ORNAMENT AND DESIGN

Space, Self, Future

Abby Lee

"True beauty results from that repose which the mind feels when the eye, the intellect, and the affections, are satisfied from the absence of any want."

- Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*

Abstract

This thesis explores the multifaceted concept of ornament, tracing its evolution from its etymological roots in the Latin *ornare* to its contemporary implications. Ornament, often dismissed as mere decoration, holds a rich history intertwined with functionality, cultural narratives, and shifts in societal values, transitioning over time from a type of functional embellishment to an element of design perceived as superfluous in modern discourse. Using the notorious essay "Ornament and Crime" by Adolf Loos as a catalysing text for inquiry, I unpack Loos's cultural biases and influence on the Modernist rejection of ornament.

Employing a multidisciplinary lens, this research investigates the role of ornament as a communicator of visual narratives, informed by theories of aesthetics, visual rhetoric, and Marxist concepts of labor and value as they relate to production and consumption. Through comparative analysis of ornamental objects—spanning architecture, jewelry, self-ornamentation, and digital forms—it highlights ornament's ability to convey layered meanings and cultural context.

As the history and technique of ornament is so broad, I frame this thesis within three sections that roughly correspond with an investigation of ornament in the past, the present, and the future. I reposition ornament within contemporary society, challenging narrow definitions of function that prioritize utility over aesthetic and rhetorical purposes. By examining ornament's role in both physical and digital spaces, the research underscores its relevance in shaping how we interact with and interpret design in a hyper-commodified world. Following a long tradition of the study of material objects, it forces us to confront the types of sociopolitical attitudes and consumerist behaviors that define the current state, and the future, of ornament. Ultimately, this thesis celebrates ornament as a dynamic and transformative element in design, bridging historical roots with modern narratives.

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☞ Introduction

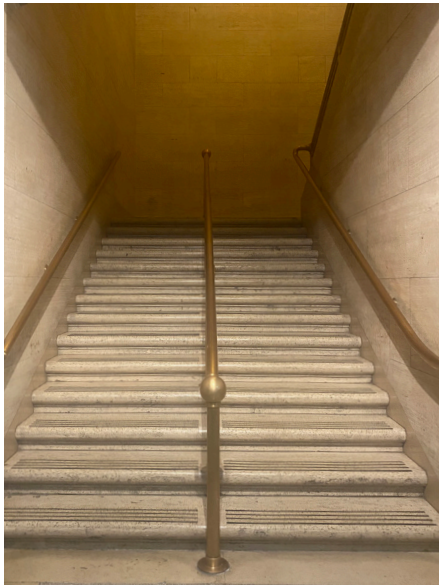
Fig. 1. Cobb Gate at the University of Chicago, from University of Chicago Library Special Collections Research Center, photographer and date unknown

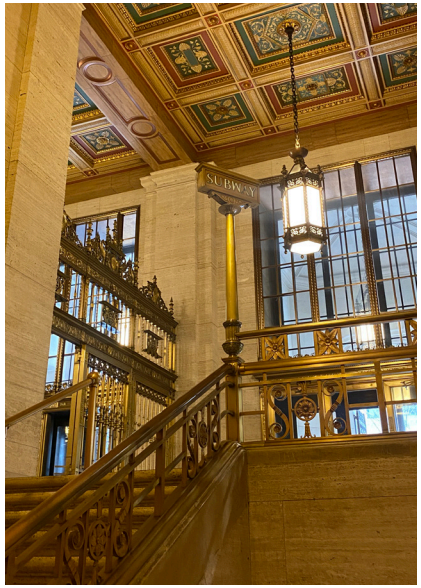
At the intersection of 28th Street and Park Avenue in midtown Manhattan, subway commuters arriving on the downtown 6 train can opt to leave the station through one particular exit. No signs announce anything special about it, but this exit leads to a path through the New York Life building.

Past the station's turnstiles, you walk through the basement corridor, ascend a travertine staircase, and emerge into a side part of the Art Deco lobby in the iconic landmark building, before you push open heavy glass doors to exit onto Park.

Without truly entering the threshold of the building's lobby, reserved for employees of the New York Life Insurance company and other businesses occupying its office space, you are, for a moment, enveloped in the glistening bronze metalwork and giant pendant light fixtures under a painted coffer ceiling 38 feet above your head. You are transported into another time, positioned inside an architect's vision, surrounded by the fruits of labor executed by skilled craftspeople from a hundred years ago.

For about a year, this was my train stop for my office, where I worked for an interior design firm. We had a project on the Upper East Side,





Figs. 2 and 3. New York Life Building Subway Access. Photographs by Abby Lee, 2022

where I would go often for site visits and installations. My coworker told me about this passage one day, and the next time I was returning to the office from uptown, I took a left instead of a right when I stepped off the train and experienced it for myself. This passage felt like a secret, I rarely ever saw other people going to or from the train this way. I was completely awestruck when I first reached the top of the staircase, and the monumental interior detail revealed itself. It is, to put it plainly, magnificent. It brings the past to the present. There are so few opportunities in one's daily life, in a city like New York, to experience such a high level of decorative beauty, even when they may be secretly tucked away all around us. And when you do get those moments, they are very special.

I have always been drawn to ornament in its many forms. I am moved by the power of its beauty and specificity, in the way that any art form is meant to elicit an emotional reaction. The history of ornament is extensive and spans across the entire globe, and in the case of the Art Deco lobby, it can visually transport you to a time before you even existed.

Within the many realms of design, from architecture to jewelry to augmented reality technology, ornament serves as a vehicle for the expression of a distinct visual language or rhetoric. In this thesis, I show that ornament in design, while often serving no utilitarian purpose, plays a significant role in communicating rich religious, cultural, or social concepts – ideology through form.

By examining a spectrum of ornament styles and fabrication processes across time and place, I challenge the Modernist notion that ornamentation is divorced from function. Instead, I assert that the function of ornament, of which there are many, is not fixed and changes over time, with the present always being informed by the past.

Finally, I argue that ornament's articulation of a visual language communicates layers of rhetorical meaning rooted in materials, craftsmanship, and cultural information that allows us to gain a deeper understanding of not only ornament itself, but of the aesthetic, artistic, and historical context that it was created in.

The following essays will weave a narrative of ornament within three realms: the space, the self, and the future. Considering the time-based efficacy of ornamental design, and the cyclical nature of culture's engagement with it, I believe this encapsulates a certain non-linear exploration that traces ornament's historical and cultural progression, while also maintaining the ever-evolving essence of ornamental styles and what they offer to the viewer.

Historical Overview

Fig. 4 Plate XX, Greek no. 6 from *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, 1856, via Smithsonian Libraries and the Internet Archive

So, what is ornament? Besides a colorful bauble you hang on a Christmas tree, that is. The earliest use of the word ornament as a noun in the English language is traced back to the 13th century, and is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "an accessory or adjunct, primarily functional, but often also fancy or decorative."[1] This definition sparks some interest, considering when you offer up a description of *ornamental*, the immediate inclination may be to envision elaborate decoration that is purely aesthetic, in its form or material quality. However, it's quite notable that ornament comes from the Latin *ornare* or *ornamentum*, meaning to equip or adorn, and stems from the root *ordo* meaning order.[2] Its etymological origin characterizes ornament as something primarily functional, with a secondary decorative use. There is a medieval notion to this, a militaristic sensibility of design as a means to represent rank and structure within a society. A sword or a shield to be used in battle may have been embellished with a family's crest, or a country's flag, to represent a soldier's affiliation. Contemporarily, ornament's definition lost its root sense of functionality. The New Oxford American Dictionary's definition is "a thing used to make something look more attractive but usually having no practical purpose, especially a small object such as a figurine."[3]

There are a great many words that describe different types of ornament, especially within architecture, and it can start to get a bit technical. Columns, capitals, cartouches. Beyond that, ornament is visual elaboration. It can be both representational and non-representational, reflections of nature or abstract geometry. It may be three-dimensional, like plasterwork on walls or ceilings, or two-dimensional, like vectorized borders or patterns. Or maybe somewhere in the in-between, like tattoos inked on skin – applying illustrations in 2D onto the physical body in 3D.

In *The Language of Ornament*, art historian James Trilling argues that ornament is an additive phenomenon, existing "for the sake of visual pleasure,"[4] and whose utility lies primarily in the enjoyment it offers a viewer.

The word exists in a multitude of forms, as well. Ornament is also a verb: "to ornament" is to decorate something. One *thing* is an ornament; a particular symbol, motif, design is ornament. A spiral, a heart, a gargoyle, a fleuron. Many *ornaments* together, working in unison, create something *ornamental*. Ornamental is an adjective, referencing style, to describe something *ornamented*. *Ornamentation* is a noun that describes an action, describing the ornamental quality of material, the sum of many ornamented parts.

So, a word's semantics significantly evolve over time and across cultures. A word's definition, while by nature is clearly *defined*, is always open to be viewed through its history and the multiplicity within its meanings. Ornament and its evolution can be treated in a very similar way. An ornamented object that was created and used for one purpose may transform over time, and when approached in a new context, or a new millennium, it could serve an entirely different purpose. Our interpretation of objects evolves the same way language changes over time—layering new meanings on top of old ones, sometimes obscuring but never completely severing the connection to their origins.

Fig. 5. Goodwood Shell House in East London, photograph by Antony Crolla

Adolf Loos, Ornament and Crime

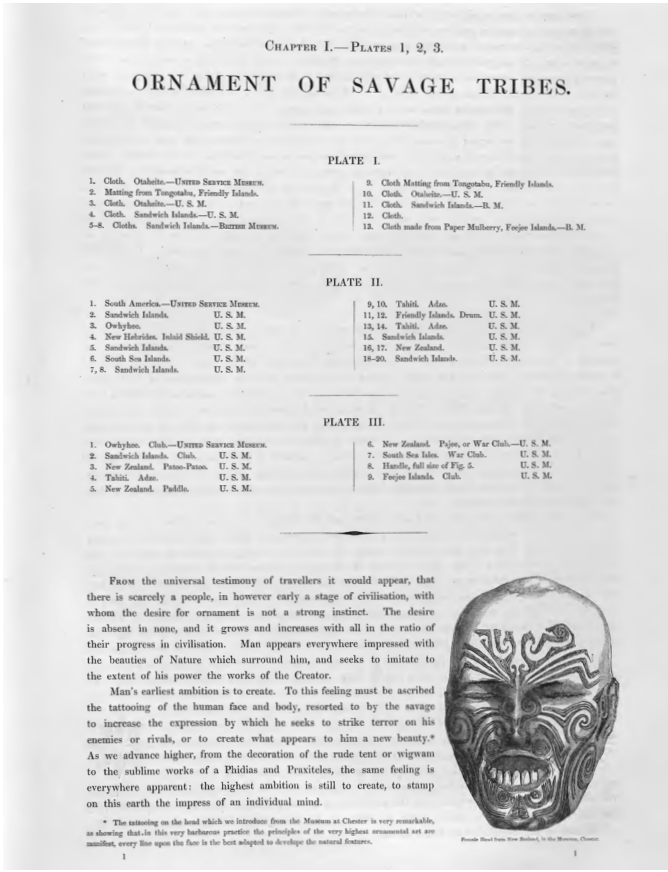
The irony of ornament's etymological origins as it pertains to function or lack thereof leaps to the foreground of Adolf Loos's infamous essay "Ornament and Crime." Loos, an Austrian architect and interior designer, first delivered the essay in the form of a lecture in 1908 (though historian Christopher Long argues for a slightly later date).[5] He had been publishing essays and cultural criticism since the late 19th century, sourcing much inspiration from the theories of men like Gottfried Semper and Alois Riegl as fellow Austrian and German contemporaries of architectural thought.[6]

Loos's essays were commentaries that sought to elaborate on the intersection of anthropology, sociology, art, and design, and he presented grandiose arguments on what the state of modern design suggested about societal progression and cultural refinement. In "Ornament and Crime," he argues that the use of ornament hinders

the advancement of culture and society by committing to stay in the past. He equates the use of ornament to a criminal act, expressing that pure ornament is useless and a complete distraction from the function of a design, specifically "utilitarian objects."[7] He shuns ornament not only from an aesthetic perspective but from an economic one as well. He argues that ornament is a waste of materials, labor, health, and resources. There is little profit to be made from ornament, and the craftsperson behind its creation is always underappreciated and underpaid. However, he doesn't elaborate too deeply on this view, suggesting his drive for abolishing ornament is not entirely an anti-Capitalist endeavor. He tries to position himself to the reader as if he really cares about the working man, the ornamentor, their low wages, and, by his assessment, wasted labor. But his description is so generalized that it fails to arrive at actual argument, and seems more of a presumption.

Ultimately, as a white Austrian man in the early 20th century, Loos's arguments leave a taste of overt Aryanism and nationalist ideology for Germanic supremacy, which have been well traced throughout his other essays on such topics as women's fashion, gentleman's hats, and cultural degeneration.[8] In "Ornament and Crime" he writes, "No ornament can any longer be made today by anyone who lives on our cultural level. It is different with the individuals and peoples who have not yet reached this level."[9] In the following paragraph, he then summarizes the work of "the Kaffir," "the Persian" and "the Slovak peasant woman" and their many forms of ornamental craft. He (and "the aristocrats" he preaches to) consents them to create ornament as this is the only thing that brings them joy and purpose, or makes them feel closer to God. By his logic, this is allowed, because they are on a lower cultural level than him and his fellow white Europeans, and they represent a modern, culturally evolved class of people.

Loos's racial categorizations of ornament were not a new concept in 1908. *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, first published in 1856, is a visual reference book, even a design manual, presenting ornamental designs from different cultures all over the world. Irene Cheng, an architectural historian and critic, has called *The Grammar of Ornament* "a tremendously influential compendium of global ornament generally regarded as promoting a liberal cosmopolitan appreciation of non-Western design."[10] Intended as a resource to introduce European and American audiences to these unknown forms of ornamental design, Jones also imposed his timeline of cultural progression beginning with the styles of "Savage Tribes" and ending with European designs. He repeatedly makes overt distinctions between indigenous or aboriginal cultures and Western society, using the language of "savage" and "civilized," respectively. In reference to his interpretation of subtle differences between Persian, Turkish, and Moorish designs, Cheng writes that "stereotypical mental attributes were thus imagined to be legible in aesthetic forms—in proportion, the curvature of a line, the choice of color."[11] Jones' analyses of such designs and their visual qualities were presented as reflections of the cultures themselves, often being dismissive of one over the other.



CHAPTER I.—PLATES 1, 2, 3.

ORNAMENT OF SAVAGE TRIBES.

PLATE I.

1. Cloth. Otaheite.—United Service Museum.
2. Matting from Tongotabu, Friendly Islands.
3. Cloth. Otaheite.—U. S. M.
4. Cloth. Sandwich Islands.—U. S. M.
5–8. Cloths. Sandwich Islands.—British Museum.
9. Cloth Matting from Tongotabu, Friendly Islands.
10. Cloth. Otaheite.—U. S. M.
11. Cloth. Sandwich Islands.—B. M.
12. Cloth.
13. Cloth made from Paper Mulberry, Feejee Islands.—B. M.

PLATE II.

1. South America.—United Service Museum.
2. Sandwich Islands. U. S. M.
3. Owhyhee. U. S. M.
4. New Hebrides. Inlaid Shield. U. S. M.
5. Sandwich Islands. U. S. M.
6. South Sea Islands. U. S. M.
7, 8. Sandwich Islands. U. S. M.
9, 10. Tahiti. Adze. U. S. M.
11, 12. Friendly Islands. Drum. U. S. M.
13, 14. Tahiti. Adze. U. S. M.
15. Sandwich Islands. U. S. M.
16, 17. New Zealand. U. S. M.
18–20. Sandwich Islands. U. S. M.

PLATE III.

1. Owhyhee. Club.—United Service Museum.
2. Sandwich Islands. Club. U. S. M.
3. New Zealand. Patoo-Patoo. U. S. M.
4. Tahiti. Adze. U. S. M.
5. New Zealand. Paddle. U. S. M.
6. New Zealand. Pajoe, or War Club.—U. S. M.
7. South Sea Isles. War Club. U. S. M.
8. Handle, full size of Fig. 5. U. S. M.
9. Feejee Islands. Club. U. S. M.

From the universal testimony of travellers it would appear, that there is scarcely a people, in however early a stage of civilisation, with whom the desire for ornament is not a strong instinct. The desire is absent in none, and it grows and increases with all in the ratio of their progress in civilisation. Man appears everywhere impressed with the beauties of Nature which surround him, and seeks to imitate to the extent of his power the works of the Creator.

Man's earliest ambition is to create. To this feeling must be ascribed the tattooing of the human face and body, resorted to by the savage to increase the expression by which he seeks to strike terror on his enemies or rivals, or to create what appears to him a new beauty.* As we advance higher, from the decoration of the rude tent or wigwam to the sublime works of a Phidias and Praxiteles, the same feeling is everywhere apparent: the highest ambition is still to create, to stamp on this earth the impress of an individual mind.

* The tattooing on the head which we introduce from the Museum at Chester is very remarkable, as showing that in this very barbarous practice the principles of the very highest ornamental art are manifest, every line upon the face is the best adapted to develope the natural features.

Female Head from New Holland, in the Museum, Chester.

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Fig. 6. Chapter 1 - Ornament of Savage tribes from *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, 1856 folio version via Smithsonian Libraries and the Internet Archive

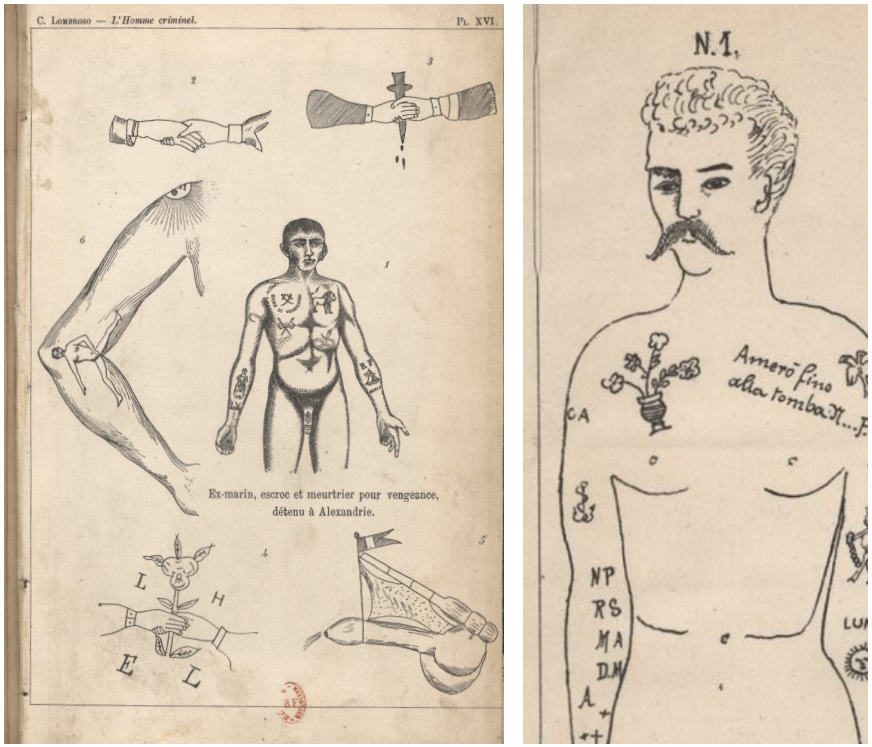


Fig. 7 and 8. Plates XVI and XXXII from *L'homme criminal (The Criminal Man)* by Cesare Lombroso, 1887, via The National Library of France

While Loos adopted Jones' categorization of "primitive" cultures and their design outputs, Jones was an upholder and dedicated researcher of ornamental design, and acknowledged its history as a fundamental element towards a well-designed future.

> ...the future progress of Ornamental Art may be best secured by engrafting on the experience of the past the knowledge we may obtain by a return to Nature for fresh inspiration.... we should regard as our inheritance all the successful labours of the past, not blindly following them, but employing them simply as guides to find the true path.[12]

Though he set forth goals and standards by which to improve the use of ornament in architecture, art, and design, his position by no means aligns with Loos desire to see ornament eliminated altogether.

In his book *On Loos, Ornament, and Crime*, Juan José Lahuerta thoughtfully and carefully examines Loos's theories in context and conversation with the works of (including but not limited to) Italian criminologists Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, social critic Max Nordau, and architects Semper and Reigel as mentioned previously. Framing Loos's essay in the relation to the work of these writers, whose works predated "Ornament and Crime," we can trace a clear cultural development on the relationships imposed on ornament, degeneration, and minority groups.

Lahuerta makes a point that as an architect, and in an essay that claims to relate to architecture and its relationship with ornament, Loos does not talk about architecture at all. In fact, Loos's language is politically coded, recalling the developing rightwing political movement that would become Nazism in the way that he "exploits the same issues and the same language as the most morbid, demagogic populist propaganda."[13] This is perhaps the most important thing to consider as I continue my inquiry and pushback against Loos's work. While there are still such ideologies deeply embedded into Western society, it is certainly not the framework I am writing or making in as a designer in the United States in 2025. And even though Adolf Loos was clearly an elitist and misogynistic racist, the reading of his work is still of critical value to this discourse as it is so embedded in the history of ornament.

These six pages of contemptuous prose have been agitating readers for almost a century now, provoking endless counterarguments, close readings, and detailed analyses within a range of different frameworks. One cannot choose to write about ornament without referencing this essay, and in turn, the Modernist design movement that spawned from the same set of principles and launched the 20th century into a period synonymous with minimalism.

Another contemporary response to Loos's essay comes from writer and design historian Alice Twemlow, in her 2005 article "The Decriminalisation of Ornament" published in *Eye* magazine. Twemlow observes that, at the dawn of the new millennium, the design world was undergoing a shift—one that embraced decorative styles and reappropriated ornament within contemporary contexts. As digital design became fully established and continued to evolve, she suggests that this renewed interest in ornament may have emerged in response to increasingly computerized design methods at the close of the 20th century and into the 21st.

Twemlow brings her analysis into the present by citing several designers and their reflections on ornament's role in their practice. Their insights reposition ornament not as a design crime, but as a vehicle for creative strategy, meaningful nostalgia, and cultural worldbuilding. Twemlow ultimately takes a clear stance in defense of ornament, emphasizing its potential to enrich design when applied with intention. In regards to ornament's supposed comeback, specifically in graphic design, she writes:

> 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, the fêting of ornament and the production of exuberantly excessive, dense, and sometimes 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 organisations in which 'problems' are 'solved' by following a sequence of codified steps.[14]

This observation opens up a more subversive reading of ornament: not just as an aesthetic revival, but as a deliberate provocation—an act of resistance against the rationalist, utilitarian values long upheld by Modernist and institutional design ideologies. Twemlow reframes ornament not only as meaningful, but as meaningfully "useless"—a challenge to the problem-solving or systems-based dogma embedded in design pedagogy.

Nearly two decades later, her perspective continues to resonate. Today's graphic design landscape—though always varied and multifaceted—is saturated with references to historic ornamental languages, such as those found in *The Grammar of Ornament*. Far from obsolete, these motifs are actively recontextualized by contemporary designers who recognize their visual richness and symbolic potential. For many, ornament becomes a tool for disruption, a way of asserting aesthetic autonomy and cultural specificity in an industry that often prizes efficiency over expression.

Industrial Labor and Production

As machines overtook manufacturing and production processes through the Industrial Revolution in the late 19th century, handcraft became a rarity and a luxury. James Trilling identifies the technological advancements as one of the culprits that "destroyed not only the skills needed to create good ornament, but the ability to recognize it."[15]

Around this time, Karl Marx introduced his formative theories of labor and value in the wake of burgeoning capitalism and further developed what a commodity is by establishing the concepts of use-value and exchange-value. Use-value can be understood as the inherent material quality and physical properties of a commodity. Exchange-value is then the value of a commodity that is determined by the market, based not only on its use-value, but also its labor-value.[16] As Stephen Shapiro writes in *How to Read Marx's Capital*, ultimately "the source of all value is human labour."[17] Not only is Marxist theory essential to understanding capitalism and economic theory but lays the groundwork for the sociological connections between human relationships with material goods. I introduce this broadly as it will become relevant later on in this thesis, as I discuss the deeply commodified nature of ornament and the conceptualization of ornament's value and function.

The final glory days of ornament (as we knew it) flourished during the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements, both popular in the West approximately between 1880-1920 and were direct reactions to rising modernization and mass production. The former was founded by English multihyphenate William Morris, who was an advocate for revitalizing the practice and production of applied art and true artisanship. Both styles sought to blur the lines between structural and decorative design, elevating a symbiotic relationship between the two. The Germans called it *Gesamtkunstwerk*, translating to "total work of art," and emphasizes that all elements of design are well-considered in relation to each other, and as a result of this connection, the work is able to thrive. Italian architect and designer Luigi Caccia Dominioni exemplified the concept most excellently in his design for a Milanese apartment building completed in 1961. As the architect, he planned the entire building's interior, and with special attention to the unique layout of the windows to accommodate all the furniture, designed by him and produced by Azucena. He worked from interior to exterior, considering furniture (the ornament) before windows (utilitarian element), and thus creating inseparable harmony between the two.[18]

However, Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau would not last long, and would be overtaken by Modernism and its inclination towards minimalist design. Most would say that modernist design is staunchly anti-ornament, but perhaps it simply created a new language of ornament that exists outside the predetermined conventions. Trilling points specifically to Adolf Loos himself and his use of marble and wood, arguing that the naturally occurring veining and grainlines create patterns that are indeed ornamental in space.[19]

It's certainly interesting to wonder what the state of ornament would be if Loos had never published "Ornament and Crime." Things may likely have turned out quite the same, that nothing would have stopped Modernism from marching on or a general cultural shift away from the perceived luxury or excessiveness of ornament. But would the reputation of ornament have been so muddied by his influential commentary that it would take several decades and several more art

historians, artists, and designers to sing ornament's praises and undo that mess? Maybe not. We'll never know!

Ornament and Visual Narrative

From my vantage point in the 21st century, commuting through New York and observing ornament all around me, Loos's essay reads as a fundamentally warped commentary with few applications across different historical periods. But I take from it inspiration and energy to address the meaning and function of ornament within my own cultural context and training in contemporary design. The world has changed very significantly from 1908. There are levels upon levels of a new material culture, performative capitalist activities, and hyper-commodification that poor Mr. Loos couldn't even begin to imagine. Ornament is special because of its rich and storied past, stretching back to early civilizations. But it is even more special because of its ability to shapeshift, adapt, and contradict. It can be so different, and the same, and even more interesting in the current post-post-modern landscape of late-stage capitalism.

Loos's strict distinction between ornament and function begs another question: What exactly is function? Trilling posits that "ornament is the only visual art whose primary if not exclusive purpose is pleasure. In functional terms, that makes it superfluous by definition, but our definition of function is unfairly restricted to the mechanical."[20] In the shadow of Loos's contempt for ornament on "utilitarian objects," there is a surprising gap in the literature when it comes to understanding ornament and its relationship to function or utility. Considering the word's Latin origins, it is certainly time to ask ourselves: what is function and what do we gain if we separate it from a sense of productivity, resource, and the "mechanical" as Trilling suggests? We conflate function with utility, but what it really means is that something has a purpose. And this purpose can serve many functions, not simply ones that relate to how an object is used. Aesthetic function, rhetorical function, communicative function – these are all highly relevant to the ways we interact with design.

Let's take, for example, two ceramic vases (figs. 9 and 10). Both alike in form, constructed from the same type of clay. One is coated with a clear glaze, allowing the whole texture and color of the clay body to come through. The other is adorned with a floral pattern all over, rendered in many colors and flowers of different shapes and sizes with added pops of greenery and leaves. Both objects offer an equally valuable visual narrative. The shape is informed by the material and the history of pottery as a craft. The plain vase reveals the integrity of the clay, what was once a soft mound of wet earth then chemically altered into a rigid state by the high heat of a gas kiln. This vase may make the viewer think immediately of clay, of where clay comes from, of the multistep process of throwing, glazing, and firing a pot. It is a simple vessel, prepared to hold water and flowers or whatever else might fit inside. On the other hand, the ornamented vase offers multiple additional layers of visual narrative to the viewer. The colorful glazes and floral pattern mask some of the natural hues of the clay. The design is intricate and precise, allowing the viewer to consider the time it took to paint the vase. There is another element of artisanship involved; was it the same person who threw the vase on the wheel that painted it so delicately? The design itself reflects nature, where the clay was originally sourced from the ground. It also calls upon the use of the vessel to hold flowers, acting as a reiterative symbol of function

Fig. 9. Ceramic vase from China (Ming dynasty, 1368–1644), The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 10. Red earthenware vase, John Bennett, United States, 1880, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

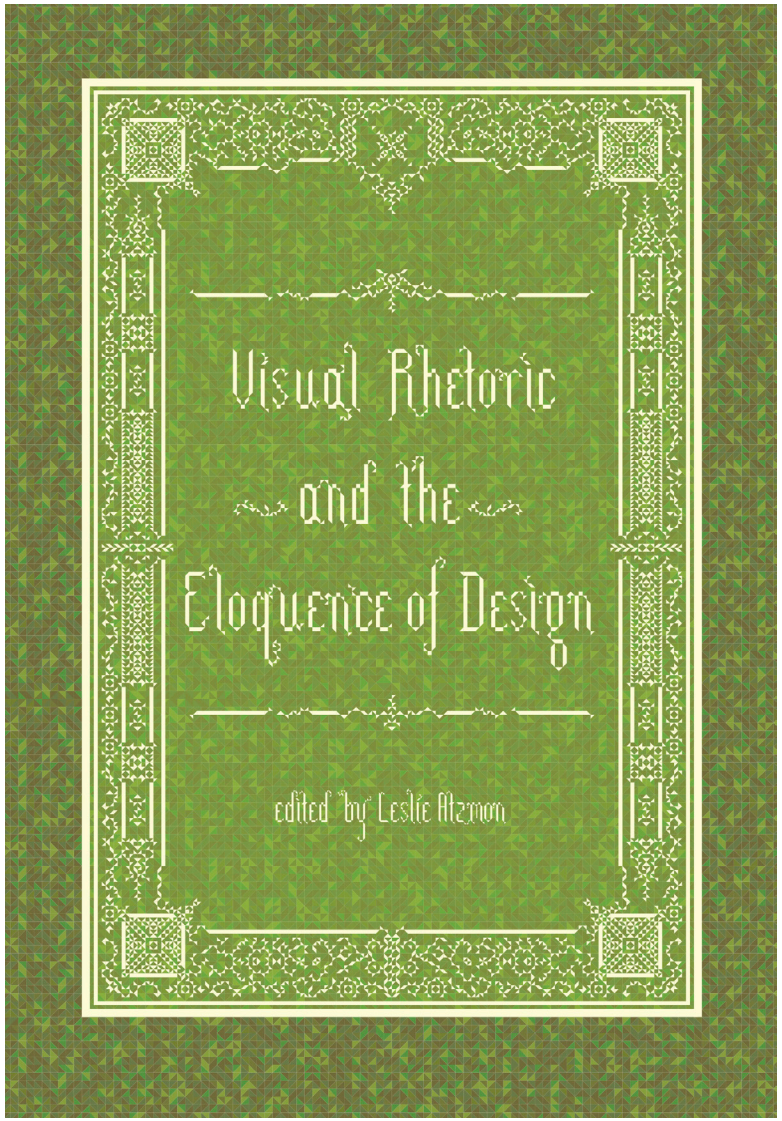


Fig. 11. *Visual Language and the Eloquence of Design* cover, design by Ryan Molloy, font desgin by Ruth Bardenstien

simultaneously fused into its aesthetic presentation. The point here is not that one vase is better than another. It is not about any elevated status between the maker who dipped one vase into a clear vase, and another who meticulously painted flowers on the surface of the clay. Those sorts of value assessments may be ascribed by the observer as an appropriate cognitive process of making meaning of something. However, what the two vases communicate, since they are presenting two distinct visual narratives, is different.

I am drawing the phrase visual narrative from Leslie Atzmon and her introduction to *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*. The book is a collection of essays selected and edited by Atzmon that consider visual rhetoric and theory to products of design. She writes:

> ...design narratives are typically constructed of layered and interconnected meanings that are articulated in a holistic fashion both in the physical form of design artifacts and also in their use processes. Design achieves the level of narrative when the meanings generated by the design elements together tell a story.[21]

This concept offers a flow of multilayered and contextual understanding to our interpretation of material objects, and is highly important to the discourse I am presenting around ornament.

I am able to unravel a thread that feels almost never ending, and create a web that connects a multitude of design disciplines with ornamental tendencies to theories of aesthetics and visual rhetoric to allow for the deeper analysis of such practices. I am aiming to illustrate that cultural objects, whether physical or digital, shape how we see and interact with the world at large. Ornament is a phenomenon common to past, present, and future, and any analysis of it must therefore incorporate some kind of reckoning with how such objects impact contemporary society under capitalism and hyperconsumption.

Ornament is a very large umbrella term, and there are so many directions I could choose to focus on that would make this a years long, if not decades long project. In light of that, I am zooming in on just a few specific methods or outputs that I believe encapsulate a certain timeline of ornamental design, and its relationship to function and cultural shifts.

The next chapter will study ornament in traditional architectural terms, highlighting the American history of decorative metalwork. This history traces the kind of messages that craftspeople embed within motifs and symbols, which then become part of the physical world we collectively inhabit.

Footnotes

1. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “ornament (n.), sense 1.a,” June 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1207673157.
2. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “orn (v.), Etymology,” July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1026885577.
3. Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. "ornament."
4. James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001).
5. Christopher Long, “The Origins and Context of Adolf Loos’s 'Ornament and Crime,’” *Jounal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 68, no. 2 (June 2009): 200–223, https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2009.68.2.200.
6. Juan José Lahuerta, *On Loos, Ornament and Crime*, vol. II, of *Columns of Smoke* (Barcelona: Tenov Books, 2015).
7. Adolf Loos and Adolf Opel, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998).
8. Lahuerta, *On Loos, Ornament and Crime.*
9. Loos, *Ornament and Crime.*
10. Irene Cheng, “Structural Racialism in Modern Architectural Theory,” essay, in *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis, and Mabel O. Wilson (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 134–52, 138.
11. Cheng, “Structural Racialism,” 139.
12. Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Day and Son, 1856), 2.
13. Lahuerta, *On Loos, Ornament and Crime*, 64.
14. Trilling, *The Language of Ornament*, 185.
15. Alice Twemlow, “The Decriminalisation of Ornament,” *Eye* (2005), https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/the-decriminalisation-of-ornament-full-text
16. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1976).
17. Stephen Shapiro, *How to Read Marx’s Capital* (London: Pluto, 2008), 11.
18. Daniel Sherer, “The Caccia Effect: Milan’s Hidden Master of Design and Archwitecture,” *PIN-UP* no. Spring/Summer (2014), https://archive.pinupmagazine.org/articles/luigi-caccia-dominioni-milans-hidden-master-of-architecture-and-design#26.
19. Trilling, *The Language of Ornament*, 194.
20. Trilling, *The Language of Ornament*, 14.
21. Leslie Atzmon, “Introduction: Visual Rhetoric and the Special Eloquence of Design Artifacts,” essay, in *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design,* ed. Leslie Atzmon (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2011), xiv.

Fig. 12. Plate LXXIV, Renaissance no. 1 from *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, 1856, via New York Public Library Digital Collections

Fig. 13. Tour poster for Mk.gee, 2024, designed by Nicholas D'Apolito

Space: The Rhetorical Power of Ornamental Metalwork

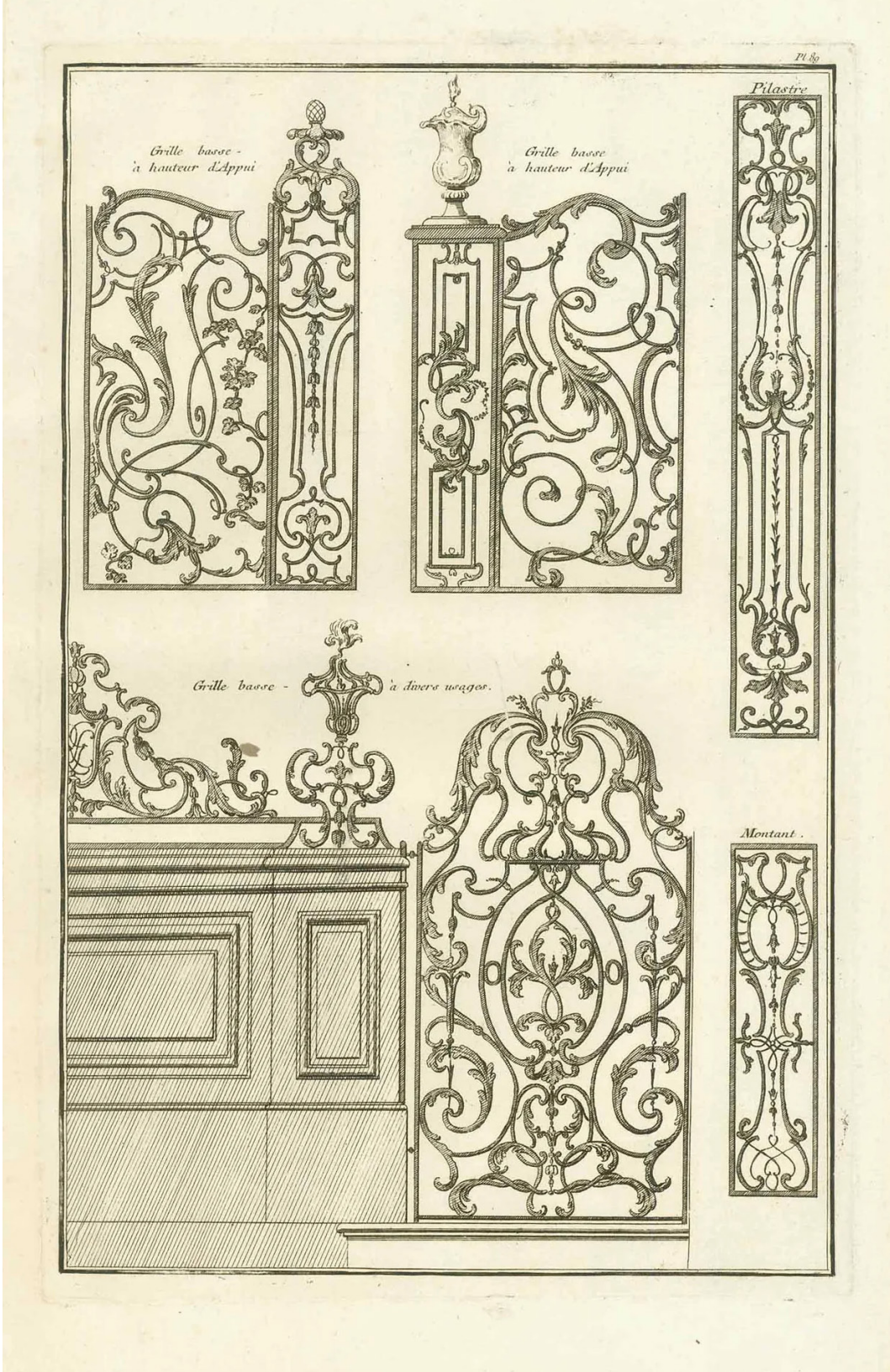


Fig. 14. Copper etchings of wrought iron gate designs, published in *Traite elementary pratique d'architecture ou étude des cinq ordres* by Barozzi da Vignola, French edition, 1767

Walking down a residential street in New York lined with apartment buildings built before the 21st century, you will encounter a succession of iron fences, gates, and railings at the threshold of the buildings. Depending on the building's style or the era in which it was constructed, the metalwork's material, color, or motifs may vary. But often, you see a repeat of iconography—hearts, curlicues, spirals, and finials.

The punctuation of a wrought or cast iron fence is a trademark of the brownstone or turn-of-the-century townhouse. Positioned at eye level, the fence may be the first thing you see as a passerby. It welcomes observation as a prominent part of a building's exterior, yet is separated from the structure itself. The fence is a boundary, a barrier, and a marker of ownership. It says, here is where public space ends and private space begins.

Fig. 15. Railing in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, NY. Photograph by Abby Lee, 2024

Fig. 16. Still from *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1988), dir. Leslie Megahey

There is something intriguing and romantic about an ornamental yet simple iron fence. It could be the common heart motif, the universal symbol of love, or the abstraction of our vital organ that keeps us alive. But I have always found a certain beauty in the fluid geometry of spirals and curved shapes rendered in such a hard material. The juxtaposition of hardness and softness forces one to consider the history of the material, and what chemical reactions and interventions resulted in the transformation from a lump of ore to a precisely executed fence.

Subjected to extreme heat, the metal becomes pliable until it cools to harden and become immovable.

It feels very metaphorical; ruminating on notions of strength and weakness, a state of metamorphosis, representations of possibility. Conceptual sophistication lies concealed in this highly visible yet seemingly ordinary object.

But I suppose that's exactly the point. We are surrounded by objects and materials and things that many could glance over without a second thought. But everything has a history, a rhetorical design narrative that is telling a story if you take a moment to investigate it. Meaning emerges from the depths of that narrative—the who, what, why, where, and how of it all.

There are strands of politics and identity and visual language woven together and embedded into everyday objects and structures. Visual culture assigns objects and materials meanings based on their inherent traits and the contexts in which they are presented. A fence is incredibly rich as both a physical structure and a concept. Fences are an imposed border, and they either keep things—objects, property, people—in or out, depending on where you are observing from.

To begin to disentangle the woven threads of politics and identity in the visual phenomenon of the metal fence, I first present a historical inquiry into the American metalwork tradition of fences (as derived from European methods), with a look at the differences between cast iron and wrought iron. In reading the record of a lecture given by a decorative ironwork to the Royal Society of Arts, this history transitions into analysis of the ways material, maker, and form encode meaning and cultural information into decorative metalwork. A comparison of Loos's critique of ornament with that of an actual artisan of an ornamental craft highlights his distance from the materials he discusses.

A note on terminology: I use metalwork as a general catch-all term, but in most cases ironwork is the particular focus of this essay, as iron was historically the most popular material with which to construct a fence or other form of barrier in the West.

Wrought Iron vs. Cast Iron

Blacksmiths produce *wrought iron* by heating the iron to a temperature that makes it pliable (a process called smelting), and physically manipulating the iron into the desired shape. Iron heated to a liquified state, and then poured into a prepared mold, is called *cast iron*. These two techniques facilitate different processes and are used in

manufacturing different kinds of objects. Wrought iron is the earliest technique used for forging iron, first appearing in parts of Asia in the 2nd millennium BC.[1]

Cast iron is a less pure form of iron, an alloy made up of a few different elements including carbon, silicone, and manganese. Since the metal is cast into molds and not hand-formed, it is a far less labor-intensive method, and can therefore take much less time to produce than wrought iron. The trade-off between wrought and cast iron, which informs its usage, is that cast iron is more brittle and less pliable than wrought iron due to its elemental structure. After the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain and the United States, cast iron methods began to take over as the primary way of producing architectural elements like fencing.[2] As the demand for fences and railings increased, companies could use cast iron to start mass-producing their designs to meet the needs of customers.

In the context of ornamental ironwork, wrought and cast iron have noticeably different qualities. Spirals, hearts, scrolls, and other organic shapes are the notable features of wrought iron, as the pliability of the material allows for their formation. Cast iron elements will be much more detailed, with more three-dimensionality as mold-making technology allows for more intricacy on the surface and form of the material.

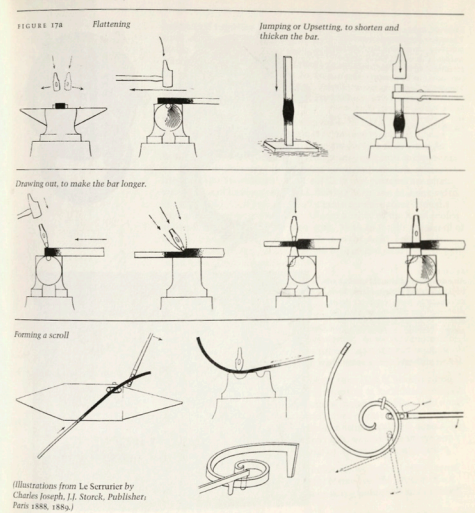


Fig. 17. Techniques of Ironwork illustraion from *Ornamental Ironwork: An Illustrated Guide to its Design, History & Use in American Architecture*, by Susan and Michael Southworth, photographs by Charles C. Withers

Fig. 18. Wrought iron fence in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Photograph by Yasmeen Abdal, 2025

Fig. 19. Cast iron fence (potentially with some wrought iron elements) in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Photograph by Abby Lee, 2024

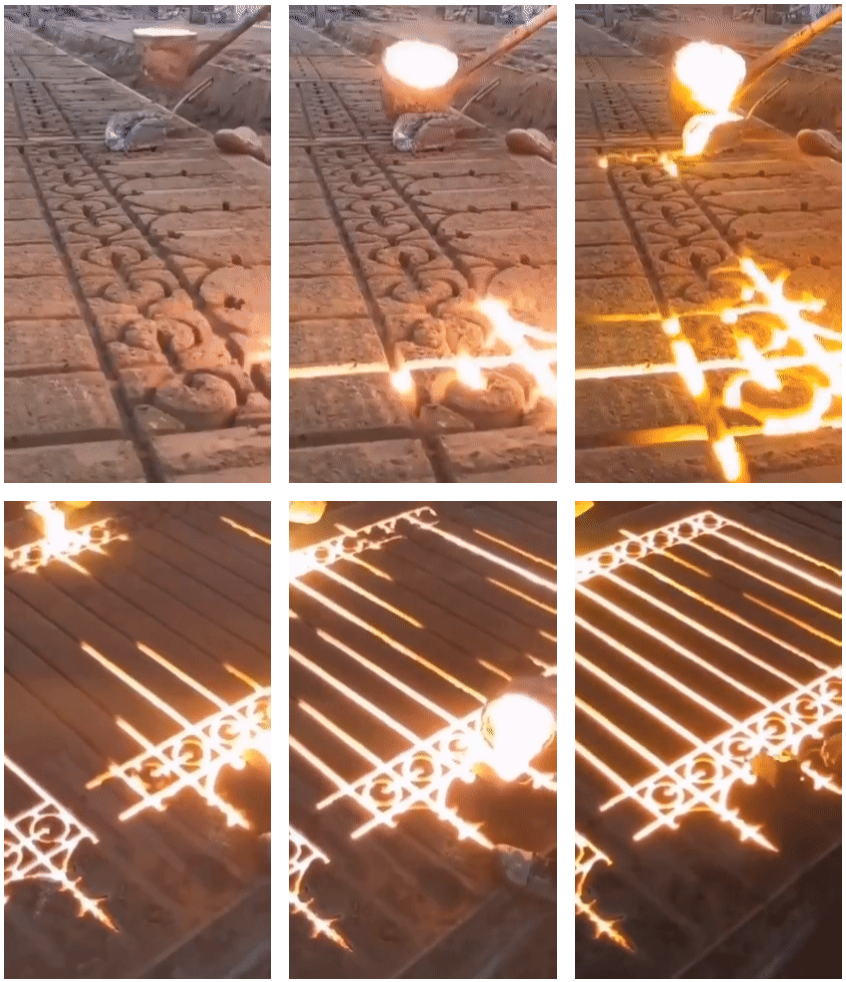


Fig. 20. Molten iron being cast into a mold for a fence, source unknown

Fig. 21. Stoop at 619 Washington Boulevard, Baltimore, MD. Built 1849-52. From "Neoclassical Wrought Iron in Baltimore." Photograph by Robert L. Alexander

A 1983 essay in the journal *Winterthur Portfolio* looks at the wrought iron of Baltimore as a case study to trace the city's Neoclassical aesthetic from its founding in the 19th century. The essay, by University of Iowa professor Robert L. Alexander, takes the reader through a highly detailed account of wrought iron in Baltimore throughout the entire 19th century, with particular emphasis on socioeconomic trends and developing technologies that influenced the design of ironwork during the century. His case study of Baltimore demonstrates that it is not uncommon to see both wrought and cast iron elements together on one fence or structure, as their material offers something different—often one can aesthetically do what the other cannot.

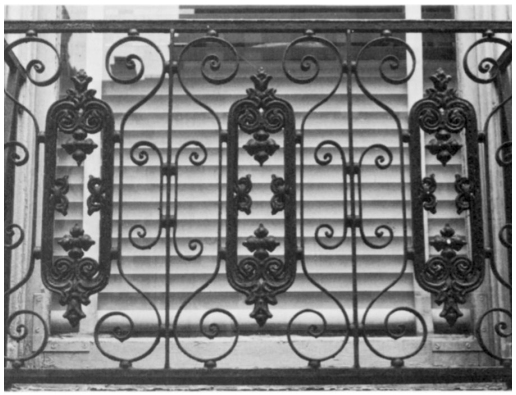


Fig. 22. Window guard (1849), 717 North Charles Street, from "Neoclassical Wrought Iron in Baltimore." Photograph by Robert L. Alexander

Fig. 22 from Alexander's essay exemplifies a combination of the two techniques that rose in popularity during the 1850s, where the maker is not trying to use one method to imitate the form of the other, but rather to "highlight the opposing natures of the two forms of metal." [3] Examining this window guard also lets us use visual rhetoric to further understand its design narrative. Considering that the blacksmith could employ both methods of ironwork production, the design choice may not have been one stemming from economic or labor restrictions. The object displays a specific interest in contrasting the two forms, with both styles offering similarly elongated shapes that differ in the density and elaboration of the motifs. The inner c-scrolls on the wrought iron sections have their cast iron counterparts on the top and bottom of the cast pieces, with contrasting openness and depth. Looking at this window guard, even without a technical understanding of wrought and cast iron processes, an intentional juxtaposition that celebrates the aesthetic offerings of both styles is clear to see.

The Craft of the Decorative Ironworker

On February 10th, 1932, J. A. R. Stevenson, a metalsmith, delivered a lecture entitled "The Craft of the Decorative Ironworker" at the Royal Society of Arts in London. In his lecture, Stevenson describes the role of an ironworker and the particular evolution of the trade. Historically, he suggests, blacksmithing has played a fundamental role in the development of a civilization. Ore as a raw material had to be processed into metal, then manipulated in countless ways to form new objects and tools that would contribute to the development of society. First came weapons, he observes, then transportation, then other utilitarian tools, and ultimately, architectural elements like fences, grilles, and railings. Metal literally and symbolically represents strength, and thus, is the material of protection and longevity.

Stevenson recounts the origins of the humble blacksmith, contrasting him with his interpretation of the modern status of "the smithy" (speaking colloquially), whose position has advanced beyond tradesman into artisan.

This lecture, subsequently published as an essay by the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, aligns with Loos's condemnation of ornament for ornament's sake in certain points:

> The matter of twiddling, of adding meaningless ornament, is a temptation of the worst sort. It should be classified with the deadly sins. We positively will not be satisfied with a plain story, expressed in terms of Mass, Proportion, Texture and Colour. We have to encrust or 'enrich' the dull, utilitarian parts of our design, of which we are frankly ashamed. We are so anxious to tell the gaping world what clever fellows we are that we have mostly forgotten the fundamentals on which all good designing must depend. We want to dazzle and to scintillate, for we know–secretly–that these are gestures which will bring us the quickest recognition by the uncritical audience with which Democracy provides us.[4]

Stevenson's "deadly sins" echo Loos's framing of ornament of "crime." In addition, Stevenson underscores the concept of the ego of the designer or artisan. Ornament may offer an opportunity to show off, to embellish as a means of promoting beauty over function, which both theorists clearly frown upon. Because the average viewer is uninformed, they suggest, the hallmark of a good designer or craftsman is not popularity among ordinary people. Both Stevenson and Loos imbue their arguments with a sense of elitism, positioning themselves and their contemporaries higher than the general public.

However, Stevenson and Loos start to diverge when it comes to how ornamentation represents a progression of society at large. Loos firmly believed that an obsession with ornament is atavistic, essentially taking design backward in time through its inherent primitiveness. But Stevenson saw the adoption of ornament in ironwork as a result of the post-Renaissance aesthetic that now considered design a more integral part of making.

While Loos begs the designers of the future to leave ornament in the past, Stevenson expresses appreciation for well-intentioned ornament and even encourages the ironworkers to reconnect with an older way of forging. There is no harm done in a return to principles of the past, where the hand of the maker was more readily seen, imbuing the finished object with a deeper sense of character. He is a fierce advocate for wrought iron over cast iron, for the hand-feel of the product versus the soulless aesthetic of a mostly mechanized process. Stevenson's position is about respect for the craft and the craftsperson, calling upon the credo of the Arts and Crafts movement. In fact, the discussion notes that follow the printed lecture note that William Morris was in attendance, and "congratulated the lecturer on being a craftsman and not a member of a profession."[5]

Stevenson refers to a turn towards "sophistication" within both the composition and manufacturing of ironwork after about the 14th century. In my first reading, I interpreted this as his recognition of more elaborate designs and embedded ornament elevating ironwork creations. While this may be true, upon closer reading and in the context of the discourse on the shifting role of the ironworker, I see "sophistication" not as an entirely positive characterization, but rather an acknowledgment of ironwork's refinement, both technically and culturally.

> The more he can keep the job in his own hands, preventing other men and the immature apprentice-boy from taking a part in it, the more surely will the finished piece reflect his personality and the care which he will have bestowed on it. It is in this respect that the early work before the Renaissance is so jolly and sincere. That old stuff simply glows with the personality of the maker. You can almost read his character in the little errors and blemishes which mark where his hammer has fallen.[6]

Here Stevenson comes to his central point: the relationship of the ironworker as or with the designer. In the beginning, the smithy was both the designer and the craftsman. And because of his expertise and familiarity with the material, the smithy was open to the influence of the material in shaping the object's design. The early architect was therefore an outsider without much firsthand knowledge of the intricacies of metal, resulting

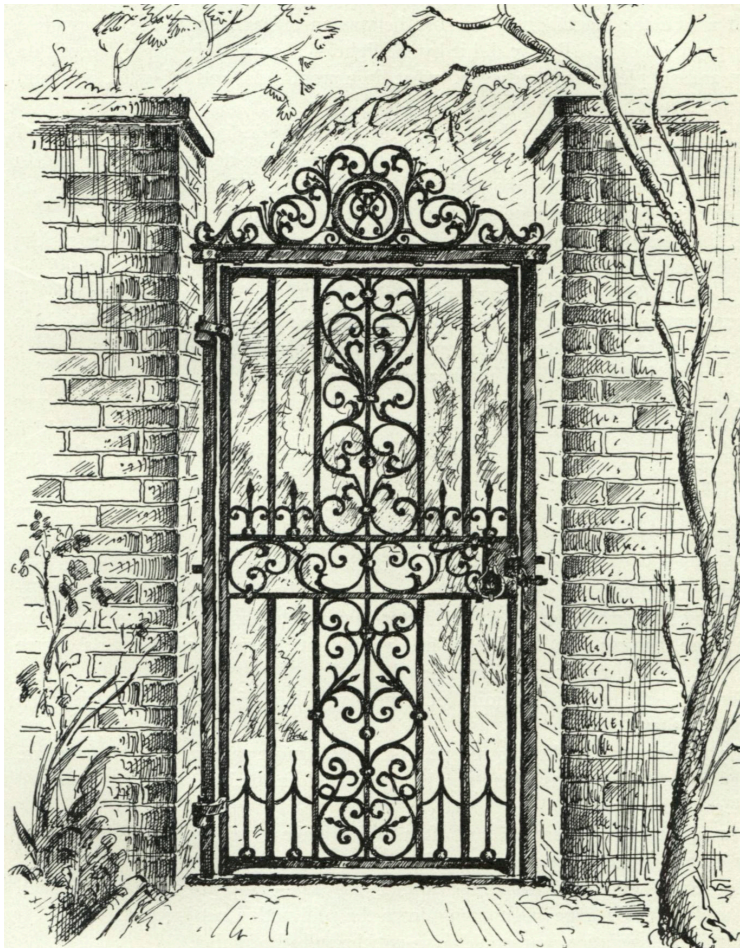


Fig. 23. Sketch of gate designed and made at The Devon Smithy for E. C. A. Byrom, from "The Craft of the Decorative Iron Worker." *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 80, no. 4140 (1932)

in a disconnect between maker and designer. If good design, on top of all the many things it has to do, is also characterized by the design's respect for the material, then this gap poses a fundamental problem. Stevenson emphasizes the importance of the outside designer fostering a deeper understanding of iron's possibilities and limitations in order to craft something that is well-considered and worth celebrating.

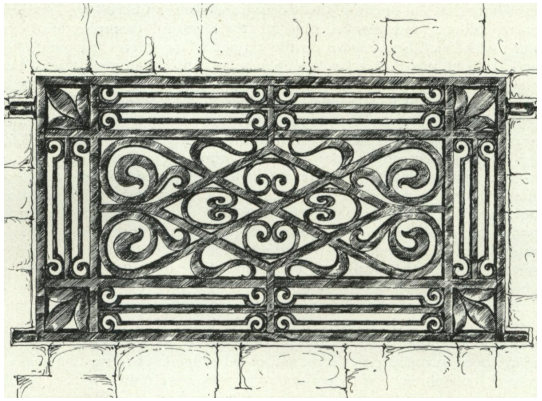


Fig. 24. Sketch of a wrought iron grill made by The Devon Smithy for the Crown Estate Office for the residence of the Prince of Wales at Sunningdale, from "The Craft of the Decorative Ironworker."

Stevenson is not against ornament in ironwork—he sees it as integral to the aesthetic function of a creation. The work that he both designed and forged at his smith, the Devon Smithy, was intricately ornamental. He does state plainly, however, that ornamental ironwork should reflect the organic geometry of the world, specifically in nature, and abstain from relying on abstract design. Abstraction, to him, represents the superfluous "twiddling" and attempts to prove "cleverness" on the part of the smithy. Ultimately, he believed the best work would be a result of a successful collaboration between metalworker and architect, craftsman and designer. Both should be deeply integrated in the design and fabrication processes, to allow for the highest level of respect and mutual understanding of the material and how the finished product will function.

The Influence of Enslaved Metalsmiths on Decorative Design Traditions Of the United States

A rich tradition attributed to African American designers in decorative metalwork is evident across the country and particularly in the southern states. In his book *The Afro American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, John Michael Vlach recounts how Black labor accounted for much of the ornamental ironwork within the south in the 19th century. Vlach acknowledges that we can never know the precise quotient of creative freedom granted to Black ironworkers executing a piece. Visual analysis of ornamental metalwork, designed following European styles but produced by Black ironworkers, offers "lingering questions about the possibility of the existence of an Afro-American style within a Euro-American artifact–a black tradition hidden at the center of a white art form."[7] This quote is in reference to work made by Christopher Werner's shop in Charleson, South Carolina, where he employed five slaves, including Toby Richardson. There is reason to believe that work like the one seen in fig. 25 was executed by the enslaved blacksmiths under general instruction from Werner.

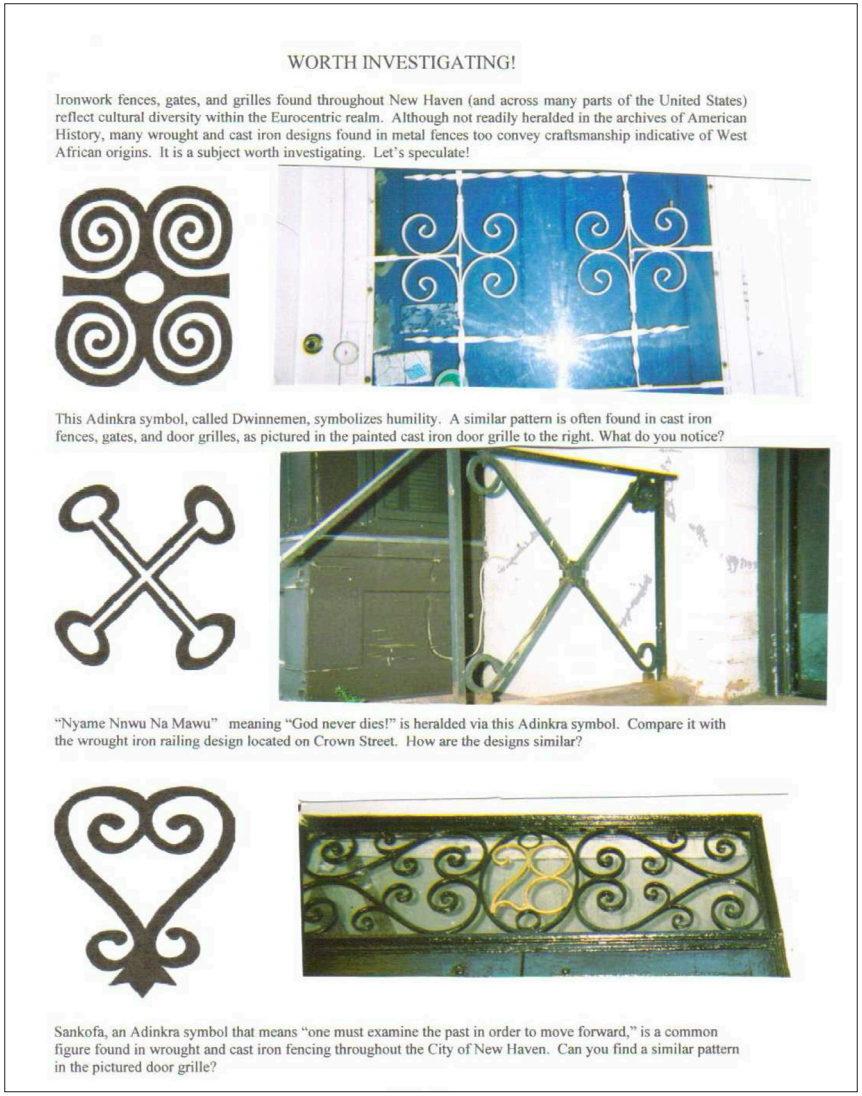
Vlach illustrates a clear connection between enslaved blacksmiths and rebellion. Blacksmiths who had the skills to work with metal could provide other enslaved workers with swords and other weapons to aid in a rebellion against their masters. This occurred in two notable attempted uprisings, one in Richmond, Virginia in 1800 led by an enslaved blacksmith named Gabriel, and another in Charleston in 1822, led by Denmark Vesey. A spearhead or pike motif is seen on the top of a fence at St. Philip's Church in Charleston: exactly the kind of pikes that would have been used for weapons in the revolts.[8]

Fig. 25. Detail of a wrought iron overthrow in Park at City Hall, Charleston, South Carolina, from *The Afro American Tradition in Decorative Arts*

The image in fig. 26 kept appearing in my visual research, and I spent much time looking for the original source. The image references particular West African Adinkra symbols and notes their appearance in wrought iron fence work in New Haven, Connecticut, to suggest the potential that enslaved blacksmiths incorporated these symbols of their cultural identity into their work, almost like hidden messages. I was able to trace the image back to a curriculum unit entitled "Breaking

Down Fences – Revealing the Past" written by Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins, a fellow of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. The curriculum is intended for elementary school aged students as an interactive way to engage with the material culture and history of their city and community. Kirkland-Mullins's guide seeks to explore many core questions, including: "How do fences and gates speak to the history of New Haven? Did they exist long ago, and if so, how far back can they be traced? For what purposes were they made, and how did their creation impact the New Haven community?"[9] It is exciting and inspiring to see this topic presented to young students at a hyperlocal level. It shows that the study of design narratives and rhetoric focusing on ornament in public space is accessible and of interest to people of any age, and is always present, no matter where you are.

So, ornamental ironwork designs and production methods do not exist in a vacuum. Zooming in on any particular element can reveal the artisan's own history and intention. Examining decorative ironwork offers more than an appreciation for its visual and structural contributions; it unveils complex layers of meaning embedded in material capabilities, production techniques, and design motifs. From the boundaries of public and private spaces to the subtleties of cultural and socio-economic influences, an iron fence, railing, or guard represents more than physical barriers. They act as tangible markers of societal shifts, which in turn influence artistic movements. By studying craftsmanship of recognized blacksmiths alongside the unacknowledged labor of enslaved workers, we can read social and cultural histories in architectural structures, and therefore reframe the design narratives we interact with on a daily basis.



WORTH INVESTIGATING!

Ironwork fences, gates, and grilles found throughout New Haven (and across many parts of the United States) reflect cultural diversity within the Eurocentric realm. Although not readily heralded in the archives of American History, many wrought and cast iron designs found in metal fences too convey craftsmanship indicative of West African origins. It is a subject worth investigating. Let's speculate!

This Adinkra symbol, called Dwinnemen, symbolizes humility. A similar pattern is often found in cast iron fences, gates, and door grilles, as pictured in the painted cast iron door grille to the right. What do you notice?

"Nyame Nnwu Na Mawu" meaning "God never dies!" is heralded via this Adinkra symbol. Compare it with the wrought iron railing design located on Crown Street. How are the designs similar?

Sankofa, an Adinkra symbol that means "one must examine the past in order to move forward," is a common figure found in wrought and cast iron fencing throughout the City of New Haven. Can you find a similar pattern in the pictured door grille?

Fig. 26. Handout included in a curriculum guide by Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins, "Breaking Down Fences — Uncovering the Past," published by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

Fig. 27. Snail scroll iron gate detail, circa 1930-40s, location unknown, via Instagram @hauteville_paris

Fig. 28. Ida Ekblad, "GIRL FIRES UP STOVE (STRANGE FREEDOMS SHALL BE SOUGHT), 202," cast iron sculpture

Fig. 29. "Gate Socks" by artist Momo Gordon, featuring original ironwork gate illustation

Fig. 30. Abigail Lucien, *L'glise de Milot Anba Zetwal Maten*, 2023, powder-coated steel. Photograph via Deli Gallery

Fig. 31. Abigail Lucien, *In the Shadow of the Hunt*, 2023, painted steel. Photograph by Cary Whittier

Fig. 32. Bleeding Hearts Braceley by Philadelphia-based jewelry designer Floating World, floatingworld.shop

Fig. 33. Cast iron armchair made by North American Iron Works, c. 1887-1897, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

WIRE AND STEEL BEDS FOR ASYLUMS, ETC.

No. B 904. Insane Asylum Wire Bed.

2 feet 3 inches wide, 6 feet 3 inches long, 18 inches deep inside.....each, $22.00
2 " 9 " 6 " 3 " 21 " " ..... " 25.00

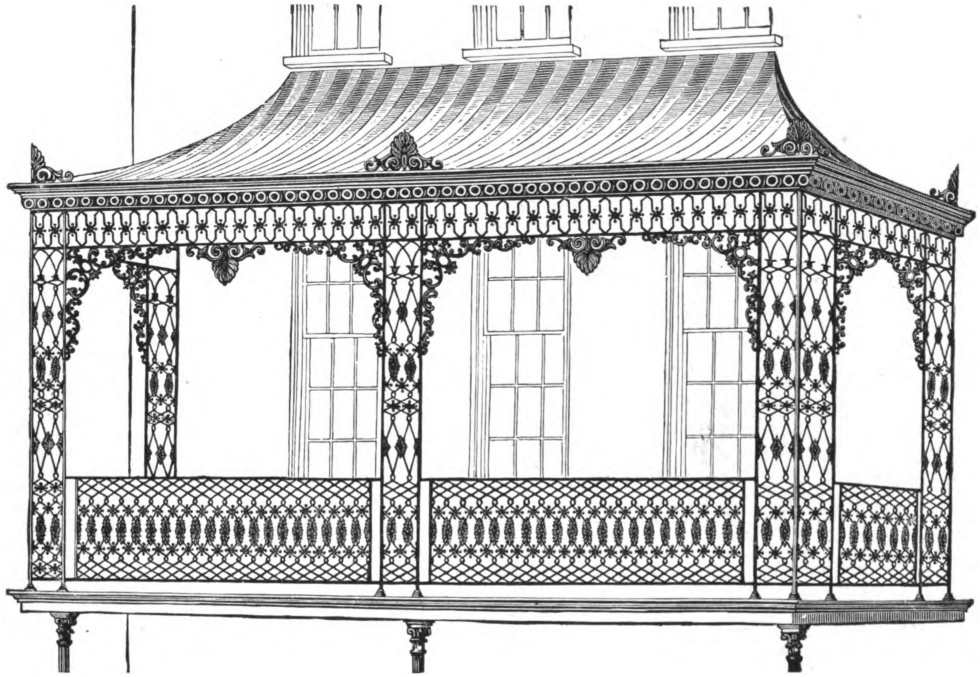
This bed is made for insane asylums, and used to lock in dangerous patients. They are made of heavy steel wire, with channel steel frame, very strong and substantial. One-half of the top and the front opens as shown by above cut.

No. B 905. Steel Bedstead.

2 feet 6 inches wide, 6 feet 3 inches long ..... each, $8.50
3 " 0 " " 6 " 3 " " ..... " 9.50
3 " 6 " " 6 " 3 " " ..... " 10.50
4 " 0 " " 6 " 3 " " ..... " 12.00
4 " 6 " " 6 " 3 " " ..... " 13.50

This is a plain, cheap and strong pattern, well adapted for hospitals, asylums, jails, etc. To parties desiring to buy large lots we make special prices. The above can be furnished with woven wire mattresses at an additional cost of from $3.00 to $4.00, according to size.

ORNAMENTAL WIRE VERANDA OR PORCH.



No. B 928. Ornamental Wire Veranda or Porch.

The above illustrates a very ornamental Veranda, made of wire, with galvanized sheet steel roof.

The style of this work can be varied from plain "diamond" mesh work to very ornamental designs in wire work as shown in cut above, or the same general style of arrangement can be followed and the work made of ornamental wrought steel scrolls.

Prices on this class of work depend largely upon the quantity to be made, size of porch, etc.

Made like the above design, about twelve feet long and six feet wide, the cost would be from $125.00 to $150.00.

If parties desiring to purchase work of this kind will furnish us with size of veranda or porch and advise us whether they wish work of about the above cost, or cheaper style of work, we will quote prices.

Figs. 34 and 35. Offerings from Barbee Wire and Iron Works, a Chicago-based manufacturer, from their 1894 catalog

Footnotes

1. “Wrought Iron,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified March 8, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/technology/wrought-iron.

2. “Cast Iron,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified February 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/technology/cast-iron.

3. Robert L. Alexander, “Neoclassical Wrought Iron in Baltimore,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 2/3 (July 1983): 147–86, https://doi.org/10.1086/496141, 184.

4. J. A. R. Stevenson, “The Craft of the Decorative Iron Worker,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 80, no. 4140 (March 25, 1932): 464–83, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41359000, 467.

5. Stevenson, “The Craft of the Decorative Iron Worker,” 480.

6. Stevenson, “The Craft of the Decorative Iron Worker,” 476.

7. John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), 115.

8. Vlach, The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts, 110.

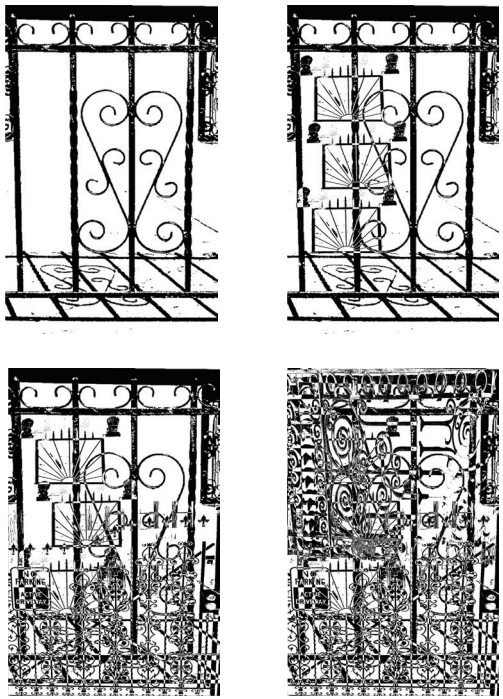
9. Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins, “Breaking Down Fences — Revealing The Past,” in *Pride of Place: New Haven Material and Visual Culture III,* vol. III (New Haven, CT: Yale–New Haven Teachers Institute, 2008), accessed March 27, 2025, https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/2008/3/.

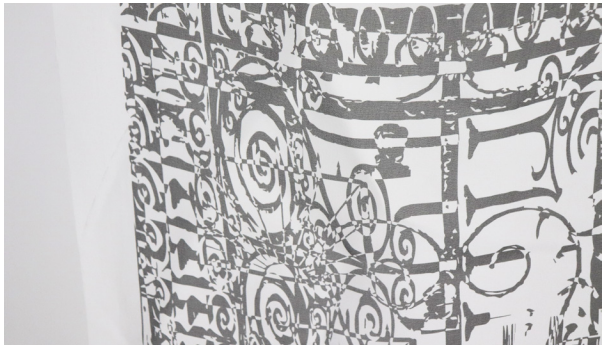
Wrought & Worn

The works on the following pages investigate cast and wrought iron forms through a series of digital translations, beginning with photographs of the physical ornament and moving through processes of scanning, layering, and distortion. These transformed visuals were printed onto sheer crepe fabric–a material chosen for its transparency and fluidity--creating a deliberate juxtaposition between the hardness of metal and the softness of textile.

Through manipulation and draping, the fabric was further evolved into wearable forms, blurring the boundary between image and body, surface and self. These garments function not only as aesthetic objects, but as sites of narrative transmission–where visual language is inscribed onto material, and material onto the human body.

Each piece becomes an experiment in embodied ornament, asking how visual motifs carry cultural, political, and personal meanings. How do these meanings shift when seen from different vantage points–through the lens of wearer or viewer, physical or digital, past or speculative future?





Self: The Charm Journey Toward Self-Ornamentation in the 21st Century

Fig. 36. Adidas x Beepy Bella custom Moss Shoe, created with deadstock beads and vintage materials

The charm revolution is upon us. Do you see it? If you aren't seeing it, maybe you can hear it. Clink, clink, clink. What is that sound? It's the sound of a 19-year-old girl with a dozen keychains, charms, tags, and trinkets all hooked onto a carabiner, clipped proudly onto her crossbody bag. The jingle-jangle is the soundtrack of her every movement. You can hear her coming from blocks away.

Click clack, ting ting. That's ten different gold charms smashing against each other, dangling from a thick chain around someone's wrist every time they move their arm, even just an inch.

One analysis of charm culture would situate it as part of the everlasting, neverending retro Y2K nostalgia fetish culture dump currently dominating the contemporary fashion and beauty landscapes. There are other ways to interpret the charm's place in culture, but its popularity cannot be doubted: Charm culture is pervasive and it is a flourishing element of the 21st-century material culture of excess. They span "high" and "low" markets, symbolizing luxury accessories and disposable, mass-produced objects alike.

Although clearly quite different to its former incarnations, the role of ornament in contemporary 21st-century society and design is far from clear. It seems to be something more to do with the self than with space, perhaps—a phenomenon existing closer to the interior than the exterior of identity.

To begin to address the mystery of the changes in culture between the time when Loos wrote "Ornament and Crime" and now, I picked up a pen to start a list of the 21st-century ornaments that have felt inescapable. The first thing that came to my mind? Croc Jibbitz. You know, the little doo-dads that you stick in the holes of Crocs. With the invention of a new object—Crocs, the personal computer and cell phone, then the smartphone, then tablet, and so on—we suddenly have a new category of personal item to *ornament*. All are durable and can weather decoration, which adds a personal flair, that differentiates these functional devices from each other, that connects them to their owner. If our phones are basically extensions of our bodies and our brains at this point, then naturally, they too become extensions of one's personal style in the ways in which one chooses to aestheticize them beyond the factory default model. Phone cases, laptop decals, cell phone straps and charms, colorful keyboards, the list can go on and on.

As a child of the 90s, I am no stranger to a charm bracelet or necklace. My sister and I had these Italian charm link bracelets where you can remove the individual links to add ones with icons on them—no dangly bits involved. After the fashion of our generation, I shared a set of "best friends forever" jewelry with countless BFFs over the years. In the late aughts, I became obsessed with these Winnie the Pooh phone charms called "Peek-a-Poohs" that you got out of toy vending machines (fig. 37). I think they were really big in Europe and Japan. One summer we took a family trip and I simply had to collect them all, Pokémon-style.

Fig. 37. TOMY toy vending machine in Italy. Photograph by Ai Wanglei, September 2011, Flickr

Fig. 38. Peek-a-Poohs. Photograph by user Etsy user TONEvintage

I did not put them on my cell phone, because I was eight years old and did not own one at the time, instead just attached them all to a carabiner to admire and show off to my friends in a jumbled, tangled mess. I was also already an avid collector of Winnie the Pooh paraphernalia (stuffed animals, mainly) since birth, as my grandmother had gifted me a stuffed animal Pooh the day I was born (which I still have, of course). Now, Etsy sellers list their vintage Peek-a-Poohs for $8 a pop. Skipping the central object of cellphone completely, I and evidently other consumers became directly obsessed with the decorative accessory.

Last summer, a store called Brooklyn Charm selling customizable charm jewelry opened up on Manhattan Avenue, a few blocks from my apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Immediately upon opening, there were lines of people down the block (mostly women, roughly between the ages of 16 and 35), waiting for hours to go into this store and shop their wares. Not long after, my TikTok algorithm was feeding me "Come with me to design my charm bracelet at Brooklyn Charm

in Greenpoint!" videos and I was starting to get a clue. The product itself was maybe not the best quality, and seemed to be made of plated baser metals, but they had hundreds of different charms, and you could pick them all out yourself, design your configuration, and have it completely personalized to you. That whole summer, every weekend, the lines went out the door. They even started putting a chalk easel out in front stating the wait time to shop (usually upwards of an hour) and would take your phone number to send a text when it was your turn, like waiting for a table at a restaurant.

In the last two years, other brands have surged in popularity with their charm offerings. Susan Alexandra and Haricot Vert, also based in New York, and of course, luxury fashion houses have incorporated charm jewelry into their collections.

Fig. 39. Customizable charm necklace by New York-based designer Susan Alexandra

Fashion trends are cyclical and based on shifting social, cultural, and political atmospheres of the time, but we can usually place them along the continuum of minimalist to maximalist. Charms have a unique ability to straddle both spheres, because of the freedom of choice and customization that they offer. The minimalist will go for a simple necklace showing off perhaps one or two charms. The maximalist can hang a charm from every single link of the chain. It is a truism of our culture that clothing and accessories are a way to express yourself, to embody what you like, and project that into the world. With charms, there's the opportunity to be hyper-specific about displaying your identity, in an extremely literal way. Do you love tennis? Tennis racket charm. Gambling addiction? Pair of dice charm.

Fig. 40. "Fuzzy Feelings Charmie Bag" by Brooklyn-based studio Haricot Vert

Fig. 41. Viking chain with pendants, c. 12th century

Charms, Amulets, and Talismans

Charms and charm jewelry are by no means a new concept. Amulets and talismans are small objects imbued with spiritual, magical, and protective qualities, and have been often worn on or attached to the body across many cultures, including in ancient Egypt, within indigenous tribes, and in Bethlehem when Jesus and his followers wandered about. In times when most realms of science and medicine were deeply intertwined with religion, these objects symbolized a connection to faith and a belief in a higher power. Danger, disease, and the pervasive threat of evil spirits resulted in a myriad of talisman and amulet forms that had specific purposes and targets, and they often represented elements of the natural world that had symbolic meaning. In many cultures and countries, certain animals share the same properties of luck, supernatural ability, or apotropaic magic (meaning that it wards something or somebody off).[1]

Fig. 42. An Egyptian Carnelian and Quartz Bead and Pendant Necklace, 3rd Intermediate/Late Period, 1075-30 B.C., Sotheby's

The necklace pictured in fig. 42 is an early example of beads and stones strung together to form what we would now consider a charm necklace. As one of the earliest pristine civilizations, ancient Egyptian artifacts are a fundamental aspect of our modern understanding of societal progression. There is no shortage of these artifacts, having been unearthed and collected for hundreds of years and spread throughout communities of private collectors and cultural institutions.

At the center is an amulet in the shape of a turtle, made from the semi-precious stone carnelian (also spelled cornelian). Carnelian is used for the cornflower-shaped beads, separated by small gold and soapstone beads. The necklace also features additional Egyptian symbology, including two Horus falcons and three scarab beetles made of soapstone and quartz.[2] A visually stunning piece, this necklace, like all jewelry from ancient Egypt, was intended to serve protective and spiritual functions. The design narrative of the necklace guides the viewer to consider beyond what the eye can see. The iconography, the materials, and the cultural characteristics reveal the layered meaning and purpose of the necklace. The turtle is not just a sea animal. The carnelian is not just a red stone. Every single element of the necklace has a greater emblematic value. Even with an object of such antiquity, where the creator's identity is unknown and their design intent can be presented explicitly, years of research and anthropological study on these objects and their contexts can illustrate the story this necklace is telling, approximately 3,000 years later.

As Carol Matthews describes in *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, a turtle amulet was "intended to work apotropaically, for it was a creature of evil symbolizing death and darkness."[3] As with several other animals in Egyptian mythology, wearing a likeness of the evil animal itself was the key to warding off whatever wicked or harmful energy it possessed. As the central amulet, we can assume that the necklace's primary function was to ward off evil as well as decorate a body.

In the polytheistic religion of ancient Egypt, the god Horus was depicted as a falcon or a man with a falcon's head. He was the god of the sky and kings.[4] Another familiar Egyptian symbol and common amulet form was the Udjat eye, also called the Eye of Horus, which was worn to offer protection for health and the life of the wearer.[5] The small falcon beads on the necklace are an iteration of this same iconography and its associated protective properties. Considering Horus is represented by two smaller beads on either side of the turtle, it can be interpreted that the necklace's primary intention is not of singular devotion to Horus, but to imbue the object with Horus' spiritual power of life.

The cornflower beads appear as the buds of the flower, suggesting a recognition of new life. Cornflowers were a common flower found in Egyptian gardens.[6] On the necklace, they descend in size, beginning larger in the middle and growing increasingly smaller.

Carnelian is a stone that was commonly found in the geographic region and was soft enough to easily carve into amulets and beads of different shapes. Its red tone, ranging in warm hues of brown and orange, was associated with blood, which represented life, energy, and vitality.[7] The turtle and cornflower buds represented in Carnelian further strengthen their talismanic power.

With the analysis of each component of the necklace and the interrelational strength of the symbols carved from a specific material, the design narrative of the necklace reveals itself. The necklace serves to bring the wearer vitality and combat dark and evil forces through expressions of life. Within its construction, there is a harmony and balance found within its relative symmetry.

As an object of ornament, a necklace generally serves no utilitarian purpose. However, in the civilization of ancient Egypt, because spirituality and the expression of devotion to the gods were such a fundamental aspect of daily life, it may be fair to say that these amulets, talismans, or pieces of jewelry could be considered objects of utilitarian value. The religious function is utilitarian, and the aesthetic and rhetorical function is not only secondary but entirely tied to the spiritual properties.

In her introduction to *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*, Leslie Atzmon writes:

> We tend to ignore or overlook a different level of persuasion that has to do not with a calculated objective but with a worldview or a set of meta-beliefs. Design artifacts are particularly effective at this other level of persuasion; they offer audiences communicative data that orchestrate an array of cultural themes. In this way, design artifacts are involved in the generation and proliferation of cultural belief systems. Influencing cultural themes, they fulfill a profoundly rhetorical function.[8]

As she states, when we consider this necklace in the present day but still in relation to its original use, the object itself is a carrier of a "cultural belief system."

Thousands of years later, as anthropologists and archaeologists uncovered these objects from tombs and the depths of the earth, they became historical data—a social function that was likely never considered by the ancient Egyptians. They are studied, analyzed, and thus, used to provide immensely valuable information to society at large. Millions of ancient objects, so many of them ornamental, have contributed to a modern understanding of civilization, society, technology, and ultimately, the evolution of the human experience. A simple and tiny object, like a carnelian turtle amulet, adds to a vast tapestry of knowledge woven through the study of historical cultural artifacts. We understand something new about craftsmanship, material, religion, and spirituality. These concepts each have their own histories individually, but unfold into yet more complex cultural phenomena when considered together by applying a framework of visual rhetoric.

An analysis of historical ornament like the necklace reveals something else: the concept of function is not fixed. The necklace was once worn, very likely in both life and death, to protect an individual. Taken out of its original context, over time, it ceases to serve that purpose. In its contemporary existence, it offers a completely different function to be drawn from both its visual properties (color, shape, scale, material) and its spiritual significance. It now serves to enlighten, educate, and even inspire future artists and designers through its form.

Fig. 43. Talisman and amulet collection from lifestyle goods brand Kindred Black, kindredblack.com

The Origin of the Modern Charm: Accessories for Accesories

The word “charm” as a noun to reference a small object was used interchangeably with amulet and talisman beginning in the 14th century.[9] To call an object a charm was taken from the previous use of the word as a noun, “the chanting or recitation of a verse supposed to possess magic power or occult influence.”[10] The object as charm became the physical embodiment of the magical spell, of a vocalized or sung enchantment.

Eventually, the world became more secular. Scientific advancements and modern medicine brought into question the effectiveness of such magical properties within these objects.[11] Queen Victoria is credited with popularizing charms and charm jewelry as accessories of devotion or dedication to loved ones (fig. 44), moving them away from their previous spiritual association. The Queen as a cultural figure was effectively a tastemaker for emerging styles within the greater public.

So, what is the difference in social function between a 21st-century charm necklace and an apotropaic Egyptian amulet? Why has this trend of keychains, doo-dads, baubles, and charms on everything taken everyone by storm all over again? Ultimately, it has much to do with the personalization of objects. These accessories add layers of individuality to sometimes homogenous fashion items, like a simple gold chain or a plain leather bag. According to fashion media outlet Fashionista, the trend has a name, coined by trend forecasting agency WGSN: chaotic customization. Citing WGSN’s data, exclusive to clients in the trade, Fashionista writes:

> accessories for accessories are set to continue to resonate with shoppers and infiltrate the market into 2026, driven in part by ‘the acceleration of industry ambitions to tackle the environmental impacts of material extraction, creation and reuse.’[12]

To me, this seems totally backward and weird. Why would arguably unnecessary objects be part of the fashion industry’s desire to address overconsumption and material practices? It is widely known that the fashion industry is one of the world’s largest contributors to climate change, via carbon emissions produced by manufacturing plants and transportation. I might understand more if this chaotic customization trend was characterized by an intentionality of using upcycled material, but that does not seem to be the case.

Fig. 44. Queen Victoria’s gold charm bracelet, 19th century, Royal Collection Trust

Fig. 45. “Adastra” iPhone case by Memor Studio, memorstudio.com

Fig. 46. Small Sicily Handbag by Dolce&Gabanna, photograph via neimanmarcus.com

Fig. 47. Shamanic Embroidery Balaclava Dress by French fashion designer Marine Serre, marineserre.com

There's certainly an obsession with identity representation through objects, especially things that are small, cute, and well-designed. Engaging in mainstream fashion is to be steeped in trend culture, where uniformity overrides originality. Although the charm necklaces may be a hot trend, there's every opportunity to craft a completely unique piece. Brands like Haricot Vert or Brooklyn Charm are finding this niche, offering customers and charm lovers the chance to participate in a more self-guided version of the trend. The pieces are made of the same aesthetic material, so they may kind of look like all the other ones, but each one is still one-of-a-kind. There's some excitement in this duality, which I believe is a main part of its draw, of its charm... if you will. Sorry! I had to do it.

When you think about it, it's kind of simple. People are obsessed with two things that are diametrically opposed: fitting in with the status quo and being a totally unique individual. The charmification of yourself or your objects, or adding personal flair to something ordinary is scratching the itch to live in both those realities at once.

Fig. 48. L.L. Bean Boat and Tote bag with "Birkin" embroidery, via @ ironicboatandtotes on Instagram

Fig. 49. Jane Birkin with her Hermés Birkin bag. Photograph: Alaca Press/ Alamy

It's normal to be influenced by the styles that everyone else has, like a classic L.L. Bean Boat and Tote canvas bag. But once you get your custom monogram stitched onto the side, be it a funny phrase or your initials, you get to assert that your bag has something a little different to say. The chokehold on the culture is real; there's even an Instagram account dedicated to clever monograms on the Boat and Tote bag, started by Gracie Wiener, a social media editor (@ironicboatandtote).[13]

This trend of adorning an affordable canvas bag stands in opposition to what feels like the original vehicle for the bag charm, chaotic customization era – the Hermés Birkin bag. Named after French actress and singer Jane Birkin, the Birkin bag was created in 1981, after a conversation between Birkin and Jean-Louis Dumas, the head of Hermés at the time, where Birkin expressed wanting a bag bigger than the one she had, and with pockets.[14] This bag is probably the most well-known handbag in the world and carries a hefty price tag. Birkin was also known to customize her own personal Birkin bag with charms, stickers, and other knick-knacks (fig. 49). It was in early 2024 that photos of Jane Birkin went viral on social media (in the wake of her death in July 2023) that sparked the bag charm bonanza.[15] But in a way, despite the vast difference in price between a L.L. Bean tote and a Birkin bag, each bag carries a level of cultural and social capital based on their respective placements within contemporary fashion trends.

Marx and Commodity Fetishization

In Marx's theory of value, he articulates a phenomenon he calls "commodity fetishization." It is a type of value assignment dependent not on the exchange-value of its materials nor its use-value in the traditional sense. He writes, "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[16] Using the example of a table, Marx describes how the wood as raw material transformed into a table carries a certain use- value, but once it becomes commodified, "it is changed into something transcendent." Sianne Ngai's analysis of commodity fetishization in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, reveals how

> Marx's account dramatized how human producers of commodities come to empathize with the commodity or perceive it from what they imagine to be its own perspective on itself: as an object defined entirely by its 'social' relation to other objects in exchange.[17]

Ngai emphasizes how Marx defines the assignment of exchange-value to an object as a "social process," and therefore commodities become considered valuable not for what they can actually do, but as symbols of social or cultural capital that they don't inherently have.

In the 21st century, where material goods are deeply tied to social identity and status, commodity fetishism remains highly relevant. Over-identifying with or placing excessive value on material objects ultimately reinforces capitalist power structures. While there is genuine joy in celebrating creative design—especially in fashion and jewelry—Marx would argue that this phenomenon reflects active participation in a system that reduces human relationships to economic transactions, all under the guise of self-expression through consumption.

Commodity fetishism continues to shape our desires, identities, and social hierarchies. The trend of "chaotic customization" may seem like a playful embrace of individuality, but in reality, it is an illusion of choice. The powerful capitalist infrastructure of consumer goods dictates what individuals believe they need to maintain social capital.

The Future of the Charm

We have come a long way from the way that Egyptian amulets or charms were used in a way so spiritual it was almost utilitarian. I believe we can hold spiritual space for physical objects, while acknowledging that a materialistic hegemony underlines our current charm craze.

In a recent time of personal difficulty, someone in my life gifted me with a bracelet of small tree agate beads. Knowing what I was going through, she picked it out specifically for the gemstone's spiritual properties. The tag on the bracelet told me it is a stone of plentitude and abundance. Aids in personal growth. Empowers. Helps maintain emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual strength. Each smooth, spherical bead is unique, revealing distinct marbled patterns in many hues of green and gray. I'm not necessarily a person who believes in the crystal culture. Am I going to rely entirely on this bracelet to improve my life? Not at all. But I can allow it to be a special thing, as a gift from a loved one in an act of deep thoughtfulness. Life is so confusing, complicated, and scary at times. We look to higher powers, religion, or literal rocks—ancient, changeless things—to provide some sense of meaning when things feel uncertain.

Is there a point, however, at which our reliance on "magical" excess objects becomes a weakness? When do these emotional connections to *things* become a liability? Or is it when our objects are devoid of an emotional significance that the accrual of them crosses the threshold, from meaningful to meaningless?

Thinking back to the way we study Egyptian artifacts and other objects of antiquity throughout time, from an anthropological and rhetorical standpoint, there is no question in my mind that Hello Kitty charms and BFF necklaces will be studied in the same manner. Even in a few hundred years, these objects will reveal something important about the lives of humans in the time they were popular. With technological advancements and trend culture moving at such a rapid speed, even objects from the 1990s or early 2000s, only 25 years ago, are relics of a different era.

The Victoria & Albert Museum in London has already begun this type of archival collection of objects from the recent past, in a program called Rapid Response Collecting. They began the project in 2014, stating that their mission is acquiring

> contemporary objects...in response to major moments in recent history that touch the world of design and manufacturing. Many of the objects have been newsworthy either because they advance what design can do, or because they reveal truths about how we live.[18]

The V&A's mission statement highlights the importance of the cultural and historical information that is embedded in design objects. It recognizes and asks the question, what traces are we leaving behind that will speak to the future of design, ornament, and material?

There appears to exist some strong and subtle relation between "truths about how we live" and this mysterious category of object. It is difficult, however, to reliably identify the chief social function of a charm while living in the society that produced it—although of course it is worth a try. The oversaturation of the charm market makes us feel ready to move on to the next thing, but we will never escape our urge to express ourselves through ornamentation. How will historians read the Peek-a-Pooh charm in hundreds of years, and would we recognize ourselves in their portraits of us? Charms raise the question of whether, when we interpret them historically, we can ever behold the "truth" of another society—as the V&A thinks is possible—or if, instead, we continually perceive only ourselves. In this reading, charms become a kind of recursive mirror, presenting a circular logic of novelty-seeking and fetishization, a paradoxical historical object always escaping categories of value and complete definition.

Fig. 50. Crocs with Jibbitz charms, creator unknown

Fig. 51. Simone Rocha x Crocs, SS25.
Photograph via Launchmetrics Spotlight

Fig. 52. Bejewelled Footwear by Grete Henriette featuring framed drawings by Laura Rikman, via Instagram @grete.henriette

Fig. 53. Sophie Stone, *Red Shell Doilie*, 2025, antique doilie, fabric dye, glass beads, acrylic, silk, and antique glass. Photograph by Sophia Aerts

Fig. 55. Gillian Wearing, *My Charms,* 2021, bronze chain, 3D-printed objects, and mixed media. Photograph by Stephen James

Fig. 54. Flip phone with cell phone charms, c. 2000-2010, creator unknown

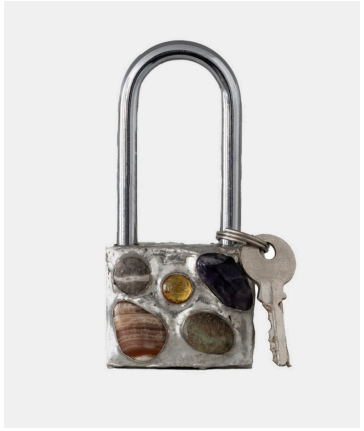


Fig. 56. The Perfect Nothing Catalogue, *Long Shackle Padlock,* 2023, tin and various stones on padlock. Photograph via The Future Perfect

Figs. 57 and 58. Farhad Moshiri, *Baby*, 2020, keychains. Photograph via Christie's auction house

Fig. 59. Bloomingdale's Little Brown bag keychain, bloomingdales.com

Fig. 60. L.L. Bean Tote Bag keychain, llbean.com

Fig. 61. Miu Miu suede bag adorned with charms and chains, modesens.com

Fig. 62. Julia Skergeth, The Charm Bag in Matcha, juliaskegreth.com

Footnotes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, “apotropaic (adj.),” December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3879538607.

2. “An Egyptian Carnelian and Quartz Bead and Pendant Necklace, 3rd Intermediate/ Late Period, 1075-30 B.C.,” *Sotheby’s*, accessed December 8, 2024, https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/antiquities-n09438/lot.43.html.

3. Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 36.

4. “Horus Falcon Wearing Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt with Uraeus,” *Harvard Art Museums*, accessed December 8, 2024, https://hvrd.art/o/303839.

5. “Sacred Eye Ydjat,” *The Walters Art Museum*, accessed December 8, 2024, https://art.thewalters.org/detail/9339/sacred-eye-udjat/.

6. “Cornflower-Bead Necklace,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed December 8, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547763.

7. Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 102.

8. Atzmon, “Introduction: Visual Rhetoric and the Special Eloquence of Design Artifacts,” xiv.

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “charm (n.1), sense 1.b,” June 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2699085511.

10. *Oxford English Dictionary*, “charm (n.1), sense 1.b”

11. Annie Thwaite, “A History of Amulets in Ten Objects,” *Science Museum Group Journal*, no. 11 (2019), https://doi.org/10.15180/191103.

12. Brooke Frischer, “The Era of ‘Chaotic Customization’ Is Upon Us,” *Fashionista*, October 25, 2024, https://fashionista.com/2024/10/shop-chaotic-customization-accessories.

13. Halie LeSavage, “The Rise of the Ironic Boat and Tote,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, August 3, 2022, https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/trends/a40775207/ironic-llbean-boat-and-tote/.

14. Luke Leitch, “Jane Birkin on the Hermès Birkin: How Fashion’s Most Iconic Handbag Was First Sketched on a Sickbag,” *Vogue Scandinavia*, July 22, 2024, https://www.voguescandinavia.com/articles/jane-birkin-on-the-hermes-birkin-how-fashions-most-iconic-handbag-was-first-sketched-on-a-sickbag.

15. Frischer, “The Era of ‘Chaotic Customization’ Is Upon Us”

16. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), archived from the original on June 7, 2019, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4.

17. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 62.

18. “Rapid Response Collecting,” *Victoria and Albert Museum*, accessed December 8, 2024, https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/rapid-response-collecting.

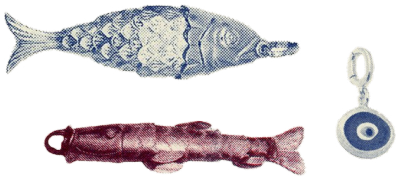
Charming Keychains

In exploring the commodification of the current charm craze, and the resulting commodity fetishism, I was interested in investigating the material and procurement of such charms and keychains. In creating these works, I sourced objects and keychains from a variety of retailers: a lot of 12 assorted vintage keychains from eBay, locks and chains from hardware stores, keychains and knick-knacks from discount stores in my neighborhood, and a selection from Temu, an online Chinese e-commerce site selling heavily discounted consumer goods. Out of these individual objects, I created new combinations.

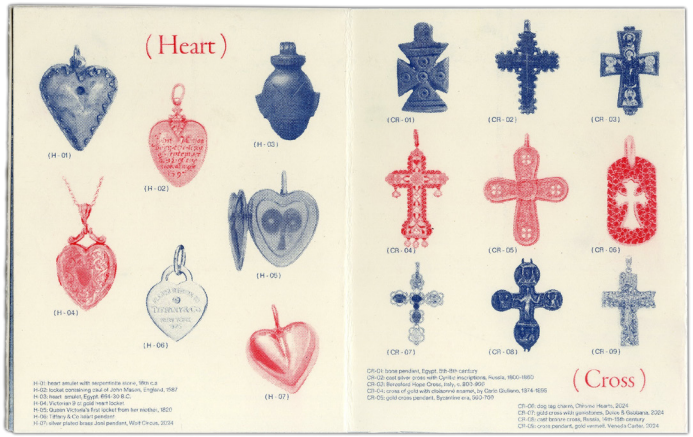
The constructed charms can be categorized as the particular "stubborn celebration of uselessness" that Alice Twemlow identifies in her piece "The Decriminalisation of Ornament."The function of purpose of the objects is up for interpretation, up to the discretion of the user. They exist at the intersection of useful and useless.


NEW

Lucky Foot Zine & Poster

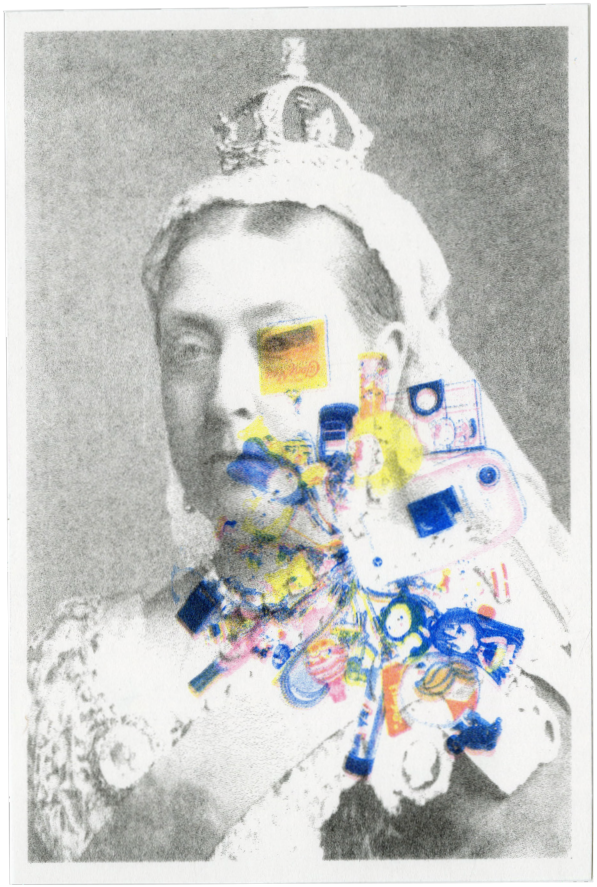


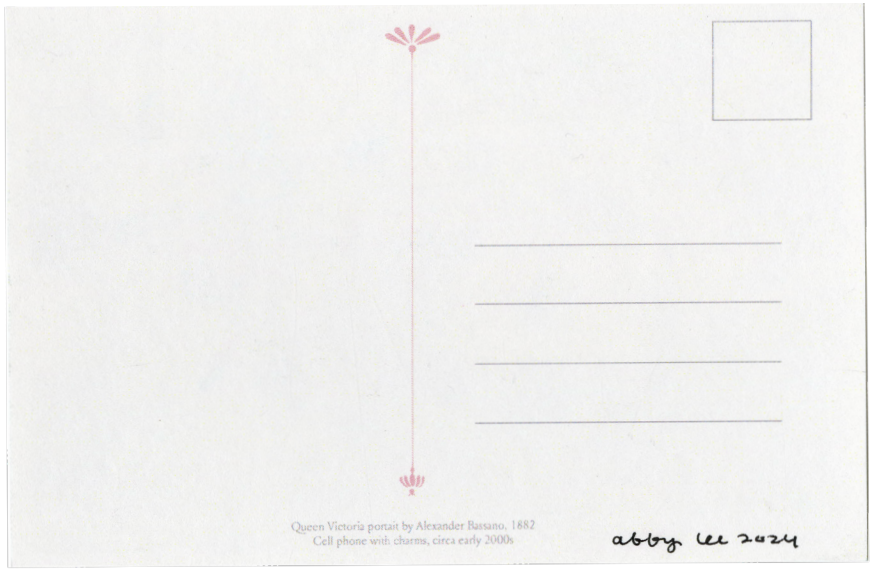
This zine presents a collected taxonomy of charms and amulets through history. Sourcing from the digital archives of institutions like The Met and the Victoria & Albert museum, these enchanted objects are curated and arranged by recurring motifs–symbols that echo across time, culture, material, and maker. By framing these talismans through the lens of visual communication, the zine highlights how ornamental design encodes and transmits belief, identity, and cultural information. The zine unfolds and on the backside is a poster showing an assemblage of charms featured in the collection.

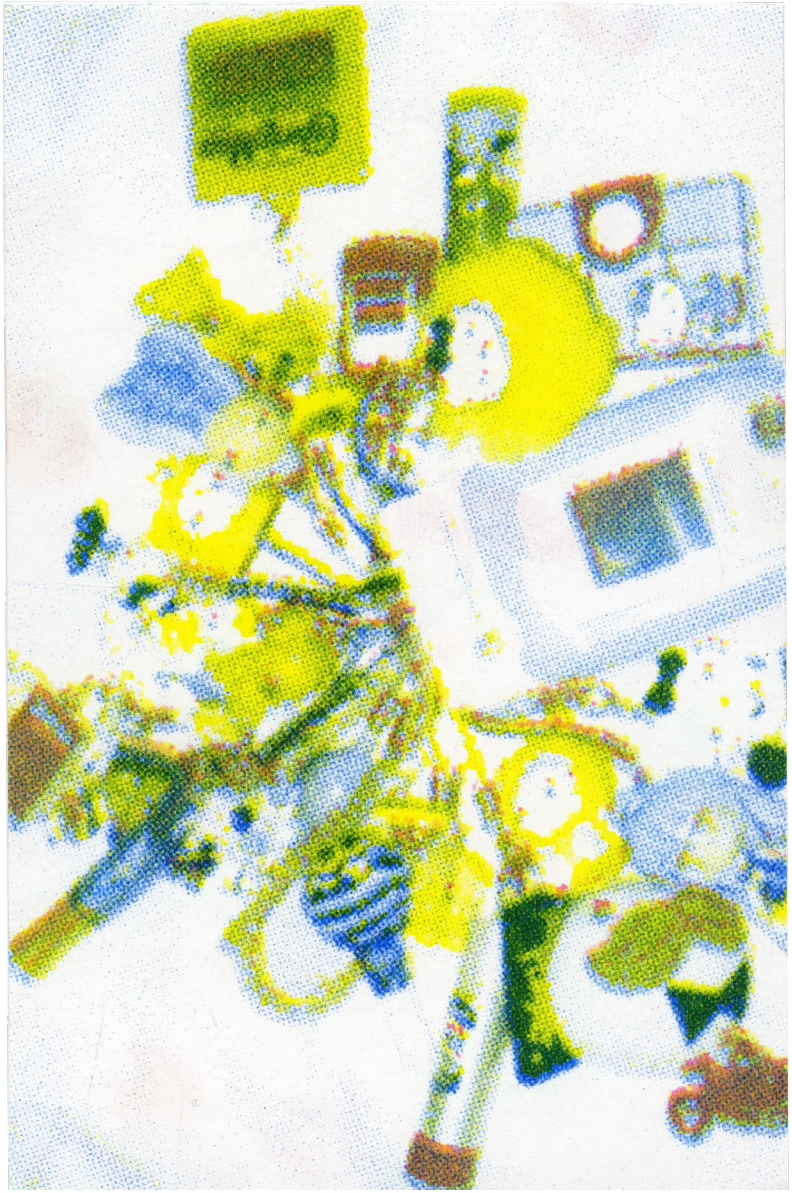


Homage to Queen Victoria

This series of four postcards, printed using four-color Risograph, explores the cultural continuity of ornament of charm objects. By juxtaposing a black-and-white portrait of Queen Victoria–whose reign helped popularize sentimental jewelry and charms –with a low-resolution, Y2K-era photo of a pink flip phone adorned with dozens of decorative phone charms, the postcards draw a visual parallel between historical and contemporary expressions of personal adornment. These images serve to support my broader argument about the enduring relationship between ornament and visual rhetoric, tracing how decorative forms communicate identity, sentiment, and cultural values across time.







"There can be no experience of any person or object as cute that does not somehow call up the subject's sense of power over those who are less powerful." - *Sianne Ngai*

abby lee 2024

Future: Navigating the Void Through Multiple Realities in Digital and Physical Ornament

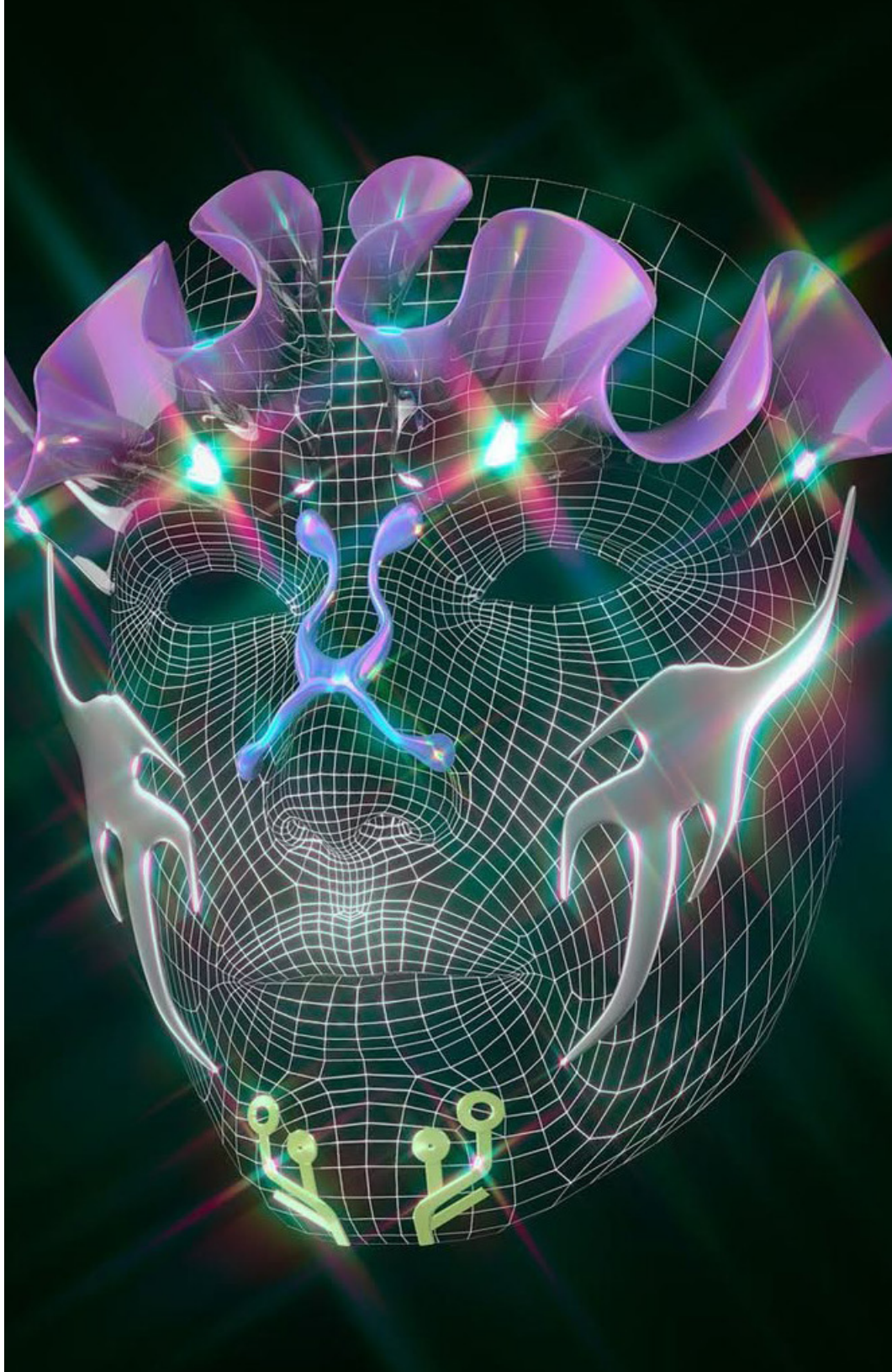


Fig. 63. 3D render of AR face filter by Ines Alpha, via Instagram @ines.alpha

I was recently reading the novel *Bitter Water Opera* by Nicolette Polek, and there is a section in which the main character is on a tour of a dead painter's estate, and the tour guide states that the Victorians were afraid of empty space. The guide elaborates further: "Victorians even covered the legs of furniture, afraid of that pulsing unknown."[1]

Fig. 64. Dining room of the Theodore Roosevelt, Sr. house, 6 W. 57th St., New York, NY, 1873 (demolished), photographer unknown

I had never heard this before, and I turned to popular contemporary search engine, Google. Victorian fear of empty space. Search. The immediate result showed me that this concept is called *horror vacui*, and is attributed to Aristotle in his *Physics*.[2] Critics have extended Aristotle's observation about the lack of voids in nature to a variety of expressive mediums, from graphic and interaction design to fine art, but its relationship to the Victorian penchant for overdecorating was suggested by Italian critic Mario Praz.[3]

In fine art criticism, *horror vacui* most often describes works that occupy the entire canvas with absolutely no blank space. In a blog post from the Fort Wayne Museum of Art, writer Jack Cantey describes these densely packed, somewhat overwhelming works of art as historically attributed to certain art styles where artists were not always traditionally trained in the fine arts. Cantey considers the conditions for *horror vacui* as a result of "an artist's overwhelming compulsion (perhaps related to mental illness) to leave no space vacant"[4] and provides as an example the work of Swiss painter Adolf Wölfli, who was psychiatrically institutionalized for much of his life.

This immediately sparked an interesting connection for me, harkening back to Jose Lahuerta's analysis of Loos, Lombroso, and Nordau, where he illustrated how these men saw the obsession or proclivity towards ornament were common amongst criminals, women, and the mentally ill— i.e. any faction of individuals subordinated by society.

Praz's implicit distaste for Victorian "over-decorated" *horror vacui* feels related to the design world's interminable discourse on minimalism versus maximalism—as if these very concepts of *minimal* and *maximal* conceal intense anxieties about the nature of the void itself.[5] All these terms seem to point to a deeper sense of filling a void, but what is that void exactly? Void feels like such a scary and ominous word. I picture dark nothingness. A chasm, an abyss, a symbol of space that is horrifying and I want to run as far away from it as possible. For some fine artists, filling the canvas with such "clutter" was an attempt to reflect the inner chaos of the mind. The Victorians desired to overdecorate to represent wealth, revealing underneath that, the fear, as Polek writes, of the "pulsing unknown." They were afraid of the uncertainty of the future, and ultimately death, but at least they were rich.

Perhaps we have historically used ornament not to fill this void, but to mask it. We want our objects and our surroundings to reflect something back to us: to remind us of joy or beauty or ourselves; how much money we have; how we worked really hard to be able to afford something special; how some design or symbol just speaks to something so deep within ourselves.

This chapter is an homage to the future of ornament rather than speculation with any sense of certainty what it will be. I offer no predictions of trend forecasts for ornament in the year 2050. My own fear, or rather, confusion surrounding the future prevents me from engaging in such conjecture. What this will be, instead, is something of a meditation on all the research I have done, which has left me with many questions. What will become of ornament? How will we continue to embody it, to speak through it, to champion it? To think about the future, we must first look at the present and what kind of ornament has emerged in the digital landscape.

Augmented Reality As Digital Embodied Ornament

I remember so clearly when Snapchat launched its augmented reality (AR) face filters. It was the beginning of my freshman year of undergrad, the fall of 2015. The app had been around for a few years and was easily the most popular amongst my peers and people in my age group. The face filters were something revolutionary—my friends and I were obsessed with the funny effects and digital adornments.

Anyone who was on the app during this time will remember the original classics—the dog face, the flower crown, the one that gave you bug eyes and made it look like you were puking a rainbow. The AR capabilities then expanded beyond just facial recognition effects, with the introduction of virtual and 3D elements into the environment through the camera, like the breakdancing hot dog who became a beloved mascot. As Brian Feldman wrote in a *New York Magazine* piece, "I would lay down my life for the breakdancing hot dog."[6] Same, Brian.

Fig. 65. Breakdancing Snapchat hot dog in augmented reality. Photograph by Abby Lee, 2025

Fig. 66. Kylie Jenner using Snapchat dog face filter, 2016

This was a huge step for social media, introducing a technology that was basically unexplored until that moment. On a human level, it provided endless opportunities for entertainment and fun, and to share moments of joy and humor between friends. On another cultural level, it introduced a new wave of digital marketing possibilities. It soon became obvious that brands of any kind could make filters to promote products and reach an audience where the entire point of the platform was to share with other people, thus maximizing engagement.[7]

I would be remiss not to mention the features of AR filters that go beyond digital ornamentation. There are endless journal articles and thinkpieces about how Snapchat and Instagram filters that manipulate modifications to the face (slimmer features, bigger lips, clearer skin) are harmful to the public, particularly girls and young women.[8] Other artists and individuals find that AR offers new forms of self-expression, including opportunities to cross gender paradigms and to play with self-presentation. Whichever interpretation resonates with you, the discourse on AR is growing and oriented around the expression and performance of selfhood on the internet.

Does digital manipulation invite a "masking" of the "true self"? It may not be ornament in a traditional sense, but the present and the future are forging new paths often unconcerned with, or intentionally opposed to, past categories of existence like "self," "other," and "subject." In the 21st century, contemporary ornament of the self includes piercings and jewelry, tattoos, nail art, makeup, and these can exist in either physical or digital forms. All these adornments, in some way, act as a mask, and the mask serves a dual function. It simultaneously hides some part of the body or the wearer, obscuring a natural feature, while at the same time presenting a new, reconstructed expression of identity. If there really is such a thing as a "true self," or an ability to present it authentically, the mask serves to conceal and reveal it at the exact same time. The "beauty filter" that imposes itself onto the face of the user, by choice or not, is a mask that does more concealing than revealing, but exposes something beyond the personal: the unrealistic beauty standard.

This duality to masking seems foundational to contemporary culture and social attitudes—introducing the possibility that "masking" is a uniquely new take on ornamentation as a practice. We are both repulsed by and obsessed with the past. Like Adolf Loos, a dominant perspective argues that atavism is no way to create a progressive future. Conversely, the zeitgeist is addicted to nostalgia and the comfort of anything slightly familiar. There are more remakes of movies and TV shows than ever before. It's kind of a depressing thought, that almost everything has been there and done that and we have to default to repackaging old ideas instead of having new ones and calling it postmodernism. What cuts through the surface, then, are creative projects or innovations that feel entirely original, because it has become more and more rare to achieve that nowadays. We are left in awe of the ability to display a type of artistry that is completely unique.

Björk and the Physical and Digital Mask

Throughout my life, both as a music lover, musician, and designer, I have been inspired by renowned Icelandic singer Björk. Her 30-plus-year career is still going strong, and her artistic outputs have only become more exciting, innovative, and grounded in personal identity. She is an incredibly singular artist. Her music is not just music, it's an entire experience engaging all of the senses. Her wardrobe is not just the clothes she wears, it's the ornamentation of a persona

that elevates her vision. It is hard to identify many other artists who are doing something like this. The only predecessor I can think of is David Bowie, who not only made groundbreaking music but adopted many unique personas that allowed him to play and experiment with the concept of identity.

I would say Björk has always been right on the pulse of technological innovation. Always a pioneer of a unique electronic sound since her career took off in the early '90s, her musical sound has demanded an equally futuristic visual and performance aesthetic—see for example the music video for her song "All Is Full of Love" (1999), which depicts the artist as a robot in love. But at the same time, her songwriting is deeply grounded in emotion and human experience.

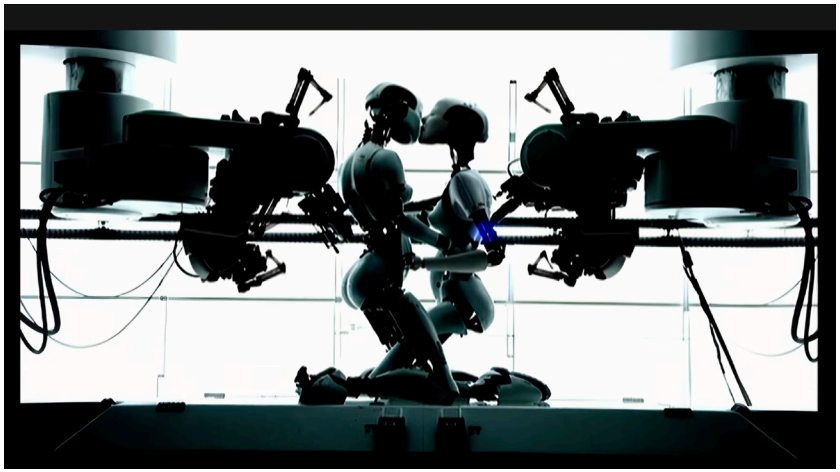


Fig. 67. Still from Björk's "All Is Full Of Love" music video, 1999, dir. Chris Cunningham

In 2015, she released her album *Vulnicura*, which received widespread critical acclaim. The album is a pure breakup album, chronicling the heartbreak experience in the wake of the end of her relationship with her longtime partner. The raw emotion is palpable through every song. In an interview with Pitchfork, Björk said, "I had like 20 technological threads of things I could have done, but the album couldn't be futuristic. It had to be singer/songwriter."[9] While there are still many electronic soundscapes and beats present on the album, she is steadfast in the directness of writing and singing about the most powerful human emotions: love, loss, and grief. It could be considered ironic, but I see it as a bit of a perfect balance, that out of this album came her first foray into the world of virtual reality, the technology of the future. The year of *Vulnicura*'s release saw the proliferation of virtual and augmented reality technologies, as with the advent of face filters on social media. In 2016, following the release of *Vulnicura* came *Björk Digital*, a traveling exhibition that allowed visitors to take a journey through music videos from the album, which Björk and her collaborators had adapted into completely immersive virtual reality pieces.

Utilizing multi-channel video installation and VR headsets, viewers were immersed in the digital world she had created in 360 degrees, creating transportative audio visual experiences. I had the privilege of being in Barcelona in 2017 when the exhibition was on view at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB) and it was honestly a life-changing experience. It was the first time I had been able to engage with VR technology, the headsets and the immersive-ness of it all and it completely blew me away. I was already such a fan of Björk and the *Vulnicura* album, and the experience elevated it to a completely new level. I was seeing things I had never seen before. Technology utilized in a way that was elevating the human experience of heartbreak. This was the chance to speculate what that pain feels like outside the realm of our own physical reality. She presented this album like a wound, referencing the Latin of its title, digitally imposed on her latex bodysuit on the album's cover image.

What is a wound if not a void? What is heartbreak if not a void left by the loss of love? Björk and her collaborators offered viewers both a masking of the void, and an exploration of the void itself through these masterful digital artifacts.

Fig. 68. *Vulnicura* album art, designed by M/M. Photograph by Inez and Vinoodh

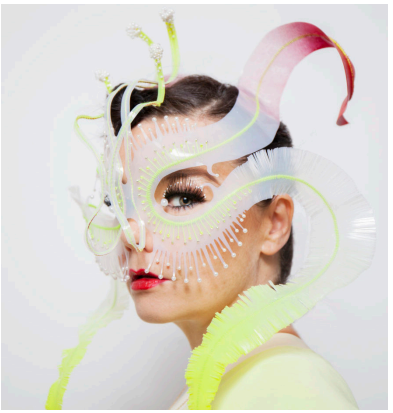
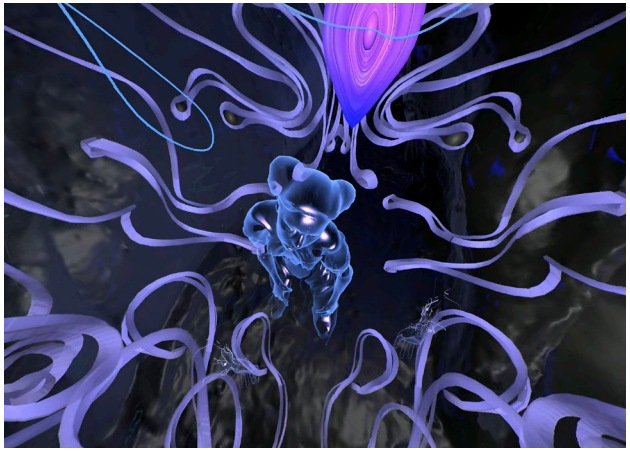
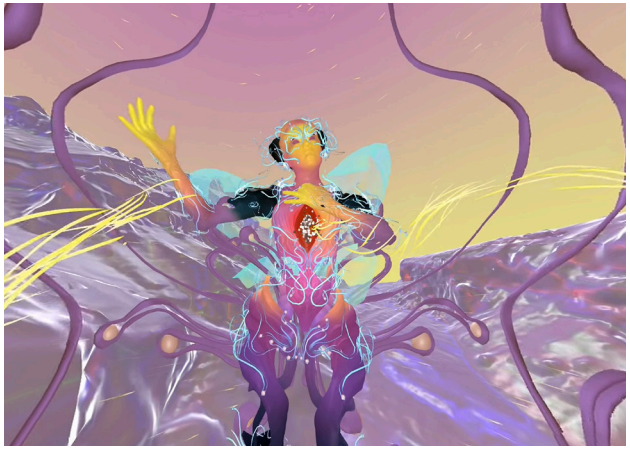


Fig. 69. 'Ghost Orchid' headpiece for Björk by James Merry. Photograph by Santiago Felipe





Figs. 70-75. Stills from virtual reality/360° video for "Family" from *Vulnicura*, 2015. Directed by Andrew Thomas Huang, featured in *Björk Digital*

As described by the CCCB summary of the exhibition, one of the pieces *Notget VR* "presents Björk as a digital moth giantess transformed by stunning masks created by artist James Merry."[10] After seeing the pieces in *Björk Digital*, I began closely following the collaboration between Björk and the artist James Merry, who had begun crafting incredible masks for Björk's live performances and subsequent album art. Merry's physical masks are unique combinations of 3D printed material, silicone, metal, beads, and more. He also creates masks, or versions of the physical masks, in digital space, to be used as face filters, or within the VR video experiences as described above.

In an interview with the magazine *Current Obsession*, Merry lets us in on his process and inspiration. In detailing the origins of the masks and working with Björk, he describes how Björk utilized them during the *Vulnicura* tour, where performing such vulnerable songs to millions of people was really aided by her ability to be shielded in some way by a mask. The function of this mask as ornament, beyond being an extension of the album's creative universe, was actually one of psychological utility for Björk. Merry then describes:

> I think it has grown since then into something else—a physical expression of an emotional state, revealing and concealing in equal measure... But the idea of the avatar, of playing with outward-facing identity, is something Björk has explored throughout her career—from the Hunter video, to numerous photoshoots, to the All is Full of Love robots, to the recent VR videos...So I see our masks more as a continuation of that thread, rather than something totally new.[11]

The visual narrative of these masks are so rich, in addition to their stunning aesthetic offering. In the same *Current Obsession* interview, Merry says, "I think it would also be foolish to ignore just the straightforward aesthetic aspect too: sometimes it can just look cool, and that's enough too."[12] This concept would make Adolf Loos or J.A.R. Stevenson turn over in their graves—ornament just for the sake of it? A straightforward aesthetic goal? Yes: Sometimes the aesthetic and the beauty and the visual pleasure of ornament and adornment is exactly its function. It's not so blasphemous anymore. I think in the current state, where aesthetic material is thrust at us from every direction, in real life and in digital space, we cannot always take the time to question or investigate deeper design narratives. Most people don't. They look at something, they think, "That looks cool," and move on. And in many cases, that is entirely sufficient. It's a refreshing expression of honesty from Merry, whose masks *are* often precisely representative of layered symbolic imagery and embedded with cultural messages. His acknowledgement of the creative importance, as well as the aesthetic cool-ness of something is, I think, very futuristic. It's the acceptance of two truths, not mutually exclusive, which continues to shape our interpretations of art and design and the rhetorical goals behind them.

I was inspired by Merry's practice to create my own filters, taking on new methods of 2D illustration into 3D modeling, then applied to augmented reality software to create the filters. This project was in pursuit of my investigation into embodied ornament, of what I consider the present and future state of ornament. Ornament embodied is the expression of personal and cultural identity. It is the opportunity to mask the void of the "pulsing unknown," or fill it, or destroy it, and grapple with the notion of any true representation of self through visual material.

Fig. 76. James Merry in his "Greenman" mask for iD magazine. Photograph by Tim Walker

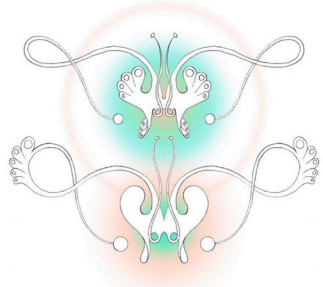


Fig. 77. Sketches for nose orchid masks for Björk's choir performers by James Merry, via Instagram @jamestmerry

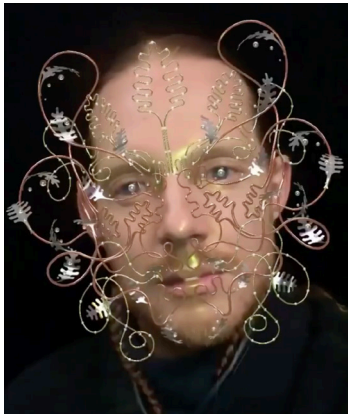
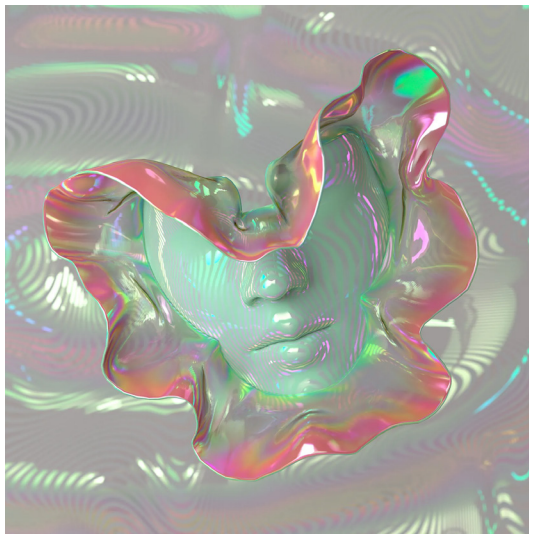


Fig. 78. VR face filter version of "Greenman" mask by James Merry, via Instagram @jamestmerry

Fig. 79. Vogue, "Impossible Beauty: Wild Lashes and Extreme Nails That Put the Fierce Back in Play," December 2024, makeup by Yadim. Photograph by Carlijn Jacobs



Figs. 80 and 81. 3D rendered masks by Ines Alpha, via Instagram @ines.alpha

Fig. 82. Handcrafted glass jewlery by KITSCH KIOSK Glass Studio, nails by Tanja Gravina. Photograph by Bastian Funk

Figs. 83 and 84. Katsuya Kamo for *purple* Magazine F/W 2006, issue 6. Hair, makeup, and photograph by Katsuya Kamo

Fig. 85. Headpiece by Fitiu, designed by Daji (@daji.cial). Photograph by Phuong Bui

Fig. 86. Headpiece from luxury Japanese label Tanaka Daisuke AW25 collection, via Instagram @tanakadaisuke_official

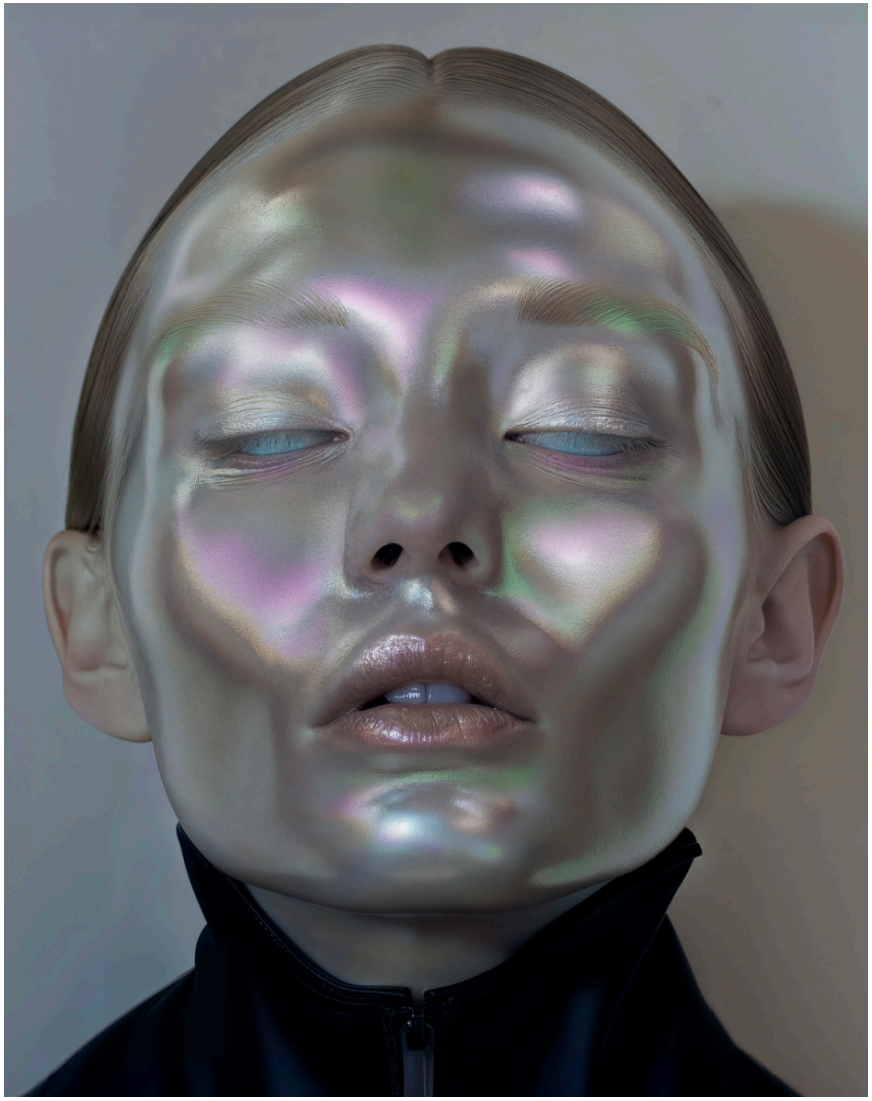


Fig. 87. *Chrome Skins,* AI-generated series by digital artist Johanna Jaskowska, https://johwska.com/

Footnotes

1. Nicolette Polek, *Bitter Water Opera* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2024), 29.

2. John Thorp, “Aristotlés’ Horror Vacui,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (1990): 149–66, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40231690?seq=1.

3. Jack Cantey. “Art Term Tuesday: Horror Vacui.” *ARTICULATE*, June 26, 2018. https://fwmoa.blog/2018/06/26/art-term-tuesday-horror-vacui/.

4. Cantey, “Art Term Tuesday: Horror Vacui.”

5. Mario Praz, *The House of Life*, trans. Angus Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

6. Brian Feldman, “The Allure of Snapchat’s Uncanny Valleys,” *Intelligencer*, May 17, 2019, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/05/snapchats-filters-are-way-better-than-instagrams.html.

7. In 2017, Snap (the Snapchat parent company) released Lens Studio, a desktop software that offered anyone the ability to create and design their own filters. The top social media competitor Meta (the company that owns Facebook and Instagram) came in and disrupted the Snapchat filter niche and the app’s story feature by introducing their own story option with similar filter offerings. This move set in motion a significant decline in Snapchat usership. In January 2025, Meta discontinued their AR lens creation software, Spark AR, and removed almost all face filters from Instagram. This was a severe blow to the community of digital artists creating AR and face filters, as Instagram was one of the only places to share this work, and make it accessible for people to use.

8. Jia Tolentino, “The Age of Instagram Face,” *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face.

9. Jessica Hopper, “The Invisible Woman: A Conversation with Björk,” *Pitchfork*, January 21, 2015, https://pitchfork.com/features/interview/9582-the-invisible-woman-a-conversation-with-bjork/.

10. “Exhibition: Björk Digital,” *Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona*, 2017, https://www.cccb.org/en/exhibitions/file/bjork-digital/226705.

11. Marina Elenskaya, “About Face: Interview with James T. Merry and Inès Alpha,” *Current Obsession*, December 11, 2019, https://www.current-obsession.com/about-face/.

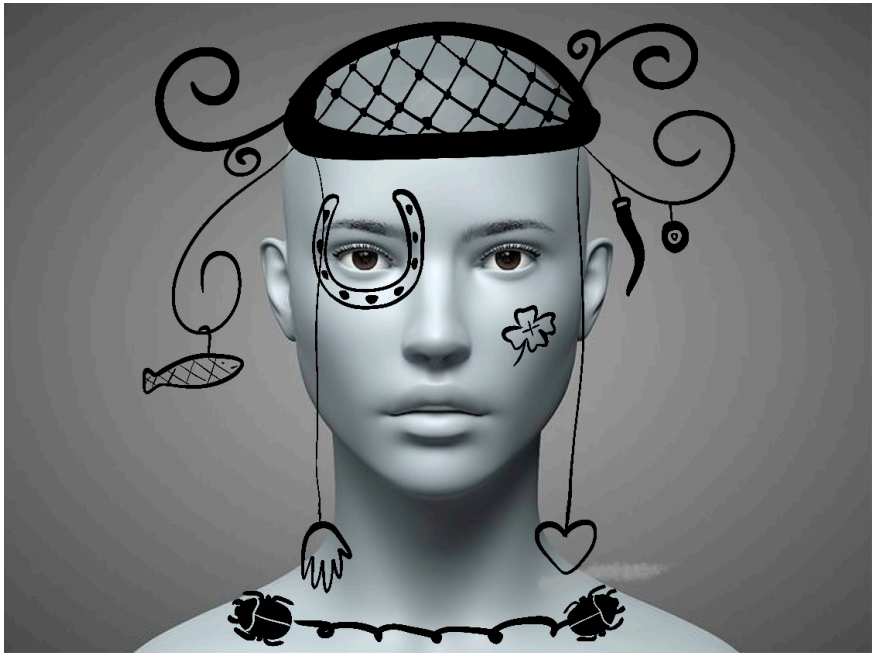
12. Elenskaya, “About Face: Interview with James T. Merry and Inès Alpha.”

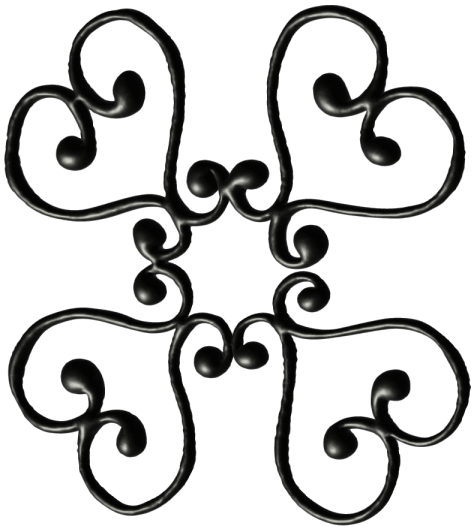
Ornament Embodied

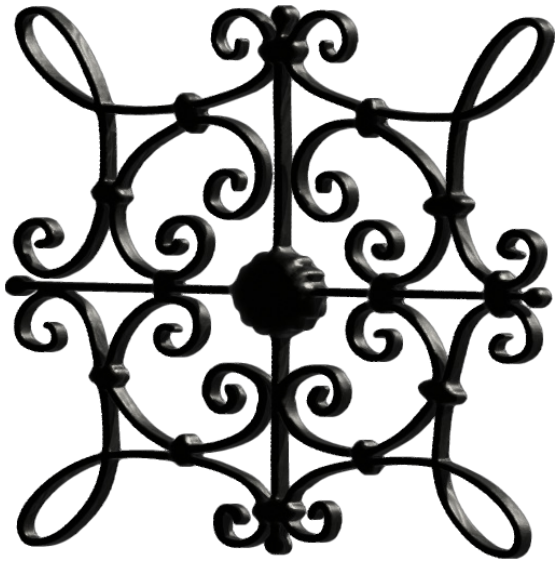
Ornament Embodied is an immersive project that brings ornamental design to life through augmented reality (AR) face filters. Each filter was crafted by adapting and drawing inspiration from elements of intricate metalwork traditions and its accompanying visual motifs.

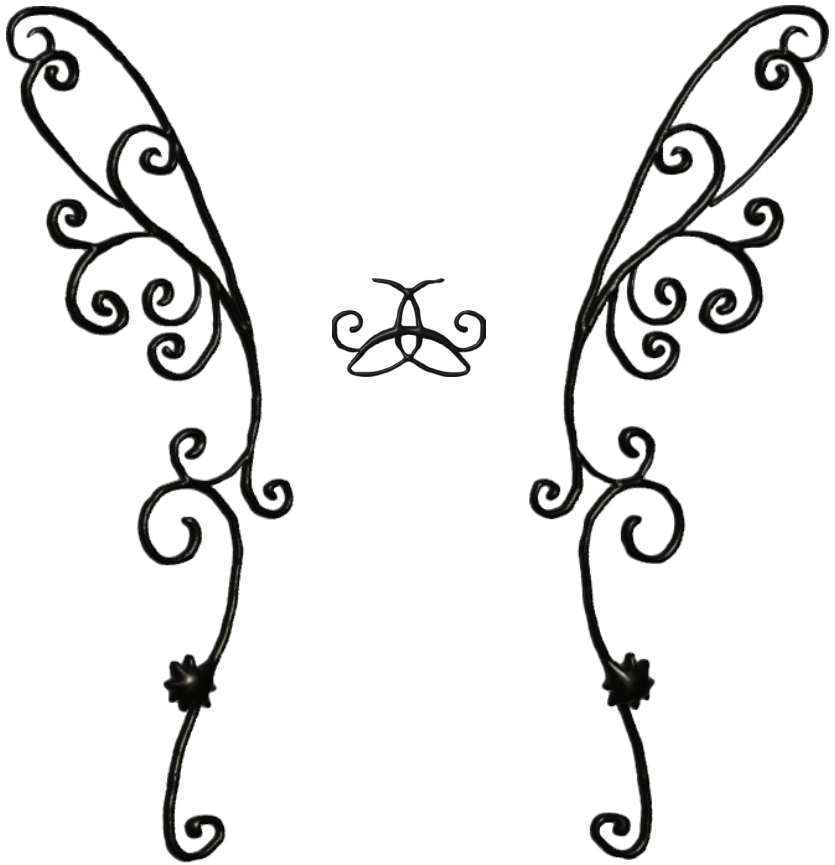
The filters explore the transformation of classical ornamentation into digital form,allowing users to experience the rich textures, patterns, and aesthetics of different eras as wearable, interactive pieces.

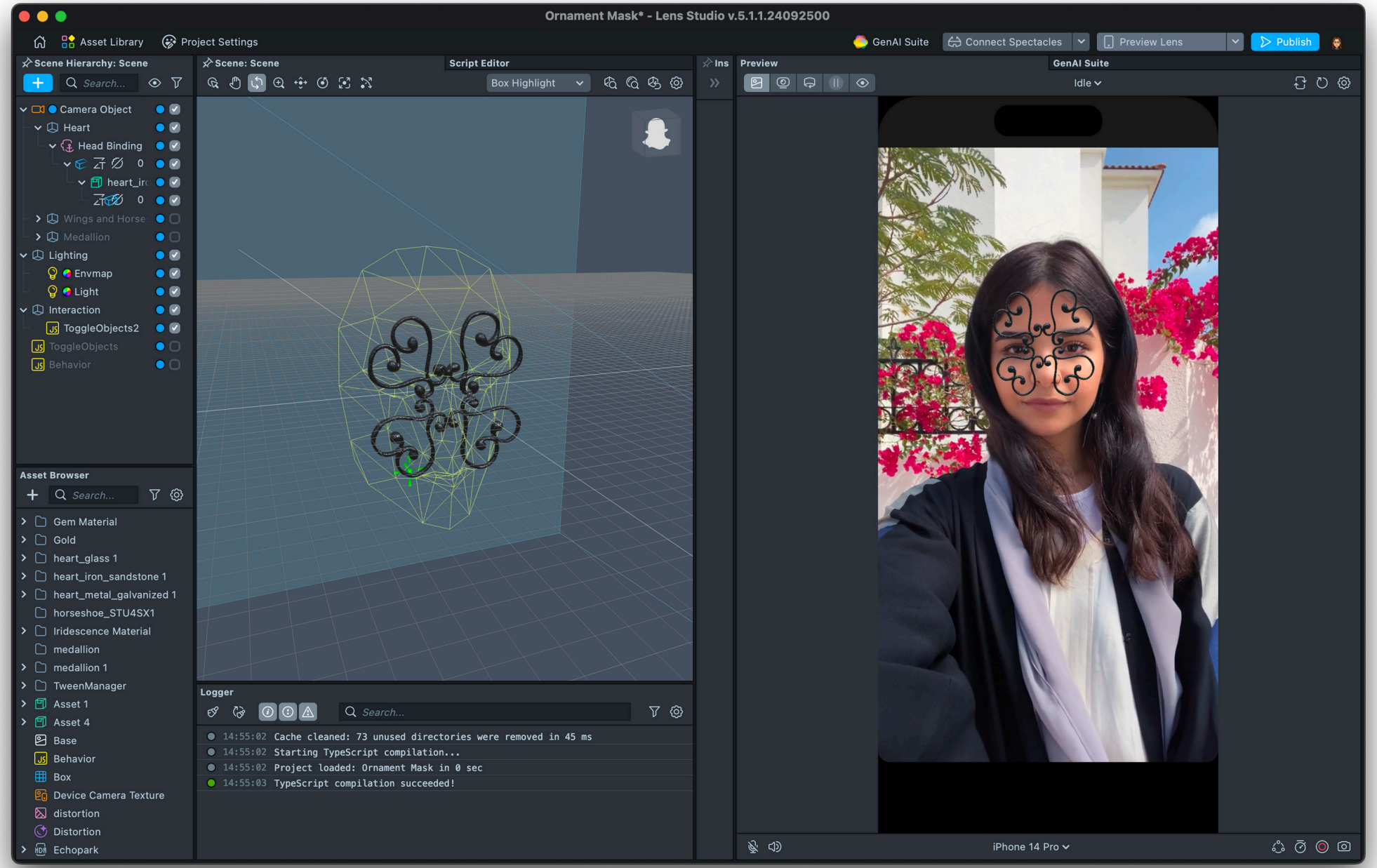
This project bridges traditional craftsmanship with digital innovation, inviting users to embody art and design history in a modern, dynamic way, and encourages users to consider what is communicated through ornament. It is a continued inquiry into the characteristics of self-ornament in the 21st century. In a world that is rapidly digitized and hyper-commodified, how has the ability to embody one's own identity changed?










Ornament Mask* - Lens Studio v.5.1.1.24092500
Asset Library
Project Settings
GenAI Suite
Connect Spectacles
Preview Lens
Publish
Scene Hierarchy: Scene
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Head Binding
Wings and Horse
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Envmap
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Interaction
ToggleObjects2
ToggleObjects
Behavior
Scene: Scene
Script Editor
Box Highlight
Ins
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GenAI Suite
Idle
Asset Browser
Gem Material
Gold
heart_glass 1
heart_iron_sandstone 1
heart_metal_galvanized 1
horseshoe_STU4SX1
Iridescence Material
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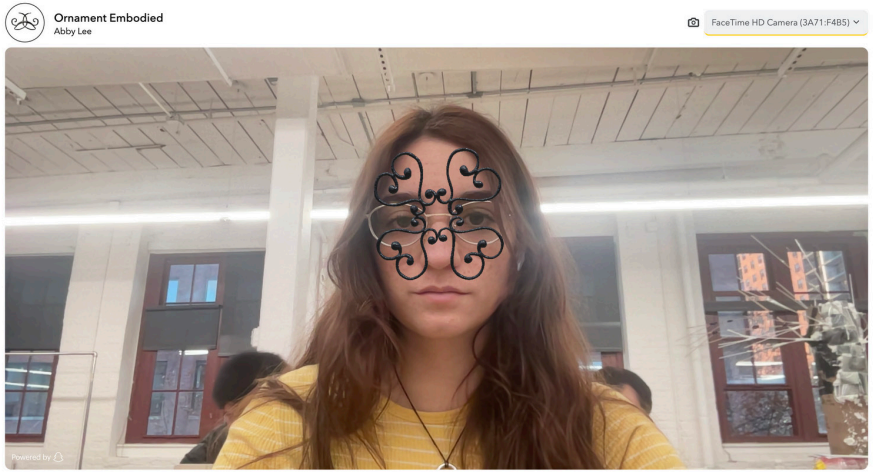
medallion 1
TweenManager
Asset 1
Asset 4
Base
Behavior
Box
Device Camera Texture
distortion
Distortion
Echopark
Logger
14:55:02 Cache cleaned: 73 unused directories were removed in 45 ms
14:55:02 Starting TypeScript compilation...
14:55:02 Project loaded: Ornament Mask in 0 sec
14:55:03 TypeScript compilation succeeded!
iPhone 14 Pro



Scan with phone camera to activate filter on web

Scan in Snapchat to activate filter in app

Conclusion

Ornament is far more than decoration; it is a dynamic and deeply rooted design and artistic practice that reflects human history, values, and creativity. By revisiting its origins and tracing its evolution, this thesis has demonstrated how ornament's function has shifted over time, often aligning with social prerogatives and cultural narratives. From its utilitarian beginnings to its dismissal by Modernist ideals, ornament has been shaped by the forces of industrialization, capitalism, and cultural critique.

The enduring legacy of ornament lies in its adaptability and range of rhetorical expression. Whether through the intricate metalwork of historical architecture or the expressive digital designs of contemporary artists, ornament continues to serve as a visual language that communicates the humanity of its artisans. Despite efforts to marginalize it by those who shun excess, ornament remains a vital element of design, capable of bridging past traditions with future innovations.

In challenging narrow interpretations of function, this thesis reclaims ornament as a purposeful and meaningful design element. Beyond utilitarian constraints, ornament embodies function in a myriad of ways that contribute to the richness of human experience, and our interaction with art and design. Its layered narratives and symbolic power encourage deeper engagement with material culture, allowing us to interpret and reinterpret the objects in our world.

As we navigate the complexities of late-stage capitalism's digital and material hyperconsumption, ornament offers us a tool for orienting ourselves at the intersections of design, culture, and function. Through this analysis, we can understand the unfixed nature of concepts like function and value. By embracing its potential, we can move toward a more nuanced understanding of ornament—not as superfluous, but as an essential expression of human creativity and cultural resonance. Beyond this written thesis, there is so much design and creative work in process for me that will continue to develop. I hope that, by reimagining the category of "ornament" and engaging with my concept of ornament as communication, I can create work that crosses material and social boundaries. Through the development of this thesis, historical design and visual research have become critical elements of my methodology across many forms of design.

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Disclosure: In preparing this research paper, I used the AI tool ChatGPT to help generate ideas, look for potential sources that I then further investigated on my own, and check for grammar and clarity. All factual information, data, and citations were verified through reliable academic sources, and the final analysis, ideas, expressions, and conclusions are my own. This disclosure is provided to maintain transparency about the tools used in the content creation process.

⚙ Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Alex Liebergesell, Zeina Abi Assy, Jo Livingstone, and Laura Serejo Genes for the incredible guidance and mentorship throughout this process. An extra double thank you to Jo, for your great enthusiasm and belief in my work, and taking the time to help me edit this writing to shape it into what it became.

Thank you to my wonderful peers, especially Yasmeen Abdal, for being part of my brain and without whom I would not have made it through this program.

To my friends and family — Mom, Dad, and Tessa — my sincerest gratitude for the love and support over these last two years.

♥

A thesis completed in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Communications Design, School of Design
Pratt Institute
Brooklyn, New York
May 2025

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Type: Diatype by ABC Dinamo, Louize by Matthieu Cortat, ornamental glyphs are Adobe Caslon Pro, drop caps are Zallman Caps
Printer: at GSB Digital in Long Island City, NY
Paper: Mohawk Superfine Eggshell White, 80lb text
Design: Abby Lee

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