

The Communicative Function of Ornament

*A Pamphlet of
Thesis Research*

Abby Lee



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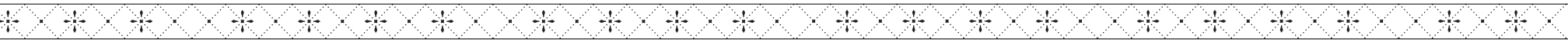
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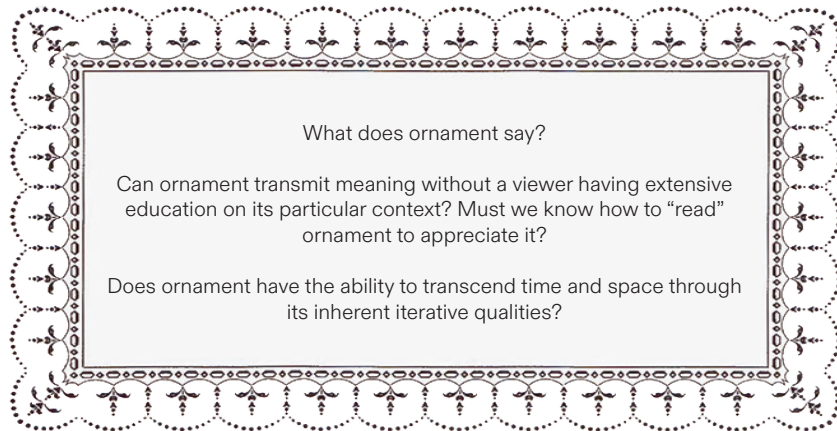


Thesis Statement

Within the many realms of design, spanning from architecture to textiles to print, 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 comprehending rich religious, cultural, or social concepts – ideology through form.

By examining a spectrum of ornament styles and methods across time and place, I challenge the Modernist notion that ornamentation is divorced from function. Instead, I assert that ornament's articulation of a visual language communicates layers of rhetorical meaning rooted in materials, craftsmanship, and cultural information.

some thesis questions.



Glossary of Terms

Ornament - from Latin *ornare* - to adorn

noun:

a thing used to make something look more attractive but usually having no practical purpose

decoration added to embellish something

one thing is *an ornament*

a particular symbol, motif, design is *ornament* - a spiral, a heart, a gargoyle, a fleuron

verb:

make (something) look more attractive by adding decorative items

many *ornaments* together, working in unison, create something *ornamental*

Ornamental

adjective:

serving or intended as an ornament; decorative

ornamental is descriptive, referencing style, to describe something *ornamented*

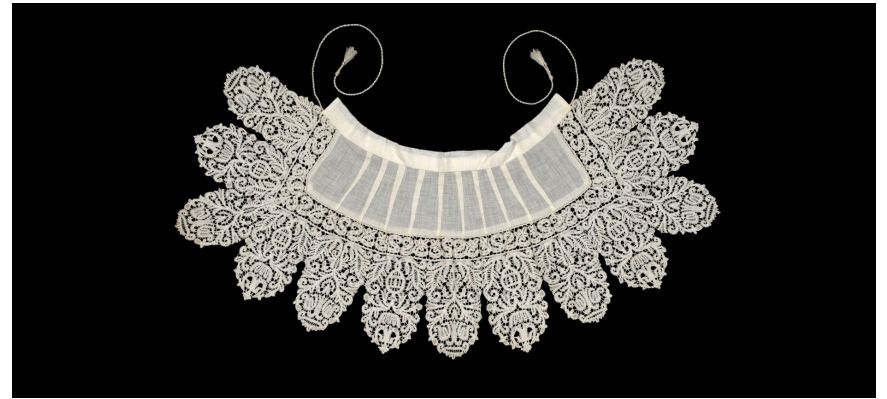
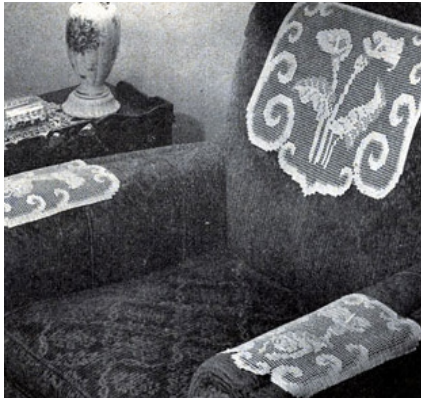
Ornamentation

noun:

things added to something to provide decoration.

the action of decorating something or making it more elaborate.

the *ornamentation* of a thing, a noun that describes an action, describing the *ornamental* quality of material, the sum of many *ornamented* parts



Clockwise from top:

1. Peggy Guggenheim with her silver Alexander Calder headboard
2. Stair railing in San Francisco, CA
3. Doily crochet patterns from 1950
4. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran
5. Lace and concrete facade of Nottingham Contemporary designed by Louise West
6. 168 Upper Street in London, England, designed by Groupwork

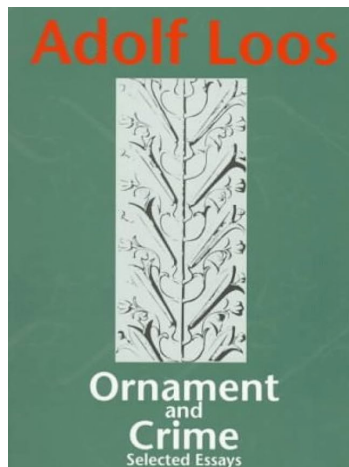
Clockwise from top:

1. Embroidery design from *The Ladies' Home Journal*, 1987
2. Goto glass by LagunaB
3. Ida Ekblad, GIRL FIRES UP STOVE (STRANGE FREEDOMS SHALL BE SOUGHT), 2021
4. Lace collar from The Netherlands, 1630
5. Decorative letter 'B' from *Picture Primer*, 1910
6. Plate from Yuan Dynasty, mid-14th century
7. Goodwood Shell House, Sussex, England, 1730s

Ornament and Crime by Adolf Loos

“Ornament and Crime” is an essay and lecture by Austrian architect Adolf Loos, published in 1908.

Through this essay, in a tone both satirical and assured, Loos delivers a highly critical perspective on the use of ornament in design. He argues that ornament hinders the advancement of culture and society by committing to stay in the past. As an architect and interior designer, Loos was certainly centering his narrative on these disciplines, but his reference to everyday objects, like shoes or a cigarette case, shows that he held the same consideration of ornament for any design product. As the essay’s title suggests, Loos 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. 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 craftsman behind its creation is always underappreciated and underpaid. Interestingly, he does not touch very specifically upon the use of modern mechanization versus traditional handicraft in his



interpretation of ornament and the economy.

There is a presumptiveness to his assertion that for “the Slovak peasant woman” or “the Persian who weaves the carpet,” their acts of ornamentation are all they have in the world, it is the only thing “holy” to them, and that makes their forms of ornament acceptable. Loos seems to express genuine appreciation for these ornamentors’ works and the work of his shoemaker and praises himself for crediting them. It is the modern artist and designer he deems must be more innovative and resourceful and not rely on useless ornament. This reads as a thinly veiled belittlement of the artistry, craft, and livelihoods of non-Europeans. Although, in a way, Loos maintains some appreciation for ornament within his critique, he speaks from a position of great power and intellect in his field. He views the potential for cultural advancement within an exclusively white and European perspective.

This text has been a foundational work in the contemporary critique and discussion of ornament in design since its publication. Loos expressed these thoughts in an era when design attitudes were

shifting towards Modernism, minimalism, and alignment with his perspective. So much of the literature within this area of research cites Loos’ essay and uses it as a jumping-off point for debate, critique, or endorsement. Because of the fame and recognition of “Ornament and Crime,” it is a fundamental text to examine as I explore ornament in my thesis. I agree and disagree with his points, and I think the duality of my interpretation can spark some exciting work. It is easy to oversimplify Loos’ critique as only a reproach for ornament, but I believe there is more nuance than that. Loos’ writing is only one small piece in a long history of ornament and is a very specific opinion that stems from his own cultural context. ©

The Decriminalisation of Ornament

by Alice Twemlow

In the 2005 winter issue of *Eye* magazine, design writer and professor Alice Twemlow contributed this essay, examining the influence of ornament's infamous reputation and assessing its role in visual design at the time.

The title takes a stab at the notorious essay by Austrian architect Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," published in 1908, in which he declared ornament a useless aspect of design. The title serves the piece well – if Loos' essay established ornament as crime in the 20th century, Twemlow has set out to prove how current designers and artists seek to "decriminalize" it in the 21st century. In a way, this piece functions as, for lack of a better term, a vibe check on the creative attitude toward ornament almost 100 years after Loos' scathing take down.

Twemlow asserts that in 2005 the design world was experiencing a shift towards decorative style and questions why that may be. Was it just to follow trends or a reaction toward an overly minimal and stripped-down design aesthetic? At a time when digital design had been fully established, but was continuing to develop and blossom, Twemlow argues that perhaps this revival of ornament was a response

to the move towards computerized design methods at the end of the 20th century and into the new millennium.

Twemlow quotes several designers on their approach to ornament and what it means to their practice. These perspectives help to recontextualize ornament not as a crime but as creative strategies, effective nostalgia, and cultural worldbuilding. She takes a strong stance in defense of ornament, considering all the ways it can heighten a design when used with intent.

Twemlow contextualizes Loos' essay by identifying the texts and events that brought the conversation and critique of ornament to the forefront. The lens is inarguably Western and European. This is unsurprising, as Twemlow is British, *Eye* is a British publication, and mainstream design has always been Euro-centric. But, ornament is deeply rooted in so many cultures outside of Europe, which barely gets mentioned in this piece. Middle Eastern architecture and design, symbols within Aztec culture, and millions of years of ancient Chinese art and language all predate European traditions of ornamentation. It is helpful to

read about these examples of European and American designers and thinkers with opinions on ornament. Still, a larger global perspective is missing by touching on only the most well-known examples of the formal ideology that arose around ornament in 19th and 20th-century Europe.

Toward the end, Twemlow brings the ideas of William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement into a contemporary lens. A cornerstone of Morris' philosophy was that ornament and craft were to be rendered by hand and not machine, but as we move through the 21st century, try as we might, there is no way technology will not take over. In my thesis, I would like to explore the relationship between ornament and the methods of making to argue that the ornament maintains a level of rhetorical meaning even if it is not handcrafted. The technology used to create ornament does not take away from the ability of such ornament to communicate a message through an object or design. The method of making and manipulating materials is simply another layer of visual rhetoric imbued in a design. ©





This page:
1. Antique bidjar rug, Western Iran, c. 1910

Opposite:
2. Flemish lace cravat, Metropolitan Museum of Art, c. 1720

Introduction: *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design* by Leslie Atzmon

Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design, edited by Leslie Atzmon, is a collection of essays highlighting the rhetorical function of design methods and objects. The essays cover different areas of design, including architecture, graphic design, and publication design. In her introduction, entitled “Visual Rhetoric and the Special Eloquence of Design Artifacts,” Leslie Atzmon explains the fundamental aspects of visual rhetoric, what it is, and how it applies to design artifacts. She begins by using the example of a teacup to describe how all the design choices that go into making the object uphold a visual narrative that the object presents.

The concept of rhetoric and how to rhetorically analyze something can be challenging to understand. Atzmon’s use of several concrete examples guides the reader toward a solid understanding of such analysis. She uses the Washington DC Vietnam War memorial designed by Maya Lin as another case study to show how all design choices, from the materials to the typography, serve a greater rhetorical function that passes meaning along to the viewer.

Visual rhetoric is a very useful

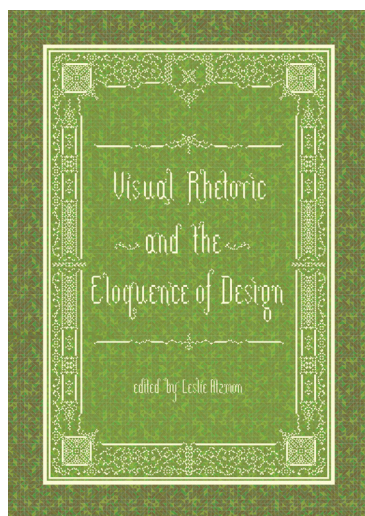
framework supporting my thesis argument on the use and function of ornament. Atzmon places particular emphasis on embedded cultural meanings in design, and how imperative they are to a design’s overall message. I firmly believe this is one of the most significant aspects of ornament’s communicative function, and I intend to illustrate this argument fully in my thesis writing and making.

Atzmon’s writing is also a great example of critical analysis, wherein the author establishes an argument (in this case, an argument for her introduction and the concept of this collection of essays) and uses specific examples to support her points. She also references many other writings, essentially including a literature review to illustrate scholars have argued about visual rhetoric before her writing. She references literature that supports her argument and makes counterarguments when necessary. This is a form of writing similar to what I envision a thesis research paper will look like, and it is helpful to read and analyze this piece in that context.

There are very important connections brought up in this

piece between various critical design theories that I am interested in exploring and mapping further in my thesis research. There is a web taking shape in my mind when I read this introduction, linking methods of making and research together. Visual rhetoric, visual culture, semiotics, and visual theory are just a few of these concepts that play an important role in the reading and analysis of ornament.

I have included another essay in this book, “Regen(d)erating Decoration: Cultural Narrative in Ornamented Fonts” by Lori Young in my bibliography as it touches directly on the topic of ornamental typography that I will explore in my thesis. ©





This page, top to bottom:

1. Lorenzo Headley, Arts & Crafts necklace, c. 1890
2. Chinese six-leaf folding screen, c. 1770

Opposite, top to bottom:

3. Elizabeth Mears, Days of Creation menorah, c. 1990
4. Machine knitting pattern chart and samples

Design

Experiments

Four design experiments applying, manipulating, and creating ornament through different methods and materials

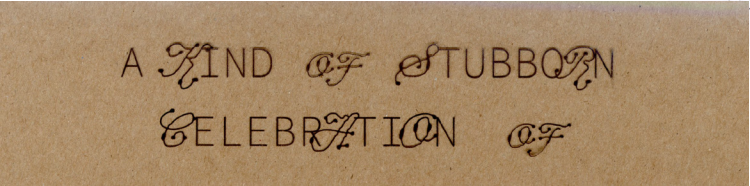
1. Midterm pin-up presentation
2. Ornamental postcard
2. Plastic combs
3. A Catalogue of AI Ornament



Thesis statement displayed in a Tramp Art frame from Pennsylvania, c. early 20th century



Ornamental typography collage overlay on Gees Bend quilt

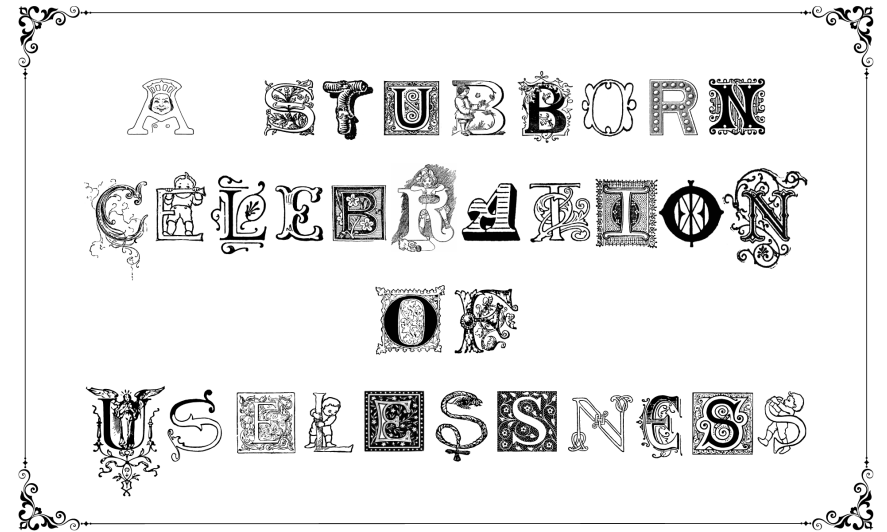


Textile exploration

I extracted this phrase, as used previously in my midterm pin-up, from a section Alice Twemlow's piece *The Decriminalisation of Ornament*, referencing the character of the 21st century revival of ornament in design:

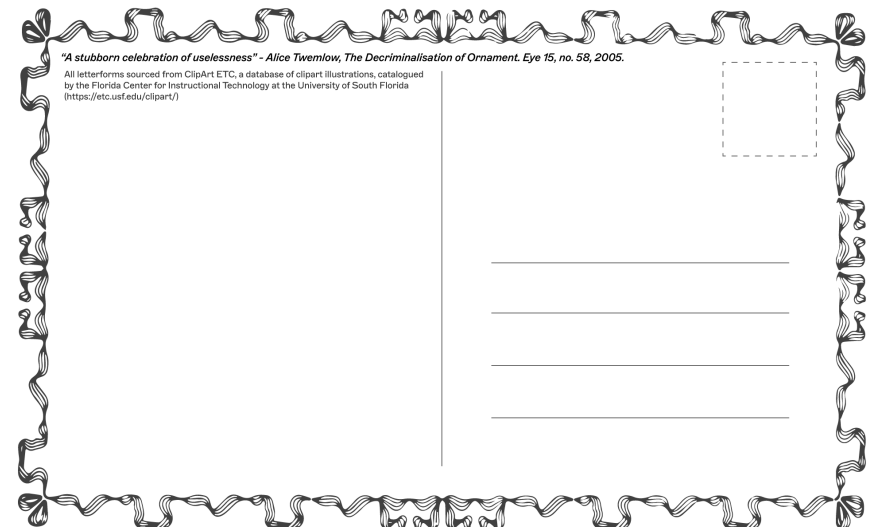
Something else is going on, too, however, that may have more lasting implications for design. The other impulse running through this work is a kind of stubborn celebration of uselessness. The Modernist-derived philosophy that has dominated twentieth-century design empties ornament of meaning and separates 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.

I was drawn to this poetic description of ornament, the acknowledgement of a desire to utilize ornament in spite of the critics; to embrace fun and playfulness and joy in design; like an act of rebellion; disregard the rules, make new ones.



Ornamental postcard

6.5 in x 4 in
Risograph dual-color print





Plastic combs

4 in x 3 in

Mini plastic combs, glass beads,
garnet, amethyst, pink quartz, plastic
beads, aluminum wire, pearls, hot glue





A Catalogue of AI Ornament

3.25 in x 3.25 in, folded
6.5 in x 6.5 in, unfolded



18th century balustrade



cartouche set in an elaborate scroll-frame and bordered with ornament



special corinthian capital with fleurons and acanthus leaves



plaster ceiling medallion



stainless steel fence with gate



wrought iron fence with gate



throw pillow with ornamental embroidery



lace appliqué panel



ornamental concrete tile



17th century english porcelain plate

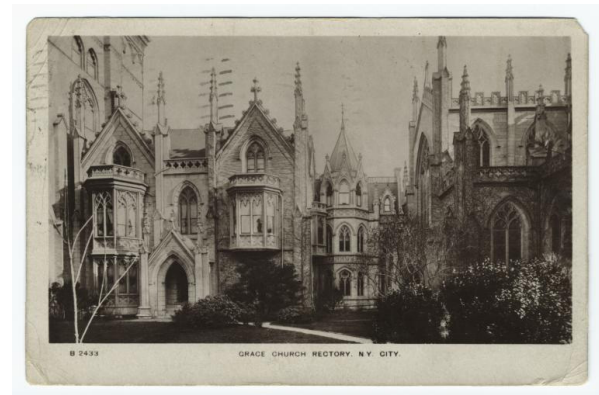
Plan of Action

1. Finish reading and re-reading current bibliography titles, particularly *The Language of Ornament* and Irene Cheng's *Structural Racism in Modern Architectural Theory* to go deeper into the racial and misogynistic ideologies in Modernism and anti-ornament campaigns. Continue researching and reading the literature surrounding ornament as a subject and practice, to expand my understanding and strengthen my bibliography.

2. I have begun collecting photos, sourced from friends and my own camera roll, of ornamental ironwork fences throughout the US. I will continue this practice of taking notice and potentially crowdsourcing more images to make an archive.

3. Visit the Merchant's House Museum in NYC, a preserved row house built in 1832 featuring many ornamental objects, decor, and architecture.

4. Continue research into ornament in religion — churches, mosques, temples, etc. Visit various religious sites around NY and during summer travels.

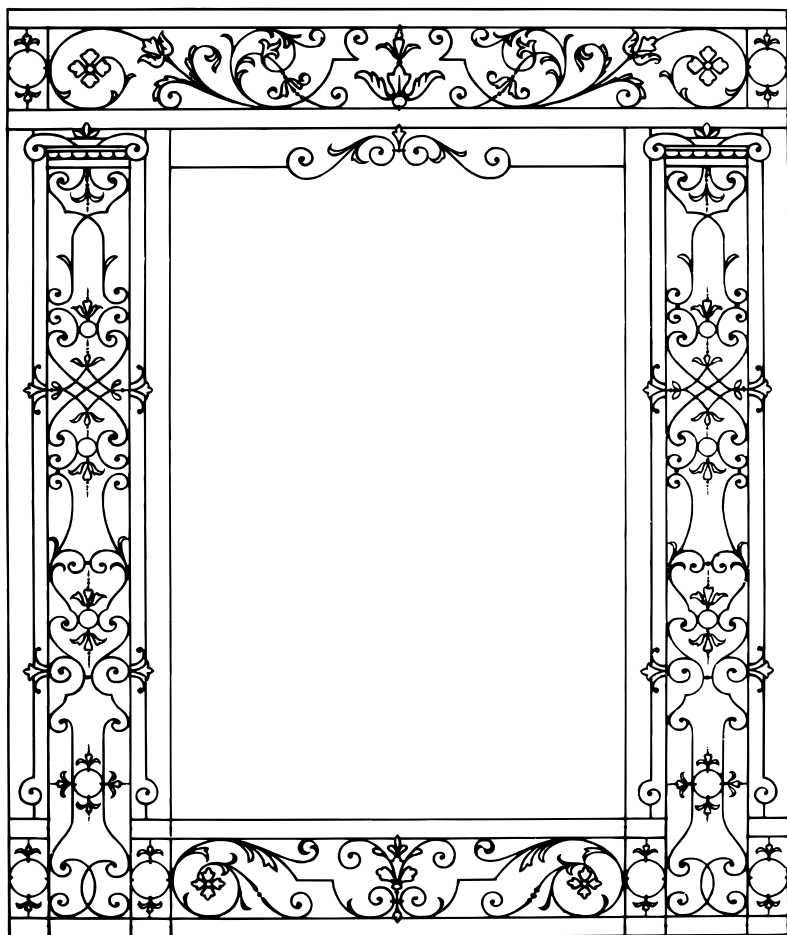


Clockwise from top:

1. Iron window grate, photographed by my friend Becca in Brooklyn, NY
2. Ornamental plasterwork at the Merchant's House Museum
3. Grace Church Rectory postcard, 1911, New York Public Library Picture Collection

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