PAUL KLEE
AND THE DECORATIVE IN MODERN ART

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: REDRESSING THE DECORATIVE

Abstraction is . . . the essential domain of the ornamentalist.
– Karl Scheffler

My lines of 1906–07 were my most personal possession. And yet I had to interrupt them; some kind of cramp was threating them, finally even ornament. – Paul Klee

It is the essence of ornament that in its products the *Kunstwollen* (art-will) of a people finds its purest and most unobscured expression.
– Wilhelm Worringer

Ornament . . . is crime. – Adolf Loos

Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at the painter's disposal for the expression of his feelings.
– Henri Matisse

If we were to begin today . . . to content ourselves exclusively with the combination of pure color and independent form, we would produce works that would look like geometric ornament, that, to put it crudely, would resemble a necktie or a carpet. – Wassily Kandinsky

About 1911, I thought of making a quilt out of bits of fabric for my newborn baby. . . . We tried then to apply the same process to other objects and paintings. – Sonia Delaunay, on herself and Robert Delaunay

> [D]ecoration can be said to be the specter that haunts modernist painting.
> – Clement Greenberg

> I am old enough to remember a generation of art lovers who insisted that the test of a good painting lay in what they called its "decorative" quality.
> – Ernst Gombrich (b. 1909)

> There is nothing the abstract painter used to dislike more than the term "decorative," an epithet which reminded him of the familiar sneer that what he had produced was at best pleasant curtain material.
> – Ernst Gombrich

According to modernist lore, art is pure and therefore absolutely independent of the decorative. Modern art's autonomy has been considered mythological rather than constitutive for some time, but what about its relationship to the decorative?[1] A perusal of the words of Paul Klee, Adolf Loos, Wassily Kandinsky, and Clement Greenberg in the epigraphs that open this chapter demonstrates the common understanding of the decorative and ornamental as something to be kept apart from pure art.[2] However, there are also the lines of Karl Scheffler, Wilhelm Worringer, Henri Matisse, Sonia Delaunay, and Ernst Gombrich – or, at least, the first quotation from Gombrich.[3] Reading these equally prominent figures' views, one is struck by their direct contradiction of the accepted premise.[4] Yet I will argue in this book that these latter views are integral to modernism, however much they have been neglected or repressed.

In the last two epigraphs, Gombrich reverses himself: At first, "decorative" is the highest praise for painting; then it is a terrible accusation. He writes these discrepant lines in the space of a few short pages in his comprehensive study of decorative art, *The Sense of Order*. My intention is not to draw attention to a lapse in Gombrich's reasoning but rather to a much more profound contradiction that structures modernism through and through, a contradiction that Gombrich inadvertently reveals rather than produces. A goal, if not *the* goal, of modernism was to represent the essence of art, which many modernists understood as pure form.[5] However, these artists found that pure form *in ornament*, which for all its promise is forever sullied by connotations of materiality, domesticity, femininity, decadence, and excess.[6] It is no wonder in retrospect that, to maintain their fiction of purity, many modernists fought hard to suppress their source. However, if modernism is truly past, we should now be able to investigate the effects of that repression, both local and pervasive, in art and art history.

The current, postmodern interest in the decorative is widespread. One finds it in contemporary art: Witness the variations on wallpaper at the 2001 Venice

Biennale, including Michael Ming-hong Lin's meticulously painted flower mural, Olaf Nicolai's representations of a seemingly random splotch of blood serially reproduced on walls, and Tamas Komoròczky's computer-generated repetition of obsessive–compulsive disorder data titled *Wallpaper*.[7] One finds it in art history, where, with previously unthinkable zeal, historians are tracking the decorative impulses of artists from times past: Nancy Troy's *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France* has recently been joined by Auguste Renoir's decorative arts essays collected and annotated by Robert Herbert; Frances Connelly's and Briony Fer's studies of the decorative in Paul Gauguin and Piet Mondrian, respectively; and analysis of the decorative even in that last bastion of intellectual modernism, cubism, by David Cottington.[8] Museums are also courting an enthusiasm for ornament, both in historical exhibitions of emphatically decorative movements – for example, the Nabis in Chicago, New York, and Paris or *art nouveau* in London and Washington[9] – and in thematic shows from Brisbane and Edinburgh to Vienna and Basel.[10] This last and most recent one, *Ornament and Abstraction*, curated by Markus Brüderlin at the Fondation Beyeler in 2001, may be the most thorough undertaking regarding the question of ornament and the decorative in art to date and thus deserves our attention.

The dazzling exhibition in Basel included everything from Islamic tiles to a reconstruction of Gustav Klimt's Beethoven frieze; to paintings by Matisse, Kandinsky, Picasso, Klee, and Mondrian; to Papua New Guinean war shields; to decorative installations on site by Sol Lewitt, Daniel Buren, and Kara Walker. The copious catalogue with beautiful illustrations and texts by noted international scholars further pursues previously unthinkable relationships such as sopraporte reliefs by Josef Hoffmann with constructivism and neoplasticism.[11] The exhibition represented, in short, a triumph of the decorative by revealing its visual continuity across the ages and by displaying its contemporary relevance.

One wants only to applaud these efforts and revelations, but the critical historian suspects, with Walter Benjamin, that every victory has its victims.[12] Who might the victims be here? Not, as a conservative critic might fear, the modernist masterpieces of Matisse, Picasso, and company: They hold their own and are possibly enriched by the layers of comparison. But where are the women artists? Where, especially, are the contributors to the informal group Pattern and Decoration – among them Miriam Schapiro, Valerie Jaudon, Joyce Kozloff, and Judy Chicago – who in their art arguably made the first concerted effort to question the modernist prohibition of the decorative already in the 1970s?[13] Curator Brüderlin legitimately emphasizes Frank Stella's turn from austere canvases to baroque swirls and Philip Taaffe's painted ornamental emanations as signs of the postmodern embrace of the decorative, but that embrace cannot yet be all encompassing, given the general dearth of women artists in the show.[14] The

decorative, after all, has a long history of being associated with the feminine, at least since Cicero paralleled the delights of plain speech with those of unadorned women.[15] Although the feminine is not reducible to women, there remains some connection that this exhibition leaves unexplored.

Simply adding women (to an exhibition, to the canon) is a feminist tactic that has lost favor because of its failure to question fundamental, determining assumptions.[16] Following current feminist theoretical practice, I seek rather to deconstruct the conceptual underpinnings of the problem of (feminine?) ornament that persist in maintaining art as a masculine domain. In this book I aim to show that the apparent triumph of the decorative in Basel retains remnants of the traditional modernist view. The key to the curators' blind spot appears to be this, as taken from the foreword to the catalogue:

> This opportunity to "look over the fences and compare" can only be offered when ornamentation is freed of its merely decorative function, and its nature as pure art, independent of technique and material, is acknowledged. In fact, the theory of ornamentation has been performing this liberation ever since Kant, and the Vienna art historian Alois Riegl finally confirmed the historical development of ornamentation in 1893 when he showed how the first Egyptian lotus ornament progressed through the Greek palmette and the Roman acanthus tendril to the most recent Oriental arabesque with a thread that runs right through these abstract mutations in form.[17]

The writer is absolutely correct to note that theorists from Kant to Riegl and beyond conceptualized ornament as free of material, as pure form. This was the quality that modernist artists sought and revered.[18] However, the premise of this book is that ornament can in fact never be completely isolated from the decorative arts or from the material.[19] That, as I hope to show, is the lure – and the threat – of the decorative. To embrace ornament wholeheartedly and to welcome women and the feminine to the fold, Kant's and Riegl's (and others') theories of ornament must be reread critically for their presumptions and misconceptions. From the outset, the insistence on form over matter is in itself historically gendered, with form assigned to the masculine and matter consigned to the feminine.[20] Thus, if ornament is read as pure form – as in Basel – its history of imbrication with the feminine is erased. Further, an unquestioning acceptance of the age-old form–matter hierarchy maintains gender inequity. It is therefore not at all surprising that masculinized ornament in that exhibition translated into a paucity of work by women. We must reveal these naturalized assumptions and we must subject the contradictions of modernist art history as demonstrated by the opening quotations to renewed interrogation.

For that purpose one artist in particular presents himself, and he is the subject of sustained analysis in this book: namely, Paul Klee.

In ways not thinkable for decades, Klee's immense artistic output and career are in fact profoundly shaped by the vicissitudes of the decorative, including gender. An analysis of Klee with attention to the decorative shows that the latter significantly informed his art production, his exhibiting strategies, his immediate critical response, and the discursive construction of his work for public consumption – and all that despite his passing disavowal of ornament cited at the opening of this introduction. Dealers produced and critics read Klee's art, especially in the 1910s, as decorative and feminine, as explored in Chapter 1. The reception of his work provides a veritable litmus test of when, where, and for whom these were positive or negative characteristics. In Chapter2 we will see that there is a momentous turning point, however: In late 1919 Klee did not receive a much sought-after appointment to the Stuttgart art academy because, as Oskar Schlemmer surmised privately, the academics found him to be too "feminine."[21] Only then, beginning in 1920, did Klee more conspicuously and consistently try to to redress his feminized decorativeness in order to build a successful career. His effort was so masterful that its rhetoric has continued to veil a decorative Klee to this day, even, or perhaps especially, the often-contradictory implications of the decorative during Klee's Bauhaus years from 1921 to 1931, the subject of Chapter 3.

Tracing Klee's decorativeness may allow for another, postmodern redress: the restitution of ornament and all its associations to their due place in the annals of art. I use the term "redress" intentionally. It implies fixing a problematic situation – for example, in modernism one was thought to cleanse the unseemly decorative element out of the artwork. It also implies providing reparations for past offenses – for example, ornament now deserves its due. But it also means re-dressing, reclothing something or someone: In this sense Klee is the perfect subject, because he re-dressed or refashioned himself and his work. The connotations of fashion and, hence, the feminine should not be missed; neither should one neglect to see that that (feminized) re-dressing served to construct an image of a pure, masculine art and artist.

Matisse may come to mind as an even more likely candidate for such a study: He acclaims the decorative himself, as his epigraph shows, and many scholars have commented on the artist's use of ornamental motifs in his many decorative paintings. Matisse returns for closer observation in the conclusion of this book, but he is not the centerpiece, because the very obviousness of his decorativeness, the conventionality of reading his work as decorative, could deny us access to the conflicted nature of the decorative and its multilayered redress. Kandinsky is another example of a major modern artist whose work could be said to be decorative, but, as his preceding quotation suggests, he

worked consistently to efface that connection, rendering the study of it in his work treacherous at best. In other words, his redress of the decorative was so early and thorough that it is difficult to trace. For example, Peg Weiss inaugurated important work in following these threads but often became ensnared in Kandinsky's own insistent dismissal of the decorative. She writes, "The call to abstraction through ornament was perfectly clear to Kandinsky. There is no doubt that from the beginning his most successful works were those that were 'ornamental' or 'decorative.'" She continues, "But decorative art had its pitfalls, as Kandinsky also recognized. . . . He suggested that the 'decorative' work could indeed serve as a bridge to the end goal of 'fine art' with a higher significance."[22] Thus Weiss, following Kandinsky all too closely, repeats the modernist censure of the decorative, without being able to escape or probe its logic.

Klee represents some middle position between embracing and denouncing the decorative. In fact, he moves nimbly between and among sometimes opposing positions in this continuum. Because the discourse of the decorative is itself tremendously convoluted – or, depending on one's perspective, intricately intertwined – Klee's own ambivalent relationship to it can be seen as emblematic of it. However, Klee's own efforts to re-dress his decorativeness and the prevailing modernist view that "decorative" is an "epithet," as Gombrich claims, have disguised this aspect of Klee's work, its promotion, and its reception. It is my hope that coming to terms with the multivalent role of the decorative in Klee may not only illuminate twentieth-century art (and its gender politics) but also will assist us in unraveling the mysteries of the decorative at large.

What is the decorative? Before focusing our attention on Klee, we must address this question, because the decorative is by no means an easily delimited field. On the contrary, it is notorious for its unexpected mutations and mobility. Nonetheless, to determine what we are talking about, in this introduction I attend first to recent philosophical inquiry into the decorative and ornament, because Western philosophy has shared modernism's privileging of form. Also, some recent theorists have questioned that legacy by examining ornament (and Kant) specifically. Reflecting the terms' free play in philosophical discourse, I initially suspend any distinction between "ornament" and the "decorative." However, the theoretical findings will prove instructive as I turn to historical usage of the terms as well as delimitation of which objects these categories might include. Finally, I explore the particular confluence of meanings of the decorative and ornament specifically in Munich – Klee's home beginning in 1898 – in the early years of the twentieth century. We will be prepared, then, in the chapters that follow, to recognize the significance of the decorative in formative moments of Klee's career. We will see that modernists may have found more than they sought in the decorative: They looked for pure form and found it there, but ornament is never only pure form – and neither is art.

THE DECORATIVE IN PHILOSOPHY

At least since Plato, Western philosophy has privileged form over matter. Immanuel Kant reinvested philosophy with this bias for modern times, and his thinking was enormously influential on modern art.[23] More recently, however, theorists have begun to deconstruct the centrality of form in Western philosophy, and ornament has been pivotal in their inquiry. There are two pertinent examples to consider: Jacques Derrida's sustained reading of Kant's *The Critique of Judgment* in his extensive essay, "Parergon," and Gianni Vattimo's reading of Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" in a short but richly suggestive essay titled "Ornament/Monument."[24]

We begin with Kant and Derrida.[25] Kant's "Elucidation by Examples" appears near the conclusion of the "Analytic of the Beautiful," and it opens with a critical distinction: "Empirical aesthetic judgments are judgments of sense (material aesthetic judgments); only pure aesthetic judgments (since they are formal) are purely judgments of taste."[26] Thus, pure aesthetic judgments – the sort with which Kant is most concerned – relate only to form and not to matter. The intention of this section in his treatise is to identify the proper object of this particular sort of formal judgment.[27] In his reading, Derrida remarks, "Now you have to know what you're talking about, what *intrinsically* concerns the value 'beauty' and what remains external to your immanent sense of beauty."[28] This presumed knowledge of the limit between inside and outside the artwork is a hallmark of modernist autonomy, and it structures Kant's examples that follow:

> Even what we call *ornaments* (*parerga*), i.e., what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but [is] only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste's liking. And yet it does so only by its form, as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings. On the other hand, if the ornament itself does not consist in the beautiful form but is merely attached, as a gold frame is to a painting so that its charm may commend the painting for our approval, then it impairs genuine beauty and is called *finery*.[29]

Derrida deconstructs the presumed limits of these examples – frames on pictures, clothing on statues, columns on palaces – showing that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern in each case where one ends and the other begins. Pushing the question to its limit, he writes, "And what about a frame framing a painting representing a building surrounded by columns in clothed human form?"[30]

The point is not to mock Kant's particular examples but to draw attention to the inevitable shiftiness of whichever examples he may have been able to produce. Derrida explores the supplemental logic of the *parergon*, *para* (beyond, by, beside) + *ergon* (work), the Greek word Kant introduced. The *parergon*, as supplement, describes a supposedly extraneous element that is nevertheless necessary for the completion of the object.[31] For example, rereading the preceding passage we may note that, as extraneous to the object as the *parerga* appear, they, too, may delight by taking part in, by "consist[ing] *in* the beautiful form." But if an ornament seems to transgress some border of taste, if it is "merely attached [*angebracht*; literally, fixed on]" such as the gold frame is, it actually "impairs [*tut Abbruch*; literally, breaks apart]" the beauty of the object. Thus the *parergon* plays in a liminal space where it can either merge for the viewer with the object itself, making it greater than it would be alone, or it can rupture the object, depleting it of its beauty. In the former case, the frame enters art and provides aesthetic pleasure. In the latter, the frame recedes into the world of things (signified in Kant by "*gold* frame"; as is traditional, color for him is specifically material and earthly). This is the mystery of the *parergon*: It is apparently detachable, yet it augments the purportedly autonomous art object as it can simultaneously convey art back into the world of things. The *parergon* vacillates between form and matter – even as Kant set up the latter as untransversable fields.

Particularly pertinent to the present study is the identification of *parerga* with ornaments (*Zieraten* in Kant), which Derrida multiplies in his text into "decoration, adornment, [and] embellishment."[32] If, for the moment, we read this collection of words as signifying the decorative at large, does the decorative behave parergonally? Does the decorative seem to be extraneous and yet simultaneously inhere in art and consort with the stuff of life? A close reading of another section of Derrida's essay supports that very suggestion.

Kant distinguishes between two kinds of beauty. Derrida sums up: "Two kinds of beauty: free beauty [*freie Schönheit*] and merely adherent beauty [*bloss anhängende Schönheit*], literally, 'merely suspended beauty, hung-on-to, de-pendent on.' Only free (independent) beauty gives rise to a pure aesthetic judgment, to a predication of pure beauty."[33] In contrast, Derrida suggests, the "merely adherent beauty" would come from embellishment insufficient in itself. Remarkably, though, Kant's examples for free beauty are themselves *parerga*; that is, his examples for the ideal object of judgment are in those decorative supplements that should, according to his logic, be outside the object. Kant writes, "Thus designs *à la grecque*, the foliage on frames or on wallpapers, etc., mean nothing on their own; they represent nothing, no object under a determinate concept, and are free beauties."[34]

Following this text, Derrida speculates, "One might be tempted, in exploiting this example . . . to conclude that contrary to what we were justified in

thinking elsewhere, according to Kant the *parergon* constitutes the place and the structure of free beauty."[35] Derrida continues:

> Take away from a painting all representation, all signification, any theme and any text-as-meaning, removing from it also all the material (canvas, paint) which according to Kant cannot be beautiful for itself, efface any design oriented by a determinable end, subtract the wall-background, its social, historical, economic, political supports, etc., what is left? The frame, the framing, plays of forms and lines which are structurally homogeneous with the frame-structure.[36]

Derrida's insight that the *parergon* identified as frame – in all its significations – constitutes the work of art has already proven productive for art history. Witness the collection of essays edited by Paul Duro, *The Rhetoric of the Frame*, an excellent anthology that analyzes literal and figurative (social, political, etc.) framing of art as diverse as Early Christian portals and the AIDS quilt. However, for the concerns of the present study, one wonders if Derrida moves too quickly to equate *parergon* with frame *only*.[37] After all, Kant mentions the foliage, the design on the frame, along *with* designs *à la grecque* and even *wallpaper*, the stuff of the everyday interior. Certainly the frame is a kind of *parergon*, but is it not an example of a larger category, namely, the decorative?

Vattimo's trenchant essay, "Ornament/Monument," a reading of Heidegger's celebrated inquiry, "The Origin of the Work of Art," underscores that reading and finds even greater significance in it.[38] Vattimo provides a keen working definition of Heidegger's complex theory that the work of art reveals the "world" and "earth" in conflict. He writes, "If we agree with Heidegger that earth and world are not identifiable with [not identical to] the matter and form of the work, then their meaning in his 1936 essay appears to be that of the 'thematized' (or 'thematizable' – that is, the world) and the 'non-thematized' (or 'non-thematizable' – that is, the earth)."[39]

Provocatively, Vattimo shows how the decorative vacillates between the thematizable and nonthematizable in a parergonal fashion. He cites Heidegger's famous student, Hans-Georg Gadamer:

> In Gadamer's text [*Truth and Method*], which serves as a sort of "commentary" to Heidegger, the essence of the decorative and secondary arts is found in the fact that they operate in a double sense: "the nature of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation; namely to draw the attention of the viewer to itself, to satisfy his taste, and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies."[40]

Vattimo does not give any examples, but one might imagine here a richly decorated carpet that forever switches between two roles: It engages the eye with its beautiful design and fades into less attentive consciousness as one steps on it to cross a room. If, following Vattimo on Heidegger, the essence of the work of art is the conflict of the thematizable (world), that to which one may draw attention to satisfy an aesthetic taste, and the nonthematizable (earth), that "greater whole context of life" in which the object exists and functions, then this richly decorated rug represents the essence of art.

To clarify the stakes of this argument, Vattimo cites Gombrich's *The Sense of Order* and a long review of it by Yves Michaud. In Vattimo's reading, Gombrich attends to art that has a pronounced lateral interest (e.g., decorative art), whereas Michaud claims that a chief component of contemporary (1980s) art may be the shifting of attention from the center to the periphery of perception.[41] Vattimo does not take issue directly with either author's claim, but he concludes with the following radical hypothesis: "For Heidegger, it would appear, it is not merely a question of defining decorative art as a specific type of art [as Gombrich does], nor of determining the particular traits of contemporary art [as Michaud does]; rather, he seeks *to acknowledge the decorative nature of all art*."[42] The *parergon* is again the consummate sign of *art*.

Now, at the beginning of this introduction I asserted that the decorative has become more accepted today; that acceptance is no doubt coextensive with the recent emphasis on peripheral art that Michaud identified some twenty years ago. An apt artistic example contemporary to Michaud's text might be Buren, whose wallpaperlike stripes have decorated surfaces from sandwich boards to gallery walls and windows, as they did again in Basel. To date, Vattimo may represent the theoretical height of this turnaround in aesthetic valuation. Heidegger, however, would never have gone so far. Indeed, Vattimo concedes that "Heidegger's theory of art would seem to be opposed to a recognition of the legitimacy of ornament and decoration – at least, in its insistence on the truthfulness of the work of art, it has generally been interpreted that way."[43] Vattimo, writing in a postmodern moment, recognizes the decorative implications of Heidegger's theory, which Heidegger, who remains in this sense a modernist, could not foresee or suppressed.[44] In fact, if we return to Heidegger's text, we find evidence of his own redress of the decorative, a move common to modernism.

Heidegger explicitly separates and hierarchizes the arts. He writes, "The arts that produce such works [that reveal truth] are called the beautiful or fine arts, in contrast with the decorative arts that manufacture equipment [*im Unterschied zu den handwerklichen Künsten, die Zeug verfertigen*]."[45] Later he distinguishes fine art from decorative art or craft again, although a reassuring "to be sure" begins to suggest some lack of sureness about the distinction. Heidegger explains, "This use of the earth [as matter] is a working with it that, *to be sure*

[*zwar*], looks like the employment of matter in handicraft [*das handwerkliche Verwenden von Stoff*]. Hence the appearance that artistic creation is also an activity of handicraft [*handwerkliche Tätigkeit*]. It never is [*Dies ist es niemals*]."[46]

That emphatic statement aside, when Heidegger rehearses the problem of the meaning of the Greek term *techne*, we can follow a slippage that turns his claims around.[47] Heidegger points out that "the Greeks, who knew quite a bit about works of art, use the same word *techne* for the craft [*Handwerk*] and art [*Kunst*] and call the craftsman [*Handwerker*] and the artist [*Künstler*] by the same name: *technites*."[48] But he warns that "[h]owever usual and convincing the reference may be to the Greek practice of naming craft and art by the same name, *techne*, it nevertheless remains oblique and superficial; for *techne* signifies neither craft nor art. . . . The word *techne* denotes rather a mode of knowing."[49] Heidegger refines the term further to signify the bringing forth of truth, which the creation of a work of art (but not the making of mere craft) makes happen: "The work's becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens [*Das Werkwerden des Werkes ist eine Weise des Werdens und Geschehens der Wahrheit*]."[50] It is *one* way, but in the following pages we read that there are others: "Still another way in which truth becomes is the thinker's questioning, which, as the thinking of Being, names Being in its questioning."[51] However, if we return to the opening passages of Heidegger's essay, we read, "To enter upon this path [his line of inquiry] is the strength of thought, to continue on it is the feast of thought, it being admitted that *thinking is a craft* [*gesetzt, daß das Denken ein Handwerk ist*]."[52] Thinking is a craft that gives rise to truth, although only art and *not craft* can give rise to truth.

This logic circles Heidegger's argument. In fact, it is the second circle of his argument, although he acknowledges only the first one: Heidegger's essay opens with the warning that the "artist is the origin of the work of art" and the "work is the origin of the artist"; to find out what art is, ". . . we are compelled to follow the circle."[53] It is the path of this circle that he claims offers the "strength of thought," even "the feast of thought," *and* that closes the second circle, the circle of craft–art–truth–thinking–craft that we previously traced. Although Heidegger would have it otherwise – as a modernist he wants to isolate handicraft from art, to redress decoration – his circle of craft is nonetheless on the way to his thinking *what art is*.

Reading Heidegger in this way, we are following in Vattimo's footsteps, finding the decorative implications of Heidegger's ostensibly antidecorative text. However, we must also remember that Heidegger *sought* to dismiss the decorative arts; he dismisses them even as they encircle his text. Could that be why, at the end of his essay, Heidegger suddenly names poetry, rather than any of the visual arts, as the highest art? In fact, he goes further than that, subsuming all arts to poetry: "*All art*, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*."[54] Certainly his precedents for

this choice are numerous and illustrious, with Kant and Hegel among them. But, as Vattimo writes, "It is not entirely clear in this essay, however, how the conflict between world and earth is brought about in poetry as the art of the word; one of the clearest of the 'concrete' examples that Heidegger provides, after all, is taken from the plastic arts, namely the Greek temple (and, earlier in the essay, Van Gogh's painting)."[55] In other words, even though Heidegger tries to sever decorative art from art, the relationship between them persists. Heidegger's modernist taste, which cannot abide that relationship, may keep him from drawing the logical conclusions of his own essay, namely that visual art most explicitly traverses the world–earth divide.

Kant, for his part, also values poetry above all else: "Among all the arts *poetry* holds the highest rank."[56] However, Kant's predilection likely comes from a certain anthropocentrism, as speech is the most bodily of the traditional arts.[57] In addition, Derrida directs our attention to not one but two footnotes in which Kant equivocates, claiming his hierarchy is not a "theoretical project": "it is but one of many attempts that can and still must be tried."[58] Kant's hierarchy is therefore not nearly as secure – or as forced – as Heidegger's. Of course, Kant was not yet a full-fledged modernist likely to denigrate the decorative.

In fact, if we look at Kant's own explicit division of the arts, we find even more evidence of his positive evaluation of the decorative, in a sort of parergonality that exceeds that of frames alone. Regarding sculpture and architecture, he writes,

> Thus statues of human beings, gods, animals, and so on belong to sculpture; on the other hand, temples, magnificent buildings for public gatherings, or again residences, triumphal arches, columns, cenotaphs, and so on, erected as honorary memorials, belong to architecture; we may even add to all this household furnishings (such as the work of the cabinet maker and other things that are meant to be used).[59]

As for the category of painting, he writes,

> I would divide it into *painting proper*, which *renders nature* beautifully, and *landscape gardening*, which *arranges* nature's products beautifully. . . . In painting in the broad sense I would also include the decoration [*Verzierung*] of rooms with tapestries, bric-à-brac [*Aufsätze*], and all the beautiful furnishings whose sole function is to be looked at, as well as the art of dressing tastefully (with rings, snuff-boxes, etc.). For a *parterre* with all sorts of flowers, room with all sorts of ornaments [*Zieraten*] (including even ladies' attire) make a kind of painting at some luxurious party, which, like paintings properly so called (those that are

> not intended to teach us, e.g., history or natural science) are there merely to be looked at, using ideas to entertain the imagination in free play, and occupying the aesthetic power of judgment without a determining purpose.[60]

The decorative may be ascribed to the border in Kant's earlier chapters, a position whose supposed detachability Derrida places forever in doubt. After all, the decorative is the source of free beauty, the purest kind. Here, in these passages, the decorative – including useful decorative arts objects, useless bric-a-brac, and feminized ornament, "ladies' attire" – is defined as part of, not separate from, the fine arts of sculpture, architecture, and painting. Therefore, however modernist aesthetics following Kant may have emphasized the autonomy of the aesthetic object, we can also read in his text that the decorative inheres in the category of art as it inhabits and furnishes life. This negotiation is an expanded version of what Heidegger theorizes as the truth of art itself and what Vattimo ventures to call decorative. But if the decorative so perfectly delineates this liminal space that philosophy names art, why did modernists (including Heidegger) work so hard to deny it that power? Here we must take our philosophical insights with us over into the field of history.

THE DECORATIVE IN HISTORY

One defines the decorative at one's peril. In recent years several art historians have nevertheless tried, and this book enters the territory they have charted. Oleg Grabar's compelling study, *The Mediation of Ornament*, offers a productive introduction to these deliberations. Grabar appropriates Gombrich's identification of the "practical effects of ornament" from *The Sense of Order*, but with a difference that is telling, and so I quote at length:

> To Gombrich, the main ones [practical effects of ornament] are framing, filling, and linking. These attributes, which are not exclusive, are certainly appropriate definitions of three common features of ornament. In addition, and more important, Gombrich identified ornament through processes in the relationships of maker and user to some object, a picture to be framed or a wall space to be covered. This process, as I understand it, was essential to Gombrich in providing the support needed for an appreciation of what is truly important about art, which is the nonornamental, that grand and grandiose recreation of the natural world that forms, at least within a mainstream art historical tradition, the major achievement of Western painting.[61]

Grabar, a historian of Islamic art and architecture, positions himself outside of this Western tradition. He continues,

> It is at this level that I part company with Gombrich's position. I do so only in part by rejecting the European-centered criticism of a vision of art based so exclusively on Western representations. . . . I do it primarily because . . . it is possible for an ornament to be *the* subject of the design. In fact, any artifact, Mshatta's façade [8th century, Jordan] or the Sistine Chapel, is to the viewer (but not necessarily to the maker) only ornamental surfaces until such time as other meanings are provided for them. In the meantime, they are not simply examples of "filling," since they were visibly the reason why a building or an object was made.[62]

There are many threads to follow in these astute observations. The first is that ornament has no consistent meaning; context produces its meaning. All design, whether an intricately carved Islamic palace or a complex Renaissance fresco cycle, is ornament to which meaning is not intrinsic but attached. Kant admired this resistance to a given purpose in designs *à la grecque* and wallpaper. Kant, too, was able to imagine the judgment of form only, no matter what the subject matter, in visual art.

The connection to Kant leads, however, to an objection to Grabar. The Western tradition has certainly been represented as favoring the "nonornamental" – in contrast to Islamic art, for which ornament *is* art – but that representation has overlooked the centrality of the decorative in thinking what art is, as our philosophical reading suggests and as Grabar's own example of the Sistine Chapel corroborates.[63] It is nevertheless important to note that Grabar is in part correct in identifying this "nonornamental" streak in Western art history; fighting that tradition, after all, is one impetus for this book. However, my intent is to counter the accepted understanding, to show that ornament may actually demonstrate the structure of Western art. What Grabar does do, inadvertently, is identify Gombrich's *modernism*, his specific need to redress the decorative even as he writes a beautiful volume on ornament. Gombrich's modernism is revealed in his limiting the effects of ornament to framing, filling, and linking. However, what Grabar claims from an Islamic art perspective, namely that ornament can be *the* reason for a work, also has a tradition in Western art and theory, as Kant suggests and as Heidegger reveals, despite himself, and as Derrida and Vattimo confirm.

Where I must part company with Grabar, however, is in his attempt to define ornament and decoration as specifically distinct categories in their relation to objects. He writes, tentatively enough,

> The visual order we shall be exploring is the one loosely called ornament. Ornament, as an initial definition, is differentiated from

> decoration in the sense that decoration is anything, even whole mosaic or sculpted programs, applied to an object or to a building, whereas ornament is that aspect of decoration which appears not to have another purpose but to enhance its carrier.[64]

In this definition ornament is a specialized sort of (building or object) decoration that is meant only to please aesthetically. This is a promising definition, in that it encourages one to distinguish kinds of decorative impulses. However, the usage is by no means consistent in Western art history.[65] We already have seen slippage among the words ornament, decoration, the decorative, decorative art, craft, and so forth, in the philosophical inquiries; there is just as little consistency over time in Western art history. It is my contention that one can make a general claim for the entire decorative category (that it delineates the perceptual structure of art in general), but it is a mistake to try to define each of the terms for all time. Rather, one must look at a particular historical moment and place to understand the usages in circulation within that milieu.

Jacques Soulillou gestures toward that historicity in his book, *Le Décoratif* (*The Decorative*). Soulillou also begins with Gombrich, whom he criticizes for not tracing the "genesis" of the decorative's position at the periphery.[66] Soulillou proceeds to identify appearances of the terms decorative and ornamental at influential junctures, such as in classical rhetoric, Roman and Renaissance architectural theory, and nineteenth-century European art debates – each of which I subsequently gloss over. Soulillou presents a nuanced and informative reading of these diverse traditions, but then he falls into the definitional trap: He defines ornament (*l'ornement*) as useful and necessary, the purely decorative (*le purement décoratif*) as singular and contextless, and the "decorative" (*le décoratif*) as debased, cheap, repeatable, imitative, and consumer oriented.[67] The "debasement" of this final category stems from its association with what he calls the "three peripheries": illegitimate strata of European society, women, and exotic peoples.[68] Soulillou is absolutely correct to connect these associations with industrialization and colonization, especially beginning in the nineteenth century. However, it is unfortunate that he reifies the "decorative" that has these associations as *the* decorative. The hazard of this move is demonstrated by his assertion that Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung (Abstraction and Empathy)* should be retitled *The Decorative and Empathy*. As we will see, Worringer's book is an important source for thinking about ornament – as Worringer calls it – in Germany in the early twentieth century. However, Soulillou writes that his preferred retitling includes the "decorative" rather than "ornament" for consistency and emphasis.[69] In other words, although Worringer uses the word "ornament," "decorative" fits better in Soulillou's schema. It is tempting to bring clarity to the muddle, but renaming Worringer's "ornament" as "decorative" distorts its historical specificity.

Rather than transforming vocabulary to name these different approaches to decoration or ornament, then, it is more prudent to see how and where particular usages appear. Greek and Latin rhetoric, as Soulillou suggests, is the first field in the West in which ornament is thematized. As the remark from Cicero (in which he equates plain speech with unadorned women) near the beginning of this introduction demonstrates, there are parallels from the outset between visual and verbal ornament. Indeed, despite the fact that they were initially conceived as pertaining to language, the usage and vocabulary inaugurated in rhetoric have had their consequences for art, as we will see.[70]

Ornament appears in the category of style (*elocutio*), one of five parts of ancient rhetoric.[71] Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is an important foundation text for style; Cicero's *On Oratory* and Theophrastus's *On Style* are the other major sources that survive.[72] According to these treatises, style consists in four virtues: correctness or purity; clarity; propriety; and ornament. The latter two especially concern us here. Propriety, or *decorum*, pertains to "the adaptation of the style to the circumstances of the speech, the character of the speaker, the sympathies of the audience, and the kind of speech."[73] Ornament (*ornatus*), the last of the virtues, signifies the "choice of words, harmony, and the use of figures."[74] Thus *decorum* describes what is appropriate to the situation, and *ornatus* involves the choice of words and expressions. Both are essential to formal speech: No one could argue that style is unnecessary, although perhaps meager or excessive and hence inappropriate.[75]

The etymology of the Latin words *ornatus* and *decorum* imbricates their meanings further for the European languages that have kept them alive (German, French, and English among them). *Ornatus* (dress, equipment, embellishment) stems from the verb *ornare* (to provide with necessaries, to equip; to adorn, to decorate). Therefore *ornare* can be understood as providing either essential or inessential goods, for example, weapons to an army, which constitute them *as army*, or flowers for one's hair. That last translation for *ornare*, "to decorate," points to the verb's semantic overlap with another Latin verb, *decorare* (to embellish, beautify, adorn). The shape of this verb can be seen in the genitive case of the noun *decus*, *decoris* (that which beautifies or adorns; distinction, grace); parallel forms are *decor* (grace, comeliness, beauty) and the derivative *decorum* (propriety, grace).[76] Thus ornament can be either necessary or not (the eternal question), and decoration (which can be synonymous with ornament) is a cognate of decorum.

These meanings are explicitly bound together in classical architectural treatises, from Vitruvius's to Palladio's. For example, architecture must follow decorum and be appropriate to a building's function. Also, as Soulillou details, Vitruvius connects the "right to ornament" in architecture with social class; ornament proper to one's class "satisfies the rules of decorum."[77] The social

classes were also assigned their proper architectural orders: Doric at the bottom, with sober and plain ornamentation, and composite at the top, the cumulative ornamental effects of both Ionic and Corinthian.[78] In the Renaissance, Palladio "presents an image of coexistence of these different strata in the space of the architectural paradigm," as Soulillou writes, in that the architect determines that the lower classes should inhabit the lower, simpler floors, whereas the more illustrious folk should live above them.[79] However, the architectural order remains paramount to Palladio, too, and the column is his prime ornament.[80]

If decorum and ornament are so closely tied to social class and building function, then it is no wonder that architectural and art debates hit a fevered pitch in the nineteenth century. With industrialization, all kinds of quicker, cheaper ornament could be manufactured and purchased by anyone of reasonable means (the lower classes were still left to their own devices). Social status became more difficult to read, and there were new building types, such as train stations, that had no traditionally appropriate style. As Gombrich notes, the momentous decoration debates of the nineteenth century were intense "particularly in England, where the problems caused by the industrial revolution were most acutely felt."[81] Gombrich also recognizes that, following the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851, the principle of decorum did not disappear but significantly metamorphosed, becoming what later was known as the principle of "truth to material."[82] This was likely an effort to regain control in social and aesthetic spheres.

Gombrich provides a thorough summary of the many great English (and some German and French) reformers of the nineteenth century, so I will not repeat all their theories here.[83] But as Gombrich succinctly sums up, "Whether the [perceived] deplorable state of European design was to be found in a lack of discriminating taste, as [Augustus] Pugin and the reformers believed, in the ravages of the machine, as [John] Ruskin thought, or in the imbalance of ends and means, as [Gottfried] Semper shrewdly suggested, the need to go back to school and to learn the principles of decoration from foreign traditions was almost universally felt."[84] Gombrich follows this need to Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which catalogues design from all over the world, design made more accessible to European eyes by the import of colonized artifacts that would build the world's great ethnographic museums. Here European industrial and colonial might collides with European fear that the ancient desire for decorum has been forsaken. Reformers hoped to regain the latter in the products of those peoples not yet blessed – or damned – by "progress."

In England the pressing concerns about proper design turned inward to interior decoration (e.g., William Morris). Following the pre-Raphaelites, an American in England, James Abbott McNeil Whistler, tried to fathom the