The Decriminalization of Ornament

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—In which tendrils creep, petals unfurl and geometric patterns abound

Ornament is the dominant visual currency of the moment. The pages we turn, the screens we summon, and the environments we visit all sprout with decorative detail, dense patterns, mandalas, fleurons, and the exploratory tendrils of lush flora. In a design climate that, for the larger part of a century, has been famously hostile to the generation, application, or even *mention* of decoration, what has happened to allow for this decriminalization of ornament discernible in today's design? And, beyond the palpable trendiness of these recent kaleidoscopic explosions and fantasy pattern-scapes, what is its significance?

—In which we follow the fluctuations of ornamentation's fortunes, from good to bad and back to good again, possibly

Ornament has had a turbulent past. For a considerable part of the last two centuries ornament has been the subject of debate in design, at least as it related to buildings and their interiors. In the mid-nineteenth century discussion focused on the meaning of decoration, its classification, and its most appropriate uses and sources. The roles of nature, history, and sources from outside Europe were all hotly contested. The development of machine-made decorative detail further complicated the debate. As

ornamentation became a more affordable and, thus, widely available feature of household goods such as textiles, wallpapers, books, cups and saucers, so the discourse that surrounded it began to take on a more moral, social and, even political, tone. It became inextricably bound up in discussions of beauty and taste.

The Great Exhibition of 1851—where the objects on display were, according to architectural historian Brent C. Brolin, "covered with clouds of putti, acres of acanthus, and cornucopiate harvests from the vegetable kingdom"—provided an opportunity for the design reformists to openly and publicly discuss ornament in relation to taste. They saw little to commend among the 100,000 objects on show and there followed renewed attempts to tame and codify decoration. The most famous and enduring of these was the architect Owen Jones's didactic *Grammar of Ornament*, published in 1856, that laid out 37 propositions relating to the appropriate uses of decoration and pattern and showcased in brilliant color (made possible by the recent introduction of chromolithography) thousands of examples of ornament from around the world. Owens believed that "All ornament should be based on geometrical construction," and he gave very detailed instructions concerning the use and placement of colors and hues. He forbade the use of "flowers or other natural objects" unless they were "conventional representations […] sufficiently suggestive to convey the intended images to the mind, without destroying the unity of the object they are employed to decorate."

Such passionate commitment to the cause of using ornamentation correctly was a central concern for all mid-nineteenth century design reformists. Henry Cole, the civil servant

largely responsible for the Great Exhibition, initiated *The Journal of Design and Manufacture*s as a systematic attempt to establish recognized principles of ornament. It was intended for the edification of those who designed, produced and sold patterns and contained right and wrong examples as well as critical reviews of new patterns. Just as Jones had argued, geometric patterns were considered to be good, and naturalistic design and excessive decorations were considered to be bad, even though naturalistic flower patterns were the most commercially successful in this period. Another example of the evangelizing for correct use of ornament could be found in the Museum of Ornamental Art (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) that was established in 1853 using many of the objects from the Great Exhibition to form the basis of its collections. In it was a gallery titled "Examples of False Principles in Decoration," that showed 87 objects specially selected to represent bad taste for the purpose of illuminating the public. Generally, three-dimensional naturalistic patterns on two-dimensional surfaces received the most criticism. The gallery became known as the Chamber of Horrors and was caricatured in Charles Dickens' weekly magazine Household Words.

John Ruskin's writings about architectural ornament, too, helped to cement a connection between appropriate decoration and virtues such as honesty and sincerity. And the moral tone of the critiques was further honed in the early twentieth century by the belief among avant-garde circles that products which disguised their modes of construction with ornament were deceitful and, therefore, fundamentally flawed. The moral resistance to ornamentation found its most vehement spokesperson in Austrian architect Adolf Loos, who in 1908 published a diatribe against decoration, titled "Ornament and Crime." In this

text Loos used stirring rhetoric to argue that nothing less than cultural evolution and human progress were being hampered by ornament. In his view, ornament was a waste of manpower, health, materials and capital. “In a highly productive nation,” he wrote, “ornament is no longer a natural product of its culture, and therefore represents backwardness or even a degenerative tendency.”

In an essay titled “Ornament and Crime: The Decisive Contribution of Adolf Loos,” the design critic Reyner Banham traces the passage of Loos’s article around Europe through its various re-printings, and speculates as to which architects read it when. Loos himself was quite convinced that ornament’s downfall was his own doing. In 1930 he wrote “I have emerged victorious from my 30 years of struggle. I have freed mankind from superfluous ornament.” The extent of the impact of Loos’s article upon the fate of ornament is still unclear, but the social and economic import of his beliefs certainly fuelled modernism’s manifestos, teachings and practice.

And so ornament began its long fall out of favor in architecture, industrial design and graphic design, a fall that lasted for the better part of the twentieth century. With postmodernism’s revivification of complexity, lent legitimacy by Robert Venturi’s writings in the 1960’s and 1970’s, ornament was granted a reprieve amongst design thinkers and makers. Even so, ornament has found it hard to shake its second-tier status within the cultural spectrum. It shared this space beyond the pale with the crafts, outsider art, popular or commercial art, and other obsessive or naïve creations such as the kinds of work depicted in Margaret Lambert and Enid Marx’s *English Popular and Traditional*

Arts published in 1946 which showcased examples of indigenous crafts such as hand-painted fairground signage, canal boat decoration, intricate lacework and straw dolls.

And, even today, despite its proliferation and the slow emergence of discourse surrounding it, the use of decoration is still regarded by mainstream graphic design as taboo—a testimony, perhaps, to modernism's enduring hegemony. A discussion about decoration on the design blog SpeakUp, for example, saw the terms "candy," "craving," "fluff," "indulge," "eighth deadly sin," "closet," and "guilt"—admittedly taken out of context here—flying around with telling regularity throughout the 62 posted comments.

For those willing to embrace decoration's possibilities and explore them through graphic design, there are few historical references or figures to turn to for validation or inspiration. "Ornament has been the subject of debate since classical times in architecture," says designer and educator Denise Gonzales Crisp, "but in graphic design it's as if it was never discussed. It's a stealth ideology." Gonzales Crisp points to the celebrated American type designers W.A. Dwiggins and Frederic W. Goudy as designers who were thinking more deeply than most about decoration, but "that's because ornament was allowed in type," she says. Goudy designed Kennerley in response to what he described as "a real need for types for decorative printing," and Dwiggins used celluloid or acetate stencils in which tiny elements were cut to create typographic ornaments for the surfaces of the books he designed.

—In which we wonder whether today's interest in ornament as it relates to design is anything more than a vagary of fashion?

At first it looks as if ornament's recent re-emergence in graphic design can be explained solely by the oscillations of style—the need to find a visual currency as contrary and exotic as possible to the one that preceded it. The early 2000's saw the energies of contemporary practice channeled through what might be broadly characterized as neo-modernism. Amongst the genre's defining characteristics were systems that generated progeny celebrated for their "default" or "undersigned" qualities and the proliferation of manifestos—those Modernist relics—dredged up for ironic reinterpretation. As with all fashionable statements, it is only a matter of time before the pendulum begins its return swing. Thus only a few short years later we find white spaces furnished with ornamental devices, serifs, borders and fleurons recalled from the dusty oblivion of archaic type specimens, and, replacing a largely urban and technological image-scape built from the visual language of computer software, and code, we find natural motifs and verdant foliage.

Evident in these expressions of the neo-baroque is bizarre nostalgia for a rural past. Bizarre because much of this pattern- and ornament-rich work evokes a time and place that never was—neither part of the designers' personal histories nor their cultural ones. Through the depiction of pastoral scenes, idealized pre-industrial landscapes populated with certain wild animals (the stag and the owl in particular) and by seeking recourse to the visual symbolism of heraldry, contemporary and largely urban designers appear to be trying to recreate a past and a rural idyll as an escape from the real urban present.

On closer inspection, however, that pendulum swing might not be such a swing after all. The current fascination with ornament and decoration can be seen not as a reaction against but, rather, as an addition to the work and thinking of the turn-of-the century systems-obsessed designers. Certain tendencies unite the neo-modern and the neo-baroque as if they were part of one seamless continuing project. Discernible in both, for example, are similar levels of irony and the use of a set of knowing references directed at fellow designers that help distance the maker from their work and possible engagement with its subject matter. It is as if merely the palettes had been swapped—the one with default type, blurry photographs of forgotten corners of everyday life, and compositions that, with a knowing wink, follow the templates in software programs, replaced by the one with serif and script faces, intensely detailed illustration, and dense patterns that evolve from the step-and-repeat function.

Something else is going on too, however, that may have more lasting implications for design. The other impulse running through this work is a kind of stubborn celebration of uselessness. The Modernist-derived philosophy that has dominated twentieth century design empties ornament of meaning and separates it from function, thus rendering it superfluous in the eyes of the canon. Knowing this, and still continuing to make exuberantly excessive, dense, and sometime exaggeratedly useless work, therefore, can be seen as a provocative thumbing of the nose to the approach to design advocated by many schools and professional organizations in which “problems” are “solved” by following a sequence of codified steps. As Gonzales Crisp puts it, “The super-rational

approach to design seems to be all about the client—the idealized client. The decorative speaks to the people using design and not just the clients who commission it."

—In which we delve beneath the surface of things

Amongst this dense forest of fashionably ornamental graphic design is work that stands out because, in addition to the irreverence and fun, it delivers complexity, meaningfulness, and a seriousness of intent. Sometimes the decorative elements in a piece of work are not merely sampled from a palette of choices but emanate directly from content and are integrated at a deep level with concept. They do as much work as the word or the image in communicating. What does it take then, to produce this kind of work? It may have to do with the extent to which a designer is involved and obsessed, even, with what they do. Many designers, including Canadian designer Marian Bantjes, speak of their obsessive approach to decoration. This obsession can be physical as well as mental—a passion that has as much to do with the act of making as it does with any theoretical intent.

The relationship between craft, decoration and ornament is a longstanding and a close one. The Arts and Crafts movement helped to reinvest handcraft with social value. William Morris was famously opposed to the mechanization of craft activity but, more recently, the design educator Malcolm McCullough has written about the idea of the computer as a craft tool. He extrapolates "digital craft" as "a blend of skill and intellect accompanied by a blend of work and play, use and beauty, tacit and codified knowledge."

The intricacy necessary to make patterns or to construct ornament suggests that real attention is being paid to the craft of making and to detail. Gonzales Crisp also sees the computer as integral to work that uses decoration in a meaningful way. “Amplification, complexity and detail are key to decoration, “ she says, “and the computer lets you do that. You can noodle the heck out of anything now if you are inclined. It feels like this powerful tool that allows complexity that only craftspeople value. It re-introduces that connection to the making that maybe we lost with the über-designer handing off stuff for production to a typesetter, lithographer, platemaker and so on. It’s like it’s come full circle.”

In product design this connection between the decorative, detail, and craft is already acknowledged and is being probed. In this field there is an emphatic and renewed interest in the humanness and the “tacit knowledge” of making to which McCullough refers. Critic Louise Schouwenberg writes in depth on the subject. “Freed from its negative connotations, craftsmanship can be valued for the psychological effect it exerts on its user: it not only refers to a slower pace, but also implants this deceleration, and the implied attention to detail, into the product,” she says. Detail is a contemporary concern of culture more generally, too. In her 1987 book *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, historian Naomi Schor posits that the detail, bounded on either side by the ornamental and the prosaic, is something historically gendered as feminine. She emphasizes the ambivalent place that the detail and the feminine have held in traditional Western aesthetics. “For as any historian of ideas knows, the detail until very recently has been viewed in the West with suspicion if not downright hostility,” she says. She believes

the “rare prominence” it is currently enjoying is thanks largely to poststructuralist thinking.

Product designer Hella Jongerius has created an upholstery fabric for Maharam that has an unusually long repetitive pattern inspired by the jacquard cards (like early IBM computer main frame punch cards) that tell the loom what to weave, and reconfigures in her ceramics and textiles archetypal patterns like pied-de-poule, stripes, and bird-and-vine, talks of “the power of decoration, which can transcend the visual to take on a different meaning.” She embeds questions in her exaggeratedly ornate Swarovksi chandelier so that decoration is put to work—in this case to ask critical questions. Jongerius was a founding member of Dutch design collective, Droog, which, in 1998, held an exhibition called “Inevitable Ornament.” This idea of an inevitable connection between ornament, form and content is something that graphic design is beginning to deal with right now. Gonzales Crisp has given this notion the label “decorational.” By fusing the normally oppositional concepts of decoration and rationality, she attempts “to engage the discourse of ornament with that of rational design” and to suggest that, “function is *completed* by ornament.”

The decoration we’re seeing today is very particular to the time we live in. In many ways it is dystopian. There’s the inclusion of urban, dark and ironic themes, as evident in Geoff McFetridges’s attitude-laden takes on patterning in three designs titled Red Dawn, Stoner Forest, and All Yesterday’s Parties. The last of these designs features camouflage patterns overlaid with a pattern of party detritus (beer cans, bottles, and cigarette butts).

Similarly, Daniel van der Velden and Maureen Mooren's identity for the 2005 Holland Festival uses the argyle patterns that the typical middle-class Festival-goer tends to wear as windows onto apocalyptic images and interweaves street trash with cathedral stained glass to create a tense critique of contemporary Dutch society. British designer Jonathan Barnbrook sums up his feelings on the topic of globalization with the word "globanalization," and expresses this idea visually through a series of works that critique the pervasive reach of multinationals. A series of Tibetan prayer mandalas, for example, are found, on closer inspection, to have been built up from thousands of tiny corporate logos. Even the voluptuous floral wall mural that extended the length of a block in the New York Prada store provided a frame for its own commentary. The installation was created in 1999 by design firm 2 x 4 in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture, and was among the first and most prominent of recent re-investigations of pattern. It uses the silhouettes of full-bodied leaves and flowers as windows for photographic images that reference what designer Karen Hsu describes as "Italianness, consumption, fashion, manufacturing, beauty, and sex."

"The rational aspect of the decorational is its capacity to tell, not only in a story like way, but also in a metonymic way in the same way that icons do," says Gonzales Crisp. If there's a key or operative word to describe what's exciting about the best decorational work, says the designer, then it's "complexity." She explains: "Much of graphic design's time gets spent on refining and organizing and making things clear. There are all kinds of ways to think about graphic design's service, however. It can also be about establishing empathy or providing escape." This sentiment is shared by Dutch designer van der

Velden. “Playfulness and layers, multiple narratives, embedding history, seeking relations, and also political implications are better expressed in a visual vocabulary less dogmatic and more rich than Modernism,” he says.

What will give ornament life beyond that of its current popularity, then, is the fact that it provides designers with an alternative to orthodox views of design’s role as a problem solver and a simplifier. It is a strategy for thinking and making that has a rich history but that can also be continually re-imagined. It can be used as a framing device to direct the viewer’s attention or as a carrier for critical or narrative commentary. The most promising aspect of the role of ornament in design’s immediate future, therefore, is that it can contain, along with the enchantment of good storytelling, the voice and actual opinions of its designer. Following an era of design in which the responsibility of decision-making was placed in the hands of code, software programs, and systems, and randomness and ironic detachment were valued above conviction, it is indeed refreshing to consider the potential of ornament as a tool that can be used to express personal or political beliefs. Whatever happens, let’s not just step and repeat.

Sidebars:

Denise Gonzales Crisp: The decorational

Denise Gonzales Crisp was in Mexico City when she was asked to design a poster (the Artcity 2005 poster *El Otro Lado*) for a Canadian arts festival with the theme of “trans.”

She turned to the decorative expressions that surrounded her and, in order to convey the idea of being transient, focused on the details that she thought wouldn't matter to anyone in Mexico—"trash, a thing on the ground, raw materials."

Close by her hotel was a bridge that had been decorated with graffiti-like carvings. Gonzales Crisp used photographs of the span of the bridge to make the frame that sits within the poster. Running along the inside of this frame you can see glimpses of what was in the background of her photographs—things such as cars passing by. In sequence they make up a miniature storyboard; a decorative sub-narrative.

Superimposed on the frame are drawn letters, created in Illustrator, which are rooted in Tuscan letterforms and inspired both by Art Nouveau wrought iron work and by the "fancy lettering" and painted signs Gonzales Crisp encountered in Mexico. They spell out the words *El Otro Lado,* which means *making it to the other side*—a pressing issue for many in Mexico as well as being what the designer calls "a nice metaphor for the creative act."

"I come from an illustration background so the idea of being able to make pictures is more allowable to me. I actually approach typography from that perspective," says Gonzales Crisp, who is the chair of Graphic Design at North Carolina State University. She continues: "It's in typography that you find the deepest tradition of the decorative within graphic design: Type designers made decorative borders and ornaments that were integrated conceptually with a type family."

For the past few years Gonzales Crisp has been engaged in a self-initiated research project that she calls the Decorational. It involves research and writing as well as practice—for her these activities are closely linked. In this extended attempt to decriminalize the decorative, she goes head to head with entrenched modes of thought such as Modernism and functionalism and tries "to engage the discourse of ornament with that of rational design;" to suggest that "function is *completed* by ornament."

It was when Gonzales Crisp went to graduate school at Cal Arts in the early 1990's, that decoration, ornament and pattern as they relate to graphic design surfaced as an interest for her. "I'd been taught that graphic design was all about clarity and simplicity and directness, and craft—but the kind of craft where you're able to draw a perfectly straight line with a ruling pen rather than the kind that involves intricate integrated systems," she says. She had a sense she didn't fit with the dominant modes of graphic design practice and so started thinking about the alternatives for herself. "At this point I was interested in what was outside the canon. I was looking at hand drawn letterforms, clip art, the certificate templates you find in Quark, and ancient calligraphic lettering."

From 1997 until 2002 Gonzales Crisp was senior designer at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA, and it was here that she embarked on her exploration of the potential of decorative strategies for design. "By the second catalog I designed for Art Center (2001–2002), I had discovered pattern making using the computer as a crafting tool," Gonzales Crisp recalls. "My work at Art Center had this complexity and

superfluity but was also very rational. Every single move I made was part of a complex tight fitting puzzle. I found all this geometry fascinating. Step and repeat seems as if it would be simple—but to do it well is something else."

Gonzales Crisp points out that vector-based technology is key to contemporary pattern making. "Originally they probably intended step-and-repeat to be used for charts, a kind of work flow idea," she observes. "What makes it interesting for me is that you can do it with photographs. It reminds me of what it might have been like when they invented the Jacquard loom [a mechanized loom introduced in 1801 that through a system of punch cards allowed more than one repeat of a pattern.] Suddenly you could make images in cloth."

Gonzales Crisp began to realize just how rich a seam of enquiry she had struck. What she was studying was tied up with issues of gender, craft, the under-represented, Euro-centricism—and was connected to a vast body of postmodern thinking. "The decorative is clearly undervalued," she says, "and not just canonically but culturally too." The term "decorator" is often used in a pejorative way today. "William Morris and Louis Sullivan—big time decorators—were not perceived in that way. Throughout history women as well as craftsmen have developed really interesting complex systems that have their own sets of logic and incredible form-making potential." Understanding that what she was doing in her work had this kind of back-story, made decoration have more meaning for Gonzales. What started as "merely kicking against the canon" has grown to

reveal a potential area of study both in terms of the designer's practice and "something larger."

So what makes something decorational—rather than, say, merely decorative? According to Gonzales Crisp, "The rational aspect of the decorational is its capacity to tell, not only in a story like way, but also in a metonymic way in the same way that icons do." If there's a key or operative word to describe what's exciting about the best decorational work, says the designer, then it's "complexity." She explains: "Much of graphic design's time gets spent on refining and organizing and making things clear. There are all kinds of ways to think about graphic design's service, however. It can also be about establishing empathy or providing escape."

Gonzales Crisp sees the computer as a central technology in the evolution of work that uses decoration in a meaningful way. "Amplification, complexity and detail are key to decoration, " she says, "and the computer lets you do that. You can noodle the heck out of anything now if you are inclined. It feels like this powerful tool that allows complexity that only craftspeople value. It re-introduces that connection to the making that maybe we lost with the über-designer handing off stuff for production to a typesetter, lithographer, platemaker and so on. It's like it's come full circle. "

Marian Bantjes: Ornamentality

"I have a very uneasy and, yes, guilty relationship with decoration. I do it because I have to; it's an obsession," says Marian Bantjes a designer and illustrator from Bowen Island near Vancouver, Canada. It's not the obsessive aspect of her relationship to her work that concerns Bantjes, however. In fact, she thinks that the best and most powerful ornament comes out of obsession and long hours of intense labor, where all sense of time and reality disappears. What she does struggle with is the extent to which what she creates is "superfluous stuff," and whether there is deeper meaning to be found through working with ornament.

"I do feel that there is something there in my own work (and in other peoples') that goes beyond gratuitous prettiness," says Bantjes. In "Please Say Yes," for example, she has given the words *Please Say Yes* deep intricate taproots that cascade the length of the page as a way to express what she calls "all the imploring hope of those words." She says, "The ornament in this case is not *merely* decorative."

"There is something about ornate intricate work that seems to stir the soul in most people," Bantjes observes. "How can you look at anything by William Morris and not feel some kind of awestruck love?

"Interestingly, the decorative arts appear most famously in religious works. There really is some kind of connection to love and inspiration there. The thousand ornamental ways that Islamic calligraphy praises Allah; the glitter of stained glass windows and the excess

of carved arches in churches; illuminated manuscripts. Where there is genuine love, care and craft, I think there is something being communicated that cannot be communicated in any other way."

Bantjes's investigation of patterns began through painting them. They began to make their way into the design work she was doing, but it wasn't until she left her design firm in 2003 that the patterns, as she puts it, "sprung forward full force." At the same time she was becoming increasingly "restless with the standard tasteful and clean aesthetic" that dominated so much graphic design at the time.

According to Bantjes there's a big difference between "good and bad ornament," between "decorative messes and considered arrangement." She's not impressed by patterns that simply repeat an icon over and over again. "Anybody can do that," she says. "A good pattern is like William Morris where the tiling unit is seamless. You have to analyze the whole pattern to find where that tiling unit is."

Bantjes always begins the process of pattern making by drawing on graph paper, taking care, she says, to think beyond the "boxiness of the medium." She scans the drawing and repeats it using Photoshop. "It's amazing what happens to something when you see it repeated 6 or 8 times," she says. "I print it out and start redrawing it—filling the holes—then I take it back into Photoshop and repeat it again."

Moving forward she says she would like to explore the possibility of reconciling ornament with Modernism. “Rationality and emotionality can live together,” says Bantjes.

Omnivore: Perspective and embellishment

“A lot of our work is based on pushing around someone else’s words. And so pattern and ornament become a way in which we can add our own voice,” says Karen Hsu, one half of the New York based design partnership, Omnivore. The other half, Alice Chung, continues the thought: “It’s a form of non-verbal narrative,” she says. “A way to interpret what we get from the client, add meaning, and create a path for the viewer that includes discovery and surprise.” Traditionally, many decorative patterns have contained meanings—both symbolic and narrative. By tapping into this tradition, the partners of Omnivore—who met while working together at the New York design firm 2x4—feel that they are connecting in some way to a longer history of pattern making.

They also feel connected to the feminine aspects of the history of ornamentation and patterning. “Making patterns for wallpaper, fabric, and china are associated with what is called ‘women’s work,’” state Omnivore. Instead of using paintbrushes, Omnivore’s tool is the computer—and specifically Illustrator.

“The computer allows for a different level of perfection,” they say. But it’s also about non-perfection, and this balance between rationality and intuition is one that the designers

are sensitive to. “It’s an emotional creation, “ says Hsu, “an organic, playful and expressive thing—that has to have a functional repeat and the ability to be manufactured.” Producing a pattern that repeats is a mathematical process. Omnivore’s concern, however, is to reduce the rigidity of a tiled repeat, and to “make it more playful.” A black-and-white floral wallpaper design they are creating for the Brooklyn contemporary design store Future Perfect, for example repeats in a functional way but how it fits together is well concealed. The wall graphics they created for the “Commodification of Buddhism” exhibition at the Bronx Museum is what they call “a pretty rigid repeat,” because the wall is built up from one poster repeated and wheat pasted but, the designers say, “because of the density, what’s going on within the pattern and the way in which the repeat creates a pattern bigger than the individual tile of the poster, the overall effect camouflages the original repeat.” In another instance, the wall mural Hsu created for the Prada store while she worked at 2x4, doesn’t actually have a repeat. Here she implied a repeat so it would read as wallpaper.

Both Chung and Hsu trace their interest in patterns to their roots in Asian culture—where textiles, packaging and architecture are highly decorative. “I remember the first time I went to Taiwan,” says Hsu. “The surface of every building was covered in some kind of material pattern. There was texture on everything.”

The duo were also influenced by the things that surrounded them while growing up in the States. In Hsu’s family home, for example it was “the totally wacky wallpaper” and

"black lacquer furniture with ornate mother-of-pearl inlay." Other things Hsu loved growing up include "Spirographs, unicorn posters that used ornate Celtic or medieval - inspired arabesques, hanging out in fabric shops, and Supermario Brothers games and cartoons for the way in which the backgrounds repeat as they move horizontally." Hsu's interest first found expression in her design in 1998 when she moved to New York into a 250-square-foot studio apartment and began to design fantasy wallpapers to relieve the oppression of her living space. Next came the "dream project" of designing a block-long patterned wall mural for the Prada Store, working with Rem Koolhaas's architecture firm OMA. Since then Hsu and Chung have tried to incorporate pattern in as much of their work as possible, all the while adding to a series of personal wallpapers that include traces of their histories and interests. One sugar-almond hued confection contains both the designers' pets, including Chula, who is depicted peeing because "he had separation anxiety at the time." Another wallpaper contains the traces of Hsu's personal history—images of buildings and landscapes from the places she grew up and studied in, and even her Volkswagen Jetta.

Working with pattern and ornamentation blurs the line between design and illustration. Omnivore enjoy the fact that they are designing their "whole palette" of tools. Everything can be self-generated they say. "In some ways we feel like a self-sufficient farmers growing our own food." In Omnivore's opinion, "the visual environment we're in right now is baroque-friendly and represents a swing back to something more dense where things aren't so stripped away." Hsu has "always loved chandeliers and funky ornamental type," so in some ways, she says, "it's just a case of good timing."

Maureen Mooren and Daniel van der Velden: Apocalyptic argyle

Earlier this year the Dutch designers Maureen Mooren and Daniel van der Velden designed a new identity for the Holland Festival. The campaign—which comprised a series of posters, printed materials, and advertisements—was evident throughout The Netherlands until the end of June. The designers met as students at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam during the mid-1990s and have worked together in a studio in Amsterdam since 1998. They used the project to critique contemporary Dutch society—images of stained glass windows are threaded through with images of crushed beer cans and soda bottles. They also used it to re-envision the possibilities and potential of a "sign"—that they see as " capable of attracting a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations"—as something separate from a "logo"—which is "a product of corporate culture" and "like a marriage based on a dating profile."

The patterns are an integral part of the identity. They are used on the insides of envelopes, the backsides of letterheads and, within the Festival poster as windows to reveal and interweave what the designers refer to as "rather apocalyptic imagery" which is part of the narrative of the "sign." The patterns are far from flat; instead they are structural elements used to build the sign in an architectural way. The patterns come from the argyle sweaters and socks favored by the festival's target audience, which the designers see as being middle-aged, well-educated, wealthy consumers of culture. "These argyle patterns stand for a conservative, yet playful aesthetic as they originate from the

costumes worn by players in seventeenth century Commedia dell' Arte," says the duo. "Almost all of our work uses ornament and pattern, but we'd never say, 'right let's add some pattern' or 'let's do some ornament now.'" The impulse will come from within a project."

Mooren and van der Velden think that the use of pattern or ornament as a visual strategy is only interesting "when its hierarchical relation to a main message is undefined, and constantly shifting." In their opinion twenty-first century ornament provides ways to convey messages that are not direct statements. "We think that patterns are interesting to the extent that they promise discovery, mystery," they say. As part of a corporate identity they designed for Stockholm Kunsthall, for example, they used leaves to form intense patterns that worked on several levels. The leaf motif, derived from the park setting of this museum, acted as a metaphor for the idea of information overload being a phenomenon more comparable to nature than to culture. Mooren and van der Velden's work was also exhibited in the museum. They presented their work for *Archis* magazine in an installation that was itself a pattern, "an information landscape." The floor was covered by pages (or leaves) ripped out from the experimental magazine, which visitors could pick up and take home.

The designers have an interesting perspective on the reasons for the Modernists' rejection of ornament. In addition to the usually stated reason—ornament is not structural and therefore not essential—van der Velden and Mooren offer another: "It contains commentary and narrative of a generally affirmative relationship to those in power," they

say. “The lions and gods and mythological figures of Versailles were there for the sake of the sovereign and nothing else; they definitely did not allow for an open dialogue. Perhaps Modernism did away with ornament because it was inherited as a visual carrier for power?”

The designers continue with this train of thought: “Nowadays, however, businessmen, lawyers and politicians are seated on Eames chairs instead; it’s clear that modernism has, to a great extent, replaced classical ornament as a staged way of conveying power. Just think of the übermensch-sterility of a Prada store, which reminds one of the film *Gattaca*.”

“Ornament nowadays is a very strategic affair,” say Mooren and van der Velden. “It’s about influencing the associative wavelength of design without touching its contours or shape. If one looks, for instance, at [the Swiss architects] Herzog & de Meuron’s use of pattern, it is clear that they are trying to smarten up and give a visual twist their Swiss boxes while still preserving austerity.”

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