Getty tomb, photograph by Cervin Robinson.



27. Southwell Chapterhouse crocket, drawing by Kent Bloomer.



28. "Class of 1954 Chemistry Research Building" gate, Yale University; Gate by Kent Bloomer; Building design by BCJ; Pittsburgh. Photograph by David Lamb.  
29. See page 8.

of today's rapidly changing world?

Incorporating both decoration and the distribution of ornament in the architecture of Modernity proposes an ideal interaction between two distinguishable realms, one inspired by man and the other given by nature. Their presence in design fulfills the discursive potential of architecture. In Pevsner's words, a "consonance out of diverging elements—a surprisingly Sophoclean ideal"<sup>15</sup> can be contrasted with the Renaissance and modernist ideals of attempting to achieve an ideal harmony out of converging elements. Nikolaus Pevsner was writing in the *Leaves of Southwell*, published at the close of World War II, about the carving of nearly literal elements of foliage into a small English chapter house (Figure 27) which was influenced by the thirteenth-century re-discovery of Aristotle in Europe: the ancient master's reverence for earthly nature and his reverence for science was just entering the mainstream of monastic thought, after centuries in which the enjoyment of sensual nature had been prohibited by the extremes of asceticism.

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**Kent Bloomer** is the principal and founder of the Bloomer Studio, and has served as its chief designer since 1965. He is also a Professor of Architecture at Yale University where he has taught since 1966. He was an instructor at the Carnegie Mellon Institute of Technology from 1961 to 1966. In addition to his permanent teaching positions, Mr. Bloomer has lectured and served as a visiting critic at many universities, including UT-Austin, Harvard, McGill, and Columbia. He has also spoken to audiences at the British Psychoanalytic Society, the Portland Museum of Art, the Graham Foundation in Chicago, the London Architectural Association, and the American Craft Museum in New York City. Mr. Bloomer's sculpture has been exhibited by numerous museums and galleries, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California, the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, CT, and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Hirshhorn Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. His large-scale projects have won statewide and national awards from the American Institute of Architects. Mr. Bloomer's most recent projects include a foliated trellis for the Ronald Reagan National Airport, Washington D.C. (architect: Cesar Pelli & Associates), large roof sculptures on the Harold Washington Library, Chicago (architect: Hammond, Beeby and Babka), an aluminum horse, wings, and trellis for The Great Platte River Road Archway Monument, Kearney, Nebraska (architect: Peter Dominick, Urban Design Group), and exterior metal panels for the new Nashville Public Library (architect: Robert A.M. Stern). Kent Bloomer is the principal author (with Charles W. Moore) of *Body, Memory, and Architecture*, published by Yale University Press in 1977. His most recent book, *The*