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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Surface Value: Ways of Seeing Decoration in Architecture

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The long 18th century was a period of intense investment in elite architecture in Britain which sustained an extensive craft culture in carving, modelling, and joinery. Yet decoration is largely marginalised or ignored by architectural historians. This antipathy to the enrichment of buildings is not particular to Britain and reflects a wider discourse on the architecture of many periods and places. By situating past and present attitudes to 18th-century decoration in Britain within a wider historiography, this paper reveals the prejudices which still attend the discussion of ornament and craft production in architecture. Conversely, it explores revisionist perspectives on craft and decoration and considers how they can inform architectural history and contribute to a more holistic understanding of building production. Despite a recent, widespread revival of interest in ornament, however, scholarship continues to privilege conceptual issues over the material practices of decoration. Disciplinary boundaries have militated against an integrated approach to architecture and decoration and historians of sculpture and architecture have overlooked significant common ground. Lacunae in the historiography of decoration in 18th-century British architecture call for approaches which integrate the analytical and methodological tools of architectural and sculpture history.

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## Introduction

This article examines the perception of decoration within and beyond the discipline of architectural history. It is at once a position statement and a research paper rooted in the exploration of architectural decoration in early modern Britain (Casey and Lucey 2012; Casey 2013; Casey 2017; Casey 2019; CRAFTVALUE 2019–23). The long 18th century was a period of intense investment in elite building in Britain which sustained ‘a superb craft culture’ in carving, joinery, and plasterwork (Wilson and Mackley 2000: 295). This was the final period in which universal, hand-crafted decoration of buildings was the norm before the gradual emergence from the later 18<sup>th</sup> century of mass-production techniques. Yet architectural historians of the period have tended to ignore or marginalise decoration. Perspectives in the historiography of early modern British architecture reflect and participate in a broader discourse pertinent to the decorative surface in the architecture of many periods and places. This paper presents a synoptic and mediated reflection on wider attitudes to architectural embellishment, which both situate ways of seeing decoration in British architecture and point to a persistent myopia in the writing of architectural history with respect to surface agency. Despite decades of revisionism, a vigorous material ‘turn’, and a burgeoning neo-formalism, the adjective ‘mere’ is still considered acceptable in the discussion of decoration, unless the work is considered to reflect a deeper meaning. The paper highlights tenacious opposition to embellishment, craftsmanship, and surface

corporeality in architecture, identifies trends in revisionist thinking about decoration in architecture, and considers the implications of these approaches for the study of early modern buildings in Britain and beyond. In so doing, it builds upon a burgeoning and wide-ranging literature within architectural history but is necessarily licentious in its chronological, geographical, and extra-disciplinary context. While ornament has recently undergone a revival, scholarship has tended to focus on conceptual issues rather than the actual material practices of decoration. Materials, media, and practitioners are of considerably less interest to scholars than the meanings and messages which the work is seen to embody and convey. Likewise, the absence of theoretical underpinning to the craftsmanship of the past has spawned a rich field of academic enquiry. ‘Decoration’, associated with materials and practice, the physical production of ornamental surface, remains pejorative, in contrast to its more cerebral corollary. Scholarship on ‘ornament’ in architecture has thus largely privileged meaning over making. Disciplinary boundaries have also played a role in the exclusion or sidelining of decoration from architectural history. The separation of sculpture and architecture into discrete areas of enquiry and the division of pictorial from architectural concerns militates against a holistic view of early modern architectural production.

Fine distinctions have been drawn between ‘ornament’ and ‘decoration’, though more often they have been used interchangeably, not least by Le Corbusier, who transposed Loos’s ‘ornament’ to ‘decoration’ (Le Corbusier 1987: 85; Wigley 1995: 92; Sankovitch 1998: 690–694; Criticos 2004: 185–219; Altea 2012: 11–13; Kavalier 2012: 47–50). Oleg Grabar considered decoration to be ‘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' (Grabar 1992: 5). Likewise, James Trilling viewed ornament as 'decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content' (Trilling 2003: 23). David Brett, perhaps wisely, side-stepped categorical definition to position decoration and ornament as 'a family of values' (Brett 2005: 4), following Ernst Gombrich, who considered it 'a mistake to think that what cannot be defined cannot be discussed' (Gombrich 1984: x). This paper follows the pragmatic approach of Ethan Matt Kavaler, who considers the terms 'nearly synonymous ... distinguished more by perspective than function', though 'ornament' implies a theoretical attitude and 'decoration' a 'craftsman-like' view (Kavaler 2012: 50). While 'ornament' might be substituted for its sibling throughout this essay without too much distortion, 'decoration' is consciously employed to evoke the actual crafted surfaces of buildings. Here 'ornament' can signify a constituent part of decoration, an ornamental repertoire, or a guiding principle: the decoration of the Vatican loggia employed a wide range of *all'antica* ornament, and ornament was central to the creative development of Giovanni da Udine. Indeed, when does an embellishing motif or composition in any number of media not constitute both ornament and decoration? A conscientious eschewal of the word 'decoration' in much modern theoretical writing, contrary to historical

practice, shows clearly the perspective of the new academy (Heering 2013; Sankovitch 1998). A plucky student fairly ventured what few scholars would dare, that ornament has 'a slightly more "architectural" connotation, while "decoration" is something often restricted for interiors' (Farrell 2005: 6).

### Antipathy

Antipathy to decoration in architecture remains latent in scholarship, architectural practice, and taste despite theoretical deconstruction of modernist bias and recent historical revisionism. While ornament has, of late, been the darling of academic discourse, decoration remains its embarrassing country cousin. Consider the stone hall at Holkham in Norfolk (**Figure 1**) and the intarsia façade of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (**Figure 2**): unlikely bedfellows, yet in the doldrums of the historiographical imaginary, kindred spirits. Among the best-known examples of their kind, images abound in survey and monograph, accompanied by discussion of formal genealogy, architectural invention, and cultural resonance. Rarely do matters of decoration arise. A volume on Houghton devotes a few lines to the achievement of the fluted and cabled columns whose timber core is sheathed in a thin layer of Staffordshire alabaster, which consumed the energies of marble masons for a period of two years (Schmidt, Keller, and Feversham 2005: 124). At Santa Maria Novella, this 'dazzling point of arrival' for the great processions of



**Figure 1:** Interior of the Marble Hall, Holkham Hall, 1734–1765, Norfolk. Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 2:** Santa Maria Novella, facade c. 1458–1470, Florence. Creative Commons CCO 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication. Photo by Jebulon, 2011. Creative Commons CCO 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa\\_Maria\\_Novella\\_Florence\\_fa%C3%A7ade.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa_Maria_Novella_Florence_fa%C3%A7ade.jpg).

the period (Hatfield 2004: 87), the intricate revetment of Carrara marble, and Verde di Prato by the workshop of the acclaimed *marmista* Giovanni di Bertino accounted for much of the vast sum expended by Giovanni Rucellai on the façade. Yet it is consistently side-stepped by most scholars of Leon Battista Alberti. A superb recent study of marble which does much to rehabilitate lithic splendour also sidelines Bertino and his ilk in its conscious privileging of poetics (Barry 2020: 249). Lack of interest, if not disdain, for the decorative part of architecture is deeply rooted. Antipathy for decoration, craftsmanship, and richness of materials is a silent reiteration of modernist critique; ‘the final retreat for ostentation ... inlaid floors spread out like carpets of stone ... intoxicated, the public learns and is dazzled ... Good lord, how rich, how beautiful ... and all made by hand’ (Le Corbusier 1987: 3–6, 97–98). Though first published almost a century ago, and ostensibly debunked by post-modern deconstruction, the attitude to decoration, ‘the degenerate potential of the surface’ (Wigley 1995: 36), manifested in Le Corbusier’s *L’Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui*, endures. At times it is refreshingly and instructively overt. For a former dean at Princeton University School of Architecture, the great 6th-century Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia exemplifies the triumph of design over decoration: ‘only the strongest geometry would be able to resist the sequential attempts to colonise the surfaces through ornamentation’ (Atak 2015: 135), while the prominent architects Jürgen Sawade, Stephan Braunfels, and Oswald Matthias Ungers respectively ‘hate ornament’, ‘don’t rate’ it as architecture, or find it simply ‘superfluous’ (Caspary 2013: 25).

Santa Maria Novella conjures the formidable ghost of Rudolf Wittkower, whose brilliant characterisation of

Renaissance architecture, informed by the harmonies of ancient musical theory, subtly relegated surface decoration to a lower order of significance. As scholars have shown (Payne 1994; Sankovitch 1998), his approach reflected a wider historiography in which ‘structure’ was used to describe the ‘real’ material presence of architecture, an unspecified reality beneath the ornamental surface. Thus the ‘colorful, exuberant, multi-material architecture of Bologna, Milan, Venice ... and Naples ... is constructed by implication into the heterogenous, the “other”’ (Payne 1994: 337). Yet however much scholars seek to rehabilitate the achievements of these centres, the paradigmatic conception of a classicising Renaissance architecture still holds sway. That a definitive and breathtaking contemporary account of Renaissance architecture by the world’s leading architectural historian of the period is entirely illustrated in black and white reflects the continued privileging of design narratives over considerations of decoration, materials, and craftsmanship (Frommel 2007).

Together with harmonic proportions and the regulating lines of the classical ordonnance which mimicked or exemplified real structure, spatiality was a dominant criterion of value in 20th-century architectural history. Influenced by burgeoning theories of perception, August Schmarsow’s theory of spatiality as a driver of architectural production, and its attendant subordination of ornament, has even been read as an attempt to counter the surface-focused eclecticism of contemporary art nouveau (Schwarzer 1991). Its influence was particularly felt in the literature on international modernism, which celebrated abstract space but extended to the architecture of the distant past. The colourful inlaid Cosmatesque works of the 12th and 13th centuries (**Figure 3**), whose



**Figure 3:** Restored cloister of San Paolo fuori le mura, Rome, completed 1214. Photo by Christine Casey, 2017.

jewel-like surfaces had enthused architects in the 1890s, were among the sitting ducks subjected to the yardstick of spatiality; 'above all, these masters lack in their works a true experience or sense of space and volume, concentrating their efforts on flat surfaces, horizontal and vertical' (Creti 2009: ix).

While the modernist high moral ground in architecture was effectively deconstructed by David Watkin, Tom Wolfe, and others, its denigration of decorative concerns was of considerably less interest to them than its arguments for a brave new world, perhaps because their respective audiences were as much in thrall to minimalism as the butt of their satire (Watkin 1977; Wolfe 1982). Even Ernst Gombrich, a knight in shining armour for the cause of decoration, admitted to sharing 'the prejudice of my generation in favour of functional form' (Gombrich 1979: x). Watkin and Wolfe followed in the slipstream of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Venturi 1966) which ostensibly put the decorative surface in architecture back on the map, while largely avoiding use of the terms 'ornament' and 'decoration'. Venturi's view of decoration was formal. Here was a form of visual rhetoric whose principal aim was to 'conduct the eye to the image of the whole'. 'Linings ... pattern ... layers ... devices ... elements' could evoke scale, define significance, express contradiction or unity. While they could do so in unexpected ways, through 'double-functioning elements' and 'violent adjacencies', discussion of 'ornamental' surface was limited to its role in the service of composition. As in Renaissance narratives, decorative surface was the instrument of architectural design but now for expressive rather than tectonic and harmonic purposes. And again, *disegno* trumped *colore*. In a reductionism echoed in John Berger's equally captivating *Ways of Seeing* (Berger 1972), Venturi equated the writhing plasticity of *rocaille* with the decorative timber banding of Frank Lloyd Wright's interiors and

the detailing of Mies van der Rohe's elevations, all seen as defining devices irrespective of *factura* (Figure 4). We, the readers, are carried along by a super-abundance of postage-stamp-like black-and-white images revelatory of design but undemonstrative of surface effect.

But exclusion is a more powerful weapon than faint praise. The master-narratives of early modern architecture in the mid- to late 20th century, by largely excluding discussion of interiors and craftsmanship, even more forcibly relegated decoration to a lowly sub-genre of architectural production. Sir John Summerson and his contemporaries, in their narratives of 18th-century British architecture, side-step issues of ornament and craftsmanship, allowing limited images and captions to stand in for discussion of decoration. Here, too, Wittkower's influence was felt, and his study of Palladianism did much to establish the 'eloquence of a plain surface' as the ultimate expression of 18th-century architecture in Britain (McKellar 2004: 44). For Summerson, real architecture was about the design of structure and volume. Wren's stylar compositions compare unfavourably to the 'sheer mass' of Hawksmoor's buildings; 'the change is a fundamental one, a change of feeling, a renewed interest in the *intrinsic* qualities of mass, rhythm, and proportion as opposed to the *extrinsic* management of form by the apparatus of classical design' (Summerson 1991: 253).

In a contemporary monograph on Vanbrugh, which contained only three images of interiors, Laurence Whistler argued for the need 'to distinguish ... between sculptor's ornament and architect's ornament, *between the applied and the integral* ... The stone carving which lavishly covers the exterior of Castle Howard ... is fine though somewhat too clearly an accessory' and distracts from 'Vanbrugh's natural inclination ... to plain surfaces and bold effects' (Whistler 1954: 6; 55; my italics) (Figure 5). Antipathy to the role of decoration in architecture persisted into the



**Figure 4:** Design for a chimneypiece and overmantel by L. Snetzler, 1757. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Venturi's reductionist analysis glosses over the complexity, fluidity and intense 'plasticity' of Rocaille decoration: 'Some of Wright's early interiors parallel in the motif of the wood strip the rocaille-filled interiors of the rococo. In Unity Temple and the Evans House these strips are used on the furniture, walls, ceilings, light fixtures, and window mullions, and the pattern is repeated on the rugs. As in the Rococo, a continuous motif is used to achieved a strong whole expressive of what Wright called plasticity' (Venturi 1966: 96–97).

late 20th century. A broad narrative of British architecture judged Palladianism to be simply unconcerned with interiors (Worsley 1995: 197), while a monograph on Castle Howard, though acknowledging that the carver Henri Nadauld was 'at least as much as Vanbrugh ... responsible for the liveliness and surface animation of the two main facades', nevertheless devoted little attention to his work (Samaurez Smith 1997: 63–66).

The plot thickens when the place of ornament is considered within wider stylistic development and decoration becomes the real villain of the piece, the nemesis of great art and architecture since antiquity. Decline narratives are rife from Rome to Byzantium to the later middle ages, mannerism, Baroque, rococo, and 19th-century historicism. Johann Huizinga likened flamboyant Gothic to

'an endless organ postlude ... an unrestrainedly wild overgrowth of the idea by the form ... The *horror vacui* which may perhaps be identified as a characteristic of end periods of intellectual development dominates this art' (Kavaler 2012: x). In a similar vein, Richard Krautheimer considered Byzantine churches had 'pushed to the limit ... into excess and mannerism' (Ousterhout 2015: 167), while Henry van de Velde, a vociferous enthusiast of ornament, rejected that of Baroque and rococo 'because it consists of a vegetation that blossoms without moderation, under a fanciful flowering creating a restless line' (Haddad 2003: 130; Van de Velde 2003: 139). The decline narrative and its ornamental scapegoat had particular impact on the perception of regional architecture, where 'departure' from the canon was most evident and 'provincial' was a term of derision, the



**Figure 5:** Castle Howard, begun 1701, North Yorkshire, England. Photo by jcw1967, 2017. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license <https://flickr.com/photos/38085866@N08/38521945571>.

antithesis of metropolitan restraint. Venice, Lombardy, and Naples were joined among others by Spain and its colonies as exuberant provincials enamoured of marble, gold, and colour. Nikolaus Pevsner managed to hit many targets in his characterisation of Antoni Gaudi's architecture as 'a frantic concoction' of Catalan, Indian, and Spanish Baroque 'possible only in the country of ... Churriguera' (Avilés 2021: 128). Eclecticism and historicism of the 19th century provided critics with a field day, this 'slip-cover' *Scheinarchitektur* filled to the brim with redundant detail: 'Hammer, hammer, hammer, pilaster, pediment and pinnacle, fill up every corner ... we give thirteen to the dozen: crockets are the best value if you want a fine, rich effect' (Elliott 1907: 160). Indeed, the representation of emulative, elaborative, and repetitive decoration as banality is a persistent feature in even the most insightful of recent literature. Yet, notwithstanding issues of quality in design and execution, emulation, elaboration, and repetition are core characteristics of ornament and decoration of all periods and places. Habitual, ordinary, slow to change, rather than novel and unconventional, 'banal', if you will. This critique is nowhere more evident than in traditional European disdain for the predominantly abstract decoration of the Islamic world; for Roger Fry, 'the besetting sin of the oriental craftsman' was an 'intolerable patience and thoughtless industry' while for Edwin Lutyens, immersed in the 'high game' of classicism, Mughal architecture was no more than 'spurts by various mushroom dynasties with as much intellect as any other art nouveau' (Fry 1910: 317; Tillotson 1989: 107). By the 1970s, readings of Islamic decoration had veered from 'decorative' to 'iconographic' and 'essentialist', identifying a broad universal religious symbolism 'unsubstantiated by concrete data' (Necipoğlu 1995: 80).

The setting apart of ingenious design and thoughtless industry had a long history; for Francesco Colonna, 'unschooled workmen' were 'the instruments of the architect' (Howard 2013: 100). Artisans and their all-too-willing clients were later seen to thwart purity at every opportunity, from Renaissance Venice to Georgian London. For Manfredo Tafuri, Venetian architecture accommodated 'two languages [that] contaminate each other: one *all'antica*, by definition cultured and abstract, and the other a "popular language" narrative and sensualistic' (Howard 2013: 96). The battle lines were drawn, at least in the academic imaginary. The juxtaposition of patrician and plebeian instincts in art and life is of course as longstanding a binary as purity and excess. Here rhetoric played an important role in determining the critical attitudes of influential Renaissance writers by providing key concepts and an 'organising frame' for discussions of architecture that paid scant attention to manual labour (Vickers 1988: 242; Grassi 1980: 78; Van Eck 2007: 35–46). Platonic idealism, in which the world mirrors a deeper reality of essential forms, had long contributed to the devaluing of surface embellishment, as had theological principles of purity and restraint, despite the decorative splendour of much religious architecture. The sober and aniconic character of reformist churches in the Counter-Reformation period and concurrent dismissal of decoration as morally suspect produced an ostentatious puritanism seen 'itself an introverted form of display' and the outcome of a complex conflation of polity and ceremony (Brett 2004; Morel 2019). Roman Catholics were pleased by surface appearance and Protestants by interiorised restraint, a juxtaposition also associated with gender identity in art and architecture and with the hegemony

of classicism. As Lucy Gent has shown, 'classicism tends to appropriate the language of purity, lucidity, beauty, and what is fundamental', leaving to 'the Other impurity, obscurity, commodity and the trivial' (Gent 1995: 54). The glitter-loving crowd, the untutored artisan doer, and the banal repetition of traditional pattern and motif point up the political dimension of decoration-shaming, neatly articulated by Le Corbusier: 'There is a hierarchy in the arts; decorative art at the bottom and the human form at the top'. Meaning trumps unmeaning: *ut architectura poesis*. Amédée Ozenfant was even more explicit: 'Each to his place! The decorators to the big shops, the artists on the next floor up, several floors up, as high as possible, on the pinnacles, higher even' (Jaudon and Kozloff 1978: 41). Originality and authenticity of expression were the characteristics of high art, while conventionality and reproduction were the hallmarks of decoration. At the heart of the tension between design and making was the thorny issue of invention, or *poesia*. As Rudyard Kipling mused in 'The Conundrum of the Workshops' (Kipling 1890), 'They builded a tower to shiver the sky and wrench the stars apart./Till the Devil grunted behind the bricks: It's striking, but is it Art?'

### Revisionism

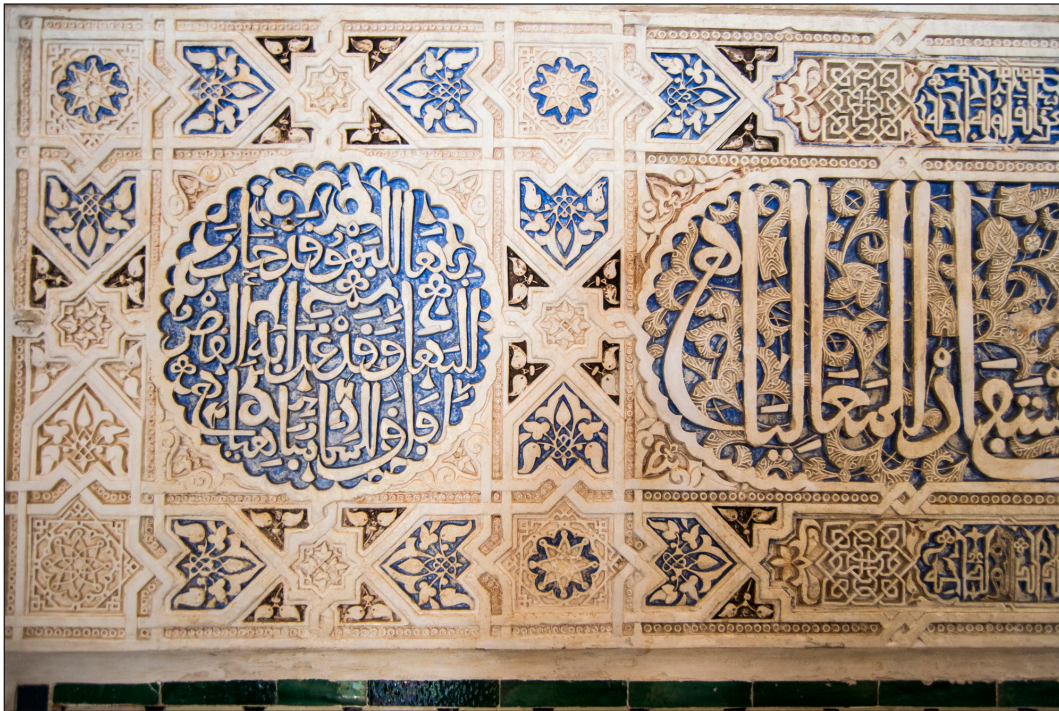
Although neoclassical architectural critique had given wide currency to anti-ornament sentiment since the early 18th century (Wittman 2009), its tenacity and *longue durée* in architectural criticism and history is nonetheless surprising, given a distinguished European tradition of scholarship stretching back to Semper's concept of craftsmanship as the progenitor of monumental architecture and Riegl's epic history of acanthus ornament as a cipher for non-mimetic artistic development. Riegl laid the foundation for a taxonomic approach to ornament, later unfairly dismissed as merely 'endless classification[s] ... irrelevant to anything but an abstract fascination with etymologies' (Grabar 1992: 39). Categorical documentation of decorative forms further fed into iconographic studies, from the antique acanthus leaf to Christian symbolism. However, Riegl's true heir in producing a monumental excursus on decoration was Gombrich, who brought his preoccupation with perceptual psychology to bear on ornament in art and architecture. For Gombrich, decoration was essentially non-representative, concerned primarily with a field of vision and derived from an innate psychological sense of order which favoured clarity, symmetry, unity, etc. Yet while Gombrich acknowledged that architecture presented the 'test case' for any theory concerned with decoration, because of its 'fruitful tension between functional and ornamental hierarchies', he devoted precious little time to it, treating decoration only as a device for framing, filling, linking, and defining of elements, categories later rehearsed by Venturi (Gombrich 1979: 164). However, his rescue of decoration from discursive oblivion was groundbreaking in offering cognitive and aesthetic explanation for decorative practices. The *horror vacui* bemoaned by Huizinga was recast as an expression of spiralling virtuosity rather than decline: 'The urge which

drives the decorator to go on filling any resultant void is generally described as *horror vacui*... Maybe the term *amor infiniti*, the love of the infinite, would be a more fitting description' (Gombrich 1979: 80). The impetus to elaboration was found in psychology:

What are the psychological forces which appear to drive ornament forward towards such enrichment – if you side with the classicists – excess? Is it simply hard to give up any activity as long as there is no pressure to stop? Going on, the craftsman can outdo his rival and show his infinite resources of skill and inventiveness. Why should he relinquish work as long as it gives him pleasure to modify it even further? (Gombrich 1979: 166)

Gombrich's rehabilitation of decoration was admired by Grabar, a distinguished scholar of Islamic ornament, who interpreted for a western audience the contested meanings and craftsmanship of Islamic architectural decoration. But for Grabar, the European post-Renaissance tradition and its categorical separation of ornament and representation prevented Gombrich from fully realising the potential of his approach (Figure 6). Grabar rejected symbolic interpretations of decorative impulses, arguing instead for the primacy of visual pleasure as a phenomenon in itself. Decorative surfaces were about the fact of richness and complexity of execution and pattern rather than about specific iconographic significance. Whether in the great, vegetal band of the Mshatta or the much-interpreted vegetal frieze of the Ara Pacis, decoration can evoke and recall meanings without compelling them. Ornament, and its corollary, decoration, is a visual order whose function is to embellish, beautify, attract the viewer, and subtly evoke meaning (Grabar 1992) (Figure 7).

The lessons of Gombrich and Grabar were imbibed by the British design historian David Brett, who set an ambitious agenda to 'restore to the ornamental, the decorative and the pleasurable some theoretical dignity' (Brett 2005: 1). Brett felt that discourse had become arid and cerebral, treating objects 'with embarrassment', and argued for the role of decoration in lived experience (Brett 2005: 7). To the concept of visual pleasure, guided by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Pierre Bourdieu, Brett added social communication as a key function of decoration and an essential part of self-presentation and group identification. In passages of inspired writing, Brett lays bare the cumulative ontological case against decoration and its low semantic standing, concluding 'Architecture, we might think, is overburdened with theory in the same measure as decoration carries insufficient ballast' (Brett 2005: 219). At the same time, historical scholarship began to acknowledge the shortcomings of artisan-architect, centre-periphery binaries and to re-evaluate the decorative choices made in regions hitherto seen as bleary-eyed cultural backwaters. Venice was a test case. By the turn of the millennium the *venezianità*, formerly seen as ostentatious and unsophisticated, now spoke of the city's essence. Wolfgang Wolters' early championing of architectural decoration, through a taxonomic analysis of the city's timber coffered



**Figure 6:** Stucco panel, Two Sisters Hall, Lion's Palace, Alhambra, 14th century, containing verses from a poem composed by Ibn Zamrak for King Muhammad V (1339–1391). Text in the round banner reads, 'The portico is so beautiful that the palace competes in beauty with the sky' (trans. by José Miguel Puerta Vilchez). Photo by Eva Amate, 2017. 'There is no design set on a background, as occurs for instance in Classical ornament; every single space is an active participant in the ornamentation. It is less a case of *horror vacui*, as it has so frequently been defined, than a much more positive attempt at making every part of the surface significant' (Grabar 1992: 160–161).



**Figure 7:** Ara Pacis Augustae, 13–9 BCE, Rome. Photo by Rabax63, 2017. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ara\\_Pacis\\_\(SW\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ara_Pacis_(SW).jpg).

'No other extant classical monument accorded so much of its programmatic imagery to complex vegetal or floral themes of this kind, and no other classical monument demonstrates so emphatically the level of importance that this type of decoration could assume ... far more than pure decoration; to ancient observers they would have appeared no less meaningful than fully anthropomorphic sculptures' (Castriota 1995: 12, 58).

'Perhaps classical scholarship, so steeped in meanings, hidden or overt, failed to deal with an ornamental realm in which esthetic values prevail' (Grabar 1992: 33).



ceilings, gradually found its way into wider narratives of Venetian architecture (Wolters 1968; Wolters 2000). 'Why', asked Deborah Howard, 'has ornament become such a devalued commodity, even in Venice with its long tradition of exquisite relief carving?' (Howard 2013: 97) (Figure 8). Likewise, the much-maligned opulence and material richness of late medieval architecture was now seen as 'essential to the appeal of these buildings ... a register of expensive labour and consequently of social status' (Kavaler 2012: 48). Splendour and 'the colour of money' had new semantic appeal (Strupp 1993).

Fruitful engagement with the role of decoration in architecture emerged within a wider theoretical analysis of ornament across many media. A colloquium held at the Villa Medici in Rome in 1996 eloquently explored the character and functions of ornament and decoration in objects, buildings, music, and texts across a wide geographical and chronological trajectory (Ceccarini et al. 2000). Repetition, multiplication, and low-level

symbolism were recognised as characteristic of this 'visual rumination', a 'particular and necessary mode of communication between groups of individuals linked by an activity, a belief, common and particular emotions' (Sauron 2000: 70–71). An even broader range of topics was accommodated by Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne at a Harvard conference of 2012, which embraced, among others, themes of trans-mediality, hybridity, luxury, and surface agency (Necipoğlu and Payne 2016). Calligraphic conventions migrate to tiled surfaces; textiles to sgraffito facades; printed vignettes to walls, ceilings, and objects; and surfaces are now animated and vital elements of objects and buildings. These and other grand cornucopias of essays, which privilege multiple and complex historicities over the universalising narratives of the 20th century, excite and stimulate (Beyer and Spies 2012; De Cavi 2015; Dekoninck, Heering and Lefftz 2013). Sustained and focused scholarship is, however, more satisfying, such as Payne's cumulative work on ornament in early modern



**Figure 8:** Palazzo Contarini del Zaffo, Venice, detail of late 15th-century façade. Photo by Christine Casey, 2017.

architectural theory (Payne 1994; Payne 1999; Payne 2001; Payne 2012; Payne 2016). This has clearly shown that pre-occupation with the classical ordonnance overwhelmed and engulfed other widespread aspects of architectural decoration and their achievement, effectively writing astyler decorative craftsmanship out of Renaissance architectural history. Payne has also consistently sought to bridge the gap between art history and architectural history by arguing for hybridity between architecture, painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts, and for ornamental transfer across media, the latter a longstanding concern of scholarship within the decorative arts (Payne 2016; Snodin 1984; McDonnell 1989).

There remains too a conscientious, philosophical, and literary interpretation of 'ornament' that refuses the visual pleasure of Grabar and Brett and sees meaning and metaphor as its primary role. This view of ornament as persuasive communication has been explored in the context of

rhetoric's role in shaping understanding of artistic and architectural production. For Clare Lapraik Guest, the 16th century represented a fall from grace: 'Once the *grotesche* are simplified and depopulated, they provide the lineaments of a decorative field in which ornament is without metaphorical significance or framing function, a beautiful yet inherently empty form of mediation between the beholder and the blankness of space' (Lapraik Guest 2015: 551) (**Figure 9**). Likewise, in the high cultural ground of late Renaissance studies, the 'twirling lines' and 'frivolous curves' of rocaille decoration continue to evade respect (Hammeken and Hansen 2019: 20). Critique is not confined to the past and the effervescence of ornament in recent architecture, with its focus on affective experience and refusal of decoration's traditional rhetorical role, has drawn censure from Antoine Picon: 'it is as if ornament were contaminating structure instead of playing the complex game of supplementarity with it' (Picon 2013: 42). In



**Figure 9:** Attributed to Nicoletto da Modena, designs for panels of grotesque ornament, c. 1507. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 'We have argued that ornament is concerned with making us see things as wholes, or in their relation to wholes ... it does this by creating borders or frames, by showing things in the "light" of their praise or perfection, or by mediating between particulars and the whole. When framing becomes over-elaborated, art becomes self-referential' (Guest 2015: 592).

the 'new sensorium', contemporary architects are judged unwilling or unable to 'reconnect' with the demonstrative role of ornament in architecture.

### Achieving Decoration: Craftsmanship and Materials

Where then were the creators of decoration at the dawn of the material turn? Relegated to the unthinking margins by classicists and modernists alike, craft had admittedly undergone radical reinterpretation in between. But John Ruskin's powerful argument for decoration as the principal part of architecture, by virtue of 'the muscular action of the human hand' (Cook and Wedderburn 1903: 465), had cast the medieval artisan as the epitome of engaged creativity, thereby dispatching his law-abiding predecessors and descendants to semantic oblivion. The early modern craftsman was emblematic of industrial production, an animated tool, capable of imitation, speed, and precision. Agency was not bestowed upon the antique and post-Renaissance artisan until the 20th century. In 1975, John Bryan Ward Perkins summarised the situation with respect to late antiquity:

On the whole this is an aspect of the study of secular classical art which has been surprisingly neglected in favour of ... style and content. The craftsman as an artist, the craftsman as an instrument for the expression of the religious or decorative symbolism of his age: these are common places of scholarship. The craftsman simply as a craftsman, that is to say as an element in the systems of production and supply whereby the material needs of the contemporary world were satisfied, this is a topic which has only recently began [sic] to receive the serious attention of classical archaeologists.

An acknowledged exception was the research of sculpture historians which showed that 'the organisation of these workshops and the sort of work they produced were related to the sources of supply' (Ward Perkins 1978: 637–638; 647).

For architecture of the early modern period, the survival of entire buildings sustained traditional emphasis on the formal characteristics of individual architects and their designs rather than the dynamic processes of building and decoration. That said, from the 1980s, new material preoccupations saw an increasing fascination with the ways in which buildings were made and the emergence of a burgeoning literature in construction history. Yet, while a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to how buildings were engineered and constructed, a striking lacuna is attention to the decorative modelling of surfaces, as if the structure-skin binary had migrated to the new material history of architecture. Engineering and mathematics, materials science, and mechanics legitimise such research within the field of architecture and its history. While masons, bricklayers, iron smiths, and carpenters are embraced by building history, the decorative work of their counterparts in joinery, carving, and modelling remains under-studied. As Jonathan Hay has argued, for a very

different medium, surface agency is the great blind spot in modern analysis of early modern decorative objects (Hay 2010; Hay 2016: 65).

Close attention to the decorative part of architecture emerged at crossing points between academic, professional, and commercial spheres, among scholars, curators, conservators, and art market specialists with tangible knowledge of materials and methods and extensive field research. One might say on the margins of art history and architectural history. In Britain, a significant corpus of publications emerged (Beard 1981; Cornforth 2004; Fowler and Cornforth 1978; Thornton 1983; Thornton 1984; Thornton 1996). Biography, chronology, provenance, style, and quality were dominant concerns, categories considered peripheral by the new art history of the 1970s with its predominantly conceptual concerns. Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard stretched the horizons of scholarship in Britain to consider the reception and social function of decoration (Snodin and Howard 1996). Yet painstaking documentation of media, makers, and their clients, worthy of its subject matter, laid the foundation for later research. More recent scholarship on the perception of craftsmanship by European craftsmen in the period underscores the central significance of virtuosity and of overcoming material constraints (Napoli 2009; Napoli 2015; Negre 2019). A further component in lending academic legitimacy to decorative craft production was the development of socio-economic frameworks, as neatly expressed by David Ormrod: 'Most artists in early modern times regarded themselves as artisans and the historical study of art as a series of interdependent crafts and trades ... provides a more reliable starting point than ... the *musée-imaginaire* of traditional art history' (Ormrod 1999: 546). Histories of technology and science likewise increasingly embraced the materials and methods of the artisan and demonstrated a fruitful dialogue or 'trading zone' between scholars and practitioners, artists, and craftsmen (Germino and Johnston 2009; Long 2015; Smith et al. 2014). However, a developmental emphasis in the history of science, which focuses upon the craftsman's contribution to the conceptual realm, is problematic for an understanding of decorative craftsmanship on its own terms. As Trilling has demonstrated for ornamental textiles, a teleological approach is antithetical to the study of pattern and its imaginative elaboration and reinvention over time (Trilling 2001).

The political dimension of semantic exclusion and the representative role of decoration has been addressed by scholars in their efforts to rehabilitate and reposition the still much-maligned rococo (Scott 1996; Michel 2000; Bailey 2014; Magnusson 2017). 'In order for decoration to work', Scott writes, 'to command the patronage of the great, post-Renaissance theory demanded that it should deflect attention from the technologies of its manufacture and obscure the antagonism around which its production was organised' (Scott 1996: 7). In the context of the wider building world, traditional distinctions between architecture and building have been examined to demonstrate the creative agency of the craftsman and building professional (Lucey 2018). For Brian Hanson, who developed the

theme of artisan-architect engagement into the 19th century, semantic invisibility carried the important qualification: 'In theory then, *if not in practice*, the contribution of the artisan to the work of architecture was rendered virtually invisible' (Hanson 2003: 3; my italics). Hanson's discussion of 19th-century poets and writers as instigators of 'descent' from reflective to constructive culture is not far from current trends in anthropology and sociology, which seek to valorise the cumulative effects of artisanal labour, such as Tim Ingold's concept of landscape creation as 'taskscape' (Ingold 1993) and Richard Sennett's positioning of craftsmanship as a tangible exemplar for a dangerously cerebral society: 'there is nothing inevitable about becoming skilled, there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself'. Drawing upon a burgeoning scholarship in artisanal and technological history, Sennett crafted a compelling critique of societal failure 'in making connections between head and hand' and a persuasive argument for craft practice as a behavioural model: 'prepare, dwell in mistakes, recover form' (Sennett 2009: 9, 161). An anthropological study of architectural craftsmanship (would there were more) in the modern cathedral workshop supports Sennett's argument: contrasting the margin for error in a figurative ornament and a deceptively simple finial, a mason considered the latter 'the real stuff ... one hundred per cent discipline... pure geometry' (Yarrow and Jones 2014: 264).

Just as craft and its exponents were being slowly nudged into the wider narratives of architectural history, so too were the materials with which they worked. Spolia and its impact in the metamorphosis of classical decoration acquired new gloss, as did the symbolic role of natural building materials and the optical and aesthetic effects of decorative materials such as mosaic and marble (Glass 1980). Thomas Raff's *Die Sprache der Materialien*, which drew primarily on scholarship on antique and medieval architecture, was significant for its focus on the properties of materials such as durability, costliness, and colour, and the iconographical and hierarchical dimensions of their disposition (Raff 2008). Marble, unlike other decorative materials, had survived the cosmophobia of modernism, aided by Loos and Mies, and remained an object of aesthetic and historical enquiry. The new phenomenology and materiality enhanced its already significant historical appeal and contributed to a re-evaluation of early modern magnificence. Pascal Julien's *Marbres de carrières en palais* is an eloquent antidote to Le Corbusier's diatribe against the rich inlays of Versailles (Julien 2006), while scholars of French 17th-century design have revealed 'the multifaceted universe of ornament', which, for all its profusion, played a fundamental role in the ordering of early modern buildings. Tellingly, 'the naked', without a supporting noun, described in 18th-century France and Britain the surfaces of buildings 'devoid' of ornament (Mérot 2005: 61; Coquery 2005: 25). The lithic artistry of Seicento Italy, described by Wittkower as 'something added and fastened on rather than innate and proper', has likewise been rescued from ignominy (Dardanella 1997; De Cavi, 2015; Napoli 2015; Del Pesco 2016; Napoli and Tronzo 2018; Barry 2020), while decorative plasterwork has gradually begun

to receive the attention it deserves (Casey 2017: 296–307). Though exploratory steps have been taken, the decorative relationship of painting and architecture remains the elephant in the room (Anderson 2018; Lewis 1982; Farneti and Lenzi 2004; Matteucci and Stanzani 1991).

### Impact

What then is the import of antipathy for the study of decoration in early modern architecture? In the first instance, a low level of scholarship by comparison to the vast scale of decorative production in the period. Second, an absence of joined-up thinking on the relationship of architecture and sculpture. Third, a persistent lack of interest in the properties of decorative materials and their manipulation by craftsmen. And finally, a blinkered approach to the commercial dimension in the finishing of buildings and to the decorative sensibilities of early modern architects. On the positive side, as seen in the foregoing account of revisionism, a burgeoning interest in ornament and craftsmanship promises to tell us more about the messy contingency that so often characterises decoration in architecture, about tensions between tectonic and ornamental concerns, about the effects and meanings of splendour in architecture, and about the relationship of architectural decoration to other kinds of cultural practices.

By comparison to other aspects of architectural history, decoration remains an orphan area of relatively low respectability on the very edge of the discipline, uncomfortably close to art history. Appraisal of the nature and effect of sculpted surfaces in stone, wood, and plaster, which account for so much decoration in architecture, is a significant lacuna in scholarship on early modern buildings. Unlike painted decoration, which has been studied as fine art by art historians, the sculpting of soffit, wall, tread, and aperture is largely seen as a form of background noise and not as a vital element of post-Renaissance architecture. Architectural sculpture falls between two stools, aptly described as the 'Cinderella of the arts': 'art historians and architectural historians alike have neglected architectural sculpture, albeit for different reasons. For art historians architectural sculpture does not count as "high art": for the architectural historian it reeks too much of it' (Den Hartog 2014: 150–151). A 'poor relation' of monumental sculpture, it has been likened to a subsidiary information service of classical architectural production (Kanz 2019: 357). Historians of sculpture, alert to the problem, have sought to include the work of decorative carvers within their research; indeed, much of what we know about architectural decoration in 17th-century Europe comes from the work of sculpture historians (Montagu 1985; Montagu 1989; Roscoe, Hardy, and Sullivan 2009). Scholars of the antique are ahead of the game in terms of close attention to quotidian architectural decoration (Lipps and Maschek 2014) and in viewing material, thematic, and aesthetic order as arising from a 'constellation of individual high-ranking and complex elements: precious materials, technically perfectly cut ashlar and columns, ... brilliant ornaments and suggestively designed images', thereby producing 'intricate networks of mutual ornamentation' from statuary to street paving (Hölscher 2018: 68;

Barham 2018: 295). A great deal remains to be done to profitably amalgamate the analytical tools of architectural and sculptural research for the early modern period. In the case of Britain, we know precious little about the activities of early modern masons, carvers, joiners, and plasterers in the crafting of the richly modelled surfaces of exterior and interior, and in the achievement of the classical orders across a range of media together with the expansive ornamental vocabulary attendant upon them. The chimneypiece, the great ornamental set-piece of the early modern interior, and among the costliest items in domestic architecture, has received remarkably little attention from architectural historians; likewise, 'history rich ... floors are not permitted to speak' (Sammartini 1999: 13).

Closely associated with the sculptural deficit in architectural history is an allied paucity of scholarship on the nature of materials and their impact upon architectural craftsmanship. It is remarkable that there is no consolidated history of the stone and marble industry in Britain in the long 18th century and only a partial picture of the vast industry in native and imported timber. With notable exceptions, low scholarly interest in materials and making also thwarts the history of painting and sculpture and has been ascribed to an incompatibility of academic and studio practices, ideas are fast and free, materials resistant and slow (Gomme 2000; Rockwell 1993; Elkins 2008; Yonan 2021). Conversely, craft practitioners have shown that the nuanced handling of materials and acute judgement of the eye are not amenable to verbalisation and should not be shoe-horned into an alien mode of expression (Frayling 2011): as noted of an earlier period, 'a visual grammar does not a verbal vocabulary make' (Speelberg 2013: 164). Ways of seeing are not ways of making. While academic research and writing is arguably as slow and painstaking as many decorative practices, the communication of a transient, grand-scale, and ambient process is more challenging than dealing discursively with the single work of art or architecture. Part of the problem lies in the traditional means of writing architectural history, dependent upon plan, section, and elevation, a method which emulates 20th-century design practice and posits a 'single, ideal and authoritative embodied experience' (Aristova 2018: 174). The principal casualties of this approach are the actual surfaces of the building, its walls, floors, and darkened recesses and the rich materials and craftsmanship which constitute them. Likewise, documentation of materials and methods has tended towards the recitation of recipes and static presentation of inactive implements and tools, though analysis of colour in the early modern British interior has been revelatory (Bristow 1996). While new technologies promise much in terms of time-lapsed procedures and surface analysis, narrative remains a fundamental vehicle of scholarship, despite the increasing fragmentation wrought by quantitative research metrics. Lest we dance on the heads of needles, greater clarity and synthesis is warranted.

A third factor which renders decoration resistant to interpretation is the commercial nature of artisanal practice and its relationship to fashion. The 'amor infiniti' of Gombrich's void-filling artisan was surely tempered by cost, the driving force of all early modern artistic

production. Ornament represented the combined cost of materials and labour and was habitually itemised in extensive detail. More ornament meant more money. And as the final and most contested aspect of the building process, decoration was particularly susceptible to changing fashion and often slipped the leash of architectural design. Contingency, cost, and client taste here had greatest agency. Because surfaces could be altered over time, they are thereby seen to compromise the integrity of design and to muddle the historical narrative. Even where architects were actively involved in the design of interior decoration, little attention has been paid to this aspect of their training and output. In Britain, this is particularly evident in scholarship on protean architects such as Vanbrugh: 'surely that is a distortion of the situation at a time when the priorities of patrons were crucial and their patterns of expenditure so significant' (Cornforth 2004: iii). A similarly compelling case has been made for Robert Adam:

Interiors were Adam's great achievement, his claim to fame. Yet, architectural historians have, on the whole, shied away from his decorative work, fearing, it seems, that focus on this subject detracts from, and may even obscure, his importance as an architect. Quite the contrary; it enlarges it. (Harris 2001: ix)

Decoration's ability to distract from 'architectural' concerns has polarised historical analysis and militated against holistic scholarship on early modern buildings in all their complexity and richness.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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