THE PASSAGE OF THE OTHER: ELEMENTS FOR A REDEFINITION OF ORNAMENT

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A signifier remains a signifier, even if set down thousands of years ago, and found in the desert or in a pyramid. It could even be said thus to gain in otherness, as the other who emitted or wrote it is no longer there to support it, to be its guarantor and interpreter.

—JEAN LAPLANCHE, "TIME AND THE OTHER" (1992)

The porcelain vase reproduced here was made in China in the middle of the eighteenth century for use at the court of the Qing dynasty, which was not itself Chinese but Manchu (fig. 5.1). The vase was made not to hold flowers but to be placed on display. In all likelihood it would originally have been matched by a second identical vase, and the two would have been displayed together, on either side of a doorway or at either end of a centrally placed long table in such a way as to reinforce the symmetry of the room and its furnishings. In technological terms, the vase was at the cutting edge of innovation and quality in its time. The perfect symmetry and balance of the form, the hardness and bright whiteness of the porcelain body, the translucency of the glaze, the evenness and clarity of the colors, at least one of which—the yellow—was a recent discovery, and the precision with which the underglaze painting in cobalt blue is coordinated with the overglaze enamels and gilding—this combination of features was the result of a uniquely highly developed system of production, with a vast range of ceramic products technologically unmatched anywhere else in the eighteenth-century world. Particularly when paired with its identical mate, the vase would have offered any eighteenth-century viewer a visualization and materialization of control—technological, financial, ideological, and political—exercised by the Qing court, whose affective power is difficult for us to access today, conditioned as we are by the experience of mechanization, not to mention digitization. My reasons for choosing this vase to discuss here and later in this essay have much to do, of course, with the fact that its surface is configured in a way that bespeaks awareness of European practice.

Is the decorated surface of this vase an example of ornament? So smoothly does the surface slip within the frame of the ornament category that, for many, this will not seem to be a question worth asking. One way to show how productive the question actually is, though, is to make visible some of the undeclared assumptions underpinning the category itself, starting with the most literal of the working definitions that underpin current discussions of ornament, before moving on to more complex working definitions in play. Art historians use the term "ornament" most simply to denote a particular way of covering a preexisting surface.[1] But particular in what way? Let me offer a schematic, but I hope still broadly accurate, answer. There is always some element in ornament that takes on a recognizable imagistic significance: call this the "motif."[2] There is always as well a way of moving the eye rhythmically across the surface: call this second element "rhythm."[3] And there is always some sort of frame, even if it is only the visible edges of the artifact: call this element the "limit." The effective working definition of ornament in the most restricted sense is: the rhythmic affirmation of motifs across a

Fig. 5.1. Qing dynasty vase, 1736–95, Qianlong mark and period. Jingdezhen porcelain with overglaze enamels, gilding, 26 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing

surface in tension with a limit. Of course, one needs to bear in mind that rhythmic affirmation of motifs across a surface may itself contribute to a limit.

With this working definition, art history has at its disposal an analytic description of remarkable flexibility. One is not surprised to see the term "ornament" used in this way within the present volume to describe Ottoman floral tilework and textiles, say, or Neapolitan altars. Islamic architectural inscription, too, may be considered to be, among other things, a form of ornament; there, the motif is the graph, and the rhythm is calligraphic. In late-nineteenth–early-twentieth-century modernism, patterns inherent in materials may be considered a naturally occurring form of ornament. There, the motif is a fragment of such material patterning, and rhythm is a combination of the negentropic logic of such patterning and the compositional disjunctions that combine the fragments. Of course, no art historian stops at treating ornament descriptively as an artistic system for covering a surface. In one theoretical tradition, the next step has been to specify ornament further by its relationship to the structure of the artifact with which it is associated, be the artifact as large as a building or as small as a brooch. This tradition has tended to inscribe ornament within the framework of an ontological binary, one of whose sides includes structure, plastic form, and the tectonic, while the other includes ornament, the pictorial, and the a-tectonic.[4] As the late Anne-Marie Sankovitch showed in her analysis of the modern structure/ornament paradigm in writing on architecture, "the figurative signification of *structure* does not escape but instead confirms the parergonal and supplemental status of ornament. If structure in its metaphorical sense is the fully conceived structure of the building, then ornament becomes the *parergon* that reifies the underlying essential idea, the recessive *unseen* structure. Without ornament the structure would not be realized, would not be present."[5]

In the structure/ornament paradigm, therefore, ornament articulates structure. On the other hand, ornament also has the capacity to escape structure through a disalignment that creates a remainder. Meyer Schapiro's description of ornament as an "adherent" art was one attempt to register a double potential of ornament as the articulation, or alternatively, the denial of structure.[6] Alina Payne, in her contribution to this volume, posits a space of negotiation between the binary's two sides that would accommodate the different pulls of ornament, toward and away from structure. Within this negotiation zone, a given treatment of surface can be seen as belonging both to the tectonic and to the a-tectonic, both to structure and to ornament; the way in which we choose to discuss the surface treatment will depend on what other aspect of the artifact we wish to relate it to. When viewed in this manner, ornament does not so much articulate structure as the relation between the tectonic and the a-tectonic. Yet, a striking feature of this theoretical tradition in all its forms is that it minimizes the significance of the experience of surface itself. Surface, although constantly referenced, is largely stripped of any active function. It functions instead conceptually in the passive role of that which is to be covered as ornament moves toward or away from structure. In effect, the minimization of surface agency becomes the condition of discursive visibility of ornament and structure and any negotiation between the two. The art historical analysis amounts to a discursive operation of subsumption, in which the agency of surface is subsumed by structure on one side and ornament on the other. Within the modern structure/ornament discourse, ornament continues to function as the rhetorical face of the artwork, a role that architectural theorists have attributed to ornament since the Renaissance.[7]

A contrasting theoretical tradition finds its starting-point elsewhere, conceptualizing ornament instead as the affirmation and articulation of surface. This tradition views ornament as only physically supplementary; conceptually, by articulating the surface in which it appears, ornament *becomes* surface and is able to participate in the larger articulation of the adorned human body or of the overall form of the artifact. The result is to situate ornament within a more thoroughly experiential and relational field of form that takes into account the wearer and the viewing subject.[8] Spyros Papapetros has drawn out this aspect of Semper's classification of adornments of the human body into pendants, annular ornaments, and directional ornaments. As regards artifacts, meanwhile, Papapetros has reminded us that Semper maintained that "ornament is not simply the transfer of a two-dimensional pattern to the surface of a material artifact but is itself part of the artifact's three-dimensional logic," and as such should be understood parametrically.[9] If Wölfflin, too, explored this territory as part of his larger concern with the body's relation to architecture, a later Vienna School writer like Otto Pächt could turn the approach into a pragmatic

method.[10] More recently, Oleg Grabar, focusing on ornament as a physical and conceptual environment coextensive with surface, formulated the relational character of ornament more systematically as a dynamics of mediation between human beings and nature or culture.[11] For Grabar, this dynamics could be mapped out as a series of modalities characterized by the specificity of the visual signifiers in play: architecture, the written word, the geometric figure, the image from nature. As in earlier examples of this second approach, surface agency is once again subsumed, but by ornament alone. In contrast to the moral rhetoric of ornament that is identified by the first approach, here it is a rhetoric of connectivity that is brought to light.

The contrast between the two approaches should not be overdrawn: since they intersect, or overlap, in their subsumption of surface agency, the approaches are not mutually exclusive. An interest in the motif does not exclude an interest in the phenomenality of surface, or vice versa, though pursuing the double interest does lead to a revealing ambiguity in ornament's status (see below). A further commonality is the shared recourse to a concept of articulation, already well established in late-nineteenth-century discussions of ornament. I have drawn on the term repeatedly in my own attempt to characterize and distinguish the two approaches to ornament.[12] "Articulation" has two basic meanings—(a) to join things in such a way that coordinated movement is possible, and (b) to express something in coherent form. This split of meaning gives articulation the capacity to make visible the double-sidedness of artistic craft, and it is this capacity that makes the concept so useful in characterizing theoretical approaches to ornament. It is questionable, however, whether the rationalist and instrumental interpretation of articulation that Riegl and Wölfflin introduced into art history reveals the full potential of articulation as an analytic concept.[13] Latent in the term is the potential to define a basic artistic function through which art does its mediating work. Articulation, I submit, denotes the distinctive function of (1) making dynamic connections between components and operations, in order to (2) arrive at an overall formal coherence that actively addresses the beholder. If we define the domain of craft broadly to include the conceptual alongside the physical, then articulation may be considered one way of conceptualizing the visual and material thinking that constitute artistic craft. Moreover, like artistic functions such as representation or figuration, which engage other aspects of art-making, articulation involves a process that is liable to betray itself; in other words, the ostensible intention or purpose does not exhaust the result. Thus, a fully articulated surface does not only achieve a sought-for relational coherence but may also incorporate into itself residues of doubt and anxiety, which can be symptomatic of the greatest social significance and reward close interpretative attention. Indeed, this symptomatic dimension of the articulated surface already emerges as a concern in the writings on ornament of Semper, Schmarsow, Riegl, and Wölfflin.[14]

Raising the profile of articulation by developing it into an expanded, functional concept is no theoretical game.[15] It provides us with one of the conceptual tools necessary to develop further the relational potential of existing theoretical approaches to ornament. With the conceptual tool of articulation at our disposal, it becomes possible to raise a question about ornament that otherwise would have no meaning: How well does the concept of ornament describe the functional articulation of surface? This question, which allows us to problematize ornament as a category, can only be answered by using a second and equally unfamiliar conceptual tool.

Although a specialist of Chinese painting, I entered the field of Chinese art history through the study of decorative arts. This specialty has managed to flourish without ever seriously taking into account the surfaces of objects experienced *as surfaces*. Out of my dissatisfaction with this ongoing situation came a 2010 book, *Sensuous Surfaces*.[16] There, I argued that the single most obvious characteristic of decoration, determining its success or failure, is topography of sensuous surface. Yet surface agency is the great blind spot of modern thinking about all nonmodern decorative objects, Chinese or not. This blind spot is arguably the main reason why the category of ornament has such primacy over the category of decoration in modern thinking that the terms decoration and ornament are often used interchangeably.[17] In response, I introduced a new concept—surfacescape—to describe what I now belatedly recognize to be the articulation of surface agency in the specific sense just outlined: surfacescape, because any articulation of surface is necessarily topological.

As some readers may know, it has been argued that all scape-related terminology is ineffective in conveying a topological understanding because the most common

scape-related term, "landscape," though originally referring to topography, has come to be understood generally in optical, subject-object terms.[18] While the obstacle is real, it only makes me more convinced that scape needs to be recuperated for use as a topological concept. Elsewhere I have argued the case for a general theory of scape in art as part of the relation between visual potentiality on the one hand, which I call "ground," and crystallization as recognizable form on the other, which is what I call "scape."[19] Since both sides of this equation imply an activated beholder, scape along with the rest of the ground–scape relation belongs to an operational, not ontological understanding of the artwork. Surfacescape, as the articulation of sensuous surface, is a modality of scape that can be found in every type of art, and every artwork. It takes on special importance, however, in decoration. A concept of surfacescape, as the book sought to show, makes it possible to reactivate decoration as a primary and theoretically productive category. For the purposes of the present volume, however, what is more important is that surfacescape offers a useful vantage point from which to reassess the category of ornament.

A rarely acknowledged feature of the ornament category as currently used is its ambiguity. When the term "ornament" is used, it is often difficult to know whether the reference is to an aspect of the phenomenality of a material artifact, or instead to an image from the design process that has been incorporated into the material artifact and can be separated out analytically with the help of a two-dimensional diagram, be it a line drawing or a roll-out photograph or a rubbing. Historically, this ambiguity between the phenomenality of artifactual surface and the motif's imagistic abstraction from that surface is a holdover from the comparativism associated with positivist evolutionary interpretations. It came about because late-nineteenth-century art historians found the sharp distinction that the mid-nineteenth-century designer, Owen Jones, drew between the two to be unworkable in interpretative practice.[20] Jones, understanding the confusion that ambiguity would cause, sought to avoid it by denoting the phenomenality of the covered artifactual surface as decoration, reserving the term ornament for the working idea made visible in two dimensions as an image field, or what I call an imagescape. Art historians, however, have rarely kept the two truly separate, allowing themselves to wholly or partially collapse the abstracted image into the phenomenality of surface and vice versa.

How, then, does the ambiguity function in art historical writing? When a working drawing exists, the art historian tends to project its design—which is to say an image—into the surface to which it contributed. In this process, she privileges the imagistic dimension of the surface (the rhythmic affirmation of motifs across the surface in tension with a limit) over its material qualities, converting surfacescape into an image field or, the term I prefer, imagescape. When such a drawing does not exist, the art historian more or less automatically creates one through a mental process of reverse engineering, whether or not she gives this image more permanent form in a drawing. That is to say, she mentally translates the surface she experiences into image terms on the model of working drawings, at which point she then inverts the process and reads the material surface under study using her visual translation. This once again privileges the imagistic dimension of the surface over its material qualities, imagescape over surfacescape. It also produces the cleavage between haptic and optic, or between object-quality and apparition-quality, that Chris Wood has identified as structurally fundamental to art history even today.[21]

To acknowledge these consequences of its constitutive ambiguity is to realize the limitations of the existing art historical category of ornament. Ornament, as usually conceived, describes well the rhetorical terms of decoration. But it does not account satisfactorily for what actually happens when a visual idea is mobilized in an artifactual surface intervening in the world. The answer to the earlier question, How well does the concept of ornament describe the functional articulation of surface? is therefore: Not well enough. Surfacescape does the latter job much better. So how does a concept of ornament serve us today? If one retains the existing ambiguous understanding of ornament, then its principal use is surely exegetic. Beyond the exegesis of a visual rhetoric, there is also the possibility of extending the interpretative model of a deciphering of meaning to include a reading of ornament as cultural symptom. Within a mediational, relational art history, on the other hand, decipherable meaning no longer provides the horizon. What matters instead is the overall complexity of what an artwork does, and how it makes sense (as opposed to conveys meaning). Under the latter horizon, it becomes necessary to split the concept of ornament into two by distinguishing between its usual first-order usage and a new second-order usage. Because image is at the core of

the category, ornament can also be seen as the description not only of the design that *precedes* a given configuration of surface, but also of the design that can be reverse-engineered *out of* an existing configuration of surface, and thus more broadly as the movement of image through surface. Understood in these second-order terms, the category of ornament opens up to become irreplaceable for conceptualizing the transfer of design ideas across boundaries—be they boundaries of medium, or time period, or culture, or geography. More broadly, by combining a split definition of ornament with the surfacescape reactivation of decoration as a category, we are in a much better position to explore how the artifacts and buildings involved make overall sense.

An obvious objection to the need for a split definition of ornament is that modern art history, working exegetically, has always understood ornament to register transfers across boundaries variously material, technical, sociological, cultural, civilizational, or historical. But it is the way in which ornament has been understood to register these transfers that matters. Students of ornament have focused on sources, borrowings, influences, reworkings, and so forth—in other words, anything that can be pinned down in positivist terms. Yet, in all this accumulated discussion a place has rarely been found for a discussion of the character and significance of the *movement* of transfer itself. The reason, surely, is that art history has wanted ornament also to be part of the phenomenality of the artifact. Ornament has thus implicitly been cast as the visible, classifiable survivals of a movement of transfer that in itself has no phenomenological status and does not itself become part of the phenomenality of the artifact except as trace. In practice, through the exegetical enterprise of identification of sources, influences, borrowings, and reworkings mentioned above, art history *converts* the elusive operation of transfer into substantive traces, whether iconographic, stylistic, or technical. It is by this route that it comes to seem natural to consider ornament as portable culture. In this seductive formulation, cultural practices are reified as culture, and culture in the form of ornament (understood in first-order terms) is set into motion by being carried; culture precedes movement. Exegetically, this is an unobjectionable interpretation; but in a larger perspective, it is incomplete. By separating out a second-order view of ornament, a more complete interpretation becomes possible in which the priority of movement over culture is just as important.

Here I return to the vase with which I began, and in the first place to the photograph that is giving you visual access to it. Standard photographs of this type reinforce the notion that ornament really is part of the phenomenality of the artifact. A photograph of this kind conditions us to see ornament as the rhythmic affirmation of motifs across a surface in tension with limits of various kinds, including registers, gaps, and the visible edges of the form. Had the photographer turned the vase so that only one of its handle-like attachments was visible and the vase's address to the viewer was not aligned with the symmetry of the design, one would immediately have a stronger sense of the vase's materiality and of its character as surfacescape. As it is, the surfacescape is implicitly subordinated to the design; the vase is presented, in effect, as a projective screen for ornament as image. I do not want to suggest, though, that this idea is wholly anachronistic or culturally insensitive. Porcelain vases with this kind of glossy surface were, in fact, made to have the capacity to register at a distance, as what we might call object-images, in addition to functioning close-up as object-bodies and as surfacescapes. The vase is thus an example of a Chinese artifact that incorporates into itself ornament as image field or imagescape, as interface between projection into, and abstraction from, the artifactual surface. The trouble with the photograph, though, is that it rhetorically introduces an imagescape phenomenality that was designed to operate at a distance into the intimacy of close viewing where the vase functions instead as object-body and as surfacescape. This rhetorical distortion makes the photograph useful for my purposes, because its very betrayal of the surfacescape perfectly illustrates the second-order projective/abstractive mechanism of ornament in action. The conceptual filter of ornament deployed by the photograph *prevents* us from seeing this surfacescape's mobilization of the resource of formal pattern to invite bodily participation in a Qing court decorum and erotics.[22] Conversely, however, if we attend to the second-order functioning of ornament, we can read the photograph across the grain and see that ornament *highlights* the vectors of cultural transfer that are mobilized by this surfacescape's decorum. It is along these vectors, in both directions, that we can see the movement of transfer, which in my title I have called the passage of the Other.

On the body of the vase, and again between the two attachments, the design places in interaction a floral

design derived from Ming Chinese imperial porcelain and an active frame derived from the European baroque, via stonework and architectural decoration. The interaction of the two systems is akin to a dance made up of rhythmic moments of linking up, fusion, and respectful separation. Just as in the floral system all connection to botanical logic is completely undone, so too the framing system has dismantled its connection to cartouches. From both systems the motifs remain as fragments but are absorbed into a new rhythm whose movement in tension with the limits of the registers and visible edges of the form is what holds them in place. A key element in this rhythm is the complex ogive just above the central flower, which finds fragmentary echoes below the flower as well. The ogive mediates the relation between the floral and framing systems, and it derives from clothing, where the cloud collar design, as it was called, had long been associated with Inner Asian peoples, among them the Manchus. Also significant are the designs in the narrow registers at the very top and bottom of the vase. The repeated floral element in the topmost register has been formalized to recall a Tibetan Vajra thunderbolt seen from the side, while its counterpart at the very bottom has a four-lobed flower that recalls the same object seen head-on; a larger version appears between the two attachments. These Tibetan references are relevant to the central lotus blossom motif, barely recognizable as such, which was originally introduced in the early fifteenth century as a motif with Buddhist associations. The beadlike elements that appear at the end of leaves and are added to tendrils are a baroque element, but the same elements appear, near the top of the vase, added to hanging blossoms, and one is also strategically placed above and below each central lotus. In the eighteenth-century Qing context, all these beadlike elements would have been readable as jewels, well known from Tibetan and Sino-Tibetan sacred decoration, including in cloisonné enamels. Indeed, the addition of gilding to this kind of polychrome porcelain seems to have been intended to evoke the cloisonné enamel technique. Elements from four different cultural traditions, several different historical moments, and a number of different material media are thus accommodated within the framing edges of a vase form that itself is based on a Song dynasty stoneware interpretation of a Han dynasty bronze vessel. As with other such objects, the vase form itself in the eighteenth century was also available for use in pictorial decoration as a two-dimensional decorative image in its own right.

No modern viewer, and no eighteenth-century viewer either, could hold in her mind at the same time all the different cultural, historical, and medium references that are in play here. The introduction of a second-order category of ornament allows us to acknowledge the eye's unceasing movement through this complexity, provoking the passage of the Other across boundaries of history, culture, and material medium as one registers, whether fleetingly or in a more considered way, similarities with other artifacts and images. The second-order category corresponds to a metapraxis of ornament that keeps us in an optically oriented, two-dimensional register of perception. This redefinition of ornament to include its second-order dimension not only makes visible the passage of the Other, but also opens the door to new symptomatic interpretations, including one that I will sketch out briefly here. At the court of the Qianlong emperor, who presented himself to his multiethnic empire as a universal ruler on the Buddhist model, the ideological utility of decoration was a given. Understood in second-order terms, ornament in this eighteenth-century Chinese context extended into the decorative arts an ideological economy of the multiethnic image that is well attested in Qianlong court art in general.[23] Our vase attempts to subsume an ornamental, *translational* expression of this larger ideological economy of the image under a surfacescape decorum that mobilizes a rhetoric of order and connectivity, and almost succeeds in being convincing. It falls short where it succeeds, in the formal deconstruction of the ornamental design, whose highly contingent coherence betrays the fragility of not just a visual but also an ideological order.

In sum, adopting a split definition of ornament allows us to register a translational movement inherent in ornament that specifically operates as image, or more precisely as imagescape. For this reason, the passage of the Other in ornament does not *require* the physical displacement of any three-dimensional artifact. A mere two-dimensional notation, or even a memory, will do. In fact, when ornament does move across time or space as part of an artifact, the artifact itself can legitimately be understood as principally a vehicle for the design that is reverse-engineered from it in its new context. The imagescapes of ornament bring into view and into discourse a movement that traverses the artifact as we connect the design mentally to other related designs both

inside and outside the culture. On this revisionist view, the nonrhetorical significance of ornament is that it always keeps open and available the movement of transfer and transit that leads designs to shed and acquire meaning, whether through formal mutation or through recontextualization. Modern art history, by contrast, has by and large construed cultural transfer in rather clunky terms to mean something like the collecting or trading of meaning units: in other words, a design that in one time and place has one meaning gets recycled in another time and place, and in the process becomes part of a new meaning unit, with the original meaning unit surviving as a kind of fragmentary image, almost like spolia. As the study of art across the world moves away from Eurocentric models, holding on to this residually positivist vision today may be a losing game. Surely we are now more sensitive to culture as flow, as movement, as exchange, in other words to "cultural" the adjective as opposed to "culture" the noun.[24] I find it more useful, therefore, to see ornament as an imagescape projected into and abstracted from the artifact that holds open the passage of the Other through the artifact.

To return, in conclusion, to the question of assumptions, my own approach obviously draws on recent anthropology's increasingly widely shared assumption that culture is always already hybrid, that cultural identity is always constituted in encounter with the Other, and that the Other is therefore primary in the constitution of cultural identity.[25] I end with a psychoanalytic formulation of the same assumption. In ornament's second-order dimension, we see seduction by the enigmatic signifier that comes from elsewhere; we see, too, the translation of these enigmatic signifiers into an articulated form that in turn plays its own role of seduction within the receiving culture, medium, or time period. Ornament might thus be considered to operate as part of the perceiving periphery of a sociocultural environment and to be, so to speak, an especially sensitive layer of that environment's skin. Here I draw on the important revision of Freudian theory by Jean Laplanche.[26] Laplanche's entire position may be summed up in a single sentence: "Processes in which the individual takes an *active* part are secondary in relation to the originary moment, which is that of a passivity: that of seduction."[27] The special role of ornament in art can be understood across an analogy between bodily surfaces and artifact surfaces, both of which may be considered perceptive peripheries, the first in relation to the psyche and the second in a cultural sense. In their respective roles as perceptive peripheries, both kinds of surface have an interface function. On the one hand, there is seduction by the enigmatic signifier that comes from elsewhere. In the infant, it is the psychophysiological skin of the entire body that registers the enigmatic signifiers brought by the adult; in the artifact, it is ornament that in its second-order dimension registers the similarly enigmatic signifiers from a cultural elsewhere. On the other hand, it is only in surface that a material coherence is created from the translation of these enigmatic signifiers, with all that translation implies of repression as well as construction. The *parapraxis* of ornament contributes simultaneously to figuration and to decoration, animating the perpetually reconfigured boundary between the two.