

**KENT BLOOMER FESTSCHRIFT LECTURE**  
***ON TEACHING ORNAMENT TODAY***  
Yale University School of Architecture  
February 23, 2019

Among the many questions that surfaced in my seminar on the theory and design of ornament, the most crucial one turned out to be, "what precisely is ornament"?

I had assumed, that by viewing, sketching, and designing, the nature of ornament would become obvious. That was my personal experience. "See what it is!" But this approach became thornier than I had anticipated. Teaching ornament in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and today, requires sorting through a ragbag of prejudices and misnomers that have to be challenged, one-at-a-time. Thousands of years of conventional knowledge about ornament has been waylaid after WWII as a consequence of its removal as a subject of discourse within our schools of design.

My own study of ornament began by being born in New York in 1935. The then five-year-old Chrysler Building, the forty-year-old Grand Central Terminal, and the myriad ornamented lobbies and façades were my first lessons. Before college I read ornament in Havana, Casablanca, London, and Barcelona, and was amazed by the interior walls of Garnier's Paris opera house. I chose M.I.T. and signed up for physics which I thought was fundamental, but slowly drifted towards the Architecture Department and their "media" labs led by Gyorgy Kepes from the New Bauhaus of Chicago. They were places to fabricate and critique visual experiments. However, in a lecture hall, I was alarmed when a fleeting image of the entrance base of Sullivan's Carson, Pirie, Scott building flashed on, only to be quickly edited by tilting the projector upward with the instructors' explanation that the street-level architecture of the building was of no importance. "Look only at the upper floors!"

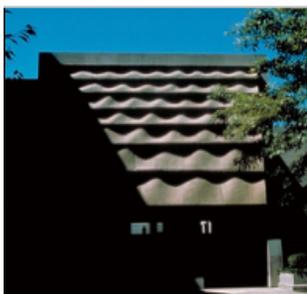


Rushing to the library, I discovered more astonishing examples of Sullivan's work, augmented by the texts.



At the end of my fourth year, I transferred to Yale where I spent three more years in the 'labs' of Albers's program exploring symmetry operations, color theory, visual semiotics, architecture and making sculpture. In the airwaves, Rudolph Arnheim was preparing his seminal book, *Visual Thinking*, published in 1969. Visual thinking, alongside verbal and numerical thought, was achieving full citizenship in Academe. After graduating, I taught for five years at Carnegie Tech alongside William Huff who had attended the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, thus updating my "New Bauhaus" research.

In my own shop I was exploring the syntax between sculpture and walls, such as the bas-relief for Pittsburgh's Temple Rodef Shalom, the sculpture "Intersection," and lobby ornament for the Northshore Plaza in Pittsburgh.



Temple Rodef Shalom



"Intersection"

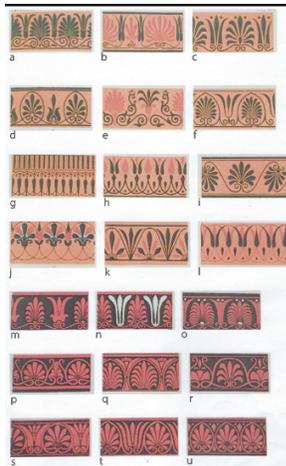


Northshore Plaza Lobby, Pittsburgh

I returned to Yale in 1966 to teach in the architecture school. Ornament was also in the airwaves; George Hersey's 1976 book, *Pythagorean Palaces*, examined Renaissance systems of cosmic geometry; the entire 1978 issue of *Via III* featured ornament and included Thomas Beeby's paper, "The Grammar of Ornament/Ornament as Grammar"; Vincent Scully referred to ornament as the "decoration of construction." The academic climate for excavating and pursuing

ornament seemed to be alive and well at Yale, despite its spooky absence from architecture programs and new architecture design worldwide.

So, in 1975, I decided to introduce a seminar titled, "The Theory and Design of Ornament." This seminar included analyzing historic ornament found in the extraordinary 19<sup>th</sup>-century encyclopedias, such as Owen Jones's seminal *Grammar of Ornament*, Racinet's *Polychromatic Ornament*, and Dolmetsch's *Treasury of Ornament*.



*Grammar of Ornament.*



*Polychromatic Ornament*



*Treasury of Ornament*

They illustrated figures of world-wide ornament belonging to the ages and had been published in a period, unlike today, when a natural recognition of ornament's timeless identity seemed to be intact. Our class discussions were further fueled by theoretical works from the second half of that century, such as Semper's *Four Elements of Architecture*, Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Riegl's *Problems of Style*, and Goodyear's *Grammar of the Lotus*, and from turn-of-the century writings such as Hamlin's rigorous *History of Ornament* and the like.

The seminar's first axiom was, ***in order to perform, figures of ornament must be systematically engaged with the material, the form, and the structural logic of the thing being ornamented.*** I called that "thing" a "holder." The figures of ornament, by themselves, were not considered to be independent works of art that could be removed and exhibited within the isolated white precinct of a museum.

At first, the design work of the seminar studied ways to distribute conventional figures of ornament into surfaces of buildings or bowls. Systems of geometry and types of animated elements were examined. Those first steps carried the early seminars through a history of styles which revealed that ornament thrived in the thresholds or liminal regions of the holders. **This**

was an important finding, although it failed to explain the essential identity of ornament *per se*. The critical question then became, "what particular type of **content**, presumably absent in a holder, is gained by incorporating ornament?"

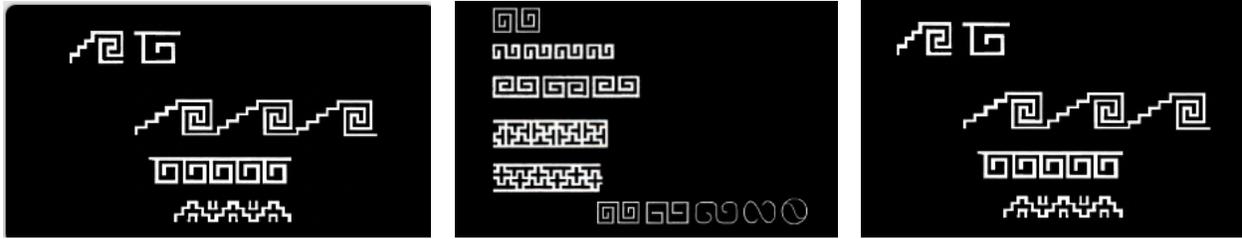
Unfortunately, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century encyclopedias, and especially in *The Grammar of Ornament*, figurations of ornament were mostly illustrated on colored plates, (chromolithography), which did not include their holders. That separation compromised our project because we could not study the connections, or syntax, which unified its figures with its holders. Nevertheless, the details inside those illustrated parcels, especially their intimate systems of organization, could be carefully analyzed and deconstructed, which revealed that a very limited number of basic tropes were common to thousands of examples throughout the world. **This was another important finding** because it showed that a common or very specific family of figuration existed in world ornament, regardless of very different periods, places, cultures, geography, and technology.

For example, a large percentage of figures were either starkly geometric or were geometry morphing into abstractions of life-forms. The most common life-form was the leaf which appeared in a majority of the plates. The West abstracted forms from the lotus, the acanthus, the palm, and the oak leaf. Early Chinese life-forms differed by incorporating serpent shapes. Islam favored pointed stars and leaf-like 'arabesques'. But those exceptions seemed to prove the rule. I personally suspected the life-forms were more '**energy-diagrams**', than culturally specific symbols.



Indeed, the small clusters of animated foliage entangled with elements of pure geometry exhibited an interaction of forces in the same way that an entire body of ornament does when it becomes entangled with the stationary form of its particular holder

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, ornament also began to be discussed as a unique worldwide language with its own 'alphabet' and grammar. Henri Focillon, in his 1934 masterpiece, *The Life of Forms in Art*, wrote in a chapter entitled, "Forms in the Realm of Space," that ornament was, quote, "perhaps the first alphabet of our human thought to come into close contact with space." The survival and persistence of that alphabet's classical tropes suggest that our all-too-relentless pursuit of innovation does not apply to ornament.



Ornament's Classical Alphabetical Tropes

Granting that technical innovations do transform the materials and shapes of the holders and thus the formation of the ornamented object, the essential content within ornament *per se* has remained unchanged. **This was one more important finding in the seminar.**

For example, ornament's adherence to a rigorous system of repetition, with linear repeats of  $2 \frac{1}{2}$  or more cycles, reveals one of its most universal and definitive visual tropes. Ornament's portions of regular repetition, without firm beginnings or endings, evoke moments of infinity or the unlimited. In early Greek philosophy, when the term "ornament" was coined, infinity was a property of CHAOS. It was the opposite of order. Thus, ornament's legacy of relentless parcels of repetition could be read as visual moments of chaos. Yet, **the axis of repetition** was immediately challenged by being divided into phrases which, by themselves, express beginnings and endings, zigs and zags, spirals, fractals, syncopation and metamorphosis. Those intervening figures order themselves into movements of unity and resolution. Harmonic orchestration begins within those phrases in which animated shapes perform a dance with and around the relentless stream of infinity. Lively expressions of counterpoint play in all scales of ornament, whether upon the smallest bowl or the largest building.

The conflation of the terms "decoration" and "ornament," in dictionaries and everyday parlance, has further muddied the discourse on ornament. Decoration is primarily concerned with the location of ornament, (or of paintings, furniture, or light fixtures, which are not ornament). It does so with respect to conventions of propriety and civil decorum which are expressions of **social order** and fashion. For example, one may decorate a room with white walls, but where is the ornament? By contrast, ornament is primarily occupied with the visual ordering and animation of forces found in **nature-at-large**. Investigating that confusion between decoration and ornament led to a collaboration with the art historian, ornamenteer, musician, and librarian, Kresten Jespersen, who had written the first dissertation in the U.S on Owen Jones's *Grammar*. Precisely because ornament's alphabet and grammar remained fundamentally unchanged over thousands of years, it was obvious that we had to visit the ORIGIN of the Latin word,

"ornamentum," to detect How and Why it came into being in the first place. It was within the *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, written around 670 A.D., within the last century of Plato's Academy, that a breakdown of the word "ornament" finally made perfect sense and aligned with visual properties we found in the seminar to have been constant from antiquity to the present.

The title of Book XIII, in the *Etymologies*, is "The cosmos and its parts." Paragraph one is titled, "**The world (De mundo)**" and states, and I am now quoting, "the world consists of the sky and the land, the sea and the creations within them. 'World' (*mundus*) is named thus in Latin by the philosophers, because it is in eternal motion (*motus*), as are the sky, the sun, the moon, the air, the seas. Thus, no rest is allowed to its elements; on this account it is always in motion," end of quote. Part two in the same paragraph continues, and again I am quoting, "whence to Varro the elements seemed to be animate, 'because', he says, 'they move of their own accord'. But the Greeks adopted a term for world (*mundus*, also meaning 'cosmetics') derived from 'ornament', on account of the diversity of elements and the beauty of the heavenly bodies. They call it Kosmos which means 'ornament' for with our bodily eyes we see nothing more beautiful than the world," end of quote. In ancient Greek, KOSMETICOS means KOSMOS made visible or audible, and sensually harmonic. For Isidore, that required making the MOTIONS within the Kosmos visible, harmonic, and therefore beautiful.

Thus, the terms "ornament" and "cosmos" were interchangeable in antiquity. Both visualized activity in the sky, the sun, the moon, the air, and the seas. Isidore's list of the specific parts of the cosmos occupies the rest of Book XIII. For Isidore, the ancient Greek vision of ORNAMENT was an astronomic spectacle of the totality, (the gestalt), of forces to be witnessed primarily, but not exclusively, in the outer reaches, in the firmament at the edge of the world-at-large.

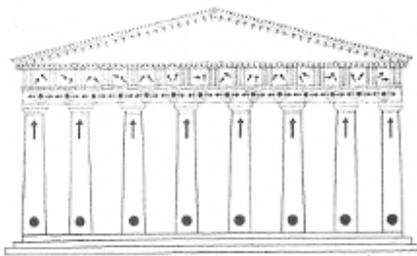
For the designer of ornament, Isidore's Chapter provides a compact summation of the motions found **in the natural environment**, beginning with heavenly bodies, followed by clouds, oceans, and rivers in second place, and earthly forms in third place. Isidore allows, furthermore, that those motions also exist within the smallest of earthly parts, such as "the finest dust" and the atoms. (Sounds like particle physics!) *Note once again his persistent emphasis on 'Motion'.*



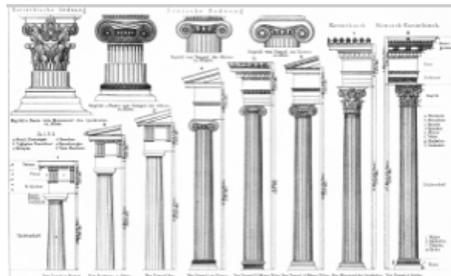
The designer can visually abstract those motions with repetitions, spirals, zig zags, fractals, plants, animated geometry or, as in Sullivan, within the turbulence of dense foliage; [classical ornament on steroids].

Significantly, Isidore's inventory of the **"World and its parts,"** does **not** mention man-made objects. His Kosmos only addresses the moving parts found in nature. One question for the designer would have to be: "what sort of details or places belonging to the holder might **provide** the connections to mediate between the motions innate to ornament and the stabilities innate to their holders?" Such details would have to be in a place of transition such as outside to inside, wall to ceiling, roof to sky, rims of glassware and pottery, and, occasionally, they may be the dead center of buildings and bowls. Places of transition per se are able to address two or more worlds simultaneously. They are realms in which the energy of ornament's motions may be distributed into the gravity of its holders. For example;

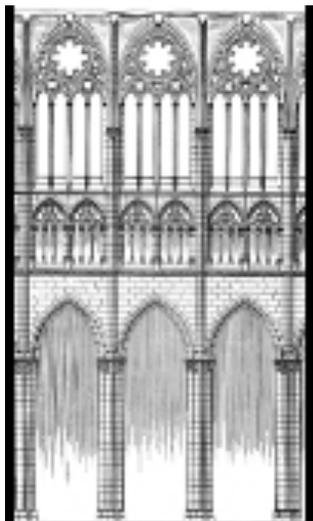
**Connections within the realm of construction:**



**Parthenon's Rhythm**



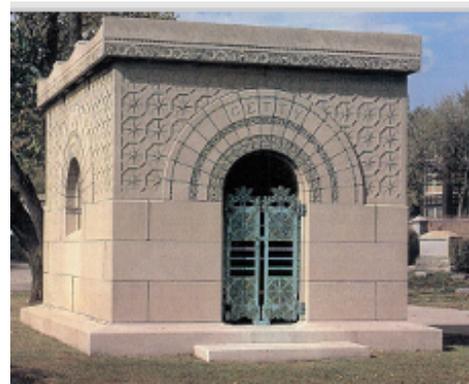
**Classical Orders**



**Gothic Nave**

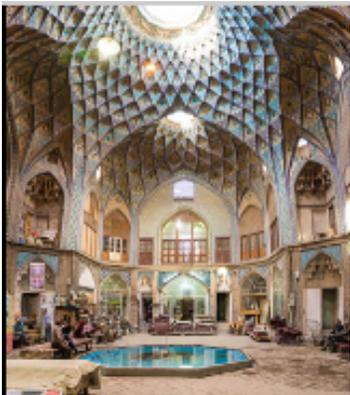


**York West Window**



**Getty Tomb**

**Connections within the Public Realm:**

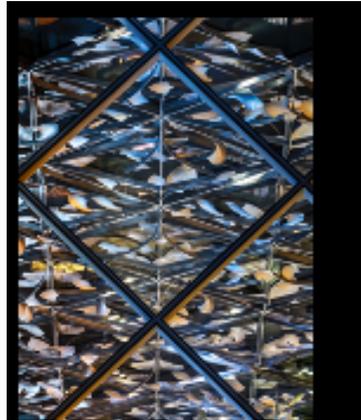
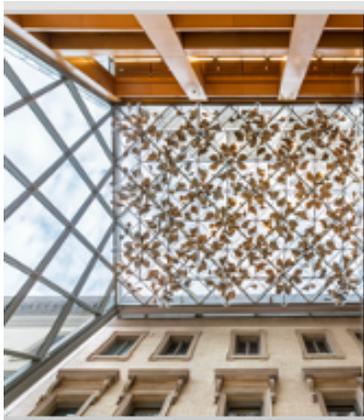
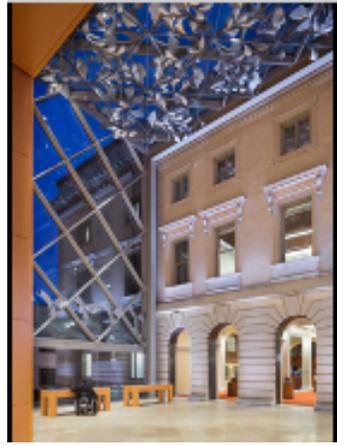


**Kashan Bazaar**

**Connections within the realm of space:**



**Kresge Chapel, MIT; Eero Saarinen Architect; Harry Bertoia Ornament**



Slover Library, Norfolk, VA; Newman Architects, Kent Bloomer Ornamenter

**Danube Vessel:**

*Note the 'dead center'*



**Neolithic: 6000 years ago from the Cucuteni-Trypillia Culture  
Moldova region in Romania, lower Danube  
Drawing by Kent Bloomer**