

GRAMMARS OF ORNAMENT: DEMATERIALIZATION AND EMBODIMENT FROM OWEN JONES TO PAUL KLEE

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As a remedy for the permanent Babelian fear of incommunicability, grammars aspire to finding a kind of transcultural morphological truth, beyond specific meanings; they are haunted by the recurring dream of an Adamic language, primeval, transparent, attuned to the inner universal logic of Being. Therefore, the metaphorical use of the idea of grammar in a nonlinguistic context is likely to reveal a broader anxiety, regarding impending chaos and loss of meaning, as well as the need for a therapy, capable of restoring and reinforcing an established order of meaning.

When in the nineteenth century new things, new materials, new practices were continuously coming to light by means of rational processes, many contemporaries felt that the interwoven strands of old styles, in proliferating sets of ornamental patterns, displayed nothing but confusion. The melancholy dulling of the artistic aura in the mass-production of trinkets, the claustrophobic stuffiness of living spaces, and the vertigo brought on by the eclectic fragmentation of history were the results. In other words, this sense of confusion and illegibility was seen as an ominous sign of cultural disaster lurking beneath the glowing aspects of modern progress. Decadence—a constant preoccupation during this period—was identified as the inevitable result of historical relativism, and the backwardness and muddle of forms in eclectic ornamentation was proof of this, reveling in the “reproduction of a galvanized corpse,” as the English architect and designer Owen Jones complained regarding neo-Gothic imitations in 1852.¹

This is why the debates on the reform of ornament were so urgent: what was at stake was not only a matter

of taste for connoisseurs but also a global cultural order before which lay a metaphysical void. At the crossroads of art and industry, ornament was expected to be the means whereby base matter was sublimated into pure form, lightening the ever-growing load of manufactured goods and shedding upon industry the clear light of art. Ornament was theoretically promoted as a powerful means of dematerialization. This is, at least, what happened in Europe in the last four decades of the nineteenth century, with Owen Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament* as a starting point in 1856. In grammars of ornament, dematerialization was first and foremost advocated through the definition of an intangible logical system of “pure” forms. But the disappearance of all bodily experience soon became a matter of anxiety, and ornamental practice was urged to produce a new sense of embodiment. This is the story told in this chapter, which will lead the reader up to the radical experiments of so-called avant-garde painting in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Grammars of ornament were prominent in debates about art and industry from the 1850s onward. They defined themselves against compendiums, which had prevailed in the eighteenth century and during the first half of the nineteenth. Even if, in the real world, the opposition proved unstable, the theoretical rift was clear: the compendium or *recueil* (in French) was generally conceived as a container, a treasure chest safeguarding a corpus of motifs and inviting users to choose and faithfully *imitate* the most attractive ones. Conversely, the grammar was considered a sort of motor, liable to *generate* new forms through a system of pro-

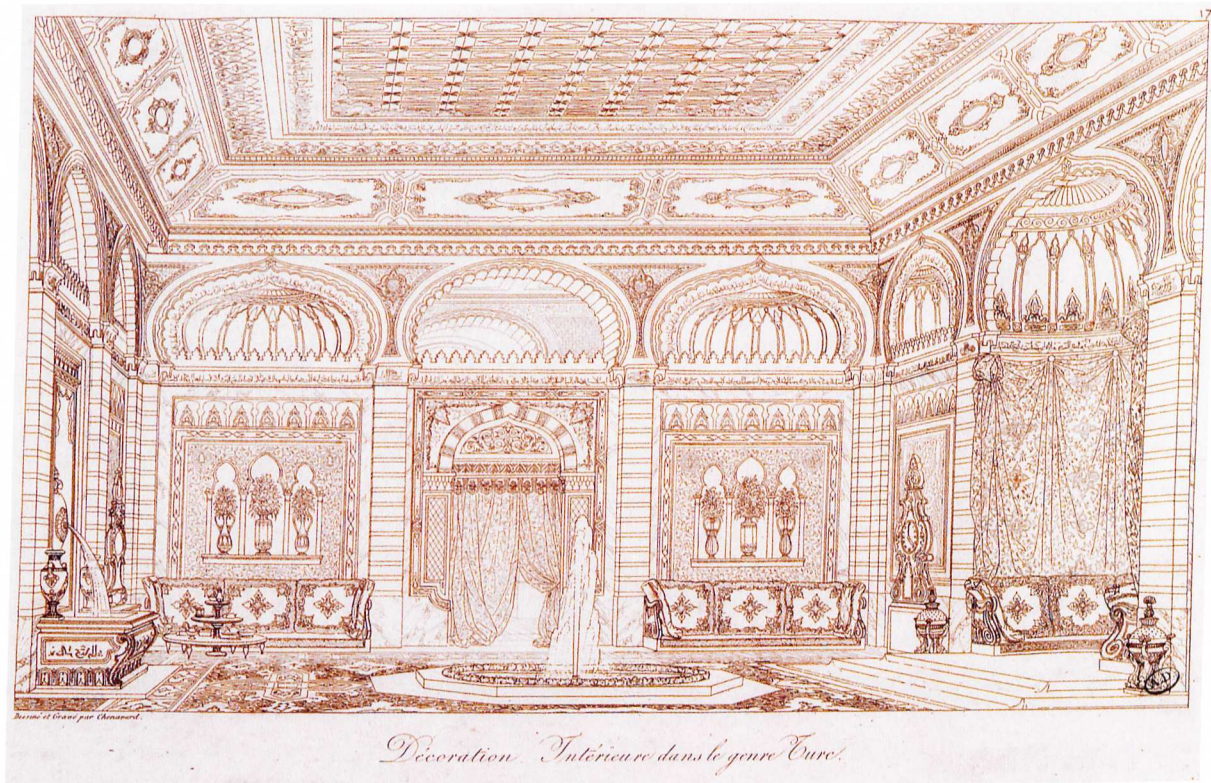


Fig. 25.1. (above) Claude-Aimé Chenavard, "Interior decoration in the Turkish style," from *Album de l'ornemaniste, recueil composé de fragmens d'ornemens dans tous les genres et dans tous les styles*, 1836.

Fig. 25.2. (right) Owen Jones, "Moresque no. 5," plate 43, from *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.



ductive rules. While the compendium was naturally turned toward the past, as a collection of possible copies, the grammar was future-orientated—an incentive to *creations* to come. A delightful muddle prevailed: on one side, a severe order; on the other, immediate visual attractiveness was replaced by strictly rational structures. Nowhere, perhaps, is the opposition more blatant than between the French decorator Claude-Aimé Chenavard and the British architect Owen Jones. Chenavard's *Album de l'ornemaniste, recueil composé de fragmens d'ornemens dans tous les genres et dans tous les*

styles of 1836 was a telling title for a temporary European best seller reflecting the eclectic taste of the 1830s–1840s,² and explicitly celebrating an aesthetics of fragmentation (fig. 25.1). Whereas Owen Jones, with his *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856, used a revolutionary title for a no less revolutionary logical approach to ornamental forms (fig. 25.2), twenty years after Chenavard's fashionable compendium.³

Following Jones's major and early example, books based on a comparison between the notion of grammar and the idea of ornament spread all over Europe and the

United States from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Even when the word “grammar” itself was not used in their titles, they were repeatedly developing a linguistic approach to ornamental forms, which obviously echoed broader cultural needs and fears. The influence of Jones’s book has to be taken into account, all the more so after 1865, when it was translated into French by its author, as this language was widely accessible in European, particularly German, artistic circles at the time. But this is certainly not the reason for the success of such a genre, which spread all over the Western world in the major industrial countries of the time, the United Kingdom, France, and the German Empire. Among numerous other examples, were the publication in Berlin of Johann Eduard Jacobsthal’s *Grammatik der Ornamente* in 1874 (fig. 25.3)⁴ and in Paris of Jules Bourgoïn’s *Grammaire élémentaire de l’ornement* in 1880 (fig. 25.4).⁵ Neither of these two works quotes or alludes to Jones, with whom their authors were apparently unacquainted (it seems unlikely that they deliberately ignored it, because they readily refer to other recent publications).

The three books share the same title and, beyond that, a similar approach: the authors are all architects more interested in ornamentation than in erecting buildings, in conceptualizing and teaching than in making things. They introduce volumes of images with long and ambitious theoretical texts, and Bourgoïn integrates all of his images within the text rather than placing them in a separate section. In these images, pure form and, in Jones’s case, color are strongly emphasized, even to the point of excluding any picturesque superimposition of patterns or hues on identifiable objects in context. This structural decontextualization is what Jones calls “architecture” in ornament; Jacobsthal, “tectonic” (following his master, the architect and archaeologist Karl Bötticher); and Bourgoïn, “aesthetic geometry.” The model for ornamentation is no longer iconicity but architecturality, which means that structural logic is systematically preferred to narrative history, and ideal form to objecthood.

If we follow Alina Payne’s argument of a “gradual transference of the explicating and rhetorical function traditionally shouldered by ornament to the objects of daily use” for the meaning of architecture,⁶ from the mid-nineteenth century onward, we might say that, at the threshold of this period, the future of modern ornamentation was twofold. It could either be replaced by a final celebration of the manufactured object as the main

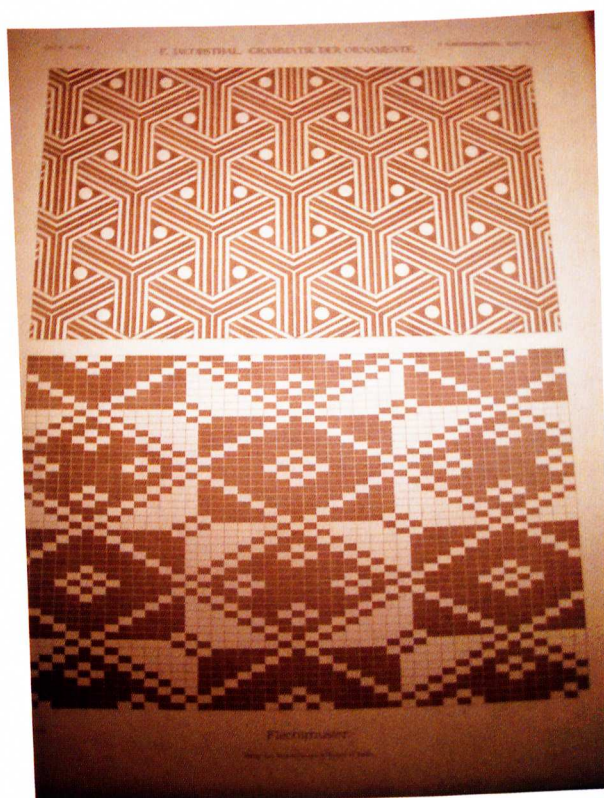


Fig. 25.3. Johann Eduard Jacobsthal, “Surface ornaments,” part 5, plate 16, “Interlacing motives,” from *Die Grammatik der Ornamente*, 1874.

signifier of architecture and, as such, of the highest, most abstract level of artistic invention (this is Payne’s contention) or be systematically developed, in order to counteract the ever-growing materialist penchant of industrial culture—in other words, either discarded or sublimated. In this context, the grammatical theorization of ornament might appear as an attempt not only to protect but to intensify its “rhetorical function” and to endow it with an invigorated power of dematerializing, that is, giving an allegorical meaning to the world of things—to all these objects and buildings that seemed to get ever more piled up and deprived of aura, in the contemporary urban environment and housing. This new task given to ornament required that it enter the field of technical production and, consequently, turn itself into a logical, scientific mode of elaboration. Grammars, as opposed to compendiums, exemplify this turn, and their linguistic guise expresses the need to define ornament as a primary artistic signifier. It must be added, however, that this scientific and linguistic sublimation of ornament is not necessarily opposed to

18 GRAMMAIRE ÉLÉMENTAIRE DE L'ORNEMENT

quartier avec lui-même et avec les trois autres, et l'on a :

Pour le premier quartier avec le premier quartier, la conjugaison suivie ;

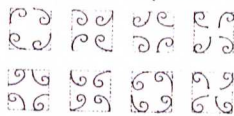
Pour le premier quartier avec le deuxième, la conjugaison à retour ;

Pour le premier quartier avec le troisième, la conjugaison diagonale ;

Pour le premier quartier avec le quatrième, la conjugaison contrariée.

Chacun des groupes précédents donnant lieu à quatre conjugaisons, on a de cette manière les quatre-vingts ($4 \times 8 = 32$) conjugaisons régulières. Si l'on dérange par rotation l'un des traits de ces conjugaisons régulières, on obtient les trente-deux conjugaisons irrégulières ou rompues.

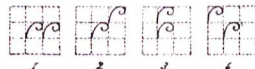
Si maintenant, toujours par rapport au trait carré, on groupe ainsi qu'il suit, c'est-à-dire en disposition révolue, chacune



des huit positions des figures 3 et 4 (23), et que l'on conjugue deux à deux les quatre motifs de chaque groupe, on aura les conjugaisons suivies, diagonales et révolues.

Enfin, en conjuguant successivement chaque motif d'un groupe avec chacun des motifs du groupe qui lui est réciproque, par retournement du motif sur lui-même, on aura les conjugaisons à retour, contrariées et retour-contrariées.

26. Supposons maintenant que dans chaque conjugaison l'un des motifs reste fixe pendant que son conjugué est transporté parallèlement à lui-même tout autour du premier, il s'en suivra, savoir :

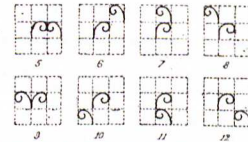


1° Pour la conjugaison suivie, quatre conjugaisons égales-

LA CONJUGAISON 49

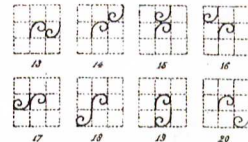
ment suivies, l'une par le travers (fig. 1), la seconde oblique en barre (fig. 2), la troisième suivie par le droit (fig. 3), la quatrième enfin oblique en bande (fig. 4).

2° Pour la conjugaison à retour : deux conjugaisons à



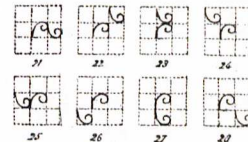
retour travers (fig. 5 et 9) et six conjugaisons contrariées, dont deux obliques en barre (fig. 6 et 10), deux droites (fig. 7 et 11) et enfin deux obliques en bande (fig. 8 et 12).

3° Pour la conjugaison diagonale, huit conjugaisons dia-



gonales (fig. 13 à 20), dont deux travers, deux droites, deux obliques en barre et deux obliques en bande ;

4° Pour la conjugaison contrariée, deux conjugaisons con-



trariées travers (fig. 21 et 25), deux obliques en barre (fig. 22

Fig. 25.4. Jules Bourgoïn, "The conjugation," part 1, chap. 2, from *Grammaire élémentaire de l'ornement*, 1880.

its final disappearance, in later modernist circles: one process can host the other, and actual elimination be the result of a grammatical distillation, so to speak.

To some extent, the shift from narration to structure can indeed be approached linguistically.⁷ If a complete decorative environment, like a mimetic painting or a sculptural group, is compared to a text, with complete interrelated sequences of meaning as in a narrative, then a compendium of ornamental patterns will be assimilated to a kind of vocabulary or dictionary, with its words available for use. By contrast, a grammar of ornament seems at first to revert from a vocabulary to the alphabet. Indeed, the idea of an alphabet has been attached to the idea of grammar in many ornament books of the time: Bourgoïn speaks of a "graphic alphabet,"⁸ and so does Charles Blanc, in his *Grammaire des arts décoratifs* in 1882,⁹ or, before them, Jules-Claude Ziegler in his *Études céramiques*, as early as 1850.¹⁰ Strictly speaking, however, a grammar of ornament should be seen as a set of stems and flexional endings, that is, the basic components of a morphology to which

a syntax adapts its rules of declension and conjugation. In point of fact, conjugation is another word used by Bourgoïn to describe the relations between the "figures, partitions, motifs and dispositions" composing the elementary forms of ornament.¹¹ Jacobsthal is probably the one who went furthest and was the most explicit in this comparison between language and ornament. He referred to Jacob Grimm's *Origin of Language*¹² and set himself the goal of describing the "ever valid laws of the language of forms" in his *Grammar*¹³ (even if, before him, in the 1850s, Gottfried Semper had already paved the way for a methodic parallel between linguistics and the science of form). Immediately after Jacobsthal's work was published, the same idea of a *Formensprache* (language of forms) was developed by his friend Julius Matthias, in his own *Die Formensprache des Kunstgewerbes*.¹⁴

It is hardly surprising that this linguistic turn was particularly effective in a German context: a "science of language" (as the linguist Max Müller called it)¹⁵ had evolved there, clearly distinct from philology, which led, on the one hand, to a formal analysis of basic lin-

guistic components, and, on the other, to a reverie on the origin of language. The close intellectual ties between Germany, France, and England, however, made a large and rapid dissemination of these early masterworks of linguistics possible: while Franz Bopp, the founder of comparative grammar, was translated into French as early as 1866,¹⁶ Max Müller delivered his “lectures on the science of language” directly in English at the Royal Institute in London in 1861 and was translated into French in 1864. In this text, he suggested that the grammarian was to the philologist what the botanist was to the gardener.¹⁷ Fifteen years later, knowingly or not, Jules Bourgoïn resorted to exactly the same comparison in his grammar, in order to advocate the higher intellectual status of the grammarian of ornament, vis-à-vis the eclectic decorator.¹⁸

Nonetheless, this reiterated desire to equate theories of ornament with grammatical theories has always remained somewhat tentative. The terms of comparison are always changing: the basic ornamental forms are sometimes compared to letters, sometimes to radicals and stems or to words in a vocabulary; sometimes we hear of ornament as an alphabet, sometimes as a morphology (*Formenlehre*), sometimes as a system of syntactic rules, sometimes as semantics, sometimes simply as a language (*Formensprache*). Indeed, as Ferdinand de Saussure would prove once and for all at the turn of the century, the idea of ornament as a sign makes no sense: the innate arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified in the linguistic sign is not encountered in the relationship between a viewer and an ornament, a relationship in which the subjective—that is, also bodily—involvement of the viewer plays the primary role.¹⁹ In other words, a formal system can be described as ornamental only inasmuch as it extends beyond its semiotic status and relies on effective, determined, nonarbitrary contexts of perception—that is, what is called a decorative environment. Moreover, shortly before Saussure founded semiotics as an autonomous science in Geneva, distinct from any anthropological knowledge,²⁰ Alois Riegl, in Vienna—though also resorting to the idea of “grammar” as a pedagogical tool, and even using the word for the title of one of his classes in 1898–99—warned his students that one could speak of a grammar of art “only in a metaphorical sense, of course.”²¹

Metaphor has more to do with the imagination than with rationality; hinting at obscure desires, it survives

its own logical inconsistency. Let us now attempt to understand the seductiveness of this metaphor of grammar to the theorists of ornament of the time, despite growing evidence that such a parallel could not be rigorously drawn. Three rallying cries contribute to explaining this insistent fascination: the quest for universalism, the belief in scientific knowledge, and the urge for invention. The three combined shaped the dream of a new kind of “Renaissance” for the modern world.

Until the Saussurian notion of semiotics was born, theories of language were all focused on the anthropological quest for a universal origin of language, of which as many fossilized indexes as possible had to be identified and collected from ancient or living languages. In particular, the ghost of an Adamic language—the German *Ursprache*—haunts much of the research into Indo-European idioms, as found in the thesaurus of ancient “Oriental” Hindu literature. In a similar way, theoreticians of ornament obsessively set off in search for primeval forms and identified them in the so-called Orient. Assuredly, the references behind this generic term were not the same in linguistics as in theories of form: even if India appeared as a common ground and if the Sanskrit literature was as fascinating for the linguists as the patterns of Mughal artifacts for the theorists of ornament (in particular at the Great Exhibition of 1851),²² this “Oriental” reference was mainly Indo-European and anti-Semitic in the case of the philosophy of language, while it was predominantly Islamic and, therefore, multiracial, in the case of ornament.

What matters more, however, is that in both cases, the “Oriental” paradigm helped to dispel an anxious awareness of historical relativism and paved the way for the artificial construction of a solid ahistorical structure: the “Orient” was a way out of history, in a utopian world of eternally valid meanings. In the case of ornament, the celebration of Islamic arts, interpreted in order to gratify Western fancies and fears, was not inspired by the desire to emphasize their exoticism but, rather, by the feeling that, in these cultures, combinations of forms went beyond particular ethnic or geographical identities and came as close as possible to a conceptual and, as such, eternal Platonic order of things, as formulated by Jones at the start of his *Grammar*: “That which is beautiful is true; that which is true must be beautiful.”²³ This is why the idea of grammar itself could easily be replaced by equivalent categories like architectural geometry or the musical scale. Grammaticality, architecturality, and musicality

could all refer to a universal harmony,²⁴ which, it was argued, could be made visible by ornament more than by any other visual form. Therefore, the lesson of “Oriental” decoration was that history was not the be-all and end-all and that perfect ornamentation had to be true to the inner structures of nature rather than adapted to specific, changing cultural needs. Gülru Necipoğlu has shown how decontextualizing and detaching ornaments from objects—be that grammatically, musically, or geometrically—was a way of advocating a disembodied cosmological vision, revealing and celebrating the conceptual, invisible basis of Being.²⁵ She has also argued that the specific decontextualization of Islamic patterns served a concurrent practical purpose, facilitating the recycling, by European practitioners, of designs turned into “reusable” fragments of buildings or things “displayed as neutral objects of ‘consumption.’”²⁶ Jones, in particular, in the passage “on the coloring of Moresque ornament” of his *Grammar*, stresses that every “local and temporary character” is based on “eternal and immutable” universal principles, “the same grand ideas embodied in different forms, and expressed, so to speak, in a different language.”²⁷ Thus, universal relevance was systematically advocated rather than systems of signification, at the expense of cultural associations and contextual meanings. (This is why Jones privileged the “pure” geometry of “Moresque” patterns and, in turn, was biased against the “mixed style” of “Turkish ornament,” which, in his view, put “Arabian and Persian floral ornaments . . . side by side,” along with “debased Roman and Renaissance details.”)²⁸

If ornamental beauty was to be assimilated to a universal truth, then ornamentation belonged in the realm of scientific knowledge, where rules could not be changed subjectively. This was the second motive for a parallel between grammar and ornament. It is consistent with a scholastic approach, according to which grammar was one of the liberal arts, together with logic and rhetoric, but also with music, geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy. The traditional concept of the visual arts as equivalent to poetry (*ut pictura poesis*) was replaced by the scientific principle of ornament as an equivalent of grammar (*ut decor grammatica*, so to speak). The modern grammarian of ornament, consequently, like the medieval student of theology, was taking an intellectual path, in order to master a rational knowledge that Jacobsthal, once again after Bötticher, calls the “science of creation” (*Wissenschaft des Schaffens*)²⁹ in the same way that Max

Müller referred to a “science of language.” It served to distinguish this modern ornament-maker from the fine artist, who derived his or her visual images from literature, as well as from the traditional craftsman, who was supposed to repeat age-old visual formulas. The invention of a new relationship between language and image gave rise to a new artistic figure, neither artist nor artisan, but a new kind of Renaissance humanist, combining, in his or her thought and practice, scientific vision and artistic inspiration. As a scientific creator, this new kind of artist had to reunite what the industrial culture had separated, science on the one hand and art on the other, and by so doing, he or she acquired a new and higher intellectual status. Only within this broader cultural framework can we understand the significance of the narrow pedagogical meaning implied by the idea of grammar: grammars of ornament had more to do with a laboratory of forms than with a textbook.

Invention, therefore, was a third rallying cry for a grammatical revolution in ornament, along with universalism and scientific knowledge. Grammar is not only a set of linguistic rules comparable to the musical scale or the geometric harmony of crystals; it is also, first and foremost, geared toward the making of sentences—namely, the production of unpredictable future utterances. It does not only suggest an idea of pure form as the basis of all Beings; it also enables acts of language. It is both a system oriented toward a timeless and immutable universal order and a means of enunciation. Ideally, the concept of grammar should ground this polymorphous future in structure. Grammatical rules are meant to organize the harmonious development of future speeches without predicting them. This is exactly what the grammarians of ornament expected from their readers and users in the realm of ornamentation. Unlike the vocabularies of motifs, these grammars insisted that ornamental patterns, as shown in their plates, had no specific iconicity in and of themselves. Practitioners were urged not to repeat what was in the book but were left free to invent their own “unknown forms” and compositions,³⁰ in the same way as it was left to speakers to employ the relevant grammatical rules in order to express themselves. Nothing was explained about what to do or how to do it, but only the logical prerequisites of any act of ornamenting. In other words, decorators were not technically trained in any specific practice but introduced theoretically to a pure *praxis*: they were taught to

become independent authors of graphic forms by a theory of action rather than by sets of repeatable tricks; so were the artists of the applied arts established as thinkers as much as makers. The fervent anti-mimetic war led by almost all the defenders of the grammaticality of ornament belongs to the same mind set.³¹ It is first justified by a desire to stimulate the creative impulses of decorators and to restore their subjective freedom to invent. It must be added that this requirement, beyond its stylistic implications, had a political aspect: by empowering practitioners by means of these intellectual tools, it favored a new horizontal distribution of social roles and symbolic productions.

Aiming at a universal common ground for all artistic languages, linking art and science to reveal an ontological order of things, and boosting the power of invention of the individual: all these features were part of the intellectual heritage of the Renaissance. Its ideal was believed to be threatened in the modern age, if only because the humanist fusion between art and science had been replaced by an irreconcilable rift between these two facets of the human spirit. It fell to the theoreticians of ornament, they claimed, to reinvent this union, which had been ruined by industrial civilization.³² What had been left unfinished by the men and women of the classical Renaissance would have to be accomplished by modern thinkers of the so-called minor arts. The latter were in a position to achieve what they thought had been beyond the reach of representational painters or sculptors. First of all, as they were directly concerned with the world of industrial production, they could convert an ethics and aesthetics of immateriality into a means to assuage the sense of panic they felt before the hold of materialism on modern life. The more the ornament could be characterized in grammatical terms, the more it could also be seen as a factor of dematerialization and could actively free the modern European from his fascination for things. Second, instead of viewing the past as a matchless model to be approached or repeated but hardly surpassed, grammatical ornament offered a different idea of origin, linked to the generative character of a grammar. Instead of nostalgically reassembling the ruins and fragments of lost worlds, it prompted a continuous dynamic of birth. Referring to the origin of forms was no longer remembering things past, so to speak, but rather assembling the elements of a generative process, resolutely gazing into the future: of course, reference to historical orna-

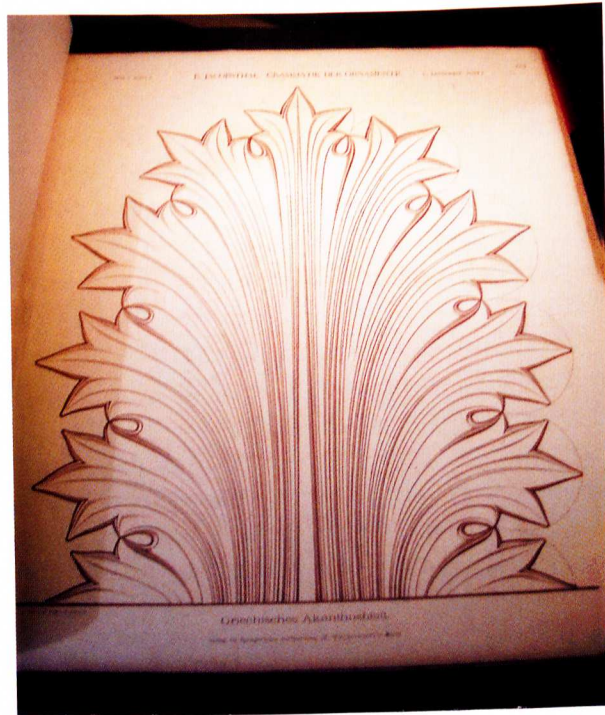


Fig. 25.5. Johann Eduard Jacobsthal, "Natural forms," part 6, plate 9, "Greek acanthus leaf," from *Die Grammatik der Ornamente*, 1874.

ments was still made, but it was graphically and intellectually emptied from the dream of reawakening old times. The primeval and perfect systems of forms—Semper's famous *Urformen*—were not like the irretrievable splendors of ancient Greece, or like the remnants of a dead Adamic language in ancient India. On the contrary, they belonged fully to the present and were ready for use; like the unlimited number of melodies potentially engendered by the seven notes of the scale, they showed how to engender the infinite from the finite. Even Jacobsthal, a most fervent apologist of ancient Greece, calls for "the inevitable simplification" of Greek patterns³³ (fig. 25.5) and claims that their direct imitation would be contrary to our "new conditions of life."³⁴

This is why the supporters of ornamental grammars had a significantly different view of the idea of a "renaissance" from that of the classical humanists or the linguists of the nineteenth century, obsessed by the archaeological quest for a first Indo-European language. It is also why the Islamic reference often seemed to be particularly relevant. Sharing the same origins as Western art (the late antique Mediterranean heritage), Islamic

art chose to draw from them general rules that were then adapted and transformed into original formal systems, while Western arts held on to the dream of a reenactment of the past. Therefore, the use of basic forms and colors in Islamic arts, being supposedly fully grammatical, had to be studied inasmuch as they provided more a model of invention than of reproduction (contrary to the western “Renaissance” of antiquity), teaching Western admirers not to imitate but to create; and, accordingly, to replace history with logic, stasis with movement, and a melancholy identification with the past with a rational apprehension of the future. From a grammatical point of view (which was not necessarily applied in reality), modern Westerners had to deal with the Islamic heritage in the same way that Islamic cultures had themselves dealt with the heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity, as Owen Jones wrote in 1852:

The Arabs . . . did not, as we should have done, continue to copy and reproduce the models which were at first so convenient to them; but, applying to them their own peculiar feelings, they gradually departed from the original model, to such an extent at last, that but for the intermediate steps we should be unable to discover the least analogy between them.³⁵

And the direct consequence of this is to be found in the *Grammar of Ornament* four years later:

We can find no work so fitted to illustrate a *Grammar of Ornament* as that [i.e., the Alhambra] in which every ornament contains a grammar in itself. Every principle which we can derive from the study of ornamental art of any other people is not only ever present here, but was by the Moors more universally and truly obeyed. . . . We will attempt here to explain some of the general principles which appear to have guided the Moors in the decoration of the Alhambra—principles which are not theirs alone but common to all the best periods of art. The principles which are everywhere the same; the forms only differ.³⁶

Thus globalism harmoniously evolved from localism, thanks to the observation of grammatical rules in the process of ornament making.

Two different ideas of the grammar of ornament lie beneath the contemporary hope for a modern Renais-

sance led by a reform of the industrial arts: grammar as a science and grammar as a *praxis*. While the first conception combines immateriality with rationality, the second takes a phenomenological turn and hints at the embodiment of abstract rules in the physical action of existing individuals, that is, living bodies. We now have to question how these two sides could come together. Ideally, a reassuring permanent structure was seen as enabling an embodied process of creation. Beneath this utopian dream, however, a contradiction cropped up between a subjective impulse, rooted in the life and body of the ornament-maker, and a scientific system of technical reproduction. The essential motivation for the invention of a grammar of ornament was to denounce the fact that the techno-industrial process of (re)production substituted itself for culture. But science itself, which was advocated by these “grammarians,” was the very basis of this technical civilization. This means that rational formalism paradoxically led to the standardized production of industrial objects, weighed down by a materiality all the more oppressive because it carried no mark of human physical work. A central index for this techno-scientific domination of dead matter was that industry identified production with massive reproduction. As a result, grammars of ornament not only expressed the univocal desire to confer a new scientific rigor on decorative arts, but they also reflected an irreconcilable contradiction in Western modern societies between processes of embodiment and processes of materialization, that is, between individual human life and technical science.

There are innumerable instances in which the most rational grammarians display a yearning for the intuitive and physical process of the craftsman. By doing so, their works and writings appear as echo-chambers for a specifically modern European dilemma. Behind the fantasy of scientific abstraction, lies a sense of mourning for embodiment. Let us simply take Jones’s praise for the “Oriental *practice*”³⁷ (rather than knowledge or theory) repeated several times at the start of his *Grammar*, and, earlier in his life, his diatribe against “the age of ugliness,”³⁸ which has been created by industry and standardization. By contrast, his famous but surprising formula that “form without color is like a body without a soul” sounds like a confession.³⁹ One would have expected color to be like a body and form like a soul, in keeping with the traditional Neoplatonic inspiration behind the classical philosophy of drawing.

The fact that, in Jones's sentence, form has to become a *body*, enlivened by color, discloses a striving for embodiment where an aesthetics of immateriality reaches its highest expression. Similarly, Jacobsthal celebrates, in one of his later works on southern Italian popular tiles (fig. 25.6), the bodily presence that transpires in their unevenness and irregularity.⁴⁰ Although, in his drawings, writings, and teachings for the future civil engineers of the Berlin Bauakademie, he had been among the most adamant champions of a severe impersonal order of neo-Grecian ornamentation⁴¹ and had restricted the definition of Bötticher's tectonic to the "dependence of artistic creation upon a process of rational intellection,"⁴² he also recognized that ornamentation was superior to language insofar as its grammaticality was primarily rooted in visual impressions and an infinite variety of vital bodily affects, instead of being confined within the limits of linguistic meaning: "If we consider the incredible wealth of signs in the organization of the optic nerves, it should come as no surprise that the language of our eyes, like that of all the senses, provides us with so much better hierarchized and more richly individualized information than words do."⁴³

But the one who suffered most from this contradiction between scientific objectivity and subjective experience was certainly Jules Bourgoïn. Instead of favoring one side against the other, or trying to find an agreement between them, he went to both extremes to the point of becoming almost unintelligible to his contemporaries and being relegated to the margins of the society of the time. On the one hand, he probably was the thinker who took the dream of radical formalization of ornament the farthest, fascinated as he was by mathematics and combinations of black-and-white squares (fig. 25.7). After almost ten years spent in Egypt and Syria, between 1863 and 1884, he rejected Orientalist exoticism⁴⁴ and was widely acclaimed as the first to clearly elucidate the mathematical basis of Islamic ornamentation.⁴⁵ At the end of the 1860s, he declared his intellectual and moral allegiance to the doctrine of the neo-Kantian philosopher and probability mathematician, Augustin Cournot, who, among many other philosophical inquiries, was characterizing the realm of abstract reason as radically alien to organic life. On the other hand, Bourgoïn ceaselessly lamented "the two unhealthy preoccupations of scholastic geometry and mechanical industry [that] rapidly annihilate a true feeling of form among the moderns."⁴⁶ Even though his



Fig. 25.6. Johann Eduard Jacobsthal, "Double crosswise division through foliation; through linear schemes and rosettes; parallel division through twisted schemes, with an octagon included, Naples," plate 10, from *Süd-italienische Fliesen-Ornamente nach original Aufnahmen*, 1886.

first book, on Islamic arts in Egypt, was prefaced by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, in his own introduction to the same book, he violently attacked the "alleged rationalists of the neo-Gothic school, all infatuated with a narrow-minded, fruitless impertinent logic and preconceived explanations for everything."⁴⁷ And he eventually criticized his master Cournot because he had ignored "the vast and lively field of industrial arts, architecture and ornament, considered in their own and autonomous principles."⁴⁸ According to Bourgoïn, in the field of these human practices, life and reason could and should be reunited, in complete opposition to the condition of "slavery" of the modern working class, controlled and exploited by these "strange new ministers of the people: lawyers, scientists and economists."⁴⁹

In brief, both philosophically and politically, he was obsessed by the need to counterbalance the scientific construction of form and the correlated mechanical pro-

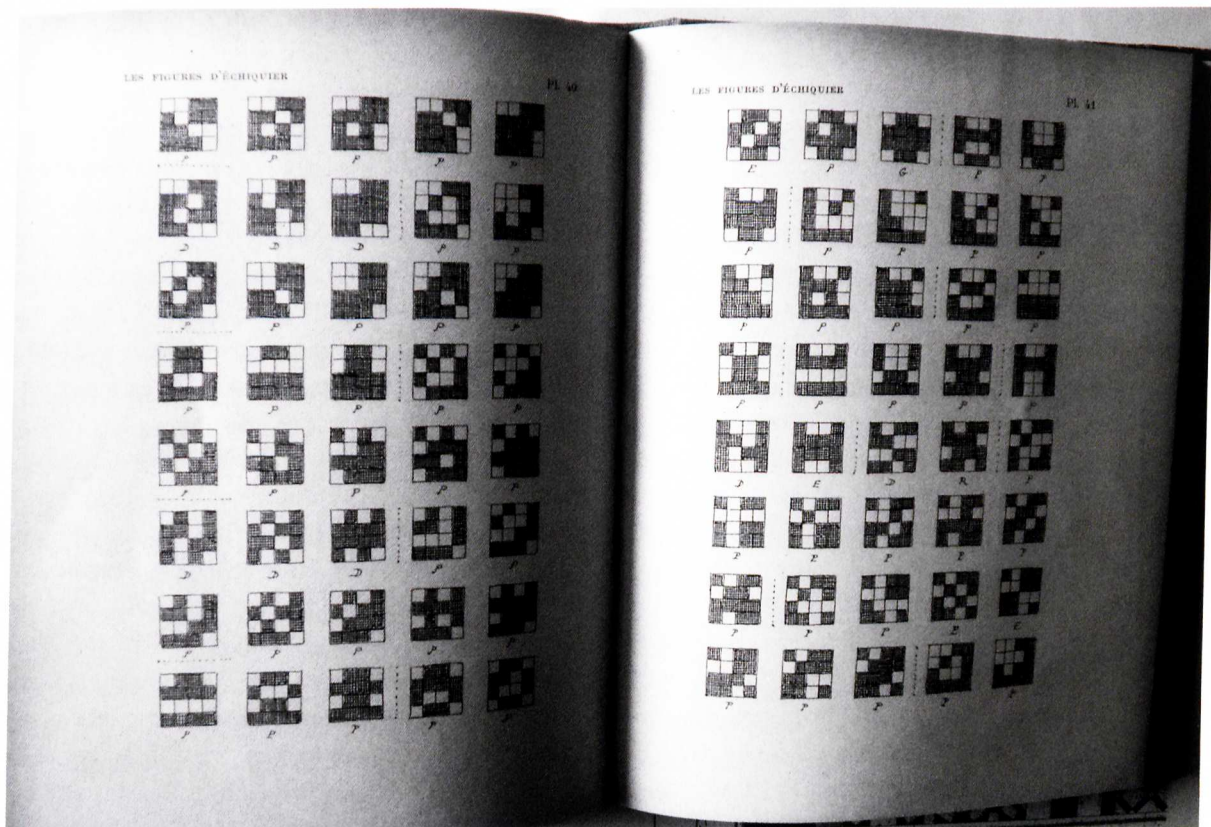


Fig. 25.7. Jules Bourgoin, "Chequered patterns," fascicle 2, plates 40–41, from *La graphique: Collection raisonnée d'études et de matériaux, de notes et de croquis pour servir à l'histoire, à la théorie, à la technique des arts et à l'enseignement dans la famille, l'école et l'atelier*, 1905.

duction of objects with the physical implication of the individual's free will. Trying to keep both sides together, he forged the idea of an "aesthetic geometry,"⁵⁰ both rigorously scientific and unpredictably creative, which he opposed to the "mathematical" or "scholastic" one, favored by modern industry. Hence his systematic promotion of freehand drawing (including the intentional trembling quality of the lines for the illustrations of his own *Grammar*) and his deep interest in the patterning of knots, emblems of the infinite inventiveness and physical flexibility of a human gesture, as opposed to impersonal fixed patterns. But his last attempt to reconcile science and emotion, through a new "science of figures," which he called the "graphic," was still in vain.⁵¹ Bourgoin's constant advice to students, not to imitate his patterns, and his invitation to readers to close his books as soon as possible and to rely on their own sensitivity in order to create new compositions, were undermined by

the growing abstruseness of his texts and bizarre, abstract compositions. The latter were the hermetic results of the compulsive accumulation, in his studio, of thousands of sheets of increasingly micrographic and unintelligible geometrical motifs. It is tempting to believe that, in Bourgoin's work, a grammatical theory of ornament simultaneously accomplishes itself and collapses, undermined from within by its own contradictions, caught between a devouring scientific passion and a no less intense conviction that, as Bourgoin himself wrote in 1873, "the more a method is perfect per se and clear to the mind, the more it is harmful, because it limits and restricts the powers [of the individual] instead of developing them and making them bloom."⁵²

This aesthetics of embodiment, as opposed both to mimetic representation and mechanical reproduction, relates the stupendous energy devoted to the theory of

ornament in the nineteenth century to the radical shift implemented by the so-called avant-gardes in painting immediately before 1914. It would be oversimplifying, however, to measure the debt of modernist painting to nineteenth-century theories of ornament in terms of abstract, nonfigural compositions. Even if pattern books like Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* must have been seen and utilized by a vast majority of art students (including future avant-garde painters) in private studios or art school libraries, the link between them goes far deeper than a sheer translation of visual elements. Visually, similarities are less relevant than differences, if only because the grammatical plates always celebrate a scientific, nonindividual rendering of motifs, explicitly devoid of any expressive pretension. This is precisely what Wassily Kandinsky pointed out as the "danger of ornamental art," when he recalled his first intuition of an abstract image: "What must replace the missing object? The danger of ornamental art clearly dawned on me. The dead, illusory presence of stylized forms couldn't but put me off."⁵³ And this is also why, although he had precociously taken an interest in Islamic "pure" ornamentation (even before his 1905 trip to Tunisia), he was cautious to counterbalance it by referring concurrently to the theory of icons as his complex thinking on abstraction and the "spiritual in art" grew to maturity. Indeed, this fear and condemnation of the decorative was quite widespread, not only among conservative critics, but also within the different factions of the "avant-garde": among innumerable examples, Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger resorted to this weapon against Matisse in their *Du "cubisme"* in 1912;⁵⁴ in turn, Le Corbusier described Picasso's cubism as "decorative" and analogous to "romantic ornamentalism" in his and Ozenfant's *Après le cubisme* of 1918.⁵⁵

Conversely, prominent modernist artists like Henri Matisse or Paul Klee were among the most deeply attracted by the question of the decorative and certainly owed much to the lesson of pattern books, while they remained always suspicious of, if not frankly opposed to the idea of abstraction in painting. Matisse, who had frequented the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1892–93, had always been clear about his appreciation of decorativeness in painting: "The decorative for a work of art is an extremely precious thing. It is an essential quality. It is not pejorative to say that the paintings of an artist are decorative."⁵⁶ This lifelong emphasis, opposed to the common

condescending opinion about decoration, did not relate to the question of figurative work or abstraction, the very dilemma that Matisse endeavored to leave behind him. From 1905 onward, and mostly in his great "symphonic" compositions (as Alfred Barr dubbed them) of the early 1910s, he was no longer concerned, as Europe had been since the Renaissance, with the nature of images—and notably their figurative or abstract essence in relation to external reality—but rather with their concrete action in stimulating a visual response in those who came across them. In other words, he was intuitively seeking to redefine artistic creation not as a matter of ontology (the essence of forms) but of phenomenology (their effect): what obsessed him was the dynamics of our relationship to images, rather than the images themselves. The opposition between abstraction and figuration thus ceased to arise; the main tension was rather between disembodied "representation" and embodied "presence." Decorativeness, in this context, did not mean a new mode of representation, even less a new style, but a new way of looking: a gaze that could be called "decorative" inasmuch as the work of art did not aim to captivate but instead to liberate the being-in-the-world of the spectator, in keeping with a centrifugal logic, endowing the living space with a new energetic quality.⁵⁷

All this means that, in order to characterize the link between nineteenth-century theories of ornament and one of the most seminal experiments in early modern art, it would probably be accurate not to focus on an ontology of abstraction but, instead, to emphasize the development of a phenomenology of perception, which seems to be nascent in many grammars of ornament and pattern books of the earlier period. For Matisse as for a few others, this phenomenological aspect was all the more active as an inspirational source as it was intrinsically contradictory and, therefore, self-reflexive. What was at stake in these books—images and thoughts all together—was not their invention of "abstraction" in itself but the inner tension between the image as the reflection of an invisible structure of Being and as "a hint of creative action," as Matisse's friend Matthew Stewart Prichard wrote in one of his notebooks in 1911 apropos Matisse's painting.⁵⁸

In conclusion, let us expand a little more on Paul Klee's case. Reliable clues show that the artist was acutely concerned with the question of ornament. As with many nineteenth-century theoreticians of ornament, his dis-

covery of Islamic decoration—in his case, the ninth-to-tenth-century Aghlabid Great Mosque of Sidi ‘Uqba in Qairawan (Tunisia), which he visited in 1914—was a turning point in his artistic career. But his leanings toward ornamentation precede his discovery of Islamic patterns and architectural structures: as early as 1909, a series of ten abstract ornamental patterns pasted on a single sheet and titled *Diverse Entwürfe für Vorsatzpapier* (*Diverse Projects for a Flyleaf*) (fig. 25.8), irresistibly recalls the plates of ornamental grammars like those of Owen Jones. Klee chose to paste together these tiny, apparently playful sketches in the early 1920s, when he decided to date and number all his works, as if he were alluding somewhat humorously to the fact that a composition similar to those in pattern books might act as a sort of opening page for the rest of his work. This decision must have been all the more conscious and programmatic, as ornament was not really welcome in the artistic circles he knew. Contrasting with numerous anti-ornamental positions—including those of Gropius and many of his allies at the Bauhaus—Klee’s delicate interweaving of “decorative” patterns, even in his most narrative works, did not fail to draw criticism. As Jenny Anger has shown, it even debarred him from the Fine Arts Academy in Stuttgart in 1919—although at that time the institution was won over to the cause of the German avant-garde.⁵⁹ Oskar Schlemmer wrote to Klee on this occasion that he had been criticized not only for his dreamlike fantasy but also for the “playful” and “feminine” quality of his work—a customary characterization of ornament as a minor art.⁶⁰

In order to take up the challenge of decorativeness in the historical context of the avant-garde, there can be no doubt that his Qairawan experience helped Klee to convince himself of the full historical legitimacy of ornamental aesthetics, combining the rigor of geometric laws and the subtle unreliability of human gestures. From 1921 onward, his teaching at the Bauhaus was focused on the requirement to infuse standardized geometry with the haphazard variations of handwork. The trembling quality of his lines and the overlapping patches of color on the gridlike contours of many paintings from this period were all intended to show that the perfect geometry of forms was not the ultimate horizon but a fascinating prison from which to escape. Klee’s specific ornamentalism always stood apart from spiritual abstraction as well as functional materialism. Clearly, what drove him to ornamental forms was their visual and semiotic instability, the suggestion of move-

ment, the specific power that allows a sinuous line to become (but never fixedly) a narrative figure and again to revert to its status of pure form.

In his teaching notes at the Bauhaus, Klee systematically warns his students against the danger of a “legalistic exhaustion” of the creative impulse and promotes the notion of “life” to counteract this tragic impoverishment.⁶¹ Nonetheless, as intentionally inchoate as his images and formal compositions may be, they are not living beings for all that. We can surmise that such a kind of animism—one of the prevailing myths of the early avant-gardes—was alien to Klee, not only because he never explicitly expressed such a belief, but also because the fundamental structure of his work hints at a very different understanding of what life can mean in an image. In his paintings, the suggestion of imaginary worlds and stories, through dreamlike settings and figures, plunging the mind into another spatiotemporal environment, is insistently set against the immediate physical impression of self-sufficient visual forms, with their arabesques, geometrical patterns, and interwoven color fields, which redirect the spectator’s gaze to his or her perception here and now. Ornamental forms appear almost animated, transformed into imaginary bodies and, conversely, a rigorous ornamental grammar, fitting together basic geometrical forms and flat colors, deconstructs this nascent fiction and substitutes for them constellations of disembodied motifs. A literary and a grammatical conception of the image rub against each other in a fundamentally dialectical manner. Thus, neither narrative images nor ornamental configurations ever stand for embodiment. Life spreads from the image negatively, so to speak, because this strange combination of incompatible formal systems never reaches its full realization. It remains an inchoate, unstable structure of conflicting forces, to which the spectator is unable to apply a clear visible code. These compositions do not provide any definition on the nature of art; through their disorderly ornamental impetus, they leave the viewer with unending questions about the reasons why the imaging process, as a fatal trait of human behavior, unceasingly tries to substitute dreams for life—and fails. In these fleeting, self-critical works, Western vision explores time and again its own uncertainties, as if the dialectics of image and ornament were too deeply rooted in the artist’s mind to allow a stable definition of art anymore.⁶²

What counts more than visual similarities and differences, between twentieth-century modernist painting

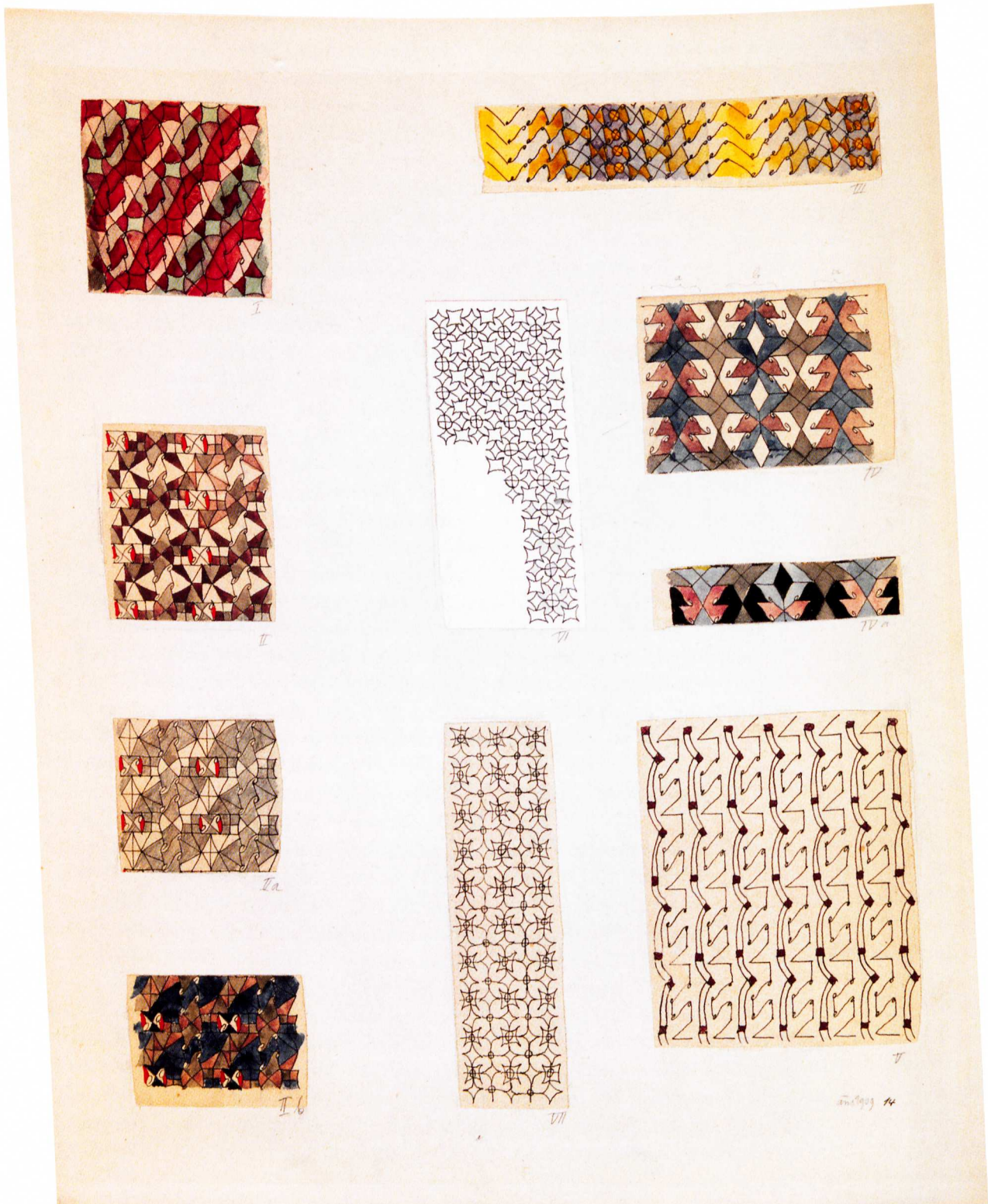


Fig. 25.8. Paul Klee, *Diverse Projects for a Flyleaf*, 1909, ink and watercolor on paper. Paul-Klee Stiftung, Bern, Switzerland.

and nineteenth-century (or Islamic) abstract patterns, is their shared experience of the internal conflicts of Western visual culture. In spite of visual and biographical evidence, a formal genealogy of modernism remains secondary, compared with this acute longing for subjective embodiment, as opposed to objective materialization. What can be called the crisis of ornament in industrial

times greatly contributed to making this anxiety self-conscious. With or without actual connections, the conflict resonates in Kandinsky's, Matisse's or Klee's works, as in many others, where it is transposed not so much into "abstraction" than, first and foremost, into a radical challenging of the legitimacy of image-making in relation to the process of embodiment.