

What Should We Do With It?

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I'll be upfront with my disgust of the term ornament. Its connotations classify it as mostly a costuming of otherwise serious and honest ambitions, expressions and perhaps, architectures. I find the assault against it by rationalists somewhat inexcusable but most certainly ignorant of the very field they claim to be "saving" from folly. But my personal feelings are beside my point, the important issue isn't the misuse of a word or failure to understand a contemporary topic, but understanding the incentives behind sidelining ornament, and the suffering caused in its wake.

So, instead, I will focus my goals, not as a defense of the use of "ornament," but a repositioning of the cultural connotations of its material being. At first we can say, "the ultimate condition of architecture is Beauty." Which then allows us to position ornament as not a "part" of architecture, but AS architecture! First, though, let's look at how this happens, because it's quite important, in fact, critical to a contemporary re-framing of the world.

One of the more interesting painterly problems is that of the crowd. "The crowd" is a strangely unique subject and entity because of its structure, parts, and operation. A crowd is defined by Webster's dictionary as a large number of persons or things gathered together. It's assigned a singular presence, using the article "a" to frame itself, but yet it represents the collection of many parts. Within this structuring the problem of crowd becomes an issue for painterly techniques to address. When painting the crowd, does one render every individual person within the group or can one simply paint "a crowd?" Is painterly realism a critical key towards the expression of a group? Or is it possible to reduce the individual of the group to only

enough presence to create a sensibility of largeness. Perhaps the only true test of the techniques success would rely on an individual's perception of the work, and their ability to register the crowd as such, or possibly more importantly, to register the mood and atmosphere of the crowd; to be able to have the feeling of collectivity without the apparent feeling of multiple individuals.

What this begins to articulate or at least expose, is the larger discussion of "part-to-whole" and its relationship to the expression of mood, feeling,

Albrecht Altdorfer: The Battle of Alexander at Issus (1526).



(Detail) Albrecht Altdorfer: The Battle of Alexander at Issus (1526).



atmosphere and engagement. Which is where the conversation begins to take interest, as we now have a direct relationship of this problem with technique to architecture. To be sure, let's define the role of architecture as the definition of creation of atmosphere.

I have no direct interest in the definition of the line between the individual and the crowd, and don't believe there is any specific (or important) relationship of that to architecture. For the purpose of this discussion, let's say at first, that the part-to-whole topic is only so important as to how we see the painterly issue of the crowd in application to a responsibility of architects to develop atmosphere. With this being the case, how does a critical understanding of painterly problems, crowd techniques, connection with beauty, creation of atmosphere, and the puzzle of part-to-whole begin to re-position the position of ornament within architecture, *TO* architecture.

Simple.

Altdorfer addresses this within his representation of the historic victory of Alexander of Darius, October 333.

- 1) The battle was fought at Issus
- 2) The battle was between Alexander and Darius (Persian)
- 3) The Persians outnumbered Alexander 666,000 men to 75,000.
- 4) 124,950 men died in total
- 5) The battle was won by Alexander (Macedonia)

An architect, Albrecht Altdorfer tried to be faithful to historic accounts of the battle for authentic kinds and numbers of the warriors within the battle. To do this, his painting adopted a bird's-eye point of view and reduced the two protagonists to being swallowed up within the massive whole of the armies. Altdorfer paints nearly all the individuals in the scene down to the detail of their armor. What is fascinating here though is his choice to portray the enormity of the scene not through an abstraction or reduction of information, but to provide such a clarity of individual accumulation, that even the two "topics" of the painting (Alexander and Darius) as left as invisible within the crowd. Unlike other representations of the battle, this one decides not paint the narrative, but instead to paint the atmosphere of the armies. The enormous detail of the

individual soldiers within the fray, as well as the numbers subvert the singular existence each of them once had, and works together allowing a new experience to come through: Atmosphere. The painterly problem was addressed through an understanding of atmospheres direct relationship to the whole and its parts. Simply put, within this issue, the parts are only important inasmuch as they allow their own individual expression to be sublimated so as to work collectively for the good of the whole, which is atmosphere. Which is also architecture.

That being said, it's most likely important to now re-examine the identity of ornament, its relationship to time, and how it both is punished and treasured by culture for the very role it's expected to play.

Up until 1908 ornament was considered the "dressing" of a project. It habited the finishing which would transform the building, or dress, or dinner, from something ordinary, into something timely, specific, and unique. Ornament could have been considered to be the elements of a work that gave it its body. In 1908 Adolf Loos wrote an article that would echo every generation since, "Ornament and Crime." He argued that ornament was of troubled importance to an architecture projects because it was the portion that would categorize the "style" of the piece, and thereby provide category for it to someday be, "out of style." If this were truly the case, as he argued, the capital investment in such a thing (ornament) was nearly inexcusable, as any efforts toward such were equally considered efforts toward pushing the work out of style, in effect, a crime against the work. What's important within Loos's sentiment is that he was exactly *correct* in his evaluation.

What's more interesting, and critical, though, is that Loos was wrong in his assumptions. For him, ornament was a representation of a politic, and no longer an elementary particle of architecture. This misstep in judgment allowed him to give a figure to a practice he rightfully found distasteful. Without laying out the cultural repercussions and damaging connotations to ornament that followed his essay, it is enough to know that ever since, ornament has become to be viewed as sometimes *nice*, but never *serious*.

Adolf Loos: Ornament and Crime (1908).

Architecture is a complex make-up of parts, forces, cultural moments, and political ambitions (either aesthetic or secular). This specific choreography of parts always results in the production of an atmosphere, or a whole. As a wholly material practice in the world, architecture relies on atmospheric response and sensitivities to transfer its meaning to the guest. In order to do so, the experiential parts are always more responsive than the academic moments. The structure of a building is just as valued in this regard as the finish of the floor, or the geometry of the cornice. This symmetry in material connotation levels the Loos-ian distinction of any part of the project as ornament. Was there ever such a part to begin with? What is ornament? If architecture truly is the sublimation of its parts into the full creative expression of atmosphere, then ornament is hierarchically equivalent with structure, material, sequencing, circulation, mechanical work, telecom equipment, light outlet, corner guards, concrete sealants, and even more practical and ordinary components to a work.

Ornament never was a bonus to architecture, but part of its whole. The ugliness of it as a topic is that it immediately segregates it from a discussion of architecture, when they share the same body. This new theory of skin is beyond any discussion of display, and certainly not about a new ornamentation, or a cultural moment that embraces

Bodybuilder Portrait (2003)

“playfulness.” Architecture can only evolve and remain of interest if it commits itself to time. This commitment allows it to constantly re-tool its position within culture as not a response to problems (often the “main” role of architecture) but to pose new problems. Ornament is the full expression of a cultural contemporaneity and was always of an expanded role beyond apparatus or application and inclusive of all “parts” of architecture.

The relationship between ornament and time can only be discussed in terms of how it’s classical definition and any current reinvention, aesthetic significance or re-emerging importance are inappropriate, because there was never a condition called “Ornament” to begin with. But its certainly dead now.

Svetlana Zakharova. Swan Lake (1999).