

The Decorative, Abstraction, and the
Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art
Criticism of Clement Greenberg

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I don't want [the decorative] to be used in any interview of mine, connected with my work. To me that word, or the way I use or feel about it, is the only art sin.

Eva Hesse, *Artforum*, 1970

[W]hen you work in the school of abstraction, you have to avoid . . . the decorative . . .

Louise Bourgeois, *Art International*, 1979

1. On Karl Scheffler's criticism see Jenny Anger, 'Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory, 1900–1915', in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1995), pp. 130–46. About Loos' notorious 'Ornament and Crime' (1908) see Miriam Gusevich, 'Decoration and Decorum, Adolf Loos's Critique of Kitsch', *New German Critique*, no. 43, Winter 1988, pp. 97–123. See also Naomi Schor's chapter on Loos in her book *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (Methuen: New York, 1987).

2. Nancy J. Troy, 'Abstraction, Decoration, and Collage,' *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 10, June 1980, p. 154. See also, Nancy J. Troy, 'Domesticity, Decoration and Consumer Culture: Selling Art and Design in Pre-World War I France', in Reed, *Not at Home*, pp. 113–29.

3. See Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (Methuen: New York, 1987) and Mark Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991).

4. On the subject see Norma Broude, 'Miriam Schapiro and "Femmeage": Reflections on the Conflict between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Art' (1980), reprinted in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds), *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (Harper and Row: New York, 1982), pp. 314–29. Also see chapter two, 'Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of Art', in Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1981).

5. To my knowledge, only Donald Kuspit's study of Greenberg's criticism, in which one chapter is devoted to the conception of the decorative, precedes my own study. See Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1979). Kuspit's analysis was invaluable as a starting place for my own investigation of Greenberg's use of the decorative.

Art-historical research regarding the concept of the decorative has focused, understandably, on the writings of artists and critics active at the turn of the century and the opening years of the twentieth century, a period in which the struggle to distinguish the Modernist aesthetic from 'mere decoration' was acute. Between 1897 and 1908 the decorative was transformed from that of a positive feature of the Modernist aesthetic to its antithesis through the demonisation of mass culture, ornament, and femininity in the writing of critics such as Karl Scheffler and Adolf Loos.¹ The effort to divorce art from decoration was especially pronounced in the case of painting at the dawn of abstraction in the early twentieth century. The anti-decorative position of painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger evident in their co-authored text, *On Cubism* (1912), as well as the Neo-Plastic theory of Piet Mondrian was central to the 'reinstatement of the primacy of easel painting' in a period of increasing challenges to its autonomy and status coming from the field of decorative and applied arts.² In related scholarship on the category of the 'detail' in Western aesthetics and the notion of purity in early abstract painting, scholars have helped to clarify the historical and philosophical roots of the decorative's association with femininity and its suppression under Modernism in the early twentieth century.³

Far less scholarly attention has been paid to the category of the decorative in Modernism of the post-World War Two period.⁴ This is curious given the term's currency in art discourse late into the twentieth century, as the epigraphs to this essay attest. Although largely ignored in art histories of the period, the category of the decorative enjoyed a renewed visibility in art critical discourse in the mid to late twentieth century equally as relevant to the conception of the Modernist aesthetic as that attributed to its use in earlier periods. Leading the renaissance in the use of the term was Clement Greenberg, who repeatedly employed the category of the decorative in his art criticism to advocate for an 'advanced' Cubist-derived abstraction. In such work, Greenberg used the decorative as a critical device to distinguish 'high' abstract painting from 'decoration' defined as a form of surface attractiveness masquerading as art. One aim of the present essay, which closely examines Greenberg's extensive use of the decorative in his criticism between 1940 and 1967, is to redress this imbalance in art historical scholarship.⁵

The larger aim of this essay is to demonstrate how the decorative functioned in Greenberg's writing beyond its ostensible role as a critical tool for making qualitative distinctions between works of art. I contend that the rhetorical

power of the opposition of abstraction to decoration in his work derives from the opposition of art to craft. To be sure, Greenberg's conception of a pure and autonomous Modernist abstraction was deeply grounded in the decorative. But his pursuit of purity in painting was achieved through an obsessive suppression of the decorative that also functioned to maintain the hierarchy of art and craft with significant consequences for artistic practice in the post-1945 era. As I hope to demonstrate, while Greenberg presented the decorative as a theory of aesthetic value in art, it also formed the basis for categorical distinctions between media, distinctions anterior to value in art. What follows is an analysis of Greenberg's use of the decorative that demonstrates its purifying function within a narrative of modern art that sought to link abstract painting to the 'high' Western tradition through the covert reproduction and maintenance of the hierarchy of art and craft.

Greenberg and Aesthetic Hierarchy

With the publication of 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in 1939, Greenberg established himself as an art critic intent upon making distinctions between 'superior' and 'mass' culture and this preoccupation with aesthetic hierarchy manifested itself in different ways throughout his critical oeuvre.⁶ Like others of his intellectual circle, in this early essay, Greenberg exhibited a frank disgust for American middle-class taste, which he perceived as rapidly appropriating 'authentic' culture for mass consumption. For him, the avant-garde figured as one of the few remaining oppositional forces in society, obligating the modern artist in a relentless battle to protect genuine cultural achievement from the ever encroaching threat of commodification.

Greenberg's concern with aesthetic hierarchy remained an important organising feature of his writing after 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', but the terms in which he articulated the 'high' and the 'low' changed over time and he would never again imbue the avant-garde with the same social efficacy. The concept of the 'decorative', introduced to his readers in 1941, constitutes one important site in his criticism where distinctions between the 'high' and the 'low' in art continued to be actively constructed.⁷

Greenberg's use of the decorative reflects the term's ambiguous meaning in the history of art. Since the late nineteenth century when it entered art critical discourse the decorative has characterised a mode of painting that, according to one view, had the potential to restore the genre's significance as an art of profound insight or, alternately, a mode of painting blurring the divide between art and design or commerce with an attendant loss of artistic identity and meaning. For instance, in the 1880s, Monet's work was acclaimed by some critics for its 'decorative effect', identifying the work as modern in its organisation of the pictorial surface.⁸ At the same time the term could be used pejoratively, as it was in 1888 by the painter Camille Pissarro to describe an exhibition of Monet landscapes as 'skillful decorations'.⁹ In the latter case the remark attributed to Monet's work an aesthetic superficiality accepted as particular to interior ornamentation.

Greenberg masterfully exploited both connotations of the term. For instance, he employed the decorative as a pejorative to describe painting he perceived as a form of superficial ornamentation rather than art, and in that sense the connection between his use of the decorative and the terms 'decoration' or the 'decorative arts' constituted its negative critical power. Of Léger's late work, Greenberg wrote, 'There is still that same effect of reconciled flatness and solidity which was one of the most pleasing qualities of

6. Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), in *Perceptions and Judgements, 1939–1944*, vol. 1 of John O'Brian (ed.), *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 vols. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1986), pp. 5–22.

7. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky' (1941), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p. 65.

8. For an excellent analysis of Monet's varying relationship to the decorative, which mirrors the critical rise and fall of the category, see Steven Z. Levine, 'Décor/Decorative/Decoration in Claude Monet's Art,' *Arts Magazine*, vol. 51, no. 6, February 1977, pp. 136–9.

9. As quoted in Gill Perry, 'Primitivism and The 'Modern', Part I: Going Away', in Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry (eds), *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press in association with Open University: New Haven and London, 1993), p. 61.

10. Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky' (1941), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p. 64.

11. Greenberg, 'Milton Avery' (1957), in *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, p. 43. The complete sentence reads: 'Decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting, and part of the latter's formal mission is to find ways of using the decorative against itself.' The sentence echoes Marx and Engels' well-known utterance from the *Communist Manifesto*: 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.'

12. Greenberg, 'Review of Two Exhibitions of Marsden Hartley' (1944), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p. 246.

13. Greenberg, 'Milton Avery', p. 43.

14. Greenberg, 'Art Chronicle: On Paul Klee (1870–1940)' (1941), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p. 68. For an extended analysis of the concept of the dialectical transcendence of the decorative in Greenberg's writing see Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1974).

15. Greenberg, 'Art Chronicle: On Paul Klee (1870–1940)' (1941), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p. 69.

16. Greenberg, 'Feeling is All' (1952), in *Affirmations and Refusals, 1950–1956*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, p. 100.

17. Greenberg, 'Milton Avery', p. 43.

18. Greenberg, 'Feeling is All', p. 101. About Greenberg's rescue of Matisse's work from the stigma of decoration see Norma Broude, 'Miriam Schapiro and 'Femmage': Reflections on the Conflict Between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Art' (1980), reprinted in Broude and Garrard (eds), *Feminism and Art History*, pp. 314–29. As Greenberg's response to Léger's late work demonstrates, to be labelled decorative in his writings did not mean, of course, one actually practised craft, or the decorative or applied arts. Rather, it derided one's painting or sculpture as minor, derivative, superficial, shallow, or too close to function. A decorative work was something less than art; for instance, something ornamental and therefore inessential or meaningless, or alternately something of potential use – 'pleasant curtain material' as E. H. Gombrich put it. Jenny Anger has cogently addressed the curious flexibility of the meaning of the decorative in regards to its position as art's opposite in early twentieth-century aesthetic discourse. She states, 'The imprecision and mobility of the term "decorative" – signifying at once an exterior embellishment and an interior, linear structure, a useless arabesque and a useful curtain – allow . . . for its repetitive usurpation and the denial thereof by "pure" modernism'. See also Anger, 'Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the

Léger's earlier work, but this has become too facile and too decorative. . . . When the abstract artist grows tired, he becomes an interior decorator'.¹⁰ There also exist key similarities between kitsch and a pejorative use of the decorative in Greenberg's criticism, suggesting that the power of the decorative to signify the 'low' in art is partly fuelled by the opposition between genuine and false culture previously formulated in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. Significantly, the 'decorative', like kitsch, referenced art forms that posed a threat to high culture: 'Decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting',¹¹ warned Greenberg in 1957. Likewise, he characterised decorativeness as derivative of Modernist innovation, a falsification of true artistic feeling and original form: '[Marsden] Hartley's notion of modern art was that of stylization', he wrote.¹²

Conversely, Greenberg used the decorative to describe the 'honesty' or 'dramatic interest' of the Modernist all-over picture. This quality of abstraction was achieved by transcending the decorative, or in his words by 'using the decorative against itself'.¹³ Greenberg described this process in relation to Paul Klee's work in 1941:

Klee produced some of his best work when he most consciously and deliberately incurred the dangers of decoration; as in the picture *Pastoral*, which is composed only of horizontal bands of uniformly spaced linear motifs repeated symmetrically from left to right. Nevertheless it is a very successful easel-painting and has little of the static quality of decoration.¹⁴

In Greenberg's view, Klee masters the decorative despite his dangerous flirtation with the static uniformity of ornament by exploiting the 'the problem of decoration versus easel-painting'.¹⁵ Similarly Matisse achieved 'unprecedented success' by 'assimilat[ing] decoration to the purposes of the easel picture without at the same time weakening the integrity of the latter'.¹⁶ Like Klee, Matisse profitably mined the tension between 'decoration and non-decorative means',¹⁷ by 'flattening and generalizing his motifs for the sake of a more abstract, "purer", . . . effect'.¹⁸

Greenberg and the Status of Craft

To be sure, in neither 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' nor his subsequent art criticism did Greenberg directly address the status of 'craft' or the 'applied arts'. The picture Greenberg provides of his regular encounter with the art exhibited in New York city at the time he was writing in combination with the absence of a sustained critique of craft therein could be interpreted as tacit approval of the category's traditionally low status in the hierarchy of the arts. One could conclude that craft was simply beside the point for the critical questions Greenberg posed about art and culture. However, his review of The Museum of Modern Art's fifteenth-anniversary exhibition of 1944, *Art in Progress*, suggests otherwise. In the piece Greenberg not only revealed his awareness of the growing visibility of craft within the art world, but also expressed his disapproval of its artistic pretensions.¹⁹ While he generally found *Art in Progress* 'another source of pleasure', and recognised it as 'the modern movement as it is embodied in the more visual arts and crafts',²⁰ his sole remark regarding the segment of the exhibition devoted to the latter registers his general dismissal of the field: 'If the remainder of the exhibition is no better than it is, it may be because modern architecture, industrial design, and their allied fields are no better than they are.'²¹

At MOMA in 1944 these 'allied fields' were the applied arts and crafts, and in the museum they were subsumed under the Department of Industrial Design directed by Edgar J. Kaufmann Jr, and after 1948 under a combined

Department of Architecture and Industrial Design directed by Philip Johnson. Unique, handmade objects in traditional craft media were collected under both Kaufmann's and Johnson's direction in these departments under the category of design. In addition, between 1950 and 1954 Kaufmann directed the Good Design programme, a partnership between art and industry that also featured examples of skilled craftsmanship. The Good Design programme was a collaborative venture of the museum and The Merchandise Mart of Chicago, the largest wholesaler in the US at the time and consisted of semiannual exhibitions of home furnishings and appliances of innovative design.²² The main exhibits, held at the Mart in Chicago, were followed by a survey exhibition at year's end at MOMA. While these exhibitions generally emphasised the utilitarian, mass-produced, professionally-designed object, they also featured examples of handmade, one-of-a-kind objects straddling the various borders between art, craft, and design. Mildred Constantine, Assistant Curator of Architecture and Industrial Design at the time of the Good Design programme, has noted that the exhibitions often featured hand weaves, including the work of Sue Fuller and Lenore Tawney, among others.²³ The comingling of works of art, design, and craft was typical of design or decorative arts expositions in the US beginning in the late 1930s. The artist Ed Rossbach's recollection of the decorative arts pavilion of the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition provides a helpful description of such exhibitions and their objectives. He recalled that:

The main part of this exhibition consisted of 15 full-sized rooms designed by prominent architects, decorators and designers, containing the new furniture, textiles and other objects, as well as sculpture by Brancusi, Calder, Gabo, Moholy-Nagy, Giacometti, and Moore. The rooms were stage sets that invited viewers to imagine themselves living beautiful *modern* lives. In a way, the displays were a variation on The Museum of Modern Art's crusade for good design, showing the public what was "good" and how to live with beautiful objects.²⁴

The mission of providing the public with a model of good design in the hope of encouraging the appreciation of modern art was also pursued by the architect-designer Serge Chermayeff and MOMA director René d'Harnoncourt, who co-authored the prefatory essay to the section of the catalogue for *Art in Progress* devoted to design or applied art. 'The quality of objects that are in daily use by everyone,' they wrote 'cannot fail to affect the taste and visual imagination of society as a whole. Every article that derives good form from efficiency helps to make the enjoyment of art an intrinsic part of living.'²⁵ Elsewhere d'Harnoncourt stated, 'Of every 100 persons who come to the Museum we estimate that no more than 10 actually accept a geometric abstraction by Piet Mondrian as valid art . . . but when principles of good design permeate a home, the occupants tend to be more tolerant, more receptive to new ideas in art'.²⁶

Greenberg saw MOMA's Good Design programme as nothing more than an exercise in good taste that was radically at odds with his vision of high culture. This is evident from his 1967 essay 'Recentness of Sculpture' commissioned for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition, *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, in which the Good Design programme explicitly figured. Here, his reference to the programme was used to illustrate minimalism's 'far out[ness] as end in itself', a condition he found to be akin to the production of 'handsome' but ultimately 'non-art' objects. The 'conventional sensibility' Greenberg attributed to minimal art, 'turns out to be in good safe taste . . . I find myself back in the realm of Good Design,' he asserted.²⁷ The modern, applied art object, which, despite its claims to the contrary by way of a new

Decorative in German Art and Theory, 1900–1915', in Reed (ed.), *Not at Home*, p. 132.

19. Greenberg, 'A New Installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a Review of the Exhibition *Art in Progress*' (1944), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, pp. 212–13.

20. Greenberg, 'A New Installation', pp. 212–13.

21. Greenberg, 'A New Installation', p. 213.

22. On the history of the MOMA's Department of Design see Terence Riley and Edward Eigen, 'Between the Museum and the Marketplace: Selling Good Design', *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century. Studies in Modern Art*, no. 4 (The Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1994). See also Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installation at the Museum of Modern Art* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1998).

23. Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (Van Nostrand Reinhold Company: New York, 1972), p. 38.

24. Ed Rossbach, 'The Glitter and Glamour of Dorothy Liebes', *American Craft*, vol. 42, no. 6, December 1982/January 1983, p. 9. The decorative arts pavilion was curated by the west coast weaver Dorothy Liebes. About the pavilion see *Decorative Arts: Official Catalog, Department of Fine Arts, Division of Decorative Arts, Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939* (Schwabacher-Frey Company: San Francisco, 1939). The catalogue offers an excellent overview of what constituted the applied arts and crafts in the 1930s and 40s. The exhibition included a huge range of media including: enamels, ceramics, glass, jewellery, lace, modern metals, wall papers, and textiles. Bookbinding, architecture, and 'sculpture in setting' were also featured. Herbert Fleishhaker, Chairman of the Fine Arts Committee for the exposition, described the objects exhibited as originating from and executed by 'artist-craftsmen', a characterisation that accurately describes the indeterminate status of unique but functional objects.

25. Serge Chermayeff and René d'Harnoncourt, 'Design for Use', *Art in Progress* (The Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1944), p. 191. Interestingly, the growing field of 'craft', although not explicitly represented in the MOMA exhibition, was still acknowledged by Chermayeff and d'Harnoncourt in their catalogue essay for the Department of Industrial Design's installation for *Art in Progress*. In the main body of the text they recognised 'specific values in the direct contacts between man and material that call for a re-evaluation of craftsmanship in light of the demands of the modern world', announcing in a footnote the establishment of a Department of Manual Industry at MOMA devoted to 'the study and stimulation of craftsmanship'. See Chermayeff and d'Harnoncourt, 'Design for Use', p. 191.

26. As quoted by Riley and Eigen, 'Between the Museum and the Marketplace: Selling Good Design', p. 155.

27. Greenberg, 'Recentness of Sculpture' (1967), in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 254.

28. Greenberg, 'Recentness of Sculpture', p. 254.

29. On the subject see Janet Kardon (ed.), *Craft in the Machine Age: the History of Twentieth-Century American Craft, 1920–1945* (The American Craft Museum: New York, 1995). See also Marcia Yockey Manhart, 'Charting a New Educational Vision', in Kardon (ed.) *Craft in the Machine Age*, p. 62.

30. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1999).

31. S. David Deitcher, 'Teaching the Late Modern Artist: From Mnemonics to the Technology of Gestalt', PhD dissertation (City University of New York, 1989), p. 303. As quoted by Singerman, *Art Subjects*, p. 70.

32. Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 85.

33. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, and Josef Albers' (1949), in *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, p. 286.

34. Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1979), p. 70.

35. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *On Cubism* (Paris, 1912) reprinted in Robert Herbert (ed.), *Modern Artists on Art. Ten Unabridged Essays*. (Prentice-Hall: New Jersey, 1964), pp. 1–18.

formal rigour in design, remained a utilitarian product, also failed to meet its 'idea'. For Greenberg this was evidence of an artist's lack of true artistic inspiration and conception, and explained his or her failure to uphold the boundaries between art and mere things, a failure he described as 'the continuing infiltration of Good Design into what purports to be advanced and highbrow art . . .'.²⁸ The comment belies a continued preoccupation with the preservation of art's autonomy from the degradations of the commercial or everyday world that, as I hope to demonstrate, had informed much of his earlier criticism where the maintenance of the hierarchy of art and craft was more directly at stake. On the basis of Greenberg's cursory comment about *Art in Progress* and his later reference to the Good Design programme, it is fair to conclude that he was well aware of this type of functional, decorative, or craft object but repudiated its claim to equal status with art.

Greenberg's attack on 'good design' also underscores his resistance to the idea of an easy embrace of modern art facilitated through décor and the idea that art and life could be reconciled. It is plausible that his negative response to craft, one of the 'allied fields' of industrial design he referenced in his review of MOMA's *Art in Progress*, may have been an implicit response to the Bauhaus ideals that were infiltrating American art institutions in the 1940s. A great number of artist émigrés to the US from the Bauhaus were master craftsmakers. Scholars of art education and American studio craft argue that the impact of their work, artistic sensibility, and pedagogical method in US art schools in the late 1930s and 40s can hardly be overstated.²⁹ Howard Singerman's research on the effort to rethink the visual arts as a scientific or intellectual project akin to laboratory research in US art schools at this time suggests that Greenberg could have been reacting to the introduction of new ideas about the role and status of art and the artist promoted by the Bauhaus émigrés.³⁰ Likewise, David Deitcher has postulated that this new vision for the arts included '[training] artists with the skills of designers, while educating designers to conceive of their profession in terms hitherto reserved for the work of artists'.³¹ Such a blurring of disciplinary boundaries stood in direct opposition to Greenberg's cherished concepts of medium specificity set out in 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', of 1940 and the Modernist 'self-critical tendency' articulated later in 'Modernist Painting', in which he posited the 'essence' of Modernism 'in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself . . . to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence'.³² Greenberg called the goals of the Bauhaus a form of 'doctrinairism' that resulted in an 'inability to rise above merely decorative motifs'.³³ Presumably it was the levelling of the aesthetic hierarchy and the integration of art into life the Bauhaus represented that fuelled this reaction. To Greenberg, such a programme only led to a cheerful artiness that misrepresented life as a realm of harmony, or in Donald Kuspit's words about this aspect of Greenberg's thought, a realm of 'reconciliation'. On the contrary, according to Kuspit, Greenberg viewed life as a realm of conflict and art as the studied response to it. Decoration was simply a 'magically applied style' that misrepresented the aesthetic experience as an easily received attractive look.³⁴

Greenberg's dismissal of the Bauhaus legitimization of the decorative can be linked to conceptions of the category posited in the early twentieth century in response to the emergence of full-blown abstraction. In this regard, important precursors to Greenberg were the Cubist painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, who distinguished between decoration and abstraction in their co-authored treatise of 1912, *On Cubism*.³⁵ In fact, Greenberg's description of the

decorative in 1957 as a 'specter that haunts modernist painting'³⁶ is closely related to the conception of the decorative posited by the two painter-theorists.

Gleizes and Metzinger's text, which sought to secure the hegemony of easel painting and Cubism's superior place within the genre, reflected the growing anxiety about the potential slippage of painting into decorative superficiality that coincided with the blurring of boundaries between art and design or decoration brought on by the emergence of abstraction.³⁷ Rejecting decoration as 'the antithesis of the picture' they ridiculed its conditional status as a single element within a larger ensemble:

Many consider that decorative preoccupations must govern the spirit of the new painters. Undoubtedly they are ignorant of the most obvious signs which make decorative work the antithesis of the picture. The decorative work of art exists only by virtue of its *destination*; it is animated only by the relations established between it and the given objects. Essentially dependent, necessarily incomplete, it must in the first place satisfy the mind so as not to distract it from the display which justifies and completes it. It is an organ.³⁸

Not surprisingly, given the two painter-theorists' hostility toward the decorative work's lack of autonomy, they believed genuine painting 'carrie[d] within itself its *raison d'être*. Essentially independent. . . . It does not harmonize with this or that ensemble, it harmonizes with the totality of things, with the universe: it is an organism'.³⁹

Of primary concern to Gleizes and Metzinger was the realisation of a mode of abstraction specific to painting rather than borrowed from the realm of the decorative arts, and their treatise considered at length the Cubist contribution to the evolution of pictorial properties of form, colour, light, and space in modern art as internal to the history of painting. Cubists, according to the two, 'tirelessly study pictorial form and the space which it engenders',⁴⁰ and therefore avoided producing work that slipped into decorative superficiality. As Nancy Troy has observed about this text, to proceed otherwise would be to threaten 'the independence of painting as a particular kind of aesthetic object and consequently jeopardise the traditional role of the painter as a visionary creator of high art'.⁴¹ 'Cubism . . . is today the only possible conception of pictorial art. . . . We ought to regard a preoccupation for decoration, if we find it in a painter, as an anachronistic artifice, useful only to conceal impotence,' is how Gleizes and Metzinger put it.⁴²

To fully understand Gleizes and Metzinger's as well as Greenberg's conception of decoration as 'the antithesis of the picture' it is helpful to go back to at least the nineteenth century with the writing of decorative arts authorities such as Henry Havard. In 1887, Havard defined decoration and its adjectival form, decorative, in his four-volume *Dictionnaire de l'ameublement et de la décoration depuis le XIII^e siècle jusqu'à nos jours*.⁴³ In it he distinguished *décoration fixe* from *décoration mobile*, defined respectively as an 'ensemble of ornamentation that decorates a room, a townhouse, a house, an edifice' and that which 'consists in art objects, chairs, armoires, wall hangings, curtains'.⁴⁴ Regarding the term decorative (*décoratif*), Havard wrote, 'One says of an object that it is decorative when it ornaments the place it occupies. . . . In recent years the custom has developed of designating as decorative arts ornamental sculpture, wallpaper, ceramics, glassware, woodwork – in a word, all the industrial arts, which have as their particular aim the interior or exterior ornamentation of a dwelling'.⁴⁵

Havard's definition emphasised that decoration and those objects deemed decorative were single elements within a larger aesthetic scheme. As Troy has

36. Greenberg, 'Milton Avery', *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, p. 43.

37. For a more thorough analysis of *On Cubism* see Nancy Troy, 'Abstraction, Decoration, and Collage', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 10, June 1980, pp. 154–7.

38. Gleizes and Metzinger, *On Cubism*, p. 5.

39. Gleizes and Metzinger, *On Cubism*, p. 5.

40. Gleizes and Metzinger, *On Cubism*, p. 7.

41. Troy, 'Abstraction, Decoration, and Collage', p. 155.

42. Gleizes and Metzinger, *On Cubism*, p. 4f.

43. Henry Havard, *Dictionnaire de l'ameublement et de la décoration depuis le XIII^e siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, 4 vols. (Maison Quantin: Paris, 1887–9).

44. As quoted in Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1991), p. 1.

45. As quoted in Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts*, p. 1.

46. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts*, p. 2.

47. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 221.

48. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 221f.

49. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 224.

50. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 223.

51. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 222.

52. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 222.

made clear in her scholarship on French decorative art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the decorator too, 'whether architect, painter, or sculptor . . . [was] obliged to submit to the demands of the object to be decorated'.⁴⁶ It was the subordination of the decorative arts to both the greater interior ensemble and the commercial market in which such objects circulated that marked the category as anathema to modern artists such as Gleizes and Metzinger, and critics such as Greenberg, who argued in favour of a conception of autonomous artistic innovation unfettered by social or market constraints. These distinctions between the so-called decorative and 'fine' arts remain key to the association of decoration with craft and unreflective labour, and art with creative, intellectual achievement.

Beginning in the 1940s, Greenberg took up the question of abstract art's inherent decorative liability and its threat to the tradition of easel painting confronted by Gleizes and Metzinger some three decades earlier. After them, Greenberg defended the autonomous status of painting, expressed dismay about the loss of artistic identity represented by the fall into the decorative, and described as 'weak' the artists he charged with adopting the decorative.

The Decorative and the Crisis of the All-Over Painting

It is in his essay from 1948, suitably titled 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' that Greenberg positions the decorative as a threat to the Western easel painting tradition, a tradition which unlike 'the Persian miniature or Chinese hanging painting', had remained independent of the 'demands of decoration' imposed by architecture or pictorial convention.⁴⁷ The uniqueness of the easel painting was further augmented in his view by the artist's subordination of 'decorative to dramatic effect' within the frame. It is the self-sufficiency of easel painting, indeed its identity and autonomy as art, that Greenberg targets in this essay as endangered in the modern period by the tendency toward flatness and an emerging all-over treatment of the surface that inverted the priorities of the mimetic tradition.

Greenberg isolated as the 'crisis' the power of the heightened sense of surface to problematise the stability of painting as the pre-eminent 'high' art. When the artist flattens the picture plane, he wrote, 'for the sake of decorative structure and organises its elements in terms of flatness and frontality, the easel picture begins to feel itself compromised in its very nature'.⁴⁸ Uniformity in abstract composition could result, reducing the picture to a purely decorative surface and threatening the boundaries separating art from ornamentation. 'Uniformity, – the notion is antiaesthetic,'⁴⁹ he asserted.

Of course, not all abstract painting succumbed to decorative superficiality, as Greenberg's response to Klee's and Matisse's work referenced earlier demonstrates. These two artists transcended the decorative in Greenberg's view, by holding in tension 'unity' and 'variety' in the all-over picture. Likewise painters such as Mondrian and Jackson Pollock, as well as others who anticipated the 'new "polyphonic" kind of painting',⁵⁰ were described as rendering every element of their composition 'different but equivalent'.⁵¹ 'No matter how much the picture is flattened [Greenberg wrote], as long as its forms are sufficiently differentiated and kept in dramatic imbalance it will remain an easel picture definitely enough.'⁵²

To describe this effect in the work of the masters he admired in this essay, Greenberg set up revealing associations. The comparison of their work to modern music stands out in this regard. Greenberg explained that 'these

painters render every element, every part of the canvas equivalent'. Furthermore, they:

Weave the work of art into a tight mesh whose principle of formal unity is contained and recapitulated in each thread, so that we find the essence of the whole work in every one of its parts. . . . But these painters go even beyond Schönberg by making their variations upon equivalence so subtle that at first glance we might see in their pictures, not equivalences, but an hallucinated uniformity.⁵³

The metaphoric use of weaving in this passage to illustrate the 'principle of formal unity' in modern abstract painting suggests that an art form historically categorised as craft might positively correspond to the Modernist imperative of aesthetic autonomy or purity. What followed the passage, however, makes clear that the repetitive, ordered structure of a weave, its material uniformity, is, in fact, that which would have to be overcome if the discipline of painting was to remain meaningful. As Greenberg explained, even Mondrian, whose pictures 'constitute the flattest of all easel painting' still succeeds by dramatising the surface, or rather, presenting 'the *scene* of forms rather than . . . one single, indivisible piece of texture'.⁵⁴

The endeavour to produce a modern work of high decorative quality without being decoration was a risky one as described by Greenberg, for although the all-over picture:

still remains easel painting somehow, at least when successful, and will still hang dramatically on a wall, this sort of painting comes closest of all to decoration—to wallpaper patterns capable of being extended indefinitely – and in so far as it still remains easel painting it infects the whole notion of this form with ambiguity.⁵⁵

Wallpaper is a motif Greenberg would employ several times in his writing as short hand for decoration or the slippage of abstraction into a lesser decorative mode. In his criticism Greenberg distinguished abstract painting from wallpaper while continuing to trade on the latter's low, decorative status, a use of the trope that allowed him to assert distinctions of value between different abstract styles at the continued expense of a real class of objects, the decorative arts and crafts. For instance, Greenberg stressed Pollock's paintings' difference from wallpaper on the occasion of the artist's solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1947:

As before, [Pollock's] new work offers a puzzle to all those not sincerely in touch with contemporary painting. I already hear: 'wallpaper patterns', 'the picture does not finish inside the canvas', 'raw, uncultivated emotion', and so on, and so on. Since Mondrian no one has driven the easel picture quite so far away from itself; but this is not altogether Pollock's own doing. In this day and age the art of painting increasingly rejects the easel and yearns for the wall. It is Pollock's culture as a painter that has made him so sensitive and receptive to a tendency that has brought with it, in his case, a greater concentration on surface texture and tactile qualities, to balance the danger of monotony that arises from the even, all-over design which has become Pollock's consistent practice.⁵⁶

Shortly thereafter, in regards to the 'even, all-over, "polyphonic" picture' the example of wallpaper would allow Greenberg to persuasively assert abstract art's difference from decoration a second time: 'That such pictures should escape collapsing into decoration, mere wallpaper patterns, is one of the miracles of art in our age, as well as a paradox that has become necessary to the age's greatest painting'.⁵⁷ As late as 1961 Greenberg would still be defending the significance of Pollock's work by differentiating it from wallpaper:

53. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 224.

54. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 223.

55. Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 222f.

56. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Worden Day, Carl Holty, and Jackson Pollock' (1948), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 201.

57. Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition of Mordecai Ardon-Bronstein and a Discussion of the Reaction in America to Abstract Art' (1948), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 217.

58. Greenberg, 'The Jackson Pollock Market Soars' (1961), in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 110. Greenberg distinguishes Pollock's painting from wallpaper one more time in an essay for *Vogue*, 'Jackson Pollock: inspiration, vision, intuitive decision' (1967) (reprinted in *Macula* 2, 1977) in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, pp. 245–50.

59. Leroy wrote for the satirical journal *Le Charivari*. In his review of the First Impressionist Exhibition, Leroy visits the exhibition with the imaginary interlocutor, M. Joseph Vincent, an academic landscape painter, whose hysterical reaction to Impressionist brushwork and composition represented the mainstream art world's and general public's indignation toward the new style of painting. For the full text of the review see Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874–1904: Sources and Documents* (Prentice-Hall, 1966).

60. Tom Taylor, 'Winter Exhibitions: The Dudley', *The Times*, 2 December 1875, p. 4. See Catherine Carter Goebel, 'Arrangement in Black and White: The Making of a Whistler Legend' PhD dissertation (Evanston, IL, 1988), p. 827. Taylor testified against Whistler in *Whistler v. Ruskin* and reiterated this evaluation, adding that 'if you bring art down to delicacy of tone, it is only like the tone of wallpaper'. As quoted by Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington DC, 1992), p. 179f.

61. 'A Life Round Table on Modern Art', *Life*, 11 October 1948, p. 62.

62. Richard A. Etlin, *In Defense of Humanism: Value in the Arts and Letters* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996).

63. Etlin, *In Defense of Humanism*, p. 10. As often as wallpaper is targeted as the ultimate failure in these types of comparisons, it is the paintings of Rembrandt that are held up as the quintessential example of achievement in art.

By means of subtle variations within the minimal illusion of depth, he is able, moreover, to inject dramatic and pictorial unity into patterns of color, shape, and line that would otherwise seem as repetitious as wallpaper.

For the spectator the problem is to learn to recognize this kind of unity . . . and when one can tell the difference, which is the difference between the success and failure of his pictures, then one has mastered what is essential in the art of his all-over phase.⁵⁸

In each instance, Greenberg's goal is to explain what makes an abstract painting a painting, a project in which a decorative art form, wallpaper, stands for a failed example of abstraction, that is, a painting experienced as mechanical or artless in execution and composition. This strategy allowed Greenberg to assert distinctions of value between modes of abstraction, re-establishing at the same time painting's superior position in the hierarchy of the arts.

Greenberg's rhetorical use of wallpaper is significant in relation to the history of modern art criticism where it frequently figured as a flat but trivial form of abstraction, equated with painting deemed unrecognisable as art and threatening to the boundaries separating the high from the low. In 1874, for instance, the French critic Louis Leroy mocked Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1874) decrying, 'Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape'.⁵⁹ One year later the British critic Tom Taylor would similarly evaluate two of Whistler's paintings from his Nocturne series, asserting that 'they only come one step nearer pictures than delicately graduated tints on a wall paper would do'.⁶⁰ Similarly, in 1947 Aldous Huxley likened Pollock's *Cathedral* to wallpaper for its unorthodox treatment of space and surface. 'It raises a question of why it stops when it does,' he remarked. 'The artist could go on forever. (Laughter). I don't know. It seems like a panel for a wallpaper which is repeated indefinitely around the wall.'⁶¹ All three examples turn upon the presumed absurdity of considering wallpaper as art and the levelling of the hierarchy of the arts abstract painting was perceived as enacting.

Not surprisingly, given its rhetorical power to represent the lowest of the low in art, the trope of wallpaper and the subtle marginalisation of craft it signals remains central to arguments about the value of painting. Most recently, wallpaper was put to good use by Richard A. Etlin in his book, *In Defense of Humanism: Value in the Arts and Letters*.⁶² As in the instances above, where the comparison of wallpaper to painting of various levels of abstraction participates in the maintenance of aesthetic hierarchy, Etlin also uses it to set parameters of value in the arts which, in the end, confirm painting's superiority to art in other media. He writes:

The goals that artists set for themselves, as well as the degree of success in realizing them, help determine where a work of art will appear on the aesthetic scale. Decorative motifs, for example, whether on wallpaper or along the stringcourse of a building . . . will generally offer simple pleasures that we can situate to one far side – shall we say, low side – of the aesthetic scale. [On the other hand] the deep humanity conveyed by the Rembrandt self-portrait . . . move[s] us with the manner of deep spiritual insight that can be located at the opposite end of the aesthetic scale, at the high end.⁶³

Greenberg's, Etlin's, and others' use of wallpaper to represent the low in aesthetic hierarchy is of interest here for understanding how rooted the opposition of art to craft is in Modernist discourse surrounding the maintenance of the superior status of painting. In the examples I have collected wallpaper functions as a straw man in the construction and maintenance of arbitrary distinctions between the fine and decorative arts that are otherwise extremely problematic to defend. For instance, Etlin maintains

that the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art reflects important differences in artistic intention and viewer response to a work that corresponds to the aesthetic hierarchy separating the 'fine' from the decorative arts. In this regard, wallpaper is an easy target. But would the argument have the same rhetorical force if one used a different example? Imagine, if in place of wallpaper, one substituted a Chinese blue and white porcelain or Andrea Del Castagno's celebrated painted leather shield depicting David with the Head of Goliath (1450–7) for wallpaper, to name only the most obvious examples of objects that are fashioned from traditional craft media or were once functional and now appreciated as 'fine' art. Etlin's criteria for the distinctions between the high and low in art is especially questionable in light of the assimilation of a wide range of artefacts to the fine arts, including vessels, manuscripts, ritual objects, and articles of personal adornment. These are objects that were once functional and often produced in media categorised today as craft, but nonetheless, comprise the bulk of what counts as 'Art' of the Western world through at least the fourteenth century, as any introductory art history survey textbook will attest.

In Etlin's (as well as in Greenberg's) juxtaposition of painting to wallpaper, there is an argument less about distinctions of aesthetic value than about media secured by preconceived ideas regarding the potential or limitations of various materials to convey significant content to the Western viewer. This is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the strategic use of wallpaper by Picasso and Braque in their collages of 1914, Andy Warhol's *Cow Wallpaper* (1966), or the editors of the feminist art journal *Heresies*, who for a 1978 special issue about women's artistic traditions reproduced a sheet of nineteenth-century wallpaper as the cover art in a challenge to the hierarchical distinctions between 'fine art' and 'craft' or 'high' and 'low' culture generally.⁶⁴

64. On Picasso and Braque's use of wallpaper see Christing Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1992), chapter 5. See also *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* (Winter 1978).

65. Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition of Morris Graves' (1942), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p.126.

66. For an excellent historical account of the way in which embroidery became identified with a certain set of feminine attributes and relegated to the category of 'women's work' see Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (Routledge: New York, 1984).

The Decorative, Ornamentation, and Skilled Labour

Greenberg maintained the hierarchy of art and craft not only in relation to abstraction but also in relation to concepts of ornamentation and skilled labour. To begin with, Greenberg wrote of Morris Graves: 'He takes most of his motifs from zoology and embroiders them decoratively.'⁶⁵ This evaluation of the artist's work characterises the treatment of the canvas surface as simply covered rather than worked or 'felt out' in Greenberg's terms, the latter process representing an artistic transformation of surface as opposed to its mere ornamentation. To describe Graves' treatment of the surface as embroidered also connotes a set of negative associations about needlework that consistently underscore Greenberg's pejorative use of the decorative. Here, embroidery evokes images of an applied embellishment without any integral relationship to its ground. It follows that embroidery and other related modes of ornamentation or surface adornment are perceived as lacking meaning. The real bite in Greenberg's critique derives from the classification of needlecraft as a popular art form, one, in fact, that is practised almost exclusively by women, who, moreover, generally purchase and follow mass-produced, prepared designs that are themselves often copies after original works of art or design. This type of artistic production, although labour intensive and often of a high skill level, is easily dismissed as uncreative, derivative, and a display of craftsmanship as an end in itself. These latter attributes are regularly assigned to work in other craft media as well and are readily proffered as evidence of craft's distinction from art.⁶⁶ Greenberg openly deploys these associations to dismiss Graves' work as shallow or without significant content, and, in so

67. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, and Josef Albers' (1949), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 286.

68. As quoted by Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg*, p. 74.

69. Greenberg, 'Review of Two Exhibitions of Marsden Hartley' (1944), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p. 246.

70. Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition of André Masson' (1942), in *Perceptions and Judgements*, p. 99.

71. Greenberg, 'The Role of Nature in Modern Painting' (1949), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 273.

72. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis' (1945), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 40.

73. Greenberg, 'De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis', p. 40.

74. Greenberg, 'De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis', p. 41f.

75. Greenberg, 'De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis', p. 41f.

76. Greenberg, 'De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis', p. 41f.

77. Greenberg, 'De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis', p. 41f.

78. Greenberg, 'De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis', p. 42.

doing, he implicitly reinforces the hierarchy of the arts. Greenberg's criticism of Josef Albers' painting as the application of 'decorative motifs'⁶⁷ to the canvas has similar implications as does his description of Motherwell's work as an art 'of surfaces . . . ornamented instead of painted into a canvas'.⁶⁸

In a negative review of Marsden Hartley's work, Greenberg associates what he perceives as the artist's decorative treatment of surface with his failure to assimilate the lessons of the French modern masters. He wrote:

Hartley's notion of modern art was that of stylization: impressionism, expressionism, cubism, abstraction for him were so many different modes of stylizing, and his effort to stylize was deliberate – and characteristic of that sad misapprehension of "modernistic" art under which so many of the first attempts to acclimatize post-impressionist tendencies over here were made. Cubism . . . was taken for something decorative, to be *applied*.⁶⁹

This notion of the 'decorative', as that which corresponds to the stylistic imperatives of fashion rather than those of art, was used by Greenberg to censure a wide variety of American and European painting and sculpture that he found to be derivative or a simulation of the 'look' of 'genuine' modern art as he defined it. Hartley and others, according to Greenberg, substituted mere motifs for original form, motifs fully abstract in their planarity and repetition, but lacking in the dynamic relationship to the canvas he identified as essential to serious modern art. It was Cubism, of course, 'the direction in which the pictorial art of our times must go in order to be great',⁷⁰ that was ordinarily misread by the lesser artists who failed to grasp Picasso's and Braque's 'new realization of, and new respect for, the nature of the picture plane itself as a material object'.⁷¹ For Greenberg, this recognition of the materiality of the painted surface was what represented the genuinely modern in art in distinction to the 'modernistic' or 'arty' work that copied the effect of the modern without regard for the difficult struggle essential to original or 'honest' artistic creation.

Roger de la Fresnaye, Stuart Davis, and Alexander Calder, were three artists Greenberg targeted as particularly guilty of misreading the modern artistic project. De la Fresnaye's paintings 'in which cubism is used as a decorative facade rather than as a means of transforming space integrally',⁷² displayed great taste but 'suppress[ed] all the struggles and resistances',⁷³ through which the more important artists worked to create something original. 'Davis's painting,' Greenberg argued, 'had become more and more abstract and at the same time decorative to the point where it is hardly easel-painting any more.'⁷⁴ Both artists 'generalize and make immediately pleasing what more seminal artists produced at the cost of strain and frequent error'.⁷⁵ Calder too has 'made modern art cheerful',⁷⁶ a decorative, 'tasteful adaptation'⁷⁷ derivative of the innovatory achievements of the French modern masters. Greenberg's conclusion, which essentially reduces all three artists to interior decorators, compares their work to that of French rococo painting conceived to harmonise with its architectural surroundings:

The only salvation . . . for artists such as Davis, Calder and De la Fresnaye is that society give them fixed, exactly defined tasks that require them to fit their cheerfulness and discretion into the general décor of modern life in a systematic way. Let Davis and Calder create an atmosphere in which to move, not solo works of art. There are examples of Boucher and Fragonard, whose spirit their own resembles.⁷⁸

Greenberg's concern with the smoothness of Isamu Noguchi's sculpture connected a certain quality of physical finish with precision and skill, an aspect of his work that, according to the critic, demonstrated a substitution of good

taste for intellectual conception not unlike that attributed to Davis and Calder. While on the one hand there was much about Noguchi's sculpture that Greenberg found compelling, on the other hand:

It is what I feel to be an excessive polish and smoothness of surface, an excessive clarity and precision of drawing, that weakens so much of Noguchi's other work. One wishes he had left most of his pieces half finished, and had the courage to stand on his conceptions as conceptions⁷⁹

In other contexts, Greenberg more directly tied surface finish to craftsmanship, traditionally a mode of production in which mastery of materials is often held to be primary to the aesthetic value of the work and the repeated demonstration of such mastery key to distinction in the field of craft. Such a mode of production is contrary to that of the modern artist whose work 'does call attention to the physical properties of the medium, but only in order to have these transcend themselves . . .'.⁸⁰ It was when the 'means of art be[came] too calculable'⁸¹ or certain, and one's awareness of the work as a physical object surfaced that the slide into the decorative was assured. This was Greenberg's reaction to the work of a number of artists, Naum Gabo included. About a 1948 exhibition he wrote:

Gabo's objects, small in format and excessively limited by the notion of neatness entailed by the constructive aesthetic, exhaust themselves too often in the point they make of symmetry; and their lightness, fragility, and transparency tend to be mechanical rather than felt out, the automatic results of an aesthetic code that precipitates itself in repetitious arabesques akin to those of penmanship exercises. These weaknesses, the weaknesses of decoration, are made very evident in some small paintings by Gabo shown here.⁸²

Greenberg's assertion that the decorative aesthetic is 'mechanical rather than felt out, the automatic results of an aesthetic code' closely ties it to a notion of craft as rote labour, repetitive (if not mass produced), and thus, unartistic. In an essay critical of Picasso's work of the 1930s Greenberg explained these characteristics as indicative of a loss of artistic identity:

The picture gets finished, in principle, the moment it is started, and the result becomes a replica of itself. With the idea of the replica there comes the idea of craftsmanship, and with that, the idea of *object*, and of the polish and finish of a finished object. The eye makes these associations instantaneously. Finish is always something expected, and the expected belongs more to the handicrafts, to joinery and jewelry, than to fine art.⁸³

Art, Greenberg stated repeatedly, 'is a matter of conception and intuition, not of physical finish . . .'.⁸⁴

Greenberg's negative assessment of Georgia O'Keeffe's work is by far the most explicit in its assertion of a relationship between the decorative and craft and the function of this relationship in the maintenance of value-laden boundaries between works of high cultural value and those out of sync with the imperatives of Modernism as he defined it. Her work, he wrote:

Has very little inherent value. The deftness and precision of her brush and the neatness with which she places a picture inside its frame exert a certain inevitable charm which may explain her popularity . . . but the greatest part of her work adds up to little more than tinted photography. The lapidarian patience she has expended in trimming, breathing upon, and polishing these bits of opaque celophane betrays a concern that has less to do with art than with private worship. . . .⁸⁵

We have already seen in Greenberg's reviews of Noguchi and Gabo quoted above that precision and neatness are two stylistic elements that he repeatedly assigned to the decorative. Their emphasis in relation to O'Keeffe's work

79. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Isamu Noguchi and American Paintings from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art' (1949), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 296.

80. Greenberg, 'Picasso at Seventy-Five' (1957), in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 33.

81. Greenberg, 'Picasso at Seventy-Five', p. 33.

82. Greenberg, 'Review of a Joint Exhibition of Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo' (1948), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 226.

83. Greenberg, 'Picasso at Seventy-Five', p. 34.

84. Greenberg, 'The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston' (1946), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 60.

85. Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition by Georgia O'Keeffe' (1946), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 87.

86. Greenberg, 'Georgia O'Keeffe', p. 87.

87. Especially to women's traditional textile craft. Greenberg's criticism of O'Keeffe's work as overly detailed draws upon the association of 'woman' and the particular extending from antiquity to the present invoked to characterise the work of the woman artist as inherently inferior. On the subject see Mira Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (Methuen: New York, 1987).

88. Greenberg, 'Jackson Pollock: "Inspiration, Vision, Intuitive Decision"' (1967), in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 247.

89. Greenberg, 'Jackson Pollock', p. 246.

90. Greenberg, 'Jackson Pollock', p. 247.

91. Greenberg, 'Jackson Pollock', p. 247.

further highlights their relation to a 'craft aesthetic' as it had been constructed under Modernism. In O'Keeffe's case, such aspects of her style give her work charm and an 'arty'⁸⁶ quality akin to that of the tinted photograph, which is to see in her work, not art, but simply the look of art. The evaluation of O'Keeffe's painting as not of high cultural achievement is secured by Greenberg's characterisation of the surface finish of her paintings as *lapidarian*: that related to the cutting, polishing, and engraving of precious stones. The image the term calls up, that of the exacting work of the gemcutter, saturates Greenberg's use of the words 'precision' and 'neatness' in the passage with associations of craft or hand labour, associations then grafted on to his overall impression of her work as myopic, overly detailed-oriented, and particular, demeaning qualities regularly assigned to craft as well as women's art and taste.⁸⁷

Circling around the attributes femininity, precision, and neatness is the concept of skill. On the subject, Greenberg asserted his position most forcefully in an essay written to coincide with the opening of the Jackson Pollock retrospective at MOMA in 1967. In it he repeats no less than four times that it is 'not skill or dexterity but inspiration, vision, intuitive decision, [that] counts essentially in the creation of aesthetic quality'.⁸⁸ About Pollock's drip paintings, he explained that they:

Eliminated the factor of manual skill and seemed to eliminate the factor of control along with it. Advanced painting had raised the question of the role of skill in pictorial art before Pollock's time, but these pictures questioned that role more disturbingly if not more radically than even Mondrian's geometrical art had . . . Pollock's 'all-over' 'drip' paintings seem swiftness and spontaneity incarnate, but their arabesque interlacings strike the uninitiated eye as excluding anything that resembles control and order, not to mention skill.⁸⁹

Greenberg counters the popular reaction to Pollock's all-over paintings by demonstrating that the strength of the pictures reside in their 'layout' not their execution, subordinating the drip technique to artistic vision. Vision or inspiration is manifested in Pollock's conception of the composition, his 'choosing, placing, and relating' of elements, which creates a 'tension . . . between the connotations of haphazardness and the felt and actual aesthetic order',⁹⁰ that accounts for the drip paintings' quality. 'No matter how much execution may feed back to conception, the crucial decisions still belong to inspiration and not to manual skill.'⁹¹

The Decorative, Good Taste, and Femininity

The pairing of femininity and the decorative is a strategy Greenberg used throughout the 1940s and 50s to distinguish good from bad painting. The authority of his judgements in these cases rests upon deep-seated, unexamined cultural attitudes about women's intellectual and creative capacities informed by the hierarchy of art and craft and the low status of women's artistic production within it.

To Greenberg, artists who exhibited nothing more than good taste, promoting in art an attractive decorative look, were derivative and essentially feminine, a characterisation that conflates the decorative with mass culture, ornament, and femininity. Greenberg's response to Roger de la Fresnaye's work as a 'decorative façade' more suitable to 'general décor' is representative. The characterisation recalls Greenberg's distaste for the notion that art and life could be reconciled through the consumption of pleasant looking works of art and more significantly, places him squarely within the tradition of associating mass culture with the feminine. On this

subject, Andreas Huyssen at least sees the typically nineteenth-century conflation of mass culture with woman in literature existing into the early twentieth century through the conceptualisation of Modernism in painting as a masculine pursuit.⁹² As is evident in his critique of De la Fresnaye from 1945, Greenberg extends the conflation of mass culture and the feminine well into the twentieth century:

Roger de la Fresnaye, who as soon as he had absorbed all that he wanted or could absorb of Picasso's and Braque's developing cubism proceeded to render it elegant, decorative, and cheerful.

De la Fresnaye anticipated the softening and prettifying of cubism. Endowed with a feminine sensibility, he was quick to grasp the point of the new style and, in grasping it, to suppress all the struggles and resistances through which it has originally been developed.⁹³

Greenberg's response to De la Fresnaye's 'derivative', 'decorative', 'cubistic' style, which he accorded to the artist's failure to apprehend the significance of Cubism and thus, characterised as a feminine weakness, posits femininity as an emasculating force thwarting the development of an original, mature, modern art. In his important review, 'The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture' of 1947, Greenberg's feminisation of the decorative revealed his impatience for the emergence of an American modern art defined by strength and virility. Regarding the work of David Smith, Alexander Calder, and Stuart Davis he wrote:

Smith's art is more enlightened, optimistic and broader than Pollock's, and makes up for its lesser force by virile elegance that is without example in a country where elegance is otherwise obtained only by femininity or by the wistful, playful, derivative kind of decorativeness we see in such artists as the sculptor-constructor Alexander Calder and the painter Stuart Davis, both of whom have great taste but little force.⁹⁴

Like De la Fresnaye, Calder and Davis both 'generalize and make immediately pleasing'⁹⁵ what the better artist achieves through difficult struggle. And Calder's and Davis' exceptional taste was of no consolation, for taste in Greenberg's view was no substitute for the risk-taking essential to genuine achievement in art. Good taste and femininity went hand in hand in his opinion and the juxtaposition of a feminine good taste in art against masculine creative force also expressed his frustration with an unsophisticated American audience for serious art. This audience, although not a mass public, posed a threat to the survival of high culture akin to that of kitsch and the taste of the masses, for the good taste this audience displayed was motivated, as far as Greenberg was concerned, more by a desire for self-improvement or fashionableness than genuine interest in an art of serious intent.

Greenberg's assignment of pejorative feminine attributes to the 'cultured American' in 'Present Prospects' conjures up a tyranny of the feminine within the realm of art that must be resisted in the same way the decorative must be confronted and transcended if art of genuine cultural significance is to be produced. He declared:

The cultured American has now become more knowing than cultivated, glib in a kind of fashionable *koinê* but without eccentricity or the distortions of personal bias, a compendium of what he or (more usually) she reads in certain knowing magazines – anxious to be right, correct *au courant*, rather than wise and happy.

He or she may have minimal judgement in literature but hardly any in art . . . In this country ninety-nine – not eighty-five – percent of the art world itself is composed of tourists . . . The discussion of American art, even in the most exalted circles, is a kind of travelogue patter – this is what fills the three or four art magazines that live an endowed existence in New York and whose copy is supplied by permanent college girls, male and female.⁹⁶

92. Andreas Huyssen, 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other', in *The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1986). Huyssen states 'the gendering of an inferior mass culture as feminine goes hand in hand with the emergence of a male mystique in modernism (especially in painting)', p. 47ff.

93. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis' (1945), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 39f.

94. Greenberg, 'Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture' (1947), in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 167.

95. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis', p. 39f.

96. Greenberg, 'The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture', p. 161.

97. Greenberg, 'The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture', p. 165.

98. Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1981).

99. As quoted by Michael Levey, *Rococo to Revolution* (Thames and Hudson: New York, 1966), p. 121. Also quoted by Parker and Pollock in *Old Mistresses*, p. 51.

100. Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1997), p. 36.

101. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, p. 37. Gibson quotes Barnett Newman's suspect claim (supported by Franz Boas' research) that in Kwakiutl societies women's abstraction in basket weaving was decorative, while men's abstraction in painting on hides 'was directed toward metaphysical understanding'. See Newman, *The Ideographic Picture* (Betty Parson Gallery: New York, 1947). See also Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Dover: New York, 1927).

102. As quoted by Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, p. 37.

In this way, Greenberg's dismissal of the American cultural elite as feminine helped constitute a theory of modern art in which virility, masculinity, individualism, autonomy, and experimentation are privileged against the backdrop of the decorative. As Greenberg put it: 'The great modern painters and sculptors are the hard-headed ones – or at least they are great only as long as they remain hard-headed.'⁹⁷ Conflating mass culture and the decorative and erecting borders around it to protect art is essential to Greenberg's construction of the pure Modernist aesthetic.

Historically, the feminine has been associated with craft. In their co-authored study, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Griselda Pollock and Rozika Parker date the explicit association of femininity with craft to the eighteenth century when the struggle of artists to distinguish themselves from an artisan class resulted in a new hierarchy of the arts cast in terms of gender difference.⁹⁸ Michael Levey has demonstrated that as early as 1713 the aesthetic theorist Lord Shaftesbury, in denouncing rococo art for its frivolity and desire to please the senses rather than engage the mind, thought, and reason, rejected 'feminine taste' and called for discrimination between the arts. Shaftesbury asserted:

So that whilst we look on paintings with the same eyes as we view commonly the rich stuffs and coloured silks worn by our Ladys, and admir'd in Dress, Equipage or Furniture, we must of necessity be effeminate in our Taste and utterly set wrong as to all Judgement and Knowledge in the kind.⁹⁹

As Parker and Pollock point out about the same passage, Shaftesbury's call for the separate categorisation of objects such as painting, jewellery, textiles, miscellaneous equipment of war or the hunt, and household furnishings is organised along lines of gender difference, affecting the hierarchical status of these objects as much as their media or function.

Ann Gibson's analysis of the exclusionary history of Abstract Expressionism confirms the decorative's affiliation with femininity as well as a 'tribal' or racialised other. Craft is intimately associated with the latter too. She submits that:

On the one hand, painting in excess of representation was an exemplary transgression and the route to power; on the other hand, it could also be seen as superficial, cosmetic, unnecessary, and therefore in the realm of the feminine. I would argue not that this painting has failed to exceed what it apparently represents, but rather that this ('decorative') painting's abstraction points to subject matter marked by American society as feminine, or as 'tribal', rather than as masculine, conscious, and European in origin. Ornamental patterning has been associated most often with the surfaces of African sculpture and with such domestic "crafts" as embroidery, weaving, and furniture design, all generally regarded as within the province of the feminine or the racialized other.¹⁰⁰

Arguments made by artists, anthropologists, art historians, and educators in the 1940s and 50s supported the notion that women's artistic production (abstract or otherwise) was inherently decorative (i.e. meaningless), and that therefore, 'they should study minor (decorative) arts like ceramics, textiles, weaving, leatherwork, and flower arranging. Women, in other words, were by nature precluded from being able to produce consequential art'.¹⁰¹ In 1948 Peggy Guggenheim felt it necessary to defend the women artists exhibited in her group show, *Thirty-One Women*, by insisting that their art was 'by no means restricted to the decorative vein as could be deduced from the history of art by women throughout the ages'.¹⁰²

In the late twentieth century, constructions of aesthetic value and assumptions about women's relation (or not) to art have continued to rely

for their authority on the low cultural status of craft. Critic John McEwan's 1978 review of a London show of contemporary art organised by a collective of women artists attests to the enduring power of associations between craft and women's presumed lack of creative prowess. In McEwan's view, only one work in the show was worthy of attention, for it:

at least exhibits none of the needle-threading eye and taste for detail that is peculiarly the bug bear of women artists when left to their own devices; a preoccupation that invariably favours presentation at the expense of content.¹⁰³

* * *

By way of conclusion, I'd like to briefly consider the implications of Greenberg's theory of the decorative and its covert maintenance of the hierarchy of art and craft for artistic practice in the post-1945 period. I will confine my comments to the following three artworld formations that I believe have been shaped in part as a response to Greenberg's separation of art from craft: (1) the continued subordination of craft within the field of artistic production despite its extraordinary expansion and vitality since the mid-1960s; (2) the feminist critique of the hierarchy of art and craft and the related elevation of textiles or fibre since the early 1970s to the status of fine art media; and (3) the rise of installation art. I will say at the outset that the exact relationship between these formations and the hierarchy of art and craft deserve far more attention than I will devote to them here.

Terry Smith's work on the position of craft in the contemporary art world 'as a set of effects of [Modernism's] own priorities'¹⁰⁴ is an excellent example of the consequences of Greenberg's use of the decorative and the subordination of craft it entailed. In summary, Smith asserts that craft was (1) 'defeated', (2) 'separated out', (3) 'isolated, marginalized, and devalued', (4) 'absorbed, aestheticised and rehistoricised', and finally (5) 'de-crafted' under Modernism.¹⁰⁵ First, Smith explains, craft was defeated by mass production and in particular by modern design, a development in 'the making of things . . . which developed a range of mass-producible products created with an eye to the aesthetics of their consumption, denying their origins in human making, and highlighting their origins in machine manufacture'.¹⁰⁶ Mass production and modern design's claims to artistic status were Greenberg's enemies too, but in regards to Smith's second and third points, Greenberg was one of the major offenders. Defining art as the 'more dynamic symbolizing process', Smith argues that the process of separating out and devaluing craft:

Left a generalized sense that art and craft differ, essentially, in all ways; in their preferred relationships to materials (for artists they are a vehicle; for craftspeople they are sacred); to composition (for artists an arrangement of imagery or images won out of the medium or against it; to craftspeople mostly a surface effect); to purpose (for artists a communicative act about something of significance usually beyond art but often about representation itself, for craftspeople the execution of an appropriate design for the provision of an object of satisfying usefulness). And for those who receive the artwork or craftwork, a different pleasuring of the eye: one intimately associated with the hand, touch (haptic); the other with sight (optic), ideas, suggestions, concepts (cognitive).¹⁰⁷

Smith could be speaking about Greenberg here, as these are precisely the distinctions that he implicitly, when not explicitly, produced in his criticism through the decorative. My analysis of Greenberg's use of the decorative above demonstrates one way in which these distinctions are maintained in the art world into the latter half of the twentieth century.

103. As quoted by Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, p. 7.

104. Terry Smith, 'Craft, Modernity and Postmodernity', in Sue Rowley (ed.), *Craft and Contemporary Theory* (Allen & Unwin: St. Leonards, Australia, 1997), p. 20.

105. Smith, 'Craft, Modernity and Postmodernity', p. 20ff.

106. Smith, 'Craft, Modernity and Postmodernity', p. 20ff.

107. Smith, 'Craft, Modernity and Postmodernity', p. 21f.

108. John Bentley Mays, 'Comment', *American Craft*, vol. 45, no. 6, December 1985/January 1986, p. 38. The essay was reprinted in *Craft Australia*. For a response to Mays and the art/craft debate generally see Sue Rowley, 'Mind Over Matter? Reading the Art/Craft Debate', *West*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1989, pp. 3–7.

109. Mays, 'Comment', p. 38f.

110. Mays, 'Comment', p. 38f.

111. Mays, 'Comment', p. 38f.

112. That is, unique objects in craft media, what is generally referred to as 'craft-art'.

113. Mays, 'Comment', p. 39.

As recently as 1986 art critic John Bentley Mays upheld just these distinctions in *American Craft*, the leading journal for the professional 'craft-artist' in the US. In December of that year, *American Craft* invited Mays to comment upon his own and other art critics' lack of critical coverage of exhibitions of contemporary work in craft media. Mays' opening statement directly recalls Greenberg's own seminal statement about the decorative as 'the spectre that haunts modernist painting'. Mays wrote: 'A spectre haunts the craft world of America, the writing about craft, the gatherings of artisans, the studios in schools and universities – the spectre of art.'¹⁰⁸ The rest of his essay demonstrates quite clearly the extent to which it is really Greenberg who is the spectre over craft:

Art critics will never be paying as much attention to crafts as craftspeople . . . think they should . . . This is so not because craft or craft-as-art (as I have experienced it) are inferior to art, but because they are *not* art.¹⁰⁹

But wait, it gets worse. Mays continues:

Hands cannot contemplate; and the creation of works for disinterested, hands-off contemplation has traditionally been a central concern of all Modern art production . . . Modern art itself, in all its variety, is proof that the historically anti-hand, anti-craft strategy continues to be radical and greatly rewarding.¹¹⁰

Mays' characterisation of craft, particularly his emphasis on the hand and the craftmaker's preoccupation with the display of skill as an evacuation of the values of art, throws into relief the persistent power of the Greenbergian Modernist position regarding the autonomy of art, its separation from other art forms and things in the world. Mays confirms Greenberg's vision that it is in the sovereign realm of the fine arts rather than 'the familiar clutter of life, that Modern art yields up to its complex, ironic truth about the world – not in being handled and known intimately, but in being contemplated by the educated eye'.¹¹¹

Mays also characterises 'non-functional craft'¹¹² as the mere imitation of art, reaffirming Greenberg's evaluation of the decorative in art as a derivative and false aesthetic, appealing to those with good taste but no serious commitment to art. Referring to the careers of the 'ceramic sculptors' Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, and David Gilhooly, he writes:

It has always seemed to me that Voulkos merely borrowed the swagger and hot-licks stylistics of action painting without much understanding of their precise, inalienable relations to the history of painting, then deployed these technical gestures in a kind of popular, stylish pastiche – a comfortable version of Modern art for people who feel intimidated by it, but who still wish to appear chic and knowledgeable.¹¹³

Mays' language and his assumption of essential differences between art and craft come strikingly close to Greenberg's own marginalisation of craft and serve as evidence of the continuing force of his rhetorical subordination of craft via the decorative.

On the positive side, a feminist critique of the hierarchy of art and craft emerged from within the women's art movement in the early 1970s in the US, England, and Australia as a rigorous challenge to the association of femininity and craft, ornamentation, or the decorative posited by Greenberg and earlier critics. Artists and scholars associated with the feminist critique of the hierarchy of art and craft targeted the gendering of the decorative as key to the marginalisation of women artists and the cultural devaluation of women's traditional artistic practices. Their efforts to reveal the sexist bias of the aesthetic

hierarchy and the fortification of boundaries between art and 'non-art' essential to the subordination of craft to art constitutes one of the most important analyses of the creation of value in the art world in this period and beyond.

While the critique mounted by women artists has taken various forms since the 1970s, the integration of embroidery into feminist works of art is emblematic of the larger goals of this segment of the women's art movement. In contrast to its use as a trope for the superficial ornamentation of a surface in Greenberg's criticism, in the hands of Kate Walker or Judy Chicago, to name only the most well-known artists working in the medium in the 1970s, feminist embroidery took aim at the equation made between women and craft as 'natural', exposing as ideological the relationship of utility, decoration, the detail, domesticity, and femininity to the hierarchy of media and the marginalisation of women's artistic practices from high culture. Rozika Parker's major study of embroidery and the historical construction of femininity, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), stands as a parallel critique in the field of feminist art history.¹¹⁴ The continued use of embroidery by women artists today such as Elaine Reichek, Ghada Amer, or Anne Wilson, all of whom address connections between femininity and embroidery (although in different ways and toward very different ends), suggests the enduring cultural strength of these associations and embroidery's viability as a medium of contemporary art. Reichek's work in particular hones in on the very terms of the opposition of art to decoration or craft exploited by Modernist critics in the twentieth century, including Greenberg.

Reichek's *Sampler (The Ultimate)* (1996, fig. 1), one of thirty-one embroideries from the series *When This You See . . .* exhibited in 1999 at MOMA, exposes the conflation of the decorative with craft, and emphasises its centrality to the Modernist hierarchy of media privileging painting.¹¹⁵ Compositionally this piece is dominated by a centrally placed, profusely ornamented floral arrangement framed by a black and white gridded border taken from an Anni Albers weaving. Surrounding the central image is a series of four statements by representatives of the larger art world: the art critic Paul Westheim, the architect-theorist Adolf Loos, the painter Georg Muehe, and the art historian Hans Hildebrandt. Taken together their statements produce a narrative of Modernist anxiety over abstraction's slippage into the realm of 'feminine' ornament or craft. Reichek's selection of Westheim's homage to the square and Muehe's revulsion toward the female Bauhaus weaver is an especially provocative comparison that highlights the interrelationship of ornament, craft media, and gender in the construction of the 'decorative':

The ultimate of Bauhaus ideals: the individual square. Talent is a square, genius an absolute square. – Paul Westheim, 1923

In the hands of the women weavers, my alphabet of forms for abstract paintings turned into fantasy . . . I promised myself that I would never . . . with my own hands weave a single thread. – Georg Muehe¹¹⁶

The juxtaposition of the embroidery (itself abstract and based on the grid) and the written word insisting on its difference from art underscores the historical construction of women's needlecraft as a form of surface decoration rather than a deeply felt negotiation or struggle with the blank canvas used to great effect by Greenberg.

Installation art is characterised by a vast set of practices and media, making it difficult, if not impossible, to generalise about the field as a whole in relation to Greenberg's theory of the decorative or the hierarchy of art and craft. That said, I do believe there is a species of installation characterised by a use of space

114. Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (Routledge: New York, 1984). Other important scholarly contributions to the feminist critique of the hierarchy of art and craft include *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics, Special Issue: Women's Traditional Arts and the Politics of Aesthetics*, Winter 1978, Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, selected essays collected in Broude and Garrard (eds), *Feminism and Art History*, Judy Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework* (Anchor Books: New York, 1980), Susan E. Bernick, 'A Quilt is an Object When it Stands Up Like a Man', in Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (eds), *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1994), *Division of Labor: Women's Work in Contemporary Art* (Bronx Museum of Art: Bronx, New York, 1995), and Moira Vincentelli, *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York, 2000).

115. See Elaine Reichek, *When This You See . . .* (New York: George Braziller, 2000). See also Bill Arning, 'Elaine Reichek's Rewoven Histories', *Art in America*, March 1999, pp. 89–95.

116. For the context of Westheim's statement see Paul Westheim, 'Comments on the "Squaring" of the Bauhaus', *Das Kunstblatt*, vol. 8, 1923, reprinted in Hans Wingler, *Bauhaus in America: Repercussion and Further Development* (Bauhaus Archives: Berlin, 1972). The statement by Georg Muehe is taken from his autobiography, *Blickpunkt* (Verlag Ernst Wasmuth: Tübingen, 1965). The full passage reads 'my alphabet of forms for abstract painting turned into fantasy and, in the hands of the women weavers, into tapestries, rugs and fabrics. I promised myself that I would never in my life with my own hands weave a single thread, tie a single knot, make a single textile design. I have kept my word'. As quoted by Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, *Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus* (Chronicle Books: San Francisco, 1993), p. 59.



Fig. 1. Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (The Ultimate)*, 1996, embroidery on linen, 54 × 54 cm. Private Collection. (Photo courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.)

within which ‘decoration’ or traditional craft media is used to address issues of gender, sexuality, or the history of the decorative itself. This form of installation is an all-out assault on the Modernist fetishisation of the autonomous work of art, an ideal held together, in part, by the separation of art from craft. Artists utilising such an installation strategy include Robert Gober, Josiah McElheny, Jorge Pardo, Virgil Marti, Roy McMacken, Andrea Zittel, Polly Affelbaum, and Abigail Lane, among others. Common to these artists’ practice is the use of traditional craft media, elevation of design, and reference to the domestic realm.



Fig. 2. Robert Gober, *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man Wallpaper, Wedding Gown, Cat Litter*, 1989. Installation view, Paula Cooper Gallery, 1989. (Photo courtesy Paula Copper Gallery, New York.)

For instance, a striking feature of this species of installation is the use of wallpaper, a medium characterised as artless by Greenberg and used by these artists to reference a variety of associations attached to the decorative, including domesticity and femininity.¹¹⁷ Robert Gober's untitled wallpapers for his 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery (Fig. 2) and Virgil Marti's *Bullies* (1992, fig. 3), one of his earliest wallpaper installations, are representative of the embrace of the medium by installation artists.¹¹⁸

Gober's installation at Paula Cooper consisted of three rooms: one with bare walls punctuated with drains, one papered in a repeat pattern based on found images of two men – one white and sleeping, the other black and

117. For an extended analysis of the history of wallpaper in modern art criticism and its relation to the use of wallpaper in contemporary installation art, see my unpublished paper, 'The Rhetorical Use of Wallpaper in Modern Art Criticism and Contemporary Art', Smithsonian American Art Museum Fellows Symposium, May 2002.

118. On Gober's installation at Paula Cooper Gallery see his 'Interview with Richard Flood', in Judith Nesbitt (ed.), *Robert Gober* (Serpentine & Tate Galleries: Liverpool and London, 1993). On Virgil Marti see *Apocalyptic Wallpaper* (Wexner Center for the Arts: Columbus, 1997).

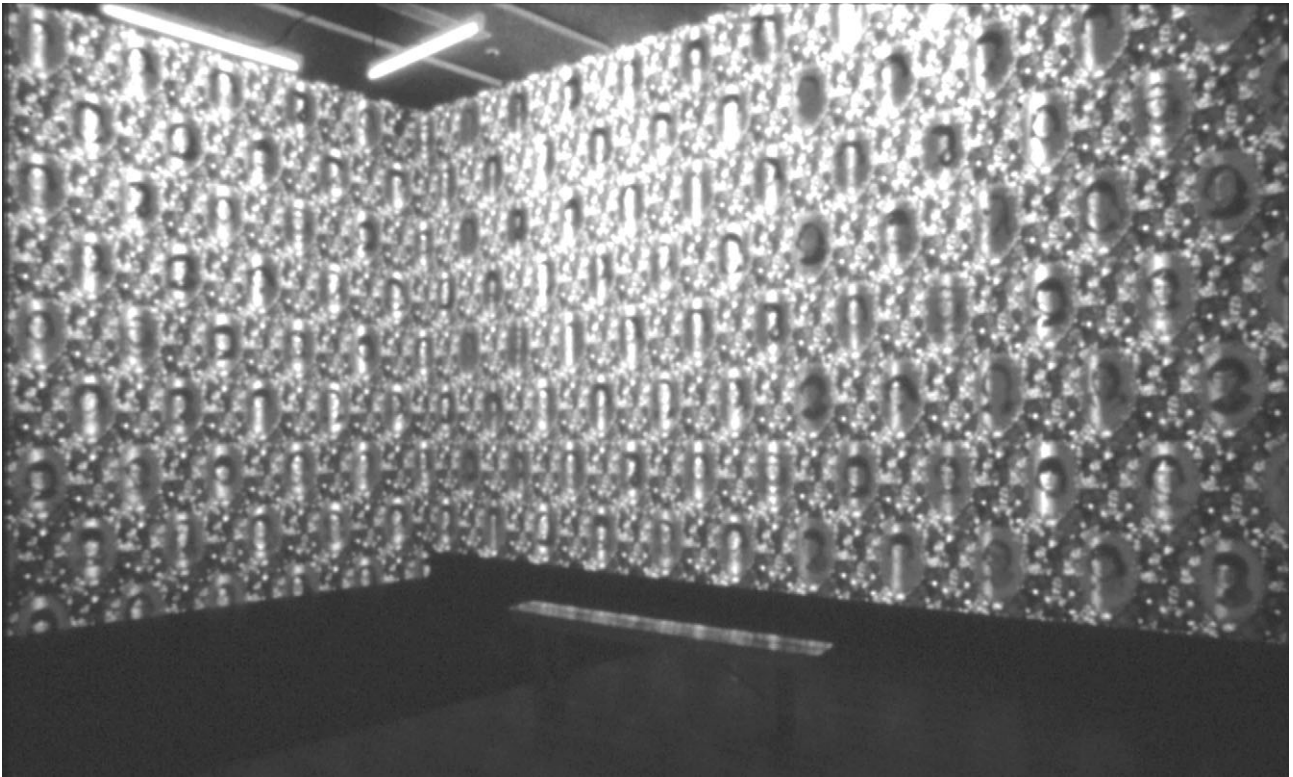


Fig. 3. Virgil Marti, *Bullies*, 1992, flocked fluorescent wallpaper, blacklights. (Photo: Aaron G. Igler.)

119. The first installation of the paper occupied a dark boiler room of Philadelphia's Community Education Center.

lynched — and a third room papered in crude chalk drawings of male and female genitalia against a black background. Among other hand-fabricated objects made by the artist for the wallpapered rooms, a wedding gown is prominently displayed.

Gober's wallpapers for this particular installation trade upon the medium's association with the home and its function as background pattern. Like his earlier hand-crafted, distorted or displaced sinks, playpens, beds, and drains, the wallpapers unravel the safety, purity, and comfort of the home. In combination with other objects in the room, particularly the wedding gown, Gober's 'decorative' imagery of racially motivated violence, sexual difference, and the rituals of heterosexual union suggest that forms of sexual and racial oppression are integral aspects of gender identity and sexual desire.

Virgil Marti's *Bullies* wallpaper also concerns itself with gender and sexual identity. The paper is based upon a French pattern to which the artist has added flock and glow-in-the-dark yearbook portraits of various adolescent boys who tormented the young Marti as he struggled to make sense of his homosexual urgings in junior high school.¹¹⁹ The pattern recalls domestic interior décor of the 1970s, and his juxtaposition of a masculine aggressiveness and feminine decorativeness in the wallpaper generally evokes traumatic memories of peer harassment for failing to correctly perform one's gender. The idea of the home or adolescent's bedroom as a refuge from such harassment is threatened by the looming faces of the wallpaper that appear as night falls.

It might seem that these examples have little to do with the historical debate over art's autonomy, the decorative, or the hierarchy of art and craft. Yet, wallpaper's historical categorisation as decorative, its association with the



Fig. 4. Josiah McElheny, *Kärntner Bar*, Vienna, 1908 *Adolf Loos (White)*, 2001. Installation view, Site Santa Fe Biennale, 2002. Wood display cases with blown glass objects, glass, and metal sign. (Photo courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago.)

feminine realm of the home, and Greenberg's promotion of it as the opposite of art, play an important role in its use in contemporary installations. Indeed, the potency of Gober and Marti's installations turn upon connections posited between social and aesthetic hierarchies: those of gender and sexual orientation and that separating art from craft. Wallpaper is the locus of their intersection.

Of the many artists who use traditional craft media in installation, Josiah McElheny is perhaps the most conscious of the historical conflict between the decorative and fine art. Like Gober or Marti, McElheny's recent installations also evoke dwelling places, but his are distinctly public and overtly directed toward the investigation of the hierarchy of art and craft. For McElheny, a glass blower, the creation of a provocative scenario for his work is essential, for glass is a medium saturated with associations of the decorative, especially skill.¹²⁰ To carve out a place for hand-blown glass within the contemporary art world, McElheny creates art-historical contexts that use the medium of glass to tell the story of its marginalisation via the decorative.¹²¹ His *Kärntner Bar*, Vienna, 1908, *Adolf Loos (White)* (2001, fig. 4) commissioned for the 2002 Site

120. Despite the recent increased visibility of glass blowers such as Dale Chihuly, the medium remains largely ignored within the contemporary art world.

121. The installations by McElheny I am referring to are *The Metal Party* (2002), a reconstruction of a party held at the Bauhaus in Dessau on 9 February 1929 and *Kärntner Bar*, Vienna, 1908, *Adolf Loos (White)* (2001), a partial recreation of Loos' American Bar designed in 1907. A similar strategy was used by Elaine Riechek. In her 1994 installation, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, she presented a series of embroideries and cross-stitches within a space that replicated her childhood bedroom. About the installation see, Norman L. Kleeblatt, 'Passing into Multiculturalism', in Norman L. Kleeblatt (ed.), *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* (The Jewish Museum and Rutgers University Press: New York, 1996).

122. See Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism. The SITE Santa Fe's Fourth International Biennial (SITE Santa Fe: Santa Fe, 2002). See also McElheny's wonderful series 'Non-Decorative Beautiful Objects' exhibited in 1997 at the AC Project Room in New York and his series of works inspired by his residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts in 1998.

123. Josef Hoffmann co-founded the Wiener Werkstätte with Koloman Moser in 1903. Oswald Haerdtl was Hoffmann's collaborator on a number of projects beginning in 1924.

124. Adolf Loos, 'Ornament and Crime', in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Ariadne Press: Riverside, CA, 1998), p. 167. For example, in *Bar Glass, Adolf Loos vs. Josef Hoffmann and Oswald Haerdtl, Vienna (White)* McElheny creates a face-off between the two heavy-weights of the Viennese architecture and design community of the early twentieth century that references Loos' criticism of Hoffmann as an 'ornamental artist' in 'Ornament and Crime'. Within the display cases McElheny has produced samples of bar glass reminiscent of Hoffmann's somewhat bulbous designs for the Weiner Werkstätte, which sought to level the hierarchy of art and craft through the production of aesthetically refined handcrafted objects and interior design, and a simpler, rectilinear shape reflecting Loos' insistence upon rational design, mass production and the rejection of ornament. To Loos, Hoffman's design aesthetic was exemplary of the wasted labour, materials, and capital of the ornamented object. In contrast to Hoffmann's interiors, which Loos predicts in 'Ornament and Crime' would be 'unbearable' in little over a decade because of the acceleration of changing decorative tastes exacerbated by commerce, he juxtaposes his own, 'Café Museum . . . [which] will be unbearable only when the carpentry works begins to fall apart' (p. 173). McElheny's re-creation of the American flag marquee of the Kärntner Bar links to another passage in the essay where Loos laments the revival of ornament in Austria as anachronistic and an obstacle to social evolution and posits America as a society free from the constraints of history. 'Happy the land that does not have many cultural stragglers and laggards. Happy America,' he wrote (p. 170).

125. On Hickey's conception of beauty see his *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Art Issues Press: Los Angeles, 1993). See also his later collection of critical essays, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (D.A.P.: New York, 1997).

126. Among the works in the exhibition were Kenneth Anger's homoerotic film, *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965), the current minimalist and optical paintings of Jo Baer and Bridget Riley, carpets by Jorge Pardo, the exotic creole Mardi Gras costumes of Darryl Montana, ceramic sculpture by Ken Price, the monochrome

Santa Fe Biennial in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is an excellent example of his strategy.¹²²

McElheny's *Kärntner Bar, Vienna, 1908, Adolf Loos (White)* is a partial recreation of the interior of the tiny, jewel-like Kärntner or American Bar in Vienna designed by Adolf Loos in 1907. For the piece McElheny replicated the dimensions of the bar and the grid Loos applied to the ceiling and upper walls of the space to frame a coffered ceiling and clerestory mirrors. In contrast to Loos' riot of surfaces for the Kärntner Bar, including a black and white checked floor, mahogany- and onyx-faced walls, a veined marble ceiling, glass shelves, and mirrors, McElheny's installation is rendered in a brilliant white. Included within it are three separately titled works: *Bar Glass, Adolf Loos vs. Josef Hoffmann and Oswald Haerdtl, Vienna (White)* (2001),¹²³ consisting of three white illuminated display cases containing an assortment of white glass vessels hand-blown by McElheny; *Ornament and Crime, 1908, Adolf Loos (White)* (2001), a white-on-white framed screen print of Loos' infamous essay of the same title; and *American Flag at the Kärntner Bar, Vienna, 1908, Adolf Loos (White)* (2001), an illuminated model of the Kärntner Bar's American flag marquee also fabricated in white glass.

As these titles suggest, McElheny's installation is an investigation of Loos' anti-decorative agenda with the display cases and the model of the Kärntner Bar's marquee serving as visual footnotes to the designer-critic's notorious essay 'Ornament and Crime', in which he asserts that 'the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use'.¹²⁴

The installation of McElheny's *Kärntner Bar, Vienna, 1908, Adolf Loos (White)* in a major contemporary exhibition could be interpreted as evidence of just how far the contemporary art world has moved away from Greenberg's prohibition of the decorative. Yet, the carefully constructed scenario he has devised for his blown glass vessels suggest that McElheny is well aware of the conceptual obstacles he faces in presenting his work as autonomous sculpture given its association with decoration. As a critique of the decorative, McElheny's installation underscores the persistence of the discourse of the decorative into the present period.

The 2002 Site Santa Fe Biennial, for which McElheny's installation was commissioned, was curated by art critic Dave Hickey. In my opinion, the negative relationship of McElheny's *Kärntner Bar* to the discourse of the decorative can be extended to Hickey's overall curatorial vision for the exhibition. In the mid-1990s Hickey made a name for himself by calling for a return to beauty in art, a stance used to champion artists whose work, according to the critic, stood outside the mind-numbing Modernist rejection of visual pleasure institutionalised by art schools and museums since the 1970s.¹²⁵ By contrast, the work Hickey supports revels in associations or practices rejected as decorative in Greenberg's writings: visually pleasing colour, sensual surfaces, optical abstraction, design, and the pleasure of the hand-made. Likewise for the Biennial, Hickey selected a group of artists whose use of colour, attractive surfaces, eroticism, and overriding interest in 'fabrication' created a complex of provocative visual pairings and other formal connections.¹²⁶ Artists working in traditional craft media such as ceramics, glass, costume design, graphic design, and interior design, made a particularly strong showing in the exhibition. Decoration was not a derogatory term in this context, it was a sign of radical aesthetic renewal, but the critical power of Hickey's position as a critic and curator hinges on the recuperation of that marginalised under the term 'decorative'.

To be certain, the three artworlds I've just highlighted as being uniquely affected by Greenberg's conception of the decorative, that of 'craft-art' (as it is still commonly called), feminist art, and at least one species of installation, have in no way resolved the hierarchy of art and craft. In fact, one could argue that artists in the first two artworlds are plagued by partial views of their relationship to the hierarchy of art and craft that often result in its perpetuation rather than its dissolution. And in the case of the installation artists I've discussed, the historical division between art and decoration or craft is essential to the practice. The lasting impact of Greenberg's use of the decorative is that it still looms as the negative example of the separation of fine art from craft. The term 'decorative' may no longer be as central to art discourse as it was under Greenberg's reign, but its importance as a concept in the history of Modernist art criticism of the mid to late twentieth century remains key our understanding of artistic production into the contemporary period.

paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, a flower arrangement by Marine Hugonnier, and Jim Isermann's permanent installation of 750 vacuum formed plastic geometric panels on Site Santa Fe's façade. Hickey used the term 'fabrication' to describe a commonality between the works in the show in an online interview. See 'Dave Hickey and Sari Carel' in issue 14 of *Zingmagazine* at <<http://www.zingmagazine.com>>