

ORNAMENT AS PORTABLE CULTURE: BETWEEN GLOBALISM AND LOCALISM

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Conference organized by Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne

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All the conference sessions will take place in Stubbins Room (112),

Gund Hall, 48 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA. Lunches and dinners are for the speakers and invited guests only.

Details about the conference and full program are available online

(<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k83922>).

Interest in ornament has grown by leaps and bounds in the last ten years or so—among artists, architects, theorists, critics and historians, among literary figures and musicians. This interest—both among scholars and among artists—is not entirely new, as at various times in history ornament has attracted intense attention. Indeed, the story of ornament has followed what amounts to a sinus curve of highs and lows—never interrupted or broken, even if from being identified as the critical signifier of identity in a culture, ornament was also demonized in the 20th century as an all too facile link to a past increasingly irrelevant to the present. Various kinds of publications have accompanied this undulating movement throughout history. Some have been thematic, some have been educational, some have been directed at craftsmen others at theoreticians and architects, some were intended for pleasure others for reflection.

The recent rise in interest in ornament has generated publications in many fields and from many perspectives, from literary studies at one end (in which scale /miniature took center stage) to gender studies at the other, which drew attention to women's art and aesthetic having been unjustly removed from the center of discourse for being "fussy", too delicate or privileging the minor arts (a pejorative term in and by itself) such as weaving, pottery or embroidery. More centrally, work on the applied arts and the movements associated with them has turned the spotlight once again on figures such as architect/theorist Gottfried Semper, on Islamic art as paradigmatic for an ornament saturated approach, to the arts of métissage between Europe and the Latin American continent, but also to moments and movements in modern art such as the Arts and Crafts, the Bauhaus, or Alois Riegl's *Stilfragen* when ornament became significant for opening new ways of thinking. Most symptomatic of a current renewed interest has been the recent work of practicing architects such as Jean Nouvel, Farshid Moussavi and Herzog and De Meuron, who have re-engaged with ornament in their buildings and in their written work. The current rise of ornament assumes that in a multi-cultural and increasingly cosmopolitan global society, symbolic communication is difficult because of the absence of a common visual tradition. Hence the former emphasis on codified languages of ornament is being replaced with new strategies privileging direct sensations capable of generating an unlimited number of resonances. This tendency to reject

cultural context and the utopia of universal visual communication through affect and sensation overlooks the complexity of communication and reception over the centuries and across different geographies. It is precisely this issue that our conference aims to address.

The two and a half day conference will consider recent trends in relation to historical precedents, characterized by differing balances between “global” and “local” elements. The aim is not to present a comprehensive survey of ornament in world cultures, but rather thematic sessions on the “rise of ornament” in diverse periods and geographies in multiple media, focusing on historiographic problems addressed through specific case studies. A major theme of the conference is the relationship between dissemination and portability. What connects globalism and localism are the artefacts that circulate as a result of movement, that are portable and capable of endless adaptation, of inserting and re-inserting themselves in the most varied contexts and media. This event aims to develop a new conceptual framework and open a dialogue between different fields of specialization in the arts and architecture, intersecting with the subject of ornament. It will begin with an evening session, “Ornament in Contemporary Architectural Practice and the Museum”, dealing with the relationship between ornament and parametricism and the return to ornament especially in buildings related to the arts such as museums. The next two days of the conference will be organized around such themes as: “Medieval Global”, “Early Modern Global”, “Figural Ornament”, “Portable Ornament: Objects, Collecting, Commerce”, “Design Sophistication and Aesthetic Theories”, and “Modernist Abstraction and Internationalism”. We hope that the questions arising from these sessions will help us explore how ornament functions as cultural glue, as well as an engine that ignites artistic imagination, and to explain its perennial fascination.