Introduction

This book aims to restore to the ornamental, the decorative and the pleasurable some theoretical dignity, which has been lost for reasons I shall describe. For several decades, the topic of decoration has not been taken seriously; it has, so to speak, fallen overboard. This was not the case during the nineteenth century when what I have elsewhere called the 'discourse of decoration' was a major feature of intellectual life all across Europe and a great deal of North America. It was especially so in Great Britain where it did similar cultural work as the debates around painting did in France: it was a forum of modernity. The highest reach of this discourse may be represented in Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* of 1907. There we read that . . .

> It is of the essence of ornament that in its products the artistic volition of a people finds its purest and most unobscured expression. It offers, as it were, a paradigm from which the specific peculiarities of the absolute artistic volition can be clearly read off . . . It ought to constitute the point of departure and the fundament of all aesthetic consideration of art.[1]

At an everyday level (which was of immense commercial and industrial importance), this discourse was conducted in and through the pages of women's magazines, art journals and numerous books, where one's choice of decor at home or of ornament on buildings or persons was the subject of an anxious enquiry which linked in closely with all the rest of common concern, from the highest level of philosophy to the merest paragraph of household advice. The 'merest' indicates the condescension now shown to matters which were then seen to be central to domestic identity. This anxious enquiry has by no means gone away, but it has become detached from the larger questions and thus trivialised. My hope would be to reconnect these kinds of daily matters of taste back to their foundations, as was the case formerly. This is what I describe as a task of 'rethinking'.

There is, of course, a literature on and about the 'decorative arts', much of which is of great interest. Several publications in recent years are of importance.

Form and Decoration: Innovation in the Decorative Arts 1470–1870 by Peter Thornon (1998) covers an immense territory with great learning, easily carried; however, the very category of the 'decorative arts' is part of the problem, as I hope to show. Oleg Grabar's study of Islamic decoration, *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992) is also immensely erudite and suggestive, though I think I am not alone in finding his theoretical approach difficult and perhaps obscure. *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* by Ernst Gombrich (1979) is a book that is unavoidably important and from it I hope I have learned a great deal; but it is different in intention and exceeds in scope my own efforts – which are directed to other points of the compass. Parts of this book have a good deal in common with Adrian Forty's *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750–1980* (1986); that is to say I am concerned with the social and ideological function of decoration; but more especially with the way in which the social and the individual merge in pleasure. There are also similar connections and disconnections with Jules Lubbock's *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain 1550–1960* (1995).

A good deal of new writing in this area is transatlantic. At a late stage in writing I encountered Rosalind Krauss's book *The Optical Unconscious* (1993), which intersects with the present volume at several points, whilst each moves past the other on a separate journey. That book and this have one assumption in common at all times; that *vision is a form of cognition*. This is an assumption shared, in a rather different sense, with the body of Rudolf Arnheim's works, which are a kind of substratum to several of the following pages. At the very last stage of my writing I benefitted from reading Debra Schafter's *The Order of Ornament, The Structure of Style* (2003). This wide-ranging book reengages with the nineteenth-century discourse of decoration and reminds us how deeply 'modernism' (however construed) is rooted in the earlier debates around ornament. All through this book I have been aware of the architectural studies of Kenneth Frampton, and this concern surfaces in my sixth chapter. The existence of these and other writings confirms me in my belief that rethinking our attitude to the decorative is a timely occupation, from several points of approach.

However, if I were asked to summarise in one sentence the theme of this study, it would be – the means by which individual pleasure and social function are suffused with one another in and through visual delight as shown in decoration.

In some respects, my concern for decoration and visual pleasure runs parallel with a mainly British debate about the nature and status of 'craft', as enlarged by Peter Dormer, Peter Fuller, Paul Greenhalgh and others. They are concerned with the question 'Why is craft intellectually inconvenient in modern and contemporary art? Why did it go out of fashion as an interesting concept and activity to argue about and to practice?'[2] I do not address myself to these issues directly for two main reasons. First, I am not primarily concerned with the current status of specific activities. I don't think we can get the historical and sociological questions right unless we give priority to philosophical and other issues (such as the perceptual sciences, developmental and cultural psychology, etc.). Second, I am not concerned at all with issues of definition, except in the very broadest terms. Moreover, I am not primarily bothered with quality; I am just as likely to be interested in the cheap and cheerful, as with the profound and sublime. Quality in decoration and ornament is often (though not always) similar to good manners; at its best we hardly need to notice either because they are wholly absorbed into the total environment they help to create. However, there will be matters here which will concern anyone interested in the nature of crafts and workmanship and the creation of meaning and metaphor through acts of making.

One result of the paucity of discourse is that we now find it difficult to speak of pleasure, let alone beauty; still less to develop a language of theory around these concepts. Criticism and practical teaching in such matters have little philosophical grounding and is, consequently, threatened with whimsy. The book proposes some means toward this restoration, without attempting an overall and logically consistent 'theory of decoration.'

The opportunity to make this restoration has become somewhat easier in the past few years, because there is a perceivable demand for books linking topics and subjects that were hitherto largely distinct. Studies of material culture, design history, cultural theory and visuality all require what I would term 'horizontal' research, which spreads out and includes matters that are normally kept apart. This meets up with a similar demand in nonspecialist writing.

What is it that comprises decoration and ornament?

I propose *not* to answer this question directly, but to follow an example given by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1968). Challenged to produce a definition of *'language-game, and hence of language'* he asks his students:

> 66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.

He then surveys a range of games and asks about the elements of skill, amusement, competition, winning and losing, showing how similarities crop up and disappear.

> 67. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances". . . and I shall say: 'games' form a family.

He then compares the family resemblances to a thread twisted from many fibres . . .

> And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.[3]

I shall treat decoration and ornament as a family of practices devoted mainly to visual pleasure; and treat this pleasure as a family of values, which includes social recognition, perceptual satisfaction, psychological reward and erotic delight (amongst others, all overlapping one another). These values are public, insofar as they are in plain view (on buildings, furniture, clothing, etc.) but they are experienced by each of us as individuals with our more or less private needs, as intimate and sometimes incommunicable satisfactions that can completely absorb us when we contemplate them.

I shall be using the term *decoration* as a generic descriptor of certain aspects of things mainly pertaining to pleasure – to what Kant described as *'enlivening the object for sensation'* and *'the sole function of which is to be looked at'*. This is very much the same kind of status that John Dewey gave to experiences *'pursued with deliberate cultivation'*. By *ornament* I shall generally mean applied decoration, especially of the three-dimensional kind such as we find in architecture, but also on clothing and many other locations. Here it is worth remembering that the term ornament derives from the latin *ornere*, which generally means to fit out or complete – as when Caesar, having built the ships, had them fitted out. The idea of completion, of satisfying a lack, will become important. But I abrogate to myself, like Humpty Dumpty, the right to say that a word means exactly what I say it means, and the varying senses in which I use these terms and their associates will, I believe, be sufficiently clear in every case. The examples I use are from architecture, clothing, jewellery, wallpaper, textiles and anything else that strikes me; most examples are everyday, but some are exotic or famous. I have usually avoided the term *decorative arts* because my concern is with the decorative element in *all* arts and manufactures, and to some extent in self-presentation and behaviour. Paul Greenhalgh has written:

> It would be a mistake . . . to see the decorative arts as a natural grouping with an internal logic. Their collectivisation in the present context is to do with negative circumstances, with the consolidation of a hierarchical classification system within the European visual arts. There came to be, to use Walter Crane's phrase, 'the fine arts, and the arts not so fine'.[4]

As for 'pleasure' it will soon be clear that, although I use both Kant's and Dewey's notions of aesthetic experience, I am just as much concerned with those aspects of decoration that signal and support social affiliations and erotic delight, with which aesthetic experience in either Dewey's or Kant's formulations has apparently little to do. The display of power, money, and sex seem to me important matters to think about, and I am sure that we cannot understand how decoration is in fact used, without reference to them and exploration of them. In my examples, especially in Chapter Four, I make use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and the associated *schemata of perception*.

The concept of habitus is usefully capacious. Bourdieu gives his own definition of the term many times, often subtly altering or reemphasizing its parts. Terms such as 'cultural unconscious', or 'set of basic, deeply-interiorized master-patterns' and 'mental and corporeal schemata of perceptions, appreciations and action' occur in his writings alongside more formal definitions such as

> a system of lasting, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures; that is, principles which generate and organize practice and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.[5]

This sounds repulsively abstract, but in practice the concept proves flexible, concrete, and invaluable, because it enables us to link decorative practice to all other practices in social life.

Decoration and the pursuit of visual pleasure are constants in human life; they presently engage us in vast personal expenditure in areas such as home furnishing, fashion and social signalling, not to mention major public works, entertainment, personal rivalry, seduction and violent animosities between groups and classes. But we lack an adequate account of why this should be so, not so much in the general (for which we can appeal to theories of consumption) as in the particular. Why is it that this or that person will seek out and choose this or that wallpaper (colour, collar, brooch, trimming, texture, etc.) rather than another? Why do the choices of one group provoke the animosity or praise of another? Why do these people dye their hair pink? Why, to paraphrase Bourdieu, are *distastes* so violent? How do individual and social tastes support one another? To anyone of only moderate curiosity, these questions demand an answer. Or, if not an answer, then a way of asking questions. The whole book is, in fact, devoted to the problem – what sort of questions should we be asking? I take them to be self-evidently interesting and important questions.

A good deal of intellectual labour has been devoted, in the past few years, to understanding the dynamics of consumption. I am referring here to the writings of Agnes Heller and Wolfgang Haug as well as Pierre Bourdieu, and more recently in the work of cultural theorists; these have been extensively sociological in nature. I hope I have learned from them, but my pursuits are rather wider. I am much concerned with the perceptual function of decoration, which I take to be independent of particular social functions, and of the relation of psychoanalytic theory to visual and tactile pleasure. What seems to me most important is to bring different kinds of enquiry to bear, in close association one with another. My faith is that this will bring together the social, historical and individual aspects of decoration in the study of what (following Hadjinicolaou) I am calling *visual ideology*.[6] 'Visual ideology' is a term developed to account for the ways in which all the elements in a work of art relate to one another as a form and instance of ideology in action. Though devised for art-historical purposes, it is equally applicable to decoration, ornament and visual display.

Above all, I am looking for a set of questions that can be applied in many instances, across a wide historical and geographical spread. In the nature of things I am largely confined to Euro-American examples and I have everywhere chosen examples that form part of my own life experience, but the questions are perennial and ubiquitous. They are related to a class of very large questions which concern us as a species, rather than as members of this or that culture.

I take it that I am dealing with a constant of human behaviour which, though it takes many forms, is just that – a constant. This is my second basic assumption, that we have an impulse or natural propensity to decorative activity which we use to make sense of the world (in particular, of the world of objects and places and spaces we have made around ourselves). I take it to be a disposition not unlike the faculty of language and counting, immanent in our nature without which we would not be complete human beings. Just as there are no societies that do not speak or count, so there are none that do not decorate, embellish or make patterns. It seems to be a matter of record that there are no people who have gone naked, even if their clothing was no more than a bangle and a flash of body-paint. Decoration of this fundamental kind acts like a marker of humanity. Donald Brown includes the decoration of artefacts, along with gossip, lying, making metaphors, binary distinctions, and a fondness for sweets in his list of 'human universals'.[7]

That universal decoration is an ethnological fact suggests that it has or had some not easily identified evolutionary function. In fact, I am struck by how little evolutionary theory (and especially 'evolutionary psychology') can bring to this kind of study; but we want to avoid making distinctions between the cultural and the natural which prevent us from looking at the obvious. One of the immense simplicities that cultural studies are always in danger of missing is the manifest continuity between human and animal lives. No one who has spent time in careful and loving observation of our fellow creatures will not, at some moment, fail to glimpse human culture as little more than the froth that turns on the surface of an immense dark pool of biological time, which includes the short time of our own species. Indeed, the great strategic weakness of cultural studies and of the humanities in general is their reduction of reality to discourse, as if a discourse can exist without its object. But all the major experiences and stages of human life exist prior to all discourse. Age comes. Shit happens. We need one another, without qualification or context. We all, without exception, have more in common than we have apart. There will, of course, be those so infatuated with theory as to fit my ascription of 'the obvious' into yet another metanarrative; in which case they are invited to talk themselves out of dying.

This is not a sarcasm; but a point of fundamental theory. Things come before thoughts and being precedes consciousness. In a good deal of academic writing on the arts, the actual objects are treated with embarrassment, as if the discourse should exist without them. But if we are to deal with matters such as visual sensation and pleasure, and of objects capable of bearing many meanings, then we must be aware of the limits of what can be said. Those who live by the discourse should be most aware of those limits. I shall be much exercised by the idea of tacit knowledge, and therefore by the curious notion of a practical or tacit theory (which is not the same as a theory of practice or a theory of the tacit).

Now that I have completed the writing of it, I find that the philosophic position which this study shadows forth is a kind of Epicureanism, based on a broadly materialist concept of life which accords with that described by Sebastiano Timpanaro.

> By materialism we understand above all acknowledgement of the priority of nature over 'mind', or if you like, of the physical level over the biological level, and of the biological level over the socio-economic and cultural level; both in the sense of chronological priority (the very long time which supervened before life appeared on earth, and between the origin of life and the origin of man), and in the sense of the conditioning which nature still exercises on man and will continue to exercise at least for the foreseeable future.[8]

Where the kinds of experience and knowledge that are offered by the pleasures of decoration are concerned, I seem to have espoused the views of Michael Polanyi as expounded in his studies of the nature of tacit knowledge. We have to do with knowing more than we can tell. The very nature of pleasure is, that it cannot be described without being chased away; and this is because, even at its most intellectual, our knowledge of it resides in bodily experience.

> Our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical . . . Our own body is the only thing in the world which we normally never experience as an object, but experience always in terms of the world to which we are attending from our body. It is by making this intelligent use of our body that we feel it to be our body, and not a thing aside.[9]

It will become apparent that the notion of pleasure is fishy – sleek and lovely to look at but slippery and smelly. We shall soon see that far from being simple, it leads us on toward the centres of human life. It is for this directing power that the pleasures of decoration, which always tend to evade rational discourse, are those sanctioned by Epicurus. They build what the poet has called

> the palpable Elysium,
> though it were in the halls of hell.

Rethinking Decoration is cast into the following shape.

In the first chapter I look into the historical and philosophical aspects of the problem and trace the contempt for decoration back to its roots in metaphysical dualism – specifically Platonism and the platonic elements in Christianity. The principal counterexample is that of Islamic decoration which is founded upon the anti-pictorial bias of neoplatonic mysticism – as developed and mediated of course, through Islamic theology.

The Platonic objections to decoration take on their modern form in Academic theory and in the long-running dispute between the respective powers of *disegno* and *colore*. Briefly, drawing, because it was addressed to Form, was the guarantor of the discursive character of painting, which alone permitted the art to be rational and noble. Colour on the other hand was simulative and hedonistic and linked to the material world. Needless to say, it was also 'feminine'. In architecture, structure was the rational equivalent to drawing which enabled Form to appear. In both cases there was a process of idealisation at work, which enabled the Ideal Beauty (general and universal) to come forward through the mesh of accidental and particular beauties.

This argument has interesting connections with the early scientific problem of the primary and secondary qualities. What were the lasting and objective qualities of the world, that inhered in the world itself, and what were those that belonged to our representations of the world (which included colour, for example)?

Embedded in the Academy was a hierarchy of practices that put the 'higher arts of design' (Painting, Sculpture and Architecture) above the mundane business of pattern-drawing and decorative design, just as the respective social standings of the professions were ranked. It was against this hierarchy that much nineteenth-century theory was directed. A great deal of this academic neoclassicism passes over into modern theory, though heavily disguised in Modernist rhetoric, and into the ostensible rejection of ornament in twentieth-century architecture and design.

Of particular importance here is the account of aesthetic experience developed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), in which aesthetic experience is described in terms of subjectivity, thus devaluing the social and the performative aspects and functions of the arts. This inevitably leads to a devaluing of decorative arts. Gadamer's criticism of Kant is studied, together with other criticism of subjectivist aesthetics.

Since contempt for decoration appears to be rooted in philosophical idealism, it is useful to look at an alternative metaphysics; in particular, at John Dewey's naturalistic account of experience as a relationship between an organism and its situation – an account which does away with subject/object dichotomies in favour of an interactive model of perception and meaning. This has much to commend it to a student of decoration, particularly since it was Dewey's ambition to restore the continuity of aesthetic experience with the normal processes of living, as an aspect of all experience.

Chapter Two is addressed, at greater length, to the perceptual functions of decoration and ornament. They are taken to be intimately linked to the process by which we make visual sense of our surroundings and seek to draw pleasure from them. Edges, borders, fringes, rims, surfaces, points of focus, and the modulation of light and colour are all required for a pleasurable navigation through the world of objects, places, and spaces. They are primary aids to what is now frequently called 'visual intelligence'. A number of simple experiments and everyday examples are offered to the reader, to illustrate the questions and topics that are raised.

I have avoided extensive use of the perceptual sciences in this discussion. They shed little light on real cultural practice because a scientific account of the properties of the human perceptual system can only be attained in peculiarly abstract terms which are culturally unrevealing. The study of our perception of space, colour, shape and so forth, if conducted in a scientific manner, has to be founded upon repeatable experiments. To be repeatable, the manifold complexities of real-world perception have to be drastically simplified. Most of the time we are looking at dots and lines on screens, peering through slits and observing eyeball-movements, or measuring wavelengths. More recently, putting spectacles on cats or sliding microelectrodes into the brains of frogs. This is far removed from the daily business of looking at the world, still less of delighting in it.

This lends particular importance to those perceptual scientists and theorists of vision who have attempted the larger view. I have found the work of J. J. Gibson particularly useful; both in the specific cases of his distinction between *field* and *world* vision, and the importance of texture for space-perception, and then more broadly in his 'ecological' theory of vision which is addressed to the interaction between the organism and its environment. Gibson is opposed to the information-processing account of perception and is looking for an altogether higher-level story, in which it is the whole creature that perceives and attends to its environment, not its neurology. I find important points of contact here with the aesthetic philosophy of John Dewey.

Where colour is concerned I spend a little time with the work of Edwin Land. Land was concerned with overall colour vision and made the important

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observation that our perception of local hue and tone is dependent on the overall colour-world in which we are engaged. Colour experience could not adequately be described within the then current laboratory conditions and conventions. This was a truth tacitly and sometimes explicitly understood through many millennia of practice by weavers, painters, and interior designers, whose advice was rarely sought by scientific enquirers (with the notable exception of Goethe). The work of Gibson and Land has been revisited recently by Evan Thompson and others, who have successfully drawn it into contemporary theory.

Like most writers in this field, I find myself employing *Gestalt* theory; on the grounds that decoration and ornament are often the perceptual means by which certain *gestalt* conditions are attained. Figure/ground relations, 'closure' by edge conditions, the creation of wholeness and the relation of detail to mass, and so forth, are the very matter with which decoration has to deal. The theory contains an element essential to my main argument: that even the smallest data of sense-perception are intrinsically and necessarily meaningful and qualitative; therefore, I add, affective.

My aim in the third chapter is to link the foregoing perceptual account of decoration with psychoanalytic theories of pleasure. I begin with a narrative of the development of sensuous experience and the growth of consciousness and memory, both for the species and the individual. The material here is drawn from standard sources but arrives at a checklist of concepts which are, I believe, very suggestive. Winnicott's treatment of the 'transitional object' is discussed, along with Melanie Klein's study of play. For this section I acknowledge the priority of essays by Peter Fuller, though I believe I came to my own formulation of similar ideas separately. The chapter reaches a preliminary conclusion with a more extended treatment of Julia Kristeva's distinction between semiotic and symbolic modes of understanding, which I am then able to link back to Gibson's division of perception into *field-vision* and *world-vision*, and this leads me to locate the decorative impulse within the transitional space between the semiotic and the symbolic, as a kind of threshold.

However, there are a number of both logical and evidential arguments to be made against this kind of enquiry, and the conclusions I am beginning to draw from it; I open them up with the aid of Ciaran Benson's critique, which employs Dewey's interactive concept of experience (which, as we have seen, supports Gibson's ecological theory of vision). Both point away from highly individualised accounts of perception and pleasure, and toward the continuity of self with shared life-worlds. Since this continuity and sharing are the essence of culture, we are now in a better position to study the social function of decoration and the shared pleasures of display, ornament and style: thus we can move forward to the social functions of decoration in visual ideology and habitus. We have to explore the actual circumstances of decoration, its operations in what